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1988-92**

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In the aftermath of the 1988 presidential election, the PRD (Partido de la Revolución Democrática) was founded with great optimism. The vote percentages obtained by the PRD, however, fell well below the vote percentage Cárdenas was officially credited with in 1988. Of twenty-two statewide races the PRD participated in between July 1989 and March 1991, the PRD obtained only 10 percent of the vote. In the 1988 presidential elections in these same states, the FDN (Frente Democrática Nacional) obtained 24.8 percent of the vote.¹ Similarly, in the 1991 congressional elections the PRD obtained a lackluster 8.27 percent of the vote, compared to 31.12 percent in 1988.² This paper will attempt to analyze the decline in the PRD vote compared to the 1988 FDN vote.

One of the principal causes of the decline in the PRD vote could be labeled “fraud fatigue.” Without exception the PRD has been declared the loser in the elections that the PRD (and before it the FDN) felt it had the best chance to win. The PRD has blamed the losses on election fraud. These elections include the July 1988 presidential election, the November 1988 gubernatorial election in Tabasco, the July 1989 election in Michoacán, the December 1989 elections in Michoacán and Guerrero, and the November 1990 election in the State of Mexico. The 1991 congressional elections and the 1992 election in Michoacán produced additional fraud charges.

Inevitably, the confrontation of what it regards as an unending string of frauds has changed the nature of the party. As columnist José Woldenberg commented, “The government’s unscrupulous fraudulent manipulation of election returns has pushed the PRD leadership to the left and at the same time isolated it.”³ It has also provided an easy excuse for failure. PRD member Jorge Alcocer claimed charges of “fraud” are often used to cover the failings of the PRD.⁴ Finally the PRD’s preoccupation with fraud has diverted energy from other organizational tasks. As Cárdenas noted, “The government’s offensive has forced us to devote more attention to conflicts which result from electoral dishonesty, fraud, and imposition.”⁵

Another factor affecting the PRD has been violent attacks on its members. During 1989 and 1990, 73 PRD members were killed, of whom 17 were in Oaxaca, 16 in Michoacán, and 13 in Puebla.⁶ Luis Salazar C. commented on the attacks directed at PRD members: "No one can deny or even minimize the harassment and aggression that this new organization has suffered at the hands of various branches of government. Dozens of dead, arrested, kidnapped, and threatened speak clearly of the hostility with which they have viewed the formation of the PRD."⁷

The political environment in which the PRD finds itself has proved less favorable than the one the FDN faced. In 1988 Mexico was mired in a deep recession, and blame was placed on the incumbents. Several factors have changed. Economic growth resumed, and Salinas promoted the widely approved free trade agreement. Also the political reform and primary elections have improved the PRI's image. All of these have cut into the protest vote.

PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) Deputy Carlos Castillo Pérez commented on the changing political environment in a speech in the Chamber of Deputies on October 18, 1989. He addressed the PRD deputies: "You members of the PRD assumed that the men of the official party and of the government would not change. We assumed that they are indeed capable of change. You believe that reform will not occur within the executive branch and we feel it is worth attempting to reform the executive branch."⁸ The Solidarity program has been especially important, since it has tended to undermine the PRD's base among the poor. As Octavio Rodríguez Araujo noted, "In a country with great needs and inequality, heavy spending should not be minimized even though it insults recipients' dignity and is quite insufficient."⁹

One of the issues that most caught voters' imaginations in 1988 was suspending debt payments. However, the PRI effectively co-opted that issue after the debt renegotiation; its stated position now resembles the PRD position. In the Plan of Action approved after the September 1990 Assembly of the PRI, the official party declared that it proposed "struggling for the full utilization and optimal use of resources freed by foreign debt renegotiation, using them for economic growth and social development in keeping with the nation's ability to pay, and giving special priority to rural areas in reallocating resources."¹⁰

Also, the potential cost of casting a protest vote has risen. In 1988 there was little to lose by voting for, or even electing, a candidate whom the world's financiers might deem too radical. At the time, new credits and new investment had stopped, the

economy was stagnant, and massive debt payments were flowing out of the country. By 1990 the Mexican economy was growing at a modest rate, and the massive flow of new investment more than offset debt payments. Thus, voters had something to lose by a rejection of the PRI. The recent examples of Nicaragua and Chile confirm that nations can pay a high economic price for electing leaders not to the liking of the United States and the international financial community.

