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## **PRI Recovers Yucatan Gubernatorial Seat, Regains Control of State Legislature**

*by LADB Staff*

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In a hotly contested race, the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) defeated the governing center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) in the Yucatan state gubernatorial election on May 20. The PRI also regained control of the state legislature and won a majority of mayoral elections. Preliminary results released by the state's electoral agency (Instituto de Procedimientos Electorales y Participacion Ciudadana, IPEPAC) on May 21 show PRI candidate Ivonne Ortega Pacheco with 49.7% of the vote, compared with 42.8% for PAN rival Xavier Abreu. Ortega's victory returns the gubernatorial seat to the PRI, which held it for decades before losing it to a coalition led by the PAN in 2001 (see SourceMex, 2001-05-30).

The IPEPAC reported a relatively high turnout, with almost 69% of registered voters casting a ballot. Ortega, a young and charismatic candidate who won the trust of the voters with a vigorous campaign, is the niece of Victor Cervera Pacheco, who was governor of Yucatan from 1984-1988 and from 1995-2001. The connection to Cervera was a double-edged sword for the 34-year-old Ortega. Her late uncle remains a strong symbol for the PRI and Yucatan, and this helped her consolidate the vote from party members.

Conversely, there is some lingering resentment against Cervera because of his heavy-handed style of governance. In 1998, a committee in the federal Chamber of Deputies sought to oust Cervera from office because of alleged constitutional violations. The charges against Cervera were based on a technicality, however, and not malfeasance while in office (see SourceMex, 1998-04-22). "Ivonne Ortega's victory is not necessarily good news for the people of Yucatan," the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada said in an editorial. "It signifies the return to office of the faction of the PRI identified with heavy-handed tactics and favoritism, which were put in place by ex-governor Victor Cervera Pacheco."

In her victory speech, Ortega attempted to distance herself from her uncle's legacy and focused her comments on denouncing the nepotism rampant during the administration of outgoing PAN Gov. Patricio Patron Laviada. "I will meet my commitment to bring professionalism to the state attorney general's office and the comptroller's office," said Ortega. "The top prosecutor and the comptroller will no longer be appointed just because they are friends of the governor."

Ortega is the first woman elected to the governor's seat in Yucatan. Dulce Maria Sauri Riancho served for two years from 1991 to 1993, but she was appointed to replace former Gov. Victor Manzanilla Schaffer. Ortega will also be one of two women serving as chief executive of a Mexican state, along with Gov. Amalia Garcia of Zacatecas.

## *Internal divisions doom PAN*

The PAN's defeat was widely attributed to divisions within the party and to a backlash against corruption in the Patron administration. The outgoing governor not only alienated a segment of his own party but was also criticized for acts of patronage and nepotism. The divisions in the PAN were first exposed during the primary election in which Abreu defeated Ana Rosa Payan, the popular former mayor of Merida (see SourceMex, 2007-02-07). Allegations surfaced that Patron intervened unfairly on behalf of Abreu. Payan, who retains a strong following among the PAN faithful in Yucatan, left the party to run first as an independent and later under a coalition formed by the Partido del Trabajo (PT) and Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD).

The PT-PCD candidate obtained about 3.3% of the vote. If all those voters had cast ballots for Abreu, he still would not have defeated Ortega. Still, some Payan supporters who saw little chance for her to win the election may have voted for the PRI. Payan, whose departure from the PAN was less than amicable, said her defection definitely contributed to its defeat not only in the governor's race but also in other elections. "The PAN was overcome by a tsunami," Payan said in an interview with the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma.

"For PAN candidate Xavier Abreu, the name Ana Rosa Payan was a source of many headaches," said the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior. "In the end, she achieved her objective of making the election uncomfortable for her former party colleague." The PT-PCD candidate accused President Felipe Calderon of sending a team of advisers to Yucatan in the weeks leading to the election, despite the president's pledge that he would take a hands-off approach to the race. "There was interference [from the presidency], there's no question about it," said Payan.

Some analysts said Calderon had ample reason to be concerned about the Yucatan election. "The PRI victory is a very hard blow to the PAN not only in the state but at the national level," said syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento. "The PAN has just lost its only stronghold in the southeast. Remember that Yucatan was the only state in the region that Felipe Calderon won in the 2006 presidential election."

At the national level, the election exposed a nasty feud between Calderon and PAN party president Manuel Espino. After the election, Espino said interference by the Calderon administration, namely chief advisor Camilo Mourino, cost the PAN the election.

## *Allegations of corruption also hurt center-right party*

The PRI was not as concerned with Calderon as it was with Patron Laviada. Nerio Torres, the PRI director in Yucatan, said the party had ample evidence that "high-level" state officials had been involved in an illegal campaign to gain votes for the PAN throughout the state. An elections-watchdog group reported that the governor's brother, Antonio Patron Laviada, was engaged in vote buying the night before the election.

