

10-25-1995

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PRI Wins Most Chiapas Elections, but Loses Tuxtla Gutierrez to PAN

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 1995-10-25

During elections held on Oct. 15 in Chiapas state, the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) managed to win a majority of the elections for local mayoralties and for the state legislature. The PRI apparently won 89 of the 109 mayoral posts and 21 of the 24 state legislative positions open to direct election. By virtue of the wide margin of victory, the PRI is expected to gain a large share of the additional 16 seats that will be allotted to parties based on the percentage of the vote obtained in the election. The next state legislature will play an important role in key legislation, including the possibility of approving laws on autonomy for indigenous communities, and perhaps the approval of revisions to a new state constitution. However, despite the relatively wide victory throughout the state, many political analysts suggested the election reflected growing discontent with the PRI, since an increasing number of the posts went to candidates from the opposition parties.

In the last state election, held in 1991, the PRI won 18 out of 21 open seats in the state legislature and 118 of the 121 contested mayoral posts. The National Action Party (PAN), meantime, won five mayoral posts, including the race in the capital city of Tuxtla Gutierrez. The Workers Party (PT) managed to win two mayoral posts, while the Cardenista Front for National Reconstruction (PFCRN) obtained one mayoral victory. According to the analysts, the PRI avoided greater losses because of the high rate of abstentionism. Statistics from the state electoral council (Consejo Estatal Electoral, CEE) showed that only 50% of the eligible voters went to the polls this year, a much lower rate than in the past. Many analysts said the low turnout was the combination of disenchantment with the PRI, the continuing presence of federal troops in Chiapas state, and a successful boycott of the elections in areas still under the control of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN).

One of the greatest surprises in the election was the decisive victory by PAN candidate Enoch Araujo in the mayoral election in Tuxtla Gutierrez, which is the state's largest city. Araujo received more than 60% of the vote, compared with about 30% for PRI candidate Antonio Garcia. On the other hand, the low participation in the election appeared to hurt the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), which until now has enjoyed considerable support in Chiapas. According to the Chiapas state electoral council (Comision Estatal Electoral, CEE), the PRD ran candidates in virtually all the municipal and gubernatorial races. However, PRD candidates won only 17 of the mayoral races in head-to-head competition with the PRI.

The PRD is certain to pick up another mayoral post, in the community of Nicolas Ruiz. The sentiment against the PRI was so strong in that community that no candidate registered to represent the ruling party for the mayor's race. PRD officials in Chiapas claim that the majority of the Chiapas citizens who heeded the EZLN's call to boycott the elections were likely PRD supporters. Chiapas state PRD leader Jorge Moscoso said the EZLN boycott especially affected voter turnout in areas where his party would have obtained strong support, including the communities of Ocosingo,

Margaritas, Simojovel, and Sabanilla. In fact, because of "electoral irregularities," the vote in Ocosingo and Nicolas Ruiz was postponed until Nov. 5.

Meantime, national PRD leaders Porfirio Munoz Ledo and Cuauhtemoc Cardenas joined in the criticism of the EZLN boycott. "[EZLN leader] Subcommander Marcos forgets that the PRD headed a great social and political movement that prevented the government from destroying the EZLN," said Munoz Ledo, who is the PRD's national president. For his part, Cardenas, who founded the PRD and ran as its candidate in the 1994 presidential elections, questioned the EZLN's lack of consistency. He pointed out that the Zapatistas continue to demand that the Zedillo administration recognize that PRD candidate Amado Avendano won the gubernatorial elections in August of 1994, but at the same time they backed away from supporting the PRD in the latest elections. In a press conference in the community of La Realidad, prominent EZLN leader Subcommander Marcos decisively rejected the arguments that the Zapatistas had presented a major obstacle to the PRD in the elections.

"We did not favor the electoral process, but we also did not disturb it," said Marcos, who is considered by some as the chief spokesperson for the Zapatistas. "The EZLN did not conduct the uprising in order to bring the PRD to power," Marcos added. "The EZLN rebelled in order to gain democracy, justice, and liberty." Despite his denial that the EZLN had undermined the PRD's chances in the Chiapas elections, Marcos hinted the party has begun to lose credibility among Mexicans. Marcos said the PAN victory in Tuxtla Gutierrez showed that the PAN has become a "viable" force in the national elections, but not the "desired alternative" to meet the needs of Mexico.

