

Exploraciones/Explorations

Winners and Losers:

Preliminary Reflections on the 2000 Presidential Elections in Mexico

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In the summer of 2000, Mexico's political system experienced something that long seemed impossible: the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) lost the presidential elections for the very first time since the party was founded in 1929. An interesting aspect of the loss of the PRI and the victory of Vicente Fox of the *Partido de Acción Nacional* (PAN) – it not yet clear which of the two will prove to be the more significant in the near future – is that it all happened in such a non-spectacular fashion, certainly if compared to developments elsewhere in Latin America. The intense international attention and expectations that surrounded the referendum that eventually sent Pinochet home in 1988 was absent in Mexico last summer. Nor did Mexico witness the spectacular emergence of a new political movement or outside leader, as was the case with Fujimori in Peru in 1990. The political ambience before the crucial elections in July 2000 was less tense than during the build-up to the highly controversial presidential elections in 1988. In that year, left-wing candidate Cárdenas headed a breakaway movement from the PRI and organized an electoral movement that gained tremendous momentum and nearly snatched victory away from PRI candidate Salinas de Gortari. It is fair to say that many, if not most, observers within and outside Mexico became so accustomed to the 'ruling party' having the upper hand that an oppositional victory became difficult to imagine. And yet it has happened.

After the elections, Mexico is going through an apparently calm and uneventful five-month period until Fox moves into the presidential palace on the first of December 2000. However, behind the scenes there are intense political activities and negotiations going on that will have a strong impact on future political developments. Vicente Fox is preparing his government team and organizing the take-over of the administrative apparatus. The PRI is licking its wounds and trying to redefine its future political role and strategy. The same goes for the centre-left *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD), despite the fact that it was able to win the important elections for 'governor' of Mexico City for the second consecutive time. Finally, tens of thousands of people linked to the former ruling party and the federal administrative structures are jockeying for positions.

At the time of writing (October 2000) it seems worthwhile to make some

preliminary assessments about some key aspects of the new political situation. For that purpose we will put the 2000 presidential elections in historical perspective. The most substantial part of this contribution is dedicated to the situation that has surrounded the PRI in the aftermath of the elections. We will reflect on the conditions and possibilities of the party in the near future. In the final section we will briefly look at some issues that may be relevant for the new Mexican president.

Victory or Defeat?

Although this is not the place to reflect extensively on the deeper and systemic causes of the events of *'el dos de julio'*, it is useful to briefly stress their historical significance. For that purpose, we will start by focussing on the defeat of the PRI. That party represented a crucial element and an excellent example of what Pempel called 'one-party dominant regimes', which, among other things, are defined by the numeric and prolonged electoral dominance of a particular party. The latter certainly holds for the PRI, the party of the revolution that was not founded to compete for state power but that was born from state power in 1929 and that remained in power nationally until 2000. The numeric dominance of the PRI has indeed been overwhelming, particularly at the national level: in 1964 the PRI obtained around 85 per cent of the vote; in 1970 and in 1976 the party amassed approximately 80 per cent of the vote; in 1982 – the year that marks the beginning of a series of economic crises and a profound readjustment of the country's development model – the PRI still managed to attract 70 per cent of the electorate. However, in 1988 the party's electoral performance plummeted to an unprecedented 51 per cent and six years later the results were no better (Klesner, 2000). The elections of 1988 are considered a turning point in recent Mexican politics, not in the least because of the massive fraud that was perpetrated against oppositional candidate Cárdenas. It is fair to say that, for the first time in decades, broad sectors of the population sensed that a defeat of the PRI at the national level was possible in principle. Since the PRI began to lose its stronghold on the electorate, the political weight of elections in the Mexican political system and the controversies about electoral outcomes have increased substantially, thereby expressing deep-seated societal transformations. In the aftermath of the 1988 elections, the editors of a book about that event suggested that 'the only real issues now are what set of political structures and arrangements will replace it [the Mexican political system, WP] how rapidly change will occur, and how conflictual the transition process will be' (Cornelius et al., 1989). Scholarly attention to the question of elections also increased.¹

A further defining characteristic, refers to the fact that such a party should be in a position to impose its views in terms of actual government, in other words, to realize a particular 'historical project'. With its roots in the social revolution of 1910-1917, the elite had at its disposition a societal and ideological project that was enshrined in the Constitution of 1917. Although government policies changed profoundly over the years, the PRI always drew its mission from its revolutionary origins. A crucial consequence of prolonged one-party dominance in Mexico has been the close ties between state, government and party

interests on different administrative levels. It is for this reason that the PRI has commonly been addressed as '*el partido oficial*' or '*el partido del estado*'. Although we believe that this constituted a core aspect of Mexican authoritarianism, we will also argue that the issue has sometimes been approached too statically. All the same, the *victory* of Vicente Fox and the PAN acquires its historical significance through their *defeat* of one of the most remarkable political organizations of the twentieth century.

