

# Presidential election marks turning point for Mexico

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The candidates for president of Mexico suspended campaigning June 29, observing the 72-hour moratorium required under the country's electoral laws. Nearly 70 million are eligible to cast ballots July 2 for president, congressional seats and positions in a dozen state governments, but most attention has been focused on whether the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party or PRI) will be defeated for the first time in a presidential campaign.

The PRI lost its majority in Congress, and opposition parties control many state governments and the municipality of Mexico City, home to 20 million people. But such is the power of the presidency, under Mexico's constitution, that the PRI remains in firm control of the executive branch, the courts, the majority of state and local governments, and the bulk of public life.

The balloting in the world's largest Spanish-speaking nation will be the first presidential contest held under the control of the election agency established in 1989 and given statutory independence of the national government in 1995. More than 700,000 Mexican citizens will work as poll-watchers, hundreds of international observers are on hand, and the Mexican media has provided extensive coverage of the three major candidates for the presidency, ending the longstanding media monopoly enjoyed by the PRI.

The three major candidates are all big business politicians with close ties to the thin layer of Mexican capitalists. All three have pledged to uphold Mexico's obligations to US and international capital, represented by agreements with the International Monetary Fund and World Bank and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

The latest published polls showed a virtual tie between the PRI candidate, former Interior Minister Francisco Labastida, and the candidate of the right-wing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), Vicente Fox, governor of Guanajuato state in central Mexico. The third major candidate, trailing in the polls, is former Mexico City Mayor Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, who heads the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), a populist split-off from the PRI.

Both Labastida and Cardenas are products of the PRI machine. Labastida served as governor of Sinaloa state, on the Pacific coast, and then as Minister of Interior (head of internal policing and ballot-rigging), the post which has become a stepping stone to the presidency in recent decades. Cardenas, the son of the 1930s reforming president Lazaro Cardenas, was governor of Michoacan state when he broke with the PRI in 1987 over the decision to open up the Mexican economy to the world market.

Fox is the personification of a newer layer of Mexican businessmen who have risen to wealth and power through service to foreign capital. The CEO of Coca-Cola of Mexico, Fox was recruited to the PAN in order to run as its candidate for governor of Guanajuato in 1991. Denied victory by the PRI state machine, he ran again and won in 1995, after President Ernesto Zedillo ordered the local PRI bosses to accept defeat.

Three other candidates are on the ballot for president: Manuel Camacho

Solis, a former cabinet minister who split from the PRI and formed the Party of the Democratic Center; Porfirio Munoz Ledo, who founded the PRD with Cardenas but recently broke away to join a smaller left-radical party; and Gilberto Rincon, candidate of the Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution, another small left-nationalist group.

There is visible disarray and confusion in the radical and middle class "left." Mexico's Green Party and a group of prominent liberal intellectuals, including Jorge Castaneda, who once backed Cardenas, are campaigning for Fox, despite his identification with the right wing, on the grounds that defeating the PRI is more important than the program of the candidate who wins the election.

In the final weeks of the campaign, however, Cardenas himself has appeared to move towards the PRI, not the PAN. His speeches at rallies were largely devoted to attacking Fox rather than Labastida, and he publicly and angrily denounced a suggestion by Fox that the PRD throw its support to the PAN in order to insure the defeat of the ruling party.

The PRI was formed in 1929 by the generals who rose to power in the course of the Mexican Revolution of 1910-20. It pledged adherence to the nationalist constitution of 1917, which contains sweeping but largely unrealized promises of land reform, labor rights and economic independence for Mexico. The PRI developed into a corporatist structure which subordinated to the ruling elite all major sectors of Mexican society—peasant associations, trade unions, the civil service, nationalized industries and the military itself. This setup had the tacit support of American imperialism, which viewed the PRI as a stabilizing factor south of the border.

Every six years since 1934, the outgoing president of Mexico has selected his successor, after a process of private consultations among the power brokers of the PRI. This president-designate would then be rubber-stamped in elections whose outcome and even vote totals were determined, not at the ballot box, but in the central offices of the PRI.

The breakup of this political structure began in the wake of the financial crises of the 1980s, when Mexico came close to defaulting on its foreign debt and the PRI was compelled to make a sharp break with its past policy of economic nationalism. Under President Miguel de la Madrid (1982-88), the PRI began to open up the Mexican economy to the world market, dismantling protection for national industries and allowing foreign capital to take a dominant place.

A section of the PRI, led by Cardenas, opposed the turn towards integration of Mexico into the global economy. Mounting a populist campaign which appealed to both the urban working class and the rural poor, Cardenas ran against the PRI candidate in 1988, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, and was widely believed to have won the election. But the government declared Salinas the victor, and Cardenas put his loyalty to the ruling elite above his personal interest, and refused to challenge the outcome.

The PRI power structure was badly shaken, however, and compelled, partly under international pressure, to make concessions to the opposition

parties. After many decades in which the PRI monopolized every office, the ruling party began to accept electoral defeats in state and local elections at the hands of the PAN and Cardenas' PRD. Cardenas was elected mayor of Mexico City in 1997—something that has contributed to his loss of popular support in the current presidential campaign, since he proved no more able than the PRI to deal with the enormous social problems of the huge metropolis.

In the 1994 election, political tensions found expression in a series of assassinations, first of the PRI presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio, then of the PRI general secretary. While the gunmen were arrested, the actual authorship of these crimes remains uncertain, leading to widespread speculation that the killings represented a settlement of political scores within the ruling elite.

