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Mexico's Political History: From Revolution to Alternation, 1910-2006

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Summary

This brief overview of Mexico's political history from 1910 to 2006, with emphasis on electoral reforms and elections, demonstrates that Mexico has evolved from long-term domination by a single party to alternation and effective competition among the three major parties. This report sets the stage for the approaching July 2006 elections.

Mexico's Early History

With a history dating to the Aztec indigenous culture and Spanish colonial rule, Mexico achieved independence in 1821. In the subsequent period, the country suffered many divisive and autocratic influences, although there was a period of reform under Benito Juárez's two phases of presidential rule (1858-1862, 1867-1872). One major dictator was Antonio López de Santa Ana (1833-1855), under whom the country lost vast northern territories to the United States — Texas in 1836, and the southwest region of the United States in 1846-1848 in the Mexican-American War. Another dictator was the Archduke Maximilian of Austria (1864-67) who was imposed by Napoleon III of France as the Emperor of Mexico. Still another dictator was Porfirio Díaz (1877-1911), who attempted to modernize the country by encouraging foreign investment. Toward the end of his reign, he faced mounting social discontent that culminated in the turbulent Mexican Revolution that ousted Díaz and established a new order.

Mexico's 1910 Revolution and the Dominant Role of the PRI

The Mexican Revolution was launched in 1910, with various goals being espoused by the diverse revolutionary groups. These goals, including effective democracy with no re-election, land reform for the peasants, labor reform for the workers, promotion of indigenous rights, anti-clerical regulation, and control of foreign investment were eventually incorporated into the Constitution of 1917. After a period of conflict and uncertainty, under Presidents Madero, Carranza, Obregón, and Calles, the revolutionary movement was consolidated under President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), who came to personify the leftist wing of the movement when he distributed more land to peasant

collectives than any previous president and when he nationalized the foreign oil companies in 1938.¹

The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), originally known by another name, was founded in 1929 to represent the forces that had triumphed in the Mexican Revolution, and to provide continuity and stability to a country that had been beset with division and violence. Generally supported by the popular sectors as an advocate of reform and an instrument of stability, the party governed Mexico with nearly complete dominance from the days of the Mexican Revolution until 2000, espousing Mexican nationalism, and drawing support from the three sectors of the party — the workers, the peasantry, and the employees of the state. Favoring a generally leftist foreign policy (support for Cuba under Castro and Nicaragua under the Sandinistas) and heavy involvement of the state in the economy, the PRI was considered to be a left-of-center political party until the 1980s.

The National Action Party (PAN) was founded in 1939, mostly as a conservative reaction to the PRI, and it has run candidates in most presidential, congressional, and many local elections. It is the conservative party in Mexico, favoring free enterprise and policies more favorable to the Catholic Church. It stressed clean and transparent government, but it had little success in winning elections until the 1980s.

Stability and Industrialization, 1940s Through 1970s

From the 1940s through the 1970s, Mexico generally experienced stability and strong economic growth while undergoing industrialization, although there were some periods of political unrest. In 1968 there were student uprisings and repression, and in the 1970s there were state supported efforts to repress revolutionary movements. These movements were aligned with guerrilla movements that were active throughout the hemisphere, contributing in many countries, but not in Mexico, to the emergence of military dictatorships.

During this three decade period, Mexico was governed by a string of PRI presidents who were elected for six-year terms with 74% to 98% of the vote. President Manuel Avila Camacho (1940-1946) sought to control the revolutionary fervor of the Cárdenas presidency and oversaw the creation of the Mexican social security system. President Miguel Alemán (1946-1952) represented the conservative wing of the party and pursued pro-business industrialization policies while largely ignoring the agricultural situation. President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines (1952-1958) sought to promote a “balanced revolution” between the policies of Cárdenas and Alemán. President Adolfo López Mateos (1958-1964) espoused a more leftist approach, but ordered action against rebellious railroad workers to ensure stability and economic growth. President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970) adopted pro-business policies and was responsible for ordering action against students in 1968 on the eve of the Olympic Games in Mexico. President Luis Echeverría (1970-1976) took a more leftist turn in foreign and domestic policy and alienated Mexican businessmen and foreign investors, and economic difficulties culminated with the devaluation of the peso in 1976. President José López Portillo (1976-1982) initially

¹ For more on Mexico’s political history, see the State Department’s *Background Notes on Mexico*, and Daniel Levy and Gabriel Szekely, *Mexico: Paradoxes of Stability and Change* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987).

regained the confidence of business sectors and initiated political reforms, but in the face of economic difficulties, he nationalized the banks in 1982, and was forced to negotiate a rescue package in 1982 to deal with an international debt situation that had become unmanageable.

Throughout this period, the PRI's presidential candidates who were named by the president in power were assured of victory, and they were elected with overwhelming majorities. At the same time, the PRI completely controlled the 64-seat Senate, and it generally controlled 80 to 90 % of the 300-seat Chamber of Deputies. Congress had little role in policy-making, and it nearly always approved the measures sent by the President. In short, the party of the Mexican Revolution was completely dominant.