The accusation is backed by a video, which shows Antonio with a suitcase presumably full of money to bribe voters in the municipality of Tixcub. Patricio Patron Laviada denied that anyone in his administration or in his family had become involved in illegal campaign activities. "This is a dirty war

against me," said the outgoing governor. Still, Patron Laviada's performance may have contributed as much as Payan to the defeat of the PAN, which had led in public-opinion polls by as many as 20 percentage points at the beginning of the year.

A public-opinion poll conducted in Yucatan by the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal indicated that Patron Laviada had only about a 58% approval rating at the end of his administration. "This is relatively low when compared with other states," said the newspaper. El Universal said many respondents applauded Laviada for public-works and public-assistance programs, but there was strong disapproval for acts of corruption and nepotism. "The party's political strength was diminished because of deficiencies in the sitting governor," said Rodrigo Sandoval, who writes the Juan Ciudadano column in Reforma.

### *Center-left PRD also considered a loser*

While the PAN was by far the biggest loser in the election, the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) also performed poorly. The PRD made some inroads in the 2001 and 2004 elections (see SourceMex, 2001-05-30 and 2004-05-19), but was unable to build on its existing support to mount any challenge in the gubernatorial election. The PRD first committed to back Payan, but internal divisions and concerns about some of her positions forced the party to back down from supporting her candidacy.

Other potential candidates who felt slighted at the initial choice of Payan refused to represent the PRD in the election, leaving the party to run with comedian Hector Herrera, who obtained 1.7% of the vote. The PRD's poor performance was also reflected in legislative and municipal races. The party won none of the directly elected seats in the state legislature and qualified for only one of the at-large seats allocated based on the percentage of the vote received.

In addition, the PRD lost mayoral seats it won in the 2004 mid-term election, including in Valladolid, Yucatan's third-largest city. The PRI was the biggest winner in the state legislative elections, taking 10 of the 15 directly elected seats, compared with only five for the PAN. Including at-large seats, the PRI will have 14 legislators, compared with nine for the PAN and one each for the PRD and the PT-PCD coalition.

More importantly, the PRI won an overwhelming majority of the 106 mayoral elections. The PAN was able to retain Merida, which it has governed for the past 17 years. Preliminary results showed PAN candidate Cesar Bojorquez Zapata defeating PRI rival Adolfo Peniche by a few thousand votes. Even in Merida, the PAN had a more difficult time than usual, facing a tighter-than-anticipated mayoral election and losing several important legislative districts to the PRI. A few days after the election, the PRI was refusing to concede in the Merida mayoral race, with the count still not completed.

Sarmiento said another important outcome from the election was the victory of Jose Adonay Aviles Sierra, a candidate who is not aligned with any party, in the mayoral race in the municipality of Yobain. "This would be the first time in the history of modern Mexico that a candidate with no party affiliation won an election," said the syndicated columnist. "Yucatan could set the trend for independent candidacies."

The Mexican high court (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nacion, SCJN) paved the way for Aviles' candidacy with a ruling late last year that political candidates can participate in state elections without having to affiliate with any party (see SourceMex, 2006-10-04). Some analysts say the ruling sets a precedent for independent candidates to attempt to run in the 2012 presidential election. In 2005, the federal electoral agency (Instituto Federal Electoral, IFE) denied a place on the ballot to two independent candidates, Jorge Castaneda and Victor Gonzalez Torres, citing Mexico's electoral code (see SourceMex, 2005-11-30).

### *President Calderon denies charges of collusion with PRI*

President Calderon wasted no time in congratulating Ortega on her victory and offered to work in a close and cooperative manner with her government. Calderon's quick response, along with Abreu's pledge not to challenge the final count, led to some charges that the PRI victory was the result of an accommodation between the PRI and the PAN. "It is regrettable [that those who make the accusations] have decided to insult the dignity of the citizens of Yucatan," said Ortega. "Many Yucatecos stood in long lines for the chance to cast their votes."

Ortega said the PRI's only agreement with the Calderon administration before the election was a pledge by the president that he would not intervene in the election in any way. "I have to recognize that the president kept his word and did not intervene in the process," said the governor-elect.

Some observers say the charges that the Calderon government colluded with the PRI may be rooted in the president's close working relationship with the opposition party in the early days of his administration. "After taking office in December Calderon boosted his approval rating by forming an alliance with the PRI," said the Mexico City English-language newspaper The Herald, which noted that PRI-PAN alliance helped Calderon ensure passage of a controversial bill to lower federal spending on government pensions (see SourceMex, 2007-03-28).

Other analysts noted that the relatively comfortable margin of victory ensured that the PAN would not challenge the results. "The result allows the PRI to be more comfortable and not be threatened by its alliance with Calderon," Daniel Lund, president of the Mexico City-based polling and consulting firm MUND Americas told The Herald. "It generally moves things forward."

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