



Desafiando al sistema

La izquierda política en México.

Evolución organizativa, ideológica y electoral del Partido de la Revolución Democrática (1989-2005)

by Igor Vivero Águila

Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México
2006, Spanish, Softcover, 384 pages

REVIEWED BY MARCO A. MORALES

Mexico's standard bearer of the Left, the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), has been a major political force for over 16 years, but there have been no academic studies of its inner workings. Igor Vivero Águila, a young specialist on the Mexican Left at the *Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México*, has filled that vacuum insightfully with *Desafiando al sistema* (Challenging the System). Vivero Águila takes the reader on a well-documented journey through the party's history, and along the way he also builds a solid foundation for understanding recent events. One series of events stands out in particular: PRD leader and former México City Mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador's whisker-thin defeat (.06 percent) in last year's presidential campaign, followed by his prolonged protest against the results.

Vivero Águila argues that the party's problems in translating its popular support into political power originate, at least partly, from the paradox created by its founding figure. The PRD was born as a political creature of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the party's "moral" leader. Cárdenas' dominating personality kept the party from unraveling into competing factions, but at the same time pre-

vented the PRD from maturing into a full-fledged political force. According to the author, today the PRD is not a programmatic, ideological party but rather a political entity where "personal and group interests prevail over proposals."

Why should we care now about the PRD's past? In fact, the PRD's genesis and development not only reveal the evolution of Mexico's struggling democratic Left, but point the way toward its future.

Sweet Sixteen

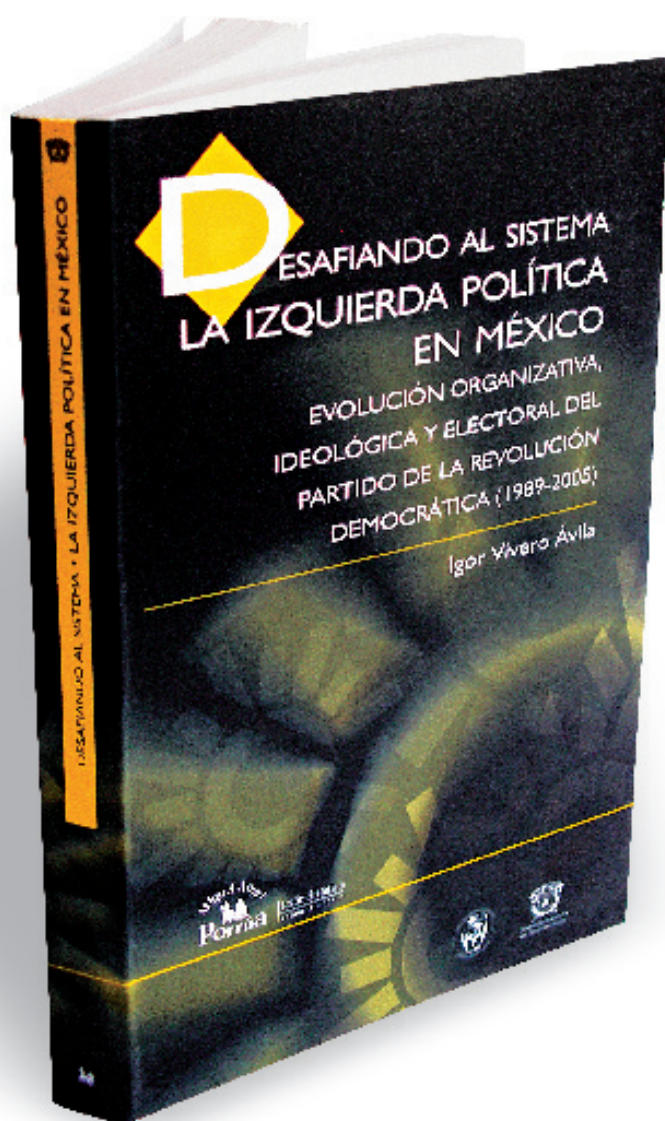
Vivero Águila's investigation shows that the PRD did not follow the standard path of institutional development. The party arose as a coalition of disparate groups on the Mexican Left—also known as "currents" or "tribes." Cárdenas was the pivot that kept the coalition together, as individual factions "lacked common identities and [had] divergent interests." The internal struggle of factions proved useful to Cárdenas, whose leadership of the dominant faction made him a central force. As party leader, he forged ad hoc alliances that provided him with just enough power to be able to constantly redistribute powerful positions among the different factions.

