

The PRD's Institutional Crisis Prospects for 2006

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THE PARTY SYSTEM AND THE PRD AFTER 2000

After the alternation in office resulting from the 2000 elections, a new stage opened up in Mexico's democratic life that has forced the three largest parties to reposition themselves on the political scene because the places they traditionally occupied changed. For decades, the parties were situated on the political spectrum according to two dimensions: authoritarianism versus democracy. This defined the roles of hegemonic-governing party/opposition parties and left/right.¹ With the National Action Party (PAN) victory in the presidential elections, the first dimension disappeared and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the PAN and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) became simply par-

ties without previously fixed places. In the context of the post-transition, the large parties have to adjust and reformulate their agendas and contend for an increasingly independent and strategic-minded electorate. They have to make new proposals that increasingly distinguish them from their competitors. However, they have faced problems in reorganizing themselves in this stage. The PAN has encountered serious difficulties assuming the role of governing party, which can be seen in its ambiguous and complex relationship with the Fox administration, from which it has been rather marginalized. The PRI has had to deal with clashes among its currents and leaderships, which now act with less discipline given the absence of the incentives it used to have because it was in office. The current problems of the PAN and PRI, however, cannot be compared with the institutional crisis the PRD is going through, unleashed by recent corruption scandals directly involving PRD Mexico City government officials and

leaders like former party President Rosario Robles. If the PRD was already facing difficulties in improving and reinventing its discourse in the transition stage, centered against the PRI and neoliberalism and in favor of democracy, it now seems to have been left empty-handed since honesty had been its main political selling point.²

The current crisis in the PRD cannot be understood if we do not take into account the party's low level of internal institutionalization, visible for some time in four main ways:

- 1) *The lack of control over its leaders.* If anything has been shown by the recent scandals involving René Bejarano and Rosario Robles, among other prominent members, it is that the PRD has little control over the actions of its leaders. They have substantial autonomy with regard to the party and have created their own spaces of power and fostered their own interests, regardless of their organization's general interest. It should

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Andrés Manuel López Obrador, currently the front-runner in the race for the PRD nomination.

be remembered that Robles had already suffered a blow internally when she resigned as PRD president in 2003 because of 354 million pesos in excess spending.

Undoubtedly, the “moral leadership” of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas has been the clearest symptom of the leaders’ independence from the party; despite having no formal post in the party structure, Cárdenas has lots of room for manoeuvring in terms of making public statements, forging alliances and promoting himself as a candidate.

2) *Internal factionalism.* A party of different currents, from its inception, the institutional design of the PRD has promoted the formation of groups. According to its by-laws, currents are not only recognized, but can also publicly disagree with leadership bodies and are proportionally represented in the National Council.³ Thus, the currents have become the main mechanism whereby individuals and factions occupy party

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posts, and their formal recognition has fostered factional behavior, despite the fact that their original purpose was to seek internal balance.

3) *Lack of discipline.* The lack of respect and agreement about the results of internal elections for leadership posts is clear evidence of the PRD’s lack of discipline. Questioning the outcome of internal processes, which in 1999 led to the cancelation of Amalia García’s election as party president, and the continual denunciation of irregularities have become the norm inside the party.

4) *Electoral zigzags and the lack of electoral homogeneity nationwide.* This was evident once again in the 2003 federal elections. Just one example is sufficient to illustrate the party’s electoral instability: in elections for federal deputies, in 1991, the PRD received 8 percent of the vote nationwide; in 1994, 17 percent; in 1997, 26 percent; in 2000, 18 percent; and in 2003, 18 percent.

Thus, in a context of low levels of institutionalization, it is not surprising that the party is facing such a severe crisis. However, perhaps the surprise is that the crisis has been sparked by being immersed in cases of corruption.

THE INTERNAL GROUPS

Inside the PRD, a large number of explicitly established groups exist, as was already mentioned, to attain posts inside the party rather than to express programmatic differences. Today, the following are some of the most important:

- *The New Left*, created by Jesús Ortega and Jesús Zambrano, which also includes current PRD General Secretary Carlos Navarrete.
- *The New Sun Forum*, represented by Amalia García.
- *The Democratic Left Current*, which includes René Bejarano and Dolores Padierna. This group had control over Mexico City’s Legislative Assembly and maintains important links with the powerful social movement Neighborhood Assembly.
- *The Civics*, which includes Mario Saucedo and the *Insurgent Grassroots Movement*.
- *The Political Action Group*, led by Higinio Martínez.
- *Unity and Renovation*, created in February of this year, which included Rosario Robles before she resigned from the party. It includes Leonel Godoy, Pablo Gómez, Graco Ramírez, members of the Democratic Left Current and the Civics, among others. Although its members said they did not aim to foster any particular candidate, it is clear they

intend to support Cárdenas in his bid for the presidency.⁴

This diversity of groups and factions does not correspond to programmatic diversity. Nevertheless, inside the PRD there are two broad currents that, despite not being formally organized, represent two different views of the kind of party they want in organizational and programmatic terms. These points of view were manifested in the 2002 internal elections for party president, when Rosario Robles and Higinio Martínez ran against Jesús Ortega and Raymundo Cárdenas.

