

PRI's Hank confirmed as new Tijuana mayor

Racetrack operator's victory had been challenged by PAN

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TIJUANA – Mexico's top electoral court confirmed the mayoral victory of Jorge Hank Rhon yesterday, ending weeks of uncertainty over who will be leading the city starting Dec. 1.

Hundreds of members of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, broke into cheers at party headquarters near the U.S. border as they listened by radio to the verdict of the Mexico City court.

"Let's put aside stupidities, and calm down to begin the transition," said Hank, addressing reporters shortly afterward across town at the Agua Caliente Racetrack, which he operates.

The seven-member tribunal, known as the Trife, unanimously turned down a petition by the National Action Party, or PAN, to annul the Aug. 1 election, which it lost by nearly 5,000 votes. The PAN accused the PRI of six major campaign violations, including excessive campaign spending.

The tribunal said the PAN had failed to prove its contentions, among them that the PRI spent more than \$1 million over the \$423,000 limit for the campaign.

The PAN also complained that thousands of PRI-istas violated electoral rules when they showed up at the polls wearing red, the PRI's campaign color.

"A citizen can cast his vote dressed in whatever color he chooses," read a passage of the 158-page decision, which has been posted on the Trife's Web page.

Hank's victory ends 15 years of dominance at Tijuana City Hall by the PAN, the party of President Vicente Fox.

Though born into a powerful and wealthy family of PRI supporters, Hank has never held political office. He ran a populist campaign, visiting the city's poorest colonias, promising to



DON KOHLBAUER / Union-Tribune
Jorge Hank Rhon, declared by a Mexico City court to be the new mayor of Tijuana, wiped his face after a news conference in his office. The clown at rear is part of a large mural.

stamp out crime and improve public services.

Educated as an engineer, the 48-year-old businessman claims a fortune worth \$500 million, 18 children and a private zoo with 20,000 animals.

Small dogs greeted reporters who came to his news conference inside a large office filled with metal sculptures of horses.

Hank has been a controversial figure dogged by questions about his past – including smuggling endangered animal skins, the killing of a journalist and U.S. allegations of money-laundering. Hank has repeatedly denied the accusations, and he has not been charged.

Hank said he has selected top staff members, but won't announce them until next week.

"It's going to be key who he puts in his Cabinet," said Jorge D'Garay, a political consultant who served in a previous Tijuana PAN administration.

Kenn Morris, director of Crossborder Business Associates, a San Diego consulting firm, said, "Both San Diego and Tijuana have to recognize that there is a new mayor in Tijuana, and we should find ways to collaborate with that mayor and the new party."

Although a local race, the outcome of the Tijuana election has been watched across Mexico as the country prepares for presidential elections in 2006.

By winning in a city that has been a PAN stronghold since 1989, the PRI has sent a message that it could recapture the presidency it lost to the PAN in 2000.

Yesterday, the PRI prevailed not only in Tijuana, but in two other key decisions. The Trife supported PRI gubernatorial victories in the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz.

For Tijuana, the weeks leading up to yesterday's decision were marked by growing political tensions. Political, religious, business and civic leaders called for calm, no matter what the ruling.

Though Hank remained low-key, PRI leaders said they would "defend the vote" in case of annulment. The Baja California state party chairman declared last week that taking over City Hall was one possibility.

Police in riot gear surrounded the state government offices in the city's Rio Zone yesterday morning. Down the street, at Tijuana City Hall, 300 officers were out of public view, but waiting in the basement in case of unrest.

But none of that was necessary.

Upbeat PRI-istas converged at the party's offices at the northern end of Avenida Revolucion. Several dozen crammed into an office, listening intently to a small clock radio that broadcast the Trife's proceedings. Eusebio Villalobos held a pet red rooster named "Jorge Hank."

"We must be humble in victory," said PRI municipal president Carlos Barboza, beaming after the verdict was read. "This new stage will require the cooperation of everyone."

Moments later, PAN municipal president Socrates Bastida was on the radio, publicly saying his party abided by the ruling.

Jorge Ramos, the PAN's mayoral candidate, told listeners of Radio Enciso in a telephone call from Mexico City, "We are not going to call for violence, nor any reaction that would affect the political climate of the city."

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