Center-Left PRD in Deep Crisis on 19th Anniversary

LADB Staff
On May 5, the Partido de la Revolucion Democrata (PRD) observed its 19th birthday in the midst of a damaging power struggle that threatens to pull the center-left party apart. The PRD held a leadership election in March but was unable to complete the process because of serious irregularities in the vote, with the two major factions accusing each other of cheating. The mishandled election and an ill-advised takeover of the Chamber of Deputies and Senate at the end of the legislative session in April have caused the Mexican public to lose confidence in the party, a couple of surveys show.

The differences between the two major factions are so vast that one party leader has called for a summit in September to renovate the party, including changing the emblem and name. At the same time, rumors are circulating that ex-presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has been laying the groundwork to create his own leftist organization. Internal election remains undecided.

The PRD's leadership election turned out to be a fiasco, with the two major factions, the Nueva Izquierda and the Izquierda Democratica, challenging the results of the tightly contested race and accusing each other of padding the ballot box in states like Chiapas and Veracruz (see SourceMex, 2008-03-26). Irregularities were also reported in Tabasco, Zacatecas, and Mexico City.

Initial results showed that Alejandro Encinas of the Izquierda Democratica faction, which is affiliated with Lopez Obrador's movement, was winning a slim majority of the vote. Before all the ballots were counted, the Izquierda Democratica made a statement claiming that its victory was irreversible. But subsequent numbers favored Jesus Ortega of the Nueva Izquierda, which put him slightly ahead of Encinas. The Izquierda Democratica challenged the later results, arguing that the final numbers were manipulated.

The uncertainty regarding the totals, and the accusations that each side cheated, prevented the election organizers from declaring a winner by a March 23 deadline. The uncertainty led to conflicting statements from the PRD’s election organizers.

In early April, officials said they were unable to conclude the count because of technical problems and irregularities. At the end of the month, they decided to declare Encinas the winner, based on partial results. That prompted Ortega to request the intervention of the federal electoral court (Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federacion, TEPJF). Encinas strongly criticized Ortega for bringing an internal party matter to the electoral court. "I regret that some of my fellow party members decided to resort to an outside arbiter to resolve what I consider an internal dispute," said Encinas, a former mayor of Mexico City. "This sets a very unfortunate precedent and threatens the autonomy and independence of our party."
Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, one of the PRD's founders, attempted at the last minute to bring together the former party presidents, including Lopez Obrador, to try to craft a solution to the vote-count dilemma ahead of the TEPJF ruling. Cardenas also echoed concerns that the PRD was leaving the matter in the hands of the electoral court. "I think we have a serious problem when we are forced to leave crucial decisions for the present and future of the PRD in the hands of someone outside the party," he said in a letter to Leonel Godoy, Amalia Garcia, Pablo Gomez, Leonel Cota Montano, and Lopez Obrador.

Under Cardenas' suggestion, Encinas and Ortega would both abandon their aspirations to become party leader. He proposed creating a political consultation council, which would substitute for the Consejo Ejecutivo Nacional (CEN) and select interim leaders. The interim leaders would serve until 2009, taking charge of the next election.

In his letter, Cardenas said the PRD was about to observe its 19th anniversary in the midst of its most serious crisis in history. "By failing to observe legal statutes, our comrades have not only created a deep and irreparable split but also threaten its [the party's] very existence," said the PRD founder. The divisions are so deep that each faction held a separate ceremony to mark the party's birthday. "Two different celebrations and two different visions marked the 19th anniversary of the PRD," said the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal. "Alejandro Encinas presided over one event and Jesus Ortega over the other."

Despite Cardenas' efforts, the PRD was unable to craft a solution before the TEPJF issued a ruling on May 7. In a 7-0 decision, the electoral court ordered the party to conduct a full recount of all ballots, effectively annulling the declaration of Encinas as the victor. Judge Maria del Carmen Alanis said the electoral court's intervention was justified because someone from the PRD had made the request. "Among the court's obligations is to safeguard the political and electoral rights of all the party members."

