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## **Analysis: Divided Democratic Revolution Party Reaches a Crossroads**

*by Guest*

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By John Ross

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On the second Sunday in July, the left-center Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) made history when it staged the first primary election ever to be held on Mexican soil. The significance of the primary as a democratic milestone in Mexico appears to have escaped the attention of most of the Mexican public. More importantly, the primary election exposed deep divisions within the PRD organization in the west-central state of Michoacan, and even greater divisions within the national party structure. At stake in the primary was the PRD nomination for governor of Michoacan, the birthplace of party founder Cuauhtemoc Cardenas. Competing for the nomination were former federal senator Roberto Robles Garnica and current Sen. Cristobal Arias, a one-time PRD candidate for governor, whom backers claim was cheated out of victory by a tainted 1992 vote count.

The primary was a departure from the traditional top-down political structure advocated by the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), in which candidates for public office, from mayor to the president, have traditionally been designated from on high. In the case of the nation's 31 governors, the selection of candidates from the PRI has usually been made by the Mexican president. In the case of the president, the outgoing president chooses his own successor through heavily-veiled rituals known as the "dedazo" or "fingerpoint," and the "destape" or "uncovering."

The PRD's two gubernatorial candidates in Michoacan used traditional electoral campaign strategies, covering walls of buildings with snappily-designed advertisements, buying radio and television time, feeding the local political gossip columns, and attacking each other relentlessly in stump speeches. An interesting fact about the race was that both Arias and Robles are connected to Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, who won Michoacan by a landslide in the 1988 presidential elections, the PRD's most important electoral victory ever. Arias a former PRI director joined the Cardenas team when the latter was the PRI governor of Michoacan (1980-86). Arias favors "dialogue" with the PRI, a position advocated by PRD president Porfirio Munoz Ledo, who is increasingly at odds with Cardenas.

Robles, also a former member of the PRI, was Cardenas's secretary of government and remains loyal to the former governor and twice-failed presidential candidate. On July 9, more than 160,000 ballots were cast in 108 out of Michoacan's 113 municipalities. The other five municipalities were considered "too dangerous" to hold a PRD campaign, since they are located in a region where many

members of the party have been killed. About 76 PRD members have lost their lives in Michoacan political conflicts since the party was founded in 1988. When the dust had cleared, Arias claimed 95,000 votes, topping Robles by a considerable margin. But the fireworks did not end with the vote count. Echoing PRD challenges in the past six Michoacan elections, albeit usually lodged against the PRI, Robles accused his opponent of stealing ballot boxes, burning votes, and employing coercive tactics of caciques or rural bosses. Robles also claimed victory, said he would not rest until Arias was driven from the PRD, and bitterly joked that if, by some stroke of misfortune, Arias won the general election Nov. 12, he would be "worse than the worst PRI governor" Michoacan has ever had.

For his part, Arias took a more conciliatory stance, calling for unity in his party's bid for its first governorship. "The time has come for a PRD governor," said Arias, arguing that the economic crisis that has gripped Mexico for most of 1995 would result in a defeat of the PRI in November. In some ways, Arias's theory is not far-fetched, since the PRI has lost three gubernatorial races to Mexico's other major opposition party, the PAN, this year. On the other hand, the virtual disappearance of the PRD from Mexico's electoral map in 1995 is somewhat surprising, given the economic collapse caused by the neoliberal policies advocated by the PRI (and the PAN). The party played no significant role in 1995 state elections in Jalisco, Guanajuato, Yucatan, Durango, Chihuahua, and Baja California, this year. All those elections were fiercely contested by the PRI and the PAN. Nonetheless, Michoacan is considered the "cradle" of the PRD and could reverse the left-center party's failing fortunes.

PRI victories in the state in recent local elections have been crafted by huge infusions of funds for public works projects, a resource constricted recently by the country's deep economic recession. An Arias victory in Michoacan in November would give the opposition the governorship of three contiguous states (Guanajuato and Jalisco are both ruled by the PAN) in the strategically-placed "Bajio" region, where so much of Mexican history has been forged. In interviews with the Latin America Data Base, PRD supporters expressed mixed views about the primary election.

