

Mexico's PRI to vote for new leader

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By Adam Thomson in Mexico City

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If there were ever a symbol of the central role the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) has played in the shaping of Mexico's modern history it is the size of the party's headquarters, which occupies an entire block on a busy and polluted artery of the nation's capital.

Yet the gargantuan site, home to the movement that ruled Mexico for 71 uninterrupted years until 2000, also bears a potent symbol of the party's present condition: a 20m mosaic depicting a ferocious bayonet-winged warrior whose surface is now cracked and severely pock-marked.

On Sunday, with the wounds inflicted by last July's disastrous performance in the presidential election still gaping, the party's 17,000-odd councillors will return to the polls – this time to choose a new leader.

The election is vital. Party members hope that the emergence of a new leader will re-establish internal order and discipline as a first step to mounting a credible bid to return to the presidency in 2012. "It will define the party's future," says Jorge Zepeda, a political analyst in Mexico City.

The result is also likely to determine to what extent the government of Felipe Calderón of the centre-right National Action Party (PAN) will be able to push his ambitious reform agenda through Congress.

Most political analysts agree that Mr Calderon's best chance of success is to harness the support of the PRI. But the lack of a clear and undisputed leader has made that task more difficult. "There just isn't anyone to negotiate with," says Fausto Zapata, a prominent PRI member and one of the 17,000 who are qualified to vote tomorrow.

Nevertheless, things are starting to look good for Mr Calderón. According to Parametría, a Mexico City-based polling company, Beatriz Paredes, the PRI's former candidate for mayor of the capital in last year's election, heads the field with 47 per cent of the vote. Enrique Jackson, her closest rival, is far behind with just 18 per cent.

Most observers agree that Ms Paredes is a potentially formidable leader. Now 53, Ms Paredes, a plump 53 year old with piercing dark eyes and an extensive wardrobe of traditional Mexican dresses, has occupied just about every elected post on offer in Mexico outside the presidency. She has also held three sub-secretary-level posts and been an ambassador to Cuba.

More importantly for Mr Calderon, she is associated with the more flexible and modernist line within her party, which is potentially willing to strike deals on many areas of Mr Calderon's agenda, including fiscal, labour and energy reform.

Significantly, too, Ms Paredes and Mr Calderón have known and respected each other at least since they were members of the lower congressional house together. There were even tentative conversations last year surrounding the possibility of Ms Paredes heading Mr Calderon's social development ministry.

Mr Zapata argues that if Ms Paredes does emerge victorious on Sunday, there is a greater chance of party members uniting. In part, he says, that is because she has more than three decades of active experience in the PRI and possesses greater leadership skills than Mr Jackson.

Unlike last year's presidential election campaign, the run-up to tomorrow's vote has also been relatively clean, with little or no mud-slinging or negative campaigning. That fact, says Mr Zapata, will minimise any bad blood after the vote and smooth the reconciliation process within the party.

Not everyone agrees, though. Mr Zepeda, for one, believes that the party's internal structure has changed irrevocably, making it much harder for any new leader to achieve the same internal discipline the PRI displayed for so many decades.

One simple reason is that the party finally lost power in 2000 and, with it, the institution of the presidency, whose occupant traditionally acted as the party's de facto boss, handing out orders that

everyone obeyed blindly.

Another reason, he argues, is that in practice the party has been leaderless since last July's election and that several figures, in particular Emilio Gamboa, who heads the PRI bloc in the lower house, and Manlio Fabio Beltrones, president of the Senate, have amassed considerable power in the meantime – power they will want to defend.

Gabriel Guerra, a former PRI presidential spokesman, agrees. "Gamboa and Beltrones got to where they are now not because the party handed them the positions but because of their own ability to negotiate and operate politically. They are not going to give up those gains easily."

The result of this new structure, with strong regional centres of PRI power represented by a handful of leading state governors as well as the likes of Mr Gamboa and Mr Beltrones at the centre, could end up closely resembling the party in its first days when it was born in the aftermath of the revolution as a way of making the peace between warring regional chiefs.

Ironically, returning to its roots could make the PRI's internal structure far more pluralistic than it has been in past decades. But with the eventual winner of tomorrow's election likely to act more as a co-ordinator than as a traditional party leader, negotiations with Mr Calderón could also end up being a lot more tortuous.

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