But at the same time, the PRD's internal fragmentation prevented

Cárdenas and his supporters from completely dominating the party apparatus. In the history of the PRD, no faction ever secured both the PRD presidency and the secretary general ship in an election of the National Executive Committee. These two positions hold tremendous power over budget control and allocation of leadership positions, both of which are important for a faction's ability to gain supporters and eventually control other groups. If one faction can secure partial control over the party apparatus—as the Cardenista faction did during the party's first 16 years—it can sustain itself in power by playing a brokering role among the other currents that seek leadership positions. The long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) provides a point of comparison to Vivero Águila's argument. Similarly created as a coalition of factions, elite rotation in the PRI transformed the party into an efficient and cohesive instrument for access to and control of power. This prevented any single caudillo from ruling permanently.

What made Cárdenas and his faction so powerful in the first place? Vivero Águila's examination of the party's electoral record unearths a seldom-noted fact: the PRD only secured stable voter support in presidential elections (around 6 million votes) in the 1988, 1994 and 2000 elections. In local elections, vote totals dramatically decreased by a ratio of approximately 10 to 1. Vivero Águila also notes that, beginning with the 1988 presidential election, the majority of Cárdenas' votes came mainly from central and southern states (Michoacán, Puebla, Veracruz, Tlaxcala, Tabasco, Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Mexico City). The faction leaders interviewed in his book dubbed this region the "PRD belt." Here, the party obtained between 20 and 30 percent of the vote, allowing Cárdenas to consolidate his and the party's national electoral base.

However, as Vivero Ávila notes,



there were deviations that strengthened the hand of other factions within the party. Governorships won by the PRD outside the “belt” (Zacatecas and Baja California Sur) provided non-Cardenista factions a local source of support and guaranteed re-election for PRD machines in those states. Most of those PRD governors were “at some point” members of the PRI. They had either resigned to join the new party, or became PRD candidates after losing the PRI nomination.

Vivero Águila follows his analysis of the PRD with an additional pair of chapters that examine the

party’s ideology. He finds that most of the PRD’s elected congressional members hold stronger “nationalist and interventionist” positions than their counterparts in leftist parties across the region, as well as more progressive views regarding abortion than the other dominant parties in Mexico.

The New Caudillo?

On election night in 2006, Mexicans were treated to simultaneous victory speeches from PRD candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador and National Action Party (PAN) candidate Felipe Calderón. López Obrador

refused to accept Calderón’s claim to be the winner, charging widespread fraud and vote manipulation. Despite the absence of substantial evidence to support his allegations, López Obrador, with the backing of the PRD, initiated a protest campaign that he hoped would discredit Calderón and the official election results. The efforts came to nothing. Calderón was sworn into office in a heavily guarded ceremony, and López Obrador wandered the country, his protestations gradually losing support even from some of his followers.

The important question is why the largest leftist party blindly followed its candidate as he navigated a collision course with the government—and with public opinion. Vivero Águila suggests an answer that can be traced to López Obrador’s working methods as Mexico City mayor between 2000 and 2005. From the start of his term, López Obrador attempted to define himself as an alternative source of power and influence within the PRD—as a powerful new caudillo—creating an effective challenge to Cárdenas’ leadership. This attracted power-hungry factions to a candidate that seemed bound to win the election, and who could be persuaded to distribute the perks that came with the presidency. Paradoxically, the very mechanism that helped Cárdenas keep the party together—constant competition among the factions for perks—would marginalize him. A new caudillo had appeared with the goods to be distributed among discontented factions.

