10-8-2008

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PRI Wins Big in Guerrero State Election, Defeating Divided PRD

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2008-10-08

Under normal circumstances, state legislative and mayoral elections fly under the radar, especially if they do not include a gubernatorial race. But this year, elections at the municipal and state level in Guerrero, held Oct. 5, gained nationwide attention, not only because they appeared to signal the return of the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), but also because they exposed the growing split in the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD).

To add to the intrigue, there were PRD charges that the drug cartels had participated in the PRI campaigns in Guerrero, one of the states where the drug trade has exploded in recent years. To that end, election officials have begun to take steps to ensure that drug money does not make its way into the federal congressional races in 2009.

PRI wins mayoral seats in major cities, assumes control of state legislature

The PRI flexed its muscles in the Oct. 5 election, winning the mayoral races in all the state's major cities, including Chilpancingo, Acapulco, Zihuatanejo, Iguala, and Taxco. Three of those cities Acapulco, Zihuatanego, and Iguala had been governed by the PRD, while a mayor from the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) had led Taxco.

The PRI also won 15 of the 28 directly elected seats in the state legislature. With the at-large seats, which are distributed based on proportion of the vote received by each party, the PRI is likely to control 20 seats in the next state legislature, compared with only 12 currently.

By contrast, the PRD and its coalition partners had 23 total seats in 2005, but that number will likely drop to 11 in the new legislature. For many observers, the PRI's overwhelming victory in Guerrero could be a sign that the party is poised to score big victories in the next congressional elections, scheduled for July 5, 2009. These elections would come halfway through President Felipe Calderon's six-year term.

A public-opinion survey by the polling firm Buendia & Laredo in September showed 44% support for the PRI ahead of the 2009 election, compared with 34% for the PAN and 19% for the PRD. The Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal commissioned the poll. A similar poll by Buendia & Laredo in July of this year showed the PRI and the PAN tied with 40% each. The biggest shift in public opinion occurred in western and northern states, two regions hit especially hard by a surge in drug-related violence.

There is growing skepticism about the ability of the Calderon government to wage an effective campaign against drug traffickers. "The drug trade is an issue that is especially relevant to the populations of the north and west," said El Universal. "The principal routes of the drug trade are in
the two regions, as is the accompanying violence." Buendia & Laredo said the biggest shift from the PAN to the PRI appeared to be among independent voters in western and northern regions.

Still, the PRI's strong performance in Guerrero and its possible support in the 2009 elections could be a function of the loss of support for its rivals more than its own strength. "In the last couple years, the PRI has become a catch-all party for the increasing number of Mexicans who feel unsatisfied with the other two parties," Jorge Buendia, director of Buendia & Laredo, told The Financial Times.

The PAN received meager support in the 2005 election in Guerrero, but the party fared even worse in 2008. The center-right party not only lost the mayoral election in Taxco but also appeared to win only a single directly elected seat in the state legislature. The PAN's total seats in the state legislature are likely to drop below the four posts the party held in 2005-2008. PRD factions blame each other.

The biggest loser in the Guerrero election was the PRD. The center-left party not only lost three major municipal races but also several elections in small and medium-sized communities. The most significant loss came in Acapulco, the state's largest city, which the PRD had governed since 1999. Acapulco is important because the city is home to about 40% of the state's electorate. Several politicians who served as mayor of that city have later been elected governor, including current Gov. Zeferino Torreblanca, a member of the PRD.

PRI candidate Manuel Anorve Banos, who served as interim mayor of Acapulco twice before, won the election with only about 35% of the vote. The rest of the vote was divided between two center-left candidates, Luis Walton of the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD) and Gloria Sierra of the PRD. Some polls had projected a narrow victory by Walton. "The victory in Acapulco by Manuel Anorve of the PRI was a mild surprise, as Walton was expected to win with the support of [Andres Manuel] Lopez Obrador, Ricardo Monreal, and the PRD organization from Tabasco state," wrote columnist Manuel Moreno in the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior.

The split vote reflected the recent power struggle between two PRD factions, the Nueva Izquierda, led by former Sen. Jesus Ortega, and the Izquierda Democratica, which is loyal to former presidential candidate Lopez Obrador (see SourceMex, 2008-03-26 and 2008-06-04). The PCD forms part of the center-left Frente Amplio Progresista (FAP), which also includes the PRD and the Partido del Trabajo (PT). The coalition was formed in 2006 to support Lopez Obrador's presidential candidacy. "The PRD lost because it has failed to acknowledge that its internal battle has weakened the party," said Octavio Rodriguez Araujo, columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada. "The party is approaching a dangerous crossroads where it may lose the support of citizens around the country."

With Sierra aligned with the Nueva Izquierda, Lopez Obrador and other members of the Izquierda Democratica opted to support Walton. Sierra accused PRD Sen. Monreal of working for the PCD candidate instead of supporting his own party. "This turned out to be a fight of PRD members against PRD members," said Sierra. Monreal denied any responsibility for Sierra's loss and offered to resign from the party if PRD leaders could prove that he had worked on behalf of Walton. Despite
the denials, PRD officials plan to launch an investigation into what role, if any, Monreal and Lopez Obrador played in the party's defeat in the Guerrero elections.

