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LADB Staff

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Primary Election for PRI Features Debate on Whether 'Dedazo' Still Exists

by LADB Staff

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On Aug. 1, the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) launched its first-ever presidential primary, pledging to overhaul the old political system and open the candidate-selection process to all Mexicans. The PRI announced it would open the process to all registered voters in Mexico in May of this year. The party set a primary election for Nov. 7 (see SourceMex, 1999-05-19).

Speaking at a rally to launch the campaign, PRI president Jose Antonio Gonzalez Fernandez declared the end of the "dedazo," the longstanding policy whereby the sitting president appoints the party's presidential candidate. "In the PRI, it's no longer one who decides," said Gonzalez Fernandez. "Millions of us will decide the name of the Mexican who will be the PRI candidate and surely president of Mexico." But the PRI's pledge to end the dedazo, or at least the perception of a dedazo, is easier said than done.

A wide perception exists among voters that President Ernesto Zedillo and the party hierarchy are putting their full support behind the campaign of his former interior secretary Francisco Labastida. But Gonzalez and other party officials have repeatedly denied that Zedillo has favored Labastida over other candidates. Labastida has also attempted to dispel the notion but without success since he has received endorsements from key players in the PRI structure such as Leonardo Rodriguez Alcaine of the Confederacion de Trabajadores de Mexico (CTM). "I'm a candidate by my own will and my own merits," Labastida told an audience at one of his campaign stops. "I want to be president with your vote."

The theory that a dedazo is still in place is heavily promoted by Labastida's rivals, particularly Tabasco Gov. Roberto Madrazo Pintado. Madrazo, who led Labastida by 10 percentage points in a poll published by the firm Louis Harris-Indermec in late July, has centered his campaign on attacking Labastida as the candidate of Zedillo and the PRI establishment. Television advertisements cause controversy Television advertisements produced by the Madrazo campaign featured the slogan "dale un madrazo al dedazo."

The slogan, which literally means "knock out the dedazo," caused considerable controversy in Mexico. Some PRI members criticized the Tabasco governor for using the word "madrazo," considered a vulgar term in some circles. But many political analysts said the slogan was a clever campaign strategy for Madrazo because he communicated his message directly to the working class. "In political belligerence, it's a very well-constructed slogan," said columnist Raymundo Riva Palacio.

Madrazo's campaign advisors said they were pleased with the advertisements because they generated a great deal of free press coverage for their candidate. "Our strategy was to make a

lot of noise with the first ad and to position Roberto as a rebel with a cause in the PRI, and it has worked beautifully," said Carlos Alazraki, the strategic planner and creative director for Madrazo's campaign.

But the advertisements attracted enough protests within the PRI and from church and union leaders to prompt Madrazo to withdraw the spot from the air. Still, the Tabasco governor found other ways to bring his message to the public.

"It is very fortunate that I am not the official candidate," Madrazo said during a radio interview in Tijuana. "The person who is on the side of the status quo is going to lose." Madrazo said ample evidence exists that Labastida is the candidate of the PRI establishment, particularly since several governors have openly endorsed the former interior secretary and even directed resources to his campaign, violating the PRI's electoral rules.

Madrazo has protested the involvement in the Labastida campaign of Govs. Roberto Albores of Chiapas, Tomas Yarrington of Tamaulipas, and former governor Carlos Camacho Quiroz of Mexico state. Labastida's campaign initially focused primarily on his public service, first as governor of Sonora state and later as agriculture secretary and interior secretary. "I arrive at this campaign with clean hands after a life of public service that lets me hold my head high," Labastida said early in his campaign.

In the early days of the campaign, Labastida refrained from direct attacks on Madrazo, preferring to make only passing references to accusations that the Tabasco governor's election in 1994 was financed by illegal donations from fugitive banker Carlos Cabal Peniche and others. Cabal, also accused of laundering campaign funds for Zedillo's presidential campaign, is fighting extradition to Mexico from Australia (see SourceMex, 1999-07-14). But Madrazo's controversial television ads forced Labastida to go on the offensive, which in turn set off its own controversy.

In a speech before Mexican graduates of Harvard University, Labastida's campaign manager Esteban Moctezuma accused Madrazo of accepting financing from the "most corrupt" elements of the PRI. "When I heard a Madrazo advertisement talking about honesty, I imagined Hitler talking about human rights," said Moctezuma, who left his post as social development secretary to manage Labastida's campaign. PRI officials immediately summoned Moctezuma to clarify the comment.

