Mexican presidential politics: Will a dinosaur win?

Denise Dresser

Denise Dresser, Ph.D., is a Senior Fellow at the Pacific Council on International Policy, on leave from her post as a professor of political science at the Instituto Tecnologico Autonomo de Mexico, where she has taught since 1991. She has also worked as a consultant to the United Nations Development Program, Barings Research and the Bank of Montreal. Dresser has written numerous articles on Mexican politics, which have been published in the Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics, among others. She is a member of the Research Council of the Forum for Democratic Studies, National Endowment for Democracy, and World Academy of Arts and Science. A Fulbright Scholar, Dresser earned a Ph.D. in politics from Princeton University. She has received research grants from the Ford Foundation, and the Institute for the Study of World Politics.

The dedazo is dead, and with its passing comes a new era of politics in Mexico, according to Denise Dresser, Ph.D. "No longer can the incumbent president use the dedazo -- the big finger -- to impose his choice of successor on a pliant party," said Dresser.

"After 70 years of PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) purgatory, Mexicans are actually building a political future of their own making."

This does not mean, however, that Mexicans are riding off into the sunset where democracy reigns and human rights are extolled. In some parts of the country, nothing has changed. Even as President Zedillo strives for democratic reforms, such as an open primary, the PRI's party strongmen still rule in "authoritarian archipelagos." These places are rife with electoral fraud, human rights violations and unresolved political labor disputes, Dresser said.

In spite of some recent political setbacks and a potential split within the party, the PRI does not seem to be in imminent danger of losing its 70-year grip on the country. In 1998, the PRI captured 44.4 percent of the vote, with much of its support coming from the poor, the dispossessed, and the agricultural workers who are easily manipulated at the local level.

"The PRI is the largest, most important party and its electoral clout should not be dismissed," said Dresser.

The Madrazo effect

For the PRI, the open primary, which takes place Nov. 7 of this year, represents "a big reform with a big risk," said Dresser. "It opens the door for a hard-line dinosaurial, vintage priista of the past to get the nomination."

This dinosaur, who is currently leading in the polls, is Roberto Madrazo, the former governor of the state of Tabasco. Madrazo's bid is a direct challenge to Zedillo and his political protege, Francisco Labastida, former Secretary of the Interior. A potential party split looms on the horizon. "If this were to occur," said Dresser, "the PRI's chances of holding onto power would be severely diminished."

Madrazo promises voters an economic program that will be more distributive, and a social policy that will be more aggressive. "He believes that his nationalist, restorationist style will appeal to rank-and-file members of the PRI who feel disaffected after 12 years of neoliberal politics."

With what appears to be an endless supply of money, "Madrazo is using television and the tools of modern campaigning to bolster his image, despite the fact that his views on the economy and many other issues are not those of a modern politician."
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The standard-bearer

Lagging in the polls is the PRI's standard-bearer, Francisco Labastida. "He is considered gray and harmless enough to bridge the divide between the dinosaurs and the modernizers."

But, like Al Gore, he has to differentiate himself from the president.

"As the president's protégé, he can't really go against Zedillo's economic policies, and yet at the same time he has to present himself as someone who has something a bit different to offer."

This is particularly important because a significant percentage of the population feels that the current economic track has done nothing to improve the standard of living.

The contenders

In a country where party platforms are not as important as personalities, two pre-candidates from Mexico's two other major parties, are waging strong campaigns.

The PAN's Vicente Fox, governor of Guanajuato and former president of Coca Cola, Mexico, has high name recognition and is right behind Madrazo in the polls, at 40 percent. "He relishes speaking his mind and lashing out against the PRI. But his tendency to trip over his tongue has caused some concern. Many people in the PAN are worried about Fox, who seems out of control, and they may not provide enthusiastic support for his candidacy."

The PRD's Cuauhtemoc Cardenas does not have a successful track record as mayor of Mexico City. "There are powerful groups in the PRI that have made it very difficult for him to govern," said Dresser. Cardenas has slid consistently in the polls; his support now stands at between 11 and 12 percent.

"At this point, I can confidently state that Cuauhtemoc Cardenas is not going to be the next president of Mexico."

What should be the position of the United States in the upcoming election? "It should be hands off," said Dresser emphatically.

"U.S. intervention is always ill-viewed in Mexico and could be seized upon by someone like Madrazo to stoke the fires of Mexican nationalism.

"It will be very important for U.S. political leaders to become better acquainted with opposition leaders, and to realize that there is a whole other face of Mexican politics that is developing."

(see table next page)
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