

## **MEXICO HAS VOTED JULY 5, 2009: A CLEAR VICTORY FOR THE PRI, A DISASTER FOR THE PAN**

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When they elected their next house of representatives, the Mexicans dealt a crushing blow to the governing party, the Partido Acción Nacional: the PAN was unable to defend more than 143 of the 206 seats it had in the previous parliament. The Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which had been governing the country alone before 2000, increased the number of its MPs from 106 to 237, while the left-wing Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) retained 71 of 126 seats. The Greens, who had held 17 mandates before, won 22, while the number of MPs of the teachers' party Nueva Alianza (PANAL) declined from nine to eight.

Even before the elections, a trend towards strengthening the PRI and weakening both the PAN and the PRD had emerged, aided by the clientelist policy which the PRI governors are known to handle with great efficiency. Moreover, the PAN did not succeed in consolidating its position in the gubernatorial elections that were simultaneously held in six states; instead, it lost Querétaro and San Luis Potosí to the PRI. Lastly, the PAN suffered losses at the local level – in the state capitals of Guadalajara, Toluca, and Querétaro, for example. Certain segments of the party were not satisfied when its chairman, Germán Martínez, resigned in the face of the historic landslide; they would have preferred to see the entire party executive go.

Many Mexicans feel disappointed these days because the change of power in 2000 did not fulfil their expectations: there was little sense of change and transition, differences in the perception of the PRI and the PAN were watered down, and bickering within the new governing party did the rest. For the PRI, on the other hand, the outcome is a triumph. Having made an impressive comeback in the regional elections of 2006, it is now once again the leading force in the house of representatives. However, the result is equally disastrous for the leftist PRD. Internal spats over, for example, the party's former top candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador ('AMLO'), who openly supported the small PT and Convergencia parties, certainly did nothing to strengthen the PRD's position.

Even in former elections it had been noted that public participation was weak, and the trend gathered momentum in this case: only 43 percent of the electorate went to the polls. This was foreseeable, all the more so as intermediaries – unlike presidential and senatorial elections – traditionally lure fewer voters to the polling stations. Logically enough, Roy Campos of the Mitofsky survey institute said in an analysis that the elections had been domi-

nated not by personages but by parties. Finally, the controversial reform of the electoral code implemented in 2007 was one of the reasons why reputable commentators appealed to the population to turn in a *voto en blanco*, an invalid voting slip. Another reason was protest against 'party rule' and the unfulfilled promises to fight for more security and suppress crime.

Part of the blame for the PAN disaster must be laid at the door of the IFE electoral institute whose reputation suffered severely when it bombarded the citizens with radio and television commercials and campaigned for abstention. The growing indifference of many people towards the political parties is one of the reasons why so many diverse alliances were formed at the regional level. And yet – Mexicans do not consider the parties to be entirely without importance, as 74 percent of them said in a survey mounted by the "Reforma" daily. 69 percent thought it made sense for them to go to the polls to articulate their own opinion. 74 percent rejected the *voto en blanco*.

Reformed after the elections of 2006, the electoral code failed to meet expectations, and matters were made worse by the IFE's interpretation of the new rules. The *consejeros* of the IFE even attempted to double their salaries because, so they said, their legal position was the same as that of supreme court judges. They abandoned their plan only in the face of massive public pressure.

Although the electoral code expressly forbids negative campaigning, the game of claim and blame was played daily by all parties, to which the IFE often responded by imposing fines. Another controversial rule says that private persons may not place television advertisements – a consequence of the experience of 2006, when corporate interference in the campaign was massive. Moreover, covert campaign funding was frequently suspected when candidates appeared in programmes and programme guides. By now, however, there are a growing number of voices within the parties themselves that are calling for a revision of the electoral code and the admission of independent candidates.

Another point of criticism is the enormous cost of campaigning. Experts say that Mexico's electoral system is one of the most expensive in the world. Expenses there are 18 times higher than the Latin American average. Added to this is the cost of maintaining the IFE and an extremely generous party financing system.

