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Amalia Garcia First Woman Elected to a Governor's Seat in Mexico

by LADB Staff

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The political misfortunes of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) and the rebound of the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) in July elections shared the headlines with another trend in Mexican politics: the emergence of strong women candidates.

One of the most significant developments during the month was the historic election of the PRD's Amalia Garcia Medina as governor of Zacatecas state. Garcia, who previously served as a federal deputy and PRD president, is the first woman elected in her own right to a major state-level post.

Other women have served in executive posts in modern times, but they were appointed as replacements for outgoing officials. In 1999, Rosario Robles of the PRD became mayor of Mexico City, succeeding Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, who relinquished the post to run for president (see SourceMex, 1999-10-06).

Similarly, Dulce Maria Sauri Riancho served as interim governor in Yucatan in 1991-1994. She resigned because of differences with the party hierarchy (see SourceMex, 1995-06-14). Both Robles and Sauri went on to serve as presidents of their respective parties.

Amalia Garcia easily wins Zacatecas governor's race

Garcia, who will succeed outgoing PRD Gov. Ricardo Monreal, won the Zacatecas election by a wide margin, obtaining 46% of the vote against 33% for rival Jose Bonilla, who was representing a coalition formed by the PRI, the Partido del Trabajo (PT), and the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM). Francisco Lopez Garcia of the PAN lagged far behind with only 15% of the vote. Amalia Garcia's father, Francisco Garcia Estrada, served as Zacatecas governor in 1956-1962.

Amalia Garcia's strong performance reflected a trend in voter preferences toward the PRD and away from the PRI that began with Monreal's election in 1998 (see SourceMex, 1998-07-08). The July 4 election will allow the PRD to again dominate the state legislature, with the party winning 12 of the 19 electoral districts. In addition, the PRD will obtain three of the 10 at-large seats allocated on the percentage of the vote received by the party.

The governor-elect credited her victory to heavy participation by women voters in the election. "Never before had I seen women so involved in the political process and in leadership roles in their communities," said Garcia. She noted that women had been forced into leadership roles because a large percentage of the state's male population had migrated to the US.

The PRD victory in Zacatecas was a bright spot in what has been a difficult political year for the party, which has been plagued by corruption scandals in Mexico City and charges that the capital's

Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador violated the Mexican Constitution by ignoring several court orders (see SourceMex, 2004-03-10 and 2004-05-26).

Sen. Maricarmen Ramirez seeks Tlaxcala governor's seat

The PRD also has the possibility of placing a second woman in a governor's seat in elections in Tlaxcala later this year. PRD Sen. Ramirez, the wife of outgoing Gov. Alfonso Sanchez Anaya, is seeking the PRD nomination to succeed her husband in the state's Nov. 4 gubernatorial election. Several public-opinion polls show her leading other potential PRD candidates. Ramirez does not, however, enjoy universal support among national and state PRD members ahead of the party's July 18 internal election in Tlaxcala.

Gerardo Fernandez Norona, the PRD's national secretary for social movements, urged Ramirez to withdraw her candidacy to avoid possible accusations of a conflict of interest, especially since she could be perceived to be receiving unfair support from her husband. In addition, said Fernandez Norona, Ramirez, as a relative of Sanchez Anaya, could technically be violating the constitutional principle of nonsuccession.

Fernandez Norona made his comments just after another controversy regarding the possible candidacy of first lady Marta Sahagun erupted in early July. Sahagun had often hinted about her desire to seek the PAN presidential nomination in 2006, but declined to confirm her intentions. This allowed rampant speculation and rumors about her prospective candidacy to flourish.

The possibility of a Sahagun candidacy has provided several openings for the opposition candidates to criticize President Vicente Fox for attempting to skirt the constitutional principle of nonsuccession. "By endorsing a Ramirez candidacy in Tlaxcala, the PRD would be weakening its argument demanding that Marta Sahagun not use her position in power to promote her aspirations," said Fernandez Norona.

Some influential PAN members have been the strongest critics of Sahagun. Prominent among these critics is former party president and ex-energy secretary Felipe Salinas Calderon, who has formally announced his intention to seek the PAN nomination in 2006 (see SourceMex, 2004-06-02).

Controversy follows new rumors of a Sahagun candidacy

One of the biggest outcries against a Sahagun candidacy came in early July, when Fox's chief of staff Alfonso Durazo Montano resigned his post and released a 19-page letter objecting to Sahagun's presidential ambitions.

