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PRI Narrowly Wins Oaxaca Gubernatorial Race; PAN loses Tijuana Election

by LADB Staff

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In one of the most competitive state elections in recent history, the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) narrowly won the gubernatorial race in Oaxaca state, setting the stage for confrontations with a coalition of opposition parties. In results released by the state electoral agency (Instituto Electoral de Oaxaca, IEO), PRI gubernatorial candidate Sen. Ulises Ruiz Ortiz received 47% of the vote compared with 45% for coalition candidate Gabino Cue Monteagudo, the outgoing mayor of Oaxaca City.

Cue represented the Todos Somos Oaxaca alliance comprising his Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD), the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), and President Vicente Fox's conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). Two minor parties, the Partido del Trabajo (PT) and the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM), backed the PRI candidate. Opposition challenges results Ruiz's razor-thin margin of victory led Cue and other members of his coalition to demand a recount and file a legal challenge.

Furthermore, PRD and PAN officials accused the PRI of manipulating the final numbers and bribing voters and employing other unfair campaign practices. Among other things, Cue charged that votes turned in from some rural locations were much higher than the number of registered voters in those districts. "We will not allow them to steal the election from us," Cue said at a press conference announcing his intention to file a legal challenge to the election. "We will defend every vote. Nothing and nobody will take away the future for which Oaxacans voted."

Coalition members have already hired a team of 30 lawyers to develop a legal strategy to challenge the election results, said PRD Deputy Rene Arce Islas. Many observers expect the dispute to end up in the Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federacion (TRIFE), which previously overturned disputed elections in Tabasco state (see SourceMex, 2001-01-10). The TRIFE is also known as the TEPJF.

Some analysts said the tight gubernatorial election was a reflection of the gradually changing political tide in Oaxaca, historically a PRI stronghold. In 1998, PRI candidate Jose Murat Casab won the election with 48% of the vote (see SourceMex, 1998-08-05). "Even if the PRI victory is upheld, Oaxaca will no longer be a bastion of the PRI," said political analyst Federico Estevez of the Instituto Tecnologico Autonomo de Mexico (ITAM).

The state legislative elections in Oaxaca were not as tight as the governor's race, with the PRI and its allies obtaining 17 of the 25 directly elected seats in the state legislature, compared with eight seats for Todos Somos Oaxaca. Some PRI officials, perhaps sensing the shift in electoral preferences in the state, were said to have resorted to the party's tradition of buying votes, especially in rural areas.

One official, outgoing Gov. Murat, is accused of having fabricated his own assassination attempt to gain public sympathy for the PRI (see SourceMex, 2004-06-09).

Tensions high before elections

Tensions were so high in the days leading to the election that some violent confrontations broke out between supporters of Ruiz and Cue. One incident in the town of Huatla de Juarez left one dead and seven injured following a fight between partisans of the two camps. Authorities had feared that similar incidents would occur after the elections, but no further violent confrontations materialized.

The competitiveness of the election helped bring out more voters than came out during the 1998 gubernatorial race. The IEO reported voter participation at about 50%, compared with 30% in the previous election (see SourceMex, 1998-08-05). Also influencing the narrow gubernatorial election, said some analysts, were the strong divisions within the PRI. A PRI faction, led by former congressional leader Elba Esther Gordillo and ex-Oaxaca Gov. Diodoro Carrasco, openly backed Cue. The support for Cue was an open defiance of PRI president Roberto Madrazo Pintado, who reportedly handpicked Ulises Ruiz to represent the PRI.

Gordillo, who has feuded publicly with Madrazo and his top supporters in Congress, was forced from her leadership position in the Chamber of Deputies after openly supporting some of President Fox's policies (see SourceMex, 2003-12-03). "Oaxaca reflects the internal struggle in the PRI, a local fight with national implications," said Jorge Javier Romero, a political scientist at the Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana (UAM) in Mexico City.

The Oaxaca election was widely considered another test for Madrazo, who has hinted that he intends to represent the PRI in the 2006 presidential election but has not yet officially declared his candidacy. "The 2006 elections will have to pass through Oaxaca," the PRI president was recently quoted as saying.

Analysts concurred with this assessment. "This is more than just a state-level election, and that's what makes it so interesting," said Armand Peschard-Sverdrup, director of the Mexico Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington. "It has a lot to do with the warring factions of the PRI." Said George Grayson, a Mexico scholar at the College of William & Mary, "I imagine Madrazo has his fingernails bitten down to the joint. This is so important to him." Grayson added, "If this election is messy, it will certainly embolden the anti-Madrazo movement in his party."

PRI scores upset in Tijuana mayoral race

Madrazo also had a hand in the Baja California elections, especially the mayoral race in Tijuana. The PRI president reportedly played a major role in uniting several factions behind the candidacy of controversial businessman Jorge Hank Rohn. Hank Rohn is the son of the late Carlos Hank Gonzalez, who wielded great power within the PRI and who was considered by some as one of Mexico's most corrupt politicians.

Like his father, Hank Rohn is identified with the old guard of the PRI commonly known as the dinosaurs. The PRI candidate, who had been down as much as eight percentage points in pre-

election polls, pulled an upset victory over Jorge Ramos of the PAN. Hank obtained slightly more than 47% of the vote, compared with about 46% for Ramos. The PAN, which had held the mayoral seat in Tijuana since 1989, had been heavily favored to win again this year. The percentage of votes received was a strong turnaround for the PRI in Tijuana, which obtained only 35% of the ballots cast in the 2001 election.

