The PRI and Reform in Mexico

An Address by

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Given at the Center for Strategic and International Studies
October 16, 1990

Policy Paper on the Americas
Volume VI Study 6

July 14, 1995

CSIS Americas Program
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I will talk briefly about the reform of the political sphere that is taking place right now in Mexico. The economic reforms in Mexico are well known, but it won't be possible to make deep economic reforms without a political transformation.

Mexico has gone through a very profound and dynamic set of changes since President Salinas took office in December of 1988. He proposed a strategy which will take the nation to a more modern stage of development, including a national agreement to enhance democratic life in Mexico. The main objective of this agreement was to open new channels of political reconciliation on the basis of respect, on the basis of tolerance, on the basis of recognizing political pluralism. New political parties had arisen in Mexico, and they expressed themselves in the 1988 federal elections. I would like to briefly refer to the advances that the Mexican political system has achieved concerning the reform of electoral laws.

For the first time in many years, the Mexican Congress has approved reforms to the Constitution that have created a new framework for the midterm elections in 1991. The Congress went through a very intense work period during the first part of the year to approve the Federal Electoral Code and develop new electoral processes. I want to point out that for the first time in many years our party, the PRI, doesn't have the majority of members of Congress needed to reform the Constitution. That is why we needed the joining of different political parties to carry out these important reforms--not only of the Constitution, but also the Federal Electoral Code. It was the first major step toward political reform performed by the Mexican political system.

At the same time, we in the PRI recognized that political reform would be incomplete if our party, the majority party in our country, did not also carry out deeply needed reforms of our structure, principles, and political programs. That is why, for almost three years, we went through a very wide and deep consultation within the party. The results of these consultations were realized last month at the PRI's 14th National Assembly. At this National Assembly, several measures were taken to reorient our national political structure according to the beliefs of our members. We are now in the process of putting into practice the agreements we achieved in our National Assembly in order to make our party much more modern and competitive. A more decentralized, regionalized party structure will prevail from now on. More important, a new equilibrium within the party was created. Before the 14th National Assembly, the sectors--which are composed of labor, campesino, and urban organizations--was the force that prevailed above all else within the party. But now we have built an equilibrium between the sectoral organizational structures and the territorial or geographically-based structure within the party. The reform of the Federal Electoral Code has led us, as a part of the modernization of our party, to develop a new electoral organization based more on a territorial basis than on the sectoral

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3The Mexico Project decided to release this 1990 address by the late Luis Donaldo Colosio, because of its substantive relevance to today's political debate in Mexico. The address reflected the vision of the reformist wing of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which at that time was headed by Colosio.
basis of the past.

New ways of selecting our candidates for electoral posts are also a mandate that we have to develop. The Council of the party now has more precise rules to select the leadership of the party in a fair and open manner. For the first time, the PRI will convene a National Political Council, which will be composed of our national sectoral organizations, but also composed of the territorial representatives of our party and Members of Congress. Several goals are assigned to this National Political Council, but the most important is to select our next presidential candidate. This is one of the major changes within our party.

Another major result of the 14th National Assembly has to do with the creation of a Foundation for our party, which will be responsible for developing international relations with other political organizations. The Foundation will also assist in raising financial resources for our party. One of the changes that we are promoting is transparency of our finances and expenses. This National Foundation is going to be a modern institution which will combine advances in ideology with state of the art advances in the political arena, not only in Mexico but all around the world.

The 14th National Assembly was an effort to create an up-to-date, national, democratic, and popular-based political party in Mexico that has the high responsibility of driving the modernization of our country, but also has the high responsibility of doing it by observing the law strictly. We also have the high responsibility of earning respect by fostering new modes of political action-- a new political organization, a new attitude, new confidence, new credibility of the Mexican people.

Next year, we're going to have the midterm federal elections. Five hundred members of our Congress and 30 members of our Senate are going to be elected. At the same time, there will be local elections in seven states of the nation. That is going to be the first challenge, not only for the PRI and its reforms, but for the electoral reforms as a whole. In that sense, it's going to be a challenge for all the political parties in our nation.

Our party is making progress in the new political culture that has been constructed in Mexico, but at the same time it is trying to incorporate new modes of political organization and new ways of guiding the country to new stages of development, not only economically, but also politically.

I will be happy to answer any questions.

QUESTION: Are there constituencies which might be emerging in Mexico that a new PRI is trying to appeal to, to attract? Are there other groups that the PRI is putting less emphasis on? In other words, what is the strategy?

COLOSIO: This is a very important question. Eight out of ten Mexicans are under thirty years old, so that is the main population target that we are after. Also, 75 percent of the electorate is concentrated in 80 cities of the country. So we have a young population and an urban population. This does not mean that we are not going to pay attention to the rest of the country or to the rest of the population. But it is very clear that our programs, our organizational work, that the
identification of our membership is going to take place mainly in those cities.