In the letter, Durazo suggested that Fox was a hypocrite for promising a government of change and then resorting to the old "dedazo" system employed by the PRI by which the president appointed his successor. "It is my conviction that the issue of presidential succession is operating more under the logic of the old regime than under that of a government of transition," said Durazo, a PRI member who has also served as Fox's personal secretary and communications director.

The uproar created by Durazo's letter forced Sahagun to call a press conference on July 12 to clarify her intention not to seek the presidency. "I want to affirm that I will not be a candidate for the

presidency of the republic," Sahagun told reporters. "I am conscious of my responsibilities and also of the limits that are imposed by this moment in history. The time is right for big decisions. This is mine." Sahagun used the press conference to endorse the concept of a woman as chief executive in Mexico. "I have said it, and I reiterate: Mexico is ready to be governed by a woman," said Sahagun. Sahagun remains very popular among voters, particularly women.

In public-opinion polls taken in the last couple of years, she ranked as the second-most-popular politician behind Mexico City Mayor Lopez Obrador. "Her popularity ratings are high because she's an active first lady," political analyst Federico Estevez of the Instituto Tecnológico de Mexico (ITAM) told Copley News Service. "She's still the best candidate for the PAN, but that doesn't mean she's electable. People will look at all her jewelry, and everything she says will be scrutinized."

Some of Sahagun's charitable activities had also threatened her viability as a candidate. The first lady is being investigated on charges that she diverted public funds from the Loteria Nacional to Vamos Mexico, a private charitable foundation she created. There are allegations that Vamos Mexico has used less than 30% of its funds to help the poor. Still, Sahagun's announcement ruling out her candidacy in the 2006 presidential race does not preclude the possibility that she will seek another office.

Many PAN members in Mexico City are urging her to run for mayor of the capital in 2006. There is also talk that Sahagun may run for governor of Guanajuato or seek a Senate seat in 2006.

PAN turns in miserable performance in July elections

In contrast to Sahagun's continuing popularity, her party did not fare well in the July 4 elections in three states. The PAN suffered a significant setback in gubernatorial races in Chihuahua, Durango, and Zacatecas, with the party's candidates attracting a very low percentage of the vote. The party also turned in a miserable performance in the races for state legislature in the three states and lost mayoral elections in several major cities, including Ciudad Juarez in Chihuahua; Durango City and Gomez Palacio in Durango; and Fresnillo and Zacatecas City in Zacatecas.

The loss of Ciudad Juarez was especially difficult for the PAN, which had governed the border city for more than two decades. The defeats in Juarez and elsewhere in Chihuahua were also viewed as a rejection of former governor and current federal Deputy Francisco Barrio Terrazas. The PAN's gubernatorial candidate Sen. Javier Corral and Juarez mayoral candidate Cruz Perez Cuellar were close allies of Barrio, who is considered a moderate within the PAN. Barrio, who heads the PAN delegation in the Chamber of Deputies, has been mentioned as a potential contender for the PAN presidential nomination in 2006.

Some observers said the PAN loss in Juarez was also because voters in the city blamed the mayors of the center-right party for the unsolved murders of hundreds of women more than they blamed the administration of PRI Gov. Patricio Martinez. The PAN had tried to place a large share of the blame for the unsolved murders on Martinez (see SourceMex, 2004-06-23). "What transpired in the Ciudad Juarez elections was related to the impunity that has prevailed under the watch of several PAN governments," wrote columnist Maria Teresa Jardi in the Mexico City daily newspaper La Cronica de Hoy.

Corral's weak performance in Chihuahua came despite an alliance with the PRD and the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD) in the coalition Todos Somos Chihuahua. Corral received 42% of the vote, compared with 56% for Jose Reyes Baeza of the PRI, which had formed a coalition with the PVEM and PT, the Alianza con la Gente. The PRI-PVEM-PT coalition also swept the state legislative elections, winning in 17 out of 22 districts. The Todos Somos Chihuahua won five districts, but will receive eight at-large seats. Some analysts noted that the handful of PAN candidates who did well in Chihuahua were aligned with a socially conservative movement within the party known as Desarrollo Humano Integral (DHIAC).