PRI leaders concerned about potential split

The heated rivalry between the Labastida and Madrazo camps has raised concerns among PRI officials about a major split in the party ahead of the 2000 election. Fernando Gutierrez Barrios, who was chosen by the PRI to manage the primary, threatened to disqualify both candidates from the primary if they did not cease their attacks. "It is necessary for the candidates as well as their campaign members to show mutual respect and respect the democratic process with the objective of strengthening party values," said Gutierrez Barrios.

Publicly, PRI president Gonzalez has said that any of the four PRI candidates could beat an eight-party coalition led by the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and the conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). But privately, PRI officials are worried that a

major split could damage the party's chances in the 2000 election. The PAN and the PRD are still negotiating a method to select a candidate who would represent the eight-party alliance (see SourceMex, 1999-08-04). "If Francisco Labastida wins the primary, it is quite possible that Madrazo supporters will not back him," said Humberto Roque Villanueva, who is also seeking the party's presidential nomination.

Roque and a fourth candidate, Puebla governor Manuel Bartlett Diaz, have criticized both front-runners, but the two candidates remain far behind in public-opinion polls. PRI & PRD prepare for Mexico City mayoral elections On Nov. 7, the PRI is also scheduled to hold a primary in Mexico City to select the party's candidate for mayor of the capital city. The race features two prominent candidates, former finance secretary Jesus Silva Herzog and Roberto Campa Cifrian, former director of the Procuraduria Federal de Proteccion al Consumidor (PROFECO). Silva Herzog, who also served as tourism secretary and Mexican ambassador to Washington and Madrid, appears to be the favorite among the PRI establishment, including Labastida.

In an interview with the daily newspaper Excelsior, Silva Herzog said he initially hoped to run in the PRI presidential primary but decided there were too many obstacles in his path. For his part, Campa must overcome the stigma of the last mayoral election, which the PRI lost in a landslide to the PRD's Cuauhtemoc Cardenas in 1997 (see SourceMex, 1997-07-09).

Many PRI members in Mexico City hold Campa responsible for the loss, since he was the head of the PRI chapter in the capital during that election. Two other candidates, former federal legislator Silvestre Fernandez and engineer Arturo Oropeza, have also declared their candidacies.

The PRD, meanwhile, expects a competitive primary to select its candidate for the Mexico City race. Two key members of the Chamber of Deputies, Pablo Gomez and Demetrio Sodi de la Tijera, have announced plans to seek the nomination. Gomez, who succeeded Porfirio Munoz Ledo as the head of the PRD's delegation in the lower house, was also recently the party's interim president. Sodi is a former PRI member who joined the PRD in 1997. He has represented both parties in the Chamber of Deputies.

Even though Gomez and Sodi are fairly attractive candidates, some PRD members are pushing former party leader Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador to seek the post. "Lopez Obrador is the person with the best qualities to continue the democratization process and change in the capital city," said Marti Batres Guardarrama, a member of the Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal (ALDF).

The PAN has not named a candidate for the Mexico City mayoral race, but some party leaders are urging former legislative leader and presidential candidate Diego Fernandez de Cevallos to run. PAN Deputy Santiago Creel Miranda, who holds key posts for his party in the Congress, has also been mentioned as a possible candidate.

PRD leaders have also mentioned possibly forming a coalition with the PAN and other parties for the Mexico City race, but the idea is not as close to reality as it is at the national level. Still, the possibility of an alliance remains strong, since voting patterns in Mexico City could have a bearing on the presidential election. "The candidate in the Federal District will be important in

helping the presidential candidate or bringing him down," political analyst Juan Crespo told the US newspaper Newsday. (Sources: Proceso, 05/30/99, 08/01/99; Newsday, 08/01/99; The Dallas Morning News, The New York Times, 08/02/99; The Washington Post, 07/27/99, 08/08/99; El Universal, 08/05/99, 08/11/99; La Jornada, 08/05/99, 08/10/99, 08/11/99; Reuters, 07/31/99, 08/04/99, 08/05/99, 08/11/99, 08/12/99; Associated Press, 08/12/99; Los Angeles Times, 08/02/99, 08/14/99; San Diego Union-Tribune, 08/14/99; El Economista, 08/06/99, 08/16/99; The News, 07/30/99, 08/02/99, 08/10/99, 08/12/99, 08/13/99, 08/18/99; Excelsior, 08/05/99, 08/06/99, 08/12/99, 08/18/99; Novedades, 08/12/99, 08/13/99, 08/18/99)

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