Power Struggle Threatens To Splinter P.R.I

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The future of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) remained very much in doubt days after the party's disastrous performance in the July 2 election. Different factions of the PRI began battling for control of the party at a special session called on July 4 to elect new leaders following the resignation of the entire executive committee (Comite Ejecutivo Nacional, CEN). The CEN, led by president Dulce Maria Sauri Riancho, had presented its resignation July 3, the day after the party suffered a near total loss. Sauri and secretary-general Esteban Moctezuma were appointed to their positions in November, specifically to lead the campaign of defeated candidate Francisco Labastida Ochoa (see SourceMex, December 8, 1999). The PRI not only lost the presidential race to Vicente Fox Quesada of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), but also suffered major defeats in congressional, gubernatorial, and state electoral races (see other articles in this issue of SourceMex).

But the party structure remains in place, which will ensure its survival in the short term. "[The PRI] has too much power to disappear overnight," said syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento. "The party remains in control of the governor's seats in 19 states and still has a substantial presence in Congress." The party's poor performance on July 2 appeared to pave the way for the party's old guard, known as the dinosaurs, to seek to regain party control. The old guard, led by former Puebla governor Manuel Bartlett Diaz, is trying to impose outgoing Tabasco Gov. Roberto Madrazo Pintado as the party's new leader. Madrazo lost a bitter primary election to Labastida in November 1999 (see SourceMex, November 10, 1999). But many other PRI loyalists, uncomfortable with handing the leadership to the old guard, are expected to block Madrazo's candidacy and propose their own candidates. Other potential candidates include Esteban Moctezuma, Campeche Gov. Antonio Gonzalez Curi, and former Mexico State Gov. Emilio Chuayffet. The various factions at the PRI gathering were united, however, in rejecting the three candidates thought to be favored by President Ernesto Zedillo: former Hidalgo Gov. Jesus Murillo Karam, defeated presidential candidate Francisco Labastida, and federal Deputy Beatriz Paredes Rangel. "Some groups think they don't want a leader who seems to reflect the president," said Javier Trevino, a former finance secretary and Labastida campaign officer. "They want this to be more of a party decision."

Resentment against Zedillo is growing among many PRI loyalists, who blame the president for the party's poor performance in the July 2 election. They hold the president responsible for eliminating the system of big-government paternalism, which helped keep the PRI in power for many years, and for pushing through the electoral reforms that opened the door for opposition parties to gain control of Congress and Mexico City in 1997 and the presidency in 2000. Some PRI officials were also angry at Zedillo's decision to quickly recognize Fox's victory. "The PRI is offended by Zedillo's decision to keep a healthy distance from the campaign and later to recognize our defeat, which no one asked him to do," said Efren Leyva, a member of the PRI's state executive committee in Chiapas state. Sauri, who agreed to remain president until a new leader is appointed, has created a special committee to develop a strategy to propose comprehensive long-term reforms for the PRI. The committee will include PRI governors, state party leaders, and the coordinators of the party's congressional delegation in Congress. Some PRI members acknowledge the party will have
to undergo a total transformation to have a chance to regain the trust of Mexican voters. "We can't promise change and then give people the same faces over and over again," said Francisco Guerrero, at 17 the youngest member of the PRI executive committee. "A new generation must take over the party. We can't keep recycling the same old people." Many analysts agree with this assessment and emphasize that the PRI cannot go back to the practices that kept the party in power for so many years. "The Mexican people were fed up with a political system that had become authoritarian and corrupt, and which was sustained by its complicity with financial and economic special interests and drug traffickers," said political commentator Luis Javier Garrido in a piece published in the weekly news magazine Proceso. Political commentator and historian Lorenzo Meyer compared the recent PRI loss to the theory behind the demise of dinosaurs. "The environment changed," Meyer said in his column in the daily newspaper Reforma. "They couldn't withstand the change in habitat." (Sources: Reuters, 07/03/00, Associated Press, 07/03/00; Proceso, The Washington Post, 07/04/00; Excelsior, La Jornada, Novedades, Reforma, The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, 07/04/00, 07/05/00; El Universal, El Economista, The Dallas Morning News, 07/05/00)

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