A candidate identified with the DHIAC, Juan Blanco, obtained the PAN's only major victory in Chihuahua. Blanco won a surprising victory in the mayoral election in the state capital, which had been in the hands of the PRI for about two decades. In addition to discontent with Barrio, PAN insiders and political observers agreed, the fortunes of the party in Chihuahua were tied to disenchantment with the economic policies of the Fox administration.

This was also the case in Durango, where the party made few inroads against the PRI, and in Zacatecas, where the PRD won handily. "This was a major defeat, and we should not view it in any other manner," said PAN Deputy German Martinez Cazerres, one of the leaders of the party's delegation in the Chamber of Deputies. The pessimistic assessment by Martinez and other PAN members is in stark contrast to the optimism that prevailed among party leaders after the party swept the legislative and mayoral elections in Yucatan in May of this year (see SourceMex, 2004-05-19).

Some discontent was evident with all three parties in Zacatecas, Chihuahua, and Durango in the July 4 elections, which citizens showed through their low participation. The state electoral institutes said abstentionism reached slightly more than 50% in Durango, 55% in Chihuahua, and 57% in Zacatecas. PRI considered biggest beneficiary of PAN debacle While the PRD turned in a solid performance in Zacatecas, many analysts said the biggest beneficiary of the July 4 elections was the PRI. "There's disenchantment with the PAN, and the PRI is capitalizing on it well," said analyst Leo Zuckermann of the Centro de Investigaciones y Docencia Economica (CIDE) in Mexico City. "And you've also got to admit that the PRI is learning to fight."

Some analysts said the trend also solidifies the position of PRI president Roberto Madrazo, who has made no secret of his desire to represent his party in the 2006 election. Madrazo lost the PRI's 2000 nomination to Francisco Labastida Ochoa in a bitter campaign (see SourceMex, 1999-11-10). "It's an important triumph for Madrazo, because he personally chose these candidates," said Juan Pablo Cordoba, a political analyst at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM).

Cordoba predicted that the PRI would win the 2006 election, especially considering the legal problems facing the PRD's likely candidate Lopez Obrador. Nevertheless, the discontent with Fox and the troubles for the PAN in the elections run counter to polls showing that the president retains a high personal-popularity level among voters. A recent poll by the daily Mexico City newspaper El Universal showed Fox's favorable rating increased to 60% in June from 53% in April. "It's not that

Fox isn't popular," said pollster Daniel Lund of Mund Americas. "He just doesn't seem to help his party much. He doesn't have the institutional coattails to help out the PAN."

Some PAN members were quick to dismiss the results of the July 4 elections, especially since the party had not been expected to do well in Zacatecas and Durango. "We were facing two efficient political machines in the two states," said Rogelio Carvajal, who represents the PAN in the federal electoral institute (Instituto Federal Electoral, IFE). Carvajal pointed out that the PAN's performance in Durango was better than expected because the party won mayoral elections in several municipalities and doubled the number of cities under its control.

Emigrants win several Zacatecas races

The Zacatecas election was also a milestone because it created the opportunity for expatriates to run for a local office. California businessman Andres Bermudez, representing the PAN, won the mayoral race in Jerez, while Martin Carvajal Martinez of the PRD was elected mayor of Apulco.

Additionally, Zacatecas natives and US residents Manuel de la Cruz Ramirez and Roman Cabral Banelos received two of the at-large seats reserved in the state congress for expatriates. Bermudez also known as El Rey del Tomate (the tomato king) because of a successful vegetable nursery he built up in Winters, California won the Jerez election handily this year after being denied the seat in 2001 despite a victory.

Electoral courts disqualified him from serving because he did not meet state residency requirements. Zacatecas state legislators remedied the situation in August 2003, amending the state constitution to change residency requirements to run for office and give expatriates the right to vote in state elections (see SourceMex, 2003-08-27). It was unclear what percentage of the total vote was cast by Zacatecas expatriates. Bermudez and Carvajal said they would work to ensure that all expatriates were able to vote in Mexican elections. "My victory opens the door to a lot migrants," said Bermudez. "Just like we left in droves, a wave of migrants will come back in droves and help their towns out of poverty."

Carvajal, a furniture salesman in Fort Worth, Texas, said he expected other states like Michoacan to follow suit. "There are thousands of Michoacanos in the US," Carvajal told the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal. The Mexican Congress already gave Mexican nationals in other countries the right to vote in 1996, but that law was vague and confusing. Despite promises to develop procedures to allow expatriates to vote in Mexican elections, legislators have yet to make this a reality (see SourceMex, 1998-11-18, 2002-07-24 and 2003-07-23).

