

# Carlos Castillo Peraza

## Ideologue of Democracy



Photos by Antonio Nava/AVE

Carlos Castillo Peraza, philosopher, writer, journalist and, above all, political activist committed to the struggle for democracy in Mexico and to the ideals of the only party he ever belonged to, the National Action Party (PAN), died in September in Bonn, at the age of 53. A man of sharp intelligence and integrity, true to his ideas, which he always put into practice, Castillo Peraza is considered one of the ideologues of the so-called transition to democracy. His party strategies are credited with the National

Action Party win in the July 2000 presidential elections which put an end to 70 years of political domination of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).

Born in Mérida, Yucatán, April 17, 1947, he graduated in philosophy and letters at the National Autonomous University of Mexico and did post-graduate studies in political philosophy at Switzerland's Fribourg University. A practicing Catholic, Castillo became active politically in the PAN as a young man in his hometown. It was



the 1960s. Opposition victories were systematically blocked by the PRI's political monopoly.

Castillo's dedication and party vocation took him to party district committees training activists and explaining party policies and his own views all over the country. By 1979, he was already a member of the party's National Council; he was secretary of international relations of the National Executive Committee from 1979 to 1982; twice elected federal deputy (1979-1982 and 1988-1991); and founder and director of the PAN's National Political Training Institute. In the turbulent times after Carlos Salinas de Gortari's 1988 presidential victory, Castillo Peraza always defended the benefits of and need for negotiation. Despite his unconditional support for PAN candidate Manuel Clouthier and being named Minister of Education in the alternative cabinet that the latter formed as a protest for what he considered the doubtful election results, Castillo Peraza was roundly criticized both inside and outside his party for having remained open to negotiation with the Salinas administration. Together with Diego Fernández de Cevallos, Castillo Peraza led the party through the so-called "conciliation-concession" period that began in 1991 when PAN member Carlos Medina Plascencia was named governor of Guanajuato state even though a dif-

ferent PAN candidate had actually run, after PAN protests about electoral fraud forced the resignation of PRI candidate Ramón Aguirre, previously declared the winner.

A little later, Castillo went through one of the most brilliant stages in his party career after winning the party presidency. For three years (1993-1996) he capitalized on the PAN's electoral gains in the previous six years: its winning the governors' seats of Baja California in 1989, the first PAN victory recognized by the federal government and official party, and of Chihuahua in 1992. He kept up the strategy of dialogue with the PRI government at the same time that he promoted an ideological proposal for the 1990s. This proposal was finally decided on by the Identity Commission, created by the PAN Executive Committee in 1989. Castillo Peraza was responsible for defining the party's different points of doctrine, with two dimensions: "identity, understood as a definition of doctrine, and its governmental program. For the first, the party leadership used the social doctrine of the Catholic Church; for the second, the proposals of Christian Democracy." (*La Jornada*, 10 September 2000).

This was the first stage of the party's greatest political and electoral growth: in addition to

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maintaining the Baja California and Chihuahua state houses, it won the Jalisco governor's seat and consolidated its electoral presence in municipalities and state capitals across the nation until it was governing almost 40 percent of Mexico's population. Dialogue with the Salinas administration led to government reforms and initiatives that the PAN leadership claimed as their own. Castillo Peraza said, "Today in Mexico we are witnessing a victory of the PAN; not just a political victory, but above all, a cultural victory." (*La Jornada*, 10 September 2000). Ever since then the PAN has been known in political circles as "the party of the cultural victory."

Despite its victories, the old guard PANistas considered that the "gradualist, pragmatic" style of their new ideologue was a departure from their basic principles. The disagreements led to a split in the party which in turn led to the resignation of prominent members like Pablo Emilio Madero, Jesús González Schmal, Bernardo Bátiz and Jorge Eugenio Ortiz Gallegos.

To everyone's surprise, Castillo Peraza decided not to run for reelection to the party presidency in 1995 despite having enough support to win. Two years later he was the party's candidate for mayor of Mexico City in the first elections for that post, running against PRI candidate Alfredo

del Mazo and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the PRD hopeful who won by a landslide, while Castillo Peraza lost resoundingly with only 16 percent of the vote. This defeat is explained by his lack of charisma before large crowds, constant problems and clashes with the press, particularly the reporters covering his campaign, and a general discourse divorced from the needs of the middle class and the poor.

After his defeat, Castillo Peraza decided to go back to private consulting and continue in the party's international relations department. In April 1998, after 34 years as a party activist, he resigned from the PAN to devote himself full time to research and academia.

Castillo Peraza was also a lecturer, a teacher of political philosophy at La Salle University and the founding editor-in-chief of *Palabra* magazine (1987). He was a contributor to the Mexican national dailies *Ovaciones*, *La Jornada*, *Reforma*, *El Universal*, the local papers *Diario de Yucatán* (Mérida), *Público* (Guadalajara), *El Imparcial* (Hermosillo) and *La Opinión* (Los Angeles, California), plus the magazines *Proceso*, *Nexos*, *Vuelta* and *Zeta*. He also wrote several books and participated regularly in the weekly Mexico City television program of political analysis, "Front Page."

Castillo Peraza died suddenly while on a trip to study and rest in Europe, causing consternation in Mexico's political and intellectual circles. Both inside and outside the PAN he had won admiration and recognition for his intellectual abilities and total, principled dedication to politics. His friends remember him as a consistent Catholic, a lover of good books, culture and his family, a baseball fan, an untiring traveler and great conversationalist who collected dinosaurs and Tweety birds.

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*Elsie Montiel*  
**Editor**