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Disputed Election Causes Major Rift In Center-left Prd, Raising Some Concern About Party's Future

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A bitterly disputed election for party leadership has exposed deep divisions within Mexico's center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and has threatened to pull the party apart. The party conducted its vote for various leadership positions in mid-March, but uncertainty about the numbers in at least 12 states left the final outcome unclear by a self-imposed deadline of March 23. The candidates for the two leading factions accused each other of engaging in massive irregularities and fraud, prompting party founder Cuauhtemoc Cardenas to call for the results to be annulled. Election organizers raised the possibility of asking the federal electoral tribune (Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federacion, TEPJF) to intervene in the dispute.

Massive irregularities reported

The battle for the PRD presidency came down to two major candidates, even though five people were seeking to lead the center-left party. Leading the field were ex-Mexico City mayor Alejandro Encinas Rodriguez of the Izquierda Democratica faction and former federal senator Jesus Ortega Martinez of the Nueva Izquierda group. Izquierda Democratica is aligned closely with Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who narrowly lost the 2006 presidential election to Felipe Calderon Hinojosa, while the Nueva Izquierda has some connections to the Cardenas family. Exit polls after the vote showed Encinas with about 49% to 51% of the vote, compared with 42% to 45% for Ortega. Encinas immediately declared victory. "The trend is very clear," he told the national television network Televisa. But the results lacked conclusive data from several states, which prompted Ortega to criticize Encinas' decision to declare himself the winner.

Ortega refused to concede with the official tally yet to be completed and irregularities reported in at least a dozen states. As later results came in, it became evident that Encinas and Ortega were locked in a statistical tie, with each candidate obtaining about 42% of the vote. Dina Navarro, one of the three other candidates on the PRD presidential ballot, also criticized Encinas for "daring to declare himself the victor based only on exit polls." Despite the tight election for national party president, Lopez Obrador's faction appeared to score overwhelming victories in some of the elections at the state level, including Mexico City and Tabasco. Leading the PRD in Tabasco will be the ex-presidential candidate's brother Jose Ramiro Lopez Obrador.

The reports of vote irregularities were so numerous that the party was unable to release an accurate count to the public by the March 23 deadline. Both factions accused Arturo Nunez, head of the party's electoral committee (Comite Tecnico Electoral), of favoring the other side. Nunez, in turn, charged that both factions were pressuring him to take their side. "We will clean up what needs to be cleaned up in this process, but we will not release results that are not accurate," said the PRD electoral coordinator, who asked the party executive committee (Comite Electoral Nacional, CEN) to intervene in the matter. He also suggested that the party might eventually ask for a ruling from the
The controversy was reminiscent of the 1999 PRD election, which was also rife with charges of fraud. Ortega was involved in that election, too, losing the race to Amalia Garcia (SourceMex, March 24, 1999). Ortega lost the PRD nomination for Mexico City mayor to Lopez Obrador's protege Marcelo Ebrard in 2006 (SourceMex, June 21, 2006).

**Cuauhtemoc Cardenas calls for election to be annulled**

The most recent voting debacle prompted PRD founder Cardenas to call for the party to annul the results and hold a new election, saying it had caused irreversible damage to the party. "The party has seen its reputation erode because of violations of its internal rules and the misdeeds of many of its leaders and members," said the PRD leader. "It has lost its moral authority to lead the nation in the efforts to protect our country's sovereignty and promote democracy." Encinas and Ortega both issued statements saying they disagreed with Cardenas' call for a new election. But other commentators said the PRD founder and ex-presidential candidate was right on target, especially because the problems related to the election were symptomatic of a deeper problem in the party. "Cardenas is very justified in his demand that the election be annulled," said Jorge Fernandez Menendez, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior. "Beyond the election, the diagnosis that he makes about the party is very harsh." Other analysts noted that the PRD's problems with its election make it appear hypocritical, especially in light of its charges that the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) engaged in massive irregularities to steal the 2006 presidential election. "What is happening within the PRD is a terrible nightmare, especially since the party has emphasized during the current presidency its allegations that the 2006 election was stolen," wrote nationally syndicated columnist Jorge Zepeda Patterson.

Manuel Camacho Solis, a former legislator and Mexico City mayor who played a key role in Lopez Obrador's 2006 campaign, warned that the leadership battle had become a "blood war" and that a split in the Mexican left would give clear sailing to the free-market agenda favored by Calderon. "Some commentators have framed the PRD contest as a defining battle between adherents of the street-fighting brand of politics favored by Lopez Obrador and party moderates who are mastering the art of deal-making in the halls of government," said the Los Angeles Times.

**Factions agree on policy, disagree on approach**

The policy positions of the two groups differ very little, with both strongly embracing the party's leftist philosophy. And all PRD factions strongly agree on the need to oppose any moves to allow private investors any significant role in the state-run oil company PEMEX. The two factions differ strongly in their approach, however, with the Izquierda Democratica taking a more confrontational approach to the Calderon administration's mostly market-oriented policies and the Nueva Izquierda seeking to find common ground with the other parties. Many PRD members in Congress, including key leaders like Ruth Zavaleta, agree with Nueva Izquierda's approach, putting them in conflict with Lopez Obrador (SourceMex, January 23, 2008).

