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HEADLINE: Ousted PRI plans return But conflict in Mexican party may put presidency out of reach

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BODY:

MEXICO CITY - A rising chorus of Mexicans is rushing to anoint Andrés Manuel LÓpez Obrador as the nation's likely next president, predicting that the former Mexico City mayor will ride the huge popularity he built 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.

Party conflicts

The party's path back to Los Pinos, the presidential residence, appeared rocky 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 Oct. 20, when Mr. 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 Buendía 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 fade away after the 2000 vote. It remains probably the country's most powerful party, governing 17 of 31 states and holding 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 Dr. 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.

Another fight

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

Mr. Madrazo denied the accusation, but Ms. 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 Calderón and Santiago Creel, who at the time were competing to become the presidential candidate for Mr. Fox's National Action Party, or PAN.

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

Mr. Madrazo is expected to emerge as the PRI's candidate, but he attracts as much hostility as support among party members. After a debate at party headquarters with Mr. Moreno, Mr. Madrazo was mobbed by supporters.

On the other hand, Mr. 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 Ms. Gordillo.

Further, fliers have started showing around town. "Do you believe Madrazo? I don't either," they say.

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

The group said that the party is "in the worst political situation in its history," and that other parties are unified 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 to comment.

Mr. Palacios, the party president, predicted a "successful process from which will emerge a united PRI."

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO(S): (Associated Press) Everardo Moreno (left) and Roberto Madrazo are leading PRI candidates for president.

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