

Out of Office

The PRI's Restructuring And Perspectives 2006

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PRI President Roberto Madrazo next to legislative caucus head Emilio Chuayffet and State of Mexico Governor Arturo Montiel with other PRI leaders.

Juan Flores/Cuartoscuro



Controversial Teacher's Union leader Elba Esther Gordillo.

Nelly Salas/Cuartoscuro

INTRODUCTION

THE GRADUAL DISARTICULATION OF POWER GROUPS: 1988-2000

The defeat of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in 2000 closed a historic cycle in Mexico's political life. Throughout its existence, the "party of the Revolution" took on several organizational identities: that of a coalition

of revolutionary regional forces during the years of the Revolutionary National Party, or PNR (1929-1938); that of a corporatist front of mass social organizations during the years of the Party of the Mexican Revolution, or PRM (1938-1946) and as the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI (1946-2000), subject, together with its three sectors (workers, peasants and community members), to the authority of the country's president. The common denominator of these stages was its subordination to an external authority, whether

the founding leader or the nation's president. And this was the fundamental distinctive trait that determined its internal power relations.

From 1988 on, external political conditions exerted increasingly strong pressures on the PRI internally, particularly the series of electoral reforms that would culminate in 1996 with the autonomy of electoral authorities vis-à-vis the executive branch of government, stripping the party of its privileges one by one, particularly those originating in the government, which had allowed

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TABLE 1
PRI LEADERSHIP ELECTION RESULTS BY GOVERNOR'S AFFILIATION
(FEBRUARY 2002)

GOVERNOR'S AFFILIATION	MADRAZO GORDILLO	PAEDES GUERRERO	CANCELLED VOTES	TOTAL VOTES	DIFFERENCE MADRAZO/PAREDES (NUMBER OF VOTES)	DIFFERENCE MADRAZO/PAREDES (%)
PRI-Madrazo	424,069	80,967	20,518	525,554	343,102	65.3
PRI-Paredes	596,611	949,824	82,746	1,629,181	-353,213	-21.7
Total PRI	1,020,680	1,030,791	103,264	2,154,735	-10,111	-0.5
PAN	384,401	266,766	33,671	684,838	117,635	17.2
PRD	112,982	168,660	12,903	294,545	-55,678	-18.9
Total PAN and PRD	497,383	435,426	46,574	979,383	61,957	6.3
Overall Total	1,518,063	1,466,217	149,838	3,134,118	51,846	1.7

Source: Table designed by the author with data from the PRI Internet portal, <http://www.pri.org.mx/principal/PRI.htm>

it to maintain electoral hegemony. This combined with a change in the internal distribution of “power quotas,” strengthening the ability of those directly linked with the new public sector technocracy to vie for candidacies for public office. That created tensions with the old “nationalist” elites linked to corporatist sectoral organizations. In turn, this would unleash an internal dynamic fraught with outbreaks of autonomy by party militants who no longer wanted to subordinate themselves to the authority of the nation’s president at the same time that links between those activists and PRI governors were strengthened.

These power struggles were also crisscrossed by an ideological fight: on one side were those who, under the flag of revolutionary nationalism, resist-

ed burying the Keynesian model of the state, and on the other extreme were those who waved the neo-liberal banner and agreed with the government technocracy’s restructuring of the economy and the public sector.

After the severe 1988 political-electoral crisis, new focuses of tension emerged in PRI internal life. During the administration of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994), two bids were made to reform the party from above with Salinas attempting to eliminate the PRI’s sectoral structure by different means: the fourteenth national assembly’s “territorialization” (1990) and the implementation of the “Pronasol” program in the sixteenth assembly (1993).¹ The assassination of PRI presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio Murrieta

during the 1994 campaign and the tug-of-war that resulted in the designation of Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León to replace him also accentuated the internal tensions.

Later, new developments sharpened internal tension and discontentment. The shock created by Zedillo’s announcement that he would establish a “healthy distance” vis-à-vis the PRI, together with the bad electoral results of 1995 and 1997 caused by discontentment with the economic crisis that broke out at the beginning of the administration were all factors that sharpened internal tension and dissatisfaction. This led to the beginning of a phase of attempted rebellion of certain PRI groups against the president, which translated into the imposition

of serious limitations on his discretionary ability to designate the next presidential nominee during the seventeenth national assembly held in 1996; these were called President Zedillo's "padlocks", or limits.

