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The lineup for the 2006 presidential election has come into focus, with the candidates for the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) almost decided. The PRI will apparently be represented by former party president Roberto Madrazo Pintado, who will likely get the nomination by default following the controversial withdrawal of chief rival Arturo Montiel Rojas from the race.

The PAN will be represented by former energy secretary and congressional leader Felipe Calderon Hinojosa, who won a cumulative 52% of the vote from three regional primaries held throughout Mexico during the past six weeks. Madrazo and Calderon will face Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) in the election, scheduled for July 2, 2006.

Lopez Obrador also gained the nomination by default when his main rival, Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, withdrew from the race earlier this year. Lopez Obrador, Madrazo, and Calderon all served as presidents of their respective parties. Additionally, Lopez Obrador and Madrazo previously faced each other in the Tabasco gubernatorial election in 1994, which was won by the PRI candidate (see SourceMex, 1994-12-14).

The wild card in the election could be the independent candidates, which might include Cardenas, who has hinted of plans to lead a leftist coalition (see SourceMex, 2005-08-24). That coalition could include the Partido del Trabajo (PT), which has been a PRD ally in recent state elections. Two other candidates without party affiliation, ex-foreign relations secretary Jorge Castaneda Gutman and businessman Victor Gonzalez Torres, are fighting for the legal right to a spot on the ballot.

Additionally, the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM) already announced that it would run its own candidate, former federal deputy Bernardo de la Garza Herrera. The PVEM, which formed a coalition with the PAN in the 2000 election and has since aligned itself with the PRI in several state elections, left open the possibility of later forming an alliance with another party.

Another small party, the Partido Alternativa Socialdemocratica y Campesina (PASC), will also field a candidate, Patricia Mercado. Mercado was previously affiliated with the Partido Mexico Posible (PMP), which lost its legal recognition after the 2003 election because of lack of support.

Arturo Montiel withdraws from PRI primary

Montiel's withdrawal from the race was the latest chapter in the ongoing feud between Madrazo and a faction of PRI members who have criticized the former party president for his heavy-handed tactics in running the party. The faction, known formally as Unidad Democratica (UD) and informally as Todos Unidos contra Madrazo (TUCOM), has also opposed Madrazo on the premise that he lacks sufficient support among the Mexican electorate to win in 2006. In early 2005,
TUCOM announced its decision to field a candidate to challenge Madrazo for the nomination (see SourceMex, 2005-02-16).

Five TUCOM members initially stepped forward to compete for the right to face Madrazo, with Montiel handily defeating his four rivals in a complicated process involving polls conducted by three prestigious polling companies (see SourceMex, 2005-08-17). In the weeks following the TUCOM "election" in August, Madrazo and Montiel engaged in a heated and often bitter campaign, filling the airwaves with negative advertisements.

The Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal reported that Montiel spent 7 million pesos (US $641,000) in the first week of his campaign on television and radio spots, which included direct attacks on Madrazo.

Madrazo, who had already been spending a similar amount per week on media spots, used some of his radio and television ads during the same week to respond to Montiel. Some analysts said the sharp attacks exchanged by the two candidates turned the nomination process into one of the nastier and more public political fights in the history of the PRI.

Madrazo is no stranger to bitter campaigns, having used a series of controversial television and radio spots against rival Francisco Labastida during the PRI's first-ever presidential primary in 1999 (see SourceMex, 1999-08-18 and 1999-09-15). Despite the ads, Madrazo lost the race to Labastida, who had the support of the party hierarchy (see SourceMex, 1999-11-10).

Questions about finances prompt Montiel decision

On Oct. 20, just weeks before the scheduled Nov. 13 primary, Montiel abruptly withdrew from the race amid reports that his immediate family had acquired about a half-dozen properties around the country with ill-gotten gains. The finances of the Montiel family came to light in a report carried by the Televisa network, which said government investigators were trying to determine the source of 35 million pesos (US$3.2 million) in bank deposits in three accounts belonging to Montiel's two sons, Arturo Montiel Yanez and Juan Pablo Montiel Yanez, and his wife Maude Versini.

Other media outlets later carried reports describing Montiel's mansions in Acapulco and Careyes, Jalisco state, and a lake-view property in the Valle de Bravo in Mexico state. Rather than attempt to explain the source of his wealth, Montiel opted to withdraw from the race. Sources close to the former Mexico state governor said, however, that Montiel's decision was based on threats he received from some members of the PRI, whose names he would not disclose. One source, a PRI state coordinator, said Montiel initially ignored the threats but started to take them seriously after the television reports were aired. "They called him and asked him if he understood that things were not going his way," the source told the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma.

