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## **Analysis: Dismal Electoral Year for Governing PRI in 1995**

*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 20 Mexican states this year were conducted under the shadow of devastating economic recession for which the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) paid a heavy political price. The final round of the electoral year, held on Nov. 12, featured elections in six states and Mexico City, with the right-of-center National Action Party (PAN) again registering significant advances around the nation at the expense of the PRI. Yet, despite the self-serving hoopla of the three major political parties the PAN, the PRI, and the left-of-center Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) the clear victor on Nov. 12 (as has been the case throughout 1995) was absenteeism. The featured race on Nov. 12 was in Michoacan state, where the PRI and the PRD had long predicted a heated battle for the governor's seat.

In 1988, the PRD's predecessor, led by native-son Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, swept all 13 congressional districts, both senate seats, and the presidential vote. That victory was unprecedented for an opposition party. However, in six Michoacan elections since, Cardenas's PRD has been soundly thrashed by a well-oiled PRI machine that has utilized co-optation, coercion, electoral fraud, and deep pockets to vanquish its arch-rival. The PRD's honor and perhaps its future were at stake in the Michoacan gubernatorial race. Indeed, the PRD which is commonly known as the "Party of the Aztec Sun" had taken only 9% of the cumulative popular vote cast in 13 state elections during 1995. But the political dynamic in Michoacan in 1995 has changed since the ardent head-to-head confrontations between the PRI and PRD that seemed to flare up every year during the presidency of Carlos Salinas (1988-94).

For one, the PRI is no longer adamantly opposed to conceding the state to a PRD candidate like Cristobal Arias, a leader of the "dialogue- minded" wing of his party who has met with President Ernesto Zedillo on several occasions. Indeed, a PRD victory in Michoacan would have bolstered Zedillo's credentials as a force for democracy in Mexico's moribund, quasi-one party political system.

Another new wrinkle in the Michoacan governor's race was the emergence of an attractive PAN alternative, Felipe Calderon, a fast-rising party official with close ties to party leader Carlos Castillo Peraza. The end result of these shifting partisan winds was the first truly three-way electoral contest in modern Mexican political history. Although considered an upstart in Michoacan electoral wars, the PAN actually has deep roots in the state, having won its first federal deputy's seat here in the 1940s. Indeed, the PAN has frequently won local elections in politically conservative Zamora,

which is the fourth largest city in Michoacan. On the other hand, the PAN's sudden emergence as a statewide force in the 1995 elections is less the result of its own strengths and more the failings of its opponents.

Many Michoacan citizens admitted voting against the PRI in retaliation for crippling economic collapse and the popular perception is that a deeply-divided PRD is incapable of governing the state. Moreover, lopsided PAN victories this year in neighboring Jalisco and Guanajuato states, have boosted the PAN's allure as a winner. "People here are opposed to the PRI and they see the power going to the PAN," said former PRI official Arminda Flores. "Besides, they have had bad experiences with the PRD candidates." Flores said she and many of her neighbors did not vote in the Nov. 12 elections. Such sentiments helped the PAN win nearly 26% of the popular vote. Notwithstanding the strong showing on Nov. 12, the PAN remains the state's third-ranking political force behind the PRI and the PRD. Weighing in with a 32% share and victory assured in about half of Michoacan's 113 municipalities, the PRD made it clear to critics that the left-center party still has a political future. But the failure to win the governorship was a bitter pill to swallow for Cristobal Arias, a two-time federal senator and the former head of the PRI in Michoacan.

The 1995 campaign represented Arias's second shot at the governor's seat. In 1991, after Arias claimed fraud had cheated him out of victory, his supporters encamped in front of the government palace in the state capital of Morelia for a month, preventing the PRI governor-elect from entering the building. The governor-elect was swiftly replaced by Salinas and an interim governor, also a member of the PRI, was picked to run the state. Arias was a more vulnerable candidate in 1995. His selection was the product of a split in the Michoacan PRD that found a voice during a bitterly-fought primary (the first party primary ever held in Mexico) in which Arias dueled with former PRD federal senator Roberto Robles Garnica, who was handpicked by Cardenas. Indeed, the selection of Arias provoked new divisions and even defections in PRD ranks, since a faction of the party had strongly supported Robles Garnica (see SourceMex, 08/16/95).

Even with the assistance of Cardenas an ex-Michoacan governor who campaigned with Arias throughout the state, the PRD still failed to capture the state house. Nevertheless, Arias blamed his loss on the large turnout by PAN sympathizers, rather than on PRD internal strife, charging that Calderon entered the race to prevent the PRD from winning its first-ever governorship, a triumph that would have transformed what has become a bipartisan national political dialogue between the PAN and the PRI into a tripartisan one. Indeed, there was some evidence that the PAN manipulated the PRD split in some communities to gain a large share of the vote. For example, in places such as Tiquicheo where the PRD has enjoyed hegemony for the past six years the PAN, abetted by dissident PRD members, was declared the victor.

