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PAN Wins Big in Baja California Election; Loses Ground in Aguascalientes

by LADB Staff

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The governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) retained control of Baja California state, scoring easy victories in the gubernatorial race, the mayoral elections in four of the five largest cities, and the state legislature in an election Aug. 5. The PAN's strong performance was balanced by a disappointing showing in the central state of Aguascalientes, where the ruling party lost control of several mayoral seats, including in the capital city, and the state legislature to the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

The PRI also swept the state legislative elections in Oaxaca state in an election decided by only about one-third of the state's registered voters. The biggest loser, said analysts, was the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), which received a very low percentage of the vote in Baja California and Aguscalientes and much-less-than-anticipated support in Oaxaca.

PAN turns back challenge from Tijuana mayor

In the Baja California election, PAN candidate Jose Guadalupe Osuna Millan received about 51% of the vote in the gubernatorial race, compared with 44% for Jorge Hank Rhon of the PRI. The PAN headed the Alianza por Baja California, which included the teachers-union-affiliated Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL) and the state party Encuentro Social. Hank Rhon represented the Alianza para que Vivas Mejor, which, in addition to the PRI, included the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM) and the local Partido Estatal de Baja California.

The election featured a spirited and sometimes nasty campaign, with the two parties accusing each other of employing dirty tactics. The PRI charged outgoing Gov. Eugenio Elorduy Walther with interfering in the election, while the PAN accused Hank Rhon's campaign of buying votes. In June, the state electoral court (Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de Baja California, TEPJBC) ordered the PAN to pay a fine of 101,000 pesos (US\$9,235) for running an "offensive and denigrating" advertisement, which it said was intended to harm the PRI candidate. The advertisement did not mention Hank by name, but used a figure that looked like the PRI candidate.

The same TEPJBC disqualified Hank from the race just weeks before the election, following a complaint from the PAN that he had violated a state electoral law that prevents a candidate from running for another post before completing the current term in office. At the time that Hank threw his hat in the ring, he was mayor of Tijuana (see SourceMex, 2007-02-07 and 2007-06-27).

Just days after the TEPJBC disqualified Hank from the election, the federal electoral body (Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federacion, TEPJF) overruled the decision and reinstated his candidacy. Osuna Millan's margin of victory of seven percentage points was large enough that Hank Rhon will probably not challenge the election before the TEPJBC.

Some members of the opposition party said the election reflected a PRI loss, not a PAN victory. Sonora Gov. Eduardo Bours Castelo suggested that the PRI made a mistake in selecting Hank Rhon to represent the party in the election when there were other more competent candidates. The party selected Hank in a closed process, prompting protests from many party members. "It was very clear to me that the citizens were in a punishment mode," said Bours.

Hank, a controversial figure who owns a racetrack and other gambling operations in Tijuana, hurt his chances when he failed to dispel allegations that members of major drug organizations were financing his campaign. Additionally, during the campaign Hank repeated his controversial comments comparing women to animals. During discussions about his private zoo, Hank was asked by reporters to identify his favorite animal. His answer was, "Women." He then tried to wiggle out of that answer, saying, "Aren't we all animals?"

The PAN also scored big in the mayoral and state legislative elections. The center-right party recovered the mayoral seat in Tijuana, which it had lost to the PRI in the 2004 race (see SourceMex, 2004-08-04). In addition, the governing party also won races in three other major cities, Ensenada, Mexicali, and Tecate, but narrowly lost the race in Rosarito to the PRI. \

In the state legislative elections, the PAN took 12 of 16 directly elected seats, with the PRI and the PANAL taking two seats each. With the PANAL aligned closely with the PAN, this means that Governor-elect Osuna Millan is likely to have a friendly state legislature.

PAN loses major mayoral races, legislature in Aguascalientes

In contrast to the strong showing in Baja California, the PAN suffered major losses in the Aguascalientes mayoral and state legislative elections, amid significant voter apathy. By some estimates, only about 40% of registered voters showed up at the polls in Aguascalientes on Aug. 5. Among the PAN losses were five major cities, including the capital Aguascalientes city, all of which went to the PRI. The PAN had governed Aguascalientes city for the last four terms, an equivalent of 12 years.

