PAN Starts Electoral Year in Strong Position by Winning Elections in Yucatan

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by LADB Staff

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In the first of 14 electoral tests of the year for the major political parties, the governing center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) swept the elections in Yucatan state at the expense of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). The PAN won mayoral elections in the state capital of Merida and many other municipalities and also retained tight control of the state legislature. There was no governor's race this year, with the next gubernatorial election in the state scheduled for 2007.

Preliminary results released by the Instituto Estatal Electoral de Yucatan (IEEY) showed PAN candidate Jose Manuel Fuentes Alcocer, a protege of Gov. Patricio Patron Laviada, with slightly more than 50% of the vote in the Merida election, compared with about 43% for former governor Victor Cervera Pacheco of the PRI. Jose Toraya Baqueiro, who represented the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), obtained just over 3.2% of the vote in Merida. The PAN also won twice as many municipalities as it did in the most recent election in 2001, including the large urban areas of Progreso, Tizmin, and San Felipe.

Surprisingly, the PRD ousted the PRI from the mayor's seat in Valladolid, the state's third-largest city. The PRI won several dozen mayoral elections in smaller municipalities in the interior of Yucatan. The PAN also dominated the state legislative elections, winning 10 of the 15 directly elected seats. The center-right party was also allocated four at-large seats based on the total percentage of the vote it received.

The PRI won five electoral districts and was in line to receive another four or five at-large seats, depending on the final count. The PRD did not win any districts, but expected to be allocated one or two at-large seats in the legislature. The PAN's dominance was not surprising because the party has traditionally run strong in Yucatan, especially in mostly middle-class Merida.

Conversely, the election was a small defeat for the PRI because the party not only lost ground but failed to portray itself as an alternative to the PAN, especially with the growing discontent with President Vicente Fox because of Mexico's recent economic slump.

Former PRI governor Cervera loses Merida mayoral race

Some analysts said the PRI shot itself in the foot by not following a more democratic process in its selection of candidates in Yucatan. The clearest example was in Merida, where Cervera imposed himself as the PRI mayoral candidate rather than allowing rank-and-file members to select a more appealing candidate.

Cervera, a member of the old guard of the PRI known as the dinosaurs, served as interim governor in 1995 and was later elected to a full six-year term. This led to charges that he violated
the Constitution by serving more than six years in office as a chief executive (see SourceMex, 1998-04-22).

By selecting Cervera, "the PRI reinforced its image as a Jurassic Park full of dinosaurs," said analyst George Grayson of the College of William & Mary in Virginia in an interview with The Dallas Morning News. "At the same time, it blocked the advancement of a younger cadre in Merida." National and state PRI leaders refused to concede defeat and accused the administration of PAN Gov. Patricio Patron Laviada of influencing the election. "This was a state election," said Sergio Martinez Chavarria, spokesperson for the PRI executive committee (comite ejecutivo nacional, CEN).

Cervera and state PRI officials said the party would challenge the results of the election before an electoral tribunal. "We have sufficient evidence that [the PAN] stole the election from us," said Carlos Sobrino Sierra, PRI president in Yucatan state. In contrast to Sobrino's statements, national PRI president Roberto Madrazo readily accepted defeat in the Merida race. "We had dreamed of ending 12 years of PAN dominance of the mayor's seat in Merida, but we were unable to complete this task," Madrazo told reporters. Other PRI officials outside of Yucatan placed the blame on Cervera. "The citizens of Yucatan did not vote against the PRI, but against Cervera Pacheco," said Ruben Calderon Cecilio, a PRI delegate from Sinaloa.

One encouraging trend of the Yucatan election was the relatively high voter participation, which approached 65%. In contrast, nationally, only 41% of voters cast their ballots in the 2003 elections for Congress and several gubernatorial seats (see SourceMex, 2003-07-09).

**PRI expected to rebound in other states this year**

The PRI's poor performance in Yucatan is not necessarily a sign of a trend in the remaining elections this year, most of which feature a governor's race. Public-opinion polls show the former governing party is favored in eight of the 10 gubernatorial elections, including Chihuahua and Durango on July 4, Oaxaca on Aug. 1, Veracruz on Sept. 5, Puebla and Sinaloa on Nov. 7, and Tamaulipas and Tlaxcala on Nov. 14.

The PRD is expected to retain the governor's seat in Zacatecas on July 4, while the PAN has a strong possibility of keeping its gubernatorial post in Aguascalientes on Aug. 1. All 10 of these states will also hold state legislative and mayoral elections this year. In addition, municipal and state legislative races are scheduled in 2004 in the states of Michocan, Baja California, and Chiapas. This year's gubernatorial races could have implications for the selection of the PRI presidential candidate in 2006.

If the former governing party lives up to expectations and wins the majority of the gubernatorial elections, this could strengthen the position of party president Madrazo, who has made no secret of his desire to seek the PRI nomination. "Madrazo will walk away strengthened," said Armand Peschard-Sverdrup, director of the Mexico Project at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).
But a PRI victory is less than assured in Tamaulipas, where Sen. Oscar Luebbert has become embroiled in a dispute with the state party organization for readily endorsing Eugenio Hernandez, mayor of Ciudad Victoria, to represent the party in the Nov. 14 gubernatorial race against Gustavo Cardenas of the PAN and Alvaro Garza Cantu of the PRD. "[The party leaders] may have selected a single candidate, but he is not a candidate of unity," said Luebbert. Electoral watchdog levies fines for 2003 campaign violations Election competition has become such that the major parties are often willing to violate campaign regulations.

