

Mexico's Embattled Ruling Party: The Calls for Change Grow Loud

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MEXICO CITY — Having brought steady growth and enviable stability to Mexico for more than half a century, this country's special form of one-party rule is now being tested by a crisis marked by a slump in public confidence and new electoral challenges to its political monopoly.

The immediate catalyst is an acute economic recession that has strained the loyalty of longtime supporters of the regime and alienated the traditionally apolitical middle classes, whose dreams of prosperity have been abruptly dashed.

There is also widespread resentment in business, intellectual and opposition circles at what is seen as the Government's use of fraud to guarantee the victory of the Institutional Revolutionary Party in recent elections in several states, including Chihuahua.

A Sense of Indignation

But perhaps most of all, particularly in more developed urban and northern regions, there is a new sense of indignation over the corruption, centralization and authoritarianism that have long characterized this political system but have been exposed by the economic crisis.

A result is that, although President Miguel de la Madrid is being challenged neither by large-scale protests nor by armed insurgency, Mexico is being stirred by a swelling demand for political change that has the word "democracy" as its battle cry.

"Of course, no one agrees on what changes are necessary," said a prominent member of the PRI, as the govern-

ing party is known. "Some conservatives are dreaming of a bipartisan system, but the PRI is not about to surren-

Neighbor in Distress Mexico's Crisis and the U.S.

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der its power. Yet, without some changes, trouble in some form or other lies ahead."

A widely held view is that the Government will soon be forced to choose between stifling dissent through more openly authoritarian rule and appeasing the restive middle classes by permitting greater democracy. The complexities and contradictions of this political system are such that predictions remain hazardous.

For example, Mexico is often said to be a dictatorship, but it retains all the formal trappings of democracy. It is described as a one-party state, but in practice real power is in the hands of the bureaucracy. The system proclaims itself to be "revolutionary," but ideology plays a minimal role in daily politics. It boasts of working for social justice, but its main objective appears to be the perpetuation of its power. And while its demise has often been predicted, its resilience is well proven.

Even now, though unpopular, the Government is fully in control of the country. The labor movement has accepted declining living standards, the situation in rural areas is calmer than it was in the 1970's, and leftist parties have proved too weak and divided to exploit the economic crisis. For the moment, the only real pressure is coming from conservative middle-class businessmen, professionals and intellectuals.

The very existence of a public debate about the future is a novelty in a country where the Government has always claimed to have all the answers and where political decisions have traditionally been made secretly and with little explanation.

Since the elections on July 6 in Chihuahua, when the governing party's claim to have won 98 percent of the elective posts in contention brought angry demonstrations in the northern state as well as incredulity elsewhere in the country, two developments have given the regime cause for concern.

Within the governing party, a so-called Movement for Democratic Renewal, headed by a former Cabinet minister and party leader, Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, has begun calling for internal reforms to make the party less dependent on the Government bureaucracy and freer to pick its own candidates for elected offices.

[These are necessary, the group argued in a recent statement, so that the party can recover authority and credibility "to satisfy aspirations of freedom and justice among Mexicans and to channel social conformity along institutional lines." Mr. Muñoz Ledo himself later called for "imagination and talent" in carrying out changes that, he said, should be "as profound as the crisis itself."

[Predictably, though, the group's offensive has been viewed by the party's current leaders as a breach of discipline. "It is a contradiction to propose defending national sovereignty at the same time as questioning the legitimacy of the Mexican state," said Fernando Gutiérrez Barrios, a veteran politician who was recently elected Governor of Veracruz State.]

The Opposition's Cry: Effective Suffrage

No less unusual, normally antagonistic opposition parties of left and right have joined forces in a campaign for "effective suffrage" to demand respect for election results. In the months leading to the presidential elections in July 1988, they plan to travel the country to press their demands.

Once again the Government has responded defensively. On the one hand, Mr. de la Madrid himself has suggested that "foreign intervention" — a common euphemism for the United States — is somehow responsible for the growth of the conservative National Action Party. On the other hand, he has seemingly recognized the need

for change by promising a still-undefined electoral reform "to perfect our democracy."

[He also named a new head of the governing party, Jorge de la Vega Domínguez, who has also pledged to carry out "profound changes."]