In the meantime, the PRD's Comision Nacional de Garantias ratified an updated count in early May that gave Ortega the lead. This prompted an angry response from the Encinas camp. Interim officers named The chaotic election left the PRD with a leadership vacuum and the need to decide whether to extend the mandate of outgoing PRD president Leonel Cota Montano, a member of Izquierda Democratica, or to name interim leaders.

On May 5, a PRD council decided to name Jose Guadalupe Acosta Naranjo as interim president and Martha Dalia Gastelum as interim secretary-general. Acosta Naranjo most recently served as the PRD's secretary-general. The decision was made entirely by the Nueva Izquierda and sympathetic smaller factions, as Izquierda Democratica and its allies boycotted the vote. Encinas and the Izquierda Democratica immediately challenged those appointments, bringing the case to the federal elections watchdog (Instituto Federal Electoral, IFE).

On May 23, the IFE declared that the appointments were legal, adding further to the rift between the two PRD factions. The growing division has raised concerns that the party is about to fall apart. There are rumors that the Izquierda Democratica may be planning to break away from the PRD
and form its own party. In an April 23 report, the Agencia de noticias Proceso (apro) said Lopez Obrador has been conducting a nationwide campaign to create a database of sympathizers, each of whom would receive a special identification card. This move could be laying the groundwork for the launch of a new party, said the news agency. "The number of people registered is impressive, since no political party and no organization can match the number of registrations obtained by Lopez Obrador's organization," said apro.

Some members of the Frente Amplio Progresista (FAP) earlier this year proposed creating a new party, but the suggestion did not move forward (see SourceMex, 2008-03-26). For now, the Izquierda Democratica faction has made no mention of breaking away. In fact, Encinas endorsed a proposal by Ortega to hold a summit in September to conduct a full overhaul of the party. Under the plan floated by Ortega, all factions would set a common political ideology and set of rules, create a new leadership structure, and decide on a new name and coat of arms for the party.

The two factions already strongly agree on ideology but differ widely on their styles. The Nueva Izquierda is more open to finding negotiated solutions with President Felipe Calderon's administration and legislators from the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) and the other major opposition party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). The Izquierda Democratica advocates a more confrontational approach with the Calderon government.

**Polls show decline in PRD popularity**

The proposal to overhaul the PRD comes as its popularity appears to be on the decline. One public-opinion survey conducted by the polling organization Ipsos-Bimsa, in cooperation with the Mexico City newspaper El Universal, shows that the PRD is lagging far behind the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) and the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in voter preferences. The poll, conducted in April, showed 20% support for the PRD, compared with about 37% each for the PRI and the PAN. The polling organization said the PRD has been hurt by its bungled internal election and the takeover of the Congress by the PRD and its allies at the end of the legislative session in April. The move, orchestrated by Izquierda Democratica, was intended as a protest against Calderon's proposed reforms for the state-run oil company PEMEX. The PRD and its FAP allies justified taking over the podium in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate as an effort to prevent the Calderon government from ramming through its plan with little debate (see SourceMex, 2008-04-30).

A separate poll commissioned by the PRD Senate delegation in May confirmed that the takeover of Congress has hurt the image of the party among the voting public. In the survey, 65% of respondents said they would not vote for the PRD because of the action. PRD Sen. Graco Ramirez, who supports the Nueva Izquierda faction, said Lopez Obrador and the Izquierda Democratica made a mistake in promoting this action because the Calderon government and its PRI allies never intended to ram through their plan and were seeking a wide debate. "There was no intention to fast-track the plan," said Ramirez. PRD Deputy Ruth Zavaleta, president of the Chamber of Deputies, echoed Ramirez's comments. In a radio interview, she said it would have been impossible for the PAN and the PRI to fast-track Calderon's proposal. "The initiative had to be placed on the agenda and would have to follow the corresponding legislative process," said Zavaleta.