Vivero Águila does not completely explain how the Cardenistas lost power, but he points out that López Obrador secured their support for his election protests and his “alternative” shadow government by making clear that the Cardenistas would remain isolated. No faction wanted to risk being caught on the “wrong side” if López Obrador were to actually succeed in his bid to de-legitimize the

election of Calderón and become the new caudillo. Months later, when it became clear that the factions had played their cards in a fruitless gamble, López Obrador's support within the party withered.

What should we expect of the PRD in the near future? The 2006 elections temporarily sidelined Cárdenas and his supporters. López Obrador's followers may place their bets on the more moderate Marcelo Ebrard, the newly elected Mayor of Mexico City. Interestingly, neither Cárdenas nor López Obrador was present at the April 2007 ceremony marking the party's 18th anniversary. López Obrador sent a media-ready video message, while Cárdenas was involved in closed-door negotiations to restore his diminished power.

An additional puzzle is left out of Vivero Águila's analysis: is it fortuitous that two out of three Mexico City mayors have been PRD presidential candidates? The answer rests more with Mexico City's role in national politics than the PRD machinery. Immediate access to national media, a growing base of electoral support for the Left and over 10 percent of registered voters in the country make Mexico City a powerful stepping stone for any presidential candidate, particularly for the Left.

With its overpowering academic bias, *Desafiando al sistema* is not always an easy read. While intended as a political science book, it is closer to a historically-based, sociological case study. Its main scope is not theoretical. Rather, it attempts to test theories about the creation and survival of parties using the case of the PRD. In the process, however, the book substantiates what journalists and editorial writers have long observed: the PRD is an archipelago of political groups, not a political party. Perhaps its main contribution is to explain how and why this arrangement worked for the PRD for so long.

The book is a good source of elec-

toral data, richly detailed anecdotes and interviews with key party actors. An added contribution is the author's use of references to other works that have attempted to make sense of Mexico's transition to democracy and the role of the PRD. Although it is lengthy, the book is a valuable reference work for the general public as well as the academic community.

Desafiando al sistema leaves plenty of room for readers to form their own conclusions about the events surrounding the 2006 election—and to be able to judge where the PRD (and Mexican) politics are heading.

Marco A. Morales is a doctoral candidate in political science at New York University.



Efectos económicos de los sistemas de pensiones

by Roberto Ham Chande and Berenice Ramírez López

México, El Colegio de la Frontera Norte / Plaza, 2006, Spanish, Softcover, 410 pages

REVIEWED BY
JORGE RAFAEL MANZANO



Ten years after Mexico's shift to private pension funds, the country's private sector workers increasingly wonder if the new system is any more secure than the old, under-funded model. The high hopes surrounding privatization have been replaced by concerns about long-term financial security. *Efectos económicos de los sistemas de pensiones* (Economic Effects of Pension Systems), a collection of essays on Mexico's social security challenges, is a timely—and not necessarily comforting—contribution to the debate.

The book, available only in Spanish, was produced by a working group of Mexican academics and researchers focusing on economics and social security. Edited by Roberto Ham Chande, a former actuary of the Mexican Social Security Insti-

tute now at *El Colegio de la Frontera Norte*, and Berenice Ramírez López of the *Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas* at the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (UNAM), it leads to a simple and poignant conclusion: the primary rationale for pension reform—privatizing the public pension system to prevent a looming financial crisis—contradicts the core values of a public pension system. In other words, pensions should be a state-guaranteed source of protection for workers, retirees and their families, rather than a private investment fund subject to the whims of the market or individual calculations.

The conclusion is buttressed by worrying statistics highlighted in the book. Over the last decade, Mexico's private pension funds have generated

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