Mexico's political earthquake: A stunning defeat for the PRI

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It's like the Berlin Wall falling down," said one Mexican official about his country's July 2 election. "But the PRI lasted longer than the wall." A lot longer. In power for 71 years, the oxymoronically named Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, has had the longest continuous rule of any political group in the world. Under the all-pervasive PRI, party, government and presidency had become virtually synonymous; unions, industries and many other aspects of Mexican society fell under its control. But on July 2 its presidential candidate, Francisco Labastida, a prim, rather colorless bureaucrat, was decisively defeated by the charismatic Vicente Fox of the National Action Party (PAN). Fox's call for change had caught fire with the Mexican people, who were fed up with the corruption and economic mismanagement—not to mention the assassinations and massacres—that had marred the PRI's seven-decade tenure.

Though primarily a businessman and rancher, the 58-year-old Fox is no stranger to politics. A former CEO of Coca-Cola's Mexican branch, he has served as governor of the state of Guanajuato and as a congressman. He is something of a maverick in his own party, which was formed in 1939 by a group of pro-business conservative Catholics concerned about the loss of church privileges and opposed to land reform. Fox knew that his party's base would have to be broadened much more if he were to have any chance of winning. He made good use of his marketing skills, and he bested Labastida twice in television debates. He was especially adept at appealing to young voters. He even wooed intellectuals on the left—and won a number of them to his cause, including the respected political scientist Jorge Castañeda.

Perhaps more surprising still is the fact that many members of Mexico's Base Christian Community movement—activists who seek to live by the precepts of liberation theology—voted for Fox. They "were being pragmatic and realistic," said Eric Olson of the church-related Washington Office on Latin America. Of course, many of their votes were more anti-PRI than pro-PAN. And some BCC activists voted for neither Fox nor Labastida, but for Cuahtémoc Cárdenas of the center-left Party of

the Democratic Revolution, who came in a distant third.

Some Mexicans say that Fox has a messianic complex and fear that he will try to replace PRI authoritarianism with a brand of his own. Hopefully, such fears are unfounded. For one thing, Fox's party will not have a majority in congress, and he will need to cooperate with other parties if he is to achieve some of the ambitious goals he has set—such as attaining 7 percent growth, creating effective antipoverty programs, revamping the educational system and devising a trustworthy justice system.

The PRI has never had much of an ideology other than self-preservation; it has, for example, both nationalized and privatized industries, depending on which seemed more advantageous at the time. But Fox too has shifted his position on a number of issues, leaving people to wonder just what his guiding principles are, if any. For instance, he has reversed himself on calling for the privatization of Pemex, the national oil company. According to Luis Hernández Navarro, an editor of *La Jornada*, Fox is "a clever salesman who is willing to say whatever it takes to win." Fox said some outrageous things in his campaign—perhaps to attract media attention—and he didn't hesitate to play the machismo card, calling Labastida a "sissy" and a "a faggot tied to his wife's apron strings." But since his victory he has tempered his brashness and taken a much more conciliatory stance.

Though divorced, Fox is an ardent Catholic. Having a president who is fervent in his faith will be something unusual for Mexico. (Unlike other Latin American countries, Mexico has a long history of hostility between church and state, and its leaders have often been anticlerical. Only in recent years have priests been allowed to vote.) Early in his campaign, Fox paraded the banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe—often used as a symbol of the Catholic far right—but later abandoned it in response to objections. At first he spoke of favoring the teaching of religious—i.e., Catholic—values in public schools, but eventually backtracked. He is strongly opposed to abortion but says he would sign a law allowing it if the majority of the people want it.

Ironically, Fox owes much of his success to the man whose job he will take over in five months. In economist Ernesto Zedillo, the PRI finally had a reform-minded president who really wanted free and fair elections, and who took action to make them possible. Mexican presidents are limited to one six-year term, but in the past they have handpicked their own successor; Zedillo changed all that by introducing a

national primary system. Moreover, he established an autonomous entity, the Federal Electoral Institute, to oversee the voting process—a crucial factor on July 2, which was largely fraud-free.

U.S.-Mexican relations are not likely to suffer and may even improve under Fox. The PAN, like the PRI, strongly favors free trade and is pro-NAFTA. But that does not necessarily mean business as usual between the two countries, especially in regard to the two most troublesome issues: illegal immigration and drug trafficking. Realizing that undocumented people will continue to seek entry to the U.S. until Mexico can provide adequate jobs and a higher standard of living, Fox hopes that the U.S. will increase the number of visas for legal immigration—which may be difficult to achieve, though not as difficult as his goal of “open borders” within a few years. As for drug dealing, he stresses that while Mexico needs to work harder at reducing the supply, the U.S. needs to work harder at reducing the demand.

The Mexican people have high expectations for Fox—perhaps impossibly high. But they feel their country is undergoing a rebirth, and at least for now he has their enthusiastic support. All things considered, Fox’s election augurs well for Mexico and its people.