As the 2000 presidential elections approached, internal clashes between PRI members identified with the party traditions and the "technocrats", the open opposition of then-governor of Tabasco Roberto Madrazo Pintado to overturning the reforms of the seventeenth assembly, and the mushrooming of groups inside the PRI with a local power base were all circumstances that led Zedillo to handle the succession in the most favorable way possible for himself. He decided to promote the direct election of the presidential nominee in which he would guarantee all the support of the party apparatus for his candidate, Francisco Labastida, and instituted a system for counting the votes by districts won, making the victory of opposition members with strong regional support difficult. The central confrontation was between Labastida and Madrazo. The primaries were held November 7, 1999, and, as expected, Labastida won the PRI's presidential nomination.

ELECTORAL DEFEAT AND THE INTERNAL POWER STRUGGLE: 2000-2002

The victory of Vicente Fox Quesada and the National Action Party (PAN) is a milestone in the country's political history. For the first time since 1929, a candidate from outside the "Party of the Revolution" had won. Until then, the PRI had not developed any real internal structure —not just a formal

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by an ideological fight between nationalists and
the neo-liberal technocrats.

one—for making major decisions and regulating internal conflict. The country's president had always taken care of that. This meant that when its candidate lost the election, the organization was left without its traditional political head.

From July 2000 until the election of the new national leadership in February 2002, the PRI came apart at the seams. After the first moments of bafflement, without the leadership of the nation's president, the elites heading up the party's different groups began to struggle furiously to fill the vacuum of power. To survive politically, party members faced the task of creating a new method for electing a national leadership and setting up rules for functioning and decision making outside the framework of the government.

In February 2001, the PRI elites and their main notables came to several agreements for electing the new national leadership. This meeting, known as the "El Caballito conclave" was the beginning of an internal truce. These informal agreements were ratified by the National Political Council. The most important was to hold the eighteenth national assembly in November 2001 to write new by-laws. The central question, naturally, would be the mechanism for electing the new party president and the general secretary of the National Executive Committee (CEN), until then appointed by Mexico's president. At this stage of the process, the actions of PRI governors were crucial. During the sessions of

the eighteenth assembly, the decisive debates took place in the working group on the by-laws, with a central confrontation between Madrazo and Labastida followers over control of the party. In general, despite the acrimony of the debate, the Madrazo followers managed to impose their proposals, particularly about how the new national leadership was to be elected.

Regardless of the kind of party the PRI might have evolved into and the degree of internal institutionalization it might achieve, simply having negotiated basic agreements and made decisions without internal splits and without the intervention of a PRI president, has undeniably meant that the party went through a major organizational change.

THE FIRST INTERNAL ELECTION OF NATIONAL LEADERS: 2002

Once the rules of the game were established, the next step was to put them into practice. In late 2001, two possible slates emerged from the two party factions to contend for heading up the party: Roberto Madrazo, backed up by Elba Esther Gordillo, and Beatriz Paredes Rangel and her running mate Javier Guerrero. They would compete for votes in February 2002. Both sides had gathered groups with different interests and varied regional forces.

The primaries took place February 24, and the results were made public on February 27. The process was not

without its clashes and frictions between the contenders; as was to be expected, both sides used the same mechanisms that the party had traditionally used to mobilize voters, sparking mutual accusations of rounding up voters and other illicit practices. At the end of the day, the winning ticket was headed up by Madrazo and Gordillo (see table 1).

Despite strong discontentment in the ranks of the defeated side, Beatriz Paredes decided against breaking with the party and accepted defeat but without hiding her disagreement. Paredes said, "I accept the commission's decision, but I do not share the way the election was carried out." The next day, she resumed her seat in the Chamber of Deputies and, before 70 deputies who had supported her, expressed the need to avoid internal clashes among legislators and of keeping the PRI caucus united so as not to lose influence.