The opposition party also wrested control of the state legislature from the PAN, which the center-right party had taken following the convincing election of Gov. Luis Armando Reynoso Femat in 2004 (see SourceMex, 2004-08-04). The PRI won 14 of the directly elected seats, compared with 10 for the PAN, one for the PVEM, and one each for the center-left parties, the Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD).

Some observers suggested that a split in the PAN may have been partly responsible for the governing party's losses, with Reynoso and the state party leadership embroiled in a very nasty feud (see SourceMex, 2007-02-07). "Reynoso is apparently engaged in an all-out war with the state and national leadership of the PAN," said Adrian Trejo, a political columnist for the Mexico City business daily newspaper El Economista. "The division within the PAN in Aguascalientes was a recurring theme during the campaign," said the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma, which noted that the possibility of expelling Reynoso from the party came up several times.

The PRI's strong showing in Aguascalientes follows a similar performance in Chihuahua state on July 1, where the party won 48 of 67 mayoral elections and 15 of 22 directly elected seats in the state legislature. The PRI defeated the PAN in the mayoral race in the border city of Ciudad Juarez, but lost the capital of Chihuahua city to the governing party.

Oaxaca election marred by extremely low voter turnout

The PRI victories in Aguascalientes and Chihuahua were minor compared with its total sweep of the state legislative elections in the embattled state of Oaxaca. The vote was marred, however, by extremely high abstentionism, with only about 35% of registered voters bothering to go to the polls, said the Instituto Estatal Electoral de Oaxaca (IEEO).

The PRI, which ran in a coalition with the PVEM, took all 25 seats up for election in the state legislature. Rather than use the electoral process to show their discontent with the administration of PRI Gov. Ulises Ruiz, leftist organizations opted to boycott the elections altogether. Gov. Ruiz won the gubernatorial race by an extremely narrow margin in 2004, in an election that critics said was riddled with fraud. Since taking office, Ruiz has frequently battled the teachers union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educacion, SNTE) regarding pay and other issues (see SourceMex, 2006-08-02 and 2006-09-13).

The SNTE opposition has widened to include many leftist organizations, which have formed the coalition Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (APPO) to demand Ruiz's resignation. The APPO has been involved in violent clashes with the state and federal governments, with both sides accusing each other of instigating the violence (see SourceMex, 2006-11-01).

The APPO, which had called on its supporters to use the election to cast a "punishment vote" against Ruiz, dismissed the results of the vote, charging that the Oaxaca government manipulated the election by bribing voters. "This was a process orchestrated by the government of Ulises Ruiz, in which voters were bribed with food and other products," said APPO spokesman Castulo Lopez Martinez.

"The effort to rally supporters did not work because the SNTE, in contrast to last year, did not organize in the various communities," said Isidoro Yescas, a researcher at the Universidad Autonoma Benito Juarez de Oaxaca. The PRI's resounding victory in the Oaxaca legislative election greatly weakens the APPO's efforts to remove Ruiz from office before he completes his term in 2010. Oaxaca voters will return to the polls on Oct. 7 to vote for mayors of 147 communities, including Oaxaca city.

Many APPO supporters, along with many voters in Oaxaca who have not sided with either the government or the leftist coalition, apparently did not participate in the election. Many analysts said this was because of a lack of alternatives, with the PAN not seen as a viable option in a state where the party has been traditionally weak.

The biggest surprise, they said, was the disenchantment with the PRD and other parties in its leftist coalition, even though ex-presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador visited the state 10 times during the electoral season to rally his base. "The most serious consequence of the

process was not the defeat of the PRD or the victory of the PRI, but the high level of abstentionism," said Yescas. "This means that society [in Oaxaca] does not see itself represented in the legislative institutions and is seeking other means to express itself, such as social movements."

PRD continues to perform poorly

The lack of support for the PRD stood out like a sore thumb. By some estimates, the PRD received 460,000 fewer votes in Oaxaca during the recent election than during the 2006 presidential race. PRD and PRI officials acknowledged that many would-be voters were turned off by the violence associated with the APPO. "The PRI victory was based on the Oaxaca citizens' rejection of violence and because our candidates offered better alternatives," said Oaxaca PRI official Heliodoro Diaz Escarraga.