In late April, the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE) announced fines totaling 418.2 million pesos (US $36.2 million) against the 11 parties that participated in the 2003 election. In many cases, the parties exceeded campaign-spending limits. The PRI incurred the highest fine at 87 million pesos (US$7.5 million), followed by the PRD at 54 million pesos (US$4.7 million). The PAN was fined only 3 million pesos (US$259,000), a much smaller amount than even the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM) and Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD), each at 17 million pesos (US$1.5 million).

All parties appealed their fines. The small fine for the PAN raised some eyebrows and led critics to question whether the Fox administration exercised undue influence on the electoral institute, which is supposed to be independent. While there was no proof of interference by the Fox government, PAN Deputy Juan Molinar Horcasitas angered the PRI by releasing a document identifying 90 "electoral criminals" from the former governing party who exceeded campaign-spending limits. PRI leaders then decided to cut off all campaign-reform negotiations with the PAN and the Fox government.

The PRI decision further delayed the passage of electoral reforms. The PRD had already removed itself from negotiations with the Fox administration and the PAN after accusing the center-right party of attempting to embarrass the party by leaking separate sets of videotapes showing a Mexico City treasury official spending extravagantly at casinos in Las Vegas and a key PRD legislator in the Mexico City assembly accepting bribes (see 2004-03-10).

Disputes derail electoral reforms, including overseas voting

The decisions of the PRD and PRI to suspend discussions with the PAN effectively ended any possibility that electoral reforms would be approved during the regular session of Congress, which concluded at the end of April. But legislative leaders pledged to support a proposal to consider the reforms during a special session during the summer. The Congress and Fox want to approve the reforms in time for the 2006 presidential election. "We are all conscious of the need to respond to citizens' concerns, and we have serious proposals that will address the types of changes the citizens want," said PRD Deputy Manuel Camacho Solis.

The proposals put forth by the major parties and the president differ little in principle. The major changes include a shorter campaigning period, a reduction in the amount of money disbursed to political parties during the campaign, and the elimination of a bank-secrecy clause that prevents disclosure of the origin of campaign funds.
Analysts say, however, that the president and the parties are using the campaign-reform proposal to position themselves ahead of the presidential election, which has contributed to tensions between the executive and legislative branches. For example, one plan presented by the PRI would require any candidates to have resigned from Cabinet or other high-level positions a full year before the actual election. This proposal was aimed particularly at Interior Secretary Santiago Creel and Energy Secretary Felipe Calderon, considered among the front-runners to gain the PAN nomination in 2006. One key proposal that presumably would be addressed through the electoral reform is a plan to create a mechanism to allow Mexican citizens residing overseas to cast ballots.

Expatriates already gained the right to vote in 1996, but Congress and the executive have failed to create the mechanisms to implement the measure (see SourceMex, 1998-11-18 and 1999-07-04). The state of Zacatecas, which has sent a large number of its citizens to the US, has developed an overseas voting scheme it hopes could become a model at the national level (see 2003-08-27). Congress and the administration said they would like to extend the vote to expatriates in the 2006 election but are proceeding cautiously because such a move would be costly and complicated.

One proposal would allow Mexican citizens with photo identification cards to vote at consulates, but this plan has been rejected because of its cost and the burden on consular staffs. Another plan would allow Mexicans to vote via the Internet, but this has the potential for massive fraud. A proposal presented by Fox would allow expatriates to vote only for president and only if they already had an electoral card issued in Mexico. One problem is that a large percentage of Mexicans residing overseas lack such a document. "It's a complicated issue. It's got to be done with a lot of thought," said Deputy Laura Martinez, the PRI liaison to emigres in the US. "We have been watched internationally because of previous problems in our internal electoral system, and there was concern as to how we could do this in the most responsible way. Now, it's on the front burner and it's just a matter of time." [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on May 19, reported at 11.55 pesos per US$1.00] (Sources: El Independiente, 04/15/04; Notimex, 03/21/04, 03/22/04, 03/25/04, 04/16/04, 04/26/04; Los Angeles Times, 05/13/04; Unomasuno, 04/13/04, 04/28/04, 05/17/04; Spanish news service EFE, 04/27/04, 05/17/04; The Herald-Mexico City, 03/22/04, 03/23/04, 04/20/04, 04/21/04, 04/28/04, 05/17/04, 05/18/04; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 04/07/04, 04/22/04, 05/04/04, 05/07/04, 05/10/04, 05/13/04, 05/18/04; El Financiero, 04/23/04, 04/27/04, 04/29/04, 05/18/04; The Dallas Morning News, 05/18/04; El Sol de Mexico, 03/22/04, 03/24/04, 04/14/04, 04/23/04, 05/03/04, 05/17-19/04; El Universal, 03/24/04, 04/05/04, 05/17-19/04; La Cronica de Hoy, 03/26/04, 04/12/04, 04/28/04, 05/06/04, 05/10/04, 05/12/04, 05/13/04, 05/17/04, 05/19/04; La Jornada, 04/13/04, 04/28/04, 04/29/04, 05/17/04, 05/19/04; El Diario de Yucatan, 05/17-19/04)

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