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Carlos Navarro

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Governing Party Suffers Another Crushing Defeat In Mayoral & State Legislative Elections In Morelos State

by *Carlos Navarro*

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On March 16, the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) suffered another setback in state elections, losing control of the Morelos state legislature and several key mayoral posts. In the current elections, all 30 seats in the state legislature were in dispute, as were all 33 mayoral posts around Morelos. Until now, the PRI held an absolute majority in the state legislature, as well as 32 of the 33 mayoralties. In the legislative elections, 18 of the 30 seats were contested through direct elections around the state. The remaining 12 seats were to be distributed among the other parties participating in the elections based on the percentage of total votes won by each party at the state level. In addition to the PRI, five other parties participated in the elections: the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), the National Action Party (PAN), the Labor Party (PT), the Popular Socialist Party (PPS), and the local Morelos State Civic Party (PCM). PRD registers major gains According to preliminary results released by the Morelos state electoral commission (CEE), the PRI managed to win only seven of the 18 legislative seats that were up for direct election, meaning that it lost more than 50% of the seats it had controlled before the election. Of the other 11 seats that were contested by direct vote, eight went to the PRD and three to the PAN. It remains to be seen how the remaining 12 seats in the state legislature will be distributed, since the CEE must still tabulate the total number of votes won by each party at the state level. In the meantime, however, the center-left PRD is already considered the big winner, given its strong performance in the elections. In addition to the eight legislative seats, the PRD also won 12 of the 33 mayoral contests in the state, including the mayoralties of Jiutepec and Cuautla, the state's second- and third-largest cities. "This is a landslide for the opposition and especially for the PRD," said Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, who represents Morelos as an independent in the federal Chamber of Deputies. From a symbolic standpoint, one of the PRD's most important victories was in the mayoral election in Tepoztlan, where the former PRI mayor provoked violent protests in 1995 by supporting a controversial development scheme that included a golf club and industrial park. The protestors forced the PRI mayor to resign, and the city has been governed by an independent committee (Comite de la Unidad Tepozteca, CUT) since September 1995. Meanwhile, the center-right PAN, which previously had no representation in the city governments, also made small gains. PAN candidates won three mayoral elections, including the state's largest and most populous city of Cuernavaca. The Morelos-based PCM won the mayoral election in the town of Zacualpan. Some observers said the victory of PAN candidate Sergio Estrada Cajiga in Cuernavaca was especially significant, since the PRI put considerable effort toward winning this particular election. The PRI was represented in the Cuernavaca election by Ana Laura Ortega, the daughter of popular former governor Lauro Ortega. "The PRI made an extraordinary effort to win Cuernavaca, but they still failed miserably," said Adolfo Aguilar Zinser. The victory in Cuernavaca helped the PAN continue its trend of winning mayoral elections in state capitals around the country. PAN mayors currently govern the state capitals of Jalisco, Nuevo Leon, Puebla, Yucatan, Baja California, Chiapas, Oaxaca, Aguascalientes, and Coahuila. As was the case in the recent election in Mexico state in November, most of the PRI's victories were in the smaller rural communities with very small populations. This means that 70% of the Morelos population will

be governed by a mayor from an opposition party. The PRI managed one small victory, retaking the mayor's post in the town of Huitzilac. Until the March 16 vote, Huitzilac was the only mayoral post under control of the PRD. Despite concerns about violence, the CEE said the election was relatively calm. A delay in the final vote count, however, briefly generated fear among members of the opposition parties, who feared the PRI might attempt to commit fraud in some elections. But CEE president Teodoro Lavin Leon explained that the delays were the result of "errors" and illegible information turned in from some of the polling places. He promised that the results would be available as scheduled. Still, PAN and PRD party leaders said they had formed an alliance to review the final results and defend their victories. Some PRI members blame election loss on Gov. Jorge Carrillo. Some political observers suggest the governing party's setbacks in the state may be related to reports of corruption on the part of PRI officials, including allegations that PRI Gov. Jorge Carrillo Olea has been involved in drug trafficking. Some factions of the PRI have blamed Carrillo Olea for not doing enough as the top PRI member in the state to prevent the losses in Morelos. In fact, the PRD mayoral candidates in Cuernavaca, Cuautla, and Jinatepec are former PRI members who left the party because of dissatisfaction with the Carrillo administration. In another sign of discontent with the PRI-led government in Morelos, more than 50% of the state's 867,000 registered voters decided to stay home on election day. Among others, four PRI members of the Chamber of Deputies whose districts are in Morelos admitted in an interview with *El Universal* that they had not participated in the state election. Deputies Florentino Castro, Ismael Orozco, Rodolfo Gonzalez, and Jose Ramirez Gamero said they decided not to vote because of dissatisfaction with the candidates chosen by their party for the legislature and the mayoral elections. PRI members in other parts of the country also raised similar concerns about the methods used to select candidates to represent the PRI. In a passionate speech to party members following the Morelos election, PRI officer Elba Esther Gordillo warned the party to either abandon its practice of selecting candidates through patronage or face the prospect of continuing defeats in upcoming elections. Some analysts and political observers suggest the results of the Morelos election could foreshadow the PRI's fortunes in the federal and state elections on July 6. In the upcoming elections, voters in Mexico will choose all 500 members of the Chamber of Deputies as well as 32 of the country's 128 senators. Several crucial gubernatorial and state legislative elections are also scheduled for that date, including the first-ever race for mayor of Mexico City. "These results are broadly representative of what we're going to wind up seeing in July, at least in this region," said political scientist Federico Estevez of the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM), who was interviewed by the *Los Angeles Times*. "It seems the well has run dry for the PRI among the electorate here." Attempting to put a positive spin on the elections, PRI president Humberto Roque Villanueva said the PRI managed to remain a strong force in the Morelos state legislature with a victory in at least seven districts. Roque said the Morelos election "in no way" represented a precedent or a tendency ahead of the July 6 election. "Each local, state, or federal election will have its own determining factors," said Roque. Observers say Morelos trends could be repeated in Mexico City. Still, the proximity of Morelos to Mexico City could have a bearing on the elections in the Mexican capital. Morelos is the second state adjacent to Mexico City where the PRI has recently lost total control of the state legislature and several crucial mayoral posts. In an election held in November 1996, the PRD and the PAN won one-third of the seats in the Mexico state legislature and several key mayoral posts (see *SourceMex*, 11/13/96). The trends in Morelos and Mexico state caused concern among members of the governing party in Mexico City, including PRI mayoral candidate Alfredo Del Mazo. Describing the Morelos results as a "red flag," Del Mazo pledged to "work hard" to win the support of voters of the Mexican capital. The PRD's victories in Morelos, on the other hand, come as welcome news to the party's

candidate for mayor of Mexico City, Cuauhtemoc Cardenas. The latest public opinion polls show that Cardenas has taken a clear lead over Del Mazo and PAN candidate Carlos Castillo Peraza. One poll, conducted by Gabinete de Estudios de Opinion (GEO) March 7-8, showed 23.3% support for Cardenas, followed by only 14.8% for Del Mazo, and 12.5% for Castillo. (Sources: Proceso, 03/09/97; Notimex, 03/16/97; Excelsior, 03/14/97, 03/17/97; Reuter, 03/16/97, 03/17/97; Agence France-Press, El Economista, Spanish news service EFE, 03/17/97; El Nacional, 03/12/97, 03/17/97, 03/18/97; La Jornada, 03/17/97, 03/18/97; The News, Los Angeles Times, 03/18/97; El Universal, Novedades, 03/17-19/97)

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