

# The Dilemmas Facing the PAN<sup>1</sup>

*Carlos Elizondo Meyer-Serra\**



Gustavo Graf / Imagenlatina

Carlos Medina Plascencia (PAN), Arturo Nuñez Jiménez (PRI) y Porfirio Muñoz Ledo (PRD), party caucus leaders in the Chamber of Deputies.

**T**he National Action Party (PAN), apparent beneficiary of the crisis of Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), is facing an important dilemma. How the party deals with that challenge will decide whether it consolidates its gains or not. Not a small matter. Today, the PAN occupies 6 of Mexico's 31 governor's mansions and 296 city halls, including 15 state capitals.<sup>2</sup>

\* Professor-researcher at the Center for Economic Research and Teaching (CIDE).

PAN leaders should be asking themselves the question, "Which of the two parties of the Revolution is more dangerous to the PAN, the 'Institutional' party, or PRI, or the 'Democratic' party, the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD)?" The PAN worked productively with the PRI during the last presidential administration, pushing through part of its legislative agenda, increasing its vote count and broadening out its positions of power. In an alliance with the PRD in September 1997, it was able to wrest control of the lower house from the PRI, occupy the chair of several important leg-



Tomás Bravo / Imageniattina



Javier García / Imageniattina



Tomás Bravo / Imageniattina

Possible PAN nominees for the year 2000 presidential campaign. Left: Vicente Fox Quezada, PAN governor of Guanajuato. Center: Carlos Medina Plascencia, leader of the PAN caucus in the Chamber of Deputies. Right: Felipe Calderón Hinojosa, national leader of the PAN.

islative commissions that had never been in the hands of the opposition before and foster changes in fiscal policy.

Relations with either party rooted in the Mexican Revolution are a highly risky proposition for a party like the PAN. In fact, the very existence of two parties of the Revolution has made it difficult, if not impossible, for the PAN to achieve its goal of becoming a great national party in opposition to the PRI. A bipartisan scenario that would give the anti-PRI struggle a winning banner was ideal for a party like the PAN. However, the emergence of the PRD has eroded the PAN vote among those dissatisfied with the PRI and made bipartisanship of the kind that exists in the states where the PAN has achieved its most important victories impossible. The PAN did not win the governorship of Sonora because of PRD strength in the region. To the extent that the PRI is weakened by desertions to the PRD, the PRD will be strengthened in states where the PAN had been the second force, which is what happened in the October 1997 elections in Veracruz.

The PAN faced its first major setback during the 1988 presidential elections. In July 1988, although it had previously been the main opposition party, far from reaping the results of the economic crisis of the Miguel de la Madrid administration (1982-1988), the PAN was pushed into third place at the polls. Why? The emergence of a group of *ex-priistas* led by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and supported by the Mexican left changed the electoral map. The Cárdenas group left the PRI because it was dissatisfied with the nomination process for the

candidacy to the presidency as well as the economic program of Carlos Salinas, the candidate finally chosen. Fighting against the PRI apparatus seemed like an uphill battle, but in the end they were much more effective than the PAN in channeling large segments of the public's dissatisfaction and nostalgia.

For the PAN, drawing closer to the PRI means running the risk of being tainted by the stigma of the old regime, the weight of the crisis, the discredit of former President Salinas. Some members of the PAN see the reasons for their bad showing at the polls on July 6, 1997, in their support for many of Salinas' bills in the legislature.

In the last federal elections, the PAN dream of becoming the country's leading electoral force, a dream they publicized widely, fell apart. They ended up very far from their goal, barely tying with the PRD for second place nationwide. They were also pushed back to third place in Mexico City, which at the beginning of the electoral campaign looked like they would take.

However, the failure of July 6 is not only —nor indeed, basically— due to having coincided with a part of Salinas' legislative agenda. This is a simplistic reading that the PRD has helped promote in order to not have to again confront a united PRI and PAN. In fact, in 1995, the first year of the economic crisis, the PAN was the big winner in the local elections.

A series of factors lie behind the PAN missing the victories it had hoped for in July 1997: first, it lacked a strong candi-

A bipartisan scenario that would give the anti-PRI struggle a winning banner was ideal for a party like the PAN. However, the emergence of the PRD has eroded the PAN vote among those dissatisfied with the PRI and made bipartisanship of the kind that exists in the states where the PAN has achieved its most important victories impossible.

date in Mexico City that would have helped its campaign nationally. Second, its media campaign was poor. Third, the market economic policy it had always defended—which though the PAN itself had not implemented it, differed little from Salinas'—had fallen into disrepute. Fourth, the successes and failures of PAN state administrations have not led to radical changes in the situation, though they had no reason to, even if people expected it of them. These administrations have not done badly in the public's estimation and some have even been re-elected, but they have sent a message of a certain amount of disillusionment which has been capitalized on by the PRD. Fifth, the PAN has found it very difficult to be convincing to the great mass of poor Mexicans identified with the discourse of the Revolution, and particularly the political practices it gave rise to. Success depends to a great degree on a party's ability to be the intermediary for public sector assistance to marginalized sectors, and the PRD is much better at this than the PAN.

