

Opposition Alliance for the Year 2000

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Mexico is currently undergoing a still un-concluded democratic political transformation. Nevertheless, the new pluralism of political life has given rise to a system of competing parties that has already strengthened local and federal representative institutions. The electoral laws and institutions established in 1996 have made it possible to overcome in the main the public's distinct distrust of elections. Today, the country's political profile bears little resemblance to what it was just a decade ago.

Political competition is carried out through a party system in which the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the National Action Party (PAN) and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) are the most important; their interaction explains the extent and limits of political change in Mexico. Each has its own way of understanding power and politics, which is what differentiates them and makes them see each other as adversaries. The PRI was born the National Revolutionary Party (PNR) in 1929 out of the governing group, and has occupied the presidency since then. Founded in 1938, the PAN has continuously maintained center-right policies. The PRD, born in 1989, combines traditions from both the left and progressive PRI members and has tried to occupy the center left.

The PAN's moderation turned it into the opposition that the government and the government party, the PRI, could come to agreements and commitments with. Just the opposite happened with the PRD, a party whose very existence is greatly the

result of the dispute within the group that has governed the country since the 1930s. The PRD's original adversary —particularly of its founding leader, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas— is the team headed by ex-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari. It is by no means irrelevant that Salinas' main ally was precisely the PAN.

The administration of President Ernesto Zedillo tried to change its relationship with the opposition and give priority to its dealings with the PRD, but was unsuccessful. With the exception of the efforts to develop the constitutional changes in electoral matters, the PRD has been absent from any other effort at consensus during the Zedillo administration.

Attempts at closer relations between the PAN and the PRD never went very far either, given the mutual aversion that stood in the way of any dialogue. Their relationship was one of true enemies: each considered the other important only as a reference point to mark the difference and reinforce its own position. They acted together in September 1997,¹ although only through their congressional caucuses and solely to open the congressional session.

From there to a PAN-PRD alliance for the 2000 elections, the step was only as rash as it was unimaginable. They shared their opposition to the PRI because it was the governing party, but nothing more. And this is not enough to make an alliance to govern a country, above all when each party has strong national figures.

The course of events changed radically. The PAN and the PRD went rapidly from unlikely allies to a possible alliance, without having discussed a political program.²

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THE THREE MOMENTS
OF THE OPPOSITION ALLIANCE³

1. The Initial Call

The original proposal was to build broad consensus. In September 1998, the PAN re-launched its proposal for a national pact for stability, governability and growth. The PRD, for its part, proclaimed its support for a national accord of governability between the executive branch and all the political forces. The PAN said its aim was to improve political, legal and social conditions to create a better scenario for 2000. While the PAN considered consensus and joint leadership urgent to avoid the country going off track, the PRD thought consensus were necessary to foster a true democratic transition. Up until that point the government and its party were part of the formula.

During the commemoration of the eighty-second anniversary of the Constitution, February 5, 1999, the president called on all the political parties to develop a common platform that would allow them to get through the political dispute over the 2000 elections without risking the main objectives they all agreed upon, regardless of particular ideologies and conceptions. This was the president's third proposal to the parties: the first, in the early years of his administration was to carry out a political reform of the state; the second, made shortly afterwards, suggested working toward consensus on a long-term state policy for development. These proposals were left by the wayside. Neither the president nor those he called upon brought them up again. His third attempt intended to build a common platform, but, like the others, it went no further than merely good intentions.

President Zedillo's attempts at the beginning of his administration to close the breach with the PRD, overcome Salinas' errors and present himself as the president of pluralism did not render the fruits hoped for. The negotiations for the 1996 constitutional electoral reform were the only exception, the only time the PRD actively participated

and endorsed the reforms. But from then on there has not been a single important issue on which he has enjoyed the support of the "party of the Aztec sun," as the PRD is called. The reformed federal electoral regulatory legislation (the Cofipe),⁴ the 1998 and 1999 federal budgets and the extremely complex matter of the Savings Protection Bank Fund (Fobaproa), just to name the most important, had to be resolved without PRD participation. This was probably a PRD tactic, but what President Zedillo called "the necessary party of the Mexican left" simply stayed on the sidelines of the important accords.

The PAN's relationship with the president, good at one time, later deteriorated. Aware of the risks to the country that a pure oppositional attitude has, the PAN has combined ideological principles with practices of government from which pragmatism is not totally absent. It has been a constructive opposition. However, the PAN has been trapped in the net of its relations with the federal government, which has had more political costs than benefits.

This state of things made closeness between the opposition and the president more difficult, particularly when the political forces were already measuring the effects of their actions in terms of the 2000 elections. For the opposition parties, cooperating with the government was like handing over part of their political assets.

2. The Difficult Agreement

The idea of an opposition alliance began to take on unexpected strength. Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas took it on board early this year and turned it into the PRD proposal. Shortly before that, Felipe Calderón, the outgoing national leader of the PAN, had talked about the opposition parties' need to join forces. It could be said that this was the opposition's answer to President Zedillo's call to develop a common platform. However, at the same time, it had decided to keep its distance from the government.

