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Governing PRI Loses Several Races to Opposition Parties in Local Elections

by LADB Staff

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In elections held in early November, the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) lost a number of key municipal and state legislative races in three states to the two major opposition parties. According to political analysts, the PRI's lackluster performance in Coahuila, Hidalgo, and Mexico states could be interpreted as a sign of voter dissatisfaction with the governing party, which could spill over to the mid-term congressional elections in July 1997. In addition to the strong support for the opposition National Action Party (PAN) and the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), dissatisfaction with the PRI-dominated political system was also manifested in the relatively light voter turnout in the three states. According to some estimates, voter participation in all three elections was below 50%.

Preliminary estimates published by state and federal electoral authorities show that only 3 million of the 8 million registered voters in the three states actually participated in the elections. In percentages, the PRI suffered its worst defeat in Coahuila state, where the governing party lost eight of the 20 seats in the state legislature to the PAN. Another 12 seats in Coahuila will be distributed among the parties that participated in the election according to the percentage of vote received. Six of these seats will go to the PRI, two to the PAN, two the PRD and two to the Labor Party (PT).

With only one-half of the seats in the legislature, analysts say the PRI will have to compromise with the three opposition parties. In addition, the PAN defeated the PRI in nine mayoral races in Coahuila, including the state's three largest cities: Saltillo, Monclova, and Toluca. The PRD won its only victory in the mayoral race in Ocampo. In the last elections in 1993, the PRI won 35 of the 38 mayoral contests in Coahuila. PRI representatives in Coahuila were quick to point out that the party retained 28 mayoral seats in the state. However, political observers said Coahuila's most populous cities were won by the PAN, meaning that the opposition party will govern about 76% of the state's electorate. Notwithstanding the PRI's losses in Coahuila, the party's performance in Mexico state was considered even more significant.

Many political analysts consider this state a possible barometer for the 1997 congressional elections, since the state is home of 51% of Mexico's total population. The PRI retained a strong grip on the Mexico state legislature, winning 30 of the 45 seats up for direct election. Of the remaining 15 seats, 10 were won by PAN candidates and five by representatives of the PRD. The most significant gains for the opposition parties were in the state's mayoral elections. While the PRI won 74 of the state's 122 mayoral spots, this represented a net loss of 34 seats. In the 1993 elections, the PRI scored victories in 108 mayoral contests. The PRI was able to retain the mayoral posts in the capital of Toluca and the state's largest city of Ecatepec, as well as in several of the communities in mostly rural southern areas of Mexico state. On the other hand, the PRI lost races to the PAN and the PRD in many of the large communities located near Mexico City. Leaders for both the opposition parties claimed their strong showing in these races could translate into significant support in the

first-ever election for mayor of Mexico City in July 1997. The PRD's victories included Texcoco and Ciudad Netzahualcoyotl, whose population has swollen to 1.2 million residents because of massive migration from rural areas. "The victory in Netzahualcoyotl leaves us in good shape to win the election in Mexico City in 1997," said PRD president Andres Lopez Obrador in a press conference.

The PAN also won several key races near Mexico City, including the cities of Tlalnepantla, Atizapan de Zaragoza, Cuautitlan, and Naucalpan. The victory in Naucalpan is significant, since this community accounts for 2% of Mexico's total GDP. "Our victories in Naucalpan and Tlalnepantla are the jewel in the crown," said Eduardo Mendoza Ayala, the PAN's chief strategist in Mexico state. "These are our country's most important communities from an economic standpoint." According to Mendoza and other party officials, the PAN will now govern about 35% of the population in Mexico state, compared with only 2.3% before the election. The elections in Hidalgo state were also considered somewhat of a setback for the PRI, even though the party still holds a majority in the state legislature and most of the mayoral seats. As a result of the elections, the party no longer has total control over the state, as was the case after the 1993 elections.

The PRI was able to retain control of the mayoral post in Pachuca, the state's largest city, but lost 11 mayoral elections to opposition parties, primarily the PRD. The PRD victories included Tula, the state's largest city. According to state PRD officials, the party received 22% of the vote in Hidalgo this year, compared with only 10% in the 1993 elections. In addition to the PRD and PAN victories in the three states, the Green Party (PVEM) won one mayoral election in Mexico state, while the PT was victor in a similar race in Hidalgo. In an attempt to put a positive spin on the elections, PRI president Santiago Onate Laborde pointed out that the governing party still attracted one-half of the 3 million votes cast in the three states on election day. "The PRI reaffirmed itself as the majority party," said Onate, who noted that the party won 70% of all the mayoral elections in the three states.