Right now we are developing a serious strategy to have a complete census of party membership. One of the major changes implemented during our National Assembly was that our national sectoral organizations, let's say the labor unions, accepted that the affiliation to our party should be on the basis of the individual. We have not renounced the practice of having organizations affiliated as such to the party, but organizational affiliation is going to be decided by the assemblies of the organizations. At the same time, we will ask for the individual affiliation of their members. We are registering members on the electoral precinct level. We are identifying perfectly-- by name, location, and residence-- those who decide to be members or sympathizers of our party.

That is precisely the work that we are doing right now, for example, in the election of the state of Mexico. The state of Mexico has 151 municipalities. We are working in detail in 23 larger municipalities because they are the ones that make up the 80 percent of the electorate of that state. We have tried to identify those citizens that decide to participate with the PRI in each one of the 450 electoral precincts of those 23 municipalities. So our design is a very detailed one for electoral purposes. We have to be much more efficient electorally in order to preserve our majority, maintain democratic reform, all while observing the law. That is why we need a real electoral organization for the party, and we can do it to the extent that we can reorganize our internal structure. That's the strategy.

QUESTION: Senator, I wonder if you could say a bit more about this new party Foundation you mentioned. Is this intended to be the kind of foundation that the German parties have? For instance, like the Adenauer Foundation or the Friederich Ebert Foundation, which study and send technicians to other places? What are the other functions for the Foundation?

COLOSIO: There are three main functions. First, is to develop and advance the ideology of our party. We must reconcile our unvarying principles and values with the means to achieve them. Second, we need to recruit new leadership at the regional levels. We need to train them; in other words, to create a kind of school for our cadres-- a cadre school. The third objective is to find new methods and ways of financing our political activities.

QUESTION: The United States press characterizes your party as moving toward the center--with Cardenas on the left and the PAN on the right in northern Mexico. When asked the question about the strategies, you put your strategy in demographic terms-- appealing to the younger generation. I wonder whether maybe you aren't moving toward the ideological center?

COLOSIO: There was much discussion on the ideological aspect of our party in our last National Assembly. The National Assembly decided that the principles our 1910 Revolution shouldn't be changed at all. The principles of democracy, social justice, sovereignty, and freedom are still the four main principles. There was a serious discussion about the means we have to use in order to achieve these principles. In the past, the State was conceived as the instrument to achieve social justice. Nowadays, a new generation believes that social justice has to be much more compatible with freedom and individual initiative. We do not believe that there is a conflict on that point.
We are a party which derives directly from the social movement of the beginning of this century, but we have made an effort to update the ways, means, and mechanisms to achieve those objectives.

FOLLOW-UP: In other words, you do not differ very much from the objectives of Cardenas and the Left, but you have different means of achieving them? You're in favor of free enterprise as opposed to statism, for example?

COLOSIO: Exactly.

QUESTION: Do you think there will be a coalition between the PAN and the PRD opposing the policies of the PRI without offering alternatives, or is the opposition developing its own platform? It seems to me that if you're going to have a real opposition then it has to be more than just a reaction to the ruling party.

COLOSIO: Nineteen eighty-eight was a very special year. That year, the economic crisis in Mexico had hit the standards of living severely. Real wages went down around 40 or 50 percent, unemployment was around 10 percent. Since then, President Salinas has gained enormous strength by governing with a very precise strategy. The economic crisis has been controlled--of course, I wouldn't say all our problems are solved--but we are on the right path. On the other hand, we have made an effort within the party, and also outside the party to allow political differences new means of expression. Political differences appeared that we were not able to conciliate within the PRI at the end of 1987. Well, a different strategy has been developed within the party to reconcile different interests, to conciliate different opinions and different concepts. At the 14th National Assembly, we accepted for the first time in modern history openly different currents of opinion within the party. Before that, we didn't have rules to manage different currents of opinion, and we created a very bad spectacle. Now, we are approaching parties and political forces that we wouldn't have thought of approaching in the past.

QUESTION: You mentioned the National Political Council within the PRI that will be responsible for selecting candidates. I understand this Council will be responsible for approving the precandidatos, which is I guess would be the equivalent of our primary candidates for President. If the Council accepts four or five precandidatos for President, who makes the final designation as to who will be the party's candidate for President?

COLOSIO: The National Political Council is going to make that designation by voting. But you have to have the support of a certain amount of membership of our party, or a certain percentage of our labor organizations, or a certain percentage of campesino organizations, or a certain percentage of our urban organizations before you can register as a precandidate.