In the view of politicians, businessmen and intellectuals of different political positions, what distinguishes the current crisis is that it goes beyond

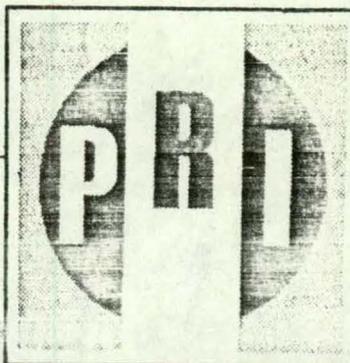
frustration at falling living standards, anger at electoral frauds or even disenchantment with the leadership of President de la Madrid.

Rather, they say, the problem lies in the unusual political formula that developed after the 1910-17 revolution and, in 1929, gave birth to a single party that embraced peasants, workers, intellectuals, bureaucrats and the military. The party came to dominate all aspects of national life and brought the stability necessary for Mexico to develop.

Mexico's Embattled Ruling Party:

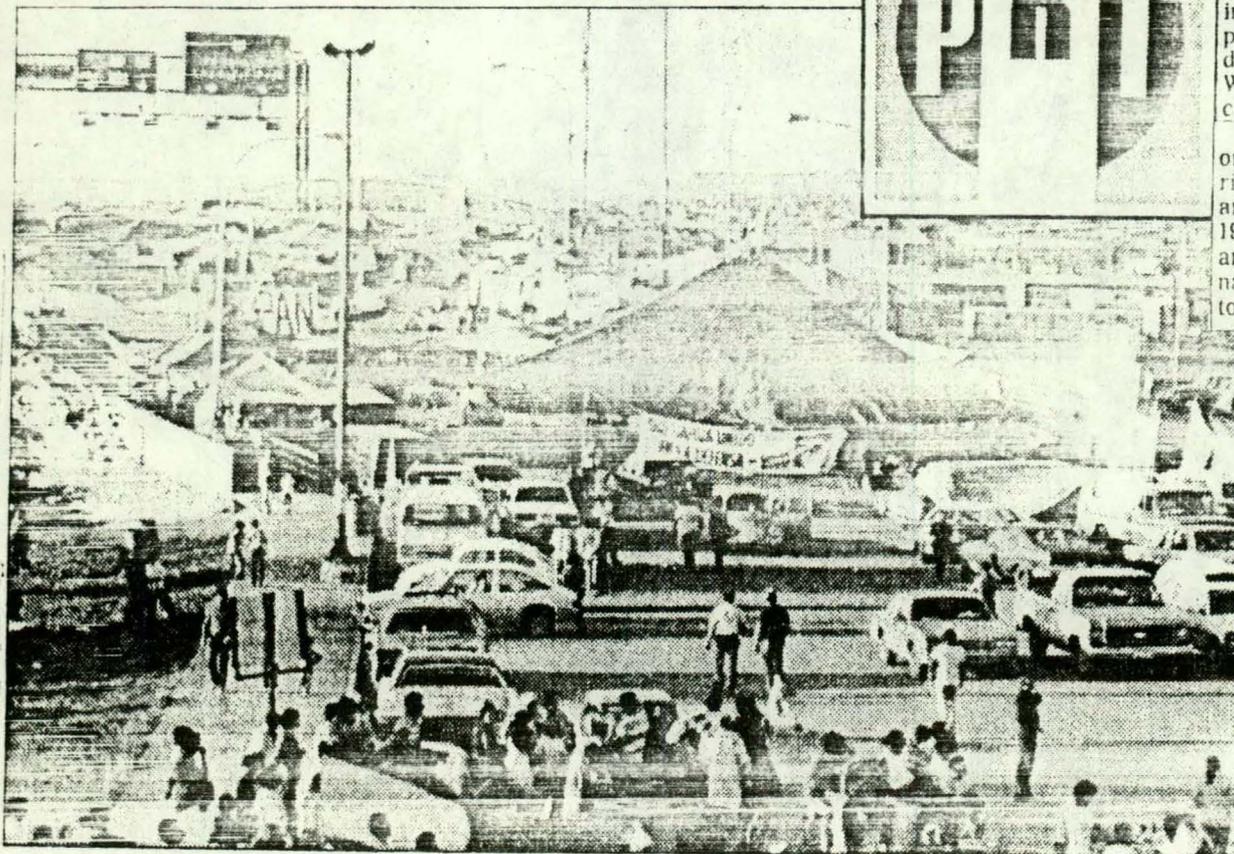
Calls for Change Are Growing Intense

Supporters of Mexican National Action Party — the Spanish acronym is PAN — blocking the Bridge of the Americas over the Rio Grande leading to El Paso. They are in opposition to the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).



