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LADB Staff

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Partido Revolucionario Institucional Sweeps Midterm Elections At Expense Of Governing Party

by LADB Staff

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With some headlines proclaiming, "The dinosaur has awoken," the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) carved a bigger space for itself on the Mexican political landscape with overwhelming victories in the congressional elections and in five of the six gubernatorial races in the July 5 midterm elections. A less-than-enthusiastic electorate returned the PRI to a dominant political position, with absenteeism and participation in the "blank vote" campaign reportedly high. Under the blank-vote campaign, voters simply marked a big X on their ballot instead of casting a normal vote.

By all accounts, the biggest loser was President Felipe Calderon's governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), which not only lost control of the Congress but also ceded two gubernatorial seats to the PRI. The performance of the left, both the Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and the parties that support ex-presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, was also underwhelming. The PRI's significant victory was evident in almost every corner of the country. The party, which obtained almost 37% of the national vote, will be able to set the agenda in the Chamber of Deputies because it, along with its coalition partner the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM), will control 260 of the 500 seats.

Additionally, the PRI won five of the six gubernatorial elections, pulling upsets against the PAN in Queretaro and San Luis Potosi states. The PRI's only loss in the gubernatorial elections was a surprising defeat to the PAN in Sonora state. Economic slump, violence drove voters to PRI. Many political observers and analysts had already anticipated the PRI's return to power, given the deteriorating Mexican economy with the country's GDP expected to fall by at least 6% this year (SourceMex, May 20, 2009). Plus, voters have major doubts about the effectiveness of Calderon's war on drugs, which has increased, rather than decreased, extreme violence in some parts of the country (SourceMex, January 24, 2007 and November 05, 2008). "If we start with the country's bad situation, both in public safety, with a government so obsessed with combating organized crime, and in an economic crisis that has affected employment and the well-being of the citizenry, then we have a very unfavorable scenario for the government [and the governing party]," wrote columnist Alberto Aziff in the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal.

Aziff, who is affiliated with the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropologia Social (CIESAS), said the PAN was also hurt by its negative campaign tactics against the PRI, a strategy that worked in the 2006 federal election but not in 2009. "The PAN turned the campaign into a referendum on Calderon's policies and lost," said Aziff. Even though recent polls have shown Calderon with a high level of popularity, the public is skeptical about the administration's economic policies. "It is not a good idea to run a plebiscite on the presidency in a recession," said analyst Jeffrey Weldon of the Instituto Tecnologico Autonomo de Mexico (ITAM) in Mexico City.

PRI to determine agenda in new Congress

The PRI won 137 of the 300 directly elected seats in the Chamber of Deputies, plus another 50 in coalition with the PVEM. The PRI-PVEM partnership is likely to get another 73 of the 200 seats allocated based on the percentage of the vote, giving the coalition 260 of the 500 seats in the 2009-2012 session of Congress. In contrast, the PRI-PVEM held only 123 of the 500 seats in the lower house during the 2006-2009 session.

The PAN, which obtained about 28% of the vote and won only 71 directly elected seats in the Chamber of Deputies, will have 143 seats in the next Congress. This is a sharp decline from the 206 seats the party held in 2006-2009. This absolute majority gives the PRI the power to set the legislative agenda in the lower house, although it will have to work with the Senate, where the PAN still has a plurality. Members of the Chamber of Deputies are elected for a single three-year term, while senators serve for a single six-year term. The current Senate was elected in 2006.

One of the first items that the PRI-dominated Congress will have to consider is the 2010 budget. Citing the need to work together in the face of the global economic crisis, Calderon asked the new Congress to negotiate in good faith with the administration. "Now that the election is over, it is time for agreements," the president said in a speech to a business group the day after the election. "Without doubt, one of the most important tasks before us is to find solutions to the impact of the economic crisis on our country." But the Calderon administration will have to be open to granting the PRI many concessions.

In a show of bravado, the outgoing coordinator of the PRI delegation in the lower house, Deputy Emilio Gamboa Patron, demanded that Calderon make changes to his Cabinet. "The president has to know that his Cabinet did not function well," said Gamboa. "He's going to have to closely evaluate his secretaries and then make some decisions." A handful of PRI members who will comprise the 2009-2012 Congress have already started to deliberate on the budget, although they have yet to be sworn in. Proposals will center on promoting a "true austerity" in the Calderon government and decentralizing social programs to make them more responsive to the people, said the new PRI legislators.

The PRI won districts in traditional PAN strongholds in Yucatan and Jalisco states and portions of Puebla, Tamaulipas, and Mexico states. The PRI beat the PAN so badly in Yucatan that the governing party did not win a single congressional district in a state in which it used to be the dominant party. The PRI soundly defeated the PAN in the "blue corridor," an area in Mexico state where the center-right party had been dominant. The area includes the Mexico City suburb of Naucalpan and the city of Toluca.

PRI wins five of six gubernatorial races, but loses Sonora

The PRI also won five of the six gubernatorial seats in play, easily taking three states where it had been favored Nuevo Leon, Campeche, and Colima but also scoring victories in states that the PAN

had expected to retain Queretaro and San Luis Potosi. The only loss for the PRI was Sonora state, where many voters blamed Gov. Eduardo Bours' administration for a fire that killed 47 children at a child-care center in Hermosillo (SourceMex, July 01, 2009).

Some analysts suggested that many voters who would have supported the PRI in the election either stayed home or cast a protest vote for the PAN, both in the gubernatorial race and in the mayoral election in Hermosillo. The PRI also scored major victories in the mayoral elections in Guadalajara and Cuernavaca, two cities where the PAN had run strong in recent years. The PAN managed to retain the mayor's post in Monterrey. The PRI victories also came at the expense of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), particularly in southern and central states. The PRD obtained 12% of the vote and won only 30 directly elected seats but will receive another 40 at-large positions based on proportional vote. Still, the 70 seats that the center-left party will have in the Congress is a sharp contrast to the 127 seats it held in 2006-2009.