QUESTION: In the past, the new President was picked by the outgoing President. You haven't mentioned the role of the President in picking the new candidate. Will the President no longer decide who his successor is going to be?
COLOSIO: The National Political Council will pick the candidate.

QUESTION: And President Salinas will be entirely without influence?

COLOSIO: Well, he's a member of our party. [Laughter] A very distinguished member of our party.

QUESTION: This is a follow-up to the question about political strategy. I'm curious about the PRONASOL and programs like it. What is its role in the political and social development?

COLOSIO: It is a very important and innovative program. PRONASOL is a social program which is oriented towards both urban and rural areas. It is designed to help people in the poorest areas of the country. But it is different from other programs. It was conceived to give more importance to the participation of the people. It is not a program designed by the bureaucracy, but in the fields and the urban areas by the political organization of the people themselves. Of course, there are some regulated aspects of the program. But what has been successful in PRONASOL-- PRONASOL stands for Programa Nacional de Solidaridad-- the most important aspect of this program is that the people of the regions decide things. For the first time in modern history, the population is deciding where and how to orient the resources. The people also contribute their own labor-- and that makes the program a very strong one because the colonias populares, the urban areas, feel like it is their own social program. They identify those programs with President Salinas, because he has been a promoter of these programs, and he is the one who is overseeing the progress of these programs. It is a very interesting and productive aspect of what President Salinas has done.

QUESTION: I'm wondering if you could say a little bit more about the difference between sectoral representation in the party and territorial representation.

COLOSIO: We are not erasing our sectoral structure. What we are doing is elevating the strength of the territorial structure. Let me give you an example. In the past, we would hold a Municipal Assembly, and that Assembly would be composed of the sectors of the party. Let's say 900 delegates-- 300 from the labor unions, 300 from campesino groups, and 300 from the urban organizations. Those representing the party at the territorial basis, at the electoral district level, wouldn't have any participation at all. The result of the 14th National Assembly is that now, 50 percent of the assemblies, it doesn't matter what kind of assembly or convention we're talking about-- it can be municipal, state, or national-- but any convention from now on within the party is going to be composed 50 percent of the delegates coming from the territorial structure, and the other 50 percent from our sectoral organizations.

Before, to be the party representative at the precinct level didn't have much value for the citizens. But now, they decide who is going to be the leader of the party at the municipal level; they decide who is going to be the next candidate for mayor; they decide who is going to be the next candidate of our party for governor; and by means of being represented in a democratic way on the National Political Council on a territorial basis, they are going to decide who is going to
be our next President of Mexico. So it's an important change.

QUESTION: If I was a political boss, and I was faced with this reform, I would pack the territorial side with my people.

COLOSIO: That is why we are putting so much emphasis on our party census. That census will tell us who lives where, and what the party is doing for them, and what they are doing for the party, but on a territorial basis.

QUESTION: If you look at the Soviet Union and if you look at Argentina, in some instances reform on the political side complements economic reform. In other cases, economic reform creates problems which conflict with the process of reform. What is the case with Mexico?

COLOSIO: Politics and economics go hand in hand. Those of us within the party are doing our job--opening up the party. But at the same time, since our economy is dependent upon so many internal and external factors, we cannot rest only on economic success. We must also transform our own party, developing a new, innovative, imaginative, political option for those people-- in the cities, in the countryside-- that are asking for new means of political participation, but are also asking for a new modern way of developing the country.

QUESTION: One argument that was heard in 1988 after the presidential election was that it was less a vote for Cardenas than it was a vote against the PRI. Should I interpret your response to the last question as an agreement with that analysis?

COLOSIO: It was a vote against the depression of standards of living. It was vote against the economics. If we rely upon the restoration of the economy and we don't do anything within the party, if we didn't do anything in the way of political and electoral reforms-- I doubt that the PRI would recover politically on economics alone. So while the recovery of the economy is very important, we also have to recognize that political reform within the party and the separate political reform related to the electoral reform has to be there.

QUESTION: If I might ask you to look a few months into the future to the 1991 Congressional elections, do you expect, as a practical politician, that the PRI will recapture the majority of those seats? And secondly, beyond the state of the economy, what might be one or two of the other dominant issues in that election?

COLOSIO: Right now we have 260 PRI seats out of 500. By our calculation, the minimum scenario that we have-- and of course, one that we don't want-- is to come up with the same result as the 1988 election. We have to do better than that, but to achieve that purpose we have to display a new kind of organization which we didn't have in 1988. So we are now trying out a new electoral organization which we hope will be fruitful in gaining more seats.