"The economic crisis and the aggravation of unemployment led people to anticipate riots and strikes," said Roldo Martínez Verdugo, a leader of the Moscow-line Unitarist Party, said. "But instead, a crisis erupted where least expected in the fraudulent electoral system people had long accepted but were suddenly no longer willing to tolerate. We're now seeing the beginning of a civic insurgency."

Although the National Action Party or PAN, charged that the Government rigged more than a dozen municipal and state elections between 1983 and 1985, it was not until the results announced in the municipal and gubernatorial polls in Chihuahua that electoral fraud became a national issue.



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Today, they argue, the country has outgrown this system: myths and methods that governed a rural Mexico of 20 million inhabitants can no longer sustain a largely urban nation with a population of 80 million that is caught up in the new "revolutions" of consumerism and communications.

"There's no denying that the system worked for a long time," Enrique Krauze, a prominent political analyst, noted, "but it has now become a straitjacket. We thought that Mexico alone had found a way of making one-party rule work. But now we're seeing where it led us; we now know how the movie ends."

Money Called the Tie That Binds the System

For many students of Mexican politics, the Government's broad alliance with the private sector, labor, newspapers, intellectuals, opposition parties, the armed forces and even, distantly, the Roman Catholic Church was held together essentially by money in the shape of contracts, incentives, subsidies, favors, donations and even corruption. "Without money for cosmetics," a writer noted, "the system looks pretty ugly."

More ominously, with the Government forced into austerity, its relations have deteriorated with several of its allies, notably the private sector, such powerful labor groups as the Oil Workers' Union, many intellectuals and political representatives of the middle classes. The Roman Catholic Church, which was forbidden from taking part in politics after the revolution, has also begun speaking out more forcefully on public affairs.

But with the enormous power at its disposal the Government has prevented these problems from assuming the shape of a major challenge. And the President has asserted that Mexico's

troubles are not political but rather stem largely from the twin misfortunes of the earthquake that shattered the Mexico City area on Sept. 19, 1985, and the near-collapse of oil revenues this year.

In recent months, more and more Mexicans, inside and outside the Government, have begun to argue the opposite — that no solid economic recovery will be possible unless preceded by moves to modernize the political system. The resulting focus on the electoral system appears to have caught the regime by surprise.

Election Result in North Sets Off Wide Protests

The Institutional Revolutionary Party has been declared the winner of every election for president, governor and senator since 1929, but the National Action Party was known to be strong in the northern state and, according to one of its spokesmen, "for the first time people throughout Mexico came to expect a defeat for the PRI."

When the results were announced amid reports of stuffed ballot boxes and dubious voting lists, the effect was felt outside Chihuahua. Three prominent National Action Party leaders began a widely publicized hunger strike. Party militants organized demonstrations and even blocked a border crossing into the United States at Ciudad Juárez. Party members also boycotted the President's state of the nation address to Congress on Sept. 1.

Still more unusual, 21 prominent intellectuals representing a wide spectrum of political views signed a protest that noted the governing party's "dan-

gerous obsession with unanimity" and called for annulment of the Chihuahua elections. Subsequently, with Communists and conservatives sitting side by side, four registered opposition parties and 20 political associations met in Mexico City to plan the campaign in favor of "effective suffrage."

An election in late October in the northwestern state of Sinaloa, where the National Action Party candidate, Manuel Clouthier, has been campaigning for more than a year, will begin a busy calendar of local and state elections leading to the 1988 presidential elections. The elections will put the Government under the constant threat of agitation if evidence of fraud emerges.

"No one is talking about an opposition victory in the presidential elections," a National Action Party official conceded, "but it's still going to be more difficult for the PRI. The more people look to the polls as an instrument for change, the more crises we're going to have."

In a Resentful North, Pressure for Change

Significantly, as in the early years of this century, the pressure for change is coming from the north of Mexico, which has long resented being controlled from Mexico City. But in this huge capital of more than 18 million inhabitants, while the ruling party won all 40 congressional seats in midterm elections last year, the eight opposition parties together for the first time polled more votes than the Government party.

