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Analysis: Governing PRI Struggles with Calls for Internal Democracy

by Guest

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Editor's note: Negotiations over political reform among Mexico's major parties broke down in early November, when the three major opposition parties refused to accept the proposal of the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) for campaign expenditures. The inability of the leaders of the four parties to reach consensus caused the proposed political reforms to automatically be forwarded to the Chamber of Deputies, which is dominated by the PRI (see SourceMex, 11/06/96). In the legislature, PRI members proceeded to dismantle many of the reforms negotiated by the leaders of the PRI and the three opposition parties. "Better that we do this alone than with bad company," said one PRI deputy, defending his party's decision to unilaterally enact the reforms. The PRI members in the Senate are expected to take the same action as their counterparts in the Chamber of Deputies before the end of November. Some members of the opposition parties say the PRI decided to take control of the reform process as "revenge" against the opposition Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) and the National Action Party (PAN) for beating out the PRI in key municipal and state legislative races in the states of Coahuila, Mexico, and Hidalgo on Nov. 10 (see SourceMex, 11/13/96).

The following article takes a critical look at the PRI, starting with the party's national convention in September 1996.

Mexico City, Nov. 10. Nearly 4,000 delegates to the 17th National Congress of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) on Sept. 21-22 called for the expulsion of former president Carlos Salinas from party ranks. Salinas's flawed economic policies plunged Mexico into the deepest downturn since the early 1930s and his alleged connections to the assassination of 1994 party presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio has made his membership a continuing sore point for rank-and-file members of the PRI. The PRI congress was billed as a watershed in the party's nearly 67-year history. For once, the members seemed prepared to defy top-down leadership and bring a semblance of democracy to one of the longest-lived political dynasties on Earth. But despite efforts from the floor to promote democratic reform, the scenario did not quite live up to such grandiose expectations. Hours after the condemnation of the former president, the delegates were on their feet, screaming for more heads.

Most significantly, delegates called for the ouster of Ramiro de la Rosa, maverick leader of the party's youth wing. De la Rosa's crime: praising the governor of Guanajuato, a member of the opposition National Action Party (PAN), for his political tolerance. Despite his youth, de la Rosa

has a lengthy history of dissidence within the ranks of the PRI. On the other hand, he has refused to follow the lead of former PRI heavies Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, Porfirio Munoz Ledo, and Manuel Camacho Solis, who have abandoned the party. Munoz Ledo and Camacho Solis were once presidents of the PRI. The week after the PRI congress, de la Rosa's "Democracy 2000" offices were padlocked by PRI honchos and the electricity cut off. So much for the PRI's newly discovered vocation for democracy. Indeed, the 17th Congress had twice been canceled because PRI leaders feared rank-and-file fireworks. Delegates not only called for Salinas's ouster, but sought to bar party newcomers and those who had never run for elected office from key nominations. Another important faction, PRI women, demanded that party leaders guarantee women 30% of all the party's candidacies.

Similarly, oil workers and nationalist politicians wanted a commitment from President Ernesto Zedillo to cancel the proposed privatization of the petrochemical sector of PEMEX, the national oil monopoly. But in standard PRI style, almost no faction of the party got what it sought. For example, Salinas's expulsion was referred to the PRI's "Honor and Justice Committee" for consideration. Also, the proposed 30% quota for women candidates was diluted to a PRI "future goal." Finally, the cancellation of the privatization of the country's petrochemical plants was rejected by the PRI leadership and their counterparts in government, despite near-unanimous approval for a rank-and-file resolution to that effect. As a compromise, the Zedillo administration in October sent legislation to the Mexican Congress calling for 49% private ownership of existing petrochemical facilities and 100% of any new installations built. This measure was dutifully approved by the PRI's legislative majority (see SourceMex, 10/23/96).

