PRD Faces Unexpected Obstacles at Start of 2006 Electoral Season

LADB Staff
The center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), which had been expected to carry the mantle of the Mexican left in the 2006 presidential campaign, has encountered unexpected roadblocks from familiar faces: the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) and former presidential candidate Cuauhtemoc Cardenas Solorzano. A few months ago, then Mexico City mayor Andres Lopez Obrador, a member of the PRD, appeared unstoppable, with many public-opinion polls showing him far ahead of potential competitors from other parties (see SourceMex, 2005-04-13).

Lopez Obrador's popularity was especially high after the failed attempt by his rivals to remove him from office (see SourceMex, 2005-05-04). Since then, Lopez Obrador who left his post in July to devote his full attention to the presidential campaign has seen his lead decline. Recent polls have the former mayor running even or slightly ahead of Roberto Madrazo Pintado of the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Madrazo is facing a challenge within his own party (see SourceMex, 2005-08-17).

The mayor is not only facing a resurgent PRI but is also contending with dissenting voices on the left. Lopez Obrador's most public threat comes from Subcomandante Marcos of the EZLN, which is intent on grabbing the mantle from the PRD as the "legitimate" representative of the interests of the poor in Mexico.

Lopez Obrador could also see some of his support eroded by Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, a three-time PRD presidential candidate who refuses to give up on a dream to end up in Los Pinos presidential palace. Cardenas had originally intended to seek the PRD nomination, but decided not to compete in a party primary because of the prospect of a likely defeat at the hands of an extremely popular Lopez Obrador.

After dropping out, Cardenas refused to endorse Lopez Obrador, saying his rival's political platform contained too many elements of the neoliberal philosophy espoused by former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994). Cardenas has now resurfaced as the top choice of a leftist coalition that includes the Partido del Trabajo (PT), the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD), and others. The Zapatista factor After months of silence, the EZLN made headlines in June with its first comments about the 2006 election. At that time, the EZLN pledged to build a political alliance of the left, "without guns, with a peaceful, civil movement." EZLN leaders said they would send a delegation on a nationwide tour to drum up support for its positions ahead of next year's presidential race.

The EZLN entry into the political debate, however, does not mean that the Zapatistas will field a candidate or candidates in the election. "Fundamentally the Zapatistas have rejected representative
democracy and formal electoral polls," Harry Cleaver, an economist at the University of Texas who has studied the Zapatista movement, told Reuters. EZLN leader Subcomandante Marcos, in statements to reporters, has continued to show disdain for the electoral process and the various political parties, which he said fail to represent the true needs of the people. "All we received from the political parties that now are competing for the presidency was tricks, lies, mockery, and disdain," said Marcos.

Marcos has especially lashed out at the Congress for failing to approve legislation that would grant indigenous communities more autonomy. The EZLN leader reserved his most stinging criticism, however, for the PRD and Lopez Obrador, whom he has compared to reviled ex-President Salinas de Gortari (see SourceMex, 2005-06-29) "This is Marcos trying to maintain his relevancy in Mexican politics and global politics," said analyst Pamela Starr of the Instituto Tecnologico Autonomo de Mexico (ITAM). "The Zapatistas have been looking for a way to re-enter Mexican politics, and they couldn't do it militarily."

As was the case with his comments in June, the EZLN leader has continued to single out Lopez Obrador as unworthy to represent the needs of the left during press conferences and meetings with supporters. Marcos holds special animosity for the PRD, which he says has failed to support the Zapatista movement both at the national level and in Chiapas and which has constantly lied about its true political intentions. "We want to say here to the directors of the PRD and to the party's leaders, 'don't keep lying' and 'look for better arguments to debate,'" Marcos said at a press conference in the community of Carmen Patate, Chiapas, in August.

While EZLN supporters have been in conflict mostly with supporters of the PRI in Chiapas, there have been some major disagreements with PRD communities over the years, including a dispute about water rights near the municipality of Zinacatan (see SourceMex, 2004-04-08). "They treated us with disrespect," Marcos said in reference to the national and Chiapas state PRD leadership councils, "and they will pay for it."

