

Has the PRI learned its lesson?

Come November, Mexico's three main political parties will have chosen their candidates to run in next year's presidential election. In the first of a three-part series, The REPORTER asks senior figures from the PRI, PAN and PRD in the state of Jalisco what their parties can offer Mexican voters.

By Brian Levinson

The head of the Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI) in Jalisco is Javier Galvan Guerrero. The 38-year-old, who also serves as a *diputado federal* (national congressman), describes himself as a member of the PRI's younger, more reform-minded generation that hopes to guide the party back into presidential power.

The 2000 election, which ended seven decades of authoritarian rule by the PRI, helped the party evolve, Galvan told The Colony REPORTER. "It gave us a reason to be. Before, the president of the republic used to make vertical decisions over the party. Now the party has shed that anchor and functions with autonomy and free determination."

But has the PRI reinvented itself? Some of its most controversial figures of old, known collectively as dinosaurs, are still on the scene. Moreover, the party's agenda remains a blur of ideological brushstrokes, at the expense of specific policies and well-planned initiatives.

"We are opening up as a political party to the center, focusing our ideological definition with tendencies toward the market and commercial openness," said Galvan, even though the PRI has spent the last five years blocking liberalizing economic packages in the national congress.

The PRI has traditionally sought to balance social welfare concerns, with market-friendly business practices, and usually falls short on both counts. There is no better example of that tightrope than PEMEX, the heavily indebted state-owned oil firm, with a terrible environmental record, that has continually failed to provide consumers with affordable gas prices.



Javier Galvan Guerrero, president of PRI Jalisco, stands in front of a poster of national party leader Roberto Madrazo. He believes his party can wrest the presidency back from the PAN in 2006.

"I think it has to be modernized not privatized," said Galvan. He embraced the idea of foreign investment, but only for certain procedures — like refinement and technology upgrades — and never in such quantities that it would wrest control from the state.

"There is an antecedent," said Ruben Vazquez, an assistant secretary at PRI Jalisco. "Before it was sold, Telefonos de Mexico (TELMEX) functioned in the red.

It was bankrupt, and today it is one of the five most productive companies in the world."

He concluded, with irony, "We don't want this to happen to PEMEX."

"We want the government itself to modernize and improve the infrastructure, rather than Carlos Slim or some Arab," added Galvan.

But with a year left to the 2006 presidential election, the question of oil is playing second fiddle to popularity contests. The PRI's top presidential contender and its national president, Roberto Madrazo, is a polemic figure but

has the party's best name recognition.

Madrazo is challenged by a group of PRI governors and congressmen who consider him a party dinosaur, left over from the days of electoral shenanigans and corrupt governance.

He won the 1994 Tabasco gubernatorial race despite widespread accusations of fraud. That would not be such an indictment

Lesson on 8

Lesson from 7

of character, given the shady politics of the era, except that Madrazo is said to have spent more than 30 times the legal limit on the race — a whopping 135 dollars per vote — with much of the funding from a corrupt banker.

"The survival of the Tabascan reflects the worst of the Mexicans," was the verdict in a scathing candidate profile published in the Guadalajara daily, Mural, last week. Madrazo is "capable of inspiring fear, but incapable of inspiring confidence."

And he has done little to improve his image. This past year he played an instrumental role in the legally dubious effort to disqualify Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador from the 2006 presidential election.

It so happens that Lopez Obrador, a member of the Party of

the Democratic Revolution (PRD), was the loser of the Tabasco contest in 1994, and stopped at nothing to prove that Madrazo cheated him out of the prize.

The PRI's electoral council will decide July 15 whether to hold an open primary or a closed assembly vote. Madrazo is hoping for the latter. He has spent the last five years gathering support from party functionaries around the country.

Javier Galvan is probably among them. He has not thrown his support behind any candidate just yet, but his affinity for Madrazo is clear. The reformist young blood is falling in step behind the old guard.

What the PRI values is style over substance and personality over policy. Even putting aside conflict within the PRI itself, Galvan had a difficult time distinguishing the PRI from its rival parties.

Asked how the PRI specifically differs with the ruling Party of National Action (PAN), he could only say, "The PAN has its historical beginnings on the right, and some cases the ultra-right. On the other hand, we are center-left."

There are, of course, tangible differences between Mexico's three major parties, but far be it from PRI politicians to explain them. Defining a political platform risks alienating segments of the population, and the PRI still wants to represent the entire population.

The party has spent the last 70 years trying to accommodate as many people as possible on board its ship — by allowing each of them to see the party as they wanted to. (Hence Galvan's vague references to left, right and center on the political spectrum.)

That ship proved too heavy, over-crowded and no longer very functional. But can the PRI, and especially its younger generation, finally streamline operations and develop a democratic identity? □