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Center-Left Candidate Leads Tight Chiapas Gubernatorial Election

by LADB Staff

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In an outcome reminiscent of the July 2 federal elections, the gubernatorial race in Chiapas on Aug. 20 was close enough to prompt the two lead candidates both to claim victory. The final numbers released by the Chiapas state electoral agency (Intituto Estatal Electoral, IEE) on Aug. 22, indicated that Juan Sabines Guerrero of the center-left alliance Coalicion por el Bien de Todos defeated his rival Jose Antonio Aguilar Bodegas of the Alianza por Chiapas by a hair.

The IEE statistics, based on the preliminary count (Programa de Resultados Electorales Preliminares, PREP), showed Sabines, a member of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), with 48.39% of the vote, compared with 48.17% for Aguilar Bodegas, who belongs to the long-governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

The PRD joined forces with the Partido del Trabajo (PT) and the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD) to form the Coalicion por el Bien de Todos. The PRI's partner in the Alianza por Chiapas was the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM).

Both campaigns were so confident that the numbers were going to favor them that each held victory celebrations within blocks of each other shortly after the polls closed in the Chiapas capital city of Tuxtla Gutierrez.

As was the case with the federal election, the official results may not be announced for some time because irregularities were reported in as many as 5% of the polling stations. The PRI has already brought a number of challenges to the federal electoral court (Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federacion, TEPJF), citing extremely irregular results from several polling stations. "There are 25 precincts...where the [coalition] won 98% or even 100% of the votes, and where our total is only one vote or zero votes," Aguilar Bodegas told a Mexico City radio station. "On election day there were arrests [of campaign workers], manipulation, and vote buying."

The tight race is a stark contrast to the results of the presidential election in Chiapas, where Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the Coalicion por el Bien de Todos took 43% of the vote, compared with 32% for Roberto Madrazo Pintado of the PRI and 17% for Felipe Calderon Hinojosa of the PAN. One major difference with the federal election is that voter participation in the Chiapas gubernatorial race was relatively low, with slightly more than 40% of registered voters casting ballots. Nationwide participation in the federal election was estimated at about 60% (see SourceMex, 2006-07-12).

In both elections, voter participation was low in the areas of Chiapas controlled by the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN). The decision by voters in Zapatista regions not to participate in the elections may be partly the result of The Other Campaign, coordinated by EZLN

leader Subcomandante Marcos, which not only raised issues about indigenous rights and poverty but also reinforced suspicion about Mexico's political parties (see SourceMex, 2006-01-18 and 2006-07-19).

Still, some voters in the Zapatista region did cast ballots, dividing their loyalties between the PRI and the PRD. "One of the most notable trends from the election was the very clear division in the area dominated by the EZLN, with the communities of Ocosingo, Cintalapa, and Las Margaritas supporting the PRD, while San Cristobal de las Casas, Yajalon, and Tenejapa backed the PRI," said the Mexico City newspaper Cronica de Hoy. Center-left coalition led by PRI defector Some analysts said Sabines was the perfect candidate for the PRD, which needed someone with a track record and high name recognition to wrest the gubernatorial seat from the PRI.

The PRD candidate recently served as mayor of Chiapas' largest city Tuxtla Gutierrez, but as a member of the PRI. He left that party when he was bypassed for the gubernatorial candidacy in favor of the party's eventual candidate Aguilar Bodegas, who was the personal choice of PRI presidential candidate Madrazo. "One of the most important assets for Juan Sabines' candidacy was his name. His father, also named Juan Sabines, was governor during those periods when the PRI overwhelmingly dominated the state. His uncle Jaime is the state's most famous poet," said syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento, who also noted Sabines' strong performance as mayor of Tuxtla Gutierrez.

Aguilar trailed Sabines in most public-opinion polls conducted before the election by five to 11 percentage points. The PRI candidate received a boost when rivals from the governing center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) and the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL) withdrew from the race and threw their support behind Aguilar. PAN candidate Francisco Rojas Toledo had received as much as 15% support in some pre-election polls. In the election, Rojas Toledo obtained about 2.6% of the vote, as his name remained on the ballot even though he had withdrawn.

PANAL candidate Emilio Zebadua Gonzalez, a former PRD member, obtained about 1% of the vote. None of the votes for Rojas or Zebadua can be transferred to Aguilar since the PAN and PANAL did not create a formal alliance with the PRI-PVEM.

PAN throws support to PRI candidate

Critics said the PAN decision to back Aguilar was an unprecedented move, as the center-right party has never publicly formed any coalition with the PRI in any state or federal elections. "We have never seen this type of circumstance before, where a party created with the sole purpose of fighting the PRI forced its candidate to decline in favor of the PRI candidate," said Jesus Ortega, coordinator of the PRD presidential campaign. Rojas Toledo said, however, that he was totally on board with the decision. "I do not regret this decision," he said.

At a press conference, PAN and PANAL officials cited several reasons to support the PRI, including concerns that outgoing Gov. Pablo Salazar Mendiguchea was using state resources illegally to conduct a "state-sponsored" election on behalf of Sabines. Salazar, who remained an independent during his six-year term in office, is a former PRI member who was elected with the support of a broad coalition that included the PRD and the PAN. He was fairly close to President Vicente Fox

during his term in office, but the relationship with the federal government began to deteriorate earlier this year.

Relations between the federal government and the Salazar administration were at their worst in July of this year, when Social Development Secretary Teresa Aranda accused the governor of appropriating some of the 11 billion pesos (US\$1 billion) in federal funds that had been designated for housing relief in some areas in Chiapas that were most affected by Hurricane Stan.

Tight presidential race a factor in Chiapas campaign

The PAN and PANAL said a second reason to back Aguilar was concern that presidential candidate Lopez Obrador was using the Chiapas election to further his political agenda.

The presidential candidate for the Coalicion por el Bien de Todos has launched a major civil-disobedience campaign in Mexico City to protest what he believes was massive fraud in the July 2 election, which gave a narrow victory to PAN candidate Calderon (see SourceMex, 2006-07-12). Among the actions by Lopez Obrador and tens of thousands of supporters was taking over Paseo de la Reforma and Avenida Juarez, paralyzing traffic on two of the capital's major arteries (see SourceMex, 2006-08-09).

"We want to make it very clear that we see Lopez Obrador's hand in the election [in Chiapas]," PAN president Manuel Espino Barrientos said at a press conference announcing the party's decision to back Aguilar. Also present at the press conference was PANAL presidential candidate Roberto Campa Cifrian, who is a former PRI member. Calderon, who was not present at the press conference, said he had nothing to do with the decision. "I had no input on this matter," said the PAN candidate. "I intend to stay out of decisions that are strictly related to the party operations."

Lopez Obrador took time off from his huge protest campaign in Mexico City to travel to Chiapas to campaign for Sabines shortly after the PAN and PANAL announced their support for Aguilar. During a speech, he said the PAN decision to back the PRI was part of a conspiracy to deny him the presidency. He accused the PAN of offering to support the PRI in the Chiapas gubernatorial race in exchange for formal recognition of Calderon's victory on July 2. "There is a group of PAN and PRI members who want to maintain a culture of corruption and impunity,

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