



NYTimes.com

## In Mexico, Unlikely Allies Hope to Defeat Resurgent Party



July 2, 2010

By ELISABETH MALKIN

TLAXIACO, Mexico — Gabino Cué is running for governor of Oaxaca State as the candidate for so many parties that his campaign is handing out a pamphlet explaining how to mark the ballot. In simple cartoons, the drawings promise voters that Mr. Cué will kick out the party that has governed Oaxaca for 80 years and clean up the state.

A decade ago, Mexico ended more than 70 years of control by the Institutional Revolutionary Party and elected an opposition president. But in Oaxaca, the PRI, as the party is known, has held fast through a vast party machine that dispenses patronage and often seems accountable to no one except the governor.

The other parties believe that the only way to dislodge the PRI here is to unite across ideological lines against it. Mr. Cué is the candidate for a coalition of the conservative National Action Party and the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution, along with a couple of small parties.

Four years ago, the idea of the left and right's joining forces would have seemed inconceivable. The two sides fought an extremely bitter, prolonged battle over the presidency, while the PRI appeared relegated to irrelevance. But since then, the PRI has roared back, advancing in state races and recovering its lost ground in last year's midterm elections.

On Sunday, voters in 12, or about a third, of Mexico's states will vote for new governors. In six of those, the National Action Party and the Party of the Democratic Revolution are running as a coalition, and polls show that Oaxaca is one of only a couple of states where they could unseat the PRI.

In the final week of the campaign, all of Mexico was shaken by the murder of the front-runner from the PRI in the northern state of Tamaulipas, presumably by drug cartels. But elsewhere, campaigning has continued unabated.

To the party strategists in Mexico City, a win by Mr. Cué in Oaxaca will prove that a coalition is the best way to stop a return to the presidency by the PRI in the 2012 election.

The PRI has recovered — with an effective majority in the lower house of Congress and in state offices — through its rivals' mistakes, said Daniel Lund, a Mexico City pollster and political analyst. The left has been divided, and President Felipe Calderón's conservative party has lost ground amid the sluggish economy and the spiraling violence of the drug war.

The PRI has come back "by simply enduring and offering a vision of what was and what might be," Mr. Lund said.



The front-runner for the 2012 presidential race is Enrique Peña Nieto, the PRI governor of Mexico State, the populous state surrounding Mexico City. But if the PRI candidate were to lose the state next year to a coalition candidate when Mr. Peña Nieto's term expires, it could destroy his Teflon image.

That explains why politicians who have nothing to do with Oaxaca — beginning with Mr. Peña Nieto and Mexico City's leftist mayor, Marcelo Ebrard, who also wants to be president — have all alighted here in the past 10 days.

But in Oaxaca, politics is a local affair. This ancient market town is in full political ferment at the home stretch. Mr. Cué and his PRI opponent, Eviel Pérez Magaña, swept through with closing rallies, and the city center is plastered with their campaign posters.

Many people here are confused about who is running for which party. Everybody promises jobs, health campaigns, better schools. But many of those who say they will vote for Mr. Cué have one goal in mind.

"We're against the PRI," said Pedro Cruz Santiago, 66, a farmer.

Mr. Cué's supporters reserve their criticism for Oaxaca's powerful departing governor, Ulises Ruiz. Analysts say he has maintained almost feudal control through a mix of favors and violence. The state is still scarred by a 2006 uprising against Mr. Ruiz by teachers and left-wing social groups that shut down Oaxaca City for months and led to more than a dozen deaths.

In the months before the election, Oaxaca has been marked by political violence, including the April deaths of a Mexican peace activist and a Finnish observer traveling to support an Indian village that has been in conflict with neighboring villages. A small-town mayor and a council member were killed last month in a confrontation over a mine. On Wednesday, another mayor and a council member from a Pacific coast town were shot and killed.

Sergio Aguayo, a political analyst at the Colegio de México in Mexico City, said that corruption in Oaxaca was so entrenched that he was skeptical that Mr. Cué would be able to make many changes if he won.

"Will he have the capacity for a major reform in Oaxaca, or will he be engulfed by the system?" Mr. Aguayo asked.

Esther Santiago López, 27, a Mixtec Indian woman with two children, said she had supported Mr. Cué until he allied with the conservative National Action Party. "They are the ones who repress the poor the most," she said.

She has lost faith in all the traditional parties. "With each election, they give us a cap, a T-shirt and a bag," she said. "They deceive us. They are just a bunch of rich people who pass the money around among themselves." Mr. Cué, a senator and former mayor of Oaxaca City, dismissed the idea that his election had national implications. "I don't feel that this is a plebiscite on Felipe Calderón," he said in an



interview. “For Oaxaca, this vote represents the possibility to break with the old authoritarian PRI that tries to remain in power through antidemocratic methods.”

Still, the PRI has strong support in the state and the race is a tossup. “The PRI gives more help,” said Salustia Cruz, 46, who displays a campaign poster of Mr. Pérez Magaña outside her house. She was especially grateful for the state government’s free mobile medical clinics.

Mr. Cué’s supporters said he would face a difficult task if he won. “I trust he can pull us out of the hole we’re in,” said Guadalupe González Ríos, 47. But she had one hesitation: “I hope he doesn’t become corrupt.”

