

PAN picks candidate for Baja California governor

by UPI

TIJUANA, Mexico - Preparing for its greatest challenge in years, the National Action Party, known as PAN, selected a 51-year-old economist Sunday as its candidate for Baja California's gubernatorial election in August.

JoseGuadalupe Osuna Millan, a former Tijuana mayor and federal legislator, narrowly won his party's nomination with 55 percent of the delegates' votes, following a hard-fought and unusually public campaign. He defeated fellow PANista Francisco Vega de la Madrid, a former state finance secretary and also a former Tijuana mayor.

The nomination plunges Osuna into the PAN's toughest gubernatorial race since the party first captured the statehouse in 1989. Osuna's chief adversary is Tijuana's wealthy mayor-on-leave, Jorge Hank Rhon, who has vowed to bring the Institutional Revolutionary Party, known as PRI, back into power in the state of Baja California for the first time in 18 years.

"What's at play is the dignity and well-being of the people of Baja California for the next six years," Osuna said shortly after voting in Tijuana Sunday morning.

By evening, Osuna was in Mexicali, the state capital, surrounded by party leaders and receiving a pledge of support from his rival for the party's nomination.

"We are going to achieve the greatest victory ever for the PAN," Osuna said. "Don't believe that money can do everything."

Separate conventions were held in all five of the state's municipalities. Tijuana's event had the flavor of a giant family gathering Sunday morning as hundreds of PANistas waited patiently at an outdoor entertainment center for their chance to vote.

Baja California, at Mexico's far northwest corner, has a population of about 3 million. It made history as the first state in the nation to elect a PAN governor in 1989. The party's advocacy of free enterprise and privatization puts it at the right of Mexico's political spectrum.

The PAN's chief adversary in Baja California remains the PRI, which ruled Mexico for seven decades until losing the 2000 presidential election to the PAN.

Baja California is one of three states with gubernatorial elections this year, and a recent independent poll pointed to a close two-way race between the PRI and the PAN candidates.

Hank's critics say his gubernatorial victory would take the state back to a system of patronage and corruption perpetrated by the PRI over decades of virtually unchecked power. But after winning three straight governor's races, the PAN has lost some of its luster in Baja California, and a party victory is far from assured.

"It's going to be a big and intense confrontation," said Benedictor Ruiz Vargas, a political analyst at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Tijuana. "The PAN is aware that this is a moment of great risk."

The weeks leading to Sunday's convention have been tumultuous for PANistas in Baja California, and differences between members have been widely publicized. In one incident, dubbed Hot Dog Gate, party leaders reprimanded a PAN state legislator for airing internal party matters after he alleged that state funds had been used to buy, among other things, 600 hot dogs for a political rally in support of Osuna.

Osuna was mayor of Tijuana from 1995 until 1998, and a federal legislator from 2003 to 2006. He has served in key state government posts dealing with water supply and delivery, and has been endorsed by Ernesto Ruffo Appel, Baja California's first PAN governor.

PANistas say their contentious process of selecting a candidate is proof of the party's openness - and are quick to contrast it to the PRI's secretive selection that led to Hank's unanimous nomination last January.

The PAN could still use legal means to try to knock Hank out of the race, and party leaders said they intend to continue their challenges.

"Nobody is above the law," said Enrique Navarro Flores from the PAN's national headquarters in Mexico City, who was standing at Osuna's side Sunday in Mexicali.

The party tried to do so last summer, invoking a state law that prevents elected officials from running for another office before their term is up. It was unsuccessful, but the Federal Elections Tribunal in Mexico City left open the possibility of a second challenge once Hank formally registers his candidacy with state electoral authorities.

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