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LADB Staff

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Guatemalan Vice President Used Government to Attack

by LADB Staff

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Fallout from passage of an unpopular tax increase approved by Congress in July continues to plague the administration. Evidence is mounting that some members of President Alfonso Portillo's administration used government resources to print and distribute an attack on one the major business figures heading the tax protest. When the legislature voted for an increase in the value-added tax (impuesto al valor agregado, IVA) from the previous 10% to 12%, business leaders organized a national protest against the tax (see NotiCen, 2001-08-09).

After the Aug. 1 public protest, Camara de Comercio president Jorge Briz, a vocal opponent of the tax and a principal organizer of the protest, said the country had repudiated the tax bill, and he called Portillo "inept, corrupt, and incompetent." He urged Portillo to resign, and he joined with other groups to plan continued protests and legal action against the tax increase. A propaganda blitz against Briz soon followed.

Posters and fliers mysteriously appeared all over the country on Aug. 8 and 9 suggesting that Briz used the widespread dissatisfaction with the tax bill for political gain and calling on the public to understand his "political pretensions." The flier took the form of a letter dated Jan. 10 in which Camara de Comercio official Federico Pola tendered his resignation because of differences with the organization's leadership. Pola said the leadership was using the Camara as a "political platform." Soon after his resignation, Pola became part of the government, taking over as minister of economy in March.

Government printing office produced fliers

The fliers were quickly traced to the Portillo administration. First, the language in the flier was similar to language used in government-paid advertisements against Briz. Then, within days, local media began reporting evidence supplied by government employees that the fliers had been printed in the government printing office (Tipografia Nacional) at the Interior Ministry, where plates and proof sheets of the fliers had been left behind.

Carlos Rafael Soto, director of the printing office, said he could not confirm anything because he had just taken over his post. He said he would start an investigation. However, the daily Prensa Libre reported that the proofs and discarded copies reporters had seen and photographed had quickly disappeared. Also missing was one ton of printed state propaganda supporting the tax increase and explaining its benefits to the public. Portillo's spokesperson said that the president had nothing to do with the fliers and that the administration would get to the bottom of the matter.

Briz said the apparent government publication and distribution of the fliers was an attack on democracy. "Those tons of paper would have been better used if they had printed school books," he said.

Constitutional lawyer Anabella Morfin said the use of government facilities to mount an anonymous campaign of defamation was a misuse of funds. In the fallout, the capital city's Mayor Hector Morales complained that sweeping up the fliers cost the city more than US\$12,674. The cost of printing them was set at US\$38,022. The cost of the rented helicopters that dropped the leaflets on the major cities has not been announced. Pola denounced the use of his letter in the campaign against Briz and said he would file a complaint with the attorney general. "It's a low and immoral act that demonstrates a lack of values and testosterone," said Pola.

Printing office director threatened

On Aug. 20, former Tipografia Nacional director Silvia Mendez informed the attorney general that Vice President Francisco Reyes had ordered her to print the fliers. Accompanied by lawyers and officials of the UN human rights verification team in Guatemala (MINUGUA), Mendez went to the attorney general's office and turned over some of the proof sheets and other evidence she said came from the printing office.

The administration had replaced Mendez with Soto as soon as the printing was completed. Besides the proof sheets, the attorney general now has 35 printing plates, negatives, eyewitness statements, and a letter addressed to Reyes with an estimate of the printing costs. Mendez said Reyes' personal secretary Luz Barrios went to the printing office Aug. 6 to order 20,000 posters and 500,000 fliers. Barrios told Mendez's assistant that the order was very important and came directly from the vice president, said Mendez.

Following the distribution of the fliers, an official in the president's office asked Mendez to resign. She said that her replacement, Soto, sent word that she would be ruined if she talked. Deputies of the opposition Bloque Unionista have started hearings on the flier scandal and have called Tipografia Nacional officials, Barrios, and others to testify. Reyes cannot be called, but they say the attorney general should question him. Reyes and Barrios told prosecutors in the anti-corruption office (Fiscalia contra la Corrupcion) that they had nothing to do with the printing. Congress president Efraim Rios Montt said Reyes was innocent of the charges.

Opposition leaders said that without the support of Rios Montt's Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG) majority in Congress, there was little likelihood of a vote to strip Reyes of his immunity from prosecution. Mendez said she had received telephone death threats, and she sought protection from MINUGUA. One telephone caller asked her for her birth date, "because we already know when you are going to die." Mendez fled Guatemala with her children Aug. 26 and was believed headed for exile in Canada. A MINUGUA spokesperson said mission personnel escorted them to the airport. At the moment, Reyes and Barrios are the main suspects in the flier scandal. While the administration has not moved against Reyes, Interior Minister Byron Barrientos has denounced him as responsible for the fliers.

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