7-10-2013

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Apparent PAN Victory in Baja California Election Leads to Rumored Back-Room Pact with Governing PRI

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Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2013-07-10

Despite conflicting polls suggesting that either the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) or the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) would win the gubernatorial election in Baja California, there was broad speculation that the results of the election had already been preordained. Rumors circulated that the PRI and the PAN had struck a back-room deal by which the conservative party would continue to support President Enrique Peña Nieto’s Pacto por México political agreement if the PRI did not block PAN efforts to retain the Baja California statehouse in the July 7 election.

And, if the rumors of a pact are true, the election appears to have followed the script closely. Preliminary results showed PAN candidate Francisco "Kiko" Vega winning the election over PRI rival Fernando Castro Trenti by a margin of 47% to 44%. State electoral authorities had agreed to a recount in some districts, but Vega’s victory was expected to stand.

Parallels to 1989 election

What made the election remarkable were parallels to the gubernatorial election in 1989, when President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, considered by some as Peña Nieto’s mentor, was said to have made an agreement with the PAN that allowed the party’s candidate Ernesto Ruffo Appel to become the first politician outside the PRI to govern a Mexican state. While Ruffo Appel, a former mayor of Ensenada, was a popular and attractive candidate, rumors surfaced that Salinas de Gortari and his team helped engineer the victory.

Analysts said Salinas de Gortari—fresh off a questioned victory over center-left candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas—was anxious to prove his democratic credentials to counter the widely held perception that his party stole the 1988 presidential election. "The news that a party other than the PRI had won a gubernatorial race was important not only to Mexicans but to the rest of the world," political researcher Luis Carlos López Ulloa said in an interview with online news site ADNPolítico two weeks before the election. "The next step was for countries around the world to congratulate the president, who then became identified as the first member of the PRI to allow democracy to flourish in Mexico."

Ironically, Ruffo Appel’s election gave way to four successive PAN administrations in Baja California, and Vega’s government would be the fifth (SourceMex, Aug. 9, 1995, July 11, 2001, and Aug. 8, 2007).

Analysts said Peña Nieto’s motivation to reach an "accommodation" with the PAN and the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD)—which was running in coalition with the conservative party in the Baja California race—was to preserve the Pacto por México (SourceMex, Dec. 12, 2012), which was intended to facilitate negotiations on major reforms in Mexico. While the president and Congress had managed to push through some of these reforms, including public education (SourceMex, March 6, 2013) and telecommunications (SourceMex, June 12, 2013) and were
close on an overhaul of the banking sector (SourceMex, June 26, 2013), the two major reforms—the
tax system and the energy sector—were pending.

Peña Nieto and the PRI took great pains to remove any obstacles to an accommodation with the PRI
in Baja California, including throwing all their support to Castro Trenti instead of the more popular
and maverick ex-mayor of Tijuana Jorge Hank Rhon, who lost the 2007 election to current Gov. José
Guadalupe Osuna Millán.

"The projections for Baja California were for Hank Rhon to win a 'comfortable victory,' especially
since the PRI had already won five cities and a majority in the state legislature in the last election,"
columnist Ricardo Alemán wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal.

But Alemán said the risk was that such a "comfortable victory" would weaken the PAN, which is an
important player in the Pacto por México. Therefore, the move to abandon Hank Rhon and support
the weaker Castro Trenti was an easy decision for the Peña Nieto government, which wanted to
appease the leaders of the two major opposition parties, Jesús Zambrano of the PRD and Gustavo
Madero of the PAN. "As it turns out, the Pacto por México ... was ultimately more important than
all the elections that were held on July 7," said Alemán.

As expected, the apparent victor Kiko Vega denied the existence of any agreement with the PRI,
although he made it a point to denounce the party's violation of electoral laws by campaigning
beyond the allotted time. "You saw how they handed out pamphlets in low-income areas," the PAN
candidate told reporters.

PAN, PRD ambivalent about pact with PRI

But the path was not so smooth for Peña Nieto and PRI president César Camacho, even with the
apparent PAN victory in Baja California. Both the PRD and the PAN also protested vigorously
against what they perceived as interference by Social Development Secretary Rosario Robles and
PRI governors, particularly Javier Duarte of Veracruz, in upcoming elections. Those charges led
the two parties to threaten to withdraw from the Pacto por México, which would have made it more
difficult for Peña Nieto to continue with his agenda to reform key sectors of the Mexican economy
(SourceMex, May 1, 2013).

While the Peña Nieto government was able to curb Robles’ activity in the days leading to the
election, the task was more difficult with Duarte and other governors like Roberto Borge in Quintana
Roo and Rubén Moreira Valdez in Coahuila. But some analysts countered that opposition governors
in states that had elections were also in a position to unduly influence state and legislative elections
within their borders, including Osuna Millán in Baja California and Rafael Moreno Valle in Puebla,
both members of the PAN, and Gabino Cué in Oaxaca, a member of Movimiento Ciudadano (MC).

In the aftermath of the elections, the PAN and PRD offered vague statements regarding their
continued participation in the Pacto por México. "The need for these types of agreements does
not change," said Madero. "What changes are the conditions by which we will participate in this
agreement."

PRD Sen. Silvano Aureoles said legislators in his delegation would like to see a more cooperative
stance from Peña Nieto government and the PRI on eliminating unfair electoral practices. "The PRD
cannot continue turning the other cheek," said the senator.
Elections bring mixed results

The elections in 14 states brought mixed results for the major parties, although some analysts considered the outcome more of a victory for the PAN because the conservative party won several municipalities that had been governed by the PRI (Saltillo, Nuevo Laredo, Matamoros, Mexicali, Tlaxcala, and Aguascalientes) and retained some important cities (Mazatlán). Additionally, the PAN either gained control or gained spaces in several state legislatures, including Coahuila, Aguascalientes, and Tamaulipas.

Still, the outcome wasn’t all that bad for the PRI, which won mayoral races in Oaxaca city (previously governed by the PAN) and Cancún (formerly led by the PRD) and retained other important cities such as Veracruz, Reynosa, Chihuahua, Ciudad Juárez, Culiacán, and Tijuana. The PRI remained the dominant force in the state legislatures in Durango, Veracruz, Hidalgo, and Quintana Roo and retained a slight majority in Sinaloa.

For the PRD, the results were not significant, except in states where the party ran in coalition with the PAN and other smaller parties. The center-left party was a partner with the PAN in Baja California, Oaxaca, and Puebla.

Participation in the elections was relatively low, with only about a 60% voter turnout reported in the states that held elections. Some analysts said the relatively low voter participation reflected disenchantment with the traditional political parties and a need to overhaul the whole electoral system. "A more worrisome trend would have been a high voter turnout for the same old politicians," Ackermann said in a message on Twitter.

Another reason for low turnout, said analyst Lorenzo Meyer, is that state electoral institutes run elections poorly. The only way to correct this, he said, is for the federal Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE) to take charge of all elections. "Sure, the IFE has its problems, but it is a better alternative than the state electoral institutes," said Meyer.

Some voters made their disillusionment with the process known by registering pets to run in several municipal elections, including Xalapa in Veracruz state (SourceMex, June 19, 2013). While the PRI candidate easily won the election in Xalapa, electoral authorities reported 7,000 votes for Candigato Morris, a cat whose owners managed to place its name on the ballot.

Still, José Alejandro Luna, president of the federal electoral court del Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federación (TEPJF), said the election results were not so bad and suggested overall figures were skewed by low voter turnout in Baja California. "Baja California has always had a high rate of abstentionism," said Luna.

Electoral authorities said that fewer than 40% of registered voters cast ballots in Baja California during the past election.