The first position reproduces the discourse for self-consumption that reiterates the artificial, worn-out opposition between neoliberalism and nationalism, backs the leadership of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and favors a party-movement model that conceives of the PRD as an instrument of society, or better stated, of social organizations. This is the vision of Rosario Robles, and, in general of PRDers close to Cárdenas.⁵

The other broad current, made up mainly of the members of the New Left, but also supported by Amalia García, fights for the creation of a modern left party and the renovation of its leaderships, pointing toward a citizens' electoral party prepared to govern. This current has emphasized the need to totally revamp the PRD, modifying by-laws, limiting the currents⁶ and changing internal mechanisms for selecting leaders and candidates.⁷

After the recent scandals, it is to be expected that certain internal readjustments will occur and possibly the New Left will be strengthened because of the discredit accruing to the first current and the exit of Rosario

PRD VOTE COUNT IN ELECTIONS FOR FEDERAL DEPUTIES (2000 AND 2003)		
STATE	2000 (%)	2003 (%)
Aguascalientes	8.39	7.05
Baja California	9.23	6.58
Baja California Sur	39.58	44.99
Campeche	15.98	2.61
Chiapas	27.11	21.70
Chihuahua	7.59	6.48
Coahuila	9.57	6.30
Colima	12.89	12.48
Durango	12.79	4.12
Guanajuato	8.17	12.72
Guerrero	38.49	39.38
Hidalgo	19.27	17.15
Jalisco	8.10	6.83
Mexico City's Federal District	30.60	44.59
Michoacán	38.85	36.29
Morelos	20.03	20.74
Nayarit	19.16	10.63
Nuevo León	6.96	2.19
Oaxaca	25.64	18.43
Puebla	13.11	7.91
Querétaro	7.72	7.97
Quintana Roo	20.92	8.03
San Luis Potosí	9.63	8.86
Sinaloa	15.51	12.78
Sonora	16.19	11.48
State of Mexico	20.67	24.34
Tabasco	36.52	37.71
Tamaulipas	9.14	7.86
Tlaxcala	27.57	33.40
Veracruz	22.67	12.42
Yucatán	4.17	5.41
Zacatecas	33.70	46.81
Total	18.68	18.24
Source: The author, using data for 2000 from Juan Reyes del Campillo, "2 de julio: una elección por el cambio," <i>El Cotidiano</i> no. 104, published by the Autonomous Metropolitan University, Atzacapotzalco campus (Mexico City), November-December 2000, pp. 5-15, and for 2003, from "Balance del proceso electoral de 2003" (Mexico City: 2003).		

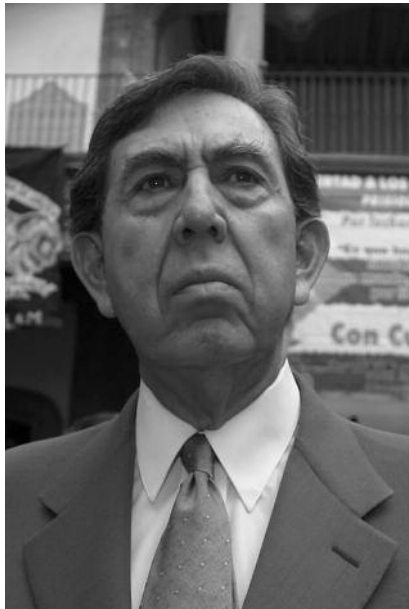
Robles and René Bejarano from the PRD. The New Left would be the most appropriate group to truly re-found or revamp the party.

POSSIBLE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES AFTER THE SCANDALS

The strength that López Obrador's candidacy was gaining for 2006 has been dealt a blow by the scandals involving several members of his administration. Just how badly Mexico City's mayor will be affected by this in the long run is still to be determined, and we will have to wait for the results of the police investigations. For the time being, several things should be taken into account: López Obrador's irresponsible reply to the corruption of PRD officials and members in Mexico City, the fact that he has maintained a high approval rating despite this and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas's positioning as moral leader of the party.

López Obrador has taken a defensive position and, separating himself from any relationship with René Bejarano, Fernando Ponce and Carlos Ahumada, has denounced the videos as part of a plot to finish him politically.⁸ Instead of taking on the responsibility for the corrupt acts of some of his administration's officials and directly dealing with the issue by being accountable to the public, he has centered his tactic on the hypothesis that a plot has been hatched by "the state apparatus and the right wing." López Obrador continues to see himself as a leader of the opposition, not someone holding office.

Nevertheless, the 13-point drop in his popularity is not catastrophic, given the magnitude of the problem. Accord-



Juan Pablo Zamora/Cuartoscuro

Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas may run for president a fourth time.

ing to a phone survey by Mexico City daily *Milenio* March 4, 69 percent of those polled thought López Obrador was a good mayor and that the entire matter was a strategy to discredit him.⁹ This indicates that despite everything, he continues to have a good image and credibility for an important sector of the citizenry. How can it be explained that he maintains his lead in the popularity polls despite not having kept his promise of honesty? This is probably due to the fact that the public's perception does not change very rapidly, and the theory of the plot may seem less costly to them. Taking this into account and supposing that Mexico City's mayor may come out of the whole mess clean, he still may be the PRD's candidate in 2006.

