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Governing PRI Announces Guidelines for Presidential Primary Election

by LADB Staff

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In mid-May, the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) approved guidelines for the party's first- ever presidential primary. The primary, scheduled for Nov. 7, 1999, will allow all registered voters in 300 electoral districts in 32 states, regardless of party affiliation, to vote for a candidate to represent the PRI in the 2000 election. PRI president Jose Antonio Gonzalez said the winner will be the candidate who gains a majority vote in the most districts, not the candidate who gets the most overall votes. He said the intent is to broaden participation from the party's grassroots supporters and prevent a divisive battle among potential candidates.

Interior Secretary Labastida announces candidacy

Voters are expected to choose from a crowded field, with several candidates already throwing their hats into the ring. Interior Secretary Francisco Labastida, considered one of President Ernesto Zedillo's closest aides, was the first to announce his intention to seek the nomination under the new PRI guidelines. Tabasco Gov. Roberto Madrazo, former Puebla governor Manuel Bartlett Diaz, and ex-PRI leader Humberto Roque Villanueva had already said they would seek the nomination before the guidelines were formulated.

Under the party guidelines, all Cabinet ministers, governors, and other high-level officials who intend to run in the primary must leave their positions by June 15 and register by July 15. This means that Social Development Secretary Esteban Moctezuma, Madrazo, and Gov. Miguel Aleman Velasco of Veracruz must tender their resignations if they intend to run in the primary. Foreign Relations Secretary Rosario Green and Social Security Director Genaro Borrego Estrada have also been mentioned as potential candidates. Bartlett and Madrazo have already spent considerable money on media campaigns.

Under the PRI's new rules, all candidates will have to stop all media advertising and other direct campaigning strategies until Aug. 1. Candidates will then be allowed to campaign until Oct. 30, a week before the primary. The guidelines also impose tight financial restrictions on the candidates, including campaign spending limits and a ban on the use of government funds for campaigns. This last measure is said to be aimed at Madrazo, who has been accused of using funds from the Tabasco state coffers to promote his candidacy. The decision to hold a primary to select the PRI candidate was part of Zedillo's strategy to push for electoral reforms in Mexico.

The primary ends the traditional "dedazo," whereby the sitting president appointed the party's next presidential candidate. "This is a huge change," political scientist Federico Estevez told the Los Angeles Times. "In terms of presidential politics in Mexico, this is a radical shift in the organization of elections. Some political analysts said the rules do not leave much opening for Zedillo to have a direct influence on the outcome of the primary. "If Zedillo would have wanted to personally

designate a candidate, why would he promote a process that makes manipulation so difficult?" said prominent political columnist Sergio Sarmiento.

Opposition parties remain skeptical

Still, members of the opposition parties were skeptical that Zedillo would remain on the sidelines. "I still think Zedillo will be the one who decides who's going to be the PRI candidate," said Mexico Mayor Cuauhtemoc Cardenas of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). Cardenas is favored to win the PRD presidential nomination over Deputy Porfirio Munoz Ledo, a former congressional leader.

Guanajuato Gov. Vicente Fox, considered the likely candidate for the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), echoed Cardenas' concerns that the PRI primary is nothing more than a charade to mask the pre-selection of Labastida. "I don't know why they are wasting their time," Fox told reporters. "Francisco Labastida is the official candidate."

But some analysts said the PRI had no choice but to hold a primary to revive the party's chances in the election. "This improves the PRI's chances, without question," said Roderic Ai Camp, a professor of government at Claremont McKenna College. "It shows that the PRI can sustain and revive itself and be victorious if it will just listen to its rank-and-file members."

Two public-opinion polls conducted in recent weeks show most possible PRI candidates will have difficulty winning a presidential race against Fox. One poll, conducted by Asociacion de Editores de los Estados (AEE) April 28-May 12, showed Fox leading in voter preference with more than 29% of the vote. The PRD's Cardenas came in second with 17% support, followed by PRI candidates Aleman with 13.5% and Labastida with 9.5%. Roberto Madrazo of the PRI and Diego Fernandez de Cevallos of the PAN each had slightly more than 8% support.

A poll conducted by Indermec Louis Harris in late April showed that Roberto Madrazo, who has already spent heavily on television advertising, would run a more competitive race against Fox than prominent PRI members Labastida and Aleman. PRI also sets rules for Mexico City mayoral primary. In addition to drafting guidelines for the presidential primary, the PRI executive committee also removed restrictions on selecting the party's candidate for mayor of Mexico City for a three-year term.

The selection will be held via an open vote on the same day as the presidential primary. This will ensure that the post is not awarded to one of the PRI candidates who fails to win the presidential nomination, party leaders said. The daily newspaper Excelsior said some PRI leaders are expected to urge Moctezuma Barragan to seek the Mexico City candidacy instead of the presidential post. "We are looking for a candidate with considerable pull," said Oscar Levin Coppel, a PRI member in the Mexico City legislative assembly (Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal, ALDF).

Other prospective candidates mentioned in connection with the mayoral primary are Sens. Maria de los Angeles Moreno and Fernando Solana Morales. (Sources: Reuters, 05/16-18/99; Spanish news service EFE, 05/17/99; Associated Press, 05/17/99, 05/18/99; San Jose Mercury News, The Dallas Morning News, Los Angeles Times, 05/18/99; El Universal, 05/16/99, 05/18/99, 05/19/99; Novedades,

05/17-19/99; The New York Times, Excelsior, La Jornada, El Economista, 05/18/99, 05/19/99; El Diario de Yucatan, 05/19/99; The News, 05/19/99)

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