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PAN Faces Competitive Gubernatorial Races in Yucatan, Baja California

by LADB Staff

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The governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) is facing strong challenges in gubernatorial races in Yucatan and Baja California this year. Both states have been considered strongholds for the center-right party, but a split in Yucatan and a potentially strong candidacy from Tijuana Mayor Jorge Hank Rhon of the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) could lead to losses for the PAN in the two upcoming elections.

The unexpectedly competitive races are just two of the problems facing the PAN, which is also having to put out several fires that threaten party unity. These include controversial comments by party president Manuel Espino about Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero on the eve of Mexican President Felipe Calderon's visit to Spain and disputes among party members in Aguascalientes and Guerrero states.

Split jeopardizes party's chances in Yucatan

The PAN is sweating out the gubernatorial election in Yucatan because of a split within its ranks. Until recently, the party appeared to be in a very solid position to retain control of the statehouse in the May 20 election to succeed outgoing Gov. Patricio Patron Laviada. The party's chances began to unravel following a dispute regarding the election of former Merida mayor Xavier Abreu Sierra to represent the party in the gubernatorial race.

Longtime PAN member Ana Rosa Payan Cervera, also a former Merida mayor, charged that Patron Laviada interfered in the selection process, effectively handing the nomination to Abreu Sierra. Abreu obtained slightly more than 50% of the votes cast by 11,100 PAN members in the state, compared with 36% for Payan and 13% for Luis Correa Mena, another ex-mayor of Merida.

Payan, who retains a strong following among the PAN faithful in Yucatan, appealed Abreu's selection to the national PAN leadership. When her efforts did not succeed, Payan resigned from the party to seek other avenues to run for the gubernatorial seat. Payan offered to represent an alliance of opposition parties. She initially considered running with the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL) as an anchor, but discarded this option after determining that she would lose support from the Frente Amplio Progresista (FAP).

The FAP comprising the Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), the Partido del Trabajo (PT), and the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD) said PANAL conspired with the PAN to steal the presidential election from center-left candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador in July 2007. Lopez Obrador lost by fewer than 250,000 votes (see SourceMex, 2006-07-12 and 2006-08-30). PANAL was founded by Elba Esther Gordillo, leader of the teachers union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educacion, SNTE) and close ally of Calderon.

Ex-PAN member to represent center-left coalition

In the end Payan decided to shun PANAL and go exclusively with the FAP, which has broader support in Yucatan. She made it clear, however, that her political philosophy remained closer to that of the PAN than to the PRD-led FAP, even asking that Lopez Obrador not campaign with her. "[Lopez Obrador] does not know about the needs of Yucatan," said Payan. The center-left parties also agreed to Payan's request that the PRD, PT, and PCD banners not be displayed during her campaign. Instead, the coalition will choose a common name and a banner for the Yucatan election.

The PCD, meanwhile, has recruited PAN defector Silvia Lopez Escoffie to represent the party in the mayoral election in Merida. PCD officials are hoping that the PRD and the PT will also support Lopez Escoffie, a former federal deputy, which would make her a coalition candidate. She will face the PAN's Cesar Bojorquez Zapata, a close ally of Abreu Sierra. The PAN's support in Yucatan has been strongest in Merida, which it governed even in years when the PRI held the gubernatorial seat.

Payan, a member of the PAN for 23 years, and the center-left coalition are strange bedfellows. Many critics often likened her to former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher because of her hard line against opposition parties, particularly the PRI. "The PRD also hated her because of the tough stance she took against leftist movements," said the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada. Still, the decision to run with Payan could be beneficial for the PRD, whose following in Yucatan is not as strong as it is in other southeastern states like Guerrero, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo, and Chiapas.

Former PRD deputy Erick Villanueva Mukul, who had been widely expected to win the FAP's nomination before the FAP went with Payan, was not pleased with that choice. He said, however, that he would not challenge the decision to ensure that the party remains united going into the election. While Payan is expected to take some of the PAN vote with her, the wild card in the election is the PRI, which had held the gubernatorial post for decades until it lost to Patron Laviada in 2002 (See SourceMex, 2001-05-30).

The PRI, which still has ample support in Yucatan, will be represented by ex-federal senator Ivonne Ortega Pacheco, a young politician who is highly popular among PRI members in Yucatan. There has been some talk that the PRI would join the PRD-PCD-PT coalition to form a united front against the PAN, but this is not likely. For now, Ortega is focusing her attacks on the PAN, Laviada, and Abreu rather than Payan. She has accused the incumbent of resorting to the same vote-buying practices that kept the PRI in power in Yucatan for many generations.

