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PRI Wins Big in Mexico State Election; Takes Nayarit by Narrow Margin

by LADB Staff
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The long-governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) won the gubernatorial race in Mexico state by a landslide, but scored a victory by only a narrow margin in Nayarit state. Elections in both states were held July 3. In the Mexico state race, Enrique Pena Nieto of the PRI obtained almost 48% of the vote, compared with nearly 25% for Ruben Mendoza Ayala of the conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) and slightly more than 24% for Yeidckol Polevnsky of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD).

The results in Mexico state differed slightly from many public-opinion polls taken in the weeks leading to the election (see SourceMex, 2005-05-25). Pena Nieto also represented the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM), which had formed a coalition with the PRI. The PRD was running in a partnership with the Partido del Trabajo (PT), while the PAN had forged an alliance with the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD).

The PRI's sweeping victory was marred by high abstentionism, with only about 40% of eligible voters bothering to cast a ballot. Still, PRI leaders viewed the result in Mexico state, the country's most populous state, as a good sign heading into the 2006 presidential race. "[With the victories in Nayarit and Mexico state], we are halfway inside the presidency," a jubilant Madrazo declared during a post-electoral speech.

In Nayarit, PRI candidate Ney Gonzalez Sanchez received almost 48% of the vote on July 3, narrowly defeating Miguel Angel Navarro Quintero of the PRD, who was running in partnership with the PT and the Partido de la Revolucion Socialista (PRS) in a coalition known as the Alianza por Nayarit. Manuel Perez Cardenas of the PAN came in a distant third with about 6% of the vote. The PRI also took 12 of the 18 seats in the state legislative elections, although the party will no longer have full control of the state legislature. Five seats went to the PRD-PT, one to the PCD, and none to the PAN.

Mexico City Mayor Lopez Obrador a non-factor

The PRD had counted on the popularity of Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador to spill over to the areas surrounding the capital and boost Polevnsky's candidacy. Lopez Obrador was said to have personally selected Polevnsky, an outsider, against the wishes of many rank-and-file party members in Mexico state. "[Lopez Obrador] had bet everything on his political protege, but in the end they both failed," said Francisco Cardenas Cruz, a columnist for the daily Mexico City newspaper El Universal.

Some analysts speculated that the absence of the "Lopez Obrador factor" in the Mexico state race might indicate that the mayor's appeal is more limited than anticipated. "[This election] may be indicative of the fact that Lopez Obrador doesn't have much influence beyond Mexico City if in a
neighboring state he is not able to give his candidate any lift whatsoever," said Armand Peschard-Sverdrup, head of the Mexico Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, DC. Analysts agreed the PRD was hampered by Polevnsky's inability to connect with voters. "Her weak rapport with local voters and less-than-stirring stump presence disenchanted voters," said the Los Angeles Times.

PAN candidate Mendoza was also inept in his campaign, particularly in his tendency to make crude remarks during some of his speeches. Most damaging, however, was his attempt to make light of a PRI effort to buy votes. Mendoza was filmed taking soccer balls and other campaign gifts from a PRI truck and distributing them to his followers. This episode was replayed repeatedly on PRI TV spots, damaging the PAN candidate's reputation.

The combination of the poor campaigns of the PRD and PAN candidates and huge television and radio expenditures by the Pena camp contributed significantly to the PRI victory. Because of Pena's media expenditures, the PAN and the PRD have both asked the state electoral institute (Instituto Electoral del Estado de Mexico, IEEM) to investigate whether Pena Nieto surpassed campaign-spending limits, a violation of state electoral laws.

The media blitz helped Pena Nieto emerge from the shadows within his own party. He was selected to represent the PRI after prominent businessman Carlos Hank Rhon decided against seeking the governorship. Hank Rhon is the son of powerful PRI politician Carlos Hank Gonzalez and brother of Tijuana mayor Jorge Hank Rhon. "The PRI took a calculated gamble on an unknown candidate, and they were able to sell this new kid," said political scientist Federico Estevez of the Instituto Tecnologico Autonomo de Mexico (ITAM).

**Losses especially hard for PAN**

While the results of the two elections were negative for both the PRD and the PAN, analysts agreed the conservative party had the more dismal showing. The percentage of the vote received by the PAN in Nayarit was in the single digits, which party leaders said was worrisome because outgoing Gov. Antonio Echeverria is a member of the PAN. Echeverria received support from the PRD and other parties in the 1999 election, which helped him win the race by 10 percentage points (see SourceMex, 1999-07-07).

Analysts said the PAN loss may be related in part to disenchantment with President Vicente Fox's policies and discontent among PAN loyalists that party leaders quashed the candidacy of Martha Elena Garcia, wife of Gov. Echeverria (see SourceMex, 2004-11-17). The PRD and its coalition partners may have been the beneficiaries of the discontent with the PAN in Nayarit, with the center-left party giving the PRI a run for its money in the election. The Alianza por Nayarit, which lost by only five percentage points, has already taken steps to challenge the results of the election. Turnout was much better in Nayarit than in Mexico state, with almost 60% of registered voters casting a ballot.

The bad news for the PAN and PRD in Mexico state went beyond the raw figures in the gubernatorial race. According to the IEEM, abstentionism in traditionally strong PAN strongholds outside of Mexico City was close to 60%, causing the center-right party to lose municipalities like
Atizapan and Naucalapan to the PRI. The PAN's only victory in its traditional strongholds was in Tlalnepantla, which it won by only a narrow margin. The PRD lost the municipality of Texcoco but managed to hold on by narrow margins to Nezahualcoyotl and other strongholds in the Mexico City suburbs.

