

# Mexico: López Obrador may lose control of PRD to “new left” faction

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The Mexican opposition Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), one of the three major Mexican bourgeois parties, will hold intra-party elections March 16. An ascendant “new left” faction (NL) led by Jesús Ortega—candidate for party president—is poised to assume control from forces loyal to former PRD presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

The NL or “Los Chuchos” (street dogs in southern Mexican and Central American nomenclature) seeks to replace the traditional economic populism of the PRD with what it describes as a more “modern” orientation to single-issue and identity politics—with the goal of forging stronger links to corporate interests and small businessmen at the expense of the party’s traditional base among the poor urban masses.

The PRD has its origins in a split within the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which held undisputed sway in Mexico from the 1920s through 2000. In 1988 Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, son of former Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas, bolted the party and mounted an independent presidential campaign against PRI candidate Carlos Salinas de Gortari, an election Cárdenas likely lost due to fraud. The PRD was formed in 1989 by former PRI members, like Cárdenas and López Obrador, and the Mexican Socialist Party. The Mexican Socialist Party itself had been formed out of the dissolution of several Stalinist parties—including the Mexican Communist Party and the Worker’s Party.

The PRD initially aimed at unseating the PRI’s 60-year reign as governing party by attacking its widely acknowledged corruption. It espoused a petty-bourgeois nationalist platform critical of pro-US, “neo-liberal” economic policies, while quietly advocating the interests of Mexico’s national elite as the rightful exploiters of Mexican workers.

Salinas de Gortari continued the privatization program initiated by his predecessor Miguel de la Madrid, reduced nationalized industry in Mexico to Pemex, the state-owned oil monopoly, and a few other less important industries. Noteworthy was Salinas’s privatization of Telmex, which remained a national monopoly until mid-1990s, when it was eventually sold to Carlos Slim Helú, who is now the richest man in the world and today a key economic patron of the PRD.

Most importantly, Salinas signed NAFTA, which opened up

Mexico for unprecedented exploitation as a cheap labor platform by US and Canadian corporations. Today, US corporate interests have virtually annexed the economy of northern Mexico. This is reflected politically by the political stranglehold over the region of the National Action Party (PAN). The PAN, more than any other party, seeks to destroy all barriers to the penetration of US capital while promoting greater US-Mexican military cooperation in domestic police work.

Following a second loss to PRI’s Ernesto Zedillo in the presidential race of 1994, Cardenas’s PRD role diminished and López Obrador became the de facto head of the organization. Under his leadership, the PRD in the years between 1996 and 1999 was able to expand its influence beyond its historic bases in the capital and central and southern Mexico. Later, López Obrador was popular as Mexico City’s mayor from 2000 to 2005. Based on his appeal, the PRD posted its best ever performance in the July 2006 legislative election, becoming the second-largest party in the Chamber of Deputies.

López Obrador lost the 2006 presidency to the PAN’s Felipe Calderón by the smallest margin in Mexican history. He then mobilized hundreds of thousands to carry out weeks of mass protests, claiming that electoral fraud had deprived him of the presidency.

Since 2006, Obrador has attempted to cultivate a personal base of support, claiming to have signed up about two million Mexicans since 2006 as citizens of his own, alternative “legitimate government.” With an eye toward a presidential candidacy in 2012, he has recently focused on opposing the privatization of Pemex—source of two thirds of government revenue and symbol of Mexican sovereignty.

But in the 2007 state elections, the PRD returned to also-ran status, garnering only 16 percent of votes nationwide, just over half the share of votes it earned in the 2006 congressional elections.

The PRD split emerged last year at the first National Congress of the “New Left,” in the guise of a “self-criticism” of the PRD’s conduct in the 2006 presidential elections. The self-criticism quickly revealed itself to be an open attack on López Obrador. The NL seized on the PRD’s more recent election failures, and joined the efforts of other establishment

parties to brand López Obrador as a “sore loser.”