Another factor limiting the PRD has been its reliance on the Mexican Revolution of 1910–17 for its ideological inspiration. Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas is closely associated with the Revolution since he literally grew up at the feet of the man most closely identified with its achievements, Lázaro Cárdenas. For the younger Cárdenas, despite the great changes in Mexico and the world, the Mexican Revolution still provides guidance. He sees the unmet goals of the Revolution as (1) democracy, (2) eliminating poverty, and (3) an equitable international order.¹¹ Cárdenas reaffirmed the importance of the Revolution when visiting Washington state in 1989: “The PRD is the heir of those who engaged in the armed struggle of 1910, seeking to end inequality and poverty, and above all, seeking democracy.”¹²

Commentators have noted the limited effectiveness of the PRD's appeal to the ideals of the Mexican Revolution. The main appeal of such a message is to marginal laborers and peasants.¹³ Also, the image of the Mexican Revolution, given the crisis of the 1980s, is undergoing rapid change in Mexico, just as the image of the Bolshevik Revolution in the former Soviet Union has undergone change. Columnist Moisés Lawson Villafaña commented on the PRD, “A party can no longer flourish in today's Mexico as the standard bearer of an economic model, the historical model of the Revolution, which has proved inefficient and terribly unjust.”¹⁴ Finally, the Mexican Revolution's appeal to younger Mexicans is weak. As Rodolfo González Guevara noted, “The Mexican Revolution does not mean anything to Mexico's youth nor does it interest them.”¹⁵

Another problem faced by the PRD is its being repeatedly described as part of the “Left.” In a sense such a charge is unfair. Cárdenas himself rejects the label, preferring the term “inheritor of the Mexican Revolution.”¹⁶ Nonetheless, the PRD is widely perceived as part of the Left and the image is continually reinforced by media references to it as “left” or “center-left.” To the extent the Left label has stuck, it has hurt. As Jorge Castañeda noted, the Left suffers from guilt by association with Cuba

and the former USSR. He also noted that in current economic thinking the Left is associated with failure.¹⁷

To the extent that the PRD is attempting to benefit by representing the Left, it faces difficulties. As French political theorist Régis Debray noted, “Today no valid alternative to the dynamism of the world market has been developed.”¹⁸ The Mexican Left has limited appeal. The PSUM (Partido Socialista Unificado de México), forerunner of the PMS (Partido Mexicano Socialista), received only 0.6 percent of the vote in Michoacán in 1986.¹⁹ A poll found only 11 percent of Mexicans considered themselves to be on the left, while 33 percent said they were in the center, and 56 percent on the right.²⁰

The PRD has also suffered due to the changed perception of state ownership of corporations. In general Mexicans share the worldwide acceptance of privatization as a remedy to economic ills. In fact, having viewed the poor performance of many state-owned corporations, Mexicans are often among the most eager to reduce the economic role of the state. As a commentator noted, “Frankly, Salinas could have asked J. P. Morgan himself to buy Telmex, and the man-on-the street would have said, ‘Why not? Can’t be no worse.’”²¹

Marcela Toledano, speaking for the FDN on the day Salinas was inaugurated, set the tone for Cárdenas’s movement in terms of privatization. She stated, “It is necessary to stop the process of privatization of state firms.”²² The PRD later adopted this position: “The leading economic role of the state should be strengthened. National democratic planning should provide society with the opportunity to participate in planning, thus democratically defining strategic priorities for development. The State should be the ultimate owner of natural resources.”²³

Cárdenas has criticized the sale of the widely disliked phone company, the banking system, and sugarmills, all of which were government owned at the start of the Salinas administration.²⁴ Such broad criticism of privatization raised the question of what, if anything, he would like to be sold.