In statements following his resignation, Montiel suggested that the Madrazo camp was behind the effort to drive him from the primary election. "The party rank and file and public opinion have witnessed an orchestrated operation whose clear objective has been weakening my candidacy," Montiel said as he announced his withdrawal at party headquarters. Madrazo not only denied the
existence of a dirty campaign against Montiel but also took the opportunity to criticize his rival as corrupt. "Arturo Montiel made a fortune and cashed in because he established a very disorderly government," Madrazo said in reference to Montiel's six-year term as governor of Mexico state.

As of late October, the PRI was still planning to hold its primary election on Nov. 13, with Madrazo scheduled to face virtually unknown candidate Everardo Moreno Cruz, who served as deputy attorney general during the administration of former President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000). The Madrazo camp is said to be pressuring Moreno to withdraw from the race and eliminate the need for the PRI to hold an election. Moreno, however, is refusing to back down. "No one is going to force me to withdraw from the race," Moreno told the Mexico City daily newspaper La Cronica de Hoy. "My decision to run is final, and I won't change my mind."

PRI faction still seeking to replace Montiel

Most TUCOM members have refused overtures from PRI president Mariano Palacios Alcocer to throw their support to Madrazo so the party can have a "unity candidate." Among those declining to endorse Madrazo are several prominent party members, including ex-PRI presidents Humberto Roque Villanueva and Genaro Borrego Estrada, federal Deputy Roberto Campa Ciprian, Sen. Manuel Bartlett Diaz, and Govs. Enrique Bours Castelo of Sonora and Natividad Gonzalez Paras of Nuevo Leon.

TUCOM raised the possibility of fielding a candidate to substitute for Montiel, pointing to public-opinion polls as a justification not to back Madrazo. Some of those polls show Madrazo in third place behind Lopez Obrador and Calderon. "The law allows for a candidate to be replaced if that candidate is forced to withdraw because of unforeseen circumstances," a TUCOM member told Reforma. Among the candidates mentioned as a possible replacement for Montiel are Sen. Enrique Jackson Ramirez, who received the second most votes in the TUCOM election in August, and Gov. Gonzalez Paras.

The PRI executive committee (Comite Ejecutivo Nacional, CEN) appeared to close the door on TUCOM, however, saying that party statutes are very clear in prohibiting the registration of new candidates. "It is impossible at this point to modify the registrations," said PRI spokesperson Eduardo Andrade. "If the Unidad Democratica insists on naming a new candidate, the issue could end up before the federal electoral tribunal."

Ex-energy secretary Felipe Calderon wins PAN primaries

The PAN also defined its candidate in October, with former energy secretary Felipe Calderon Hinojosa winning the third of three regional primaries by a convincing margin over ex-interior secretary Santiago Creel Miranda and former environment secretary Alberto Cardenas. Calderon received close to 58% of the vote in the last of the regional primaries, giving him 52% of the cumulative vote. This margin was sufficiently large to avoid a runoff with Creel, who had a cumulative 33% of the vote. Cardenas obtained the remaining 15%.

Calderon's victory was a surprise to many, as most public-opinion polls earlier this year had projected Creel as the PAN nominee. Creel, the PAN candidate most closely associated with President Vicente Fox's government, was blamed for many of the administration's missteps. Even
though Fox denied supporting any of the three contenders, Creel had been widely viewed as the administration's unofficial candidate.

Especially damaging to Creel were reports in June of this year that he misused his post of interior secretary to grant illegal favors to a firm associated with television network Televisa (see SourceMex, 2005-06-29). Many PAN members welcomed Calderon's decisive victory over Creel, whom they said carried too much baggage and would leave the PAN with little possibility of competing effectively in the 2006 election. "The Fox administration's sympathies toward Santiago Creel had no bearing on the way members of our party voted," said PAN federal Deputy Rodrigo Ivan Cortes.

Following the defeat, Creel immediately urged his followers to throw their support to Calderon. Relations between the two candidates were not always cordial, with Creel accusing the Calderon camp of committing fraud in the first two primary elections. Creel, with the support of Alberto Cardenas, filed a complaint asking party leaders to take a closer look at the vote in Yucatan during the second regional primary, where Calderon took 72% of the vote.

