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PRI Sweeps Elections in Chiapas, Oaxaca Amid Very Low Turnout

by LADB Staff

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In elections on Oct. 4, the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) swept municipal and state legislative races in Chiapas state and mayoral contests in Oaxaca amid extremely sparse voter participation. Preliminary results released by the Consejo Estatal Electoral (CEE) indicated PRI candidates won 18 of the 21 directly elected seats in the Chiapas state legislature, while the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) won two state legislative races. The PRD won only one directly elected post in the state legislature. In municipal races, the PRI won 80 of the 103 contested mayoral posts but was unable to unseat the PAN in the state capital of Tuxtla Gutierrez.

Electoral authorities in Chiapas reported voter participation at 40%, although independent electoral observers said overall turnout could have been as low as 30%. Participation was particularly low in communities such as Soconusco and Sierra Madre, where heavy rainfall and flooding caused extensive property damage and forced many residents to evacuate. The damage was so severe that authorities at one time considered postponing the elections in most of the affected region (see SourceMex, 09/23/98). However, elections were suspended in only three communities. Bishop Samuel Ruiz of the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas said postponing the vote in coastal areas damaged by Tropical Storm Javier affected the outcome of the elections.

Speaking at a forum in Mexico City, Ruiz said these areas have traditionally voted for opposition parties. Participation was also sparse in the communities of Chenalho, San Andres Larrainzar, and Las Abejas, where most residents support the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN). A statement issued the day before the election by the EZLN's Subcomandante Marcos said the Zapatistas would not interfere with the elections. However, many EZLN supporters mistrust the government and decided against casting ballots. Low participation hurt PRD's chances in Chiapas. Some observers said many citizens who did not participate in the elections were probably Zapatista supporters. The high abstention rate hurt the PRD, which is most closely aligned with the EZLN. The PRD won 17 mayoral contests but narrowly lost in the town of Ocosingo, located within the EZLN sphere of influence.

The PRD, the PAN, and the smaller Partido Democratico Chiapaneco have pledged to challenge the results of the Ocosingo election, charging that the PRI won through a combination of vote-buying, threats, tampering with the voter rolls, and reducing the number of polling stations. Only about 24% of the registered voters in Ocosingo cast ballots. Observers from the US-based organization Global Exchange said the presence of the Mexican army, state police, and paramilitary groups in communities that support the EZLN also discouraged voter participation.

In addition, the PRD said the governing party resorted to its age-old practice of buying votes through massive distribution of food and construction materials in the days before the election.

"In the town of Pochutla, the PRI candidate was giving away cartons of beer," said PRD president Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

While participation was low, election observers like the Alianza Civica reported no serious violence. "That's good news, given our history in Chiapas," said Francisco Gallardo, a spokesperson for the Alianza Civica. "There was fear that the elections might complicate the conflict by sharpening political rivalries, but that does not seem to have happened so far," political columnist Jose Antonio Crespo told The Dallas Morning News. "But the state elections did not help either. That's a reflection of the poor electoral conditions that prevail in Chiapas." An observer team sent by the Canadian Parliament also reported few irregularities in the elections. "On election day, we saw no evidence of intimidations or violence," said delegation spokespersons Raymonde Falco and Ghislain Picard. "There appeared to be some minor problems, but they apparently did not affect the results in the areas we visited."

The only controversial incident was the refusal by residents of San Juan Chamula to allow the CEE to install 59 voting stations. The residents, staunch Roman Catholics, blocked the elections after Gov. Roberto Albores Guillen refused to release five men accused of killing two Protestant leaders in 1997. The action by the San Juan Chamula residents, who have traditionally supported the PRI, could hurt the governing party. The inability to set up voting stations in San Juan Chamula could have left the district with too few votes to legally seat the winning PRI candidate.

If the state electoral tribunal (Tribunal Estatal Electoral, TEE) nullifies the results of that race, the legislature would be one seat short of the required 21-seat quorum. That would prevent the new state legislature from taking office in November. Until the matter is settled, state authorities cannot determine the makeup of the remaining 19 seats in the state legislature, which are based on the percentage of votes received by each party. The TEE is expected to rule by the end of October.

PRI loses mayoral races in two major cities in Oaxaca

In the Oaxaca municipal elections, where voter participation was estimated at about 53%, the PRI won 120 of the 152 municipal races. However, the party lost in two key cities, Oaxaca City and Salina Cruz, to the opposition parties. The PAN, which governs many major cities in Mexico, retained the mayoral post in the state capital of Oaxaca City. PAN candidate Alberto Rodriguez Gonzalez, host of a popular call-in show, handily defeated PRI candidate Alfonso Gomez Sandoval. PRD officials were pleased with the party's victories in the strategic port city of Salina Cruz and in nearby Juchitan. These victories give the PRD control over the most important cities in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

PRD mayors also govern the cities of Minatitlan and Coatzacoalcos in Veracruz state. As in Chiapas, PRD officials accused the PRI of winning the elections by bribing and intimidating voters. The PRD had expected to be competitive with the PRI in at least half the 152 mayoral races in Oaxaca. Overall, the PRD won 28 mayoral races in Oaxaca but lost to the PRI in 18 communities that had been governed by the PRD. (Sources: Reuters, The New York Times, El Universal, Notimex, 10/05/98; El Economista, 10/01/98, 10/06/98; Spanish news service EFE, 10/04-06/98; La Jornada, 10/05/98, 10/06/98; The Washington Post, The Dallas Morning News, Associated Press, Los Angeles Times, The News, Novedades, 10/06/98; El Diario de Yucatan, Excelsior, 10/06/98, 10/07/98)

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