MEXICO'S PARTY OF THE DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION AT 25: DISAPPOINTMENT & DISILLUSION

written by Dan La Botz | May 13, 2014

The Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), which was founded in 1989 as the hope of the left, celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary on May 5 amidst expressions of disappointment and disillusion. The hope that the PRD would become a left political party capable of winning the presidency and a majority in the legislature and changing the face of Mexico has not been fulfilled. The principal founder of the party and repeat presidential candidate, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, speaking on the occasion of the party's twenty-fifth anniversary, said that the Party of the Democratic Revolution is "far from that which we proposed to construct" back in 1989. And its other most important former leader, also a repeat presidential contender, and the party's biggest vote-getter, Andés Manuel López Obrador, has left the PRD gone off to found a rival left party, the Movement of National Regeneration (MORENA).

While there is no question that the PRD will continue to play a role in Mexican politics, there is considerable doubt about its leftist character and its value to the country's working people. The Mexican government, the corporate media, and the two major parties—the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the National Action Party (PAN)—have done everything possible to deny the PRD the possibility of winning a presidential election or becoming the majority in congress. At the same time internal factionalism, bribery scandals, alleged involvement with the drug cartels, and the suggestion from others on the far left that the Mexican political system and *all* of its parties are corrupt and undeserving of support, have over the years discredited the party in the eyes of many Mexicans. The PRD's problems, some would argue, spring from its birth when elements of the PRI joined with Communists and other leftists to create a party focused on elections.

The Origins and Growth of the PRD

In the mid-1980s a new group of "technocrats" trained at universities in the United States took power in the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), advocating neoliberal economic reforms such as privatization of state-owned industries, open markets, and increased foreign investment, as well as cuts in state social welfare spending and a reduction of the power of the labor unions. In reaction to the PRI's sudden rightward turn, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the son of Mexico's most famous and beloved modern president, Lázaro Cárdenas, broke with that leadership and established the Democratic Current within the PRI. Then in 1988, Cárdenas left the PRI, formed the National Democratic Front (FDN), attracting support from many on the far left, and ran for president, but lost to his technocratic opponent Carlos Salinas de Gortari, in what most observers believe was a stolen election.

Following his defeat, C. Cárdenas and his allies Porfirio Muñoz Ledo and Ifigenia Martínez, left the PRI to found the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). This break from the PRI immediately attracted Mexico's two major leftist organizations that had already worked with Cárdenas in the FDN: the Mexican Workers Party (PMT) of Herberto Castillo and José Álvarez Icaza and the Unified Socialist Party of Mexico (PSUM—Mexico's pro-Soviet Communist Party—led by Arnold Martinez and Gilberto Rincón Gallardo. It also attracted other smaller parties, some of them much further to the left coming from nationalist, Castroite, Maoist, and Trotskyist traditions. The PRD, originally

made up of longtime PRI politicians founded itself involved with leftists whose work had been among peasants and workers or which, in some cases, had been armed guerrilla groups. While the PRD became somewhat more left with the ingress of the old left parties, the historic left itself virtually disappeared from the Mexican scene.

The PRD took as its symbol the "Sol Azteca," a yellow, rising sun promising a bright future for the country's working people. Party leaders pledged to create a party whose leaders would be honest, transparent and responsive to the membership. The PRD's ideology from the time of its founding until today has been leftist and nationalist, nominally in the tradition of General Lázaro Cárdenas who as president in the 1930s nationalized the foreign oil companies, recognized the industrial labor unions, and distributed millions of acres to poor peasants and indigenous communities. L. Cárdenas also reorganized the state-party by incorporating the labor unions and peasant leagues into it as its constituent organizations, creating the modern Mexican corporativist state-party. His successors affiliated the PRI to the Socialist International, the organization of the European socialist and social democratic parties.

The General's son Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas represented the living embodiment of that left, national tradition, though acting within the context of the neoliberal agenda being imposed by the United States, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank, the son's pronouncements and practice became center-left. López Obrador followed a similar trajectory, left rhetoric giving way to more conservative practice. For example as mayor of Mexico City, he hired U.S. Republican Rudy Giuliani to help him develop a "zero tolerance policy." The PRD never pretended to be either a working class or a socialist party; it was a self-conceived people's party fighting for reform. The PRD's program was only mildly social democratic, its rhetoric populist in the Mexican political tradition, and its practice increasingly compromised by both political bargains and corruption.

