Arturo Prida Romero – President, IX National Council del Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), Mexico



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03.04.2020

Tags: Mexico, PRD, Healthcare, Coronavirus

Arturo Prida Romero, the president of the current National Council of the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) – one of the main political parties in Mexico – shares the background of PRD's agenda, focusing on education, public security and healthcare as the three pillars of public service; the importance of building citizenship in the country, especially as it pertains to improving the public healthcare system; and his message of unity to the international community.

Arturo, could you please briefly introduce yourself and the PRD to our international audience?

I am Arturo Prida Romero, the president of the current National Council of the PRD, which is the party's top decision-making body from one congress to another. The IX National Council has been in office since 2017. My background is in political science and national security intelligence, and I consider myself a 100 percent political man and a 100 percent committed PRD man, or 'perredista,' as we call PRD members and supporters!

PRD is a left-wing political party founded in 1988. We have always been the champions of greater social justice for Mexicans. Mexico has spent many decades in the last century under a single-party regime and so, since the establishment of PRD, we have been driving a political transition that is as yet unfinished. We have always been active in the national chambers as well as different state and

local government institutions. Two years ago, on the party's 30th anniversary, I remarked to my colleagues that the Mexico of the 1980s and 1990s is completely different to the Mexico of the 2000s and 2010s, and I believe that much of this change has to do with the politics advocated by PRD. Without the PRD, the country would have seen no alternation in ruling parties and no reforms like the sort that we have seen. This may have cost us electorally but we believe it is better to be an opposition party that negotiates with those in power to effect change than to be an opposition party that simply says 'no' at every opportunity. While we have tried to enter negotiations and pacts with ruling parties with the best intentions, the execution of such policies is not up to us – and we have seen poor execution across many policies.

The PRD agenda has always been focused on the three pillars of public services that we believe the state has to guarantee fundamentally as part of the social contract: education, public security and healthcare. Mexico's healthcare system has not changed fundamentally in many years. The last major policy change was the introduction of *Seguro Popular* under the Fox government but even then, the *Seguro Popular* only changed the way the public hospitals were financed for a specific group of Mexicans. The health service and hospital network already existed under the Ministry of Health.

Electorally and organizationally, PRD has always had a much greater presence in the south and the centre of Mexico. We have also historically had some presence in the north, such as the states of Zacatecas and Baja California Sur. But fundamentally, the strength of the PRD lies in the centre and south of the country. Part of this can be attributed to the characteristics and profiles of the populations living in the different parts of the country.

From 1997 to last year, we ruled Mexico City, which helped us to catapult our left-wing program to national attention. Many of our municipal public policies actually served as examples for many of the policies and measures introduced by the current Federal government, such as those relating to pensions and student scholarships.

In terms of healthcare, what are the main concerns of your members and constituents?

Mexico has a very strange and fragmented healthcare system. There are many different healthcare institutions providing coverage and actually, the Ministry of Health oversees the smallest numbers of hospitals compared to IMSS and ISSSTE, which are the two major public insurance systems in Mexico. Different states also provide their own health services. But there were still many people in Mexico that do not belong to any system, and this was the group that *Seguro Popular* targeted.

One of the things that we have to understand as a party and as a society is that it is not easy for the government to manage a healthcare system that is completely free for 130 million people! We have to find a model where everyone participates as much as possible, and this was the underlying logic of *Seguro Popular*, which was founded on a sustainable fiscal model.

At the same time, we also appreciate that the country should undertake the challenge of unifying all the existing social security systems. At the moment there is a great debate surrounding this topic but today the different systems mean that different people receive access to different standards of care and services. If we are able to unify all the systems and truly implement universal health coverage where everyone feel part of the system, that would be the ideal scenario.

For the moment, we see that the establishment of the new healthcare institution INSABI is in reality just a name change. The bigger issue is that *Seguro Popular* was dismantled by the Mexican government before INSABI was properly established. The result is that we see today significant shortages of medicines and the inability of patients to access the necessary services and medicines they need because many patients now exist in the limbo between the old *Seguro Popular* system and the new INSABI one.

In my opinion, the president is not doing scalpel politics, he is doing politics with a machete! We may have problems with corruption but the solution is not to remove the system. We cannot say that to avoid theft and corruption in the procurement of medicine, let us just stop buying medicines! The solution is to improve and fix the system. If you must destroy the system, first you must build the replacement. I believe that this is the main task the state has and we must all come together to push this agenda forward.

How can the Mexican healthcare system be improved?

There are very few magic solutions to any social problems. Such problems do not fix themselves overnight. For instance, the Mexican President has said that he wants to have a health system like the Norwegian one. But to do that, we have to pay taxes like the Norwegians and to do *that*, we have to have the *per capita* income of the Norwegians, right?

It is not a matter of single policies but the entire system. The state needs to increase its revenue, citizens need to contribute more. Mexico is a country with a large informal economy that does not contribute tax revenues.

I believe that one of the great undertakings the PRD has ahead of us is building citizenship in the country. A conscious citizen is someone that pays taxes and demands his rights, that votes consciously and participates in societal decisions, that contributes to the functioning of society in their daily positions and roles. Building this sense of citizenship is important to have a functioning state where everyone feels that they belong and where the state has the capabilities to provide solutions and services to its people. This cannot be achieved with voluntarism or with money. People need to come together as good civic citizens to build up their country.

On that note, do you think that Mexico is prepared for the coronavirus crisis?

What is positive is that we have experts in the government that are prepared. Dr Jose Narro Robles, the previous Minister of Health, was in attendance at a meeting with the PRD deputies. He said that the country's public health system is ready and has the capacity to respond. We have the medical laboratories as well as expert epidemiologists and other doctors. Mexico has experienced different epidemics before, whether the standard flu or H1N1. The Mexican people understand the importance of preventative measures like working from home, using antibacterial gel and hand sanitizer, and staying away from crowds. We also have healthcare and academic institutions of a high level with expert research and knowledge to handle the situation. We have many brilliant doctors in Mexico. In terms of these aspects, we are prepared.

However, the challenge with the coronavirus is that it spreads quickly. Even though the mortality rate is not as high as other infectious diseases, the risk is that a high influx of infected patients could collapse our ailing healthcare system in a couple of days. We saw that in China, they had the capabilities to build new hospitals in a matter of days. They put an entire province under quarantine. I do not know if we have those capabilities here.

The only group I believe to be unprepared is the federal government. I am concerned that the Presidency will not follow the scientific strategy outlined by our experts. That would be a huge problem for the country.

A final message for our international audience?

I would like to say that in Mexico we have another type of the left, not a left that looks and governs similarly to a conservative party. At the PRD, we believe that there is a different way to look at the politics and problems of the world, not just our country.

We are faithful believers in a society built on the values of liberal democracy. We have to understand that liberalism and socialism in a democracy are not enemies. They are two sides of the same coin. We need to combine the classic liberal values like freedom, work, business and so on with the values of the welfare state, including progressive taxes, human rights, environmental rights and so on. This is the only way to give the entire planet a much better future.

We also need to start thinking about the whole world, not just our own country. We all live together on the same planet. Very often, focusing on solving the problems of your own country generates a problem in another country. But we all live together and if something goes wrong in another country, eventually it will affect us. We need to think less about ourselves and more about the good of society globally.

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