Madrazo supporters took on the task of building bridges with the Paredes supporters in negotiating the composition of the PRI's new National Executive Committee. The new team was made up mainly of Madrazo and

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Paredes supporters. In this way, the new national leadership took office, but it had to negotiate its executive committee with its adversaries. Up to that point, the PRI's road was not an easy one, and at times it veered dangerously close to the abyss of organizational break. With things like this, the PRI approached 2003, a year which had several crucial developments in store.

In short, the internal power vacuum caused by the country's new president not being a member of the PRI and the subsequent faction fight seemed to herald the collapse or fragmentation of the party if not its complete disappearance from the political map. However, contrary to all forecasts, its elites managed to come to a basic agreement in the November 2001 eighteenth assembly to decide on the party's new by-laws. The most surprising thing was that the PRI did not split during this process.

THE TESTS OF 2003 AND ELBA'S COUP²

After the defeat of PRI presidential candidate Labastida, the party had to make its own political decisions for the first time. Since then, it has gone through difficult situations and serious internal conflicts, the results of which in the medium and long terms are uncertain. In 2003, several issues stand out: the repercussions of "Pemexgate";³ the debate about the privatization of the electrical industry; the designation of candidates for public office, particularly for Congress; the decision about who was going to head up the PRI's congressional caucus; and the position of the PRI caucus about the PAN administration's fiscal proposals. These problems, although they each had their own dynamic, ended up by tainting each other. This was due to a great extent to the way that Elba Esther Gordillo tried to arrange power relations in her favor.

For the first months of 2003, the PRI's attention was fixed on the matter of the illegal funneling of state-owned oil giant Pemex funds through the union to Francisco Labastida's presidential campaign. In March, the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) fined the party about one billion pesos, a heavy blow to PRI finances, particularly amidst preparations for the next federal electoral campaign. This soured relations between the two sides of the national leadership since, at the end of the day, "Pemexgate" was a problem that had

TABLE 2
NATIONAL VOTE BY PARTIES AND NUMBER
OF DISTRICT WINS (1997-2003)

	VOTE (%)			DISTRICTS WON		
	1997	2000	2003	1997	2000	2003
PAN	26.6	39.1	31.8	65	141	82
PRI	39.1	37.8	38.0	165	131	163
PRD	25.7	19.1	18.2	70	28	55
Others	8.6	4.0	11.9	—	—	—

Source: <http://www.ife.org.mx/>

The polemical Elba Esther Gordillo
used the National Educational Workers Union to support
gubernatorial candidates opposing the PRI.

been created by Labastida's campaign committee, though the whole party was made to pay the cost.

The debate about privatization of the electrical industry began to have repercussions among the PRI currents even before the 2003 mid-term elections, but was momentarily taken out of the limelight because of the proximity of the elections and the change-over that meant in the Chamber of Deputies. Even so, it was clear that inside the PRI the discussion about how to combine the strategy vis-à-vis the new PAN administration overlapped with the redefinition of the state's new institutional profile and that, what was worse, there was no internal agreement about this matter.

Although there was no longer a member of the PRI occupying the presidency to approve (or "put a check mark next to the name of") the selection of candidates for senator and federal deputies for the July 2003 elections, in March, the new PRI leadership managed to negotiate its lists of candidates, suffering serious internal frictions like in any other party, but without organizational break-ups.

Once again, the PRI governors were a powerful factor in the negotiation of the candidacies, but not the only factor: the leaders of the large corporatist organizations had held onto their share of power, among them, Elba Esther Gordillo, the de facto leader of the National Educational Workers Union (SNTE), the country's largest union.

For example, one of the many conflicts brought about by the new general secretary of the CEN, Gordillo, came about when she was nominated as a deputy by proportional representation without promising to resign from her post in the party structure as stipulated in article 166 of the by-laws recently approved in the eighteenth assembly. Not only that, but from the beginning of the year, she announced that she would head up the PRI caucus in the newly elected Chamber of Deputies.