The first of the major electoral reforms came in 1977 when an additional 100 seats were added to the Chamber of Deputies and assigned on the basis of proportional representation to all parties with fewer than 60 deputies. As a result of this reform, the PRI's control of the Chamber of Deputies after the 1979 elections slipped to 74%, still clearly an adequate majority to approve legislation.

Economic and Political Reform, 1982-2000

From 1980 to 2000, Mexico underwent a major reform in the economic and political spheres, with economic policy shifting to more free market policies, and electoral reforms laying the basis for increasingly democratic and pluralistic elections.

Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988). Miguel de la Madrid of the PRI was elected President in 1982 with only 70% of the vote, as opposition candidates from the right and left seemed to be gaining some strength. Under his administration, a number of economic reforms were begun, including opening the economy to more foreign investment, and privatizing many inefficient state enterprises. With the PAN gaining strength and winning a number of municipalities, the demand for additional electoral reforms was mounting as well.

Another major electoral reform followed in 1986 when still another 100 seats were added to the Chamber of Deputies, and 200 of the 500 seats were distributed almost entirely to the smaller parties on the basis of proportional representation. Despite the reform, there still were widespread demonstrations and allegations of fraud in a number of elections, particularly in the gubernatorial elections in 1986.

Carlos Salinas de Gotari (1988-1994). Carlos Salinas de Gotari of the PRI was elected President in 1988, with only 50% of the vote, against Cuauhtemoc Cárdenas, the candidate of the leftist coalition who received 31% of the vote, according to official, but highly disputed results. Cuauhtemoc Cárdenas was the son of leftist President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) and he and other PRI members had broken with the PRI and formed a coalition with other leftist parties largely because they objected to the economic reforms espoused by Miguel de la Madrid and Carlos Salinas de Gotari. Arguing that the election had been stolen, the leftist coalition continued to protest for some time, but later accepted the reality of Salinas' presidency.

The continuing public doubts about the validity of the elections forced Salinas to accept a number of electoral reforms. In 1990, the new Federal Code of Electoral

Institutions and procedures created a Federal Electoral Tribunal with more autonomy to adjudicate complaints, and a Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) to conduct the elections, using a new voter registry and ID cards. In 1993, the law enhanced the Federal Electoral Tribunal's impartiality, and set a maximum of 315 seats in the Chamber going to any one party. It expanded the size of the Senate to four seats per state, and specified that one seat would go to the second place party in each state. It set limits on campaign spending, and facilitated access to the media.

President Salinas continued and expanded the economic reforms as the economy was opened to trade and investment and state enterprises were privatized, and the anti-clerical posture was softened. After negotiations and legislative approval in 1990-1993, the country entered into the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the United States and Canada, prompting more cooperative relations with neighboring countries on a whole range of trilateral, bilateral and border issues.

In 1994, during an election year and Salinas' last year in office, the country faced a number of serious challenges. In January the Zapatista guerrillas attacked in Chiapas, demanding democracy, social reform, and modification of NAFTA. In March, the PRI's presidential candidate, Luis Donaldo Colosio, was assassinated, raising questions about intra-party conflict. In March and April, two billionaires were kidnapped, highlighting personal safety and police concerns. In September, the PRI Secretary General was assassinated and the President's brother, Raul Salinas, was subsequently charged and convicted of involvement in the murder.

In this context, with the demand for more democracy mounting, another electoral reform was enacted in 1994. The central feature of this reform was to give majority control of IFE's General Council to six non-partisan "citizen counselors" elected by a two thirds vote in the Chamber of Deputies. Other reforms provided for independent audits of the electoral registry, penalties for improper use of state resources and other electoral crimes, more equitable access to the media, some campaign spending limits, expanded rights for domestic election observers, and the invitation of "international visitors" to observe the August 1994 election.

Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000). Ernesto Zedillo of the PRI was elected President in 1994 with 50% of the vote, while Fernandez de Cevallos of the PAN came in second with 27% of the vote. Cuauhtemoc Cárdenas of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) created in 1990 from elements that supported his candidacy in 1988, came in third with 17% of the vote. Seeming to vote for continuity over untested opposition, voters gave the PRI a nationwide victory, including the Governorship in Chiapas, dominance in the Federal District's Legislative Assembly, 60% control of the Chamber of Deputies, and 74% control of the Senate.

President Zedillo continued Salinas' free market policies, but was forced to implement a number of austerity measures to emerge from the very serious 1994-1995 peso devaluation crisis. In other areas, he initiated reform of the police and contained conflict in Chiapas, and he strengthened democracy by relinquishing the prerogative to name the PRI's presidential candidate. By early 2000, Mexico had experienced four years of economic recovery, although living standards were still below 1995 levels and there was widespread poverty and inequality in the country.

In the period of the austerity measures, the PRI suffered a number of electoral defeats, prompting further electoral reforms. The 1996 electoral reform made the IFE independent by removing the Minister of Government from the General Council and by electing an independent as President, by increasing the number of citizen counselors and by giving political party representatives only the right to speak but not to vote. It also provided significant public financing, with 30% distributed equally among the parties, and 70% distributed according to previous electoral returns. The reform also provided more equitable access to media, provided for supposedly fraud-proof electoral identification and voter registry, and established the direct election of the Mayor of the Mexico City Federal District.

