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Mexico's former ruling party seeks a comeback

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MEXICO CITY - A rising chorus of Mexicans is rushing to anoint Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador as their nation's likely next president, predicting that the former Mexico City mayor will ride the huge popularity he built up in the capital all the way to the National Palace.

The country's former ruling party strongly disagrees. Evicted from the presidential mansion in 2000, the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, is devising a comeback in 2006.

As the PRI prepares to select its presidential candidate Sunday, the question is whether the party can overcome scandal, internal fissures and voter antipathy to prevail in the general election.

Some analysts say the party could win the July 2 election, arguing that President Vicente Fox has not had a very successful term. But many say the party is too divided, has a serious image problem and is likely to offer a candidate with limited appeal to voters.

"The PRI has the best chance of any of the parties of coming in second," said David A. Shirk, director of the Trans-Border Institute at the University of San Diego. "For a lot of Mexican voters, it is a choice between the old regime and anything else."

With an intense and often bitter struggle between two of their own presidential hopefuls behind them, party leaders are convinced they can regain the presidency after six years in the wilderness.

The party's path back to the presidential residence, Los Pinos, appeared rocky earlier this year, as a fight developed between its two leading presidential hopefuls, former party chief and ex-governor of Tabasco state Roberto Madrazo, 52, and Arturo Montiel, 62, former governor of the state of Mexico.

Largely ignoring a third contestant, Everardo Moreno, 58, the pair slugged it out in public. Not even an effort by party kingpins to have them sign a civility agreement worked.

The party's fortunes picked up on Oct. 20, when Montiel dropped out of the race. His withdrawal came in the face of questions about how he acquired a fortune and several expensive properties, including a \$2 million apartment in Paris.

Nevertheless, say some analysts, the party is still fractious and worse, bereft of new ideas. It will have limited appeal to voters, especially younger ones, they say.

"The PRI didn't just lose the opportunity to create a new image, but it reinforced the worst positioning possible," said political analyst Jorge Buendia Laredo.

"For many, the Montiel case confirms that corruption is part of `priista' DNA," he added, using the term for PRI members.

The PRI did not exactly fade away after the 2000 vote. It remains probably the country's most powerful party. It governs 17 of 31 states and holds 224 of 500 seats in the lower house of Congress, the Chamber of Deputies, and 60 of 128 in the Senate.

"The PRI was one of the world's greatest political machines for 71 years," said Shirk, who also is an assistant professor of political science at the University of San Diego. "The question is whether that machine is still formidable."

With the party not running the country, the tradition of an outgoing PRI president handing off to a hand-picked successor is gone, replaced by a free-for-all.

Beside the Madrazo-Montiel flap, the party underwent another public spat between Madrazo and Elba Esther Gordillo, the No. 2 party official, who slammed Madrazo for supposedly blocking her expected elevation from secretary of the party to president.

Madrazo denied the accusation, but Gordillo fired several broadsides at him. "Madrazo lies systematically and uses the structure of the PRI to satisfy personal interests," she said in late August.

She then held talks with both Felipe Calderon and Santiago Creel, who at the time were competing to become the presidential candidate for Fox's National Action Party, or PAN.

Calderon eventually was selected to represent the PAN in next year's election. Lopez Obrador is with the Party of the Democratic Revolution, or PRD.

Madrazo is expected to emerge as the PRI's candidate, but he seems to attract as much hostility as support among party members.

After a recent debate at party headquarters with Moreno, Madrazo was mobbed by supporters, many of whom barely had been able to conceal their impatience with Moreno, whom they dismissed as an old-fashioned politician. "A dinosaur," sniffed one PRI member of Congress.

On the other hand, Madrazo is opposed by the National Union of Education Workers, a longtime key element of the PRI. The teachers union has sided with union leader Gordillo in her dispute with the party front-runner.

Further, fliers have mysteriously started showing around town, posted on construction-site barriers and lightposts. "Do you believe Madrazo? I don't either," the fliers say.

And last month, a group of PRI stalwarts called a news conference to express their concerns.

The group said in a statement that the party is "in the worst political situation in its history" and that other parties are unified behind their candidates while the PRI "suffers severe decomposition."

"The candidacy of Roberto Madrazo is electorally unviable," the statement said.

"The polls are very clear," said Lorena Beauregard de los Santos, of Tabasco state, a former Congress member and one of the mavericks. "Roberto Madrazo is a divisive factor in the PRI ... he's depriving the PRI of the possibility of returning to Los Pinos."

Madrazo representatives declined comment.

(EDITOR: STORY CAN END HERE)

Palacios, the party president, remains confident that priistas - and the country - will rally behind the PRI. At recent press briefing, he pointed to previous crises in the party's history, including the assassination of presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio in 1994.

He touted a "successful process from which will emerge a united PRI."