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Governing Party Expands Majority in Yucatan State Legislature

by LADB Staff

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In state elections on May 24, the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) expanded its majority in the Yucatan state legislature with victories in 10 of the 15 districts up for direct vote. The center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) won the other five directly elected seats. Another 10 seats will be allocated based on a party's percentage of the vote. If the results hold, the PRI will receive another five seats, while the PAN will get four seats and the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) one seat.

In the mayoral contests, also held May 24, the PRI won 95 of the 106 municipal governments but was unable to wrest the state capital of Merida away from the PAN. In Merida, PAN candidate Xavier Abreu received 51.2% of the vote, compared with 40.7% for Eric Rubio of the PRI and 4% for Francisco Luna Khan of the PRD.

Opposition parties accuse PRI of buying election

The elections were tainted by low voter participation and charges that the PRI, led by Gov. Victor Cervera Pacheco, bribed voters in contested districts with gifts of sewing machines, bicycles, and other items in exchange for their vote. PAN officials said the PRI gave away 500,000 sewing machines and a similar number of bicycles in the days leading up to the election. The PRD joined the PAN in attacking the PRI for violations of the campaign code.

On the eve of the election, PRD national president Manuel Lopez Obrador accused the PRI of spending 200 million pesos (US\$US\$22.5 million) on the campaign, 20 times more than allowed under state electoral laws. Similarly, the human rights organization Frente Mexicano Pro Derechos Humanos called on federal authorities to conduct a thorough audit of PRI expenditures during the campaign, particularly those incurred by Cervera Pacheco. Statistics released by the Consejo Estatal Electoral (CEE) indicate that only 55% to 60% of the registered voters in the state participated in this year's election, compared with more than 60% in 1994, 1996, and 1997.

The PRI victory leaves the governing party with control of 15 seats in the next legislature, compared with 13 seats in the most recent session. The PAN will only have nine seats, compared with 12 in the previous session. The PRI's ability to increase its control of the state legislature appears to have consolidated Cervera Pacheco's position while the governor fights off possible impeachment procedures by the opposition-led federal Chamber of Deputies. The constitutional-issues subcommittee (Comision de Gobernacion y Puntos Constitucionales) has accused Cervera of violating a constitutional clause that prohibits any chief executive from serving more than six years in office. In 1995, Cervera was appointed to complete the unexpired term of former governor Dulce Maria Sauri. Cervera was later elected to serve a six-year term.

PAN Deputy Santiago Creel, who chairs the subcommittee, said the outcome of the Yucatan state elections will have no bearing on the impeachment proceedings. PRI holds first-ever gubernatorial primaries in three states. The charges of campaign violations against the PRI in Yucatan are a stark contrast to the party's efforts in other parts of the country to reverse its anti-democratic image ahead of key state elections this year and the presidential race in 2000. For the first time, the PRI held electoral primaries on May 25 to select gubernatorial candidates in Tamaulipas, Sinaloa, and Puebla states. In the primaries, the party's candidate was selected by registered voters rather than appointed by state or federal party officials.

Unofficial estimates released by PRI officials indicate that 1.25 million voters participated in selecting PRI gubernatorial candidates Juan Millan in Sinaloa, Melquiades Morales in Puebla, and Tomas Yarrington in Tamaulipas. Millan, a federal senator and a leader of the Confederacion de Trabajadores de Mexico (CTM), beat former Culiacan mayor Lauro Diaz Castro.

The primary was even more hotly disputed in Tamaulipas, where Yarrington defeated federal Deputy Marco Antonio Bernal and two other candidates for the nomination. Even with the open primary, Bernal accused outgoing Tamaulipas Gov. Manuel Cavazos Lerma of using state funds to finance Yarrington's campaign. Yarrington is a member of Cavazos's cabinet. The PAN also selected gubernatorial candidates for the Sinaloa and Puebla races through party conventions held May 25.

In addition to those three states, gubernatorial elections are scheduled this year in Chihuahua, Zacatecas, Durango, Aguascalientes, Veracruz, Tlaxcala, and Oaxaca. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on May 27, reported at 8.87 pesos per US \$1.00] (Sources: El Economista, 05/22/98; Los Angeles Times, 05/24/98; The News, 05/22/98, 05/25/98; Reuter, Novedades, 05/25/96; Excelsior, 05/25/98, 05/26/98; La Jornada, 05/22/98, 05/25/98, 05/26/98; El Diario de Yucatan, 05/26/98, 05/27/98)

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