In the elections for federal deputies elected by district majority, the PRI ran as a coalition with the Green Party of Mexico in 97 districts, and made quite a good showing, coming out with a plurality of 38 percent of the vote, and winning outright 163 districts. This gave the PRI back its plural-

ity in the Chamber of Deputies that it had lost three years before (see table 2).

After the elections, Gordillo managed to impose herself as head of the PRI caucus. As was to be expected, tension in the Chamber of Deputies increased because Gordillo continued to occupy her post as general secretary of the party, openly contravening party by-laws. By October, a group of 70 deputies—a number which later grew even more—called for deposing Gordillo and electing a new head of the caucus because of her frank collaborationism with the PAN administration and her arrogance and temerity in occupying positions of power inside the party. This time the former governor of the State of Mexico, Emilio Chuayfett Chemor, came into the limelight as the new man of the hour. The clash between the two sides in the PRI congressional caucus then spread to PRI governors.

The conflict deepened even more in October for two reasons. One was when Gordillo named only her own

TABLE 3
LOCKED AND DISPUTED DISTRICTS
CLASSIFIED BY WINNING PARTY (1997, 2000 AND 2003)

	TYPE OF DISTRICT	NUMBER	%
Locked districts 1997-2003	PAN	40	13.3
	PRI	99	33.0
	PRD	18	6.0
Subtotal		157	52.3
Disputed 1997-2003	PAN - PRI	81	27.0
	PAN - PRD	45	15.0
	PRI - PRD	17	5.7
Subtotal		143	47.7
Source: Calculations by the author using IFE data from http://www.ife.org.mx/			

The PRI has known how to deal
with the new political-electoral challenges, but its
internal equilibrium is still fragile.

followers to head up the key Chamber of Deputies committees allotted to the PRI, shunting aside deputies trusted by party president Roberto Madrazo. The other was when she pressured to force the whole PRI caucus to vote in favor of the Fox administration's fiscal proposal to put a VAT tax on medicine and food, an issue discussed in October and November 2003. These were the straws that broke the camel's back. Until that time, Madrazo had been ambivalent about the general secretary's maneuvers during the conflict. But, since Gordillo had already made too many assaults on his supporters and pressure had begun to mount, Madrazo had to concede and begin the process of removing her as head of the caucus.

On December 2, awash in a sea of intense pressure, the extraordinary session of the PRI Standing Political Commission⁴ and the National Political Council met to make a call to relieve Gordillo of her post. This was despite the fact that only hours before, the Gordillo bloc had pressured and even threatened deputies aligned in favor of the switch, and that the Gordillo deputies' absented themselves in an attempt to make a quorum impossible. The next day, the PRI caucus met and elected Chuayfett as the new coordinator by 118 votes. Once she was defeated, her support among the governors also waned, since they opted to respect the deputies' decision. That closed, for the time being at least, the chapter of Elba's coup.⁵

During 2004, Gordillo has continued to be the source of polemics since she created a new leadership post inside the SNTE, which she then proceeded to occupy. Later, during the local elections in Aguascalientes and Oaxaca and probably also in Veracruz, she used the union to support gubernatorial candidates opposing the PRI, which led to calls for her expulsion from the party (although this proposal was never implemented).

PERSPECTIVES FOR 2006

Thus, 2003 brought the PRI the most important political choices it has had to face as an organization independent of the government and led by an internally limited, but elected national leadership. The party has been transforming itself up to a certain point into a different political organization from what it was before 2000, but it has still not shed many of the old hallmarks of party identity that its long organizational past left indelibly engraved on its internal habits.

Although until now the PRI has been able to deal more or less positively with the challenges of the new political-electoral situation and has managed to avoid the internal power struggles causing splits, it is undeniable that its internal equilibrium is still fragile and precarious. And not only that: many of its actors operate motivated only by vested interests, which makes for a panorama of rather unstable internal alliances.

Leaving behind the anachronistic division between those who disciplined themselves to the nation's president, when the PRI still managed to impose its candidate, and those who rebelled against the government technocracy that used the party as a mere instrument, and going beyond the conflicts arising out of the simple struggle for power, we can also recognize a political-ideological axis that runs through the PRI with different intermediate shades of grey. It goes from those who, under the banner of the old revolutionary nationalism, defend the need to continue to reserve for the state Keynesian economic and social functions, all the way to those who favor a neo-liberal restructuring of the state and the economy.

