

Alliances, Counter-Alliances and Pending Outcomes

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Maria Ghilizza/AVE

Representatives of the failed Opposition Alliance (PAN, PCD, PRD, PAS, PT and CD).

Without a doubt, Mexican democracy will go through a crucial stage as the century begins. We political analysts watched with great interest the process that began with contradictory signs in spring 1999. We all knew that the transition was incomplete, that the relatively modest changes incorporated into the political structure did not guarantee its success, but were actually rather incomplete episodes, and that legitimacy and economic equilibrium were far from being assured.

The political scene was enormously dynamic. The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) had

begun an internal process to choose its presidential nominee unique to its long history of hegemony. That process could have threatened the broad alliance on the basis of which the presidentialist system has always operated.

The president said he was giving up his traditional right of designating his successor through a secret, almost magical process, *el dedazo*, or “pointing the finger.” Although he decidedly supported Francisco Labastida, he had to deal with a rebellion that he probably did not expect when the process began in May: Roberto Madrazo challenged Labastida’s coronation. His campaign, bolstered with millions in funding of dubious origin, sowed the idea in Mexicans’ collective imagination

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that if the PRI process did not come to a happy end November 7, there could be a break in the old, broad alliance that held it together. If Madrazo felt cheated—and he had the means to make the public, his supporters and sponsors believe it if he did—it could bring about a new rift in the PRI that could cost the nomenclature nothing less than the presidency itself.

Finally on November 7, after a campaign fraught with attacks and insults, Labastida won a “surprise” victory in 272 districts; Madrazo took 21; and Manuel Bartlett, 7. The whole process was a success for the PRI: none of the losers broke away and Madrazo acknowledged his defeat; the nomenclature could breathe

easy. Meanwhile, in the summer the opposition parties tried to build an alliance. Their quick success in writing a common platform and programs showed that it was not ideological dif-

ferences that would make it fail, but certain political factors. The supporters of the alliance had a great deal of difficulty in opening up room for negotiations, which, unfortunately, were broken off at the end of September. Despite their efforts, the alliance did not come about, and they missed the boat.

Probably neither of the two large opposition parties really wanted the coalition and Vicente Fox, the front runner for the National Action Party (PAN), despite his clear advantage in the race for an alliance nomination, demanded that if elected, his administration be given a free rein. This, of course, was incompatible both with the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) stance and with the very structure of a coalition.

Around mid-August, a public announcement was made of an invitation to Jaime González Graf, Miguel Angel Granados Chapa, Hugo Villalobos,

Gastón Luken, Antonio Sánchez Díaz de Rivera, Sergio Aguayo and myself to form a Citizen’s Council to develop a method for overcoming the two irreconcilable positions on how to select the alliance nominee: that of the PAN, to use opinion polls, and that of the PRD, to hold an open primary.

Our council—that the official press contemptuously, and later the public itself, called “the group of notables”—proposed a method that combined opinion polls and a primary (limited to only 2,500 closely monitored polling booths).

The PAN questioned the proposal arguing that the PRD had committed irregularities in its own March internal leadership elections.¹ What actu-

ally concerned the PAN was its organic weakness, since it is a party based on cadre incapable of maintaining any structure outside of election time. The proposal was accepted, however, by the PRD and six smaller parties. They

agreed that the results of the process would not be obligatory nor would it give priority to one method over the other, thus leaving in the hands of each of the parties the right to decide its stance once the results were known.

Despite the practical consensus and approval of the proposal in principle, the parties decided to expand the council. In the September 20 and 21 meetings, we were able to reach an overall consensus about an outline of a general agreement that we had arrived at with the parties in August, enriching it to strengthen the conditions of certainty that the PAN demanded. Unfortunately, however, the PAN began attacking council members, particularly Jaime González Graf and myself, saying we had not been able to find “the third road” and questioning our impartiality. The PAN finally rejected the council’s proposal and the Alliance for Mexico failed despite the fact that, as the polls

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But, all speculation to the contrary and despite PAN statements, the alliance did not break up because the PAN or the PRD or the Citizen's Council were incapable of finding a method for selecting a common candidate. The real conflict always remained in the shadows. The alliance was a target for attacks by the PRI and its sympathizers and allies, yes. But resistance by the fundamentalist, radical or opportunist hard-liners in the PAN and PRD themselves was no less important. Former PRD President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and current candidate for the Mexico City mayor's office, at a splendid lecture about his book on the Savings Protection Bank Fund,² was right when he said, "The broad differences about the public policy a coalition government should pursue were the real cause of the break."

