

Impeachment of Mexico City mayor sparks political crisis

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On April 7, the Mexican House of Deputies stripped Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, Mayor of Mexico City, of his immunity from prosecution in connection with an obscure case involving a contempt of court charge over a land-use dispute. The action sets the stage for Lopez Obrador's prosecution by the National Attorney General, which would bar him from running in the 2006 presidential election. He currently places first in presidential polls.

Hours before the ruling National Action Party (PAN), the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and half of the Green Party legislators joined in the vote to impeach Lopez Obrador, hundreds of thousands marched on Mexico City's Zocalo Square to denounce the move. Out of 500 Deputies, 360 voted for the impeachment. Supporting Lopez Obrador and the PRD were several small parties, 11 PRI members and the rest of the Green Party.

Despite the trappings of legality, the vote is widely recognized as a maneuver to prevent Lopez Obrador from running for president. It unites the PRI, which until 2000 had exercised a virtual political monopoly in Mexico for 70 years, and the PAN, which came to power five years ago claiming to represent democratic reform and openness in government. Together, they are carrying out a sweeping attack on democratic rights—a preemptive political coup—that, if successful, will restrict Mexican voters' choice of candidates to those vetted by the business establishment. If the election were held today, opinion polls indicate that Obrador would beat his closest opponent by 10 percent of the vote.

Under Mexican law, public officials are immune from prosecution unless impeached. However, once someone is charged with a crime—even before they are convicted—they are barred from running for any office.

The Mexican constitution also charges state legislatures with the impeachment of state officials but does not specifically include Mexico City—a separate federal district. Lopez Obrador's supporters consider that Mexico City falls under the same constitutional clause and that, at most, the federal government may only recommend impeachment to the municipal legislature. While PRD politicians and constitutional experts insist that the vote of the federal legislature has not deprived Lopez Obrador of his office, since the impeachment vote he has decided not to challenge the courts on his removal and has taken a leave of absence.

More than anything else, however, the impeachment exposes divisions within the ruling class and the fragility of Mexico's political system. President Vicente Fox, in Rome for Pope John Paul II's funeral, described the impeachment and conviction of Lopez Obrador as a "historic day," saying that Mexico was setting an example to the world on how to impose the rule of law. Six days later, a PAN

spokesperson held out the possibility that after being convicted Lopez Obrador could be pardoned by President Fox, so he could run for office. Shortly afterward, his office discounted the report. The PRI vacillated for months, with competing factions at times favoring and opposing the attack on Lopez Obrador.

In another indication of conflicts within the Mexican government over the case, the Attorney General's office has announced that it is not bringing charges for the moment against Lopez Obrador because of the Mexican Supreme Court's consideration of the case. The decision puts off for at least a month any indictment of the Mexico City mayor.

Lopez Obrador is alleged to have ignored a 2001 court order to compensate a landowner who had won a \$164 million judgment against the city. In 1989, municipal authorities under a previous mayor had expropriated 750 acres and evicted thousands of squatters. The municipality's position is that the landlord's title is fraudulent. Part of the land was used to build a road to a hospital. Lopez Obrador supposedly ignored a court order to stop building the road. He denies the charges.

Mexico City's legislative assembly (ALDF) responded a day after the impeachment by voting to confirm Lopez Obrador as Mayor and by appealing to Mexico's Supreme Court, arguing that the Federal legislature has no constitutional right to impeach Mexico City's mayor on the grounds described above. The ALDF, dominated by the PRD, insists that the impeachment is politically motivated to deny him the right to run for office in 2006.

The PAN administration of President Vicente Fox countered that it is simply enforcing the law. Yet Fox, like his PRI predecessors, has ignored scores of similar cases, employing a different standard of justice toward corruption by the friends of the president and leaders within the ruling party. Just a few days after the impeachment, a Mexican judge ordered charges dropped for lack of evidence against Nahum Acosta, a former Fox travel coordinator. Mr. Acosta had been taped negotiating a \$5,000 payoff from Juarez drug kingpin Beltran Leyva in payment for information on Fox's travel itineraries.

Fox, the PAN and the PRI have sought to cover up the connection between the impeachment and the social and political issues raised by the 2006 elections. Foremost among these is the carve-up of the state-owned oil and electricity industries. The privatization scheme would represent the final dismantling of the legacy of Mexico's Democratic Revolution of 1910-1917, which led to the nationalization of the railroads (1937), the oil industry (1938) and of the nation's electric power plants and distribution system (1962).

In March of this year, the World Bank called for the privatization of the oil and electricity sectors of the economy. According to the World

Bank, the entry of private capital would provide the necessary US \$13,000 million that the energy sector will need each year for the next decade. President Fox, who supports legislation making that possible, seconded the World Bank call: "We in the federal government continue to insist on an energy reform that makes it possible to invest in exploration, transformation, oil production, petrochemical investment, and in electric power plants," said Fox.