The PRD's Political Record

During the 1990s the PRD succeeded in electing several congressmen and then senators as well, winning its greatest number of representatives in both houses in 2006. Since 1997 when Cuauhtémoc won the post, the PRD has won every election for mayor of Mexico City. The party, strongest in central and southern Mexico, also succeeded in winning the governor's mansion in several states in those regions, tough it also once won the governorship of Baja California Sur. The PRD ran Cárdenas as its candidate for president in 1994 and 2000 and Andrés Manuel López Obrador in 2006 and 2012. Like the 1988 election, the 2006 election was also believed to have been stolen.

While achieving enough political success to make it Mexico's second or third political party—after the PRI and the conservative National Action Party (PAN)—the PRD also began to degenerate into just another Mexican political party. The PRD's internal life became riven by factionalism, the factions generally based on alliances among the various, former left parties that had helped to found the party. If one names only the most important factions, there have been more than half a dozen: the New Left, the National Democratic Left, the National Democratic Alternative, the New Sun Forum, the Political Action Group, the Worthy Fatherland, and the Progressive Movement. In particular the National Democratic Left faction fought for years to wrestle control from of the party from Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, and for the political offices and perquisites that come with such control.

Most damaging to the PRD's reputation were the video-scandals of 2004 in which businessman Carlos Ahumada was videotaped passing money along to various politicians of the PRI, the Mexican Green Ecological Party (PVEM), the PAN, and the PRD. René Bejarano, López Obrador's personal secretary, was videotaped accepting US$1.45 million. The whole scheme of bribes and tapes seemed to have been arranged in an attempt to discredit López Obrador. Then in 2009 Jesús César Godoy

Toscano, a PRD congressman in Michoacán, was accused of having ties with The Family, the drug cartel that controlled the state's narcotics business. He fled and after losing his legislative immunity remains a fugitive from justice. The PRD's internal factionalism, the video-scandals, and the presence of a drug dealer in its ranks, seemed to prove that on its fifteenth anniversary it was simply another Mexican party based upon political fear and favors.

While the PRD claimed to be the genuine expression of the Mexican left, it was challenged after by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), the small group of revolutionaries who had led a peasant rebellion in the southernmost state of Chiapas on January 1, 1994. The Zaptistas, who also placed themselves in the left nationalist tradition, consistently rejected the existing Mexican government and its political parties, including the Party of the Democratic Revolution. The EZLN spokesman *Subcomandante* Marcos spoke scathingly the PRD and its candidates Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and López Obrador, arguing that they were simply another expression of Mexico's corrupt political system. For the last twenty years the EZLN has rejected any cooperation with the PRD or any participation in electoral politics. Though most other far left groups have critically or uncritically supported the PRD's campaigns one way or another.

The PRD Challenged

Over the last 25 years the PRD has suffered numerous defections, including of some of its most important leaders: founder Porfirio Muñoz Ledo left in 2000, former Mexico City Mayor Rosario Robles in 2004, and Leonel Cota, former governor of Baja California Sur in 2012. The most important renegade, however, is Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the party's top vote-getter in the presidential election of 2006 when he won 35.3 percent of the vote. He in 2012 he received 31.6 percent. He argues that he was the real victor in both "fraudulent" elections. In 2012 López Obrador left the PRD and founded the Movement of National Regeneration pledging to make it the political party of the left. He has already announced that he will be its candidate for president in 2018.

At the PRD's twenty-fifth anniversary celebration, Cárdenas criticized the PRD from wandering from its radical, founding ideas. "The discourse about having to create 'a modern left that distances itself from radicalism' only serves the interests of the sell-out regime," he said. "Principles are not just a fashion."

Commenting on the chasm between the party's founding principles and its current situation, Cárdenas asked rhetorically, "Responsible? On the one hand, the hostility of the state and the so-called real powers that have fought against the PRD's project of national sovereignty and democracy, and on the other, all of us who founded and make up this organization are all also responsible."