

The Opposition Alliance

Obstacles and Prospects

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INTRODUCTION

The possibility of forging an opposition alliance for the 2000 presidential elections has posed a series of questions about the prospects for a coalition between Mexico's Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and National Action Party (PAN) and the possible impact on the party system itself. Among these questions: What stands in the way of the coalition? What vision of democracy is at play in the debate around the opposition coalition? What impact would a joint candidate have on the electorate?

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What would the prospects be for a "multi-color" government if the opposition coalition won?

These are some of the questions I will take up in this article.

REASONS FOR THE ALLIANCE

A federal electoral coalition between right and left in Mexico would be unprecedented.

A few local experiences have been the exception in the political life of the PRD and the PAN. In 1991, the PAN and the PRD, together with the now defunct



Ramón Cavallo/magdalena

The leaders and negotiators of the parties that tried to forge the alliance.

Mexican Democratic Party (PDM), supported Salvador Nava's bid for the governor's seat. Nava was a respected local leader with no partisan allegiance, who was able to build bridges among the different parties. In the July 4, 1999, local elections in the state of Nayarit, the PRD and the PAN, together with the Green Ecologist Party of Mexico (PVEM) and the Labor

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Party (PT), formed the "Alliance for Change" coalition that ran joint candidates in the gubernatorial, mayoral and state Chamber of Deputies races. The alliance's victorious gubernatorial candidate was former

Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) member, Antonio Echevarría. This win has been cited as a determining factor in the decision of the national party leaderships in initiating more formal talks on the possibility of an alliance for the 2000 presidential elections.¹

These negotiations are a novelty, but they still have borne no fruit. What is the motivation behind them?

At the heart of the proposal to form an opposition alliance is the question of the transition to democracy. For party leaderships and some intellectuals, Mexico's transition process is still inconclusive because federally there has been no partisan alternating in office. The argument most often heard is that if on a local level parties' alternating in office is a sign that the transition is underway, the same is needed federally to prove that the transition has been completed.² The only objective of an alliance of the left and the right would be to defeat the PRI and thus complete the transition. Once the PRI lost the presidency, it would be forced to compete in equal terms.³

The coalition does not seem to have any other goal than defeating the PRI. The PAN and the PRD conceive of the 2000 elections as a plebiscite in which they would invite the population to declare itself in favor or against the PRI.

Outside this goal, the parties share little common ground, a fact reflected in their negotiations over the last few months.

THE DEBATE

The central point of the PRD-PAN negotiations has been the mechanism for selecting the presidential candidate, although they have also touched on the coalition platform and the way in which the cabinet should be chosen.

Initially, the PAN said it would agree to an alliance only if its candidate headed it up under its political platform.⁴ Later, its leaders proposed picking a candidate by opinion poll.⁵

The PRD has rejected opinion polls as a method for picking the presidential candidate and has proposed primary elections open to all voters. The PAN has definitively rejected primaries, arguing that they imply the risk of rival forces intervening in the process, alluding at the same time to their distrust of PRD members. According to the PAN, the recent PRD attempt to elect its party president brings into question its ability to carry out non-conflictive, clean primaries.

The two proposals, opinion polls or primaries, stem to a great degree from the political assessments of both parties and their presidential front runners. Recent opinion polls put Vicente Fox, the only real possible PAN candidate, way ahead of Mexico City Mayor Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the PRD front runner. A July opinion poll done by the Mexico City daily newspaper *Reforma* gives Fox 37 percent of the votes and Cárdenas only 12 percent.⁶ This would ensure Fox the candidacy. Cárdenas, on the other hand, is proposing primaries to gain time to recover public support.

Up to now, the candidate selection method continues to be the most conflictive point on the agenda and still has not been resolved. There does not seem to be much of a future for a third road since Cárdenas and the PRD have already stated

that primaries are the only democratic mechanism for picking the coalition candidate.⁷

The issues of the electoral platform and how to tailor a coalition government have been put on the back burner during the party negotiations. The little attention paid them also indicates that there are actually substantial differences. Initially, Fox proposed that there be no joint platform, but that each contender present his own program and the winner would have his program adopted as the coalition platform. Cárdenas, on the other hand, has insisted on a common platform being decided on first and proposed that it should deal with five issues: democracy, economic development, justice, peace and equity and sovereignty.