   Issues in the election. Well, the economic issue is going to be very important. But also in Mexico the regional issues are very important. For example, agricultural issues in the northern
part of the nation are different from agricultural issues in Yucatán. So we have two kinds of agricultural sectors. In certain areas, the issues are going to be ecological. For example, in Chiapas. For example, in Guadalajara the issue of Lake Chapala has become very public. Urban services are going to be a very big issue in some cities. One of the major consensus agreements that we arrived at the National Assembly was the creation of an area concerning human rights within the party. In certain parts of the country this is going to be an issue.

QUESTION: What is the deal between the maquiladora industry and growth in the border region?

COLOSIO: It is, of course, a source of job creation. But at the same time, we have observed that the growth of the maquila industry on the border cities has created side-effects on urban services, and that has put some strain on the political side. For example, we recently had elections in one northern state, Tamaulipas. The PRI lost two important border cities there-- Reynosa and Matamoros. I wouldn't say that we lost those elections exclusively because of the lack of public services or people blamed the party. We also had a lack of organization for the election. But the main part of the results can be explained because we had not planned from the moment the maquiladoras were installed. Problems like those are important for us as a political party to consider.

QUESTION: There seems to be an evolving structure for representing special interest groups in Mexico. How are groups that might not be represented by your party participating in the process as it stands right now?

COLOSIO: You mean groups within the party?

QUESTION: I mean groups within the electorate. For example, the American Association of Retired Persons is very willing to handle certain aspects of public policy in the United States. How do you view any complications groups such as these in Mexico might have on the free trade agreement?

COLOSIO: We have already made some attempts to contact some interest groups. For example, the party is paying much more attention right now to the effects that this NAFTA agreement is going to have on the agricultural sector. Last week, the soybean producers in the north of the country asked for an urgent meeting within the party in Mexico City to express their disagreement with the effects of the importation of soybeans from the United States. They disagree because they are not able to allocate their production within the country or outside of the country. So those aspects, real aspects of disagreement, are ones that we are dealing with in the party. We agree with President Salinas that solutions to those specific problems are more possible if we have an agreement than if we don't have an agreement. Because if we have an agreement, we are going to be able to ask for fair trade between the two countries. Right now the United States is exporting soybeans to Mexico, Mexico cannot do the same thing to the United States, and that is affecting an important group-- producers in the northern part of the country.
That is an example of how we are working on a political basis, because those producers in the northern part of the country are very important from a political point of view.

QUESTION: I've always wanted to ask this question. You're a practical politician as the head of the PRI. I'm curious to know what is the relationship between the president of the country, and the president of the party? How much room do you as head of the party have with respect to criticism, with respect to opposition? What are the areas where the PRI can take a more independent view, and what are the areas that you as a party leader are allowed to speak on?

COLOSIO: It is a relationship of respect. I think that right now there is much more room for the development of the political strategy of the party on its own. I think that the relationship between the President and the party, is at the same time, respectful. The presence of the President in our National Assembly caused a very good reaction among our membership. For the first time, a President of Mexico addressed the party as the leader of the party. He assumed the leadership of the party openly. This is a major change in Mexican politics, because although we always say "Yes, he is the leader of the party," to openly assume the leadership is different.

Let me give you an example of the expanding room in our political party life in Mexico. The government decided to declare in bankruptcy one of the main centers of mining in Mexico, Cananea, in my home state of Sonora. Cananea is not only a mining center, it is also a very important historical point in the revolutionary movement. At the beginning of this century, it was the original movement of the whole revolutionary movement in our country. Until a few months ago, the mining center was a state-owned company. It was recently sold. But at that time it was a state-owned company and it was declared in bankruptcy. The party opposed it-- not the decision itself, but the way it was implemented. For the first time in years, the party openly opposed this important presidential decision and we publicly gave our reason to the workers. It was an innovation in our political action. We needed to do so, because mining workers all across the country are in the party. We have to represent those interests, conciliate those interests with the government. So we acted politically with a result that benefited our workers. About two months ago that company reopened, it was sold to a private investor, and the economy of that important city is recovering substantially. If we hadn't acted that way, we would have lost a very important part of our constituency there.

About the Author

The late Luis Donaldo Colosio held numerous key positions within the Mexican Government and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). He was elected Federal Deputy for the state of Sonora in 1985 and served in that capacity until 1988. He was then elected Senator, a position he would hold until 1992. During this period he held numerous key positions within the Ministry of Budget and Planning (SPP). Senator Colosio was then appointed Secretary of Urban Development and Ecology in 1992, and with the name change of the ministry, became Secretary of Social Development until 1993.
Luis Donaldo Colosio was general campaign coordinator for the Salinas's presidential campaign in 1988; president of the PRI between 1988 and 1992; and on the 8th of December of 1993, he was nominated the PRI's presidential candidate for the August 21, 1994 presidential election. Luis Donaldo Colosio was assassinated on March 23, 1994, in Lomas Taurinas in Tijuana Mexico.