Earlier this year, a group of PRD legislators aligned with Lopez Obrador initiated a motion to remove Zavaleta as president of the Chamber of Deputies because of her tendency to "collaborate" with the Calderon government. A majority of PRD legislators in the lower house did not agree with
the dissenters, with 110 of the 127 members voting to give her full support. PRD senators also issued a statement praising the work of Zavaleta in the Chamber of Deputies. The difference in approach is evident in the PEMEX privatization issue. Lopez Obrador has threatened to call for massive protests and blockades around the country if the Congress votes during its energy-reform deliberations to allow private investors any significant role in PEMEX. Ortega has also made it known that he opposes private participation in the state-run oil company but has strongly denounced Lopez Obrador's plan to call for a massive strike and blockades of highways and airports.

The divisions were evident at a rally to defend Mexico's oil sovereignty, organized by Lopez Obrador in late February, when several of the former presidential candidate's supporters shouted insults and threw objects at Sen. Carlos Navarrette and Deputy Javier Gonzalez Garza, who lead the PRD delegations in the two chambers of Congress. The two PRD congressional leaders have not been shy about criticizing the Calderon government. Still, some supporters of Lopez Obrador have accused them of "treason" because of their support for Ortega. Navarrette identifies himself as a member of Nueva Izquierda, while Gonzalez Garza is a member of a third PRD faction, the Movimiento por la Democracia. In the past this movement has worked closely with Nueva Izquierda but ran its own candidate, Alfonso Ramirez Cuellar, in this year's election.

The incident forced Lopez Obrador to issue a statement rebuking the perpetrators. "Above all, we have to remain united and respect the opinions of our comrades at a time when we face the prospect of turning over our national oil riches to Mexican and foreign private parties," he said. "We should not shout insults; we have to listen to one another." Lopez Obrador and other party leaders are hoping that the common opposition to the influx of private capital into PEMEX can bring the PRD together. "No matter who wins, our movement against the PEMEX privatization will continue," Lopez Obrador said a few days before the PRD internal election. "[The Calderon government] is betting that we will continue divided, but that's an old strategy." But Lopez Obrador is facing dissent from other quarters in his efforts to unite around the oil-privatization issue.

Some PRD governors like Zeferino Torreblanca of Guerrero and Juan Sabines of Chiapas have already made it known that they will not necessarily follow the directives of Lopez Obrador in the energy debate, especially the call for acts of civil disobedience. Torreblanca said his position is that he was elected to govern on behalf of all citizens of his state, regardless of their political orientation. "We are not party leaders even though we are committed to the ideals of our party," he said.

**Concerns arise about possible rupture**

Some analysts believe the dissent in the PRD could very well cause an irreparable rupture in the party. There have been some suggestions that if Ortega is declared the victor Lopez Obrador's followers could move to form a separate political organization. "If his group is unable to win control of the political party, sooner or later Lopez Obrador is going to leave the PRD," said political consultant Alfonso Zárate. "He is not going to accept a leadership in the PRD that he has called 'too soft.'" The proposal for Lopez Obrador to form a separate party was already floating around Congress in February. However, the suggestion did not come from within the PRD but from fellow leftist Dante Delgado, founder of the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD).
The PCD is one of three partners in the leftist coalition Frente Amplio Progresista (FAP), along with the PRD and the Partido del Trabajo (PT). PRD leaders strongly criticized Delgado's suggestion. "We are not thinking in those terms," said outgoing PRD president Leonel Godoy. "Rather, we want to consolidate the PRD as a national party." Still, some voices within the PRD are suggesting that the party be dissolved and re-emerge as a new political organization. "The current PRD model has run its course," said Ramirez Cuellar, who was on the ballot with Encinas, Ortega, Navarro, and Camilo Valenzuela. In separate interviews, Ramirez and Navarro cited the need for the party to identify more with the grassroots organizations seeking social change.

Recent polls show the PRD has a long way to go to regain the confidence of the Mexican voters. One recent public-opinion survey by the polling firm Ipsos-Bimsa showed that the number of voters who identify themselves as members of the PRD has fallen to 11%, compared with a high of 23% during the 2006 presidential election. Ipsos-Bimsa director Jorge Buendia said the decline could be attributed in large measure to what many voters consider the "radicalization" of Lopez Obrador in the aftermath of the 2006 presidential race. He noted that many voters were turned off by Lopez Obrador's decision to take over a section of central Mexico City for seven weeks (SourceMex, September 20, 2006). Still, Lopez Obrador's staunch opposition to the privatization of Mexico's oil resources has helped his personal popularity recover. A recent poll by the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma said the ex-Mexico City mayor had an approval rate of 37% as of March, compared with only 30% in December.

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