

Ruling party defeated in Mexican elections

Patrick Martin
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The long-ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) suffered a massive defeat in the July 2 national elections in Mexico, losing the presidency for the first time in its history and suffering other losses in elections for Congress, for mayor of Mexico City and for two state governorships.

Vicente Fox of the right-wing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) won a clear-cut victory in the presidential election, taking 44 percent of the vote, compared to 34 percent for Francisco Labastida of the PRI and 16 percent for Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, candidate of the populist Partido Revolucionario Democratico (PRD). Fox carried 22 of Mexico's 32 states, compared to 9 for Labastida and only one for Cardenas, his home state of Michoacan.

Within hours of the close of the polls President Ernesto Zedillo went on national television to confirm what exit polls were already making clear, that Fox had won the presidency. He pledged that he would transfer power to his successor on December 1, as provided by Mexico's constitution. Labastida followed with the first-ever concession speech by a PRI presidential candidate, acknowledging his party's defeat and congratulating Fox.

Mexico now faces an extended period of political instability, which will not end when Fox takes office. The PAN president will face a legislature in which no party controls a majority. Exact figures on House and Senate seats are not yet available, but preliminary vote totals showed a considerably closer race in the legislature than for the presidency, with 38 percent of votes cast for the PAN, 36 percent for the PRI and 19 percent for the PRD. The PAN led in 16 states, the PRI in 14 states, and the PRD in two.

Fox will not control the capital, Mexico City, as the PRD candidate, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, won election as governor of the Distrito Federal. Obrador received 39 percent of the vote and edged out the PAN

candidate, Santiago Creel, who received 34 percent. Jesus Silva Herzog, the candidate of Mexico's ruling party, came in a poor third with 22 percent.

Although the PAN won the two state governorships which were up for a vote, in the small states of Morelos and Guanajuato, more than half the state governments remain under the control of the PRI. More importantly, the entire government bureaucracy, local, state and national, owes its allegiance to the PRI. Civil servants were effectively compelled to join the PRI and make financial contributions as a condition of their jobs, and the PRI also controls the major civil service trade unions.

The PRI's defeat marks an end to 71 years of continuous rule by the party founded in 1929 by the generals who emerged as the key power brokers at the end of the Mexican Revolution. While the PRI long ago abandoned its nationalist program of land redistribution, economic independence and limited concessions to the working class, its defeat is not the product of a mass movement from below.

On the contrary, popular anger over corruption, mismanagement and endemic poverty has been diverted behind a right-wing big business party that will seek to intensify, rather than reverse, the attacks on working people carried out by the PRI. Fox, a former executive for Coca Cola, has pledged better relations with Wall Street and further privatization and deregulation of the Mexican economy.

Fox's election was hailed in the American media as a triumph for democracy in Mexico. In the weeks leading up the vote there were repeated warnings that international public opinion—i.e., Washington and the IMF—would not tolerate any attempt by the PRI to rig the vote results.

This is in sharp contrast to 1988, when the PRI faced its first significant challenge for power. In that campaign Cardenas broke with the PRI and ran for

president on the basis of a populist program, presenting himself as the advocate of the workers and the rural poor. The PRI blatantly stole the election, but there was no outcry from the US government, which had no desire to see the PRI replaced by a more radical regime.

Fox will preside over a country riven by social tensions. According to government figures released last month, the gulf between the country's rich and poor is wider than ever. Between 1996 and 1998, the share of the national income earned by the richest tenth of households rose from 36.6 percent to 38.1 percent. Meanwhile, the poorest 60 percent of households saw their share fall, from 26.9 percent to 25.5 percent. According to the Inter-American Development Bank, during the 1990s inequality in wages increased more in Mexico than in any other Latin American country.

Severe regional differences exist between the northern half of the country, where most foreign investment has been concentrated, and the much poorer southern states. These disparities were reflected in the presidential vote. Fox carried 14 out of 17 states in northern Mexico, where the PAN has historically been centered and where the PRD was barely a factor. In central Mexico, around the capital city, and in the southern states, the vote was a closely contested three-way race, with PAN leading in eight states, the PRI in six. Cardenas of the PRD led in only one, but finished second in several others, including Mexico City. Fox won an outright majority in 11 northern states, but did not do so in a single southern or central state.



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