The EZLN leader pledged to break the PRD "into little pieces" even if this meant isolating his own movement. Marcos has continued to hammer Lopez Obrador for endorsing certain neoliberal economic policies promoted by Salinas and several business leaders. He singled out the former Mexico City mayor's partnership with entrepreneur Carlos Slim Helu to renovate the historic district in Mexico City. Lopez Obrador has used this partnership as an example of how he would work with the private sector if elected president. "With this renovation, they are expelling the indigenous vendors from the district and opening up spaces for Slim and other entrepreneurs," said Marcos.

Lopez Obrador has said he respectfully disagrees with Marcos but will not argue with him. "I'm not going to become involved in a street fight with Subcomandante Marcos," Lopez Obrador told reporters during a campaign swing through northern parts of the country. "I greatly respect his points of view, but I'm touring the country with another purpose," he added, referring to his presidential campaign.
PRD leaders generally refrained from responding directly to Marcos' criticisms other than calling his statements excessive. "We've had enough of unfounded attacks against the PRD," said secretary-general Guadalupe Acosta Naranjo.

One prominent PRD leader, Michoacan Gov. Lazaro Cardenas Batel, a former federal senator, offered an olive branch to the EZLN leader. He said the PRD made a mistake by not making a greater effort to ensure passage of indigenous-rights legislation when it came before Congress in 2001 (see SourceMex, 2001-05-02). "Subcomandante Marcos is right in criticizing senators from the Partido de la Revolucion Democratica, including myself, for failing to push more vigorously for passage of indigenous-rights legislation," said Cardenas Batel.

There is some concern in the PRD that Marcos' criticisms could have the effect of reducing participation in the 2006 election, with many voters who would have cast their ballots for Lopez Obrador choosing instead to stay home. Even though most analysts believe that the EZLN leader's criticisms may ultimately have little direct impact on the election, these comments should not be ignored. "The luxury we Mexicans can't give ourselves is to underestimate the importance that Subcomandante Marcos can have on the nation's politics," said syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento.

Cuauhtemoc Cardenas could lead leftist coalition

From an electoral point of view, Cardenas could pose more of a problem for Lopez Obrador and the PRD because he would give left-leaning voters a real choice at the ballot box. Cardenas has not officially agreed to lead any party, nor has he confirmed that he is a presidential candidate. But he is talking as if he plans to run as the head of a leftist coalition, which the PT and other parties are patching together.

At a late-August rally supporting the candidacy of PRD Deputy Pablo Gomez for mayor of Mexico City in 2006, Cardenas said the debate in the left "should be about projects and proposals and not about individuals." Cardenas insists that he has not broken with the PRD and that any coalition should include the center-left party.

Coalition proponents include some members of the PRD and the PRI. Among those supporting the effort are Zacatecas Gov. Amalia Garcia, PT leader Jose Narro Cespedes, PCD president Elias Barajas Romo, and others. "We are trying to construct a space where all the leftist and revolutionary forces can come together to create a program of political action," said Arturo Romo Gutierrez, a member of the PRI. Garcia has an ambivalent position, endorsing a broad effort to select a leftist candidate but also offering support for Lopez Obrador's candidacy.

The absence of anyone from Lopez Obrador's team in the coalition opens the possibility of a power struggle between the former mayor and Cardenas. PRD leaders are working hard to talk Cardenas into abandoning his presidential ambitions and endorsing Lopez Obrador. Camilo Valenzuela, who heads the party's national political council (ConsejoPoliticoNacional, CPN), acknowledged that Cardenas still commands a lot of respect inside and outside the PRD but said "he is not considered the alternative that the people are seeking." Other PRD elected officials and supporters have chimed
in with the same message. "We have to be honest and recognize that now is the moment for Lopez Obrador, who enjoys immense popularity," said Guerrero Gov. Zeferino Torreblanca.

Teresa Juarez, widow of the late Sen. Heberto Castillo, urged Cardenas to step aside in favor of Lopez Obrador, just as her husband did for Cardenas in 1988. "If both the candidates have the best interests of the country at heart, and if one sees that the other is favored by the Mexican public, he should step aside," said Juarez.

