

López Obrador Continues His Presidential Crusade in Chiapas

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OVERVIEW

- After losing the fraud-ridden presidential race in 1988, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas sought to give impulse to his National Democratic Front (FDN) in the November 1988 Tabasco election by recruiting Andrés Manuel López Obrador as FDN's gubernatorial standard-bearer.
- On Sunday, López Obrador, or *el Peje*—as he is colloquially referred to—will attempt to keep alive his political momentum in the Chiapas governor's race between Juan Sabines Guerrero, whom he selected as the nominee for the Por el Bien de Todos (For Everyone's Well-Being) coalition, and José Antonio Aguilar Bodegas, the hand-picked choice of Roberto Madrazo for the "Alliance for Chiapas," composed of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the Mexican Ecologist Green Party (PVEM).
- *El Peje* would flaunt a victory by Sabines, whom most polls show in the lead, as evidence that he was the victim of fraud in the July 2 presidential contest. Meanwhile, leaders of the National Action Party (PAN), hope that their support for the PRI nominee in Chiapas will lay the groundwork for cooperation in Congress on apparent president-elect Felipe Calderón's ambitious reform program.

Sabines: The Early Frontrunner

A few weeks ago, it looked like Sabines would waltz into the governor's mansion. He is the nephew of renowned poet Jaime Sabines for whom Mayor López Obrador named a new bridge in the Federal District (D.F.) and the son of ex-governor Juan Sabines Gutiérrez (1979–1982). In addition to robust name recognition, the 37-year-old Sabines—he turns 38 on Election Day—has done a respectable job as mayor of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, has issued a responsible program for improving poverty-ridden Chiapas, enjoys the vigorous political and financial support of outgoing state executive Pablo Salazar Mendiguchía, and is well regarded among several currents of *priístas*—the party to which he belonged until April. What's more, the left-of-center coalition did well in last month's presidential election in Chiapas, with López Obrador

(43.4 percent) handily defeating Madrazo (33.6 percent) and Calderón (16.9 percent).

Salazar narrowly beat the Institutional Revolutionary Party candidate six years ago thanks to a coalition of the Party of the Democratic Revolution, National Action Party, Labor Party, Mexican Ecologist Green Party, and "Convergence" (PRD-PAN-PT-PVEM-Convergencia). Yet the governor could not muster support for his preferred successor, the unpopular Secretary of Government Rubén Velásquez Gómez.

In the spring, Salazar, who had co-opted several dozen PRI mayors, was eager to back a *priísta* for the governorship. He and party envoy Tomás Yarrington agreed that Sabines, who had already been nominated for a Senate seat, would be the ideal choice. Madrazo initially gave Sabines the thumbs up, only to infuriate local leaders later by shifting his support to Aguilar Bodegas.

Chiapas Assumes National Importance

That's ancient history. This Sunday's gubernatorial election represents a continuation of the rambunctious presidential conflict. Last weekend, López Obrador left the encampments of Mexico City to barnstorm on behalf of Sabines, who earlier had appeared to be a shoo-in—in part because of his positive record and in part because there were three other competitors in the race.

But there are national considerations at play. If he becomes chief executive as expected, Calderón must

obtain legislative assistance from opposition parties to advance his ambitious agenda of economic development, job creation, fiscal reform, trust-busting, and crime reduction. His party, the PAN, which has only 206 seats in the 500-member Chamber of Deputies and 52 senators in the 128-member Senate, desperately needs allies. The PVEM or "Greens" (18 deputies; 6 senators) and the New Alliance Party (PANAL) (9 deputies; 1 senator) may prove helpful, but the PRI, with 104 deputies and 33 senators, holds the key to Calderón's success or failure.

Table 1. July 2, 2006, Presidential Election Results: Chiapas

Candidate	Party/Alliance	No. of Votes	Percent of Votes	Turnout
Andrés Manuel López Obrador	Por el Bien de Todos (PRD, PT, Convergencia)	551,749	43.4	-
Roberto Madrazo	Alianza por México (PRI, PVEM)	427,351	33.6	-
Felipe Calderón	PAN	215,358	16.9	-
Patricia Mercado	Partido Alternativa Socialdemócrata y Campesina (PASC)	15,065	1.2	-
Roberto Campa	Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL)	7,378	0.6	-
Nonregistered	-	8,395	0.7	-
Invalid Votes	-	47,327	3.7	-
TOTAL	-	1,272,623	100.1	49.05 percent of 2,594,044 registered voters

Source: Federal Electoral Institute (Instituto Federal Electoral).

