

The Future of the Party System In Mexico

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The leaders of the three main political parties: Dulce María Sauri Riancho, of the PRI; Luis Felipe Bravo Mena, of the PAN; and Amalia García, of the PRD.

Today, all questions, expectations and concerns about Mexico's governability must be seen through the prism of the system of political parties. The reason is very simple: after July 2—and it does not take great perspicacity to see it—the three main political parties will undergo profound changes that will in turn affect the system of parties forged in recent years. This will give rise to a new, different system, whose composition and functioning are still an enigma. To the extent that the parties are the keys to demo-

cratic life, their actions and interactions will be decisive for governability and, as a result, for the future of Mexican democracy.

From my point of view, the party system will inevitably change as a consequence of the July 2 election results. The new balance of forces and the new distribution of power will sooner or later be reflected in its make-up. Neither the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), nor the National Action Party (PAN), nor the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), the bases for political representation and upon which public power was formed during the last decade, will be able to continue as they did in the past, and in the process of their changes, they

will unravel the knots that held together what today could be called the party system of the Mexican transition. Suffice it to look at these three parties' most obvious challenges to show that the least probable scenario is that of the system staying as it is now.

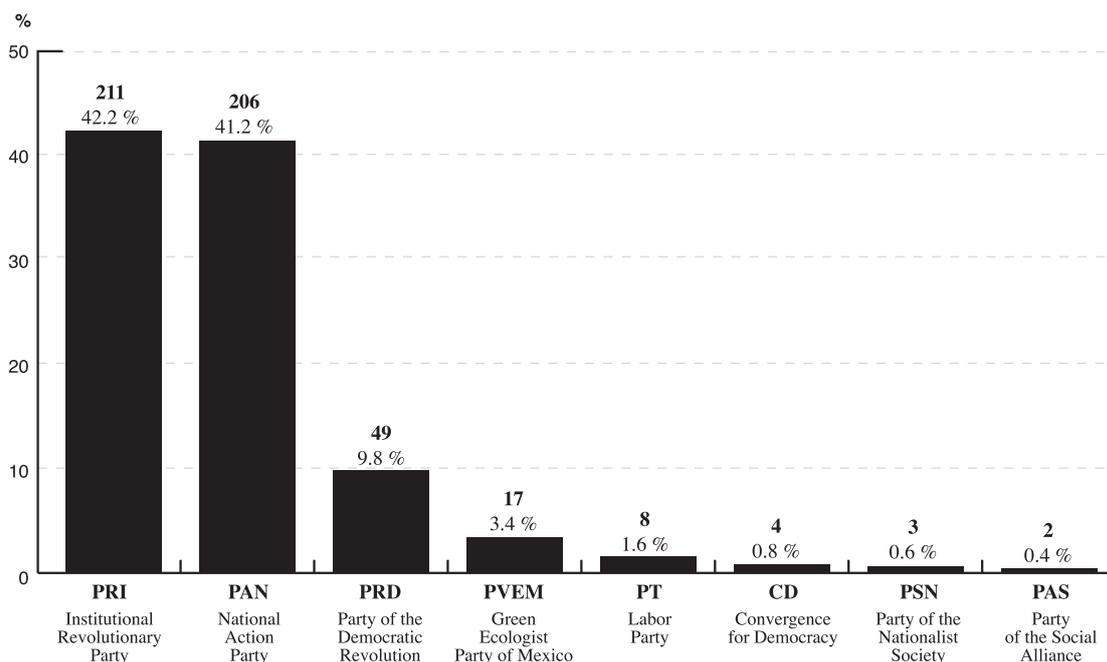
But, what factors will determine the recomposition of the party system? What direction could it take? How will that process be linked to Mexico's governability?

THE SYSTEM OF POLITICAL PARTIES

Historically speaking, the competitive system of parties is new in our country.

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DISTRIBUTION OF SEATS IN THE CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES



Until just a few years ago, the struggle for power and its transmission were not resolved by genuine competition among the parties. It was not until the second half of the 1980s that elections began to have real meaning and stopped being merely a democratic facade for the post-revolutionary regimen, useful only to lend legitimacy to what the president and the large interest groups inside the PRI had already decided at their desks and dining tables: the selection of occupants of practically each and every one of the country's elected posts. The figures speak for themselves: in 1982, the PRI still held 91 percent of the 3,479 elected posts that existed at the time, including the presidency, the Congress, the governors' seats, local congresses and municipal governments. By 1997, of a total of 4,157 posts, the PRI occupied only 54 percent.

