

# Ruling party in Mexico suffers another defeat in Chiapas state vote

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The Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI—Institutional Revolution Party) was swept from power August 20 in the state of Chiapas in southern Mexico, in the first statewide election after the PRI's historic defeat in the July 2 presidential election. Chiapas is one of eight impoverished southern states which have been strongholds of the PRI throughout its 71 years in power nationally, but Pablo Salazar, candidate of an eight-party opposition coalition, easily defeated Sami David of the PRI, 57 percent to 43 percent.

The 46-year-old Salazar, a longtime PRI politician who broke with the party only three years ago, headed an alliance which included the two main bourgeois opposition parties, the Partido Revolucionario Democrático on the left and the Partido Acción Democrática on the right, and had the support of the victorious PAN presidential candidate Vicente Fox.

After Salazar's victory, Fox issued a statement saying the election “confirms the will of the citizens to promote the changes Mexico needs by way of democracy, legality and peace.” He called on the EZLN guerrilla movement in Chiapas, which has maintained an armed standoff with Mexican army troops for the last five years, to treat the defeat of the PRI nationally and in Chiapas as the basis for resuming peace talks with the federal government.

Fox offered to meet some of the conditions set by the Zapatistas before talks stalled in 1996 with President Ernesto Zedillo, including a limited pullback of federal troops and passage of Indian rights legislation drafted by a commission that included Salazar, then a senator from Chiapas.

The Zapatistas officially boycotted the federal and state elections, and no ballots were cast in the Mayan Indian villages which are their strongholds, but they

clearly regarded Salazar with more favor than the PRI. Salazar won a heavy majority in the Mayan-populated areas, which make up about one third of the state.

The Zapatista leadership has made an initially conciliatory response to the political shifts both nationally and in Chiapas. In the runup to the national election July 2, Subcommandante Marcos, the top leader of the EZLN, issued a statement declaring the Zapatistas would respect the results of the elections, which he described as “this form of civil and peaceful struggle.”

The defeat of the PRI in Chiapas, a state which regularly recorded majorities of 90 percent or more for the ruling party, will have political reverberations throughout the country. It came despite a heavy-handed campaign in the state media, which served as a virtual campaign organ for the PRI. Salazar's religion—he is an evangelical Protestant—was given wide publicity, in a transparent appeal to bigotry in a state and country more than 90 percent Catholic.

Thousands of election observers flooded the small state, which has only 2.1 million registered voters, bringing considerable international pressure on the local PRI machine. Faced with opinion polls forecasting a Salazar victory, the outgoing governor of Chiapas, Roberto Albores, summoned all 111 PRI mayors in the state on the eve of the election and forbade them to stuff ballot boxes or otherwise interfere in the voting.

The result, as in the national election, means rising political tensions. The top office will change hands, while the PRI continues to hold most local offices, as well as controlling the army and the federal police, the main source of power in the war-torn region. Chiapas has been riven by conflicts, especially between the indigenous Mayan-speaking tribes and the Spanish-

speaking landowners, throughout its modern history. One expression is extreme political instability: Salazar is the 167th governor in the state's 176 years as part of Mexico.

The Chiapas election has broader significance as well in the changed alignments among the major bourgeois parties. Salazar won as the candidate of an alliance which included both the PRD and the PAN, and his campaign is now being cited by aides to Fox as evidence of the practical benefits of such a coalition on a national scale.

Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, a liberal academic and former supporter of the PRD who is now a top adviser to Fox, called on the PRD to join with the PAN in creating a working congressional majority. The July 2 election left the PRI the largest party in both houses of Congress, but only by a narrow margin. The 500-seat lower house is split 209 for the PRI, 208 for the PAN, 53 for the PRD, 15 for the Greens and 15 others. A PRD-PAN-Green coalition would also control a majority in the Senate.

While such a coalition would be inherently unstable, it is being proposed as the only alternative to a deadlocked Congress or a de facto coalition between the PAN and sections of the old ruling party. None of these possibilities offers any way forward for the masses of workers and peasants in Mexico, whose interests are not represented in any of the three main bourgeois parties.

At a National Council summit of the PRD in early August, there was growing support for a rapprochement with the incoming Fox presidency. One senior PRD leader, Ricardo Pascoe, declared that the PRD, despite its weakened showing in the national elections, still played a critical role because of its support among the poor (the PRD controls the municipal government of Mexico City, for instance). "Without the party, there's always the way of arms," Pascoe said. "If it weren't for the presence of the PRD, this country could easily be in civil war."



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