In any case, a PAN-PRD alliance seemed rash and devoid of any future. The differences seemed insurmountable. A first obstacle was the weight of the



The PAN is betting on Vicente Fox.



Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the hope of the PRD.



Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, presidential nominee of the Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution.

Photos by Antonio Navas/AVE

leading figures: Vicente Fox in the PAN and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in the PRD. They both accepted an alliance but neither would admit to eventually giving up his place.⁵ Prominent PAN leaders, among them their national leader, had already stated that any attempt to unite around a common presidential candidate would be very problematic. In their own way, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and the PRD leaders had said the same.

Their traditions, as well as their respective programs and ideological principles differentiate them more than they bring them together. Different and even opposing conceptions of the state and its functions, or their positions on public education, what should be done with the oil and electricity industries, not to mention issues like NAFTA, Fobaproa or abortion, have always situated them on opposing sides.

But what kept them clashing and made them irreconcilable enemies were not exactly ideological disparities, but the kind of relationship that each had with the previous and current administrations: the PAN's collaboration and the PRD's questioning. The PRD systematically censured the PAN for its agreements with the administration, while the PAN criticized the PRD for a lack of proposals. Their mutual recriminations were their point of contact.

The only precedent of joint action by the two most important opposition parties, a real exception in the history of their conflictive relations, was an experiment known as the Majority Opposition Bloc that was needed for inaugurating the Fifty-seventh

Congress and deciding on the internal functioning of the Chamber of Deputies in September 1997.

In this atmosphere, the news of intentions of forging an alliance were mere publicity and vague. Those backing the proposal did not clearly express their ideas; everything remained at the level of public statements in which PAN and PRD members alike presented themselves as the decided activators of a pact that the other side was blocking.

What kept the proposal of an alliance alive was the desire to defeat the PRI, and here was another big problem: the lack of a program. This is why the decision about who would head up the alliance delayed commitments enormously and the programmatic discussion never happened.

3. *Toward a Democratic Transition:*

The PRI in Opposition?

Different factors came into play so that the PAN and the PRD, plus six smaller parties (the Labor Party [PT], the Green Ecologist Party of Mexico [PVEM], and other new parties like the Party of the Democratic Center [PCD], the Party of the Nationalist Society [PSN], the Party of the Social Alliance [PAS] and Convergence for Democracy [CD]),⁶ would publicly commit themselves to an alliance. Two very important elements were the victory of the alliance for change in Nayarit⁷ and the PAN's and PRD's candidates defeats in the elections in the State of Mexico.⁸ However, the decisive factor was the dissension between opposition and administration around the legislative agenda,

particularly the new reforms to the Cofipe that were passed by the Chamber of Deputies only to be voted down by the PRI majority in the Senate.⁹

If the alliance is achieved, it would not guarantee an opposition victory, but the lack of an alliance would ensure a PRI win. This is how PCD leader Manuel Camacho Solís summed up the reason that the PAN, PRD and the other six parties committed themselves to it. They all agreed that the Alliance for Mexico should be formed by August 31 at the latest, and have its basic documents concluded in September. Its explicit purpose is to foster Mexico's democratic transition in peace and stability. With the slogan "For a new social pact," the parties agreed to participate in the 2000 elections with common candidates for the presidency, Congress, the mayor's seat of Mexico City and in all the state elections that year. However, the time limits set have not been complied with.

But the problem with an alliance like this are the self-imposed limits determined by its anti-PRI orientation. While it is true that PAN and PRD members also concur on democratic convictions, these have been thrust into the background. An alliance presidential candidate could perhaps beat the PRI, but questions then arise of how he will govern, who will support him and what controls the parties would have over the executive.

Though a possible advantage of a coalition candidate is that he would not assume the office of president as a minority leader, he would also not have a majority in congress: the majority, if he had it, would be the coalitions', and that sort of majority is always precarious. In this framework, the risks of institutional blockage cannot be ignored; and if that happened, there would be no "higher ups" to resolve the problem. Institutional crisis could be inevitable. Gilberto Rincón Gallardo, leader of the Social Democracy Party (DS), has pointed out the negative results that an alliance of this sort could bring about, such as the creation of an omnipotent figure, worse than Peru's Alberto Fujimori or Venezuela's Hugo Chávez.

The central discussion of the protagonists of the alliance has been about the procedure for choosing the man that would carry its banner.¹⁰ The two most prominent figures, Vicente Fox and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, have taken precedence over both the opposition coalition and the PAN and PRD themselves. The fundamental political discussion and programmatic proposals have been marginal and in truth only considered at all in order to cover Cofipe requirements. That is why its critics say the alliance, if it were made, would lack a clear profile. ■■■

NOTES

¹ This refers to the inaugural session of the new legislature, when for the first time the opposition had a majority in the Chamber of Deputies and imposed a series of unprecedented changes in its internal functioning. [Editor's Note.]