Some observers had suggested the Mexico state election could be a microcosm of the 2006 election because of the wide diversity of populations in the state. But other analysts cautioned not to read too much into the Mexico state race, even though some trends could translate into the 2006 national election. The most important difference, said columnist Alberto Aziz Nassif of El Universal, will be the quality of the candidates. "We will have a much different set of candidates for the national election than those who participated in the July 3 election," said Aziz. "But we may see some types of behavior and strategies in the national election [that were used in Mexico state]."

**PRI faces major internal strife ahead of 2006**

All three major political parties are entering the 2006 election with serious divisions. Madrazo, who is seeking his party's nomination, is facing a challenge from a faction called Unidad Democratica, informally known as the Todos Unidos contra Madrazo (TUCOM) group. This faction, which does not believe that Madrazo can lead the PRI to victory in 2006, has launched a series of television and radio advertisements and billboards promoting each of the faction's potential candidates: former governors Tomas Yarrington of Tamaulipas and Manuel Angel Nunez of Hidalgo, outgoing Govs. Arturo Montiel of Mexico state and Enrique Martinez of Coahuila, and Sen. Enrique Jackson.

Rather than campaign against each other, the TUCOM candidates are directing the bulk of their criticisms at Madrazo. In addition to the rift between TUCOM and Madrazo, the PRI is facing major divisions over Madrazo's successor as party president. Under party statutes, secretary-general Elba Esther Gordillo would be next in line to ascend to the presidency. Gordillo has been a lightning rod for controversy within the PRI, taking such actions as aligning herself with President Fox and backing an opposition candidate in the recent Oaxaca gubernatorial election (see SourceMex, 2003-12-03 and 2004-08-04).

A large number of PRI members stepped forward in early July to oppose Gordillo's promotion. The secretary-general, however, defiantly defended her right to rise to the party presidency, creating a standoff within the PRI. Madrazo, who had a tense relationship with his second in command, had agreed to hand the reins over to Gordillo as he began his presidential campaign. The party president, however, was forced to remain in his post, at least until early August, while the leadership controversy is sorted out.

Still, Madrazo expects the controversy to be resolved in favor of Gordillo even though many PRI members oppose her. "There is nothing that can [legally] prevent Elba Esther Gordillo from succeeding Roberto Madrazo," said Sergio Martinez Chavarria, a spokesman for the Madrazo campaign.

**PRD, PAN also face major divisions**

The PRD is also facing a high-profile rift heading into the 2006 election. Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, a three-time presidential candidate, has not been shy about highlighting his differences with the
PRD's likely candidate Lopez Obrador. Cardenas, who earlier this year announced his intention to seek the presidency for a fourth time, abruptly dropped out of the race for the PRD candidacy in early July. He accused the party of putting more emphasis on the mechanics of the election and "failing to open avenues of discussion" on issues and proposals. "Not registering for the primary does not imply that I am resigning from taking an active part in the country's political life," Cardenas wrote in his open letter to the media. He said he would continue to help the left regain its place in the vanguard of the struggles for sovereignty, the deepening of democratic change, and the well being of all Mexicans.

In an interview with the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma, Cardenas raised concerns that the party is giving carte blanche to Lopez Obrador's proposals, which the Mexico City mayor presented in a 50-point plan as he unofficially launched his campaign in mid-July. Cardenas, who admitted not having read Lopez Obrador's entire plan, said he does oppose some of the measures that have been proposed such as a proposal to create new taxes and a plan to bring private capital into Mexico's energy sector.

Since his decision to step down, Cardenas has made conflicting statements on whether he would seek the presidency under the banner of another party. This possibility has raised strong concerns among PRD leaders, since Cardenas could potentially sap votes from the center-left party and its likely candidate Lopez Obrador.

The PAN, meanwhile, has a rift of its own. One of its four candidates, Chihuahua ex-governor and legislative leader Francisco Barrio Terrazas, stepped down after accusing the Fox administration of promoting Santiago Creel ahead of a pending PAN primary. He said Creel is "receiving political support" from several federal offices.

Barrio, who will now serve out the rest of his term in the Chamber of Deputies, appears to be favoring fellow candidate Felipe Calderon. Many members of Barrio's campaign staff have already joined the Calderon camp. (Sources: Associated Press, Copley News Service, The New York Times, 07/04/05; Diario Amanecer-Toluca, 07/04/05, 07/05/05; The Dallas Morning News, 07/05/05; Los Angeles Times, 07/04/05, 07/13/05; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 07/04/05, 07/15/05; Notimex, 07/03/05, 07/04/05, 07/09/05, 07/18/05; El Informador-Guadalajara, 07/04/05, 07/18/05; The Herald-Mexico City, 07/05/05, 07/06/05, 07/15/05, 07/18/05; El Financiero, 07/04-06/05, 07/19/05; Reforma, 07/08/05, 07/19/05; El Universal, 07/01/05, 07/04-06/05, 07/08/05, 07/12/05, 07/18-20/05; La Cronica de Hoy, 07/04-06/05, 07/11/05, 07/20/05; La Crisis, 07/04-06/05, 07/13/05, 07/18-20/05; La Jornada, 07/04-06/05, 07/16/05, 07/18-20/05)

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