To many people the final election results came as a surprise. For months the opinion polls had predicted a close finish between Fox and PRI-candidate Francisco Labastida, but most of them tended to favor Labastida. It was clear that the final result would depend on the voters that remained 'undecided' until just before the elections. Although opinion polls are a relatively new phenomenon in Mexican politics, they have generally become more reliable over the years. Why couldn't they predict the final result that favoured the PAN-candidate with a margin of almost seven percent? In most opinion polls it was common practice to distribute the percentage of 'undecided' votes evenly between Labastida and Fox. It turned out later that almost all these voters opted for what was coined the *voto útil*: driven by a mood of 'now or never' they massively cast their vote in favour of Fox instead of the other oppositional candidates, most importantly Cárdenas, who ran for the presidency for a third consecutive time (Greenberg et al., 2000). This fact seems to suggest that a considerable portion of the voters is not strongly committed to Fox ideologically and even less to the PAN. They simply considered him the best opportunity for change.

Whereas most predictions about the electoral outcome proved wrong, the results also confirmed patterns that had been consolidating for some time. A first analysis shows that the PRI especially won in rural areas and that the PAN is particularly strong in urban areas. Two remarkable examples are the poor southern states of Oaxaca and Chiapas. Of the 23 electoral districts in these two states the presidential candidate of the PRI won 21. The two districts won by Fox corresponded to the two state capitals. There are also states with several (intermediate) urban centres and important rural regions, such as Veracruz and San Luis Potosí. Here as well the predominantly rural areas went to the PRI and the urban districts to the PAN. At the other extreme there is the Distrito Federal, the heart of greater metropolitan Mexico City: here the PRI did not manage to win even one of the 30 electoral districts! The once so powerful ruling party that had already not governed the Mexican capital for the last three years was actually chased out of town in 2000.

PRI: *Requiescat In Pace?*

A first glance at the electoral results suggests a huge task for the PRI if it wants to recover the terrain lost in urban Mexico. Its chances for survival will depend on the way in which it can adapt to its new position in the political landscape. One of the most widely spread ideas about the PRI has been that it never was a 'real' political party. Two reasons are given: the origins of the party as an institutional framework explicitly designed (from above) to guarantee non-violent presidential alternations in the aftermath of the revolution and its endur-

ing role as the sole governing party. Both these factors have resulted in an intimate but dependent relationship with the state. In this view, the party is seen as merely a vehicle through which people gained access to political and administrative positions and through which public resources were channelled to certain social groups. In any case, the party is seen as being in a subordinate position *vis-à-vis* the state. The prolonged and unequal entanglement between them – the metaphor of the umbilical cord has also been very popular – also explains the problem of corruption.

The consequence of this general view is that when the party is cut off from state and public resources, it will disintegrate and cease to exist. The problem has always been that it was impossible to verify this hypothesis. When the PRI started to lose elections at the local and the regional level, it was easy to explain its comeback three and six years later by the support from party and state functionaries that were still in control at the federal level. This will no longer be possible. With the PRI no longer in the presidential palace, the party will have to act without the usual and crucial line of support. The question then arises whether the PRI can survive as a political party that is not in government?

In order to assess the answer to this question we would like to briefly reflect on two issues. The first is to take another look at the aforementioned relationship between the party and the state. We will point to the recent history of the PRI and argue that it is wrong to simply consider the party as an appendix of the state. Secondly, we will briefly refer to the eventual outcome of the power struggle about the leadership and strategies of the party.