² After the close of this issue, the PAN announced September 28 it would not be participating in the "Alliance for Mexico" because it disagreed with the proposed procedure for choosing the presidential candidate. [Editor's Note.]

³ A fourth moment that emerged after this article was received could be called "the failure of the alliance." [Editor's Note.]

⁴ The Cofipe is the Federal Code of Electoral Institutions and Procedures. While the main political parties came to a consensus on the 1996 constitutional electoral amendments, including the Federal Electoral Institute being completely composed of non-partisan councilors, the Cofipe did not have the same fate. Reforms to this regulatory legislation were approved by only one party, the PRI, who held the majority of votes, because agreement was not reached on two basic points: party funding and —precisely— alliances and coalitions. [Editor's Note.]

⁵ This turned out to be the case. See box "Mexico's Opposition Alliance. A No-Go," p. 12. [Editor's Note.]

⁶ See box "The Parties of the Alliance," p. 18.

⁷ An alliance of opposition parties won the governor's seat for the first time in the July 2 Nayarit state elections this year. The PRD-PT-PAN-PVEM alliance was headed up by ex-PRI member José Antonio Echavarría. [Editor's Note.]

⁸ Later it became clear that an alliance does not always make for victory: the PAN-PRD-PT-PVEM opposition alliance in the state of Coahuila headed by PAN gubernatorial candidate Juan Antonio García Villa was defeated at the polls Sunday, September 26, two days before the PAN announced it would not participate in the alliance for the presidential elections. [Editor's Note.]

⁹ In July 1999, the opposition parties in the Chamber of Deputies PAN, PRD, PT and PVEM, approved a reform to the Cofipe in which, among other things, the obstacles and constraints for party coalitions were eliminated. The initiative was not supported by PRI members and was finally voted down by the PRI majority in the Senate. [Editor's Note.]

¹⁰ See the box on the break-up of the alliance, p. 12.

The Parties of the Alliance

The National Action Party (PAN), founded in 1939, has the longest tradition in Mexico's opposition. Currently led by Luis Felipe Bravo Mena, it has nominated Vicente Fox Quezada as its presidential candidate. On the center-right of the ideological spectrum, its program is based on Christian Democratic principles and the concept of solidarity (or subsidiary-ism). It has achieved electoral importance since 1998, winning 7 governorships and more than 200 municipalities, among them all the country's major cities except Mexico City. In the last federal elections in 1997 it received 27 percent of the votes nationwide.

The Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) was founded in 1989 after the controversial 1988 presidential elections, by former members of the Democratic Current of the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the alliance of several traditional left organizations, the most important of which was the Mexican Socialist Party (PMS), mainly made up of former communist activists. The PRD, now headed by Amalia García, has for the third time made Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the PRD's historic and moral leader and mayor of Mexico City until September 29, its presidential candidate. The PRD alone or in alliance with other parties (particularly the Labor Party [PT]) has won four governor's seats, counting Mexico City, and more than 200 municipalities. In 1997, it received 25 percent of the vote nationwide.

The Labor Party (PT), a left populist organization made up of several grassroots organizations, mainly from northern Mexico, notably in the states of Durango and Chihuahua, obtained its legal registration to participate in the 1994 federal elections. In 1997, it won 2 percent of the votes. Its current national leader is Alberto Anaya, and it has thrown its support to Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas for next year's presidential election.

The Green Ecologist Party of Mexico (PVEM) obtained its legal registration for the 1994 elections with Jorge González Torres as its national leader since its inception. In 1997, the PVEM received 14 percent of the vote nationwide and has broad support in Mexico City. Its political platform centers around defending the environment and promoting sustainable development. For the second time, it has nominated González Torres as its presidential candidate for next year.

The Party of the Democratic Center (PCD) received its registration in May 1999 and is led by Manuel Camacho Solís, former mayor of Mexico City, Minister of Foreign Relations and peace commissioner in Chiapas under the Carlos Salinas administration. Defining itself as a liberal republican party, it is in the center and has been one of the main promoters of the opposition alliance.

Convergence for Democracy (CD), another very recently established party, is headed up by a former PRI governor of Veracruz state, Dante Delgado. It proposes defining the democratic transition through parties alternating in the presidency. Also a center party, it has decidedly promoted the alliance.

The Party of the Nationalist Society (PSN), led by Gustavo Riojas, also emerged this year. Its policies are based on the political ideas of the former PRI presidential candidate, Luis Donaldo Colosio, assassinated during his campaign in 1994. The PSN ideological stance is undefined.

The Party of the Social Alliance (PAS) is on the center-right; it recovered its legal registration in 1999 under its new name; its immediate predecessor was the Mexican Democratic Party (PDM). Led by José Antonio Calderón, this current emerged more than 50 years ago and was originally associated with the sinarquista movement and different religious groups.