Cárdenas does not condemn all privatization, although such subtleties are likely to get lost in press reporting. He criticizes current privatization efforts as “turning over the most productive state enterprises to multinational firms.” He sees such privatization as resulting from “conditions the foreign creditors have imposed in exchange for debt negotiation and receiving more loans.” Cárdenas claims that such decisions should be left to the Mexican government, not tied to debt settlement.²⁵ Cárdenas also feels

privatization should be “rational and strengthen specific economic areas and ensure that new owners have a stake in the well-being of Mexico, and not just engage in speculation, as has been happening.”²⁶

The PRD’s advocacy of government economic control has provided conservatives with ammunition for criticizing the party. For example, Enrique Krauze sees the party’s failure to follow the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (POSE) and recognize the supremacy of the “invisible hand of the market” over the “visible hand” of the state as the reason it has failed to build a strong base. Krauze also notes the PRD has failed to address the question of what is the least expensive way to provide services traditionally provided by the state.²⁷

The PRD has also been labeled vague or fuzzy on issues. Initially this was understandable, since the party was new and brought together such diverse ideologies. Additional factors reinforced this initial impression. It was an easy issue for unsympathetic media to comment on. The delay in defining the PRD’s platform reinforced this impression. It was only at its November 1990 congress that the basic documents such as statutes and declaration of principles were finally agreed upon. To compound the problem, these documents were published only in 1991. When they were finally published, the long, detailed documents were not widely read. The *Criticism and Alternative to the Government Economic Policies*, for example, had a press run of only two thousand.

The vagueness charge put the PRD on the defensive, forcing it not only to say what it was for, but to declare that it in fact offered a concrete alternative. Referring to the supposed failure to offer alternatives, a 1990 pamphlet outlining PRD policy stated, “This pamphlet, the work of the parliamentary group of the PRD, will contribute to wrecking this pernicious authoritarian allegation.” The pamphlet then provided 127 pages of economic analysis.²⁸ In fact PRD proposals are anything but vague. A PRD study on agriculture devoted sixty-four pages to analyzing current agricultural problems. This was followed by thirty-five pages of proposed solutions.²⁹

Another disadvantage the PRD has faced has been generally unsympathetic media coverage. The PRD has been repeatedly described as a “violent” party due to its occupation of city halls and blocking of highways to protest election fraud. Despite the PAN’s having initiated highway blocking in the 1980s, its sacking of the furniture store in Valladolid, Yucatán, and its fatal election-fraud protest in Culiacán, it was never so labeled.

The media double standard was apparent in conjunction with Cárdenas's travels to the United States. On the front page of *Excélsior*, Romeo Flores Caballero characterized Cárdenas's trips to the United States as providing "an invitation for other nations to declare themselves as guarantors of Mexican democracy." The same issue of *Excélsior* reported that PRI President Colosio went to the United States to "improve Mexico's political image."³⁰ Other publications, while never questioning the motive of Salinas's U.S. visits, characterized Cárdenas's trips as "unpatriotic" and "seditious."³¹

Similarly, the media uncritically repeated the PRI charge that Cárdenas was illegally campaigning on election day in Michoacán in July 1989. This was a highly unlikely charge since he was followed all day by dozens of reporters. Rather than questioning the charge or consulting with reporters who were with him, the Mexican press widely repeated the accusation. A *Time* magazine reporter who was with Cárdenas that day responded to the PRI's charge on Univisión news, "How can we believe its other declarations, if we realize that what we have witnessed is a big lie." The correspondent's comments were not broadcast in Mexico.³² The press also uncritically repeated charges, made just before the special mayoral election in Uruapan, that Cárdenas was involved in massive financial fraud. The PRD coordinator responded, "The government periodically unleashes media campaigns to denigrate and slander the PRD, its leaders, and what it represents."³³

The PRD has been hurt by alliances between the PRI and other major groups. These groups feel they need to present a united front with the PRI to blunt the PRD's momentum. The business community, which before 1988 had been dallying with the PAN as a safe option to the PRI, has embraced the PRI since the PRD's founding.³⁴ Similarly, the PRD has been hurt by the PAN-PRI alliance. As Bertha Lerner noted, "There is no doubt [of] the weakening of Cárdenas' movement and the PRD was one of the central goals of this alliance."³⁵ Finally, as historian John Coatsworth noted, after the 1988 presidential elections the U.S. government lost interest in pressuring Mexico to liberalize its electoral system. Rather than facing the possibility of a PRD victory, the United States preferred to throw its support to the PRI.³⁶

Many potential voters feel that the PRD's plans, as they have been elaborated, simply will not work or will not work as well as Salinas's. The PRD has called for (1) taxing the rich, (2) substantial wage increases, (3) rethinking (at least) the free trade agreement, (4) a strong state sector, and (5) regulating foreign investment. Many feel

that the implementation of such policies would result in massive capital flight. The experience of President López Mateos (1958–64) is illustrative. When he declared that Mexico was on the left within the constitution, roughly \$200 million left the country, plunging it into recession. It took some time for him to convince business that he was not a real leftist and to reestablish business confidence.³⁷

