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Guest post: The PRI's photogenic comeback kid

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*By Alina Rocha Menocal of the Overseas Development Institute*

What a comeback! Twelve years ago to the month, Mexico celebrated what appeared to be the end of the world's most successful system of single-party rule. The Partido de la Revolución Institucional, the PRI, had ruled Mexico for longer than the Communist party ruled the Soviet Union. The 2000 election was Mexico's own Berlin Wall moment.

But on July 1, Mexicans voted to bring the old guys back in. The party that invented what Mario Vargas Llosa called "the perfect dictatorship" will return to Los Pinos on December 1. The PRI has never looked so good – literally. If the newly elected president Enrique Peña Nieto is anything, he is good looking and telegenetic. His first lady, Angélica Rivera, known as "la Gaviota", is the sweetheart of Mexican soap operas.

Yet this is not so much an election that the PRI won, as one that the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) lost. The results are a withering indictment of the PAN's two terms in office, the first under Vicente Fox and the second under Felipe Calderón.

After ending 71 years of single-party rule, Fox did not need to accomplish much. But his administration was a colossal disappointment, ensnared in the kind of practices reminiscent of the old PRI days. Then, in 2006, Fox presided over a highly flawed electoral process that seemed bent on ensuring that Manuel Andrés López Obrador, the combative former mayor of Mexico City from the left-leaning Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), did not win.

It worked. López Obrador's career never fully recovered. He ran for president again in this month's election but was unable to recreate the kind of support he enjoyed

before. Much more fundamentally, Mexico didn't fully recover, either.

The legacy of the Fox years was a polarised and antagonistic politics, poisoned by recrimination and resentment, and a divided and disillusioned population.

According to a recent Latin American Public Opinion Project poll, since 2004, public satisfaction with democracy in Mexico has dropped from 50.3 to 40.6 per cent.

Fox's successor, Calderón, came to power under a cloud of suspicion and distrust after winning the bitterly contested 2006 election by the narrowest of margins. His search for legitimacy was a leading driver of his war on drugs, which he made the flagship of his administration. But while it seemed to pay off at first, his administration and his party could not recover from the wave of violence and insecurity the war unleashed – and it is not clear how the country can recover, either. More than 50,000 dead later, Mexicans have sent the PAN packing – and ushered in the return of the PRI.

But we are not back to square one. Mexico today is not the same country it was before 2000. The recent mobilization of students and the election results reveal a sophisticated and discerning citizenry that is ready to hold its politicians and their parties to account.

For many voters, this election involved making a choice of the least bad alternative among a pool of uncompelling candidates. Voters punished the PAN for its poor performance. But they stopped short of fully endorsing the PRI, denying it a majority in either chamber of congress. They also rewarded competent government at the local level. In the case of Mexico City, for example, Miguel Mancera from the PRD won by a historic landslide, riding on the coattails of the current PRD mayor, Marcelo Ebrard.

López Obrador, on the other hand, performed much more poorly at the national level because he remains a problematic figure in the eyes of many. Mexican voters are able to distinguish between federal and local candidates independently of their parties.

Peña Nieto portrays himself as the face of the “new” PRI. In fact he comes from the most unreformed currents of his party. During his candidacy, he focused on form over substance and often could not contain his contempt for those he perceived to be critical of him or his party. But while he won the elections by a comfortable margin, his was still a victory by default. Fully 60 per cent of the electorate did not vote for him.

Sometimes a pretty face is not enough even if it has the full force of Televisa behind it. Mexico remains a deeply divided society in need of a compelling narrative of

national unity. The success of Peña Nieto's presidency will hinge on his ability to reach out to the population as a whole, to address emerging social demands, and to open up space for genuine and constructive dialogue that moves beyond old forms of PRI tutelage and co-optation.

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