Finally, the PRD and the PAN have accepted that the coalition have a common platform and proposed that the president elect would pick a plural, inclusive cabinet, and that during the elections, a collegiate body be formed to ensure the implementation of the alliance's agreements.⁸

This apparent accord is still up in the air, however, since the platform has not yet been hammered out, nor a mechanism defined to pick a plural, inclusive cabinet. Would it imply an equal number of cabinet seats for all parties in the alliance? The central problem so far unresolved is what the coalition proposes to do if it wins the presidential election.

This dearth of definitions continues and, seemingly, the proposed alliance is confronted with insuperable obstacles.

THE OBSTACLES

The ideological factor is frequently mentioned as the basic obstacle to an alliance between the PRD and the PAN. Undoubtedly, these parties have sharp differences in matters of economic policy, differences that can be summed up in the former promoting state intervention and the latter trying to limit state participation in the economy. They

also differ on social questions such as abortion and sexuality. Nevertheless, ideology does not seem to be the central obstacle to an opposition alliance. As Leonardo Curzio says, the ideological debate has never been a central trait of our party system; partisan politics is more a matter of clans and personal loyalties than debates on the issues. We are far from the classical political system of Europe in which ideological tenets were for decades the crosscutting themes of partisan debate.⁹

The opposition coalition is inviable not for these reasons, but fundamentally because of the Fox and Cárdenas leaderships. The debate around the presidential candidate selection mechanism shows that what is at stake is the leadership of the two front runners. It would seem that each is willing to make a coalition as long as he is the nominee, which is why they have proposed different mechanisms for making the choice. In addition, the distrust between the party leaderships and memberships has to be taken into account.

Another obstacle is the kind of electoral base each party has. Are PRD and PAN voters respectively transferable? Can we really count on an opposition coalition winning a presidential election? These issues surely have a certain weight in the considerations of both party elites.

We do not have many studies on the profile of the Mexican electorate. Whether an independent opposition electorate really exists that would vote for the PAN or the PRD indistinctly depends on the data used to make the analysis. If we merely add up the vote counts of each party in the last federal election of 1997, the coalition would have a good chance of winning. Other data also supports the hypothesis that there is a pool of voters out there who would cast their ballot for any opposition party. The case of Baja California is paradigmatic:

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in 1988, Cárdenas received 37 percent of the state's votes and the PAN 24 percent; then, in the 1989 elections, the PAN won the governor's seat. Data like this is indicative of a volatile electorate that easily changes its vote from one opposition party to another. Nevertheless, other studies present a more complex view of the Mexican electorate.

One of the most detailed, careful analyses of public opinion and electoral preferences in Mexico is the book by Jorge I. Domínguez and James M. McCann, *Democratizing Mexico: Public Opinion and Electoral Choices* (Baltimore, London: John Hopkins University Press, 1996). Domínguez and McCann construct a model to explain electoral behavior based on an analysis of 1988 and 1991 Gallup polls and the vote counts in the 1988, 1991 and 1994 federal elections. According to this model, voters judge first of all the strength of the governing party and whether it will be able to develop the economy and maintain social peace. If they decide that the PRI is weak, a good number of voters will cast their ballots for an opposition party, whether left or right. A certain, lower, number of voters cast their ballots tactically, that is, on the basis of which opposition party they think has the best chance of beating the PRI.

Domínguez and McCann show that a sizeable portion of the Mexican electorate that votes for the opposition is consistent in identifying with certain left or right issues, for example, foreign investment and privatization. What would these non-tactical voters do when confronted with a joint opposition candidate? Would voters who agree with the privatization of the electricity industry vote for Cárdenas? An opposition alliance would leave a good part of the public without an electoral option.