Zedillo, who was Colosio's campaign manager and then successor as PRI candidate for president in 1994, has presided over a considerable shift in the forms, if not the substance, of Mexican politics. The electoral institute was given statutory independence from the Interior Ministry, media censorship of opposition candidates was loosened, and Zedillo himself agreed not to select his successor in the traditional way. Instead, a PRI national primary was held last December, won easily by Labastida, who had the support of Zedillo and the bulk of the PRI leadership.

The shift in policies under Salinas and especially Zedillo reflects an understanding on the part of the Mexican elite that its continued rule requires different political methods. However, with the prospect looming larger of the PRI losing power outright, or of an election result which is contested and unresolved, there is concern over potential instability, both in the ruling circles and among their US counterparts.

In the two months since Fox drew even with Labastida in the polls, the PRI has mounted a furious counterassault. Labastida brought in a new team of campaign officials drawn from the “dinosaurs,” the widely hated party bosses, including Manuel Bartlett, who as Interior Minister in 1988 supervised the stealing of the presidential election from Cardenas. Vast sums of government money have been expended in last-minute spending on roads, sewers and other social infrastructure, or to finance outright bribes to voters, such as giving away appliances to those who pledge support to the PRI.

The Clinton administration appears to be siding with the PRI, and Democratic Party pollsters and campaign advisers have worked with Labastida. The Republican Party and some American companies with investments in Mexico are openly backing PAN, leading to charges in the last week of the election that Fox had taken illegal campaign contributions from some US supporters.

It is a truism that an entrenched and corrupt regime faces its greatest danger when it attempts to reform itself. Aggravating that danger in Mexico is that the new political forms are being introduced under conditions of mounting social tensions and with an economy that has still not fully recovered from the 1994-95 devaluation crisis, let alone overcome the longstanding problems of underdevelopment and desperate poverty.

Mexico is among the most socially polarized countries, ranking fourth in the world in the number of billionaires—after the US, Japan and Germany—while its rural areas are among the poorest on the planet. The top 20 percent of the Mexican population receives about 56 percent of total income while the share that corresponds to the bottom 70 percent is about 33 percent. Out of a population of 94 million, 30 million live in extreme poverty.

There are vast regional disparities, with per capita GDP ranging from \$8,000 a year in the booming northern region, where most foreign investment goes, to only \$400 a year in Chiapas and Guerrero, the poorest southern states. And there is an even bigger social gulf between the privileged middle class of Mexico City and Monterrey, which provides Fox his political base, and the masses of rural peasants and urban semi-

employed, who have long served as political cannon fodder for the PRI.

The majority of Mexican workers have lower real incomes today than in 1981, before the first debt crisis exploded. The minimum wage amounts to \$3.25 per day. About half of the population earns two minimum wages a day (\$6.50). Assuming both husband and wife work for that wage, this is far short of the basic shopping basket needed in Mexico City to sustain a family per month (\$516.)

All three major candidates disguise their essential similarity in program and class orientation with torrents of nationalist demagoguery, each one denouncing the others as “traitors” to Mexico.

Fox has been under attack for comments which he made on a business trip to New York City in 1996, when he said that he favored privatizing the state-owned oil monopoly, Pemex, created by Cardenas' father in 1938. After Labastida and Cardenas attacked him as treasonous, Fox held a campaign ceremony in which he surrounded himself with former communists and socialists who now support his candidacy and pledged never to privatize Pemex.

Both the PAN and the PRD have attacked the PRI for its economic record, and above all for the corrupt relations between party bureaucrats and big business, without offering a fundamentally different program. In the last several months, there has been intense public interest in the investigation into the bank bailout conducted by the Zedillo government after the peso devaluations in 1994-95. The PRI has refused to make public the lists of businesses and individuals whose loans were absorbed by the federal rescue program, at public expense. The PAN has pressed the issue very gingerly, because its own supporters benefited heavily from the bailout as well.

The policies and program of PAN are utterly right-wing. The party which now claims to represent the democratic alternative to PRI authoritarianism—Fox regularly compares himself to Nelson Mandela and Lech Walesa—was formed in the 1930s by admirers of the Franco dictatorship in Spain, in alliance with traditional supporters of the Catholic Church hierarchy, bitterly opposed to the secular principles of the Mexican Revolution.

During the first week of May a congress of Catholic bishops was held in Mexico City, the first since 1924, and called upon all Catholics to oppose vote fraud and “the vicious practices of ... corporative voting”—i.e., voting based upon class and social interests. Fox had made no secret of his alliance with the Church, occasionally adopting the slogans of the Cristeros, right-wing guerrillas who fought against the Mexican Revolution in the early 1920s at the command of the Catholic hierarchy.

PRD politicians have accused Fox of intolerance and of persecuting teachers in Guanajuato who insisted on presenting national liberal hero Benito Juarez in a positive light and defending the anti-clerical character of the state. Fox also defends the action of the state of Baja California, where a PAN governor prevented a 14-year-old rape victim from obtaining a legal abortion.

All three parties have shown their instinctive hostility to any genuine social movement from below, in their unanimous condemnation of the year-long strike by students at UNAM, the national university in Mexico City, which was broken up by federal police in April. The students denounced the position of each of these parties and their candidates to their strike in defense of public education, declaring that they would consider the entrance of any of the candidates into the university an “act of provocation.”



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