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Gubernatorial Elections in Mexico Show Morena as a Rising Party, PRI in Trouble

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The governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) won two very narrow—and highly questioned—victories in the gubernatorial elections in the states of México and Coahuila on June 4 while losing the gubernatorial race in Nayarit state and several mayoral seats in Veracruz state.

“It was a bad Sunday for the PRI,” columnist Salvador Camarena wrote in the daily business newspaper *El Financiero*, pointing out the party’s defeat in Nayarit and the fact it received 1 million fewer votes than in 2011 in México state, the home state of President Enrique Peña Nieto. On top of that, the party lost a large number of municipalities in Veracruz state, including the capital of Xalapa and the important port cities of Tuxpan, Coatzacoalcos, and Veracruz.

Additionally, the PRI’s success in Coahuila was highly controversial. The narrow margin of victory reflected some discontent with the governing party because of the corruption allegations against former PRI Gov. Humberto Moreira and his brother, Rubén Moreira, the outgoing governor ([SourceMex, March 9, 2016](#), [Aug. 17, 2016](#), [March 22, 2017](#)).

The México state results were not entirely what the upstart Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena) had targeted: It’s goal was to win. However, Morena, a center-left party created by two-time presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador, came within three percentage points of victory, giving it strong momentum heading into the 2018 presidential and congressional elections. Morena, which only gained status as an official party in July 2014 ([SourceMex, July 30, 2014](#)), also fielded candidates in the Coahuila and Nayarit gubernatorial races. Still, Morena must overcome differences with the established center-left party, the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), to attain success in the 2018 vote.

México, Coahuila victories challenged

A dark cloud hangs over both the México state and Coahuila gubernatorial elections, with the second-place finishers alleging that the PRI resorted to unfair electoral tactics—and outright fraud—to earn victories for its candidates. In México state, the official results from the state electoral agency (Instituto Electoral del Estado de México, IEEM) indicate that PRI candidate Alfredo del Mazo won the race with about 33.7% of the vote, edging out Morena’s Delfina Gómez by almost three percentage points. Juan Zepeda of the PRD obtained about 18% of the vote and Josefina Vázquez Mota of the PAN took 11%.

Analysts said many of the voters in México state cast their ballots either against the PRI or against Morena, which explained the surge of Zepeda, who was a late entry to the race, as an alternative. Many PAN voters appeared to abandon Vázquez Mota, who was down in the polls in the weeks heading into the election. Vázquez Mota, who ran for president in 2012, again showed her lack of campaigning skills in the México state election. “She was a candidate that failed to gain the sympathy and empathy of the voters,” said former PAN president Germán Martínez. “She came across as cold and joyless. It was almost as she was going through the motions.”

Still, Vázquez Mota joined with Zepeda and Gómez in challenging the results of the vote, which they said was manipulated by the PRI in favor of Del Mazo. According to the opposition candidates, there were sufficient irregularities to call the results into question. López Obrador went as far as to demand a full recount of every ballot box. "Morena believes that Delfina Gómez won the election on Sunday and that she is the governor of México state," he said.

López Obrador also accused the administration of outgoing Gov. Eruviel Ávila and the national and state PRI organizations of resorting to old tricks, including bribing voters with building materials and other items, stuffing ballot boxes, and manipulating the voting process.

The IEEM has agreed to a recount for selected locations where irregularities are alleged, but officials at the electoral institute declined López Obrador's demand for a full recount. Some observers pointed to the México state electoral code, which stipulates that a full recount is warranted only when there is a difference of one percentage point or less in the vote totals attained by the top two candidates.

IEEM officials raised concerns about the opposition parties' statements questioning the integrity of the institute, particularly since the matter could end up in the electoral courts. "The Instituto Electoral del Estado de México is going to defend the work of its members before the tribunals," said the institute. "We are not defending any of the candidates, but the work of the poll officials in each of the districts."

There were similar questions about the process in Coahuila, with the PAN and its allies accusing the Moreira administration and the state PRI organization of manipulating the votes in various precincts. According to the official results released by the state's electoral agency (Instituto Estatal Electoral de Coahuila, IEEC), PRI candidate Miguel Riquelme received almost 39% of the vote compared with slightly more than 36% for Guillermo Anaya of the PAN, who was also representing three smaller parties: Encuentro Social, Unidad Democrática de Coahuila and Primero Coahuila.

The challenge, led by Anaya, pointed to anomalies in the preliminary count (Programa de Resultados Electorales Preliminares, PREP) managed by the IEEC. The IEEC was releasing the preliminary count results on a regular basis until they came to a point where 72% of the vote had been counted. The release of results was suddenly halted at that point, which raised suspicions that authorities started to manipulate results at that time. Additionally, the PAN and its allies showed video evidence of what they said were theft of ballot boxes on the part of PRI supporters in key precincts. The candidates for Morena, the PRD and the Partido del Trabajo (PT) joined with the PAN in demanding that the results of the election be annulled in favor of a new vote.

Tens of thousands of PAN supporters joined in a rally in the city of Torreón on June 12 to protest what they considered fraud perpetuated by the PRI and the Moreira administration.

Riquelme acknowledged that there might have been some irregularities in the voting, but suggested these cases were isolated. He explained that the PREP was halted at 72% because some the results that were coming in at the time had "inconsistencias."

The national electoral institute (Instituto Nacional Electoral, INE) also raised concerns about the process but did not go as far as calling for the election to be annulled. Instead, it asked the IEEC to provide information about the PREP and other relevant data to help clear up any doubts about the process.

“We will require the Coahuila electoral authorities to give us information on all the packets that were not counted [via the PREP],” said Pamela San Martín, who chairs the INE commission that tracks rapid counts. “We want to know the reasons why all ballots were not counted.”