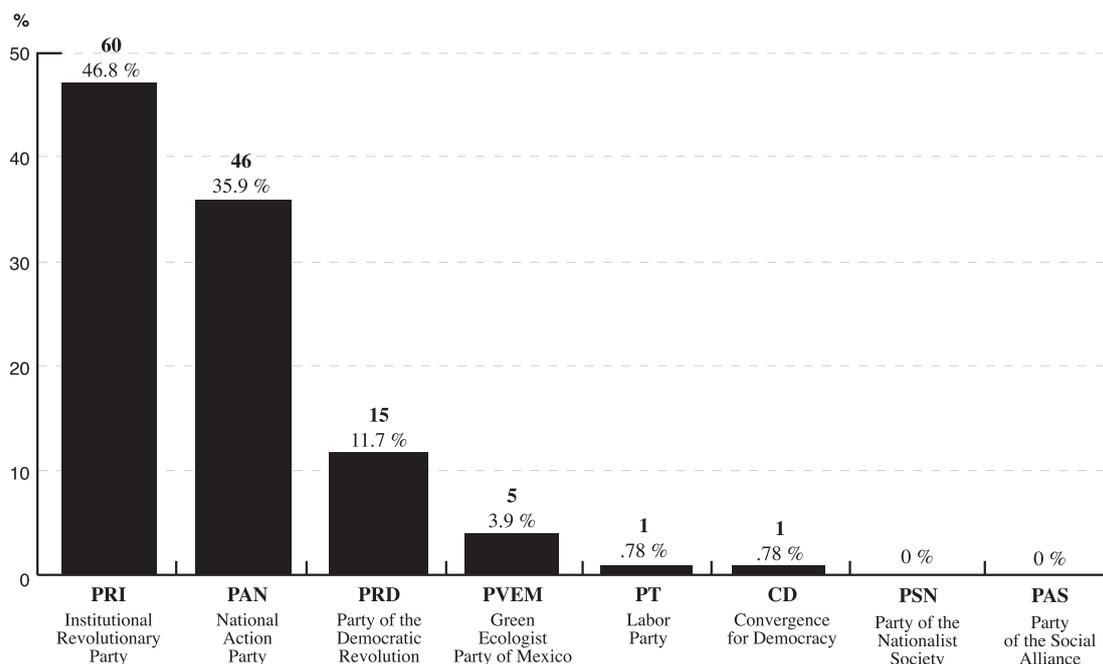
Things changed. The economic crisis of the 1980s, the emergence of a more critical, demanding public, the con-

solidation of the PAN as a really competitive force, and, finally, the split of a democratic current from the PRI in 1987, brought the regimen up against the fact that the efficacy of its revolutionary legitimacy had simply worn out. Neither the power of the state, nor corporatist structures, nor the patronage networks upon which the PRI system had been built for six decades were sufficient any longer to contain society's and the opposition parties' demands for democracy. The 1986 elections in Chihuahua and the 1988 presidential elections put an end to the PRI's ability to stay in power through fraud without having to pay extremely high costs and putting the country's governability at risk. After that, the PRI was forced to enter into dialogue and negotiations with the opposition about the rules and conditions for contending for political power.

After the 1988 ballot, when the legitimacy of the new administration was questioned because of grave irregulari-

ties in the elections themselves, change was imperative. What is more, Carlos Salinas de Gortari's economic project to strengthen the market and open up the economy required recognition and trust from abroad, which could only be obtained by solving the problems of democracy. Simply, a modern, liberal economic face could not be presented on the old, authoritarian political body. This was the beginning of the successive electoral reforms (1989-1990, 1993, 1994 and 1996) aimed at guaranteeing transparency and impartiality in the organization of elections and equal conditions for real competition among political parties. Parallel to this process of reforms, within the new regulatory and institutional electoral framework, a new system of political parties began to take shape in which the three main protagonists, even taking into consideration their highs and lows during the 1990s, proved themselves truly representative of Mexican society.

DISTRIBUTION OF SEATS IN THE SENATE



Initially, however, the Salinas administration's electoral reforms (1989, 1990, 1993 and 1994) and the results of the 1991 and 1994 federal elections made many analysts and political actors think that Mexico's democracy would end up being a two-party system. The PRI was forced to face the challenge of electoral competition and was resolved to win popular support by offering a new proposal for government; the PAN was concerned about the 1988 Cardenist wave and was willing to negotiate to build the norms and institutions needed for its democratic struggle; and the PRD was harassed by the regimen and took a hard line on dialogue and negotiation. In contrast with the results of the National Democratic Front (FDN) in 1988, the PRD's 1991 and 1994 electoral performance was practically disastrous: it got only 8.2 percent and 17.1 percent of the vote in those two years. By contrast, the PRI did very well in those two elections: 61.5 percent in

1991 and 50.1 percent in 1994, while the PAN consolidated itself as the main opposition, with 17.7 percent and 26.7 percent, respectively. The rise of the PAN in 1994 led some to think that it had serious possibilities of winning the presidency, even though its candidate, Diego Fernández de Cevallos, never really got close to PRI candidate Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León.

