

MEXICO - Voters Bring PRI Dynasty to Definitive End (by Diego Cevallos, IPS)

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IPS - Mexico's once-powerful PRI is hanging its head in shame after a disastrous performance in Sunday's elections, while leading candidates Felipe Calderón, of the governing conservative party, and left-leaning Andrés Manuel López Obrador remain under the microscope for the duration of the definitive recount.

At this point, the presidential elections are mired in uncertainty, but one fact is not debatable — that Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) candidate Roberto Madrazo finished a distant third and did not win even one of the country's 32 states.

Another is that this party, which governed Mexico from 1929 to 2000, was also soundly trounced in the elections to select new representatives for the Chamber of Deputies and Senate, three state governors and the mayor of the capital.

The PRI thus slipped from being the most powerful party in the legislature to filling the number three position.

In September, when the new government takes office, the party will head into the 500-seat Chamber of Deputies with 113 seats, down from 203. Its representation in the 128-member Senate will drop from 58 to 37.

This is the first time the PRI has suffered a defeat of this magnitude.

While it lost the presidency in 2000 to then-candidate Vicente Fox, the party still received 36.5 percent of the votes and managed to retain its position as the dominant legislative force.

According to preliminary counts, 21.5 percent of the electorate voted for PRI in Sunday's elections.

Following their ignominious performance, some beleaguered PRI members have suggested it is time to "restructure" the party.

"There's no question that the biggest loser in Sunday's election was the old PRI," which is now experiencing the worst crisis in its history, political consultant Alberto González told IPS.

As for the traditional opposition parties, which until the late 1990s were under the thumb of the PRI, the situation is vastly different.

The governing National Action Party (PAN) has become the dominant party in the lower house, its representation going from 148 to 210 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and from 47 to 53 in the Senate. It also won the three contested governor seats in Guanajuato, Jalisco and Morelos.

The opposing leftwing Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) fared almost as well. Its candidate was successful in winning the mayoral seat in the capital, which the PRD has held since 1997, and the party increased its presence in the Chamber of Deputies from 97 to 163 seats and in the Senate from 15 to 37 seats.

Between the two, presidential candidates Calderón (PAN) and López Obrador (PRD) captured close to 29.2 million of the 42 million ballots cast, with Calderón leading by a slim margin of 257,532 votes.

The figures correspond to a preliminary count of ballots collected from polling stations by 913,000 citizens trained by the independent Federal Electoral Institute (IFE), accompanied by political-party representatives.

The PRD has complained of system irregularities, but PAN has expressed its utmost confidence in the recount procedure.

Between now and next Sunday, the final count will be conducted under the supervision of party delegates. The IFE will use these result to declare the winner.

However, if any party cries foul after the final count, the official results could be delayed. As per law, complaints will be heard by the Federal Elections Court, which has until Aug. 31 to hand down its rulings.

Since the elections Sunday, Mexicans have been collectively holding their breath like never before, waiting to find out once and for all who will take over the new six-year presidential term in December.

Calderón said he has no doubt that the final count will only confirm the preliminary count indicating his victory. López Obrador has also proclaimed himself the winner, and has called on the public to disregard the preliminary count, which he charges was manipulated.

The PAN candidate on Wednesday challenged López Obrador to compare the copies of the reports that both parties received and signed in each polling station. The preliminary counting system based its results on the data from those reports.

López Obrador nevertheless complained of "irregularities" surrounding three million votes that were not included in the count.

The IFE explained that these votes consisted of improperly filled-out ballots, a situation that political parties were aware of. It further clarified that these ballots would indeed be included in the final count.

An agreement signed by party delegates several months before the elections specifically provided for the exclusion of such ballots from the preliminary data.

López Obrador and his followers have reacted as anyone else would in an electoral contest as close as the Mexican race, Gabriel Negreto, political analyst at the Centre for Economic Research and Education, said. It is only to be expected that irregularities and new counts are brought up, he noted.

López Obrador has said he would accept the results of a complete recount.

With the inclusion of imperfect ballots, the margin between the candidates narrowed from 1.04 percent to 0.6, with Calderón still in the lead, and Madrazo himself has tacitly acknowledged Calderón's apparent victory.

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