

8-4-1999

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Opposition Parties Consider Common Presidential Candidate in 2000

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 1999-08-04

Mexico's opposition parties have taken major steps toward running a common candidate against the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in the 2000 presidential elections. In early August, representatives of the eight registered parties, who had been meeting over the past several weeks, announced they had agreed on a format to select a common candidate.

The coalition is led by the two largest opposition parties, the conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) and the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). The Partido del Trabajo (PT) and Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM), which are currently represented in the Chamber of Deputies, are also participating in the coalition. The alliance also includes the Partido del Centro Democratico (PCD) and three other minor parties. The PCD is the centrist party created by former Mexico City mayor and Chiapas peace negotiator Manuel Camacho Solis.

Coalition agrees on limited election to select candidate

While the parties have yet to work out details, leaders adopted a seven-point plan that includes a proposal to select the common candidate through voting in electoral districts or municipalities. The PRD had pushed for a full primary, while the PAN had proposed some sort of consultation. A common candidacy became a stronger possibility in early June when the PAN agreed in principle to explore a coalition as long as all the registered opposition parties could agree on a format to select a common candidate.

At that time, a coalition appeared unlikely because of wide philosophical differences between the two leading opposition parties, the PAN and the PRD. As recently as late July, PRD interim president Pablo Gomez and PAN Sen. Gabriel Jimenez Remus predicted that a coalition would not happen.

The July 4 gubernatorial elections in Nayarit and Mexico states provided additional impetus for the PAN to join a coalition. In the Nayarit election, the PAN and the PRD came together for the first time ever in a gubernatorial race to support the candidacy of Antonio Echeverria Dominguez. Echeverria handily defeated PRI candidate Jose Lucas Vallarta (see SourceMex, 1999-07-07). In the Mexico state election, the opposition parties were divided and failed to keep PRI candidate Arturo Montiel from winning the election by a few percentage points. Many political analysts suggested a common candidate could have defeated Montiel.

Meanwhile, the PAN and the PRD have also agreed to back a common candidate in the gubernatorial races in Coahuila state in September 1999 and in Chiapas state in August 2000. Sen. Juan Antonio Garcia Villa will represent the PAN, PRD, PT and PVEM in the Coahuila election scheduled for Sept. 26. In late July, the four parties formally agreed to back Sen. Pablo Salazar Mendiguchia as coalition candidate in the August 2000 gubernatorial race.

Vicente Fox or Cuauhtemoc Cardenas expected to lead coalition

The coalition for the 2000 presidential race will likely be led by Guanajuato Gov. Vicente Fox of the PAN or Mexico City Mayor Cuauhtemoc Cardenas of the PRD. Both candidates have announced they will leave their current positions in the coming weeks to campaign full time. The two candidates have already campaigned for their party's nomination for several months and have pushed their party's platform the PAN's free-market philosophy and the PRD's economic proposals centering on greater government control over the economy. But Fox has led Cardenas and three of the four PRI candidates in early public opinion polls and is considered the stronger of the two opposition candidates.

One poll conducted by Indermec-Louis Harris in July showed Fox could easily win the presidency if he ran as a representative of a coalition. The poll showed Fox could win the election handily in a three-way race if former PRI president Humberto Roque Villanueva or former Puebla governor Manuel Bartlett Diaz gained the PRI nomination. But the poll showed a tighter three-way race for Fox against former interior secretary and Sinaloa governor Francisco Labastida and could lose the election to Tabasco Gov. Roberto Madrazo Pintado, both of the PRI. The PRI is scheduled to hold a primary election on Nov. 7 to select its candidates for president and Mexico City mayor.

Recent polls show Madrazo leading Labastida in a tight race to gain the governing party's presidential nomination. The Indermec-Louis Harris poll showed Cardenas trailing Fox, Labastida, and Madrazo, but ahead of Roque and Bartlett. Still, despite his low standing in the polls, Cardenas has not conceded the election to Fox. "I am very optimistic of winning the coalition candidacy," said Cardenas, who has been selected as the presidential candidate for the PT but must still face a primary election within his own party against Deputy Porfirio Munoz Ledo.

PRI president Jose Antonio Gonzalez Fernandez acknowledged that his party would have to change its political strategy for the 2000 election if the opposition coalition becomes a reality. "We won't minimize the alliance, but we don't fear it either," said Gonzalez. But the PRI president disputed the results of recent polls, saying any of the four PRI candidates could beat either Fox or Cardenas.

PRD elects Sen. Amalia Garcia to lead the party

A common candidacy was one of the top priorities for newly elected PRD president Amalia Garcia Medina, who had pushed for the PAN to accept an open primary. Garcia defeated Sen. Felix Salgado Macedonio by a wide margin of 54% to 27% in balloting held in late July. This was the PRD's second attempt to hold an election for its officers. The party had to cancel the results of its first election in March because of complaints of massive fraud. The first election left the party deeply divided, with Garcia and former PRD secretary-general Jesus Ortega running a very close race (see SourceMex, 1999-03-24 and 1999-04-21).

Garcia's candidacy received a boost when Ortega and a third candidate, Mario Saucedo, decided not to run a second time. However, she still had to face fairly strong races from Salgado and Deputy Ifigenia Martinez. PRD election organizers said turnout was sparse, even though the vote was extended to members residing in the US cities of Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, and New York.

Voting was down from the March election, with only one-fourth the 2 million registered PRD voters participating in the process, party officials said.

Garcia will have to work hard to heal bitter divisions within the PRD, particularly the growing animosity between Cardenas and Munoz Ledo in the race to win the PRD's nomination. Munoz Ledo, who trails Cardenas in public-opinion polls, has increased his attacks on the Mexico City mayor. "Cardenas is stuck in backwardness and dogmatism," Munoz Ledo said in an interview with The New York Times in July. "He runs a terrible city government. He betrayed his friends who believe in a modern leftist party."

But Munoz Ledo's constant criticism of Cardenas has lost him some of his early supporters. "His unceasing attacks against the party and the mayor of Mexico City have been useless," said PRD Deputy Fernando Elia Hernandez. "He has only succeeded in gaining the animosity of PRD members." (Sources: Proceso, 07/11/99; The New York Times, 07/15/99, 07/27/99; The El Universal, 07/07/99, 07/27/99; The Dallas Morning News, The News, 07/27/99; Associated Press, 07/31/99, 08/01/99; Reuters, 07/26/99, 07/30/99, 08/02/99; La Jornada, 07/27-30/99, 08/02/99, 08/03/99; Excelsior, 07/27/99, 07/30/99, 08/02/99, 08/04/99; Novedades, 07/27/99, 07/30/99, 08/04/99; El Economista, 07/30/99, 08/02/99, 08/04/99)

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