For his part, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas has once again situated himself as the squeaky-clean moral leader of the PRD, stating unambiguously (in contrast to López Obrador) that those who have engaged in reprehensible behavior have no place inside the party and support-

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ing disciplinary action against his old ally, Rosario Robles. He has insisted that the PRD must reaffirm its commitment to the fight against corruption, which would seem to strengthen him as a possible candidate for 2006.¹⁰

THE PRD AND 2006

The PRD will face the 2006 elections amidst the worst crisis in its history, a crisis that will be very difficult to overcome even if it revamps itself entirely. Until now, the possible candidates continue to be the same: one who, paradoxically, may either take the party to the presidency or to disaster, and the other, who, despite having more moral authority, would again put the PRD in third place among the voters.

As its past shows, by itself the PRD does not have sufficient electoral support to win a presidential election through mere organizational strength, above all taking into account that candidates are increasingly important in

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Leonardo Carza Treviño/Cuartoscuro

Ricardo Monreal, current governor of Zacatecas, is also in the running for the PRD nomination.

voters' decisions. The 2003 elections clearly showed that this party has consistent influence in a handful of economically and socially diverse states: Baja California Sur, Chiapas, Mexico City, Guerrero, the State of Mexico, Michoacán, Morelos, Oaxaca, Tabasco, Tlaxcala and Zacatecas (see table). In several other states it is practically non-existent. In 2003, repeating its prior showing, it received less than eight percent of the vote in nine states, among them Aguascalientes, Baja California, Nuevo León and Chihuahua. The difference in vote counts by state is of note, indicating a lack of homogeneity nationwide.

Under these conditions, the PRD's prospects for 2006 are not good. Worse yet, the prospects for the party system as a whole are not good either. The events involving the PRD and some Mexico City officials uncover a more general problem that seems to affect all the parties and our system of representation. Despite the fact that the parties all have incentives to become

more institutional, since electoral legislation gives them a monopoly on political representation, they are still confronting serious difficulties in achieving that end. The general trend points to the establishment of parties without political accountability, whose elites seem to act without regard to the demands and sensibilities of the public. For that reason, the crisis the PRD is going through not only affects it directly, but also the system of representation as a whole, public morals and the public trust in institutions and their representatives. Besides damaging the quality of our democracy, the crisis in the PRD will leave a good number of leftist voters with no political option in the next elections, and, therefore, without representation. **MM**

NOTES

¹ See the studies by Alejandro Moreno, *El votante mexicano. Democracia, actitudes políticas y conducta electoral* (Mexico City:

Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2003) and Beatriz Magaloni, "El voto estratégico: racionalidad individual, ordenamiento de preferencias y multidimensionalidad," Carlos Elizondo Meyer-Serra and Benito Nacif Hernández, comps., *Lecturas sobre el cambio político en México* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica/ CIDE, 2002), pp. 238-254.

² A series of scandals broke out in March 2004 when videotapes were aired on television showing party members and Mexico City government officials receiving large sums of money from a local businessman, setting off what is perhaps the most profound crisis in the history of the PRD. These scandals involve some of the PRD's most prestigious political figures and compromise the possibilities for success of the party's best bet for the candidacy in the 2006 presidential elections, Mexico City Mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador. [Editor's Note.]

³ Article 10, Sections 4 and 12. *Estatutos del PRD* (Mexico City: PRD, 1998), pp. 14 and 16.

⁴ "Los grupos del PRD," *Reforma* (Mexico City), 11 March 2004, and Aminadab Pérez Franco, "Implicaciones de los videos de corrupción en el Distrito Federal: mucho de qué preocuparse," *Boletín* 50, <http://www.fundación-christlieb.org.mx/coyuntura/boletin50-1.htm>.

⁵ Rosario Robles, Carlos Imaz, et al., "Las tareas del PRD," *Coyuntura* 98 (Mexico City: PRD, June-July 2000), pp. 50-52.

⁶ Although it should be said that the recently created Unity and Renovation proposes defining currents' obligations.

⁷ "2 de julio: balance y perspectivas," *Coyuntura* 98 (Mexico City: PRD, June-July 2000), pp. 39-49.

⁸ These three individuals are implicated in the corruption scandals: René Bejarano had been Mayor López Obrador's main assistant; Carlos Ahumada is the businessman seen giving him money; and Gustavo Ponce was Mexico City's Finance Minister. Ahumada and Ponce are currently wanted by the police. [Editor's Note.]

⁹ María de las Heras, "La popularidad de AMLO cae trece puntos," *Milenio* (Mexico City), 8 March 2004, p. 12.

¹⁰ Alberto Aguirre and Daniel Pensamiento, "Exige Cárdenas aplicar castigos," *Reforma* (Mexico City), 8 March 2004, p. 1.