

# THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

## Women fighting for office

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MEXICO CITY - With cries of dictatorship, sexism and "political immorality," a national debate is raging in Mexico around two women who are running to succeed their husbands as governor.

In Mexico, which just emerged from 71 years of one-party rule, many see the women's candidacies as an attempt by their husbands to evade strict term limits aimed at preventing political dynasties. President Vicente Fox's wife recently dropped out of the running for the 2006 election for precisely that reason.

But arguments about first ladies María del Carmen Ramírez García of central Tlaxcala state and Martha Elena García de Echevarría of western Nayarit have dominated talk shows and barstool debates.

"This is very dangerous. This country is very vulnerable to dictatorships," said Luz Aurora Oyanguren, proprietor of the Pronto Coffee Shop in central Mexico City, as several customers nodded.

About 61 percent of Mexicans believe a first lady should not succeed her husband, according to a national poll by the *Reforma* newspaper. Thirty-four percent believe it is OK, and the rest had no opinion.

Of men, 67 percent disapproved, compared with 54 percent of women. The Sept. 25 poll surveyed 850 people by telephone and had a margin of error of 3.4 percentage points.

In Mexico, most elected officials are barred from serving consecutive terms, and the furor over the women has started a debate over whether that should change.

During a recent visit, U.S. billionaire George Soros said the term limits are crippling Mexico. Once elected, Mexican politicians never have to face voters again, meaning there is no incentive to fulfill their campaign promises, Soros said.

The Popular Democratic Party tried to disqualify Ramírez, the wife of Gov. Alfonso Sánchez Anaya, after she announced her candidacy for the Nov. 14 vote. But last month the country's top electoral court knocked down party rules that prohibit a spouse from running.

Critics within the party then threatened to pull out of the alliance that chose Ramírez. But on Saturday, by a 102-73 vote, the party's leadership decided to back her.

Encouraged by Ramírez's success, García has announced she will run to replace her

husband, Gov. Antonio Echevarría, in a July 3, 2005, election.

A number of prominent women have applauded them, among them Mexico's popular presidential first lady, Marta Sahagún de Fox.

"(Ramírez) fought, on the basis of the law, to defend her rights as a citizen, and those rights remained intact," *Proceso* news magazine quoted Sahagún as saying. "I congratulate her for that."

Some women's rights activists say sexism is partly to blame for the latest uproar.

"There is a lack of confidence in the ability of women in politics," said Erica Cervantes, an official with Women's Information and Communication, an activist group. "It's a deep and continuing sexism in our society."

But others aren't so sure that's the issue. The National Women's Institute, a branch of the federal government, is calling for tougher election rules to prevent nepotism.

"We cannot return to the days of the monarchist transfers of power," said Isidro Chávez Castillo, a spokesman for the institute. "We want more women to get involved in politics . . . but not at the expense of ethics, not if it means political immorality."