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PRD Retains Michoacan Governor's Seat

by LADB Staff

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On Nov. 11, on an electoral Sunday that yielded mixed results for the three major political parties and their allies, the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) narrowly retained the governorship of Michoacan state, while the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) consolidated its dominant position in Puebla and Tamaulipas states, and the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) scored a surprisingly strong victory in the state legislative elections in Tlaxcala state. The PRD also won a slight majority of seats in the Michoacan state legislative elections, fending off a strong challenge from the PAN.

The PRI defeated the PAN in mayoral elections in the largest cities in the four states, including Morelia, Matamoros, Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, Ciudad Victoria, Puebla City, and Tlaxcala City. The PRD came in a distant third in those races. The elections were marred by relatively low voter participation, charges of vote-buying, and allegations that drug-trafficking organizations provided funding or were involved in some way in the electoral campaigns in Michoacan and Tamaulipas.

The two states are home to major drug-trafficking operations (see SourceMex, 2005-06-22, 2006-04-19, and 2007-07-26). Observers said all three major parties engaged in the long-standing practice of bribing citizens to secure their vote. "One of the worst vices of our electoral tradition resurfaced [on Sunday], even though we had thought that we had left it behind with the advent of a more democratic system," said Yuria Sierra, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior. "The common denominator in Sunday's election was that the PAN, the PRD, and the PRI accused each other of engaging in this practice."

Voter turnout was low, about 50% in all four states. This was especially surprising in Michoacan, which had a very competitive gubernatorial race between the PRD and the PAN. "The political parties have lost the confidence of the people," said Ricardo Rubi Bustamante, president of the Michoacan state chapter of the Consejo Coordinador Empresarial (CCE). In Puebla City, the election for mayor and representatives to the state legislature drew less than 40% voter participation. One major development, said Sierra, was the election of two women, both members of the PRI, as mayors of major cities. They were Blanca Alcala Ruiz in Puebla City and Lorena Cuellar Santos in Tlaxcala City.

PRD retains Michoacan governorship

In the Michoacan gubernatorial election, Leonel Godoy Rangel of the PRD defeated Salvador Lopez Orduna of the PAN by slightly more than 4 percentage points, a difference of about 30,000 votes. Godoy's victory was in line with several pre-election polls, which had predicted a narrow win for the PRD candidate. He was also representing the Partido del Trabajo (PT), the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD), and the Partido Alternativa Socialdemocrata y Campesina (PASC) in a coalition called Por el Bien de Michoacan.
Official results showed that Godoy obtained almost 38% of the vote, compared with a little more than 33% for Salvador Lopez Orduna of the PAN and about 25% for Jesus Reyna Garcia of the PRI. Godoy, who will succeed fellow PRD member Lazaro Cardenas Batel, will serve for only four years because of changes to the Michoacan Constitution to align state races with the federal elections by 2015 (see SourceMex, 2007-03-07).

The PRD candidate fended off a strong challenge from Lopez Orduna, who was running in a coalition with the Partido Nueval Alizanza (PANAL). The PAN candidate likely benefited from President Felipe Calderon's popularity in Michoacan, his native state. Additionally, the affiliation with PANAL, which is close to the teachers union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educacion, SNTE), also boosted the number of votes for Lopez Orduna. Analysts said the key to Godoy's victory was his decision during the campaign to minimize his connections to fellow PRD member and recent presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who has lost favor with a large share of the electorate because of his open defiance of President Felipe Calderon's administration.

Lopez Obrador, who set up a "parallel government," lost the election to Calderon by about 236,000 votes (see SourceMex, 2006-08-09). Even some key PRD members, such as Sen. Carlos Navarrete, acknowledged that the center-left party asked Lopez Obrador to keep a low profile during the Michoacan elections to help Godoy win. This request came even though Lopez Obrador received 100,000 more votes than Calderon in Michoacan during the 2006 presidential election. "Notably absent from the victory celebration were Lopez Obrador and [ex-Mexico City mayor] Alejandro Encinas," reported the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio Diario. Encinas is said to be Lopez Obrador's top choice to lead the PRD as it moves into its internal elections in the next few months, but he is expected to face a tough race from Jesus Ortega of the Nueva Izquierda faction.

Godoy denied that Lopez Obrador's absence during the campaign represented a break with the center-left politician. "[Lopez Obrador] knows the difference between being a political candidate and an office holder," the governor-elect said following a meeting with Lopez Obrador after the election. "When you're in office you have to maintain relations with all other levels of government."

During the campaign, Godoy highlighted his strong connections to outgoing Gov. Cardenas Batel and his father Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, who served as Michoacan governor and Mexico City mayor and also as the PRD's presidential candidate in three elections. The Cardenas family is linked closely with the Nueva Izquierda faction of the PRD. Godoy pledged to continue Cardenas Batel's policy of maintaining a cooperative relationship with the Calderon administration. "We will have a relationship of respect with the federal administration," said Godoy, who has served as PRD president and as federal senator. "This is what happens in any democratic country where you have parties of different political orientations."