While no doubt can exist that the party has long been a political instrument in the hands of the governing elite, especially since the organizational reform of 1946, there has always been another aspect to it. A historical analysis of the relationship between three key actors within the PRI shows that the role of the party within the broader political system cannot be identified as one of subordination only. Against the background of changing societal developments and government priorities and especially so in the context of increasing electoral competitiveness, the power relations between the national party leadership (with its intimate and loyal ties to the presidency), the corporatist organizations and local and regional party organs strongly identified with state governors have shifted profoundly.

In his recent work Rogelio Hernández (1997, 1998, 2000) has argued that there has always been a political basis within the party that strives towards greater autonomy *vis-à-vis* the state. This resulted in a permanent tension between what he calls ‘a subordinated and an autonomous PRI’. In the last eighteen years this tension has been exacerbated as a result of the growing distance between the federal executive (and the national party leadership) and broad sectors of the party itself. This clearly happened during the presidency of Salinas (1988-1994)², but came to a climax during the administration of Zedillo (1994-2000). These presidents successfully sought to diminish the power of the corporatist organizations in the PRI, but they could only do so ‘*a cambio de una nueva instancia dominada por los gobernadores*’ (Hernández, 2000: 296). The local and regional branches had always been viewed as a counterweight to the power of the corporatist organizations, but now they dramatically increased their weight within the party. The problem was that the interests of the national leadership and the local constituencies of the party and their leaders began to

diverge, especially because the federal authorities started to 'permit' electoral victories of the opposition in the provinces.

The ambiguities and tensions in the relationship between the executive power and the ruling party reached a climax during the National Assembly in 1996. Here local and regional representations of the party managed to impose new regulations on the party leadership that conditioned the selection of candidates up to those for the presidency of the Republic as well. During the second half of Zedillo's administration, the president was no longer in a position to *and* no longer wanted to exercise his leadership over the party. Local and regional groups headed by ambitious governors filled this power vacuum. A review of recent developments in the PRI thus shows that the party cannot be dismissed as merely an appendix of the (federal) executive and the state. There exists an organizational and political base – the size of which depends on the circumstances – for party autonomy, although this should certainly not be confused with an enhancement of democratic practices. It could in fact mean the opposite. In any case, this interpretation implies that the party will not necessarily wither away after its longish and intimate links to state power will cease to exist.

The near future of the PRI will also depend on the outcome of the power struggle that is currently taking place in its ranks. As suggested above, the local and regional branches of the party are playing a crucial role in this power struggle. It did not come as a surprise that prominent spokesmen caught in this stream of events have been the first to speak out. After President Zedillo announced Fox's historical victory in a televised speech on the night of election day, he was heavily criticized by prominent PRI governors. They suggested that the president had insufficiently supported Labastida's campaign and considered his speech a premature public capitulation. They furthermore accused him of being more concerned about his own role as the president who had made democratic change possible, than about the future of the party that brought him to power (Hidalgo et al., 2000a).

The struggle for the leadership and the direction of the party continues. From the declarations of several leading PRI-members, several positions regarding the party's future can be discerned. The most influential position has put forward a 'refoundation' from within and a democratization from the party base.³ The principal protagonist of the latter group that challenges the national leadership of the party from provincial power bases is undoubtedly Roberto Madrazo Pintado, governor of the southeastern state of Tabasco. In 1994, Madrazo took over power in Tabasco after one of the most controversial regional elections in recent decades, in which he defeated a prominent leader of the centre-left PRD after having spent an enormous amount of money on his campaign.⁴ Madrazo later clashed with president Zedillo, who unsuccessfully attempted to dislodge him from power. In 1999, he became the main opponent of Francisco Labastida in the PRI's primary elections. He conducted a harsh campaign and continuously complained about Zedillo's favouritism towards Labastida's candidacy.⁵ After Labastida had convincingly won the PRI's primaries in November 1999, president Zedillo used all his power to convince Madrazo and his followers to stay loyal to the party and its candidate, which they accepted reluctantly.

However, after the PRI lost the national elections, Madrazo's group pre-

vented Zedillo from appointing Labastida as the new national leader of the PRI, arguing that '*El PRI está urgido de un nuevo liderazgo, y para que tenga autoridad moral debe surgir de un proceso democrático interno, que pueda reunificar al priísmo y lograr la reforma democrática integral que nos permita recuperar la credibilidad*' (Reforma, 2000). Immediately afterwards he launched himself as a strong contender for taking over the party leadership. He has gained support among more traditional party members with his open challenge to Zedillo and his *revanchista* attitude towards the opposition. With respect to Zedillo he stated that '*el Presidente de México ha cumplido su función como Jefe del Estado mexicano, pero que a partir del 2 de julio las condiciones han cambiado en la vida interna del partido y que esto nos permite a... determinar con plena libertad el camino del futuro de nuestra organización*' (Hidalgo et al., 2000b).

