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## The hope of Zacatecas

**State's first female leader is seen as 'model of a Mexican politician'**

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JUCHIPILA, Mexico - It was steaming hot in this Zacatecas resort town recently as a group of sweaty men wearing cowboy hats and leather boots argued over how to divide dwindling treasure.

One person in the crowd appeared undisturbed by the heat - and the heated debate. Amalia Garcia Medina, the new governor of Zacatecas state, was like a Zen buoy in a stormy sea of men.

She was surrounded by the state's mayors, whom she had summoned to discuss Zacatecas' shrinking budget, failing farm economy and continued hemorrhaging of able-bodied people to U.S. jobs.

Garcia, 54, is the first woman governor of Zacatecas and only the fourth in Mexico's history. She's considered the politician most likely to resuscitate both her ailing state and her struggling party, the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution, or PRD. "She is the model of what a modern Mexican politician ought to be," said Luis Miguel Rionda, a political-science professor at the College of the Northern Frontier in Tijuana. "She knows how to dialogue with the different factions of her party and with leaders from other parties. Not many in Mexico can do that today."

### **Self-made politician**

Because half the people who consider Zacatecas home now live in Texas, Illinois and California, Garcia also welcomes her role as a binational governor. Even before she took office, she paid routine visits to constituents in Dallas, Los Angeles and Chicago. Migrants sent \$480 million to their families in Zacatecas in 2003.

Unlike other women, such as Maricarmen Ramirez, who is trying to succeed her husband as governor of Tlaxcala state, or first lady Martha Sahagun de Fox, who has caused a firestorm because of her perceived presidential ambitions, Garcia is seen as having gained political altitude on her own wings.

"Amalia has always selected her objectives and has shown that she won't quit until she achieves her goals," said Patricia Mercado, a feminist and probable 2006 presidential candidate.

Mercado described Garcia as emblematic of the increasingly mainstream status of political women in Mexico - a country that just a generation ago had a law that allowed men to bar their wives from working outside the home.

Garcia, a single mother who was elected in July, identifies with feminist politics - she's an advocate of equal pay and reproductive rights. But she insists she'll be a governor for all.

"Here in Zacatecas, it can't be about your gender. It can't be about your party. It must be about who can lead," she said. "It's about what men and women, conservatives and socialists, can do together."

### **"We have to put aside politics"**

Political commentators say she would have a shot at the Mexican presidency in 2012 if she can turn around Zacatecas' fortunes.

"We have to put aside politics and ideology and work in an inclusive manner," she said, sitting straight in her restaurant chair, "or we're in trouble."

Friends describe Garcia as studious, an obsessive reader. She's a historian by training, and analysts say she brings that education into political debates, disarming opponents with a near-wonkish command of Mexican history.

And Mexico's political history is a part of her own pedigree. Her late father, Francisco Garcia, was Zacatecas state governor from 1956 to 1962. Her grandfather was mayor of the city of Zacatecas and a congressman. Her daughter, Claudia Sofia Corichi Garcia, is a front-line PRD staffer with her own political aspirations.

After his tenure in Zacatecas, Francisco Garcia became Mexico's ambassador in Guatemala, Dominican Republic, Philippines and Poland.

The family arrived in Warsaw in 1968, at the height of tensions between student democracy movements and the former Soviet Union. Then, Garcia recalled, came the televised accounts of the Tlateloco massacre in Mexico City. That incident pushed her to petition her parents to return to Mexico, where she dived into campus activism and the Mexican Communist Party.

After joining the PRD in its infancy, she was chosen as an at-large congresswoman and then federal senator. That led to a 1996 run at the party's presidency. She lost to Mexico City's current mayor, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, but tried again in 1999 and became the first woman to lead a Mexican party.

The job proved thankless. She spent much of her time trying to prevent factions from consuming each other in squabbles. The party is now a weak third in Congress, based on seats.

Garcia makes no apologies for her time at the party's helm.

"She's brought fresh air to every job," said Juan Jose Garcia Ochoa, a congressman.

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