Some observers suggested a Godoy victory was more beneficial strategically to Calderon than a Lopez Orduna win. Leo Zuckermann, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior, said Calderon could not afford a post-electoral conflict in his own state, particularly when the administration is attempting to devote its full attention to the recent weather-related disaster in Tabasco (see SourceMex, 2007-11-07).
"Imagine a scenario where Lopez Orduna had won the election by one percentage point, when all the pre-election polls were pointing to a Godoy victory," said Zuckermann, who noted that the PRD had already prepared its challenges in case it lost the election. "A Godoy victory was more convenient for Calderon, especially because the PRD candidate had already expressed willingness to work closely with the administration."

The narrow gap between the PRD and the PAN was also evident in the state legislative elections. According to the state electoral agency (Instituto Electoral de Michoacan, IEM), the PRD won 11 of the 24 directly elected seats in the state legislature, matching its total three years ago. The PAN scored victories in nine electoral districts, while the PRI took four seats.

The PAN's support appeared to come at the expense of the PRI, which won 10 seats in the 2004 election, compared with three for the PAN. Because of the plan to align the Michoacan elections with the presidential race by 2018, the newly elected legislators will serve four years instead of the customary three. This means the next election will take place in 2011 instead of 2010.

For the PRI, the one significant development in Michoacan was its victory in the mayoral election in the capital of Morelia, which had been governed by the PAN. PRI candidate Fausto Vallejo easily defeated his PAN rival Eloy Vargas. With the victory in Morelia, the PRI took 49 of the mayoral elections in Michoacan, compared with 41 for the PRD and 18 for the PAN.

**PRI Sweeps Puebla, Tamaulipas; PAN surprise winner in Tlaxcala**

The PRI's best performances came in Puebla and Tamaulipas, two states where the party has traditionally been strong. There were no gubernatorial elections in either state this year, but the party won those races by landslides in 2004 (see SourceMex, 2004-11-17). This year, the PRI won state legislative elections overwhelmingly, in what is known in Mexican politics as "carro completo."

In Tamaulipas, the PRI won all the 19 directly elected seats in the state legislature. The inability of the PAN to win a single seat was a major setback for the governing party, which also suffered heavy losses in the municipal races. The PRI retained the mayoral seats in Matamoros, Nuevo Laredo, Ciudad Madero, and Tampico, and ousted the PAN from Reynosa and Ciudad Victoria. The PRI, which ran in partnership with the PVEM, had a similarly strong performance in Puebla, taking all the 26 directly elected seats in the state legislature and winning 143 of the 217 mayoral races, including contests in the cities of Puebla, Tehuacan, and Cholula. "The PRI victory in Puebla was also a setback for the PAN, which not only failed to win a single legislative seat but also lost important cities like San Martin Texmelucan, Zacatlan, and Atlixco," said the Puebla-based daily newspaper La Jornada de Oriente.

Some party officials said the PRI's strong showing in Puebla indicated that Gov. Mario Marin remained strong in the state despite the scandal surrounding his participation in the illegal detention of journalist Lydia Cacho in 2006 (see SourceMex, 2006-02-22, 2006-04-26 and 2006-09-27). "This is a favorable referendum on the governor, who was never abandoned by the PRI," said the party's vote coordinator Javier Lopez.
PRI president Beatriz Paredes said the PRI victories in Puebla and Tamaulipas would go a long way in helping the party recover the confidence of Mexican citizens following the poor performance in the 2006 presidential election. In that election, PRI candidate Roberto Madrazo came in third (see SourceMex, 2006-07-12).

Paredes put a positive spin on the Tlaxacala elections, highlighting Lorena Cuellar's victory in the mayoral election in the state capital. But this win could not compensate for the PRI's inability to win a single seat in the state legislature, with the PAN and its coalition partner Alianza Ciudadana winning 14 of the posts and the PRD taking the other five. As recently as 1995, the PRI held 15 of the 19 state legislative seats, with that total dropping to 14 in 1998 and eight in 2004.

The Tlaxcala elections, in contrast, were a milestone for the PAN, which was only a minor player in state politics until 2004. That year, PRI defector Hector Ortiz took advantage of a scandal in the PRD and a weakened PRI structure to score a surprise victory for the PAN (see SourceMex, 2004-11-17). Ortiz's personal popularity was a factor in the elections, some observers said. "Practically all the candidates aligned with Ortiz won a seat in the state legislature," reported La Jornada de Oriente. The PRD accused Ortiz of violating election statutes by campaigning for PAN candidates, accusing the governor of using state money on their behalf.

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