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Analysis: Recent Election Shows Loss of Support for PRI in Southeastern States

by Guest

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By John Ross

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Mexico's tropical and oil-rich southeastern region has long been considered the "green reserve" of the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), with states like Veracruz, Tabasco, and Chiapas routinely turning out a 90% vote for the PRI. However, a recent round of local elections has threatened PRI hegemony in two of those states, and the tense inauguration of the ruling party's governor-elect portends anarchy in Chiapas, home base of the rebel Zapatista National Liberation Army (Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional, EZLN). Despite a relatively wide victory by PRI candidate Ernesto Zedillo in the Aug. 21 presidential elections (with just under 50% of the national vote), the center-left Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) demonstrated remarkable strength in the three southeastern states, winning key districts and turning out more than one million voters.

Support grows for PRD

Because of the PRD's strong showing in the southeastern states on Aug. 21, many political observers had anticipated a similarly strong performance for the party in the Nov. 13 municipal elections in Veracruz state and the Nov. 20 gubernatorial race in Tabasco state. However, until recently, the PRD participation in both Veracruz and Tabasco was less than certain, given a push by former PRD presidential candidate Cuauhtemoc Cardenas for the party to refrain from participating in any more races unless the PRI-led government "cleaned up" the Aug. 21 presidential election, which he said was fraudulent.

Withdrawal from the electoral process has long been the ace up its sleeve for the PRD, since such a boycott would seriously discredit the PRI's stated determination to pluralize the party system. In fact, the Cardenas-led proposal to refrain from future electoral participation came up for a vote at a PRD national council meeting in mid-September, but the measure was narrowly defeated, chiefly because of favorable prospects for the party in the Veracruz and Tabasco races. The Veracruz municipal elections were the first to be conducted since Aug. 21, when a record 77% of the electorate turned out. However, less than half that percentage cast ballots in the state elections on Nov. 13.

According to state electoral officials, the PRI retained control of most of the 207 municipalities in Veracruz, but opposition strength continues to swell throughout the state. Veracruz is of strategic importance to the PRI, since the state ranks third in petroleum production. On the other hand, the PRD has gained a stronghold in Veracruz because of the state's dubious reputation for the extreme

level of marginalization of its 700,000 indigenous peoples. In fact, the PRD which captured at least 29 county seats in Veracruz again ran up big numbers in the industrial southern areas of the state. This was particularly the case around the critical petrochemical center of Coatzacoalcos, where allegations of widespread irregularities led to clashes between the PRD and the PRI. As result of the allegations, the PRD has demanded that PRI victories in 22 additional municipalities be annulled.

PAN gains in Veracruz

The greatest surprise in Veracruz, however, was the strong performance of the center-right National Action Party (PAN), which won 19 municipalities and captured three of the state's largest cities, including the port of Veracruz. Because of the party's strong showing, the PAN now governs 2.5 million residents in Veracruz, nearly a third of the state's population.

In Tabasco state, the governor's seat and 17 municipalities were up for grabs Nov. 20. The PRD garnered 38% of the Tabasco vote during the presidential elections on Aug. 21, according to the official tally, four times the total registered by the party in the 1988 gubernatorial campaign. In both the 1988 and 1994 races, the PRD candidate was Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who, like PRD founder Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, is a former PRI official. In fact, Lopez Obrador has been frequently mentioned as the odds-on choice to succeed Cardenas as the PRD's candidate in the next presidential race in the year 2000.

The PRI candidate in the Tabasco election was Roberto Madrazo, son of a former Tabasco governor who once attempted to reform the party and died in a mysterious airplane crash in 1969. Madrazo's campaign, however, was saddled with a more recent scandal: the crumbling empire of disappeared banker Carlos Cabal Peniche, the principal private investor in Tabasco.

Cabal case brings down PRI in Tabasco

In September, the Finance Secretariat (Secretaria de Hacienda y Credito Publico, SHCP) accused several companies owned by Cabal Peniche's Grupo Cabal, including Banca Cremi- Union, of defrauding the government of as much as US\$700 million by obtaining loans from government agencies under false pretenses and using the money to cover personal or company debts. Cabal, whose arrest was ordered by the government, remains a fugitive and is said to be hiding in Monte Carlo. Despite repeated PRI denials, Cabal's ties to Madrazo have been well documented, since the two often appeared at public events together. In fact, Lopez Obrador accused the disgraced tycoon of being the source of Madrazo's multi-million dollar financing.

Furthermore, Madrazo outspent Lopez Obrador by a margin of nearly 200-to-one, and a close Cabal business associate headed the Tabasco State Electoral Council (Consejo Estatal Electoral, CEE), which oversaw the Nov. 20 election. Election day in Tabasco, meanwhile, was marred by reports of stolen ballot boxes, shoot-outs, and malfunctioning computers. The allegations surfaced despite the fact that the election was witnessed by 5,000 observers. After the CEE awarded the PRI's Madrazo 56% of the vote, Lopez Obrador mobilized thousands of supporters to march 1,000 kilometers to Mexico City to protest ruling party fraud. Arriving in the capital's Zocalo square on the eve of President Ernesto Zedillo's Dec. 1 inauguration, the protesters clashed with police during the gala event. When negotiations with the new Zedillo government failed to produce a change in the electoral results, Lopez Obrador led his supporters back to Tabasco, where a civil disobedience

campaign was initiated on Dec. 8. In fact, Lopez Obrador has threatened to impede Madrazo's inauguration, scheduled for Dec. 31.

