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Questions Remain 18 Years after Assassination of Presidential Candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio

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Almost two decades have passed since presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio was gunned down during a campaign rally in Tijuana on March 23, 1994, and many questions remain about the murder. Authorities are sticking with the theory that the man they arrested, Mario Aburto, was acting on his own initiative and was not part of a conspiracy. Still, many theories are floating around, including one that suggests that Colosio's murder was part of a conspiracy by members of his own Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) or the drug cartels.

The PRI's current candidate, Enrique Peña Nieto, has invoked Colosio's name during informal campaign speeches, which is part of a strategy to make him appear as a populist. Because of a law allowing for independent candidacies, 59 people have filed the paperwork to run for president in the July 2 election. But only two of those candidates, both affiliated with political parties, pose a serious challenge to Peña Nieto—Josefina Vázquez Mota of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) and Andrés Manuel López Obrador of a center-left coalition led by the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD).

Colosio's assassination threw the 1994 presidential election into turmoil. Having survived an internal power struggle with former Mexico City mayor Manuel Camacho Solís, Colosio was finally gaining momentum when he was shot to death during a campaign rally in the Lomas Taurinas neighborhood in Tijuana ([SourceMex, March 30, 1994](#)). The death of its candidate forced the PRI to scramble to find a replacement, finally settling on Ernesto Zedillo, a polar opposite of Colosio. Zedillo, a Harvard-educated technocrat, had a more-low-key style, compared with Colosio's fiery populism. He went on to win the presidency by a wide margin ([SourceMex, Aug. 24, 1994](#)).

Investigations all conclude that assassin acted alone

The administrations of former Presidents Carlos Salinas de Gortari, Zedillo, and Vicente Fox launched several investigations into the Colosio murder, and each of the four prosecutors appointed to lead the probes came to the same conclusion—that the PRI candidate was murdered by a single gunman—Mario Aburto ([SourceMex, April 6, 1994, Sept. 25, 1996, March 25, 1998, and April 7, 1999](#)).

The investigations were suspended in 2000 after special prosecutors said they had exhausted all leads ([SourceMex, Oct. 25, 2000](#)), but the government left open the possibility of reopening the case if new evidence was brought forth. Some questions arose in ensuing years ([SourceMex, March 24, 2004](#)), but the case was not reopened.

Plenty of skeptics dismiss the government's explanation that Aburto acted alone. "Eighteen years have transpired since the murder of Luis Donaldo Colosio, and his death continues to exist under a shadow of doubt, in a void that no homages or flowery words can fill," columnist Jorge Fernández Menéndez wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper *Excelsior*. "The basic and essential questions remain unanswered."

There are questions about how the government handled the investigations, especially in the aftermath of the assassination. One journalist, the late Jesús Blancornelas, editor and publisher of the Tijuana weekly newspaper *Semanario Zeta*, was the only one able to obtain an interview with Aburto. "In reality, [Aburto] did not tell him anything," said Jorge Morales Almada in a column published in the online news site *La-Ch.com*.

Alleged killer Aburto insists he was set up

The only revelation from Aburto, said Morales Almada, is that he did not pull the trigger and that he was set up. This testimony is found in the transcript of a note Aburto sent to special prosecutor Luis Raúl González Pérez from his cell at the Puente Grande federal penitentiary. "I did not shoot Mr. Colosio...the fingerprints that were found on the gun were from another person who looked like me," said the transcript. Despite Aburto's protestations, González Pérez and other prosecutors did not believe him.

Morales Almada said Aburto made the same claim in a recent letter to his father, Rubén Aburto, who lives in southern California. He suggested that authorities coerced a confession from him. "Through various forms of physical and psychological torture, they forced me to admit guilt for a crime I did not commit," said the letter, dated Dec. 23, 2011.

In the letter, published by *La-Ch.com*, Aburto alleged that then Sonora Gov. Manlio Fabio Beltrones, who is currently the coordinator for the PRI delegation in the Senate, ordered his torture to make him confess to the murder.

"They do not have any concrete proof, only a video showing a hand [pulling the trigger]," said Aburto, even though the file for the case comprises more than 69,800 pages, based on 1,261 separate testimonies.

Rubén Aburto implied that ex-President Salinas might be behind the decision to go with the lone-gunman theory recommended by all four special prosecutors. "All of them have gone with this theory from the time that Salinas gave the order to special prosecutor Diego Valadés."

