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PRI Suffers Major Defeat in Veracruz Municipal Races, Wins Big in Tabasco

by LADB Staff

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In elections on Oct. 19, the two major opposition parties turned in a strong performance in municipal elections in Veracruz state, but were unable to make significant gains against the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in local and state legislative races in Tabasco state. Electoral authorities in both states reported close to 50% abstention. According to spokespersons for the Instituto Electoral de Tabasco (IET), poor weather may have discouraged some citizens in that state from casting their votes.

Opposition parties win 11 of 12 largest cities in Veracruz

In Veracruz, the state electoral commission (Comision Estatal Electoral, CEE) reported that the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) won mayoral elections in 11 of the 12 most important cities in the state. The CEE said PRD candidates won races in the state capital of Jalapa and the industrial cities of Coatzacoalcos and Minatitlan. Voters in Cosoleacaque, the site of one of the petrochemical complexes designated for privatization, also elected a PRD mayor.

Meanwhile, the PAN scored a victory in Veracruz city, which is the state's largest city. PAN candidates also won in the key cities of Cordoba and Orizaba. The only major seat won by the PRI was in the city of Poza Rica, although the governing party managed to win elections in many of the small communities throughout the state. In contrast to Veracruz, the PRI won an overwhelming number of the mayoral and state legislative posts in Tabasco state. According to the Instituto Electoral de Tabasco (IET), PRI candidates took close to 60% of the vote, winning all of the mayoral and the state legislative elections.

The PRI's strong performance in Tabasco represents a moral victory for the governing party, which was expecting a major challenge from the PRD. In fact, PRI leaders were promoting this year's election as a "popular judgement" on PRD leader Andres Lopez Obrador, who was the party's candidate for governor in the 1994 elections. The PRD received 40% of the statewide vote in Tabasco, but failed to win any of the 17 municipal races or any of the 18 state legislative seats. "We don't recognize the Tabasco results, because the electoral process was clearly not clean," Lopez Obrador and other PRD congressional leaders said in a press conference the day after the election.

Lopez Obrador raised the possibility of organizing widespread demonstrations around the state and in Mexico City similar to those that followed the 1994 election, when the PRD candidate lost a disputed race to current PRI Gov. Roberto Madrazo Pintado. Charging that Madrazo stole the 1994 election through fraud, Lopez Obrador took the complaint to the Procuraduria General de la Republica. Then attorney general Antonio Lozano Gracia supported some of Lopez Obrador's complaints, but the PRI-dominated Tabasco state legislature failed to take any action.

PRD accuses PRI of widespread vote buying in Tabasco election

According to the PRD and allies from the PAN, Gov. Madrazo engaged in the same fraudulent electoral practices in this year's election as in the race that brought him to office in 1994. Among other things, the opposition parties accused the PRI of using money from federal anti-poverty programs to support the governing party's candidates. "I am concerned that PRI elected officials in Tabasco used federal resources to remain in power rather than to alleviate the widespread poverty in the state," said PAN federal Sen. Francisco Salazar Saenz at a joint press conference with PRD Sens. Hector Sanchez and Felix Salgado.

However, members of the PRI delegation in the Chamber of Deputies held their own press conference to defend the results in Tabasco. "The voters cast their ballots for PRI candidates to reaffirm the strong economic development we have experienced under the current state administration," said PRI Deputy Roberto Albores Guillen of Tabasco. For his part, PRI Deputy Carlos Jimenez Macias accused the PRD of hypocrisy. "It is unfair to criticize the PRI for winning everything in Tabasco Sunday, since the legitimacy of the PRD victories in Mexico City were never questioned after their wins," said Jimenez.

The opposition parties also accused the PRI of massive vote buying in the Veracruz state elections, particularly in the small towns where the governing party's candidates emerged as winners. "PRI officials engaged in a widespread electoral operation designed to buy votes and coerce citizens to cast their ballots for the governing party," said the independent electoral-observer group Alianza Civica Veracruzana. The weekly magazine Proceso said PRI officials in Veracruz diverted funds from a World Bank anti-poverty program for electoral purposes. The report said the actions were taken with the full knowledge and consent of President Ernesto Zedillo. (Sources: Proceso, 10/19/97; Notimex, El Nacional, Associated Press, 10/20/97; La Jornada, 10/17/97, 10/20/97, 10/21/97; El Diario de Yucatan, Dallas Morning News, Houston Chronicle, El Sureste de Tabasco, 10/21/97; Novedades, 10/15/97, 10/20-22/97; The News, 10/17/97, 10/20-22/97; El Universal, Excelsior, 10/20-22/97; El Economista, 10/21/97, 10/22/97)

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