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Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) Narrowly Wins Michoacán Gubernatorial Election Amid Allegations that Drug Cartels Influenced Final Results

by Carlos Navarro

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The elections in Michoacán state on Nov. 13 consolidated the position of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) ahead of the 2012 presidential vote but were also a major blow to the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), which had governed the state for the past two terms. In an election marred by allegations that drug cartels influenced the final results, the PRI narrowly won the gubernatorial race and took a majority of legislative districts and mayoral seats. The race was also somewhat of a disappointment for the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), which had hoped to score a symbolic victory in Felipe Calderón's home state. The PAN narrowly lost the gubernatorial race and turned in a fairly weak performance in the legislative and mayoral races.

While the PRD failed to retain the gubernatorial seat in Michoacán, the center-left party and its allies took a major step during November to unite behind a single candidate. In a nationwide survey by two major polling organizations, respondents affirmed Andrés Manuel López Obrador as the candidate of the center-left coalition in the 2012 election. López Obrador received three votes for every two for his rival, Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard.

PRI retakes governor's seat, wins many mayoral, state legislative races

The PRI victory in the Michoacán gubernatorial race came as a mild surprise, since PAN candidate Maria Luisa Calderón had a slight lead in some polls in the weeks leading to the election. Calderón, sister of Mexican President Felipe Calderón, was far behind at the start of the campaign but quickly narrowed a 22-point deficit to take the lead in one poll. In the end, Calderón received about 33% of the vote, compared with 35% for Fausto Vallejo Figueroa of the PRI and 29% for Silvano Aureoles Conejo of the PRD.

For the PRI, the victory means that the party will return to the governor's seat for the first time since 2002. Lázaro Cárdenas Batel and Leonel Godoy Rangel of the PRD have led the state for the past 12 years.

The PRI also performed well in the state legislative elections, winning 11 seats, compared with eight for the PRD and five for the PAN. This is also a turnaround for the PRI, which won only five districts in the 2008 legislative races, compared with 11 for the PRD and eight for the PAN. An additional 16 seats will be distributed based on the percentage of the vote received by each party participating in the election.

The PRI won 44 mayoral elections, compared with 31 for the PRD, 28 for the PAN, three for the Partido del Trabajo (PT), and one each for the Partido Verde Ecologista de Mexico (PVEM) and the Movimiento Ciudadano (MC). The MC was previously known as the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD). An odd alliance among the PAN, PRI, and PVEM won three other seats.

One of the biggest prizes was the capital city of Morelia, which the PRI won handily. The party also was the victor in most other major cities, including Pátzcuaro, Apatzingán, Uruapan, and Zitácuaro. The major exception was the important port city of Lázaro Cárdenas, which went to the PRD.

The election results should boost the presidential aspirations of PRI candidate Enrique Peña Nieto in 2012. The ex-México state governor acknowledged as much during a speech in Washington, DC, in the aftermath of the Michoacán vote. "This victory in Michoacán consolidates and supports the PRI's position around the country as the party with the most support among the electorate," Peña Nieto said during a presentation at the Woodrow Wilson Center in the US capital.

Did organized crime have a hand in the election outcome?

The PRI's narrow victory in the gubernatorial race drew expected challenges from the PAN and the PRD, particularly in light of allegations that drug cartels had major influence on the outcome.

Recent reports published by the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) and the Secretaría de Seguridad Pública (SSP) confirm that La Familia and its offshoot the Caballeros Templarios (Knights Templar) have gained control of many communities in the mountains of Michoacán, even in some medium-sized cities such as La Piedad. At least one-third of the 113 municipalities in Michoacán—a total of 32—have been designated as trouble spots.

"These are municipalities where the drug cartels and criminal organizations have a strong influence," said Ricardo Alemán, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper *Excelsior*. "In effect, there is nothing to stop the criminal groups from interfering in the elections."

There was some evidence that the cartels were attempting to sway the elections. In La Piedad, Mayor Ricardo Guzmán was gunned down as he handed out campaign literature for Maria Luisa Calderón and other PAN candidates at the end of the campaigning period in early November.