The Government, which has long exercised political control through its bureaucracy rather than the party, has been forced to recognize that the party today is electorally weak.

As Mexico developed, the party's three sectors — labor, peasant and white collar — were insufficient to accommodate all the key interest groups, and a system emerged to ally the Government with other interest groups.

Thus, as power moved away from the party and patronage came to be distributed by the Government, the party was gradually reduced to an electoral role. Ambitious young politicians came to recognize that jobs in the Government were not only better paid but were also more secure ladders to the top than party posts.

Old-Style 'Políticos' Yield to Technocrats

Significantly, none of Mexico's last three rulers — Luis Echeverría Alvarez, José López Portillo and Miguel de la Madrid — had run for public office before they were elected President. And all three accelerated the transfer of power from old-style "políticos" with grass-roots experience to younger, foreign-educated technocrats often more versed in Keynesian economics than revolutionary lore.

A result was that the party, enjoying no autonomy from the Government, began to wither away. The President routinely picked gubernatorial and congressional candidates on the basis of friendship and loyalty, while state governors used the same criteria to select local candidates.

Even the presidency, the one institution that has traditionally been above public criticism, appears to be losing some of its aura of infallibility, partly because Mr. de la Madrid, a 51-year-old, Harvard-educated lawyer, is seen as having failed to provide strong leadership.

But such is the cyclical nature of Mexican politics that while the country's crisis is probably too severe to be resolved simply by a change of presidents, a battle among leading Cabinet members for the party's presidential nomination is already under way.

NEXT: As economic hardships persist, consumers and the Government try to cope.

Struggle Is On to Follow de la Madrid

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MEXICO CITY — In a country where one party has won every presidential election since its foundation 57 years ago, the real struggle for power takes place not at the polls but in the fierce competition to determine who should become the party's candidate.

Thus, if Mexico's recent history is any guide, when the Institutional Revolutionary Party nominates its candidate around September 1987, it will also be announcing the winner of the July 1988 elections and the successor to President Miguel de la Madrid in December 1988.

The mystery of this ritual is not how the party makes its choice, because, by tradition, it names the person indicated by the departing President. Rather, what insures 12 months of tension in Mexico is that no one knows what criteria Mr. de la Madrid will use to pick his successor.

Nonetheless, although no politician can publicly admit presidential ambitions, an informal list of contenders has emerged and even a form of phantom campaign has begun, with leading aspirants trying to persuade Mr. de la Madrid of their loyalty and talent while undermining the images of their competitors.

Infighting Begins Early

Political scientists say one symptom of the perceived weakness of the current administration is that infighting among potential candidates has begun earlier and more visibly than during any government in recent memory.

For the moment, three Cabinet ministers are considered strong contenders:

¶Alfredo del Mazo, 42 years old, a former Governor of the state of Mexico, who entered the Cabinet in April as



Manuel Bartlett Díaz



Alfredo del Mazo



Carlos Salinas de Gortari

Minister of Energy, Mines and State Enterprises. He is said to enjoy the backing of the powerful labor leader, Fidel Velázquez.

¶Carlos Salinas de Gortari, 38, a Harvard-educated economist with the image of a technocrat who, as Minister of Planning and Budget, has emerged as the principal architect of Mexico's economic policies.

¶Manuel Bartlett Díaz, 50, a British-educated lawyer with extensive government experience and the reputation of a political hard-liner. As Minister of the Interior, he controls all political and security matters in the country.

Others Are Contenders

Because of the unpredictability of the succession race, other members of the Cabinet are also mentioned as contenders, among them Health Minister Guillermo Soberón; Urban Development Minister Manuel Camacho Solís; Mario Ramón Beteta, the head of the Pemex oil monopoly, and Foreign

Minister Bernardo Sepúlveda Amor.

The crucial test of the smooth functioning of Mexico's political system is that, when the party's candidate is finally named, all losing aspirants must close ranks around him in a display of discipline and unity. Those who do not can expect no political rewards from the next administration.

But it is difficult to predict, even after nomination, how the chosen candidate will behave as President. Until his inauguration, he must adhere to the opinions and policies of the man who chose him. Only when in office can he show his true face.

As a result, while the leading contenders this time around all carry labels such as conservative, liberal, technocrat or populist, these are in fact poor guides to the direction that Mexico might take between 1988 and 1994. Certainly, in the past, Mexicans have often been surprised to discover whom they have elected.