Party leaders agreed to review results of the first two primaries and did find some irregularities in Yucatan, Guerrero, and Morelos, but said these were not sufficient to alter the final result of the votes. Even though Calderon gives the PAN a better chance of running a competitive race in 2006 than Creel, the governing party faces long odds against the popular Lopez Obrador and the PRI political machinery.

Another obstacle is Calderon's low-key campaigning style, which contrasts with the fiery, populist styles of Lopez Obrador and Madrazo. "[Calderon] is a very decent, honest, straightforward character, but I don't think anyone has ever called him charismatic," said George Grayson, a political scientist at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. Grayson specializes in Mexican politics.

Another major problem for the PAN, said an aide to Calderon, is that the party base accounts for only about 25% of the electorate, which means that Calderon will have to compete heavily with Lopez Obrador and Madrazo for independent voters. The PAN is expected to seek to broaden the support for Calderon by forging coalitions with small parties and courting some of the disgruntled members of the PRI, including the teachers' union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de Educacion, SNTE). SNTE leader Elba Esther Gordillo feuded with Madrazo during the time she was PRI secretary-general (see SourceMex, 2003-012-03, 2004-08-04, and 2005-08-17). The feud worsened this year when Madrazo maneuvered to block Gordillo from ascending to the party presidency after he left the post to start his presidential campaign (see SourceMex, 2005-09-28).

**Independent candidates seek place on ballot**

The 2006 election could also include independents Castaneda and Gonzalez Torres if the two candidates are able to overcome legal obstacles. Castaneda has been fighting the federal electoral agency, the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE), for the right to a place on the 2006 ballot. The IFE has disallowed Castaneda's request on the grounds that Mexico's electoral code requires that all presidential candidates be affiliated with a political party. Castaneda brought the issue to the Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nacion (SCJN) in March, but the high court sided with the IFE.
a 6-4 ruling issued in early August, the SCJN said individual citizens could not file constitutional appeals against election laws.

The court left open the possibility that a government agency could file such an appeal on behalf of Castaneda. The former foreign relations secretary has been a controversial political figure, coming under criticism for contributing to the deterioration of Mexico's relations with Cuba. He also had a rocky relationship with other members of Fox's Cabinet, including Creel (see SourceMex, 2003-01-15). Castaneda, who viewed the SCJN decision as a violation of his individual rights, took the case to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), part of the Organization of American States (OAS), this summer.

In October, the IACHR agreed that the decision to prevent Castaneda from participating in the 2006 presidential election could be construed as a human rights violation. The Washington-based IACHR voted 6-1 to request that Mexico adopt "precautionary measures" that would allow Castaneda's name to appear on the ballot in next year's vote. "This is an important step forward for Mexican democracy," Castaneda said at a news conference. "At the municipal level, in state elections, at all levels of government, independent candidates should be allowed to run for office." The IACHR ruling may not be sufficient to help Castaneda obtain a place on the ballot, however.

Constitutional scholar Diego Valades, who teaches at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM), said the commission has no legal authority to enforce its recommendations. The IFE agreed with Valades, noting that the IACHR ruling was a simple "recommendation" to the Mexican Congress to make the necessary changes in the law to allow independent candidates. The IACHR recommendation could gain a stronger legal footing if it were turned over to the Inter-American Court on Human Rights, said Valades.

The IACHR ruling could have implications for Gonzalez Torres, who is commonly known as "Dr. Simi" because he owns a chain of discount drugstores called Farmacias Similares. Shortly after the IACHR recommendation became public, Gonzalez Torres filed a formal request with the IFE to be allowed a place on the ballot.

Gonzalez has gained some name recognition through a tour of 43 cities in which he has championed universal health care, improved education, and a tougher tax code. His chain of pharmacies offer Mexican-manufactured generic medicines at prices up to 80% below the cost of brand-name prescription drugs. He also subsidizes more than 2,000 clinics where doctors see patients for as little as 20 pesos (US$1.83) a visit. "He's like a pharmaceutical Ross Perot," said political analyst Oscar Aguilar of Universidad Iberoamericana, in reference to the US businessman who ran an independent campaign in the 1992 US election. The 43-city tour has gained Gonzalez much-needed media attention.

A poll by the respected Mitofsky polling organization found that two of every three respondents had heard of Dr. Simi. The same poll, however, placed Gonzalez in eighth place among 12 presidential candidates. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Oct. 26, reported at 10.90 pesos per US$1.00] (Sources: Spanish news service EFE, 08/08/05, 09/11/05, 10/17/05; Los Angeles Times, 10/19/05, 10/21/05; Associated Press, 08/14/05, 10/03/05, 10/20/05,