The PRD performed well in two of its traditional strongholds, Michoacan and Baja California Sur states. PRD officials said the federal government's move to detain 10 Michoacan mayors accused of protecting local drug traffickers had little impact on the Michoacan election (SourceMex, May 27, 2009). The mayors belonged to the three major political parties. The PRD had developed a coalition with the Partido del Trabajo and Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD) in the 2006-2009 Congress, but that working relationship was nonexistent this year, with the two smaller parties backing a faction of the PRD that supports ex-presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador rather than the party hierarchy.

In the next Congress, the PT will have 13 seats and the PCD six. The Partido Nueva Alianza (PNA), another small party, managed to get enough votes to receive nine at-large seats in the next Congress. One party that had representation in the 2006-2009 Congress, the Partido Socialdemocrata (PSD), received less than 2% of the vote in this election and will lose its registration. The PRI won a big victory over the PRD in the eastern areas of Mexico state, including the "yellow-belt" region, which includes the Mexico City suburbs of Ecatepec and Texcoco. This area had been dominated by the PRD.

The PRI's strong performance in Mexico state could give a boost to Gov. Enrique Pena Nieto, frequently mentioned as the party's likely candidate in the 2012 presidential election. PRD loses some ground in Mexico City The one important area where the PRI was unable to carve a space was in Mexico City, where the voters have refused to support the party since ex-President Miguel de la Madrid's administration mishandled the response to the devastating 1985 earthquake (SourceMex, September 21, 2005). "The PRI debacle [in Mexico City] extends to all areas," said syndicated columnist Miguel Angel Granados Chapa. "With one exception, no candidate from that party has been able to win election to the federal Congress, the mayoralty, the legislative assembly, or the presidency of a borough." The PRD remained the dominant party in Mexico City, but it lost five seats in the legislative assembly (Asamblea Federal del Distrito Federal, ALDF) and the presidency of another borough to the PAN. And, in a reflection of the huge split in the center-left parties, the PT candidate, supported by Lopez Obrador's faction of the PRD, defeated the PRD candidate in the borough of Iztapalapa.

The PT victory in Iztapalapa raised hopes that Lopez Obrador could run again in the 2012 election as a center-left candidate. But he would have to unite the deeply fractured left, which is a very tall order. The faction would also have to choose between Lopez Obrador and Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard, who has also expressed presidential ambitions. As evidence of the split in the left, PRD president Jesus Ortega threatened, without naming names, to expel any PRD member who supported candidates of another party. There were some rumblings within the PRD about Ortega's leadership, with some members calling for his ouster as party president. But the general consensus is that Ortega will survive. This is unlike PAN president German Martinez Caceres, who is expected to leave the post because of the party's dismal performance in the election.

Abstentionism and blank vote also affect election

For many analysts, the PRI victory was not so much an endorsement of that party as a rejection of the PAN. "The PRI returns, but apparently not because of its own merits but rather because of mistakes and rejection of the PAN and the PRD," *El Universal* said in an editorial. The PRI cannot seem to shake off its label as a corrupt party that dominated Mexican politics for seven decades. One newspaper trumpeted the PRI victory with the headline, "The night when the dinosaur awoke." Another headline read, "The dinosaur roars." Still, PRI officials insist that it is a changed and modern party that won the July 5 elections.

During the campaign, the PRI actually used its long tenure in government to sway voters, saying it had experience in solving problems. At the same time, it said the corruption and authoritarianism were a thing of the past. "This is a party that learned from its mistakes and has made adjustments," said PRI president Beatriz Paredes. "This is a PRI that knows how to govern." Still, there was ample evidence of citizen discontent at the ballot box. The Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE) recorded voter participation at about 45%, on par with recent midterm elections, which lack the allure of a presidential race. But 1.3 million ballots, perhaps 5% or 6% of all votes cast, were marked with a big X. This was part of a citizen campaign known as Voto en Blanco, or Voto Nulo, which urged voters to use the election to show their dissatisfaction with all parties (SourceMex, June 24, 2009).

The participation in the campaign varied from state to state, with Mexico City and Jalisco and Aguascalientes states reporting the highest number of voters placing an X on the ballot. In Michoacan state, the entire community of Paracho, with a population of 3,500, voted not to participate in the election. "The people decided not to vote because authorities have not fulfilled their promises," local resident Guadalupe Martinez Rubio told the Mexico City daily newspaper *Reforma*. Some observers criticized the IFE for downplaying the extent of citizen discontent. "The high levels of abstentionism should not be discounted," independent journalist Lydia Cacho said in a column in *El Universal*. "The decision to stay away from the polls is a political act, and the blank vote does not nullify social strength or an ideological position."

Fernando Zea, a political columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper *Excelsior*, noted that the percentage of blank votes was higher than the percentage received by either the PSD or the PCD in the election. "We have to take into account that this movement did not receive any public funding, nor did it participate in any of the 23 million media spots," said Zea. "It was motivated primarily by the disgust of citizens at politicians who lack credibility." Alberto Serdan, one of the organizers of

the Voto en Blanco, said he does not consider the relatively high participation in the campaign as a victory because the effort will not by itself transform Mexico's political system. "We are not satisfied because there is no change," said Serdan. "Even though the citizenry caused a change in the party in power, we are not sure whether the parties will continue the status quo. Until change occurs, we will not be happy."

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