Sen. Carlos Navarrete, who heads the PRD delegation in the upper house, expressed similar sentiments. "Our misfortune was in part because of our relationship with the movement headed by the APPO," said the senator. "If there was a punishment vote, it was not against the PRI, but against the PRD for aligning itself with the APPO," said syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento.

PRD secretary-general Jesus Romero Lopez acknowledged that Lopez Obrador's visits to the state during the campaign did little to rally the voters. "There was no Lopez Obrador effect [in this election]," said Romero Lopez. Others agreed with this assessment. "The strategy that centers on promoting a defeated presidential candidate is not supported by the general population," said Pablo Hiriart, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal.

The PRD's poor showing in Oaxaca appears to be a pattern prevalent throughout elections this year, starting with the gubernatorial race in Yucatan, where the center-left party was unable to field a credible candidate. The PRD came in fourth in the contest (see SourceMex, 2007-05-23). "The PRD was erased from the election, despite the proximity of Lopez Obrador's home state of Tabasco," said Trejo. The PRD's performance in Baja California, Oaxaca, and Aguascalientes was also a stark contrast to the level of support received in those states in the presidential election. The PRD obtained only 2.3% of the vote in the Baja California election, compared with 23% in the 2006 presidential race.

Similarly, the party obtained about 7% of the vote in the Aguascalientes mayoral and state legislative races, compared with about 22% in the July 2006 election. The contrast was just as dramatic in Oaxaca, where the PRD's share of the vote was only 27% in the August state legislative election, compared with 46% in July 2006. "The party that emerged as the second-largest force in Mexican politics following the July 2, 2006, presidential election has been unable to capitalize on that position," said El Economista's Trejo.

Even in Zacatecas, which the PRD has governed for almost a decade, the results of the municipal and state legislative elections on July 1 were disappointing. The party retained its plurality in the state legislature, but suffered a net loss of three electoral districts. The PRD and its partners in the Alianza por Zacatecas also lost mayoral elections in the two largest cities, falling to the PAN in the capital of Zacatecas city and to the Partido del Trabajo (PT) in Fresnillo.

The losses in Zacatecas were widely blamed on a feud between two factions, one aligned with Gov. Amalia Garcia and the other with former Gov. Ricardo Monreal. The winner in the Fresnillo mayoral election was the ex-governor's brother David Monreal, who defeated his rival from the PRD. Many PRD members accused Ricardo Monreal of acting against the interests of the party by supporting his brother and other candidates rather than members of his own party. Monreal, who insisted that he had no plans to leave the PRD, was summoned by the national party leadership to explain his role in the election.

Michoacan election a test for PRD

The center-left party is also facing the challenge of overcoming bitter divisions that emerged during the selection of its candidate for the Nov. 11 gubernatorial election in Michoacan, considered a party stronghold. There was bitter infighting between supporters of outgoing Gov. Lazaro Cardenas Batel and Lopez Obrador. In the end, Lopez Obrador's protege, Sen. Leonel Godoy, emerged victorious in the internal election against Enrique Bautista, who was supported by Gov. Cardenas and his father Cuauhtemoc Cardenas.

Three other candidates representing PRD factions also participated in the internal election, including former federal senator Cristobal Arias. The PRD has a decent chance to retain the gubernatorial seat in Michoacan if the party is able to come together, especially since the PRI and the PAN are both expected to field relatively strong candidates, which should divide the opposition vote. A poll by Consulta Mitofsky in August showed Godoy with 26.4% of voter preference, compared with 24% for Salvador Lopez Orduna of the PAN and 16% for Jesus Reyna Garcia of the PRI.

About 23% of the Michoacan voters interviewed for the poll said they had not decided which candidate they would support. In addition to the large number of undecided voters, another factor that could affect the election is whether President Felipe Calderon, a Michoacan native, continues to have fairly high approval ratings, which could translate into votes for Lopez Orduna. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Aug. 8, reported at 10.92 pesos per US\$1.00]

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