The PAN turned in a strong performance in Coahuila’s municipal elections, with the center-right party winning the mayoral races in the three largest cities, Saltillo, Torreón, and Monclova. It also narrowly won the elections for state legislature, taking nine of the 16 seats. The PRI won the seven other posts.

‘Something rotten’

Some analysts believe there might be a legitimate reason for authorities to conduct a review of the vote. According to Pablo Hiriart, columnist for the daily business newspaper *El Financiero*, “something appears to be rotten” with the Coahuila election.

“There appear to be sufficient grounds for an electoral court—whether federal, state, or local—to consider the possibility of calling new elections,” he wrote. “If indeed the electoral packages were altered and the ballot boxes violated in the centers where the votes were counted, then we have a very serious irregularity.”

Other analysts agreed that irregularities were evident in the two contested elections. “The gubernatorial elections in México state and Coahuila uncovered grotesque tendencies that we had not seen in a long time—that the prehistoric practices of altering the results of an election remain alive in this regime,” said *El Financiero* columnist Raymundo Riva Palacio.

In a strange twist, former Gov. Humberto Moreira, who ran for a spot in the state legislature under the banner of the upstart political party Partido Joven, accused the administration of his brother Rubén Moreira of stealing the election. The Partido Joven originally supported the PRI in the governor’s race but backed out because of differences over the process of selecting mayoral and legislative candidates. Humberto Moreira was president of the PRI during the early part of Peña Nieto’s campaign. “When a former president of the PRI speaks of the ‘theft of an election,’ he must know a lot about this issue,” columnist Salvador García Soto wrote in the daily newspaper *El Universal*.

PRI falls hard in Nayarit, Veracruz

There was no question about the result in Nayarit state, where Antonio Echevarría García, representing a PAN-PRD coalition, took more than 38% of the vote, compared with about 27% for Humberto Cota Jiménez of the PRI.

The PRI’s collapse was even greater in Veracruz, perhaps because the governing party is linked with the administration of disgraced former Gov. Javier Duarte, who is facing charges ranging from money laundering and corruption to embezzlement and association with criminal organizations ([SourceMex, March 1, 2017](#)). Duarte was arrested in Guatemala in April ([SourceMex, April 19, 2017](#)).

The PRI was victorious in only one of the mayoral elections in the state’s largest cities, in Orizaba; it lost the mayor’s seat in Veracruz (the state’s largest city) to the PAN-PRD coalition. Altogether, the PAN-PRD coalition took five of the largest cities, while Morena was victorious in four major municipalities, including Xalapa, the capital. Notably, independent candidate Octavio Pérez

Garay won the seat in the city of San Andrés Tuxtla. Independent candidates have won several elections since the Electoral Reforms of 2013, including the mayoral races in the cities of Morelia, in Michoacán; García, in Nuevo León; Zapopan, in Jalisco; and Comonfort, in Guanajuato. An independent candidate also won the governorship of Nuevo León ([SourceMex, July 17, 2013](#), [June 24, 2015](#), [May 18, 2016](#)).

One observer said the questions about the elections in the states of México and Coahuila were an indictment of the INE, which had oversight over the state organizations that handled the elections.

The INE was created as part of the electoral reforms approved in late 2013 and enacted in 2014 to guarantee fair and transparent elections ([SourceMex, December 11, 2013](#)). “The INE was created with the mission of organizing elections that were free, equitable, and trustworthy. The objective was to protect the voting rights of the citizens and contribute to the promotion of a democratic environment in our country,” columnist Nicéforo Rodríguez Gaytán wrote in the online news site E-Consulta.

Rodríguez Gaytán noted that PAN, which enthusiastically voted to create the INE to replace the mostly inefficient and corrupt Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE), is now protesting the results of an election that was under INE’s watch. “In essence, this is a tacit recognition of the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of the new model,” he wrote.

Divisions exposed ahead of 2018 vote

While the results do not offer definitive trends for the 2018 presidential election, two things are apparent: Morena is a party on the rise, and the PRI could be in trouble. Morena, however, has some work ahead to build a center-left coalition. According to analysts, López Obrador remains his own worst enemy by shutting out the PRD, which won a respectable third place in the México state gubernatorial election.

Some analysts suggested that Morena could have won the election outright if at least some of the voters who cast their ballot in favor of Zepeda had instead voted for Gómez. But rather than reach out after the México state election, López Obrador criticized the PRD for its alliances with the PAN in some elections and for not recognizing Morena “as the true representative of the left.”

Omar Ortega Álvarez, the PRD coordinator in México state, pointed out that there was no alliance with the PAN in the state gubernatorial race, and that the members of the party had expressed willingness to forge a coalition with Morena, the PT, and the Movimiento Ciudadano (MC) in the gubernatorial race. However, the PRD rejected the terms dictated by López Obrador and decided to run its own candidate.

“[López Obrador] is the one who set limits and does not respect the existence of a broad-based leftist movement,” said Ortega Álvarez. “We wanted to dialogue with Morena, but not to submit ourselves to the whims, ultimatums, and policies of submission demanded by its leader.”

The PRD formed a coalition with the PAN in the Nayarit and Veracruz elections, a successful alliance for the two parties.

There are also some divisions in the PAN, where Vázquez Mota’s poor showing created some discontent. Margarita Zavala, considered a front-runner to gain the party’s nomination in the 2018 election, blamed the lack of support for the PAN candidate in México state on party president Ricardo Anaya. “He sacrificed the needs of the party to promote his own interests,” Zavala said.

“We are not ready, and we are not in good shape [heading into 2018],” added Zavala, a former federal legislator and the wife of former President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012).

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