And on election day, the local newspaper *A.M.* published an advertisement warning residents not to campaign for the PAN. "Don't wear T-shirts or PAN advertising because we don't want to confuse you and have innocent people die," read the note, which was also circulated by email. The newspaper added a notice that it was publishing the warning under duress.

There were similar reports of intimidation before and on election day. Many candidates dropped out of their races after receiving threats from cartels. And Germán Tena Fernández, president of the PAN in Michoacán, reported that armed men showed up at several polling locations with instructions for voters on how to cast their ballots.

It was not clear what total impact the incidents had on the election results. The PAN and PRD suggested that, given the tight gubernatorial race, the manipulation might have given the PRI an edge. "Allowing organized crime to manipulate elections will never lead to security," Maria Luisa Calderón said in an interview with the Televisa network.

The PRD called for the elections to be annulled and for authorities to hold a new round of voting.

Aureoles went as far as to accuse the PRI of collusion with the drug-trafficking organizations. "The people of Michoacán won't let themselves be governed by a party with a history of pacts and agreements [with cartels], one that let organized crime coordinate the campaign," Aureoles said in an interview on Televisa.

The PRI dismissed the allegations, challenging the PAN and PRD to present proof. Vallejo rejected the accusations and said he would do everything in his power to defend his victory. Rather than

dwell on the allegations, the PRI candidate acknowledged that the vote was very tight and that it was time to bring the state together. "We won the closest election in the history of Michoacán," said Vallejo. "Now it's time to heal wounds. We are going to work toward the reconciliation of Michoacán."

Still, analysts noted that the party leadership should not ignore the environment under which the PRI won the election and the implications for Peña Nieto if he wins the 2012 presidential election, as most polls suggest at this point. "What is certain is that the PRI's victory in Michoacán under these conditions, more than a source of joy, should be a warning to Enrique Peña Nieto," said Alemán.

Center-left parties unite ahead of 2012 election

Even with the not-so-encouraging news out of Michoacán, the PRD took a step toward party unity when Mexico City Mayor Ebrard publicly accepted the results of a special public-opinion poll in which a majority of respondents favored López Obrador as the candidate of the center-left coalition for the presidency in 2012. The PRD and its allies, the PT and the MC, commissioned the polling organizations Nodos and Covarrubias to conduct the survey among a cross-section of 6,000 voters from all parties. Respondents to the polls, conducted on Nov. 6-11, supported López Obrador by a margin of 3-to-2.

The two candidates had pledged to support the winner ([SourceMex, June 29, 2011](#)), and Ebrard made good on that promise in a joint press conference with López Obrador in mid-November. "I recognize that the vote favors Andrés Manuel López Obrador," said the Mexico City mayor. "It would be a mistake to argue that we are equal. These results define our candidate."

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Ebrard said his main concern now was a united left heading into the 2012 election. "A divided left would only go to the precipice," he said. "I will never be the person who leads Mexico's chances for change to failure."

López Obrador called Ebrard a friend and comrade and an "extraordinary and exceptional politician."

López Obrador and his center-left movement, which will be called the Movimiento Progresista, faces an uphill battle in the election. The coalition not only needs to attract independent voters but must contend with Peña Nieto's personal popularity, which has put him far ahead in the polls.

The PAN could help tighten the race if it nominates a candidate attractive enough to siphon off some of the independent votes that as of now are likely to go to Peña Nieto. But analysts point out that the mood of the voters is for a president who is not from the PAN and who represents a break with the past. Peña Nieto is young enough that he is not associated with the old guard of the PRI, especially among young voters.

López Obrador has recognized the need to obtain support outside the center-left parties and has toned down his fiery rhetoric, which was a hallmark of his 2006 campaign, which he lost by a very narrow margin to Calderón in 2006 ([SourceMex, July 12, 2006](#)).

But some analysts suggest that López Obrador is seen as an "old-guard candidate" and lacks Ebrard's appeal, and this could hurt the center-left coalition in the long run.

"It seems to me that Marcelo had more opportunity to grow in popularity," said José Antonio Crespo, a political analyst at the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE). "López Obrador, despite his more moderate discourse, won't attract independent voters or the protest vote against the PAN....Marcelo had a greater possibility of moving into first or second place."

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