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Mexican Left Undergoes Major Realignment; Lack Of Unity Could Have Repercussions For July Elections

by LADB Staff

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The Mexican left is undergoing a major realignment, with followers of ex-presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador informally shunning the Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and creating a new movement around the Frente Amplio Progresista (FAP). While the FAP was consolidating its position in Mexican politics, one coalition member, the Partido del Trabajo (PT), also fractured when a large number of members bolted the party in favor of the PRD because of disagreements with their party leader. The growing divisions within the left could undermine its ability to expand its numbers in the July midterm congressional elections.

Although there are some minor policy differences between the two major movements, the disagreements have more to do with approach. The PRD faction that works through the FAP and calls itself the Izquierda Democratica continues to favor a confrontational approach with President Felipe Calderon's administration, while the pragmatic wing of the PRD, which now controls the party, has shown more willingness to dialogue with the two other major parties, the Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) and the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). This PRD faction, led by former Sen. Jesus Ortega, is known as the Nueva Izquierda and is aligned with ex-presidential candidate Cuauhtemoc Cardenas. Controversy regarding leadership election splits PRD The fissure within the PRD had been growing for some time but became more pronounced after the latest leadership election in March 2008, a contest between ex-Mexico City mayor Alejandro Encinas and Ortega. Both sides claimed victory in an election marred by fraud and irregularities, amid charges of vote buying, intimidation, and ballot stuffing (SourceMex, March 26, 2008).

In a confusing turn of events, the PRD first announced that the preliminary count had given Encinas the victory. But for several weeks, the party did not release official results because of questions regarding the count, and conflicting tallies also indicated that Ortega has received more votes than Encinas. The party then decided to annul the election altogether on the grounds that there was no way to verify the outcome. In the absence of a clear result, the PRD named Guadalupe Acosta Naranjo interim president, but the Izquierda Democratica refused to recognize him because the decision was made primarily by members of the Nueva Izquierda and other smaller factions (SourceMex, April 04, 2008). The two camps appealed the case to the federal electoral court (Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federacion, TEPJF), which then ordered a full review of the vote.

The recount confirmed Ortega had won the election by more than 35,000 votes, prompting the TEPJF in mid-November to declare the Nueva Izquierda candidate the winner. In their decision, TEPJF members agreed that the results from hundreds of balloting sites were either fraudulent or filled with irregularities, and those results were thrown out. That meant that Ortega's victory was based on roughly three-quarters of the balloting sites. "We met our obligation as legal professionals and as public servants," said TEPJF magistrate Flavio Galvan Rivera following the decision. The Izquierda Democratica immediately criticized the electoral court's decision, with Encinas calling

the ruling a "clear case of interference" by the state in an internal party matter. Furthermore, he suggested that the Calderon government influenced the decision in exchange for Nueva Izquierda support of legislation to overhaul the state-run oil company PEMEX. The legislation was approved with support from all parties, including the PRD (SourceMex, October 29, 2008). "It was a political decision made during the resolution of the oil reform and the 2009 budget," Encinas said following the TEPJF ruling.

Lopez Obrador was more direct in his criticism of the electoral tribunal. "The only thing I'm going to say is that this electoral body is controlled by a political mafia," he said during a tour of Aguascalientes state. "That is all I need to say." Ortega said he was pleased with the court's ruling but also pledged to unite the party. "It's time to close this difficult, complex, and torturous chapter," he said at a news conference. "I'm taking firm steps to reconcile and unite the PRD." Leaders seek unity ahead of elections Acosta also urged reconciliation, saying the party and the leftist coalitions needed to forge a united front ahead of the 2009 congressional elections. "I am making an appeal for unity," the interim president said, following rumors that the PRD was breaking apart. The PRD acknowledges that a united front is more essential than ever, since the party is not competitive in 17 states. In a document published in early November, the PRD said it lacks electoral strength in the states of Baja California, Coahuila, Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, Durango, Colima, San Luis Potosi, Nuevo Leon, Sonora, Sinaloa, Queretaro, Jalisco, Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Puebla, Yucatan, and Campeche.

