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Guest Author

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Analysis: Electoral Tensions Fuel Mexican Tinderbox

by Guest

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By John Ross

[The author is a freelance journalist who has written on Mexican political and economic affairs for many years]

Elections in Mexico are chronically tense affairs even in the best of times. Now, in the worst of times, the electoral calendar has the potential for igniting the tinderbox of tensions that grip a nation devastated by economic collapse and massive unemployment. The May 28 gubernatorial elections in Guanajuato and Yucatan states were anticipated with justifiable apprehension. Four years ago in Guanajuato, the candidate of the center- right National Action Party (PAN), Vicente Fox, apparently edged out Ramon Aguirre of the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), but was denied victory by the PRI-controlled state electoral commission. Aguirre was a member of the old guard of the PRI, which is commonly known in Mexico as the "dinosaurs."

In response to the Guanajuato results four years ago, the PAN launched marches, blockading highways across the state, and Aguirre was forced to resign on orders from then-president Carlos Salinas de Gortari, just minutes after being awarded victory by the commission. A deal cut by leaders of the two parties blocked Fox's claim to the state house, handing tenancy instead to an interim PAN governor, Carlos Medina Plascencia. Such negotiated settlements of electoral conflicts have come to be known as "contraceptions," or concessions to the opposition in the Mexican political lexicon. Even though Medina's interim status meant he would serve less than the normal six-year term for Mexican governors, the May 28 Guanajuato election represented the first test of the 66-year-old conservative party's ability to win re-election in a state it already governs.

Fox, who once headed Coca Cola operations in Mexico, was again pitted against a PRI "dinosaur," Ignacio Vazquez Torres, but the ruling party's shortcomings in a time of economic crisis severely weakened Vazquez's candidacy. Official results give Fox 59% of the vote, the most lopsided drubbing the PRI has ever received in a gubernatorial balloting. In February, the PAN won the governorship of neighboring Jalisco state with slightly more than 50% of the vote (see SourceMex, 02/15/95). The victory put Fox at the top of the heap for the PAN's presidential nomination in the year 2000. Constitutional prohibitions had barred the Guanajuato businessman from his party's nomination in 1994, since his father was born in Spain. However, changes were made to the constitution in 1994 that would allow Fox to run in the election in the year 2000.

Yucatan was also the scene of a Salinas-era-engineered "contraception" 18 months ago when the mayor's seat in the state capital of Merida was assigned to the PAN after a hotly contested balloting. This arrangement so infuriated then-interim PRI governor Dulce Maria Sauri that she resigned her post a move that ultimately necessitated new gubernatorial elections May 28. As in Guanajuato, the PRI candidate, Salinas's Agrarian Reform Secretary Victor Cervera Pacheco, was chosen from

the old guard of the party. But the PAN's standard-bearer Luis Correa Mena, noted more for his aggressive speeches than for the content of his proposals, proved a far less impressive candidate than Fox. Official results give the PRI a 22,000 vote advantage, but the PAN insists it can prove that Cervera tallied 50,000 illegally-received votes and has challenged results from 21% (327) of the state's polling places. According to the PAN, if this claim had been upheld by the state electoral tribunal, this would be enough to annul the elections. Balloting for the state legislature, which the PAN has apparently won, is even tighter and more contentious. To back up its claims of PRI fraud, the PAN has called for daily demonstrations in Yucatan and throughout the country, apparently with the intention of forcing President Ernesto Zedillo's administration to intervene and clean up the election.

Zedillo, unlike his predecessor, has repeatedly stated that he will not resort to "concessions" to resolve state election conflicts. Post-electoral tensions in Yucatan have grown so heated that they threaten the increasingly strained PAN-PRI "marriage," which flourished during the Salinas years and gave the PAN three governorships, 24 senate seats, and 118 federal deputy posts. At its apogee, the arrangement reduced Mexico's electoral options to a bipartisan arrangement, virtually eliminating the center-left Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) from electoral contention. Now, like many marriages in their seventh year, the "couple" appears to be splitting, said political analyst Ricardo Aleman in the daily newspaper La Jornada.