Nevertheless, the idea of alliances is still valid. The PRI's traditional, age-old alliance is a precondition for its own victory. The opposition can make different kinds of coalitions outside of the presidential race. They have innumerable agreements about the transition to democracy. In essence, those of us who support an alliance are right. This can be seen by the formidable popularity the alliance came to have. The idea that opposition unity would consummate the transition is something that will not be easily squelched. One way or another, this means that the alliance will reappear on the political horizon very soon, whether partial or complete.³

Thus, the relatively stable conditions that existed in spring of 1999 that previewed how the administration would end had become almost incomprehensible by the end of the rainy season. Today, without the opposition alliance, PRI unity may eas-

ily guarantee its candidate's victory. However, we still have to wait until the end of this extended, complex process in the six long months from now until the July elections. Then, we will have to wait until the loser and his supporters accept the results and the victor without raising a fuss. Otherwise, a dangerous, violent postelectoral process could begin.

The divisions in the PRI and among the opposition do not make for a clear scenario. Any form of segmentation of the political parties could take Mexico into a crisis of another kind. If the most reactionary forces of the system felt threatened by a weak government emerging from the July elections, they could use their political and financial

resources to try to destabilize the country.

The frustration of alliances by one group or the other are political phenomena whose impact is not yet completely clear. It may be insignificant and people may rapidly forget

or it could weigh on an already discouraged, bitter mood and lead to accusations that Mexico's "partyocracy" is responsible for the country's ills. We may be faced with episodes of civil resistance and political violence due to growing discontentment with the bad PRI administration and the long economic decline that could push people into a less passive spirit than they have displayed up until now.

In the economy, things are equally contradictory. Instability and political violence and the inevitable crisis that accompanies every change in administration force us to imagine a somber scenario for the end of Zedillo's mandate. The answer the government has sought to this possible crisis is what it has called financial "armor:" it has accumulated a great many resources, international reserves, loans, lines of credit and the hope of more loans to deal with the speculation that always occurs in an election year.

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The Zedillo administration will probably stand up under the pressure. The improvement in oil prices and the growth over the last two years, the increase it has achieved in hard currency reserves and the drop in inflation, as well as the maintenance of a stable exchange rate of the peso to the dollar are all positive signs. However, the economic legacy that the current administration will leave behind it as a consequence of the bank bail-out and other serious errors accumulated over the years continue to have an increasingly brutal effect on the Mexican economy, and their weight could quash any and all of the new administration's projects in the year 2001. Nothing assures us, however, that the "end-of-administration crisis" will break out before Zedillo hands over his office.

We cannot underestimate the importance that discontentment in broad sectors of society may have. Even if high economic growth rates are maintained, the trend toward the concentration of wealth and speculation will make it very difficult to reach the minimum levels of employment required, to generate wealth and systematically reduce

extreme inequality and poverty and, in general, overcome the dearth of real opportunities for development, a legitimate demand of the majority of the population.

It is difficult to know how Mexicans will react to these factors during the election campaign. The combination of a broad, complex, but also incomplete, political opening creates spaces in which disagreement can develop much more forcefully than through electoral channels. ■■■


NOTES

¹ In March 1999 the PRD had to declare its leadership elections null and void after many irregularities and examples of fraud were brought to light. [Editor's Note.]

² Andrés Manuel López Obrador, *Fobaproa: expediente abierto. Reseña y archivo* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1999).

³ In fact, in early December, two coalitions for the presidential elections were registered with the IFE: one led by the PRD, the Alliance for Mexico, including the Labor Party (PT) and three new smaller parties; and a second headed by the PAN, the Alliance for Change, that includes the Green Ecologist Party of Mexico (PVEM).

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