Economist Christopher Whalen commented on what he perceived to be the inviability of the PRD model, “Recalling past prosperity, Cárdenas promises a return to ‘successful’ statist economic policies, without explaining that these policies are the cause of the country’s growing difficulties.”³⁸ Columnist Eduardo Borrell Navarro commented on this same problem, “Up until now Cárdenas has not made it clear how his party, embracing former socialists and Trotskyists, proposes to get owners of capital to repatriate it, and get them to invest Mexico’s resources in a non-inflationary manner.”³⁹ PRD economist Ifigenia Martínez downplays these concerns, noting that in fact the largest capital flight in Mexican history occurred during the presidency of De la Madrid and resulted from a lack of confidence in the economy. She sees PRD policies as restoring the health of the domestic market, making Mexico safe to invest in, and thus increasing investment.⁴⁰

As one might assume, the government has not looked favorably on its rival. Cárdenas observed: “We are operating in a hostile environment. This makes our struggle more difficult. The government puts every conceivable obstacle in our way.”⁴¹ Comments by PRI officials have reinforced the negative image of the PRD. Guerrero Governor José Francisco Ruiz Massieu described the PRD as “the party of blood and violence.”⁴² The PRI has also used ads to undermine the PRD. Just before the municipal elections in Guerrero, the PRI took out a full-page ad that proclaimed, “The PRD is for violence in Guerrero.”⁴³

Official labor followed the government’s lead. CTM (Confederación de Trabajadores de México) leader Fidel Velázquez declared: “There are many armed people in Mexico who have plans to destabilize the country. Authorities at the highest levels know there are opposition members—specifically the PRD—who are involved with drug traffickers because the weapons they use to occupy city halls cannot come from anywhere else.”⁴⁴

Other attacks were less obvious. For example a *gaceta*, presumably paid for by the PRI, had headlines proclaiming, “Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the coordinator of the PRD, makes irresponsible charges of vote fraud.”⁴⁵ In general the government is

much more critical of the PRD than of the more middle-class PAN, since the PRD is seen as a threat posed by the lower classes.⁴⁶

The PRD's response to the Salinas administration has not proved fruitful either. Since Salinas's inauguration, Cárdenas's followers have refused to meet with the president, claiming that he represents an illegitimate government that should not be dignified by such a meeting. Initially, when Salinas appeared weak, that might have been a wise tactic. However, as Salinas's political stature has risen and the PRD's has fallen, the PRD has clung tenaciously to this policy. That has left it open to the charge that it is intransigent.

Once it became apparent that the PRD would refuse to talk to him, Salinas repeatedly extended invitations for dialogue. In his 1989 State of the Nation address, Salinas stated: "I have invited all the political parties to dialogue. Most of them have accepted in a serious, responsible manner." This created the image of Salinas as a reasonable president, and the PRD as obstinate. Rather than using interviews to ask Salinas embarrassing questions, and then reporting the response (or lack of one) to the public, Cárdenas has always put conditions on talks, leaving himself isolated. For example when asked what he would do if Salinas requested direct talks, Cárdenas replied: "We would have to know why he wanted them and what he wanted to talk about. We would have to fix an agenda and make the discussion public because we can't, as we have said, legitimize what cannot be legitimized with a photo opportunity."⁴⁷

Some potential voters were inevitably alienated by the hard-line stance a faction of the PRD took vis-à-vis the government. Heberto Castillo reflected such a stance after the July 1989 elections in Michoacán: "We will make life impossible for the government. We will call on the public to use its imagination and block government action in any way it can."⁴⁸

The hard line vis-à-vis the government has led to criticism both from within and outside the PRD. Jorge Alcocer, who resigned from the party in protest, noted PRD policy was based on the "unfounded hope that there would be some sort of collapse of the government, that Salinas could not govern, and that would be followed by mobilization and change until new elections were called. But that didn't happen, and it's not going to happen."⁴⁹ Alcocer also criticized the PRD for being so obstinately antigovernment that it failed to join the PRI and the PAN in supporting political reform. Rather than confrontation, Alcocer felt that the PRD should "force the