Under the World Bank plan, the Mexican government would a) insure profits to private producers, b) end subsidies to consumers of electricity, and c) open the petroleum fields to foreign exploitation. Since the administration of Miguel De la Madrid (1982-1988), successive governments have systematically and quietly eroded public ownership of PEMEX and the petrochemical industry. President Ernesto Zedillo privatized the railroads in 1999.

A PRD victory in 2006 could place an obstacle to the privatization of PEMEX and the electrical industry. That is why both PRI and the PAN have formed a bloc to prevent Lopez Obrador from being the PRD's candidate for President in 2006.

CIA Director Porter Goss expressed US concerns over the election in testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee earlier this year. The vote, he warned, "will probably paralyze the progress of fiscal, labor and energy reforms."

The dismantling of nationalized industries throughout Latin America and Mexico since the 1970s has invariably resulted in the impoverishment of millions of workers. The past decades have seen a handful of people became multibillionaires, while real incomes for the vast majority in Mexico either remained stagnant or sank; 50 percent of the country's population exists below the poverty line, 20 percent in extreme poverty. At the other extreme, the top 10 percent receives 30 percent of the nation's income, and controls over 40 percent of its wealth. Each year, poverty and unemployment force tens of thousands of young men and women to migrate to the United States.

Despite the near unanimity of the PRI legislators in the impeachment trial against Lopez Obrador, the PRI is deeply divided between reformers and so-called dinosaurs on the future course of the party. The 19th PRI Assembly meeting in Puebla last month voted to drop the defense of public ownership of the energy sector from the party's program. The meeting ended with walkouts by five governors. PRI leader Roberto Madrazo has met with representatives of the Bush administration, and appears to have agreed to their demands for the sale of PEMEX.

In his defense, Lopez Obrador denounced the hypocrisy of the impeachment. The PRI and PAN bloc routinely shelters corrupt politicians and bankers like those that participated in two recent scandals, Fobaproa and Pemexgate; they looted with impunity hundreds of millions from Mexican society.

During the buildup to the impeachment, the US White House did not conceal its opposition to Lopez Obrador. It ignored the mobilizations in defense of the Mexico City Mayor, while praising mass mobilizations in the former Soviet Union and in Lebanon. According to one report, Bush has strongly reacted against the prospect of sharing a 2,200-mile border with a country ruled by what the US administration sees as another Hugo Chavez. During a recent visit to Mexico, US State Department Secretary Condoleezza Rice would not comment publicly on the current crisis, but is rumored to have urged President Fox to stop Lopez Obrador.

While there is no question that the maneuver against Lopez Obrador is directed by the dominant sections of Mexico's ruling financial oligarchy, this does not mean that the PRD represents a genuine

alternative for the Mexican working class. Its history and its program demonstrate that the PRD is just as much a tool of the Mexican capitalist class as the PRI and PAN. It has at times blocked with the PAN against the PRI and joined with both parties in voting down legislation granting greater autonomy to Indian communities. In fact, the PRD is fully engaged in the everyday horse-trading and bribe-taking characteristic of bourgeois governments around the world.

The PRD is the product of a split in the PRI in 1987. The Party ran Cuauhtémoc Cardenas for President in 1988 but lost to Carlos Salinas in an election marked by widespread fraud in the PRI's favor, including the shutdown of the electoral system's computers on election night to manipulate the vote count.

The PRD bills itself as the left alternative to government's economic policies and counts on the support of hundreds of thousands of disaffected Mexicans, particularly in Mexico City, for whom the PRD presents itself as the continuator of the pre-1982 PRI and of the Mexican Revolution. It advocates a "third path" that rejects both socialism and the excesses of capitalism. Yet the party's leadership is dominated by former PRI officials, who played a central role in implementing the privatization policies and attacks on the social conditions of Mexican workers and peasants under the Salinas government.

In reality, what separates the PRD and Lopez Obrador from the other parties is its belief that the interests of the Mexican bourgeoisie can best be advanced in partnership with the labor bureaucracy, small businesses and the privileged layers of the working class. The PRD's perspective is to somehow broker an agreement with imperialism that will preserve what remains of the reforms introduced by President Lazaro Cardenas in the 1930s, defend the profit interests of big business and prevent a social explosion from Mexico's working class. Like Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Lopez Obrador evokes the image of a semi-mythical past, Simon Bolivar on the one hand, Madero and the Mexican Revolution on the other.

Much of Lopez Obrador's popularity in Mexico City has come from the creation of jobs through public works projects. His administration also initiated a program of US \$64 monthly subsidies to the elderly poor. That these very modest measures are unacceptable to Fox and the PRI is an indictment of the business plutocracy that holds political power and dominates the economy.

The popular desire for social and economic justice drives the support for Lopez Obrador. The anger created by the PRI-PAN judicial coup and the mobilizing of mass support on his behalf can quickly get out of control. There is substantial fear within ruling sectors as well as in Washington that the political controversy can spark a social explosion rooted in two decades of increasing hardships, growing poverty and unemployment.

Lopez Obrador is himself quite conscious of this threat and has appealed to his supporters to keep protests peaceful and not engage in road blockades, building occupations or other actions that could provoke a direct confrontation with the Mexican state.



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