Meantime, Victor Manuel Tinoco Rubi, a candidate selected by the PRI national leadership, appears to have won the Michoacan governorship through the party's time-honored formula of patronage and violence. Indeed, both the PRD and the PAN released a list of examples in which they accused the PRI of coopting the vote. For example, the PRD accused the PRI's interim governor, Ausencio Chavez, of withholding agricultural subsidy checks to farmers until the eve of the election in order to improve Tinoco's chances. For its part, the PAN issued a list of what it considered 58 politically-motivated public works projects launched by Chavez throughout the state in the month before the

election. Spending limits for the parties were set at 28 million nuevo pesos (US\$4 million), a sum only the PRI could afford to spend.

On election day, PRD election-watchers documented PRI officials delivering baskets of chocolate candy to residents of poor neighborhoods near Morelia. PRD candidates in Turicato and Tiquicheo were murdered prior to the Nov. 12 elections. Although final tallies were slow in coming in, Tinoco appears to have won just 38% of the popular vote the lowest ever for a PRI gubernatorial candidate. Tinoco's small margin of victory was due in part to the heated three-way race and the high percentage of abstentionism, which reached 42% statewide. Still, the 38% vote received by Tinoco was a smaller share of the total vote than the percentages received by defeated PRI candidates in gubernatorial races in Guanajuato, Jalisco, and Baja California states this year.

Other local elections around Mexico on Nov. 12 also featured high absenteeism, often accompanied by a PAN victory. The PAN scored victories in the mayoral races in major metropolitan areas throughout Mexico, including Puebla, Oaxaca, Tampico, Matamoros, Culiacan, and Mazatlan. As a result of this year's elections, the PAN now governs 30% of the Mexican population, including 11 state capitals. However, the latest PAN victories, along with the recent victory in Tuxtla Gutierrez, Chiapas state, on Oct. 15, have been accompanied by voter abstention rates of 50% or more. In the Tuxtla Gutierrez race, more than 80% of the registered voters stayed away from the polls, giving PAN candidate Enoch Araujo a decisive victory (see SourceMex, 11/25/95). Nonetheless, the spread of PAN victories throughout the country, enhances the party's chances to win control of the federal congress in 1997 mid-term elections, a step which party leader Castillo Peraza says is necessary for the PAN to gain the presidency in the federal elections in the year 2000.

In Mexico City, the specter of absenteeism reached historical proportions on Nov. 12 when 1,100 candidates competed for "citizen councilor" slots on advisory boards set up by the capital's 16 delegations or boroughs, in preparation for the direct election of a mayor in 1997. According to political writer Ricardo Aleman, the PRI sensing defeat by the PAN in the electoral process pushed through a law requiring all candidacies to be non-partisan. Nonetheless, the parties were deeply immersed in the electioneering, positing "unaffiliated" proxy candidates, with the PRI's moneybags showing the way. Despite the strong controversy surrounding the Mexico City election, absenteeism ranged between 81 and 85%. Of 5.4 million voters, fewer than 900,000 citizens cast ballots on Nov. 12. Using words such as "catastrophe," newspapers in the capital described the low turnout as politically disastrous for Mexico City mayor Oscar Espinosa.

According to political analysts, Espinosa was counting on a large voter turnout, which he saw as an endorsement of his hard-nosed style of governing. "No one believes in elections, no one believes the parties, no one believes the government, this is a bad sign," said Cuauhtemoc Abarca, an independent candidate, who for years has represented the rights of victims of the devastating earthquake in Mexico City in 1985. Abarca lost by a single vote to a PRI-sponsored rival.

Not all resistance to the Mexico City election was passive. In the dirt-poor Ixtapalapa delegation, members of the Francisco Villa Popular Front, which opposes electoral participation, violently shut down polling places. Since the record turn-out of 77% in August 1994, which gave the PRI's Ernesto Zedillo a landslide presidential victory, opposition to electoral participation has grown

more outspoken around the country. For example, in the Chiapas elections on Oct. 15, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) called on its supporters to boycott local elections, handing the PRI 100% of the vote in some communities.

"The system of parties has taken on a lot of water in recent months," said political analyst Luis Hernandez Navarro in a column in La Jornada. Hernandez contrasts the successes of the nonpartisan "Civil Society," with depleted trust in the political parties. He cited such successful thrusts as the campaign against government and banking credit policies by the nonpartisan debtors union El Barzon and the EZLN's plebiscite, which attracted 1.3 million participants. Another example, he said was the growing autonomy movement among indigenous communities throughout Mexico.

In a column published in La Jornada, PRD federal deputy Marco Rascon said the electoral path has lost relevance because the majority of the citizens in Mexico do not believe that the mere act of voting can bring about the social and economic changes needed in Mexico. "People do not believe that voting for a mayor can halt the economic disasters that have befallen Mexico this year," he said. Rascon, who outraged his colleagues in Congress by wearing a mask of US President Bill Clinton on the floor of the Chamber of Deputies, believes that Mexico's economic policies are now crafted in Washington. Therefore, Rascon has suggested that the US presidential race between Republicans and Democrats in November 1996 will be the most significant election facing Mexicans in the near future.

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