Two contradictory phenomena can be seen in the 1994 election results: the Chiapas conflict and the enormous support that Carlos Salinas' project still enjoyed. On the one hand, the uprising of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) shook the conscience of Mexican society and brought it right up against the crude, painful reality of the poverty and exclusion of millions of Mexicans. It was clear that modernization did not have room for everyone and that those excluded were increasingly removed from the benefits of modernity. But, on the other hand, the

fear of violence and the desire to continue looking ahead on the road to modernization produced a vote for peace and the continuity of the model. The PRD's position, openly against the Salinas project and ambiguous vis-à-vis the guerrilla movement and the armed struggle road, paid heavily at the polls. In the weeks after the August 1994 elections, it seemed clear that the PRI and the PAN were the parties that would contend for or share power in an increasingly competitive electoral arena.

This perception about the effects of the 1991 and 1994 electoral results on the party system was reinforced by another significant factor: the agreements between PRI and PAN on questions of economic policy and the signal of certainty that they sent the markets and investors, who saw that plurality of two, that incipient two-party format, as a guarantee that the big policy decisions would not be sub-

ject to changes and surprises because of election results.

Despite this perception, the PRD continued to represent broad sectors of society who opposed the economic model supported by the PRI and the PAN. It is no less true that a slip-up or failure of that model would be capitalized on by its only open opponent. And that is just what happened. The continuing conflict in Chiapas, the scandals about crimes and corruption involving the Salinas family, and, above all, the profound financial crisis in which Salinas' term ended and the Zedillo administration began changed things radically. If the Salinas years tended to show a trend toward a two-party system, during the first part of the administration of Ernesto Zedillo, that trend was erased with the imposing rise of the PRD. The climax of that rise, in 1997, established the three-party format, to the degree that the PRD not only won the first elections for mayor of Mexico City—something that had seemed a piece of cake for the PAN only a few months before—but, it even won more seats in the Chamber of Deputies than the PAN (PAN, 121; PRD, 125), where the PRI lost its absolute majority for the first time in history. There was no doubt about it: PRI, PAN and PRD would be in the same league to share and contend for power in the next presidential elections. And in those conditions, the road to 2000 began.

In retrospect, we can say that the first competitive system of parties in Mexico went through two stages between 1988 and 2000. In the first phase, under the administration of Carlos Salinas, it took on characteristics of a two-party system. This was not just because of the high percentage of politi-

cal representation concentrated by the PRI and the PAN (in the 1991 and 1994 elections, the two together represented 79.2 percent and 76 percent of the vote, respectively). It was also because these two parties were the ones who designed, negotiated and carried out the major reforms from 1988 to 1994. In the second stage, particularly after the 1997 elections, things changed to a three-party system, which represented the nation and carried out the negotiations and agreements for the exercise of public power. In this last period, the PRD had not only recovered a very important space on the political scene, but also, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, given his landslide victory in Mexico City, became a very strong candidate for the 2000 presidential elections.

THE FUTURE OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

The results of July 2 and the Vicente Fox phenomenon outstripped the political parties in two senses. In the first place because Fox practically appropriated the PAN candidacy without its institutional structure and its traditional leaders—the party's ideological core—being able to avoid it, despite their reservations about Foxism. The second reason is that the Fox candidacy broke down the barriers of the PRI and PRD electoral clienteles, penetrating into segments of the voters who had seemed reserved for those two parties, achieving support and votes previously alien to the PAN. With his enormous capacity for turning the presidential elections into a choice between change, represented by himself, and continuity, represented by the PRI, Fox's candidacy became to a certain

extent a supra-partisan phenomenon. Nevertheless, the July 2 results maintained an essentially three-party system. For how long is another question. None of the parties that ran alone (Party of the Democratic Center [PCD], the Social Democracy Party [PDS] and the Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution [PARM]) kept their legal status. And none of those that allied with the PAN (the Green Ecologist Party of Mexico [PVEM]) or with the PRD (Convergence for Democracy [CD], the Labor Party [PT], the Party of the Social Alliance [PAS] and the Party of the Nationalist Society [PSN]) will be decisive in and of itself for the approval of constitutional and legislative reforms in Congress.