Madrazo capitalizes on widespread worries among local and regional party groups. Seen through their eyes, there are indeed reasons for deep concern. This was proven by the outcome of the gubernatorial elections in the state of Chiapas that took place shortly after the presidential elections. Here the PRI candidate lost out against a candidate supported by a broad alliance of opposition parties. The PRI did better in the local elections (municipalities and local deputies) in the state of Veracruz in September 1999. Although these elections were politically less significant, the outcome means that the PRI has not lost everything yet. The disputes between the different political parties will continue at the local and regional level. In November 2000, gubernatorial elections will have been held in the important state of Jalisco, of which the capital Guadalajara is the second largest city of the country. The outcome of this process is highly relevant because it decides whether the PAN will be able to prolong its rule over one of Mexico's most densely populated states. If, on the other hand, the PRI would be able to win back Jalisco it would give the party confidence for recovering terrain elsewhere as well. The meaning of these local and regional elections obviously transcends the regional arena, insofar as they influence the relationships of force between the parties at the national level. The control of state governments by different parties has, for example, an important impact on the debates about the distribution of federal expenditures between the states of the federation.

The national political implications of regional elections were underlined again by the gubernatorial elections that took place on 15 October 2000 in the state of Tabasco, the home state of outgoing governor Roberto Madrazo. Before the elections took place, it was widely speculated that a win of the PRI candidate and Madrazo-follower would almost certainly pave the way for Madrazo himself to assume the leadership of the PRI. A defeat of the PRI candidate, however, would seriously affect Madrazo's credibility, but also a disputed victory of his candidate would weaken his position within the PRI.

The elections resulted in a close struggle between the PRI and PRD. When Governor Madrazo immediately declared the PRI candidate the winner and the PRD complained about fraud and called for a campaign of civil disobedience, the state electoral commission delayed its definitive report until a week after the elections. Although the final official results favoured the PRI candidate, the margin with the PRD candidate was only one percent (approximately eight thousand votes). Before the elections, the opposition parties and non-

governmental organizations such as *Alianza Cívica* denounced several irregularities; after the elections protests multiplied. Both the PRD and the PAN have called for the elections to be annulled, although such an option does not appear in the state's electoral law. At the time of writing, both Zedillo and Fox have not reacted to the increasingly tense situation. The national political consequences are therefore difficult to assess, although it seems likely that there will be a serious post-electoral conflict. It is far from clear that the outcome will ease Madrazo's attempt to occupy the national presidency of the PRI, despite the fact that his successor in Tabasco declared euphorically: '*Tenemos el triunfo del PRI y con Madrazo a la cabeza, el partido no sabrá de fracasos*' (Méndez, 2000). It now seems that Madrazo's ambitions have created more tensions within the party than conditions to bring it together again. Some consider that a win with a margin of less than one percent, despite the massive support of the outgoing governor and the state apparatus, is actually a loss (Delgado et al., 2000).

Fox, the Winner

To conclude this brief assessment of the new political situation in Mexico, we will briefly look at two issues from the perspective of Vicente Fox: the first concerns the nature of Fox's relationship to the PAN and the second to his relations with the legislative power. During the election campaigns Fox presented himself as a charismatic, unorthodox candidate that appeared very sure of his cause. His sometimes bold statements frequently provoked astonishment and disbelief, also with his own party PAN. He more or less imposed his candidacy on the PAN by initiating the internal campaign well before other candidates and, more importantly, by creating a parallel political organization, *Los Amigos de Fox*, that gained immense popularity and influence. After the elections, Fox has followed a more conciliatory approach towards the government, the PRI and the PRD. He has also insisted on forming an 'inclusive' government team. All this raises questions on how the relationship between Fox and the PAN can be characterized. We would like to point to two aspects. The first refers to the antecedents. From the beginning of his political career, Fox has maintained tense relations with the national leadership of the PAN due to the fact that the latter negotiated with president Salinas about the controversial gubernatorial elections in Guanajuato in 1991. The outcome of these negotiations – part of a broader political agreement between the president and the PAN leaders known as *concertación* – was that Fox's alleged victory in the polls was 'sacrificed' in favor of an interim-solution that was acceptable to the PRI.⁶ Many local and regional panistas became disenchanted by the politics of *concertación*, and a few years later they put forward a candidate (strongly linked to Fox) for the presidency of the party against one from the ranks of the dominant group. Although the latter won, it became clear that there were increasing tensions between the two groups, not only about the appropriateness of *concertación*, but also about the 'presidentialist practices' within the party itself and the role of ideological doctrine. The struggle for control of the party, among other things for candidate selection, explains why Fox opted for building a parallel electoral infrastructure (*Los Amigos de Fox*), that was instru-

