

3-30-2005

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Controversy Surrounds Election of New PAN, PRD Leaders

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2005-03-30

The conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) and the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) each selected new leaders to guide them through the 2006 presidential campaigns, but the process created major rifts in each party. In a vote open only to the party's 376 delegates in early March, the PAN elected conservative candidate Manuel Espino Barrientos to a three-year term ending in 2008. Espino defeated moderate rivals like Sen. Carlos Medina Plascencia and Deputy Alejandro Zapata Perogordo. Some critics are nervous about Espino's past ties to ultraconservative groups, even though the new leader emphasized that he was elected as "president of the PAN, not of the ultraright."

The PRD election, held in late March, also included some controversy, with a faction of the party claiming that the executive committee (comite ejecutivo nacional, CEN) and Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador designated outgoing Baja California Sur Gov. Leonel Cota Montano as the new party president rather than allow a fair election. The vote, open to the PRD rank and file, was also marred by irregularities at polling places and controversy surrounding elections of some state leaders.

New PAN president linked to ultraconservative groups

Espino's election as PAN president created strong discontent among some party members, who raised concerns about the new leader's past association with an ultraconservative secret organization known as El Yunque. The organization was created in the 1950s to promote anti-communism and uphold the more conservative values of the Roman Catholic Church.

Journalist Alvaro Delgado, who writes a column for the Agencia de noticias Proceso (apro), said the organization "infiltrated" the PAN in the 1970s to counter what it considered the move to the left during the administration of former Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) President Luis Echeverria Alvarez (1970-1976). Critics say Espino's election consolidates the power of the ultraright in the PAN, displacing moderates like Medina Plascencia.

The new president is expected to move the party to the right and away from a philosophy described as "neopanismo" (new PAN), whose goal is to incorporate business leaders into the party structure. "[Outgoing PAN president] Luis Felipe Bravo Mena managed the transition from neopanismo to the ultraright," said political analyst Victor Alejandro Espinoza Valle of the Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF).

Espino has acknowledged his conservative position on several issues, but denies any current direct connections to El Yunque or any other conservative group. "I am going to be president of the PAN, not of the ultraright," Espino said in an interview. Critics are skeptical about the new president's statements, saying Espino's intentions are evident because 14 of the 27 PAN members selected for

the PAN's executive committee have clear ties to El Yunque. The group includes new secretary-general Arturo Garcia Portillo. "[Manuel Espino] represents the most conservative elements of the right," said political scientist Eric Magar of the Instituto Tecnológico de Mexico (ITAM).

Others say the connection to El Yunque is just one of several avenues for ultraconservative elements to promote their agenda within the PAN. "El Yunque is getting most of the attention these days, but Mexico is teeming with other militant and often secretive right-wing Catholic organizations, including Opus Dei, the Legion of Christ, the Knights of Malta, and El Muro (Movimiento Universitario de Renovadora Orientacion)," said Kelly Arthur Garrett, a columnist for the Mexico City English-language daily newspaper The Herald. "In general, these groups push a fundamentalist Catholicism, want to see the last vestiges of liberation theology eliminated, and have little use for any collective secular effort to solve social problems."

High-profile PAN member resigns from party

The PAN election resulted in the defection of high-profile member Deputy Tatiana Clouthier Carrillo from the center-right party. Clouthier, who has decided to serve the rest of her term in the Chamber of Deputies as an independent, is the daughter of ex-presidential candidate Manuel Clouthier. Clouthier, a beloved figure in the PAN, came in a distant third to Carlos Salinas de Gortari in the 1988 election. Manuel Clouthier was killed in an automobile accident in 1989. Tatiana's sister, Rebecca Clouthier, remains a member of the PAN leadership.

In announcing her resignation, Tatiana Clouthier said she did not like the direction the PAN was taking. She accused Espino of being out of touch with the majority of the party. "Our party is no longer acting out of conviction," said Clouthier. Two other high-profile members of the PAN, former veteran legislator Luis H. Alvarez and Deputy German Martinez Cazares, also took potshots at Espino but decided to remain within the party. Martinez said Espino's election reflected a move to the right of the party and to "intolerance, exclusion, repression, and vengeance that are direct steps to defeat."

Similar statements came from Alvarez, who has served as PAN president, senator, and Chiapas peace commissioner. "[The PAN] is in the midst of difficult situation because of the rise of a radical group that has nothing to do with the humanist doctrine that gave origin to our party," said Alvarez. Espino and other party leaders said they do not expect the criticisms to create a major rift in the PAN. But some moderate party members disagree with this assessment. "The PAN faces a real risk of turning into a party of factions at best or into a sectarian party at worst," said Sen. Felipe de Jesus Vicencio Alvarez.

Medina Plascencia, who narrowly lost the election to Espino during a runoff vote, did not criticize his rival directly. The senator and ex-Guanajuato governor made his feelings known by declining Espino's offer to join the PAN executive committee (comite ejecutivo nacional, CEN). It is notable that none of the four major candidates for the PAN presidential nomination, all advocates of the neopanismo philosophy, supported Espino's nomination. Three of the candidates, Felipe Calderon Hinojosa, Francisco Barrio Terrazas, and Alberto Cardenas Jimenez, openly endorsed Medina Plascencia.