Under existing regulations, expatriates who wish to participate in Mexican elections must register several months before the vote and return to Mexican soil to cast their ballots. In the past, authorities have set up voting booths in Tijuana, Ciudad Juarez, and other border cities to facilitate the process. The delays have only intensified demands by expatriate organizations that Congress and the administration create ways to simplify the process.

"The bottom line is that not a single political party wants to include us because they do not know how we would vote," said Guadalupe Gomez, former president of the Federation of Zacatecanos of

Southern California. "Since most of us were forced to leave Mexico because our government was not capable of supporting our families, the least they could do is give us our rights."

In the latest response to these demands, both the administration and a PRI-PRD coalition in Congress proposed plans in mid-June to develop regulations for expatriates to vote in time for the 2006 election. The administration's latest plan directs the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE) to develop a process for expatriates to register and cast ballots without having to return to Mexico. The plan also would impose stiff penalties for any candidate who campaigned outside Mexico's borders, saying it would be too difficult to control campaign spending in a foreign country.

The PRI-PRD proposal differs little in most aspects from the administration's plan, but allows expatriates to vote only in the presidential race, not in state, local, and federal congressional elections.

Judge exonerates company that sold voter rolls to US firm

The three major political parties have a lot at stake in the 2006 election if they are able to agree on a plan to extend the vote to expatriates. Some estimates indicate that about 3 million of the 8 million Mexican nationals residing in the US could become eligible to cast ballots in 2006. The simplification of the voter rolls could also prove lucrative to US marketing companies, which have already attempted to gain access to a voter list in Mexico. One company, Atlanta-based ChoicePoint, created a major controversy when it purchased the list of 65 million Mexican voters (see SourceMex, 2003-04-30).

Electoral authorities immediately launched an investigation to determine which officials attempted to sell the list to ChoicePoint. Authorities discovered that the list had been sold to ChoicePoint by private Mexican company Soluciones Mercadologicas en Bases de Datos (SMBD). The Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) brought charges against company officials and several employees, who appealed the case to a federal court.

In December 2003, a federal judge threw out the charges, citing insufficient grounds to charge the Mexican company. The PGR's Fiscalia Especializada para la Atencion de Delitos Electorales (FEPADE) appealed the decision to a higher court in January, saying that SMBD employees had committed treason by selling confidential state documents to a foreign entity. Judge Jose Luis Lopez Moya determined, however, that there was insufficient evidence to charge SMBD with a serious crime. (Sources: Associated Press, 06/16/04, 07/05/04; Unomasuno, 06/16/04, 06/28/04, 07/06/04; El Diario Digital-Chihuahua, Imagen de Zacatecas, 07/06/04; Spanish news service EFE, 06/15/04, 07/05/04, 07/06/04, 07/12/04; Notimex, 07/05/04, 07/06/04, 07/12/04; Reuters, 07/05-07/04, 07/12/04; Knight-Ridder Newspapers, 07/05/04, 07/07/04, 07/12/04; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 07/06/04, 07/08/04, 07/09/04, 07/12/04; Copley News Service, 07/12/04; El Universal, 05/28/04, 06/16/04, 06/17/04, 07/06/04, 07/07/04, 07/12/04, 07/13/04; La Jornada, 05/28/04, 06/16-18/04, 07/06/04, 07/07/04, 07/12/04, 07/13/04; El Financiero, 06/16/04, 07/06/04, 07/07/04, 07/13/04; La Cronica de Hoy, 06/16/04, 06/18/04, 07/06/04, 07/07/04, 07/13/04; The Dallas Morning News, 06/16/04, 07/05/04, 07/08/04, 07/13/04; Milenio Diario, 06/18/04, 07/06/04, 07/07/04, 07/13/04; The New York Times, 06/16/04, 07/05/04, 07/12/04, 07/13/04; The Herald-Mexico City, 06/16/04, 07/06/04, 07/07/04, 07/12/04, 07/13/04;

Los Angeles Times, 07/05/04, 07/06/04, 07/13/04; The Washington Post, 07/07/04, 07/13/04; The Financial Times-London, 07/13/04)

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