"[The PAN] continues to distribute construction materials," said Ortega. "We are ready to file a formal complaint." PAN officials are extremely worried about Payan's candidacy. "Definitely, we sense a danger in the elections," said PAN Sen. Alfredo Rodriguez y Pacheco, who represents the party in the upper house. He raised concerns that the party could eke a narrow win and remain divided after the election. "We have to provide opportunities for reflection to allow our members to overcome our internal differences," said the PAN senator.

Tijuana mayor poses formidable opponent in Baja California

In Baja California, the PAN could face a formidable opponent in Tijuana Mayor Jorge Hank Rhon, son of the late Carlos Hank Gonzalez, a powerful and corrupt politician who wielded great power within the PRI. Jorge's brother, Carlos Hank Rhon, is one of Mexico's most powerful business leaders. Jorge Hank Rhon, who won a surprising victory over his PAN opponent in the 2004 Tijuana mayoral election (see SourceMex, 2004-08-04), had no prior political experience. He was known in Tijuana primarily for his gambling and racetrack operations.

Believing that Hank Rhon was its best option to win the Aug. 5 election to succeed PAN Gov. Eugenio Elorduy Walther, the PRI leadership took no chances and anointed the Tijuana mayor as its gubernatorial candidate in a closed-door session. The state party's 350-member council later ratified the decision. The move prompted protests from potential candidates about the lack of democracy in the process. "We cannot allow a few people to claim ownership of our party and make decisions of behalf of thousands of PRI members," said ex-Mexicali mayor Eduardo Martinez Palomera. "I wanted to compete in a democracy."

Still, Martinez was in the minority, with most party members focusing on the possibility of victory in August. "We see that there is only one person who will lead us to victory, and that person is Jorge Hank," said Edna Perez Corona, one of the state council members who approved Hank's nomination. Some PRI members emphasized that, while there was no public debate, Hank Rhon's candidacy was the result of an exhaustive internal process. "This was a task that took much time, many discussions," said federal Sen. Fernando Castro Trenti, who once served as an aide to Hank.

The PRI's decision to go with Hank came just a day after the federal electoral court (Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federacion, TEPJF) ruled against a motion brought by PAN leaders in Baja California seeking to prevent the Tijuana mayor from running for governor. In challenging Hank's right to seek higher office, the PAN had cited a law approved by the Baja California legislature in 2002, which prohibited any elected official from resigning a post to run for another position.

The TEPJF said it could not consider the PAN complaint because the electoral season in Baja California had not yet officially begun. The PAN has yet to designate its gubernatorial candidate, but some major divisions are already evident among factions of the party. The contest is shaping up to be a bitter battle between two former Tijuana mayors, Jose Guadalupe Osuna Millan and Francisco Vega de LaMadrid.

Gov. Elorduy has pledged not to take sides, but critics fear that he will tacitly support Osuna Millan. Vega de LaMadrid was linked closely to the late PAN Gov. Hector Teran, Elorduy's predecessor. Some analysts likened the PAN's situation in Baja California to that in Yucatan, where two strong candidates are splitting the party. "Vega de LaMadrid has a very strong personality, and he believes that the party owes him because he deferred to Eugenio Elorduy in the last internal election," said political science professor Cuauhtemoc Lopez Guzman of the Universidad Autonoma de Baja California (UABC).

"Even if the PAN does not experience the same type of break as in Yucatan, it will be weakened," said syndicated columnist Miguel Angel Granados Chapa. "This is a party that won the last three gubernatorial elections by a wide margin."

The Aug. 6 election will clearly be a contest between the eventual PAN candidate and Hank Rhon. The center-left parties, which enjoy only a small amount of support in the state, are also experiencing a split. The PRD has already announced it will run its own candidate rather than form a coalition with its FAP partners, the PT and PCD, which could work in favor of the PAN. The PRD has raised the possibility of recruiting the PRI's Martinez Palomera as its candidate, which could result in the loss of some support for Hank Rhon.

Party leader Espino embarrasses President Calderon

The PAN is facing fractures and disputes on other fronts. One of the most visible splits emerged during President Calderon's visit to Spain in late January. In a widely publicized interview with the Spanish daily La Razon, PAN president Espino criticized Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero for having "a tolerant attitude toward terrorism" and "trying to dialogue with organized crime." Espino's statements caused significant embarrassment to Calderon because they were published the day before he was to meet with Rodriguez Zapatero.