Analysts said Hank Rohn was able to turn the election in his favor by spending a considerable amount of his personal wealth in the campaign. A few days before the election, Hank held a rally that was more like a huge party. He treated participants to free alcoholic beverages, a lineup of nationally famous entertainers, and the opportunity to win 10 new minivans in a raffle. Still, insiders pointed out that Hank Rohn's victory would not have been possible without the assistance of party president Madrazo, who stood to gain from a PRI victory in Tijuana.

For Madrazo, Hank represented "a dinosaur with all the money in the world," said independent political analyst Gilberto Calderon. Some analysts said the influx of Hank Rohn's money into the election set the tone for the campaigns.

Political analyst Benedicto Ruiz Vargas of Universidad Iberoamericana in Tijuana said the debates leading up to the election were more about Hank's wealth and questionable character than about proposals to improve government. "I regret that this campaign had more to do with money than ideology, more about power than political discourse," said Jesus Blancornelas, editor of the weekly newspaper Zeta.

Baja California voters disenchanted with PAN

Other observers pointed out that discontent with the PAN at both the local and national level also contributed to the defeat of its candidate. Successive PAN administrations in Tijuana have been blamed for the rising crime in the city. At the national level, voters are disenchanted by Fox's inability to deliver on campaign promises to boost the national economy and end corruption. "The vote showed that people were well-aware of the PAN's political errors during the years," said Victor Clark Alfaro, director of the Binational Human Rights Center in Tijuana.

Tijuana is the second major city along the US-Mexico border that the PAN has lost to the PRI this year. On July 4, the PAN lost the mayoral race in Ciudad Juarez after governing the city for two decades (see SourceMex, 2004-07-14). Clark said many Tijuana voters showed their discontent with the PAN in another manner, choosing to stay home from the polls rather than cast their ballots for Hank Rohn.

Abstentionism in Tijuana was almost 65%, compared with 37% in the 2001 election. The trend was common throughout Baja California, with abstentionism statewide also reported at close to 65%. Observers said Hank Rohn's victory was even more of a blow to the PAN because voters ignored his shady past to vote for the PRI candidate. Hank Rohn, who owns a racetrack in Tijuana, has been accused of laundering money for the notorious Arellano Felix drug cartel. In 1988, two of Hank Rohn's employees were convicted of killing journalist Hector Felix Miranda of the weekly newspaper Zeta, which has made a practice of writing stories about corruption and the drug trade.

There are allegations that Hank may have also had a hand in the more recent murder of another Zeta journalist this year, columnist Francisco Ortiz Franco (see SourceMex, 2004-06-30). Hank has adamantly denied the charges. "The allegations are old, tiresome, and not true," Hank told The Dallas Morning News. "All I am interested in right now is in how to rescue our city from criminal elements who operate with impunity. I will rid Tijuana of crime and drugs." The Tijuana victory has given the PRI hopes of recovering the governorship of Baja California in the next election. "Baja California will be up for grabs in the 2006 election," said David Shirk, director of the Transborder Institute at the University of San Diego.

The party's fortunes, however, were mixed outside of Tijuana. The PRI appears to have also won the mayoral election in the city of Tecate, but narrowly lost races in the important cities of Mexicali, Ensenada, and Playas de Rosarito. Preliminary results show the PAN also won 11 of the 16 electoral districts that were up for election in the Baja California state legislature.

PAN sweeps Aguascalientes elections

In contrast to Baja California, the PAN's fortunes were much brighter in Aguascalientes. The center-right party not only retained the governor's seat but also scored victories in 10 of the state's eleven mayoral races and won 15 of the 18 electoral districts in the state legislature. PAN candidate Luis Armando Reyonso Femat obtained 55% of the vote, compared with 25% for Oscar Lopez Velarde of a PRI-PT-PVEM coalition. Running a distant third was Manuel Banuelos Hernandez, representing the PRD-PCD.

Reynoso will succeed outgoing Gov. Felipe Gonzalez, also a member of the PAN. The election in the capital of Aguascalientes City, with 70% of the state's population, was much closer than the governor's race. PAN candidate Martin Orozco Sandoval defeated his PRI-PVEM-PT rival Carlos Lozano de la Torre by just a few thousand votes, leading the PRI to ask for a recount.

PRI leaders also accused the outgoing PAN administration of having rigged the election in favor of Orozco. Abstentionism was also high in Aguascalientes, with only 52% of registered voters casting ballots. (Sources: Revista Vertigo, 07/25/04; Semanario Zeta, 07/23/04, 07/30/04; Associated Press, 07/29/04, 08/01/04; Copley News Service, 08/01/04, 08/02/04; United Press International, 08/02/04; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 07/19/04, 07/26/04, 07/27/04, 07/29/04, 08/02/04, 08/03/04; Unomasuno, 07/23/04, 07/27/04, 07/29/04, 08/02/04, 08/03/04; The Dallas Morning News, 07/24/04, 08/02/04, 08/03/04; Notimex, Spanish news service EFE, 07/27/04, 07/28/04, 08/01-03/04; Reuters, 07/28/04, 08/02/04, 08/03/04; El Financiero, Los Angeles Times, 08/02/04, 08/03/04; La Jornada, 07/16/04, 07/23/04, 07/26/04, 07/27/04, 07/29/04, 08/02-04/04; La Cronica de Hoy, 07/22/04, 07/27-29/04, 08/02-04/04; El Universal, 07/22/04, 07/23/04, 07/27-29/04, 08/02-04/04; The Herald-Mexico City, 07/29/04, 07/30/04, 08/02/04, 08/04/04; The Financial Times-London, 08/04/04)

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