In some of those states, the PRD is proposing forming alliances with other parties and organizations, including using the FAP to form a united front. There have also been discussions of entering into alliances with the PRI, which has shown a center-left orientation at the grassroots level even though some national leaders like former Presidents Carlos Salinas de Gortari and Ernesto Zedillo adopted more neoliberal policies. One prominent PRD member caught in the middle of the power struggle is Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard, who has been affiliated with Lopez Obrador's faction but as an elected official also feels bound to respect the country's political institutions. "In my capacity as mayor of Mexico City, I have the obligation to respect and accept the decisions of the electoral tribunal," said Ebrard, in announcing his endorsement of the TEPJF ruling. The members of the Izquierda Democratica have not formally broken with the PRD, but they have given some signals that they are prepared to act independently from the PRD leadership. For example, Lopez Obrador announced in early November that he would work with the PT and the PCD to find candidates who would participate in the congressional elections under the FAP banner.

At the same time, PT and PCD officials said that they would enter into leftist coalitions only with the Izquierda Democratica and not with a Nueva Izquierda-led PRD. PCD leader Luis Maldonado went as far as to predict an electoral debacle for the PRD in 2009, because the party's political stance under its current leadership ran counter to the large segment of the population that voted for Lopez Obrador in the 2006 presidential elections. "This is an electorate that voted in 2006 and that has been betrayed by the faction currently in power," said Maldonado. "We are prepared to fill the void." Ortega, meanwhile, accused the PT and the PCD, also known simply as Convergencia, of "stabbing the left in the back" instead of seeking unity. "Despite their stance, I will be patient and continue efforts at dialogue," said the newly confirmed leader in a television interview.

The cracks in the Mexican political left have created some concerns. "The electoral court's decision that gave Jesus Ortega the presidency of the PRD...has left the party in danger of a total break," said Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal. Some commentators say a break would be regrettable. "Mexico needs a united and modern left," wrote columnist Adela Micha in the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior. "It needs a left that brings together the voices of those who are not heard." Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada published similar comments in an editorial entitled, "Izquierda sin partido, partido sin izquierda (A left without a party, a party without a left)," in reference to the dilemma facing the PRD. The newspaper said the decision of the PT and PCD to distance themselves from an organization led by Ortega and the Nueva Izquierda places the PRD in a very difficult position. "Without the votes of supporters, leaders, and sympathizers of the PT and the PCD, and without the unaffiliated activists from the citizen movement [which backed Lopez Obrador in the 2006 election], the Nueva Izquierda is going to find itself with a deficit of votes for its candidates to have any chance of victory."

Some key members of the Izquierda Democratica have already decided to switch their affiliation. Prominent among these is Sen. Ricardo Monreal, who joined the PT and will lead a FAP delegation in the Senate. According to Monreal, he made the move to ensure the viability of the PT in the Senate. By law, a party must have at least five members to qualify as a parliamentary group. With the recent defection of a PT member to the PRD, the PT was left with four members. But Monreal noted that five other PRD senators sympathetic to Izquierda Democratica have also threatened to bolt the party because of disagreements with Ortega and the Nueva Izquierda. He said the dissidents who might switch are Sens. Salomon Jara, Rosalinda Lopez, Yeidckol Polevnsky, Alfonso Sanchez Anaya, and Jose Luis Garcia Zalvidea. PT also suffers major divisions. Even as the PT appeared to be gaining new legislators in the Senate, it also lost about 3,000 members to the PRD because of an internal dispute. In mid-January, the PT faction known as Unidad Democratica Nacional, led by Deputy Jose Narro Cespedes, left the party because of a disagreement with party president Sen. Alberto Anaya, whom it accused of hiding funds disbursed to the party by the federal electoral institute (Instituto Federal Electoral, IFE).

Furthermore, Narro Cespedes accused Anaya of going behind the backs of party members to forge secret agreements with PRI president Beatriz Paredes ahead of the gubernatorial election in Nuevo Leon on July 5. "This is not a small break," wrote columnist Luis Hernandez in La Jornada. "Those who left say that they represent 40% of the membership. Those who remained behind contend that this figure is inflated. But beyond the dispute over the numbers, this is a painful rupture." By moving to the PRD, Narro's faction is turning its back on the FAP and joining forces with Ortega's Nueva Izquierda. There was talk that the PRD offered the members of Unidad Democratica Nacional a certain number of seats in Congress if they defected, but Ortega denied these rumors. "There was no exchange," he said. The PRD has also reached out to other smaller parties with a center-left orientation, including the Partido Socialdemocrata (PSD), to join forces in the 2009 congressional election. The PSD has experienced its own break, with founder Patricia Mercado leaving the party to form her own organization, known as Movimiento Alternativa.

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