Backed by several influential PRD legislators—including Jesús Ortega, Jesús Zambrano, and Carlos Navarrete—NL leader René Arce Islas declared, “It can’t be ignored that López Obrador’s campaign based itself on the poor, which is a noble cause, but it failed to connect with other sectors like the middle class, young people and the small and medium-sized businessmen who were also waiting to hear policies that would suit them...He didn’t give due importance to big business either, because...not all of them are corrupt.”

Arce further noted, “Mexico needs a modern, reformist left that can capture the concerns and aspirations of those sectors that until now we have not had contact with. This implies a profound transformation...We can’t remain in a barricade strategy...in permanent conflict with our adversaries.”

Mexico’s *La Jornada* reported on roundtable discussions held at the NL congress. At one roundtable, Senator Carlos Navarrete rhetorically posed the question: “Will the PRD continue to only seek refuge in the land of the ‘angry’ voters?”

To this group of voters, Navarrete counterposed the “hopeful” voters that want greater inter-party agreement on legislation to help advance the national interests of Mexico. “They are moving away from the PRD,” he lamented.

During the NL congress, the attacks on López Obrador and his supporters became so pointed that Jesús Ortega himself felt compelled to soften the blows. “We have no intention of starting a witch hunt,” he said, “nor do we want to achieve party supremacy and even less do we want to smear López Obrador.”

By July 2007 it was reported that the NL faction had won 80 percent of key party positions and would likely set the party’s political line and control the election of its new leadership. One month later, at the party’s 10th National Congress, the NL exhibited its newfound strength by forcing through a mandate to officially recognize Felipe Calderón as Mexico’s legitimate president.

The mandate represented a decisive break with the PRD’s post-election stance: that the Calderón presidency was illegitimate because it was gained through fraud. The policy shift resulted from a challenge made by Jesús Zambrano, who presided over the party congress, to an initiative proposing to extend a prohibition on all dialogue with Calderón.

Despite NL’s predominance at the conference, Zambrano’s challenge did not pass without heated debate. The debate eventually gave way to angry denunciations of the NL, which culminated in chants of “Panistas!, Panistas!” (You are members of Calderon’s PAN party!) by supporters of López Obrador. These were met by NL chants for “Unity” and “PRD.” According to *La Jornada*, López Obrador supporters then directed themselves to the table where Jesús Ortega was seated and began to chant, “We are leaving, We are leaving,” to which Ortega pleaded “it’s just a vote, man!”

The NL’s call for acceptance of the Calderon presidency was

accompanied by an effort to elevate the significance of identity politics within the party. At the August PRD Congress, party statutes which mandated that 30 percent of directive and congressional positions be given to women—originally an affirmative action program designed to ensure a minimum participation—were changed to raise the proportion of female positions to 50 percent. Jesús Ortega and other NL representatives wasted no time characterizing the reform as the essential task of a “left” party and an historic blow to inner-party sexism.

After its success at the August National Congress, in response to accusations that the NL represents a right-wing betrayal of the party, the NL has apparently muted its “self-criticism” of Obrador and the PRD populists. Nonetheless, the political maneuvering has continued with vigor. In December, the NL announced that it had finalized an agreement with the National Democratic Alliance—the next largest faction within the PRD—to promote Jesús Ortega as party head.

If the NL now takes control of the PRD, there is a strong possibility that López Obrador and his supporters will abandon the party, taking away much of its popular support.

In reality, neither López Obrador nor the NL faction represents the interests of the working masses in Mexico. The split that has emerged represents a conflict within a section of the ruling elite, with the NL seeking to disavow the populist demagoguery associated with López Obrador in an effort to reestablish the PRD’s bourgeois electoral legitimacy.

López Obrador is no less an opportunist than any other tendency within the PRD. His differences with the NL are merely tactical or even personal, linked to the 2006 presidential election that he entered as a heavy favorite, only to see the PAN candidate installed in office.



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