The fourth likely candidate and front-runner, Interior Secretary Santiago Creel, remained on the sidelines. Rumors were also circulating of a rift between Espino and first lady Marta Sahagun, linked to past disagreements between the two high-profile PAN personalities. But Espino denied that there was any animosity between him and Sahagun. "You don't have to believe everything that the newspapers publish," said Espino, who held a brief meeting with the first lady shortly after his election.

Sahagun later told reporters she and Espino had a "cordial conversation" and were committed to work together for the good of the party. Other high-profile PAN officials, including Govs. Hector Ortiz of Tlaxcala and Juan Carlos Romero Hicks of Guanajuato, called on the party to close ranks behind Espino. "There are 100,000 active members in our party whose voices will be respected," said Romero Hicks.

During his acceptance speech, Espino promised he would reverse the trend of PAN losses in gubernatorial elections during the past two years. The party only won two of 11 gubernatorial races during the period. And it won one of those elections, in Tlaxcala state, because of strong divisions within the PRI and the PRD (see SourceMex, 2004-11-17). One of Espino's first acts as party president was to designate Jose Gonzalez Morfin as the new PAN floor leader in the Chamber of Deputies. Gonzalez Morfin replaces Francisco Barrio, who resigned to campaign for the PAN presidential nomination in 2006.

PRD election also called into question

The election of the new PRD leader also contained some controversy. A major issue was a complaint that Cota Montano, who received 73% of the vote in the election for party leader, and Marti Batres, who won the Mexico City election, were personally selected by Lopez Obrador. Critics said this process was reminiscent to the old "dedazo" employed by the PRI for generations, by which a party leader designated his successor. "It was well-known that Lopez Obrador picked two of his friends for two important positions in the PRD," said Rene Aviles Fabila, who writes a column for the Mexico City daily newspaper La Crisis. "Neither of the two really campaigned. Why should they, when the mayor's finger was already pointing to them."

Cota's lone rival, Camilo Valenzuela Fierro, said the process was manipulated by the Nueva Izquierda faction, led by Sen. Jesus Ortega. "Elections were especially unfair in places where the Nueva Izquierda was dominant, such as the states of Oaxaca, Tabasco, Tamaulipas, Aguascalientes, Puebla, and the Valle de Chalco district in Mexico state," said Valenzuela. Valenzuela said voters in many states were unable to cast ballots because of fraud and disorganization by state PRD officials.

There were also allegations that PRD members with connections to winning candidate Batres stole ballot boxes in the election in Mexico City. "The triumph of Batres as director of the PRD in the Federal District cannot be legitimate until these allegations are cleared up," said Julio Cesar Moreno, a PRD member in the Mexico City legislative assembly (Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal (ALDF)).

Critics said the disenfranchisement of many voters and the disorganization of the PRD elections in many areas may have contributed to the extremely low voter turnout of 12% of the party's voter

list. "Taking into account the PRD voter rolls, this year's election resulted in the lowest participation ever," said apro. Other analysts agree that the election process does not bode well for the party.

"The internal elections for PRD party leadership on March 20 revealed a party not only in disharmony but unable to agree on how to resolve, or even live with, that disharmony," said columnist Fred Rosen in the Mexico City English-language daily newspaper *The Herald*. "The long-term consequences of this open discord cannot be heartening to the party's adherents."

Still, the problems faced by the PRD this year appear minimal compared to the 1999 election, when the party was forced to schedule a second round of elections because of vote-tampering in at least 10 states (see SourceMex, 1999-03-24 and 1994-04-21). Valenzuela, who claimed to have sufficient evidence of malfeasance to have the results overturned, had not decided as of late March whether he would file a formal legal challenge to the PRD election.

Party leaders, however, pleaded with Valenzuela not to make a major issue of the election, citing the need for the PRD to remain united in the face of the possible upcoming trial in Congress to oust Lopez Obrador. A special committee was to decide by April 1 whether to recommend impeachment of the Mexico City mayor for violating the Mexican Constitution by ignoring judicial directives (see SourceMex, 2004-05-26). "It is important for our party to present a good image," outgoing PRD president Leonel Godoy told Valenzuela. (Sources: Associated Press, 03/05/05, 03/14/05; *El Financiero*, 03/08/05, 03/15/05, 03/18/05; Agence France-Presse, 03/18/05; Spanish news service EFE, 03/05/05, 03/14/05, 03/20/05; *The Herald-Mexico City*, 03/15/05, 03/16/05, 03/25/05; Notimex, 03/14-16/05, 03/21/05, 03/22/05, 03/27/05; *La Crisis*, 03/07-09/05, 03/14-17/05, 03/22/05, 03/23/05, 03/28/05; *El Universal*, 03/07-11/05, 03/14-17/05, 03/22/05, 03/25/05, 03/28/05; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 03/07/05, 03/09/05, 03/14-17/05, 03/21/05, 03/22/05, 03/24/05, 03/28/05, 03/29/05; *La Cronica de Hoy*, 03/07/05, 03/09-11/05, 03/14-17/05, 03/22/05, 03/23/05, 03/28/05, 03/30/05; *La Jornada*, 03/08-11/05, 03/15-17, 03/22/05, 03/24/05, 03/28/05, 03/30/05)

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