While an alliance with the PRI means the PAN would run the risk of being accused of becoming its confederate, proximity to the PRD means another risk: being overwhelmed by a party with stronger, more able leaderships, more able to mobilize the public, better management of the written media, more support among intellectuals and capable of using the lowest tactics in confrontations with the PAN locally. Emulating them, as some PAN leaders who have revived populist rhetoric suggest, brings with it an even greater risk: being

identified with a national project to a great extent opposed to PAN ideology, competing with the PRD on its home ground, which would end up cutting into the base of support the PAN does have without much hope of making any significant inroads into PRD supporters. What a cruel paradox for the PAN if the "democratic transition" culminated in the year 2000, with or without its support, in an electoral victory of the son of General Lázaro Cárdenas, whose "socialist" policies during his presidential administration (1934-1940) were the origin of the dissatisfaction of broad sectors of the middle class that led to the birth of the PAN.

Can the PAN find a place for itself between the two parties of the Revolution? Apparently, the PAN leadership has this dilemma clear. That is the root of the violent critique that PAN President Felipe Calderón has more than once directed against PRD parliamentary leader Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, the frequent insistence that there is no such thing as an "opposition bloc"<sup>3</sup> and the fact that the PAN has not ceded its Chamber of Deputies' leadership to the PRD.

However, this need to distance itself from the PRD does not mean there is no possibility of coming to agreements with it. There is no opposition bloc, but there certainly are a great many factors to base agreements on. Clearly, one area is always open to agreement: everything that contributes to eroding PRI mechanisms of control.

This is unavoidable, though paradoxical. Without the mechanisms of patronage characteristic of the PRI to win over the poorer classes, the big winner would be the PRD, not the PAN. The PRD has the leadership and the discourse needed to mobilize the poor sectors of the population linked to the nationalist, revolutionary rhetoric of the PRI and a political practice capable of channeling the demands of the neediest sectors of society. The PAN, even when it controls a governorship, has difficulty getting the poor to recognize the achievements in social policy it has been able to make.

The historic PAN tradition of denouncing misuse of public funds makes it probable that it will vote jointly with the PRD in the Congress' investigative commissions.<sup>4</sup> The two parties will also vote together, of course, on questions of the internal functioning of the Chamber of Deputies. The PRI is very mistaken if it thinks it can change that. The relationship between the PAN and the PRD (and the support of its minor allies, the Labor Party [PT] and the Mexican Green Ecologist



Gustavo Graf / Imagenlatina

Deputies Marco Antonio Fernández (PRI), left, and César Jáuregui (PAN) at loggerheads. Politics on the chamber floor are different now that the PRI no longer dominates the scene.

Party [PVEM]) will tense up occasionally, but it is highly unlikely that it will break down completely around the question of keeping the PRI from controlling the Chamber of Deputies.

However, the PAN and the PRD cannot go much further together. First, because it would imply grave risks for the PAN itself if it allowed its agenda to be confused with the PRD's. In the final analysis, the PAN's economic policy is much more similar to the one the executive branch has been promoting, with a fortiori PRI support, for more than 10 years, than the PRD's, regardless of the latter's recent efforts to temper some of its old proposals. The PAN would advance its agenda more if it maintained its independence, acting as the fulcrum of the scales of power, than if it accepts being a part of a PRD-controlled bloc or a simple PRI ally.

In the second place, the so-called opposition bloc cannot constitutionally promote a reform of the state, or even approve ordinary legislation without the concurrence of the PRI. The PRI controls the Senate and the president has a veto in most cases. Except in the specific case of the budget, approved annually as the exclusive prerogative of the Chamber of Deputies, all legislation will have to be negotiated among the three main parties.

If part of the PAN's plans is to merely establish an alliance with the PRD, it risks not only seeing its own star wane as a political party, but it would be weakening its effectiveness for pushing its legislative agenda. The PAN's dilemma is how to turn its two dangerous competitors into assets in the defense of its platform and at the same time work to improve the living standards of the populace it already governs. ■■■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This article was originally published in the Mexico City daily *Reforma* on October 17, 1997.

<sup>2</sup>These figures include the results of the October 1997 Tabasco and Veracruz state elections, but do not allow for possible changes in contested races due to any future decisions by state electoral tribunals. The state capitals are Aguascalientes, Cuernavaca, Culiacán, Guadalajara, Hermosillo, Mexicali, Mérida, Monterrey, Morelia, Oaxaca, Puebla, Querétaro, San Luis Potosí and Tuxtla Gutiérrez.

<sup>3</sup>The alliance of the PAN, PRD, Mexican Green Ecologist Party (PVEM) and Labor Party (PT) in the Chamber of Deputies to control the internal workings of the legislature and its main decisions has been dubbed "the opposition bloc." [Editor's Note.]

<sup>4</sup>The congressional investigative commissions are ad hoc bodies set up to investigate assassinations and the most explicit cases of corruption in the public administration. The best known are the Colosio and Ruiz Massieu Commissions (assigned to investigating the assassinations of political figures Luis Donaldo Colosio and José Francisco Ruiz Massieu) and the Conasupo Commission, set up to look into corruption in the National Company for Community Subsistence (Conasupo), a government foodstuffs and provisions distribution agency.