Onate also said the results actually reflect somewhat of a "recovery" for the PRI, since in 1995 the party lost several key state and municipal races to the opposition parties, namely the PAN. "The fundamentally interesting thing here is that the PRI is ending this year with numbers that show a clear improvement compared to what we got in 1995," the PRI president said. "There is a recovery in the overall figures." Onate also disputed statements by political analysts that the reduced support for the PRI relative to 1993 was a sign of dissatisfaction with the policies of President Ernesto Zedillo and his predecessor Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Instead, the PRI credited the increasingly strong competitive position of the PAN and the PRD. "These results demonstrate that Mexico is developing a pluralistic political life," Onate said. "We are witnessing how electoral preferences are distributed among three political forces, with the PRI leading the pack, but closely followed by the PAN and the PRD."

The leaders of all three major political parties agreed that Hidalgo, Coahuila, and Mexico state elections were relatively clean, although there were still some charges that local PRI leaders were resorting to old fraud habits, such as offering money for votes and transporting some voters to different polling places to cast multiple ballots. A few days before the election, Interior Secretary Emilio Chuayffet told reporters that the ruling party had a strong interest in ensuring that the elections were free of major fraud, since this would help the PRI convince opposition parties of its sincerity in pursuing electoral reforms. The talks on electoral reforms have snagged on

disagreements regarding the PRI's proposals to allocate 2 billion pesos (US\$253 million) to the eligible political parties to use in the mid-term congressional race in August 1997 (see SourceMex, 11/06/96). The PAN, PRD, and PT would like to see the amount reduced in half, but the PRI has refused to compromise.

According to political analysts, the PRI does not want to lower spending limits because the party could lose some of its existing advantage in local and state elections. In fact, PRI leaders have bluntly admitted that a lesser amount of money could put in peril its "viability" as the leading political force in the nation. The issue was originally under negotiation by the leaders of the four major parties and the Interior Secretary Chuayffet. However, when the parties failed to reach a consensus by a deadline of Nov. 6, the issue reverted to the Chamber of Deputies, where the PRI holds a majority. The legislature has yet to vote on the electoral reforms. However, PAN, PRD and PT legislators are so opposed to the PRI proposal that they have threatened to vote against the entire package of electoral reforms, even though they agree with other legislative initiatives contained therein. In an article published in early November, the daily business newspaper *El Economista* questioned the PRI's ethics in suggesting that 2 billion pesos be spent for political campaigns in 1997.

The newspaper said the amount sought by the PRI for the campaign is also higher than the 1.5 billion pesos (US\$189 million) announced by President Zedillo for anti-poverty programs in early November. Under the program, the administration will provide direct food subsidies equivalent to 10 pesos (US\$1.26) per day to 400,000 families living in dire poverty next year. Furthermore, *El Economista* pointed out that the amount requested for election campaigns next year would be 600% higher than in the last national election. In contrast, the newspaper said, the economic growth pact (*Alizana para el Crecimiento Economico, ACE*) announced in October, sets the increase in the minimum wage at only 17% next year. Finally, *El Economista* said the PRI's proposed public funding for the campaign is proportionally higher than the US\$142 million the US government awarded to the candidates of the Democratic, Republican, and Reform parties during the recent presidential election in November 1996.

Meantime, the newly installed federal electoral institute (Instituto Federal Electoral, IFE) announced a decision to eliminate campaign financing from its budget. IFE president Jose Woldenberg said the institute's budget will only request operating expenses, meaning that campaign financing would have to be channeled through other means. "As long as there is no clearly defined mandate, the IFE must stay out of the debate," said Woldenberg. "The institution must avoid giving any wrong signal or interpretation." [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Nov. 13, reported at 7.90 pesos per US\$1.00.] (Sources: Agence France- Presse, 11/07/96, 11/10/96, 11/11/96; Notimex, Reuter, Associated Press, 11/11/96; Excelsior, 11/07/96, 11/12/96; *El Economista*, 11/08/96, 11/11/96, 11/12/96; *The News*, 11/11/96, 11/12/96; *New York Times*, 11/12/96; *Novedades*, 11/07/96, 11/11/96, 11/13/96; *El Universal*, 11/07/96, 11/08/96, 11/11-13/96; *La Jornada*, 11/07/96, 11/11-13/96)

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