

# PRI Primaries

## Caught Between Democracy and a Split

Carlos Casillas\*



The four contenders for the PRI presidential nomination, from left to right: Manuel Bartlett, Roberto Madrazo, Francisco Labastida and Humberto Roque.

Every day Mexican television viewers watch as a historic event in national political life unfolds. Some surprised, others indifferent, they all see publicity spots for each of the four different candidates for the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) presidential nomination. And next November 7, all of Mexico will witness something unprecedented: after 70 years in power, for the first time the PRI will hold a presidential primary open to all citizens.

### CHANGING TO PRESERVE

Over the last seven decades, Mexico has had 14 presidents. The Mexican political system's golden rule, however, has been that each chief executive designated his virtual successor.

In the last 20 years, Mexico's party system has undergone significant changes. As a result of successive electoral reforms<sup>1</sup> and the increase in political competition, the previously invincible PRI has been defeated in 10 states during this administration and in 1997, after mid-term elections, lost its majority in the Chamber of Deputies.<sup>2</sup>

All these blows and the profound dissatisfaction of its rank and file threatened the PRI, the

\* Political analyst and current contributor to *Nexus* magazine. Winner of the Carlos Pereyra Prize for a Political Essay, 1997.

party longest in office in the world, with total defeat in next year's presidential elections if it did not change. The president, therefore, encouraged the idea of opening up the selection process for the PRI presidential nominee. Recent experiences in state elections showed that choosing the nominee by consensus, a simulated form of imposition, was risky because the contenders for the candidacies for different public positions no longer followed party discipline, and several public figures emigrated to other parties.

The PRI's aim in trying a new method of choosing its presidential nominee, therefore, was to recover lost support. It needed a legitimate, open, transparent mechanism that would change the public's perception of the culture of the *tapado* and the *dedazo*.<sup>3</sup>

#### THE RULES OF THE GAME

The PRI national leadership decided to hold nationwide primaries open to the entire society November 7; the winning candidate will be whoever takes the majority of the country's 300 electoral districts. Campaign time limits and a debate among all the contenders were set;<sup>4</sup> spending ceilings were established, and members of the PRI national and state leaderships prohibited from coming out in favor of any of the candidates.

#### PRIMARIES THE MEXICAN WAY

In contrast with the U.S. model of staggered state primaries, the PRI opted for a single day of balloting. No mechanisms were established, however, which would allow for the less likely contenders to withdraw from the race without creating an impression of a split or unequal conditions in the race.

The electoral rules complete with sanctions, however, have not effectively averted a negative campaign abounding in criticism and personal

attacks, with proposals and argumentation in short supply. Criticisms are rife about candidates' campaign spending, the use of public funds to favor one or another and, in general, each contender's personal record.

#### THE CANDIDATES

Francisco Labastida, Roberto Madrazo, Manuel Bartlett and Humberto Roque all registered as candidates for the nomination. In practice, however, the first two have commanded the public's attention and therefore become the front runners.

Francisco Labastida Ochoa, born in the northern state of Sinaloa 57 years ago, has held many posts in the federal government: three times a cabinet member (twice during the Zedillo administration), he was also the governor of his home state in the 1980s.

Too grey a figure for some, too grim for others, Labastida has sought to convince voters with arguments that he is honest and hardworking. Jobs, public safety, education and the countryside are the issues he offers to deal with, putting forward his experience in public office as a guarantee. His candidacy has met with problems, however. Just before the formal start of the campaign, Labastida, then Minister of the Interior, was pointed to as the president's choice who, in contrast with past elections, would try to legitimize his position through a democratic process. The media and the other PRI hopefuls attacked him and built a wall of repudiation against an "official candidacy."

Awash in the sea of accusations, Labastida defended himself, saying that he had gotten where he is on his own merit. Taking this tack had different effects and created ambivalence among PRI members. On the one hand, it fed the feeling that Labastida's was a disguised official candidacy and therefore undemocratic. On the other hand, it fostered the idea that there really was no "favorite" and that therefore, sympathies and preferences could be won by others.

## THE "REBEL" CANDIDATE

Another strong competitor is 47-year-old Roberto Madrazo Pintado. Born in Tabasco, he is the son of Carlos Madrazo, the national leader of the PRI in the 1960s, identified as a martyr to democracy by many PRI members after his death in an airplane crash. With a long political career behind him (two terms as federal deputy, one as senator and one term as the governor of Tabasco), Madrazo Pintado jumped into the national political arena when the legality and democratic nature of the elections that put him in the governor's chair were questioned in the courts. A political manoeuvre—it is said that Madrazo disobeyed express presidential orders to resign the governorship—allowed him to remain in the post and project himself as "the rebel governor," the man who had shaken off the tutelage of presidentialism.

Once in the fray of the struggle for the PRI nomination, Madrazo went through a decisive transformation. His discourse went from critical to radical, from traditionalist to democratizing. Coming out strongly against President Ernesto Zedillo's economic policies, accusing it of neoliberalism, Madrazo has emphasized poverty, crime and the economy. He understood that the form of the transfer of power had changed in the PRI and with the help of publicity experts, he invaded the homes of millions of Mexicans with his television spots offering a product with slogans like, "Deeds, not words," and, "Who says it can't be done?"