One PRD voter, Jose Mendoza Lara, expressed satisfaction that party supporters and not the hierarchy had the final say in the selection of the PRD's gubernatorial candidate for the November elections. "What other party would have allowed this," he said. On the other hand, another PRD supporter, Pepe Morales, pointed to the past relationship of both candidates to the PRI. "The candidates stink," he said. "They are both classic caudillos who have always fought to control the party here." Indeed, Robles and Arias last tussled in April for domination of the PRD state committee, with their proxies taking turns locking opponents out of party offices. Morales said the effort of Arias and Robles to control the party tends to keep "new blood" from taking a leadership position in the Michoacan PRD.

"You have to line up with one or the other or you can't even get in the door," said Morales. "It's just like in the PRI." The heated Michoacan primary exposed deep and perhaps unbridgeable rifts within the "Party of the Aztec Sun" (as the PRD is known), ahead of its Aug. 23-27 national congress at the resort of Oaxtepec in Morelos state. However, the differences between Arias and Robles are small when compared to the ongoing rift between PRD leaders Cardenas and Munoz Ledo. Munoz Ledo is currently the PRD's president. Cardenas, on the other hand, holds no official party posts but (as party founder) is considered the "moral authority" of the PRD.

Both Cardenas and Munoz Ledo are backed by multiple, inter-connected factions, and the decision-making process in the PRD structure is brokered through arrangements between these factions. The PRD itself grew from a coalition of dissatisfied PRI members (including Cardenas and Munoz Ledo) and members of organizations with at least a dozen leftist tendencies. The new coalition used the registration of the Mexican Socialist Party (PSM) itself an amalgamation of four parties to win a place on the ballot in the 1988 presidential elections.

The varying viewpoints of the PRD factions are reflected in the composition of its current membership. One faction, known as the "trisecta," is headed by PRD national secretary Mario Saucedo, a one-time urban guerrilla. This faction, considered the most radical, coincides with (but does not necessarily follow) Cardenas's position. The Cardenas position is also supported by popular Tabasco leader Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who has threatened to distance himself from the PRD if the party leadership ignores his claims on the governorship of his state in favor of dialogue with the PRI. On the other hand, to varying degrees a number of other factions back Munoz Ledo's plan to seek negotiations with the PRI. Several PRD legislators have openly supported this position, including federal Deputies Jesus Ortega and Jesus Zambrano, and Sen. Heberto Castillo.

Members of these factions also back Munoz Ledo's plan to create a sort of "Rainbow Coalition," in a strategy similar to the one advocated by former US presidential candidate Jesse Jackson. Indeed, the rift between Cardenas and Munoz Ledo is also reflected in specific issues related to the relationship between the PRD and the PRI. For example, last January Munoz Ledo signed Zedillo's National Political Accord over Cardenas's strenuous public objections. Additionally, Munoz Ledo has staunchly opposed Cardenas's call for Zedillo to resign in favor of a government of "national salvation."

Cardenas has linked his call for Zedillo's resignation to the economic bail-out agreement signed by the president with the US and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). According to Cardenas, this agreement compromises national sovereignty by giving the US and the IMF greater control over Mexico's economic decisions. On the other hand, Munoz Ledo has expressed strong reservations about a "national salvation government," since this would open the door for an administration that leans further to the right than Zedillo. More importantly, Munoz Ledo who is considered by many as a consummate opportunist views Zedillo's weakness as an unprecedented opportunity. "You can win concessions from weak presidents," he said. He reiterated his viewpoint in a recent interview, in which he urged the PRD to begin negotiations with the PRI now rather than later, since an economic recovery could strengthen the bargaining position of Zedillo and the PRI. The future of the PRD has also been the subject of debate in other circles. For example, Marco Rascon, a PRD leader in Mexico City, is concerned that a deal between the PRD and the PRI could compromise his party's push for open democracy.

"The choice is not really yes or no, a dialogue with the PRI or not, but to keep up the pressure from below for change," said Rascon in a column in the daily newspaper La Jornada. "The outcome of this debate is a life or death issue for my party." Meantime, the comparisons of the PRD as a party "just like the PRI" has come from a variety of quarters. As part of its strategy to win supporters who want

change, the PAN has turned the tables on the PRD and has emphasized the party's similarities to the ruling PRI.

By far the strongest criticism of the PRD, however, has come from Subcomandante Marcos, a chief spokesperson for the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN). Marcos, who offered the criticism of the PRD directly to Cuauhtemoc Cardenas during a meeting between the two leaders in May 1994, is considered a leading voice for the new "partyless" Mexican left.