Calderon was forced to issue a statement distancing himself from Espino's comments and apologizing to the Spanish leader. "I respect everyone's opinion, but I clearly and resoundingly recognize and support the Spanish government's struggle and efforts in this area," Calderon told reporters. Espino's maverick style and his failure to consult with the president before making such an important statement on foreign policy have angered many PAN members.

Furthermore, he has long been aligned with an ultraconservative faction of the party known as El Yunque, which has prompted many PAN members to call for his removal (see SourceMex, 2005-03-30). In mid-January, some party members, led by Puebla ex-mayor Luis Paredes, held a rally for the removal of Espino and the expulsion of all El Yunque members from the party.

PAN also faces feud in Aguascalientes, scandal in Guerrero

The PAN also had a major problem in Aguascalientes state, where the state party leadership and some state legislators became embroiled in a very acrimonious dispute with Gov. Luis Armando Reynoso Femat. Party leaders threatened to expel Reynoso from the PAN because he allegedly violated party statutes with his decision to allow the state to incur 2 billion pesos (US\$182 million) in debt. Party statutes prohibit the governor from incurring debt. The debt, payable over a 25-year period, would help fund some state programs.

Reynoso had made this decision in consultation with members of the opposition parties in the Aguascalientes state legislature. The national party leadership (comite ejecutivo nacional, CEN) intervened to prevent Reynoso's expulsion, but tensions remain between the governor and the party leadership regarding the governor's decision on the debt. In late January, some PAN members in the state legislature filed a motion with Mexico's high court (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nacion, SCJN) seeking to reverse Reynoso's decision.

A murder scandal created major problems for the party in Guerrero state. In mid-January, federal authorities arrested Aldy Gonzalez Rodriguez for hiring a gunman to kill PAN Deputy Jose Jorge Bajos Valverde in early January. Bajos was murdered Jan. 4. He had been awarded the at-large seat in Guerrero allocated to the PAN based on the percentage of the votes it received in the July 2 election.

Gonzalez confessed to paying 20,000 pesos (US\$1,825) to Nicolas Artega Cardoso to murder Bajos, so that alternate Jacqueline Orta, who is married to Gonzalez, could assume the seat in the Chamber of Deputies. Also implicated in the plot was Angel Pasta Munuzuri, who directed the PAN presidential campaign in Guerrero state in 2006.

Ramiro Arteaga Sarabia, the PAN president in Guerrero, is also under investigation for possible involvement in the plot. Some observers say the situation may go deeper than a dispute over a seat in Congress. The Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal said Bajos, who once chaired the Guerrero state legislature's committee on budget and public accounts, had investigated 77 municipal governments for misappropriated funds, potentially implicating some of the suspects. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect Feb. 7, reported at 10.96 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: La Revista Peninsular, 01/12/07; El Economista, 01/05/07, 01/07/07, 01/12/07, 01/25/07; Notimex, 01/03/07, 01/08/07, 01/31/07; The Herald-Mexico City, 01/12/07, 01/18/07, 01/31/07; El Financiero, 01/05/07, 01/08/07, 01/12/07, 01/25/07, 01/30/07, 01/31/07, 02/01/07; Excelsior, 01/08/07, 01/22/07, 01/31/07, 02/01/07; The San Diego Union-Tribune, 02/01/07; La Cronica de Hoy, 01/12/07, 01/18/07, 01/19/07, 01/22/07, 01/26/07, 01/30/07, 01/31/07, 02/02/07; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 12/29/06, 01/02/06, 01/04/07, 01/11/07, 01/31/07, 02/06/07; Reforma, 12/30/06, 01/05/07, 01/10/07, 01/11/07, 01/12/07, 01/18/07, 01/19/07, 01/30/07, 01/31/07, 02/01/07, 02/06/07; El Universal, 01/12/07, 01/19/07, 01/22/07, 01/25/07, 01/30/07, 01/31/07, 02/01/07, 02/02/07, 02/05/07, 02/06/07; Por Esto, 02/06/07; La Jornada, 12/29/06, 01/05/07, 01/11/07, 01/12/07, 01/18/07, 01/19/07, 01/22/07, 01/25/07, 01/26/07, 01/30/07, 01/31/07, 02/01/07, 02/02/07, 02/07/07; Milenio Diario, 01/12/07, 01/19/07, 01/22/07, 01/26/07, 01/30/07, 02/01/07, 02/02/07, 02/05-07/07)

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