mental in becoming the party's presidential candidate. The second point we make is intimately related to this. The 'distant' relation between Fox and the traditional party leaders at the national level is very different from that of the party's 1994 presidential candidate Fernández de Cevallos, whose father was one of the party's founders and who identified strongly with the party's ideological principles (Loaeza, 1999: 515-522). While the latter stated in 1993 that '*El triunfo del PAN será mi triunfo*', Fox declared: '*Gobernaré yo, no el PAN*' (Loaeza, 1999: 521; Jáquez, 2000). The combination of Fox's relative independence from the PAN, his links to other social and political organizations, his strong personal style and the historical strength of the executive contain all ingredients for the emergence of (renewed) *caudillo*-like leadership.⁷ The eventual effects this might have on the consolidation of more democratic practices are far from unambiguous.⁸

Fox has already announced that the executive will take important reform initiatives. To prepare and elaborate these ambitious reforms on a short term, Fox has composed distinguished and pluralist groups that include academics, politicians and entrepreneurs of many diverse political colors and backgrounds. These task forces are currently preparing the contents of Fox's reform agenda that includes a political reform, which will supposedly be expressed in a 'transition' government; an economic reform, of which a fiscal reform will be one of the most important elements; a social reform to fight poverty more adequately; a reform of the justice system that will include a reorganization of the police forces in order to fight corruption and drug-cartels and increase public security; and finally, a reform of the educational system.

In order to carry out these reform projects, the executive will require constitutional changes that need a two-third majority in Congress. However, for the second consecutive time in modern Mexican history, no political party obtained an absolute majority in the Chamber of Deputies. Moreover, in the last elections the same situation emerged in the Senate. Thus Fox will need not only the support of his own party, but also large sectors of the PRI or, to a lesser degree, the PRD, since alliances with the small parties will not be sufficient. The new president and his team will need all their negotiation skills to get every single one of their ambitious proposals approved. The possibilities for a strengthening of the executive may thus become balanced by the composition of the legislative power, at least until the mid-term congressional elections in 2003.

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Notes

1. During the heydays of the one-party regime, political scientists working on Mexico generally considered elections as playing only a ritual and legitimizing role. But after 1988, attention has shifted to electoral processes, disputes, parties, legislation and institutions. Some interesting

- works are Serrano (1998), Domínguez, J.I. & J. McCann (1996) and Domínguez, J.I. & A. Poiré (1999).
2. In 1992 and 1993 there were rumours that Salinas had plans to re-elect himself without the PRI and with the help of the institutional infrastructure he had mounted to carry out his social policies.
 3. The concept 'refundación' was employed to describe the attempt of president Salinas to reform the PRI.
 4. Madrazo's contender in these elections was PRD member Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who was elected 'governor' of Mexico City in the 2000 elections. The opposition has always accused Madrazo of having links with one of the richest and most corrupt bankers of the Salinas years, Carlos Cabal Peniche, who is currently in jail in Australia.
 5. Hence his campaign slogan 'Dáale un Madrazo al dedazo'!
 6. As a result of this decision, Fox withdrew from the political arena until president Salinas left office. His return to politics in 1995 brought him victory in Guanajuato, a platform he used to launch his presidential ambitions.
 7. To all this can be added the widespread discontent about the absence of strong presidential leadership during the Zedillo years.
 8. In the words of Soledad Loaeza: 'A mi me parece que el presidencialismo puede ser la gran tentación de Vicente Fox, y eso sí sería una lástima porque justamente es lo que estamos tratando de superar en este país', see Rivera (2000).

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