

Former ruling party slips to 3rd

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MEXICO CITY - While the photo finish in Mexico's presidential election left the winner in dispute on Monday, there nonetheless was a clear loser: the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI.

The PRI shaped modern Mexico. From 1929 to 2000, every Mexican president had been a member. Until recent years, nearly every governor and most members of congress were party stalwarts. Through patronage and pressure, it controlled unions and peasant farmers, shoeshine stands and luggage porters. It effectively coerced the vote of average Mexicans, and the country's biggest businesses were loyal to it. Its colors were the same as those of the Mexican flag - green, white and red.

Now it seems in free fall. Its presidential candidate, Roberto Madrazo, won less than 22 percent of the vote. Its candidate for mayor of Mexico City, Beatriz Paredes, was crushed by nearly two to one.

Adding to the insult, Madrazo represents the party's old guard and Paredes, the newer generation. Both wings of the party were roundly rejected by voters Sunday.

The results were welcome news to many Mexicans who endured decades of one-party, often heavy-handed rule at the hands of the PRI. Many Mexicans have resented the PRI since the 1988 elections, when a computer crash resulted in a narrow PRI victory and gave the appearance of a stolen election.

Now they wonder if the PRI is finished.

"I think it's necessary," said Patricia Correa, a businesswoman. "Their past weighs heavily on them."

Correa was standing in front of the PRI's towering headquarters in Mexico City. A five-story-tall poster of Madrazo was affixed to its facade, but little else resembled years past when a presidential election would have made the building the center of activity. Sunday, the PRI garnered little more media attention than two tiny parties that won a few percentage points of the national vote.

Over the past 20 years, news of the PRI's imminent death has proven greatly exaggerated. It was supposed to fall apart after the disputed 1988 elections, then in 1994 after the murders of party leader Jose Ruiz Massieu and presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio. Ruin for the PRI was predicted after a severe economic crisis in 1995 and then with certainty after it lost the presidency in 2000 for the first time since 1929.

Yet the PRI continued to exercise power from the sidelines. It enjoyed the largest bloc in congress and from there hampered most of President Vicente Fox's reform plans.

Even with election results showing it losing its position as the largest bloc in congress to No. 3, behind the National Action Party (PAN) and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), some say it's too soon to declare the PRI dead.

The PRI still holds the governorships of 17 of Mexico's 31 states. In Sunday's balloting, PRI candidates won the mayor's race in Monterrey, Mexico's industrial capital, and a majority of the wealthy cities that surround it.

The PRI has reinvented itself in the north as a younger, more modern party. Its members rejected Madrazo but stuck with their local, experienced representatives.

Analysts now expect PRI reformers to move to replace Madrazo, who was the party's president before he became its presidential candidate.

"I think the problem the PRI still has to sort out is the division between the traditionalists like Madrazo and the reformists," said Roderic Camp, author of 20 books on Mexican politics and a professor at California's Claremont McKenna College. "I think the PRI is still a long way from disappearing from the scene."