Still, many analysts expect the true test for the PRD to come in the Michoacan gubernatorial, municipal, and legislative elections on Nov. 12. The PRD has a strong following in the state, which Cardenas once governed as a member of the PRI. On the other hand, the PRD is entering the state election as a divided party, following a disputed race between Sen. Cristobal Arias Solis and former senator Roberto Robles Garnica to gain the nomination (see SourceMex, 08/16/95). Indeed, some political analysts have suggested that Arias Solis, who beat out Robles for the right to represent the PRD in the gubernatorial race, could face a closer-than-expected contest from Victor Tinoco Rubi of the PRI and Felipe Calderon Hinojosa of the PAN. A strong showing by the PAN in Michoacan would be surprising, since the party has traditionally not enjoyed much support in this state.

Meantime, national PRI president Santiago Onate Laborde admitted that despite the party's overwhelming victory in the Chiapas elections, the party was somewhat disappointed by the results. He said the loss of the mayoral race in Tuxtla Gutierrez and other mayoral and congressional races was the result of a weak PRI organization in Chiapas and internal conflicts within the party. Election observers including 120 members of the federal Chamber of Deputies as well as representatives of governmental and non-governmental organizations from Costa Rica, Chile, and Argentina generally proclaimed the elections as free of outright fraud. However, this view was not shared by members of the opposition parties in the state. The PAN and the PRD challenged the results of mayoral races in 26 cities, charging unfair and sometimes illegal campaign practices by the PRI. Indeed, after the election, the CEE made public a list of complaints about the elections, including coercion of voters in some areas, delays in installation of voting booths, and vote buying. In addition, the CEE said

elections were marred by the constant patrols of the Mexican federal army outside of the areas controlled by the EZLN. In addition, the CEE said a number of voters within the areas controlled by the EZLN especially in Simojovel, Bochil, and Tila were unable to reach voting locations, since roads leading to the communities were blocked.

On the other hand, all the parties participating in the elections said they were pleased by the general absence of violent incidents during the vote. Before the election, a number of civic and religious leaders, including Bishop Samuel Ruiz of San Cristobal de las Casas, had raised concerns about the possibility of violence. Meantime, representatives of the Zedillo administration and the EZLN appeared to be making progress in negotiations held at the end of the month. In this set of negotiations, the government and the EZLN focused on discussions regarding the human, political, and economic rights of native communities in Chiapas. "The balance of what we have achieved so far shows that the problems (of the Indians) are being looked at in depth and that there are serious efforts to find solutions," the Zapatista rebels said in a statement dated Oct. 21.

Still, both sides said significant issues over the extent of autonomy for indigenous communities remain unresolved. On the other hand, the progress made in negotiations could be undermined by the arrest of Fernando Yanez Munoz, whom the government suspects is EZLN leader Commander German. German allegedly was one of the military leaders who led the EZLN uprising in Chiapas in January 1994. Yanez, who was arrested in Mexico City, was charged with possession of illegal weapons, including an AK-47 automatic rifle. His attorneys charge, however, that the government planted the evidence in Yanez's car and fabricated the charges. In an interview with reporters in jail, Yanez denied any connection to the EZLN. He noted that even if he had connections with the EZLN, his arrest constitutes a violation of the "pro-dialogue" law passed by Mexican legislators in March, which suspends all pending arrests against Zapatista leaders for as long as negotiations continue.

On the other hand, Yanez did acknowledge his connection to a group called Forces of National Liberation (Fuerzas de Liberacion Nacional, FLN), which in the early 1980's led a series of small revolts in Chiapas. Yanez said the FLN has been disbanded. Members of opposition parties also criticized the arrest as counterproductive to the peace process in Chiapas. "Just when we are working a peaceful way out, this threatens the whole process in Chiapas," said Rosario Ibarra, a representative of the PRD in the Chamber of Deputies. Meantime, the Interior Secretariat (Secretaria de Gobernacion, SG) downplayed Yanez's detention, saying that the arrest does not violate the temporary amnesty decreed by the legislature in March. According to an SG spokesperson, Yanez was arrested on charges that are not directly related to the conflict in Chiapas. [Sources: Notimex, 10/15/95, 10/16/95; El Diario de Yucatan, 10/16/95, 10/18/95; Reforma, 10/16-18/95; Inter Press Service, Siglo 21 (Guadalajara), 10/18/95; Reuter, 10/17/95, 10/22/95; El Financiero International, 10/23/95; Excelsior, 10/13/95, 10/17/95, 10/18/95, 10/19/95, 10/21/95, 10/24/95; La Jornada, 10/15/95; 10/18/95, 10/19/95, 10/24/95; Agence France-Presse, 10/16/95, 10/17/95, 10/23/95, 10/24/95; New York Times, 10/25/95]

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