The mid-term legislative elections of 1997 were a watershed event in Mexico's evolution toward full democracy. The PRI lost its majority in the Chamber of Deputies, its two-thirds majority in the Senate, and it lost the first election of the Mayor of the important Mexico City Federal District to two-time presidential candidate Cuauhtemoc Cardenas of the PRD. While some domestic observer groups criticized electoral results in rural areas, the elections demonstrated that the opposition would have a new role in Mexico. Opposition parties had a majority in the Chamber of Deputies if they held together, the PRD controlled the Federal District, and 5 of 32 governor-level positions were held by opposition figures.

In the Congress, opposition parties held together to demand control of more committees, particularly in the Chamber of Deputies. With their stronger position, they succeeded in increasing social and local government funding in budget debates, and in demanding more transparency in government practices, including an audit of the bank protection agency responsible for rescuing the banks in the 1994-1995 crisis, and in creating a committee in the Chamber of Deputies to monitor any misuse of state resources in the 2000 election.

Alternation in the Presidency: Vicente Fox, 2000-2006

If the 1997 election was a historic event, the 2000 election was even more historic, ending the PRI's 71 years of control of the Presidency. Opposition candidate Vicente Fox of the Alliance for Change (an alliance of the PAN and the Green Ecological Party of Mexico or PVEM) was elected President with 42% of the vote over Francisco Labastida of the PRI with 36% and Cuauhtemoc Cardenas of the Alliance for Mexico (an alliance of the PRD and other leftist parties) with 17% of the vote.² In the congressional elections, no party or coalition had a majority in either chamber, although Fox's coalition initially had the largest bloc in the Chamber, and the PRI had the largest bloc in the Senate, with the result that significant negotiation and coalition building was required for passage of legislation. In the Mexico City election, the PRD and the Alliance for Mexico regained control of the Federal District, and the Legislative Assembly was divided between the Alliance for Mexico and the Alliance for Change. In the gubernatorial elections, the PAN won in both Guanajuato and Morelos.

² See CRS Report RS20611, *Mexico's Presidential, Legislative, and Local Elections of July 2, 2000*, by K. Larry Storrs.

Vicente Fox of the conservative Alliance for Change coalition was inaugurated as President on December 1, 2000, promising to promote free market policies, to strengthen democracy and the rule of law, to fight corruption and crime, and to end the conflictive situation in the state of Chiapas. However, the slowdown in the United States following the September 2001 terrorist attacks affected Mexico adversely, and the economy contracted 0.8% in 2001, and grew only 0.9% in 2002 and 1.3% in 2003, giving the government limited funding for promised health and education programs. In the July 2003 elections to renew the Chamber of Deputies, the PAN lost seats, putting it in a weaker position to support Fox's program, while the PRI and PRD delegations increased.³ Although the country's economic performance improved in recent years (4.4% growth in 2004 and 3.5% growth in 2005), without a majority in Congress, the President has been unable to obtain approval of major legislation, including a proposed tax reform and a proposed energy reform that would permit greater private participation in the hydrocarbon and electricity sectors, although Congress did pass a social security reform in July 2004.⁴

In other areas, President Fox has attempted to professionalize the police under a new public security ministry to deal with widespread public concerns with security and police corruption, and he has undertaken vigorous efforts against illicit drug traffickers. In late March 2004, he proposed a judicial reform that would make the criminal justice system more efficient, transparent, and public, but the Mexican Congress did not complete action on the proposal. In December 2004, he followed up with a series of proposed human rights reforms to discourage torture and to strengthen the rights of defendants in Mexico. In the foreign policy area, he promoted warm relations with the United States but was disappointed by the failure of the United States to enact comprehensive immigration reform following high level bilateral talks between the countries.⁵ In 2002 and 2003, Mexico held a temporary seat on the U.N. Security Council and expressed support for continuing diplomatic efforts under United Nations auspices to achieve the disarmament of Iraq, leading to expressions of disappointment from the Bush Administration. In March 2005, Presidents Fox and Bush met in Waco, Texas, along with Prime Minister Martin of Canada, and launched the trilateral "Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP) of North America."

In the last year of Fox's term, with presidential elections approaching in July 2006, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the leftist PRD is leading in the polls against Felipe Calderon for the PAN, and Roberto Madrazo for the PRI in what is expected to be a tight three man race with an uncertain outcome.

³ For more detail on the 2003 elections, see CRS Report RS21561, *Mexico's Congress and July 2003 Elections*, by K. Larry Storrs.

⁴ For one assessment, see Carol Wise and Manuel Pastor, Jr., "The Lost Sexenio: Vicente Fox and the New Politics of Economic Reform in Mexico," *Latin American Politics and Society*, Vol. 47, No. 4, Winter 2005, pp. 135-160.

⁵ See CRS Report RL32735, *Mexico-United States Dialogue on Migration and Border Issues, 2001-2006*, by K. Larry Storrs.