Members of the Izquierda Democratica faction, meanwhile, put the blame for the losses in Guerrero squarely on the shoulders of Gov. Torreblanca and outgoing Acapulco Mayor Felix Salgado Macedonio. Some critics said the loss in Acapulco is the result of the poor performance of three successive PRD administrations in the port city, particularly the last three-year term under Salgado.

Jorge Fernandez Hernandez, a columnist for Excelsior, said drug-related violence has exploded in the city during the past three years. In addition, the mayor has failed to take steps to stem the increased pollution at beaches and other public facilities in the city. "The [PRD's electoral] disaster is an indictment of the government of Felix Salgado Macedonio," said Fernandez. The Acapulco mayor denied any role in the party's losses. "I am not the party's president," said Salgado.

PCD officials went one step further, accusing Nueva Izquierda of negotiating a pact with the PRI in preparation for the next presidential election. "They plan to work together in the 2012 election," said PCD secretary-general Pedro Jimenez Leon, referring to a recent announcement by national PRD officials, led by Nueva Izquierda, to consider alliances with either the PRI or the PAN in the next presidential election. The divisions in the PRD and the FAP do not bode well for the party and the coalition in the 2009 and 2012 elections. "What will PRD leaders like Jesus Ortega, Guadalupe Acosta Naranjo, [Sen.] Carlos Navarrete, and [Deputy] Javier Gonzalez Garza say now?" Moreno said in his column. "Surely they will insist that the PRD remains united and that there are no internal disputes."

Drug cartels said to be involved in elections

In the days leading to the election, some allegations surfaced from within the PRD that drug traffickers had supported the PRI electoral campaigns in Guerrero. In an interview with Excelsior at the end of September, Sen. Navarrete, who coordinates the PRD delegation in the Senate, said the support of drug traffickers for the PRI was more practical than ideological. "Narcos do not have an ideology, they have interests and work toward supporting those interests in the most convenient manner," said Navarrete.

The PRD senator said drug traffickers probably carried out the attacks against candidates from his party in the communities of Tierra Caliente and Costa Chica. "I am not going to make a direct accusation because I would have to support it with proof," said Navarrete. "All I have now are indications and suspicions." PRI officials had no immediate comment to Navarrete's allegations. The possible involvement of the drug trade in Mexican elections is a major concern for political parties and for federal electoral authorities. Authorities are looking at two potential problems: that individuals with links to drug cartels would become candidates for the political parties and that the cartels would pour funds into the electoral campaigns. With very few exceptions, authorities have been unable to prove that campaigns have been corrupted by drug money.

Some specific allegations have surfaced, such as the contention by pharmacist Zhenli Ye Gon that the more than US$200 million seized from his house in Mexico City was not the product of drug profits but was stashed there to finance Calderon's presidential campaign (see SourceMex,
Ye Gon, who is in custody in the US, is awaiting extradition to Mexico. Leonardo Valdes Zurita, president of the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE), said he supports a proposal to have the federal intelligence agency (Centro de Investigacion y Seguridad Nacional, CISEN) launch a full investigation of all parties and candidates seeking office in 2009 to determine if any have any ties to the drug trade.

The IFE is also exploring ways to prevent organized-crime money from contaminating the political campaigns. "It is probable that money from illicit sources will attempt to enter the campaigns," said Francisco Javier Guerrero Aguirre, a member of the IFE council. Guerrero said it was important for the electoral institute to ensure a clear and fair process in 2009 so that it could gain the confidence of the citizenry ahead of the 2012 presidential election. "I am concerned about the institute's difficulty in regaining the trust of the voting public," said the IFE councilor.

The political parties are taking their own steps to eliminate or at least minimize the involvement of drug cartels in their campaigns. In late September, the PRD approved a 10-point resolution to protect itself from infiltration from the drug trade. The document calls for extensive background checks on all its candidates. The parties are also looking for direction from the IFE.

Carlos Abascal Carranza, a member of the PAN executive committee, called on the IFE and the political parties to decide on a set of guidelines as soon as possible. "We have three months between now and the start of official electoral campaigns," Abascal said in an interview with the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal. "This is a very short time to decide what I consider a matter of national security." Abascal served as labor secretary and later as interior secretary during the administration of former President Vicente Fox.

There are some concerns that the government might not be able to keep funds from organized crime out of the elections. "The risk of drug money in campaigns is, of course, a latent risk," said Interior Secretary Juan Camilo Mourino. Mourino said the effort to clean up the electoral process could be as difficult as the government's campaign to root out corruption from law-enforcement agencies. "The police are infiltrated, and as long as they are infiltrated we cannot fully guarantee security or secure people's confidence," he said. "Drug traffickers have become the principal threat because they are trying to take over the power of the state," CISEN director Guillermo Valdes Castellanos said in an interview with foreign reporters.

Some critics contend that the government has known that funds from organized crime have tainted electoral campaigns but has taken little or no action. "I have my doubts that the IFE can take any actions in the federal elections during the next year," columnist Abel Magana wrote in El Diario de Mexico. "The drug traffickers may be corrupt but they are not dumb. They will not get caught turning over money in bunches to the future legislators."

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