PRI candidate Enrique Peña Nieto invokes Colosio's name

Eighteen years after Colosio's assassination, the PRI is invoking the memory of the former presidential candidate, perhaps to reshape the party's image as one that cares about the people's needs.

"The most positive reference that the PRI makes regarding its platform and any promises of social justice involve the name of Colosio," said Ezra Shabot, a political commentator for *OnceTV*. "To invoke Colosio is to restore the mythology and the hero that the party itself created."

Even before the campaign was fully underway, Peña Nieto was already using statements from Colosio's 1993 campaign to promise that the PRI would run a clean election and dispel the long-held notion that his was a party of patronage and vote-buying. "In this campaign, we are seeking to convince voters. I say emphatically, the PRI does not need any vote obtained outside the law," said Peña Nieto. "We will work to provide an example of democratic practices."

Some analysts praised the PRI candidate for bringing up Colosio as an example for the party to follow. "Peña Nieto did well to bring up the values promoted by Colosio, which were lost in the

years following his death," said Fernández Menéndez. "But the incident should cause the PRI to reflect on the causes of assassination and move forward from that point."

Shabot agreed that Colosio's death was the start of a downward spiral for the PRI, which lost control of the Congress in 1997 and the presidency in 2000. Several other developments contributed to the party's misfortunes, including the uprising by the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) in Chiapas in December 1994 ([SourceMex, Jan. 4, 1995](#), and [Jan. 11, 1995](#)) and the economic crisis that followed the peso devaluation in 1995 ([SourceMex, Jan. 11, 1995](#), and [Jan. 18, 1995](#)).

Peña Nieto far ahead in public-opinion polls

Peña Nieto is confident he can recover the presidency for the PRI after 12 years of PAN-led governments. Three recent polls released just days before March 30, the day when all parties can start their official campaigns, showed the PRI candidate with large leads over his closest rival. In two of those polls, the lead was in the double digits.

A poll by Consulta Mitofsky had Peña Nieto with 48% of voter preferences, compared with about 29% for Vázquez Mota and about 23% for López Obrador. Peña Nieto also had a comfortable lead in the poll by Buendía y Laredo and the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal, with 42% in voter preferences, followed by 23% for Vázquez Mota, about 17% for López Obrador, and 1% for Gabriel Quadri of the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL).

A poll by Milenio GEA-ISA gave respondents the option of saying they were undecided, and 31% indicated this preference. This was equal to the percentage that said they supported Peña Nieto.

Another 23% expressed support for Vázquez Mota, 15% for López Obrador, and less than 1% for Quadri.

Some undecided voters might cast their ballots for one of dozens of independent candidates who have thrown their hats into the ring this year. A partial electoral reform approved by the Chamber of Deputies in November 2011 allowed for citizens without a party affiliation to run for Congress and the presidency ([SourceMex, Nov. 2, 2011](#)). The Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE) said 55 people filed papers to run for president by the initial March 23 deadline, in addition to the candidates representing the four established parties or coalitions. The institute said 20 independents filed to run for the Chamber of Deputies and three for the Senate. IFE officials plan to review the list to certify each person, and some might be dropped from the list.

The independents seeking the presidency include two controversial personalities. The first is Rafael Acosta (known as Juanito), a street vendor, who won the election in the Iztapalapa borough in Mexico City in 2009 as a substitute for former federal Deputy Clara Brugada, who had been disqualified from the race. Under a deal with Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard, Acosta would give up the seat shortly after his swearing-in, paving the way for the mayor to appoint Brugada to the seat. But Acosta created some drama when he threatened to keep the seat he won in the election. Ebrard and the PRD finally convinced him to give up the post.

Asked why he was running for president in 2012, Acosta responded, "The people have asked me to do so. I have about 20 million people who follow me."

Also on the list is Manuel L. Clouthier, son of former PAN presidential candidate Manuel Clouthier, who came in third behind Salinas de Gortari and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in the 1988 presidential elections. The younger Clouthier recently left the PAN in a dispute about the party's selection of

at-large candidates for the Senate. Most other names on the list are relative unknowns, including a maritime lawyer and a professor at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). A lingering question is how many of these candidates, if any, will be invited to participate in debates in the next several weeks.

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