Ironically, after six years of rocky relationships with the PRI, the PRD led in part by Munoz Ledo's efforts to some extent has found a warmer working relationship with the ruling party. For example, in June of this year, 40 PRI and PRD legislators signed a joint statement directed at their party leaders, urging a resumption of "dialogue", the reactivation of last January's stillborn "national political accord," and the launching of fresh negotiations towards definitive electoral reform. The suggestion of dialogue by a faction of the PRD appears to be convenient for the PRI, whose relationship with the PAN has soured. In a speech to business leaders in July of this year, President Ernesto Zedillo stressed the historical importance of the Mexican left, apparently rejecting the bipartisanship that won the PAN political power during the administration of his predecessor, Carlos Salinas. Zedillo's complimentary phrases were in stark contrast to the Salinas approach (which included political violence that resulted in the killings of hundreds of PRD rank and filers) and has sharply divided the PRD into camps favoring or rejecting continued dialogue with the PRI.

Still, the PRI and the PRD may not be able to reach any sort of meaningful working relationship unless the governing party agrees to investigate allegations of massive fraud by its candidate Roberto Madrazo Pintado in the gubernatorial election in Tabasco in November 1994. Furthermore, the PRD has also gone on record as fully supporting the PAN in its charges that the PRI was engaged in massive irregularities in the gubernatorial elections in Yucatan in May of this year. In addition to huddling with their PRI counterparts, PRD legislators have also been holding meetings with PAN leaders since January at Mexico City's lofty Chapultepec Castle, reaching agreement on a reported 139 points of electoral reform. The possibility of a PAN-PRD alliance has been advanced by Guanajuato's new governor Vicente Fox, a leading contender for the PAN's presidential nomination in the year 2000.

Ironically, Cardenas, who publicly complains about continued PRD liaisons with the PRI, has not been as critical of similar contacts with the PAN. Even as the PRD performs a slow tango with the PRI, the party's left-center space on Mexico's political spectrum is being crowded from all sides. Directly to its right, PRI deputy Oscar Levin (an ex follower of Maoist doctrines) seeks "to amplify the center" and thinks his party must hold the government accountable, rather than act as its "accomplice." Levin is now associated with Manuel Camacho Solis, one-time Mexico City mayor, Chiapas peace negotiator, and rejected 1994 PRI presidential hopeful. Camacho, who has written a political manifesto and hinted that he might launch his own center-left party, is backed by the influential San Angel group, a "plural" caucus of intellectuals and politicians that came together in 1994 to pave the way for a "government of transition."

However, the PRI's big presidential victory obviated the need for such a "plural" formulation. Also, from within the PRI, elements of the old guard, or "dinosaur" wing, appear to be looking

left. Sen. Guillermo Carbajal has been particularly critical of the government's neoliberal project. Bitter at ceding ground in state elections to the PAN, Mexico's economic difficulties have turned some "dinosaurs" against Zedillo's technocrats and generated support for the sort of state-based centralized solutions endorsed by Cardenas. Meanwhile, new players are lining up to the left of the PRD. The Labor Party (PT), a regional party with strong support in Durango state, backs its leftist rhetoric with opposition votes by its 10 representatives in the Chamber of Deputies.

Ironically, the PT which seems genuinely determined to become the socialist alternative in Mexican politics was created by the PRI to undercut the PRD. To the left of the PT, the EZLN is conducting a national and international plebiscite that will influence its future as a political force, either as an independent force, or in coalition with other leftist organizations. In reality, the EZLN already directs a political organization, the National Democratic Convention (CND), and is closely connected to Chiapas's "government-in-rebellion," headed by non-aligned "civil" leader Amado Avendano. Avendano, a newspaper publisher, represented the PRD in the Chiapas gubernatorial elections in 1994.

The CND itself claims the allegiance of three federal deputies (selected on the PRD slate). One CND deputy, Rosario Ibarra, was twice the presidential candidate of the Trotskyist Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT). The PRT recently dissolved, apparently in anticipation of the EZLN's re-incarnation as a political organization. "The party system in Mexico is dead," writes historian Antonio Garcia de Leon, a CND ideologue, who sees a coalition of civil organizations as the key to change. "The crisis must be resolved from below, it can no longer be settled by deals among party directorates."

-- End --