Many of those now voting up the privatization measure had been vociferous critics of privatization at the party congress. There was one surprising reform that the membership temporarily succeeded in imposing upon the top of the ticket. This reform stipulates that PRI presidential and gubernatorial candidates must demonstrate at least ten years membership in the party and must have previously won election to another political office. The resolution was seen as a slap at the last three "technocrat" Mexican presidents, including President Zedillo. Had such rules been in place previously, Miguel de la Madrid, Carlos Salinas, and Zedillo would have all been barred from running for the presidency. Although the measure was strongly approved by PRI delegates, the restrictions do not please all PRI leaders. And, with crucial 1997 mid-term elections in the pipeline including the selection of the first-ever governor of Mexico City insiders predict that the new rule will soon be suspended.

Since he took office, Zedillo has kept and even publicly sought "a safe distance" between the president and the party he is supposed to command. On the other hand, it is doubtful that the PRI can survive as an entity independent of the state and the all-powerful presidency that has sustained it for so many decades. Virtually all legislation that moves to the Congress is the result of presidential directive, and criticism of the chief executive by members of his party is never voiced. Zedillo's appearance at the PRI congress, complete with all the hoopla of mandatory adulation, belied his pretensions of maintaining a "safe distance" from the PRI. Soon after the party congress, Zedillo chose to impose his own line on the rebellious rank-and-file members through the appointment of close ally and former interior secretary Esteban Moctezuma as the PRI's ideological director. Moctezuma provides a counterbalance to the PRI's pragmatic president, Santiago Onate, once Carlos Salinas's chief of staff. According to political analyst Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, currently an

independent member of the Chamber of Deputies, PRI membership is more "an idiosyncrasy than an ideology."

Aguilar Zinser is angry at the PRI for shutting down a congressional investigation into the state-run food distribution agency CONASUPO, which involved charges of improper payments authorized by Zedillo when he was Salinas's budget secretary. Zinser also charges that the PRI cannot be considered a political party because it has remained in power for 67 consecutive years. "Rather than a political party, it is the party of the state," he said. Nonetheless, an unexpected appointment by Zedillo at the outset of his administration has forced the PRI to behave something like a political party.

The selection of Antonio Lozano Gracia of the opposition PAN as attorney general has given PRI rank and file a perfect foil for attack. Lozano's failure to clear up the 1994 assassination of Colosio has spurred monthly demonstrations by party members, even though disputes among high-ranking members of the PRI are thought to be at the bottom of the Colosio assassination. Ironically, the PRI, which hardly ever stages protest demonstrations, is now leading a Mexico City legislative drive to bar protest marches in downtown Mexico City. The Mexican state party was founded in 1929 by Plutarco Elias Calles as his personal vehicle to retain power after his constitutional term as president expired. In the first four years of the existence of the Party of the National Revolution (PNR), Calles appointed four proxy presidents.

A decade later, at the height of his authority and following expropriation of Anglo-American oil monopolies, President Lazaro Cardenas converted the PNR into the Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM) and transformed its internal structure from a top-down one to a corporate directorate that included key sectors, such as labor and agriculture. Party membership, rather than being an individual choice, was mandated by the sector. In other words, workers and farmers were obligated to vote for the PRM or risk losing their job or their land. The PRM became the PRI in 1946 under President Miguel Aleman but retained sectoral representation as the basic underpinning of party organization. The PRI celebrated its 50th anniversary under that name earlier this year.

Although membership is now considered a matter of "free association," the corporate structure still remains the bedrock of party loyalty. Changing the PRI into a political force independent of the government has often been promised by party leaders. On March 6, 1994, Colosio called for just such a separation of the PRI and the government only to be gunned down 18 days later. In 1969, Carlos Madrazo, then president of the PRI, was killed in a mysterious airplane crash after barnstorming the country calling for democratic reform of the ruling party. Despite the lack of democratic change, the PRI has retained a relatively strong grip on power. After losing key local races, the PRI still managed to attract more than half the votes cast in the recent elections in Coahuila, Hidalgo, and Mexico state on Nov. 12. In October, the PRI won 54 out of 76 municipalities in the conflictive state of Guerrero. In 1995, the party took 45% of the popular vote in all state and local elections and early bets on 1997 federal mid-term balloting favor the official party. "Party democracy has never been critical to the success of the PRI steamroller," said Aguilar Zinser.

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