

Mexico's Two Presidents

By Laura Carlsen | September 20, 2006

On September 16, over one million people raised their hands in a vote to recognize center-left leader Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador as the “legitimate president” of Mexico. Gathered in Mexico City’s historic center, the delegates to the National Democratic Convention (NDC) agreed to inaugurate their president on November 20—ten days before the inauguration of the officially recognized candidate, Felipe Calderon. This act of civil resistance ushered in a new stage in an electoral conflict that has developed into an all-out battle for the country’s future.



The NDC constituted an unprecedented event in Mexico’s tumultuous sequence of starts and stalls toward democracy. No matter what the outcome, the convention will go down in history as a defining moment in the nation’s political development. What it will define, however, is still anybody’s guess.

The conservative camp that supports the presidency of Felipe Calderon, who has been officially certified by electoral institutions and backed by mainstream media conglomerates, big business, and much of the U.S. press, has portrayed the convention as the last-gasp attempt of a losing candidate to attain power.

But try telling that to any of the delegates straining to hear the proceedings over the rain and crowd noise on Mexico’s Independence Day. For them, “their” president not only deserves office by right of having won elections stolen through fraud, but also because he represents their interests. Running on a pro-poor platform, Lopez Obrador has gained the confidence of millions of Mexicans. The poor form the backbone of a movement that has rapidly

evolved into a widespread rejection of the status quo.

After months of protesting fraud, the convention represented a change in direction. Amid the morass of unexplained discrepancies and manipulated results that have characterized Mexico’s presidential elections, the distinction between the demand for a fair vote count and the need to redress deeply felt social wrongs has been subsumed into a general movement for fundamental reforms.

From Fighting Fraud to Fundamental Reforms

It would be a mistake to write off Mexico’s post-electoral conflict as a battle between legality and sore losers. Mexico’s current political crisis developed out of the lack of public confidence in an exceedingly tight and contested presidential election. The Electoral Tribunal’s declaration of Felipe Calderon as the official winner on September 5 failed to restore credibility in representative government for three fundamental reasons: a bad count, a lack of transparency, and the belief of poor Mexicans that the new government will not represent their interests.



The problem with the count is straightforward—no one can say with certainty who won the Mexican presidential elections. The official system of preliminary results showed such obvious flaws in functioning—including the original exclusion of 3 million votes—that the matter passed to a full review of tally sheets amid growing suspicions of foul play. Later, the judicial electoral tribunal rejected the demand for a full recount of ballots despite ample indications of irregularities.

In this context, the tribunal's decision to legally proclaim Felipe Calderon the victor by a half-percent margin over Lopez Obrador was more a matter of expediency than a measure of justice. The tribunal acknowledged arithmetic errors and electoral law violations but concluded, somewhat speciously, that they did not change the outcome.

In the absence of a full count, the tribunal's decision reflected wishful thinking rather than a clarification of what really happened on July 2. Evidence that included numerical differences between tally sheets and actual ballots, additional and missing ballots, and adulterated official results cast a pall over the first elections held under the rightwing National Action Party (PAN).

The political will of the majority of Mexicans on July 2 may never be known. Electoral officials have unaccountably refused any public review of ballots. The Federal Electoral Institute has rejected several freedom-of-information petitions to allow public access to ballots and tally sheets. Likewise, the information released to date by the Electoral Tribunal has inexplicable and unjustifiable gaps. By admitting a recount of only 9% of the precincts and nullifying certain polling place results without releasing clear, specific data on where and why, it raised more questions than it answered.

An election is not a technical exercise but a civic ritual that serves to renovate and legitimate powers. When it does precisely the opposite, as it has in Mexico today, it fails to serve its purpose. A democratic election cannot be declared by fiat, whether legally sanctioned or not. It has been done—in Mexico 1988, in Florida 2000—but that doesn't make it right. Transparency is a prerequisite for elections in a democratic society, not only so the electorate can be sure the votes were counted, but also to ensure public confidence in the outcome.

Unrepresented Poor

The vast majority of the poor—the core of the over 15 million who voted for Lopez Obrador—do not believe that Calderon will hear them, much less represent their interests.