Concern about the acts of civil disobedience prompted the government to send troops to Tabasco to protect installations of the state-run oil company PEMEX. A drawn-out, post-electoral battle with the PRD in Tabasco over who won the gubernatorial election parallels the escalating conflict in adjacent Chiapas. Political emotions are fast spinning out of control in the once-upon-a-time "green reserve" of Chiapas.

'Illegitimate' election in Chiapas

The Aug. 21 governor's race in Chiapas was characterized by an independent, blue-ribbon electoral tribunal as "illegitimate." Because of this, the inauguration of Eduardo Robledo of the PRI on Dec. 8, which was witnessed by Zedillo, was a source of significant tension, with thousands of Mayan Indian farmers descending on the state capital of Tuxtla Gutierrez to protest the event. Under the edgy gaze of heavily-armed Mexican troops in Tuxtla Gutierrez's central plaza, supporters swore in PRD candidate Amado Avendano as governor of Chiapas, at almost the same time as Robledo's inauguration only ten blocks away. According to results released by state election officials, Robledo received 51% of the vote on Aug. 21, compared with 35% for Avendano. The PRD candidate, a crusading newspaper editor who is supported by the Zapatista rebels, was nearly killed in a suspicious automobile accident one month before the election and was unable to campaign.

The PRI has dismissed the Avendano swearing-in as head of a "Chiapas government in rebellion" as merely "symbolic," but Robledo's ability to govern while a parallel authority exists could become problematic. Since Oct. 12, indigenous and mestizo farmers have declared four regions as "autonomous" in Chiapas, blocking roads, running off PRI mayors, refusing to pay taxes and electric bills, and closing down federal and state offices in their areas. Avendano will symbolically govern those areas of the state. Emulating President Zedillo, who recently appointed a member of the opposition to his cabinet, Robledo selected a founding member of the PRD as his secretary of government. Robledo also resigned from the PRI so he could become "the governor of all the people," and even offered to give up his office if the Zapatista rebels would lay down their arms and negotiate a peace agreement. The EZLN promptly turned down the offer, however.

During the administration of Zedillo's predecessor, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, at least six governors were replaced after PRD and PAN street mobilizations made it impossible for the PRI governor to continue. In four states, PRI governors, elected in fraud-marred elections, took leaves of absence soon after being sworn in. Whether Zedillo will continue this pattern of response will be tested by the stand-off in Chiapas.

A deal with the PAN in Monterrey?

The PRI's failure to reach compromise with the opposition in Chiapas contrasts with the governing party's eagerness to accommodate the PAN in the north. One month after the Aug. 21 election, the PRI agreed to accept a ruling by a regional electoral tribunal that annulled tainted results from hundreds of polling places in Monterrey, the nation's third largest city. The decision awarded the mayor's office of that industrial giant to the PAN candidate, allowing the party to gain political

control of three quarters of Nuevo Leon state. The concession to the PAN was reminiscent of 1989 electoral bartering between the two parties, in which the PAN received the governorship of Baja California state. PAN candidate Ernesto Ruffo Appel thus became the first opposition governor so elected in this century. The deal with the PAN in Baja California was completed on the same day that massive fraud by the PRI deprived the PRD of control of the local congress in Michoacan, Cardenas's home state. As a result of the 1989 negotiation, the PRI and the PAN formed a legislative alliance that effectively isolated the PRD throughout the outgoing administration of Carlos Salinas.

Zedillo's appointment of PAN congressional leader Antonio Lozano as Attorney General, the first member of the opposition to be incorporated into a presidential cabinet in modern Mexican political history, is considered one indication that the alliance between the ruling party and the conservative opposition is very much alive. Lozano's appointment to such a high-profile post, however, did not stop the PAN from accusing the PRI of irregularities in local elections in PAN strongholds in two central states during a Dec 4 election.

In Guanajuato, a state the PAN has governed since 1991, the PRI claimed 55% of the vote and 32 out of 46 municipalities. In Leon, the principal industrial city, marchers from both parties were in the streets, proclaiming victory. The PRI also appeared to be the victor in municipal elections in San Luis Potosi state, where many races were decided by less than 100 votes. Balloting was postponed in the state capital of San Luis Potosi, when most opposition candidates dropped out of the race to protest the ruling party's control of the electoral mechanism.

The PAN will also be a formidable foe for the PRI in the Feb. 12 governor's race in the west-central state of Jalisco, where the party took ten out of 20 seats in the races for the Chamber of Deputies on Aug. 21. The Jalisco gubernatorial election, one of the first to be conducted entirely under Zedillo's stewardship, will also be a test of the new president's much-touted internal party reforms that promised a democratization of the nomination process. On Nov. 6, the PRI held its first "popular consultation" ever in Guadalajara, the Jalisco state capital. The unprecedented event was a sort of primary election in which up to 16 candidates originally competed for the gubernatorial nomination, but only five ultimately made the ballot. The contest was won by a three-to-one margin by Eugenio Ruiz Orozco, the political godson of a former governor and Zedillo's personal choice for the nomination. The process differed little from previous PRI selection practices in which either Mexico's president or a local political strongman known as a cacique designates the candidate. Another indication that the PRI has not much changed its spots: more votes were cast in the "popular consultation" than the number of delegates permitted to cast them.

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