Security and the economy were the subjects that exercised Mexicans most of all. While the middle classes in the big cities complain about security defects, the lower classes fear for their jobs. It is true that the government is not responsible for the crisis, and that its macroeconomic control did keep worse things from happening. Yet rising unemployment is certainly not a recom-

commendation for the 'workers' president' that Felipe Calderón said he would be in 2006. In point of fact, there is no way in which Mexico can avoid implementing structural reforms and improving its international competitiveness. The country's traditional markets are being conquered by new competitors, especially in the USA. And there are other problems as well: as migration flows to the north shrink and the migrants' remittances or *remesas* decline, pressure on the labour market increases. Tourism has been hit by the swine flu. While the fight against the drug cartels is successful in parts, it claims many victims. And as the recent arrests of mayors and PRD functionaries in Michoacán show, illicit links between politicians and the narco scene are still a problem.

During the election, the PAN attempted to attack its main competitor, the PRI, by pointing at its own committed struggle against drugs and organized crime. In addition, it skilfully kept the subject of the economy out of the debate. On the other hand, the appeal of references to the burden inherited from the PRI was declining. The PRI, in turn, accused the governing party of incompetence in dealing with the country's true problems and said that the PAN was merely trying to divert attention. At that, its own history caught up with the 'revolutionary party' when the former head of state, Mr de la Madrid of the PRI, accused his successor Salinas de Gortari, also of the PRI, of corruption and connections with drug dealers. The PRD sought to win votes by highlighting social issues and the consequences of the economic crisis. At the same time, its former partners basked in the favour of the PRD's former leading light, Mr López Obrador, whose 'project' was invoked again and again. The Greens' partially watery demands called for sentencing murderers to death, improving medical provisions for the public, and computer training for everyone. Finally, the core issue highlighted in the campaign of the teachers' party, PANAL, was enhancing education.

The 23 million commercials that were aired on radio and television gave the media an outstanding role in the last campaign. The internet became another scene of the battle between the parties, with forums like Facebook and YouTube publishing messages that were occasionally aggressive. There was a heated controversy about the use of fictitious push polls to influence the perception of a party's own candidate and/or his opponent.

In parallel with the parliamentary elections, six federal states elected their governors and regional parliaments. In each case, the contest was between the PAN and the PRI, with the PRD hardly playing any part at all. In Nuevo León, the PAN did not succeed in wresting the governor's position from the PRI. In Querétaro and San Luis Potosí, both governed by the PAN until then, the governing party was defeated by the respective PRI candidate. Things were different in Sonora, where the PAN candidate succeeded in recapturing the office from the PRI, possibly because of the news that a group of owners

close to the PRI might have been partly responsible for a fire in a day-care centre in which 48 children lost their lives. There was no change of power in PRI-led Campeche. In the small state of Colima, the PRI candidate breached the tape on election day despite charges of drug-dealing. In some states, local elections were held at the same time, including the *distrito federal* of Mexico, where a success boosted the image of the PAN when it took away another district from the PRD. In the state of Mexico, on the other hand, PRI governor Enrique Peña Nieto impressively consolidated his position.

The record of the 60th parliamentary period is a mixed bag. What the incoming parliament will be able to achieve will emerge in due course. Its work will not be easy because the presidential elections of 2012 are looming already. The situation of the current incumbent, Mr Calderón, is anything but comfortable: he is as weakened as his predecessor, Mr Fox, was at the beginning of his second term. Moreover, money is no longer flowing into the state's coffers as it used to, for in these times of crisis the oil business is flagging. Nevertheless, work on reforms must go on, for they are urgently needed in many areas – the judiciary, security and taxes, energy, social insurance, and labour legislation, to say nothing of the structural reforms which have been overdue for some time.

But how is parliament to go about tackling these problems without a clear majority? Having asked ourselves this question, we might as well ask another: who are these people who will soon be applying for the highest office in the state? While the PRI's candidate, Enrique Peña Nieto, the governor of the state of Mexico, appears to enjoy the sympathies of the media, we will have to wait and see whether the PRD will field Andrés Manuel López Obrador once again. The only party that has not yet drawn its ace is the PAN. President Calderón has not yet groomed a successor, and it is doubtful whether he will do so within the foreseeable future.

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