Part of the problem is Mexico's major obstacle to democratic transition—the power of the presidency. Once elected, Vicente Fox, like his predecessors in the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), used presidential powers to force unpopular measures through the back door in the form of executive decrees. Instead of limiting this power, Fox used it to consolidate neoliberal reforms.

Another problem is that Mexico's political system has few mechanisms of accountability to constituents.

Under this system, one has to have power to leverage power. Most of the millions who voted a second time for Lopez Obrador on September 16 have, for the most part, only the two feet they stand on for leveraging power. They believe that Calderon's PAN is the party of the rich and powerful. The government-in-resistance is their bid for a voice in a political system that has systematically excluded them.

Democracy reduced to electoral representation has always been a frail form of “rule by the people,” since the people often wind up far removed from their representatives. But when its ability to represent its citizens is in doubt, the system moves from frail to farcical. Mexico’s system has now clearly fallen into this category.

Institutional reform has been a plank of Lopez Obrador’s campaign since his original proposal for a new social pact. The civil resistance plan approved at the convention calls for protests at every public appearance of the “spurious” president, but also incorporates campaigns against the privatization of petroleum and electricity, as well as in defense of public education. The program adopted for the parallel government includes battling poverty and inequality, defense of natural resources, the right to information, an end to the privileges of the few, and profound reforms in national institutions.

Mexico’s constitution sanctions the right of the people to exercise sovereignty beyond the institutions of the government. Article 39 of the constitution suggests that altering the form of government is not only an inalienable right but also an obligation when the institutions no longer operate in the public interest. The government-in-resistance claims that the nation’s institutions have been manipulated through pseudo-legal and illegal ways to benefit a very small minority of the population. The poor have been left out. And now they want back in.

Mexico’s Political Crisis in the World

For the United States, Mexico’s political crisis hits close to home, literally. Not only is the nation located on the U.S. southern border, the conflict

affects U.S. interests in the fundamental areas of trade relations, immigration, and security.

Mexico was the laboratory for the U.S. strategy of free trade agreements based on open access to markets, favorable terms for international investment, and intellectual property protection. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) negotiated in the early 90s forced Mexico to compete with the world’s wealthiest and most powerful nation and led to millions of jobs lost in national industry and small-scale agriculture.

Instead of examining the negative impact of NAFTA, the U.S. government has insisted on more of the same. It refused to renegotiate the agricultural chapter of NAFTA that calls for complete liberalization of corn and beans in 2008. Calderon supports the liberalization, despite studies that predict a profound negative impact on approximately three million small-scale farmers.

Lopez Obrador has made the derogation of the NAFTA agricultural clause a constant, and much applauded, point in his recent speeches. While he supports NAFTA and open markets, he has also drawn up economic policies that reclaim the direct role of the state in generating employment, protecting strategic domestic markets, redistributing income by eliminating tax breaks for the wealthy, and guaranteeing a basic standard of living for those at risk—the elderly, single mothers, persons with disabilities, and small farmers.

The plan is far from radical, but it has drawn the fire of powerful business interests at home and abroad. The Bush administration would rather not have another defection from the ranks of economic orthodoxy at a time when much of Latin America shows signs of leaving the fold.

Following the official pronouncement of Calderon as president-elect, conservative analysts eagerly placed Mexico in the ranks of nations loyal to U.S.-style economic integration. With Mexico again assured as an unconditional economic and political ally, the “Pacific Axis” of Mexico, Central America, Colombia, Peru, and Chile seemed secured at its northern end.

But with the current divisions, the Mexican elections can hardly be hailed as a major ratification of neoliberal policies in the hemisphere. The political crisis also complicates the Bush agenda in areas of counter-terrorism, immigration, and drug trafficking, although the basic terms of cooperation will continue.

Even if Calderon were miraculously able to consolidate power over the coming months—a scenario that looks increasingly unlikely—a broad movement calling for major institutional reforms will be on the political scene for a long time to come. Whether as a parallel government, a grassroots social movement, a partisan opposition, or some combination, the movement will weaken the new presidency and strengthen hopes for a real and inclusive democratic transition.

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