Many political observers suggest Cardenas may have actually won the general election against the PRI's Salinas de Gortari in 1988. Salinas emerged with a majority of votes following a "computer malfunction" that temporarily halted the vote tally. The incident sparked a movement toward electoral reforms (see SourceMex, 1994-07-27). PT president Alberto Anaya offered a different opinion, suggesting that Cardenas is "better known among the Mexican population." He said Cardenas has proven that he can lead a leftist coalition, just like he did in 1988.

For now, Cardenas has rejected endorsing the PRD front-runner. "[Lopez Obrador's] platform is not the one that our country needs," Cardenas said in mid-August. He cited disagreements with many elements of a 50-point plan presented by the former mayor as he launched his campaign. The plan was basically a road map of specific actions that Lopez Obrador would take regarding the economy, the petroleum sector, indigenous rights, and other issues. Marcos has criticized this same 50-point platform as "political window-dressing" on the part of Lopez Obrador.

Even if Cardenas ends up not leading a coalition, PT officials are thinking about approaching him to be their candidate in 2006. "We are seriously contemplating this possibility," said Deputy Alejandro Gonzalez Yanez, the party's floor coordinator in the Chamber of Deputies. This development could represent another blow for the PRD, which had formed coalitions with the PT in recent gubernatorial elections. The PCD has also offered other possibilities to lead the leftist coalition such as Juan Ramon de la Fuente, the rector at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM).

**Lack of national appeal remains a major problem for PRD**

Lopez Obrador, who has run very strong in Mexico City and in some PRD strongholds like Zacatecas, Michoacan, and Baja California Sur, is trying to boost his appeal in other parts of the country. While his personal popularity may win him some votes, the inability of the PRD to build a strong party organization in many states could ultimately become an obstacle in the elections.

A case in point is the PRD's extremely poor showing in a public-opinion poll ahead of the Coahuila gubernatorial election, scheduled for Sept. 25. The poll indicated that PRI candidate Humberto Moreira was favored by 58% of respondents, compared with 30% for Jorge Zermeno of the PAN and close to 5% each for Juan Pablo Rodriguez Delgado of the PRD and Ana Patricia Reynoso of the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM). "The PVEM candidate is actually slightly ahead of her PRD counterpart," said the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal, which conducted the poll.

Even Lopez Obrador's personal popularity has been insufficient to turn the tables in favor of the PRD in other states. For example, PRD candidate Yeidckol Polevnsky came in third in the Mexico
state election despite the close proximity of most communities in the state to the Mexican capital and despite Polevnsky's campaign appearances with the former mayor (see SourceMex, 2005-07-20).

Still, Lopez Obrador remains slightly ahead in many public-opinion polls. One poll by the Mexico City daily political newspaper La Crisis in early August showed Lopez Obrador with a slim lead of 35%, compared with 34.6% for Roberto Madrazo, who is considered the PRI front-runner. The PRD candidate acknowledged that voter turnout could make the difference. "The party that has the better structure and most supporters participating will be the winner," he said. (Sources: The Christian Science Monitor, 08/02/05; Reuters, 06/28/05, 08/06/05; Associated Press, 06/30/05, 08/13/05; The Herald-Mexico City, 07/15/05, 08/08/05, 08/11/05, 08/15/05, 08/16/05; El Financiero, 08/11/05, 08/17/05; Vanguardia, 08/20/05; Spanish news service EFE, 06/30/05, 08/03/05, 08/07/05, 08/09/05, 08/13/05, 08/14/05, 08/17/05, 08/21/05; El Universal, 07/22/05, 07/25/05, 08/08/05, 08/15/05, 08/16/05, 08/22/05; Notimex, 08/07/05, 08/10/05, 08/14/05, 08/15/05, 08/22/05; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 06/30/05, 07/22/05, 08/12/05, 08/17/05, 08/18/05, 08/22/05, 08/23/05; La Crisis, 07/25/05, 08/08/05, 08/09/05, 08/11/05, 08/15-18/05, 08/22/05, 08/23/05; La Cronica de Hoy, 07/01/05, 07/25/05, 08/08/05, 08/09/05, 08/11/05, 08/15/05, 08/16/05, 08/19/05, 08/22-24/05; La Jornada, 08/04/05, 08/08/05, 08/09/05, 08/11/05, 08/12/05, 08/15/05, 08/16/05, 08/19/05, 08/21-24/05)

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