Nonetheless, Cervera's victory (or perhaps more correctly stated, his ability to dodge defeat) shows that the PRI, with its continuing control of the electoral machinery, and core cadre that are able to turn out a severely-tested but yet-loyal base, can still win elections, even in the midst of generalized economic crisis. One reason the PAN has decided to make its stand in Yucatan is that party chairman Carlos Castillo Peraza, a native of that state, had staked his political future upon winning the governor's slot for Correa Mena, his son-in-law.

As head of the PAN, Castillo has set an ambitious timetable for a PAN presidential victory in 2000 that includes winning half the nation's 31 gubernatorial posts, and control of both houses of the federal congress in 1997 mid-term elections. Recently, Castillo has taken or planned trips to Cuba, Spain, and the US, in what observers say is a move to prepare their respective governments for a PAN president in Mexico. The Yucatan politician apparently would like to be that president, or so he hinted in a pre-election interview with the weekly news magazine Proceso. Castillo's bid is sure to worsen his already difficult relations with Vicente Fox. The Guanajuato governor-elect depicts himself as open to alliances with the PRD against the PRI, a linkage which Castillo has shunned. Fox has reportedly invited the losing PRD Guanajuato gubernatorial candidate to join his cabinet, an invitation pointedly not extended to PRI candidate Vazquez Torres. "Sometimes I think I have more support in the PRD than in my own party," said Fox in a recent interview. A Fox candidacy could prove the bridge to a broad coalition of opposition forces from the left and the right in the next presidential contest, since many observers see such a coalition as the only way to beat the PRI at the numbers game.

Much more electoral turmoil looms just up ahead on the Mexican electoral calendar. August gubernatorial elections in Michoacan the "cradle" of the PRD and birthplace of the party's founder Cuauhtemoc Cardenas will feature a PRI greatly wounded by economic recession, which restricts

its ability to buy votes with public works projects. At the same time, the PRD has become so divided that, of late, warring factions have taken turns locking each other out of party offices. Other races that will prove conflictive are municipal elections in Chihuahua, the nation's largest state, which is currently governed by the PAN and which the PRI badly wants to regain. The October gubernatorial contest brewing in Baja California will also be a dogfight. In that state in 1989, the PAN won the first governorship ever conceded by the PRI to an opposition party. Gov. Ernesto Ruffo Appel's would-be successor is Hector Teran, the PAN's first-ever senator. The PRI is bruised by the continuing outfall of the assassination of its presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio in Tijuana, and deep internal rifts over blame for the killing, but will fight fiercely to resume control of this key border state.

Also on tap in October: Chiapas municipal elections that are already sounding conflictive with that rebellion-torn southern state's "government in transition" refusing, thus far, to participate. Mexico's body politic is equally as troubled by old electoral scars that have yet to heal. In Chiapas, Amado Avendano, "governor in rebellion" and champion of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), continues to defy PRI authorities despite Zedillo's removal of EZLN nemesis Eduardo Robledo as the state's official governor and the substitution of a less controversial PRI member in his stead.

The questionable PRI gubernatorial victory in neighboring Tabasco on Nov 20, 1994, also continues to churn up political waters. On June 3, 1,000 PRD supporters who had walked more than 500 miles from that state's capital to demand the removal of PRI governor Roberto Madrazo were welcomed by a huge throng as they marched into Mexico City's main square, the Zocalo. Led by Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, Cardenas's heir apparent as PRD presidential candidate in 2000, the "Exodus for Democracy" is prepared to encamp indefinitely in the great square. They have also conducted demonstrations in front of Zedillo's presidential residence and the Mexican stock exchange. Despite the political effervescence and Zedillo's often-stated promises of tolerance and plurality, there is fresh evidence that Mexico's authoritarian, sometimes-brutal political system, has not much changed. Even as the citizens of Tabasco stepped into the Zocalo demanding democracy, back in their resource-rich home state, the bodies of two PRD vote promoters were found washed up on the banks of the Usumacinta River. According to sources, the two PRD activists, Amado Astudillo and Amelia Jimenez Chable, had been shot execution-style in the head and both bodies bore signs of torture.

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