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First Mayoral Debate for Mexico City Scheduled for May 25

by LADB Staff

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In early May, leaders of the opposition Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) and the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) reached an agreement to sponsor a debate between their mayoral candidates. The election for mayor of Mexico City will be held on July 6, along with elections for the full Chamber of Deputies, a portion of the Senate, and several gubernatorial and state legislative posts.

According to the agreement, candidates Alfredo del Mazo of the PRI and Cuauhtemoc Cardenas of the PRD will hold a one- on-one debate on Sunday, May 25. Local leaders of the PRI, PRD, and the National Action Party (PAN) had originally agreed to hold a three-way debate on Sunday, May 17, but were unable to reach an agreement on the format of the debate and on other details.

The lack of agreement on the format for the May 17 debate led PRD and PRI leaders to seek a two-way debate between Cardenas and del Mazo, to be sponsored by the Camara Nacional de la Industria del Radio y la Television (CNIRT). The agreement on a two-way debate was reached by the Mexico City leaders of the two parties, Roberto Campa of the PRI and Armando Quintero of the PRD. Exclusion of PAN candidate Castillo draws bitter complaint The decision to exclude PAN candidate Carlos Castillo Peraza from the debate sparked immediate protests from the PAN candidate as well as the party's Mexico City leader Gonzalo Dimas Altamirano, who suggested the PRI and PRD were "afraid" to debate the issues with the PAN. "They are also cheating the citizens of Mexico City, who have expressed in recent polls a preference for a three-way debate," Castillo told the daily newspaper Excelsior.

According to a public opinion survey conducted by the polling company Bimsa in early May, 76% of respondents said a debate was the only way for voters to know the true stands of the candidates on the issues. Many respondents said they wanted the debates to focus on crime and on economic topics and not on the personal lives of the candidates. There was a twist of irony in the PAN's exclusion from the debate and the PRD's decision to seek a two-way debate. During negotiations on the format, PAN leaders had insisted on limiting the debate to the top three candidates, thereby excluding representatives from five other political parties.

On the other hand, the PRD had originally insisted on including all candidates in a major debate. In response to the PAN's complaint, Cardenas said it was not the PRD's intention to prevent Castillo from presenting his stance on the issues, but rather to organize a debate between the front-runners. "A little more than a month ago, it would have been desirable to hold a three-way debate," said Cardenas. "But polls show that voter preferences are leaning toward the PRD and the PRI." According to Cardenas, given the PAN's standing in the polls, there was concern that Castillo would be tempted to use the debates to launch direct attacks on his opponents and not debate the issues. "Castillo's game is no longer to win, but to stop my candidacy by any means possible and at any cost," said Cardenas.

Still, Cardenas suggested that Castillo should be allowed to hold one-on-one debates with himself and with del Mazo. "He would just have to wait his turn," said Cardenas. For his part, del Mazo told reporters that the PRI supports a three-way debate, but his party decided to accept the PRD's conditions so negotiations would not drag on further. According to del Mazo, PRI leaders will continue to work to convince the PRD to allow Castillo to participate in the debate on May 25.

One poll shows large lead for PRD candidate Cardenas

Meantime, recent public opinion polls have shown a wide discrepancy in voter preferences. One prominent and respected polling company, Indermec/Louis Harris, reinforced Cardenas's contention of high voter preference for the PRD. According to the Indermec/Harris survey, conducted in early May, 41% of respondents selected Cardenas over his opponents, a small increase from a previous poll in April that gave Cardenas 40% of the vote. The Indermec/Harris poll also showed Castillo in second place with 26% of the vote, followed by 21% for del Mazo.

Still, another poll conducted by Gabinete de Estudios de Opinion (GEO) in mid-April showed a very different standing for the candidates. The GEO poll gave 21.8% support to del Mazo, 21% to Castillo Peraza, and 19.5% to Cardenas (see SourceMex, 04/30/97). [Sources: Reuter, 05/12/97; Excelsior, 05/08/97, 05/09/97, 05/13/97, 05/14/97; The News, 05/09/97, 05/13/97, 05/14/97; Novedades, 05/09/97, 05/14/97; La Jornada, El Universal, 05/14/97]

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