Clinton unwisely snubbed forces for reform in Mexico

By Andrew Reding

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On his first foreign excursion since his acquittal by the Senate, President Bill Clinton has turned a blind eye to fresh evidence of corruption and electoral fraud in Mexico.

With the president about to certify to Congress that Mexico is cooperating in the war on drugs, word came that Mexican authorities had recently released the country’s most prominent money launderer, Humberto García Abrego—brother of former Gulf cartel kingpin Juan García Abrego, who is serving 11 life sentences in the United States.

Meanwhile, in the impoverished state of Guerrero, in the south of Mexico, it appears that the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, has again resorted to electoral chicanery. Official returns from the PRI-dominated state electoral commission show René Juárez Cisneros, an ally of Mexican president Ernesto Zedillo, winning the governor’s race by a paper-thin margin over federal senator Félix Salgado Macedonio of the center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution, or PRD—a margin, the opposition says, that can be attributed to irregularities in the vote count and the fact that the PRI distributed food, money, and other material incentives to the poor in return for votes.

Unless the election is annulled, the PRD is calling for mass civil disobedience.

Zedillo, who has promised to bequeath his successor a more democratic Mexico, has done nothing to rectify a potentially explosive situation in Guerrero, already the site of a guerrilla insurgency. Clinton, usually quick to counsel other foreign leaders on the need for greater democracy, has likewise been silent.

Instead, the two presidents were the guests of the authoritarian governor of the Yucatan, Víctor Cervera Pacheco, who is battling impeachment on charges of corruption and electoral fraud. They were also entertained at the hacienda of Roberto Hernández, a banker who helped arrange a $25 million-a-plate fund-raiser for the PRI in an earlier presidential election.

Compounding the political damage is the fact that this was a big step backward for Clinton. On his last visit, two years ago, he met with opposition leaders. This time he did not—despite the fact that the opposition is fast gathering strength. Together, the PRD and the center-right National Action Party, or PAN, hold 10 of 32 governorships, including four of the five most important—the Federal District (Mexico City), Jalisco, Nuevo León, and Baja California Norte—and run the country’s most populous cities, including Mexico City, Guadalajara, Monterrey, Tijuana, Juárez, and Puebla.
The governor of Guanajuato, Vicente Fox, a PAN member, leads early opinion polls for next year’s presidential election, with the PRD governor of the Federal District, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, in second place.

There is therefore a good chance the PRI will lose control of the presidency next year, ending 70 years of one-party hegemony. Yet the Clinton administration is not even hedging its bets. A few weeks ago, US officials showered praise on Secretary of Government Francisco Labastida Ochoa, the second-most-powerful man in Mexico and Zedillo’s apparent choice to succeed him as president. (Zedillo cannot run for reelection under the Mexican Constitution.)

The message is not lost on the Mexican public or on the opposition politicians who are most likely to take over the helm in the new millennium. As far as Washington is concerned, the PRI—which most Mexicans now associate with corruption, drug cartels, falling real wages, and lower prices for agricultural commodities, torture and other police abuses, and electoral fraud—can do no wrong.

Turning a blind eye to Mexico has several predictable consequences. The narcotics cartels will thrive. The security forces will become more repressive in an attempt to contain dissatisfaction over poverty, corruption, and electoral fraud. And when the forces of democracy finally prevail, don’t be surprised if they are more nationalistic and skeptical of Washington’s motives. But then again, that won’t be Bill Clinton’s problem, will it?

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