This makes it difficult to predict the result of the PRI candidate selection process for 2006, particularly the presidential nomination. This will be the PRI's real trial by fire: nominating a presidential candidate without splitting the party and carrying out a coordinated electoral campaign. The precedent set by Gordillo, who frankly and openly violated the by-laws and established external alliances without the party's approval, and the lack of a political response by the national leadership may be an incentive for everyone to ignore the by-laws when the time comes to choose a presidential candidate and launch themselves into a battle without quarter that could seriously fracture the party. Of course, it is also very possible that political pragmatism, something the PRI elites excel at, may also lead them to keep the party together for all of 2006.

The external challenges arising from the election results are still to be met, whether they win or lose the presidency, whether they win a majority in

the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate or not. In both cases, there will be pressures inside the party. From the point of view of the elections themselves, the PRI has two things in its favor: having maintained a constant 38 or 39 percent of the vote in the last three federal elections (1997, 2000 and 2003) and having won one-third of all the seats in elections of federal deputies by district (see table 3). Actually, a great deal seems to depend on how the non-PRI vote is distributed between the PAN and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) in a series of strategic districts. In any case, most probably, their efforts will center on taking the districts where the PAN has a chance of winning, where the result of the federal elections will also

be played out to a great extent. From that point of view, the PRI's hand is not bad, but everything will depend on its knowing how to play its cards. And for that it has to maintain organizational unity, something which is more uncertain. **MM**

NOTES

¹ The author refers here, first, to the attempt to transform the party from a corporatist organization based on sectors into one in which the leaderships were picked on a territorial basis. The implementation of the Pronasol program refers to the attempt to subordinate the party to the interests of and support for the National Solidarity Program (Pronasol), the administration's social relief program that covered all aspects (education, health care, housing, food) and was used in a corporatist way to strengthen the government party among the country's poorest population. [Editor's Note.]

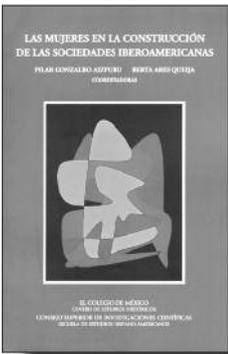
² "Elba's coup", or the *elbazo*, refers to PRI General Secretary and Federal Deputy Elba Esther Gordillo's actions: together with a group of followers, she decided to support the Fox administration's fiscal proposals without reaching an internal agreement with the PRI's main political players.

³ The term "Pemexgate" refers to the scandal about Mexico's state-owned oil giant funneling funds to the PRI presidential campaign through the union. [Editor's Note.]

⁴ This structure, made up of National Political Council members, was created by the eighteenth national assembly, and is an intermediate body between the NCP and the PRI's national president.

⁵ In PRI insider language, the term "*albazo*" is used to mean that a political group attempts to surprise another group with an unexpected maneuver ahead of scheduled formal events. The term "elbazo", loosely translated as "Elba's coup", is derived from Gordillo's first name, Elba, and refers to her maneuvers during fall of 2003.

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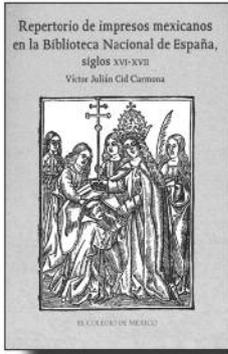
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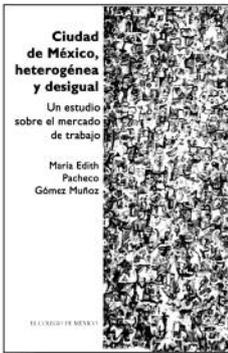
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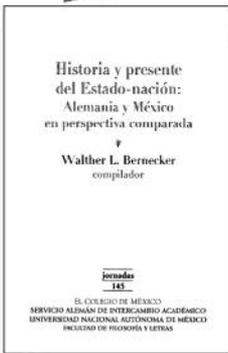


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