RISKS AND COSTS

Up until now, the opposition alliance is only a promise. The negotiating commission continues to discuss the candidate selection method. Never-

theless, the key problem—which is not the central point on the negotiators' agenda—continues to be the kind of government that a coalition would form if it won the presidential elections. How would it pick the cabinet? What economic policy would it implement? What mechanisms would it set up to ensure its own cohesion and to deal with internal differences?

If different economic and social policies are not the PRD's and the PAN's main obstacle for establishing an electoral alliance, they are an impediment for a coalition government implementing minimally coherent economic and social policies. In the current legislature, the PAN and the PRD have clashed, for example, on the question of how to deal with the Savings Protection Bank Fund (Fobaproa). What could be expected from a "multi-colored" government? The lack of a shared platform brings with it the risk of ungovernability at a key moment in which democratic institutions have been gradually built up. A proposal like Cárdenas' to resolve differences in economic matters by referendum does not seem to be a way out.

The victory of an opposition coalition in a presidential election might solve the symbolic problem of the end of the transition. Nevertheless, it would come at a great price for the allies. A coalition would foster voter volatility and contribute to the weakening of party loyalties. This is not in the interests of any political party because it would make it more difficult for them to count on a stable electoral base.

The debate about the alliance shows that important sectors of the opposition (particularly in the PRD) do not seem to think the PRI would have a place in a democracy. The PRI has legitimate social and electoral support; it cannot at all be identified with a dictatorship. Democracy does not depend on a particular electoral outcome, but is a procedure, and the PRI could win in an election with real competition.

The PAN and the PRD already govern 11 out of 32 states; they have the majority in several state congresses and that of Mexico City and more than

half the seats in the federal Chamber of Deputies, and they hold innumerable city halls. It seems paradoxical that these parties are considering the possibility of an opposition alliance just when the conditions of party competition have improved substantially. In this context, the repeated denunciations of electoral fraud and the PRD slogan "Throw the PRI out of the National Palace" already sound anachronistic and hollow. Democratization has moved forward without a coalition. The fundamental issue in 2000 will be clean elections in which all the participants accept the results no matter who wins. ■■■

NOTES

¹ On September 26, an opposition alliance of the PAN, PRD, PT, and PVEM that ran long-time PAN member Juan Antonio García Villa for governor of Coahuila was defeated at the polls. This may well have influenced the definitive break-up of the alliance on September 28, when the PAN withdrew because it did not agree with the proposed procedures for choosing the presidential candidate. See box "Mexico's Opposition Alliance. A No-Go." [Editor's Note.]

² For this position, see Alberto Aziz's article "Una alianza para el futuro," in *La Jornada* (Mexico City), 3 August 1999, p. 5, and César Cansino's essay, "Crisis de partidos y cambios en el sistema de partidos: 1985-1997," César Cansino, comp., *Después del PRI. Las elecciones de 1997 y los escenarios de la transición en México* (Mexico City: Centro de Estudios de Política Comparada, 1998), pp. 47-74.

³ See, among others, statements by PRD governors in *La Jornada* (Mexico City), 9 March 1999, p. 5, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, *La Jornada* (Mexico City), 25 March 1999, p. 7 and PAN leader Diego Fernández de Cevallos, *La Jornada* (Mexico City), 3 August 1999, p. 6.

⁴ *La Jornada* (Mexico City), 9 July 1999, p. 7.

⁵ The candidate selection procedure was finally what determined the break-up of the alliance. See box "Mexico's Opposition Alliance. A No-Go." [Editor's Note.]

⁶ Quoted by Héctor Aguilar Camín in his article, "La alianza," *La Jornada* (Mexico City), 9 August 1999, p. 19. In addition, a *Reforma* poll published September 28, which asked "Who should be the alliance candidate?" put Vicente Fox ahead of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (60 percent to 19 percent, respectively). [Editor's Note.]

⁷ "Mensaje a la Nación. Coalición por la democracia, la soberanía y la ley," *La Jornada* (Mexico City), 29 July 1999, p. 7.

⁸ See box "Mexico's Opposition Alliance. A No-Go," p. 12.

⁹ Leonardo Curzio, "Coalición opositora: ¿Ariel o Calibán?," *Voz y Voto 77* (Mexico City), July 1999, pp. 12-17.