Table 2. Backgrounds of Candidates in August 20, 2006, Chiapas Governor's Race

Candidate	Party/Coalition	Background
José Antonio Aguilar Bodegas	Nominee of the "Alliance for Chiapas," composed of the PRI and PVEM, with formal backing from PAN and PANAL	Born Dec. 28, 1949, Tapachula, Chis.; degree in industrial relations (U. del Valle de México); M.A. in public administration (U. del Valle de México); various state and federal positions, including the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS), Banco de Crédito Rural, and state delegate of the Secretariat of Agriculture and Water Resources (SARH); mayor of Tapachula (1988–1991); federal deputy (1997–2000); and elected to Senate (2000).
Juan Sabines Guerrero	Por el Bien de Todos alliance composed of the PRD, PT, and Convergencia	Born Aug. 20, 1968; degree in public administration and political science (U. Iberoamericana), advanced studies in international relations (UNAM), public finances (U. California-Berkeley), and municipal public administration (U. Iberoamericana); active in social development with Impulso al Desarrollo Social; adviser to Chiapas state representative in D.F. (1994); director of social development and medical services for Cuauhtémoc delegation in D.F. (1995); state delegate to Chiapas of IPONAM (1997); president of Fundación Colosio in Chiapas (1999); PRI secretary-general and president in Tuxtla Gutiérrez (2000); state legislator (2001–2004); and mayor of Tuxtla Gutiérrez (2004–present).
Jesús Gilberto Gómez Maza	Partido Alternativa Socialdemócrata y Campesina	Born in the 1940s; degree in pediatric medicine; member of the Mexican Workers' Party (PMT); a founder of PRD in Chiapas (1989); state secretary-general of the party; state legislator (1995–1998); resigned from the PRD because of its domination by "power-hungry tribes"; unsuccessful candidate of the Social Alliance Party for mayor of Tuxtla Gutiérrez (2001).

Source: Adapted from *La Jornada* (Mexico City), *La Reforma* (Mexico City), *El Universal* (Mexico City), and various other Mexican publications.

Tactical Alliance: PRI-PAN-PANAL

To propitiate the Institutional Revolutionary Party in Congress and in the Senate, Calderón's PAN—in a move spearheaded by the National Teacher's Union (SNTE) moral leader Elba Esther Gordillo, a *Chiapaneca*—has extended a helping hand to the PRI. Specifically, they have convinced the gubernatorial aspirants of the PAN and the Gordillo-controlled New

Alliance Party—Francisco Rojas Toledo and Emilio Zebadúa González (Governor Salazar's former government secretary and a strong PRD pre-candidate), respectively—to decline in favor of Aguilar Bodegas, who has already enjoyed the endorsement of the PVEM.

PAN leader César Nava Vázquez denied that there was either a "deal" or, in *el Peje's* words, "*un complot*"—

that is, “a conspiracy.” Vázquez insisted that “in an exercise of realism, what matters is that upon the realization of our own candidate’s inability to win, there is an ethical right to support the candidate who has the greatest possibility of pulling off a defeat.”

PRI spokesman Carlos Flores Rico and PRI Senate Leader Emilio Gamboa both also strenuously denied that the alliance with the PAN in Chiapas represented a “blank check” to Calderón.

In an early-August Mitofsky survey, Sabines (40.7 percent) was running 11 points ahead of Aguilar Bodegas before Rojas and Zebadúa exited the race to protest “a state-manipulated election.” If the *panistas* hold their collective noses and cast ballots for the PRI standard-bearer, he could make a good showing—even though the Sabines camp is questioning what Rojas—a respected physician now derided as “*Pacobonos*”—did with the 7 million pesos allocated to him by the state electoral institute. Indeed, Aguilar Bodega’s major headache springs from PRI dissidents like ex-governor Roberto Albores and mayors like Sergio Lobato García of San Cristóbal de las Casas. They have blasted what is known as the “PRIANAL” pact.

An upset victory by Aguilar Bodegas will reinforce *el Peje*’s belief that the PAN, PRI, PVEM, and PANAL have made common cause to take the wind out of his political sails even as he prepares to create a parallel government next month. Of course, López Obrador neglects to mention the ample public funds being expended on behalf of Sabines.

Conclusion

Less pious observers will conclude that after two apolitical presidents—Ernesto Zedillo and Vicente Fox—it is encouraging to see the Calderón team—strongly encouraged by Gordillo—making shrewd moves. Whether or not they finish on top on Sunday, they will rejoice if they can shave the percentage that López Obrador’s “For Everyone’s Well-Being” coalition attained on July 2. Their pragmatic collaboration in Chiapas may augur well for PRI-PAN-PANAL (and, possibly, PVEM) legislative cooperation to enact Calderón’s sweeping reforms that are so crucial to generating employment and spurring robust, sustained economic growth.

About the Author

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