Madrazo has set himself up as the spokesman for PRI members offended by the PRI technocracy, as the balance between tradition and modernity. With these ideas Madrazo has managed to excite a good number of PRI sympathizers and a sector of voters without partisan affiliation. At the same time, with his television spots, Madrazo invites all Mexicans to a silent revolt against the presidency, urging them to strike a blow against presidential imposition by aiming a "*Madrazo al dedazo*."<sup>5</sup>

## THE RISKS

Positions inside the PRI are quite polarized and the outlook is uncertain. In the eyes of the voters, the battle is between the candidate of the status quo and the government, Labastida, and the wounded traditionalist PRI represented by Madrazo.

The trends in campaign publicity, personal attacks and suspicions that some governors are mobilizing resources in favor of one of the candidates put the PRI primaries at risk. If we add the most recent opinion polls that point to a virtual technical tie between the two front runners, the possibilities of a split in the PRI increase.<sup>6</sup>

What until a few years ago seemed impossible, the PRI's democratization, is happening. Nevertheless, the change could make for its defeat if the contradictions accumulated during years of the top-down exercise of power overcome the democratic dynamic and the PRI emerges from its primaries split apart. ■■■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Mexican electoral legislation has been amended five times since 1978. The most important changes in 1996 gave the current Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) full autonomy to organize and oversee the elections.

<sup>2</sup> The PRI won only 47.5 percent of Chamber of Deputy seats in 1997, although no other individual political party won a majority either, creating a situation wherein there is no majority, a particular form of divided government.

<sup>3</sup> In Mexican political parlance, the *tapado* (or "covered one") is the politician selected by the serving president to succeed him; the *dedazo* ("the big finger" or "pointing the finger") is the mechanism whereby the chief executive picked his heir.

<sup>4</sup> See box "The PRI Contenders' Debate," p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> This play on words uses Madrazo's last name, which in rather risqué Mexican slang means a "mighty punch," against the *dedazo* (the aforementioned presidential "pointing the finger," or individually deciding on his successor).

<sup>6</sup> According to the Mexico City daily *Reforma* (30 August 1999), Madrazo is ahead with 26 percent to Labastida's 23 percent. The University of Guadalajara's Center for Opinion Studies, for its part, puts Labastida ahead with 30.5 percent, to Madrazo's 27 percent (*Reforma*, 31 August 1999).

# The PRI Contenders' Debate

On September 9, Mexico watched the first television debate ever among candidates for the PRI presidential nomination, Francisco Labastida Ochoa, Roberto Madrazo Pintado, Humberto Roque Villanueva and Manuel Bartlett Díaz. The debate aimed to show each contender's priorities and proposals before the November 7 primary, as viewers scrutinized how each defended his own proposals face to face with the others.

However, unprecedented as it was together with the much touted elimination of the *dedazo* (the tradition of the president "pointing his finger" to designate his successor), the debate did not live up to expectations. Though all the candidates talked about their concerns, most of which were common to all four, what should have been a debate about platforms and ways of doing politics became vague statements with few concrete proposals about how to solve what they themselves pointed to as the country's most serious problems. In addition, at one point Francisco Labastida Ochoa and Roberto Madrazo Pintado began hurling personal attacks at one another. This was the follow-up of Madrazo's campaign of "denunciations" of the PRI's antidemocratic practices, thanks to which, in his opinion, the party leadership has thrown its support to Labastida, whom Madrazo has referred to as "the official candidate." Meanwhile, Labastida accused Madrazo of being a "liar" and wishy-washy on the issue of selling Pemex, the state-owned oil company, and pointed to his links to former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

## THE COMMON CONCERNS

Center stage was taken by public insecurity and the fight against crime. Labastida proposed "strength and vigor" to fight it. Madrazo called for higher sentences for convicted criminals and introducing "a reform to protect victims," without specifying what that would mean. Roque said, "public participation and the creation of a new body to fight crime" would be basic. And Bartlett pointed to poverty and marginalization as the roots of crime and proposed fighting them and creating "neighborhood and community defense committees."

Education took second place. The candidates talked of the need for free education and the new training programs especially for women (Bartlett), more and better schools (Madrazo) and quality education (Labastida), although none expressed an opinion about the strike in the National Autonomous University of Mexico, or how they would resolve the conflict if it were up to them.

Third place, although closely related to the first two, was occupied by economic growth: more and better jobs (all the candidates), encouraging savings and support for the countryside (Roque), higher wages (all), jobs for retirees and a plan to support micro-, small and medium-sized companies (Madrazo). Other important concerns were the development of legislation to protect the physically and mentally challenged and the fight against drug use among children and teenagers (Madrazo); housing for the poor (Bartlett); and improving health services and the need to end centralism (Labastida).

## HOW THE VIEWERS RATED THEM

Three companies that do nationwide surveys, the *Reforma* daily newspaper, CEO and Indemerc-Louis Harris, all put Roberto Madrazo in first place (27.3 percent, 30 percent and 43 percent, respectively), Francisco Labastida second (25.5 percent, 20 percent and 24 percent), with Humberto Roque and Manuel Bartlett in third. La Crónica-IDS, a company specializing in opinion polls, did surveys in Mexico City, Guadalajara and Monterrey and came up with similar results, although they found percentage differences to be wider (Madrazo, 33 percent; Labastida, 15 percent; and Roque and Bartlett, 6 percent). However, Alduncin, another company whose polls cover the same cities, put Labastida in first place with 35.5 percent, Madrazo in second place with 29.7 percent and Bartlett and Roque trailing in third.