The three main parties concentrate almost all the seats in the new Congress. In the Chamber of Deputies, they hold almost 94 percent (PRI, 42.2 percent; PAN, 41.2 percent; and PRD, 9.8 percent), and in the Senate, 94.4 percent (PRI, 46.8 percent; PAN, 35.9 percent; and PRD, 11.7 percent). If we consider that normal legislative procedures require a simple majority of those present in both chambers, clearly, to approve any reform or new law, the presence of two of the three main parties will be required. In addition, none of them, even allied with a small party, would be able to make up that majority without one of the other two large parties. For constitutional reforms requiring a two-thirds vote in both chambers and the majority of the 32 state legislatures, the only road is a PRI-PAN agreement. From that point of view, the federal elections maintain the PRI-PAN-PRD, three-party system, even if the PRD is smaller than the first two. However, as I said initially, the problems and challenges faced by these three

organizations will hardly be met and solved without changing the party system as a whole. Let us see.

The PRI must build a leadership to substitute for the presidential leadership it has revolved around for seven decades. It must establish legitimate, effective rules and procedures for its internal life. It must define an ideological identity and a programmatic proposal that are a coherent, attractive alternative for the voters, an alternative that must take the place of public policies designed and executed from public office. And it must do all this without breaking up. If it does not succeed, the road to fragmentation will be inevitable, and with it, the splits to call for the creation of new parties or to join other, already existing forces. The critical moment will be when President Zedillo leaves office and a new leadership will have to be formed. In the meanwhile, each local election will be a test for the PRI's ability to win the voters and maintain its internal cohesion.

The PAN, for its part, is facing a crucial challenge. It must resolve its relationship with Vicente Fox and decide whether it will be the party of the administration or not, something which does not seem to be part of the vision of the president-elect. The PAN's identity and institutional solidity will be riding on this decision and the exercise of the office of president. The danger of winning office and losing the party — as Don Luis H. Alvarez, one of its historical leaders, once put it — is at hand. In the short term, the make-up of Vicente Fox's cabinet and the terms of Fox's relations with Congress during the first session of his administration (September to December 2000) will be fundamental.

The PRD is confronted today by the challenge of going from what it is now, a conglomerate of currents and factions tied together solely by the leadership of their caudillo, to the establishment of democratic rules and procedures that give it institutional solidity. It is also facing the demand that it take a critical look at its identity and discourse in order to be able to infuse its project with content and feasible proposals in a context of growing interdependence with international markets. Like the PRI, the PRD's horizon is fraught with the risk of splits. The fragility of the agreements and equilibria among its currents and factions, as well as the opportunism that dominates the PRI-ism adopted by the PRD to win governors' seats, are serious threats to its unity.

The challenges and outcome of the internal conflicts in the PRI and the PRD will be closely linked to the needs and interests of the small parties that maintained their legal status after July 2, 2000.¹ Except for the Green Ecologist Party of Mexico, whose electoral alliance with the PAN will probably extend into Congress, the other four parties (PT, CD, PAS and PSN) do not look like they will continue in the shadow of the PRD, under whose auspices — in a tactical decision by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas the high costs and zero benefits of which have still not been accepted by anyone — they maintained their registration. The four organizations with legal status are already an enormous temptation for potential — and seemingly inevitable — splits from the PRI and the PRD.

In these conditions, where is the party system heading? That is a difficult question to answer. The factors in its recomposition are so many and

varied that any prediction would be a wild guess. What is clear is that the combination of splits from the PRI and the PRD (inevitable, from my point of view) and the existence of four vacant or semi-vacant (practically representing no one or almost no one and without any quality ideological or programmatic content) but legally existing organizations (PAS, PSN, PT and CD), is a heavy brew, contaminated with the worst kind of opportunism, that will not be easy for the new government to get down, a new government that, above all needs to show signs of the change that it offered and to guarantee governability. This will necessarily depend on the Congress, where no party has the majority needed to legislate alone.

Today, with three large parties in Congress, negotiating and forging agreements seems complicated, but feasible. If in a few months the legislators regroup not in three caucuses but in eight, every agreement could become a veritable miracle. For that reason, a vital, strategic goal for the president-elect will be maintaining the internal cohesion of the two main opposition parties, unless he believes it possible and profitable to attract PRI and PRD split-offs himself in order to be able to create his own parliamentary majority.

Time will tell. ■■

NOTES

¹ The parties that kept their legal registration were the PRI, the PAN, the PRD, the Green Ecologist Party of Mexico, the Labor Party, Convergence for Democracy, the Party of the Social Alliance and the Party of the Nationalist Society. The Social Democracy Party, the Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution and the Party of the Democratic Center lost their legal status.