Massive protest forces end to prosecution of Mexico City's mayor

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Mexico's President Vicente Fox announced last Thursday that the "storm clouds" had cleared in the political crisis that has gripped the country since the government stripped Mexico City's Mayor Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador of his immunity from prosecution. The government has backed away from the political maneuver, which had seemed almost certain to preclude Lopez Obrador's candidacy in the 2006 presidential election.

"The path is now clear," Fox told a group of business executives. "We have gotten rid of the storm clouds, we have gotten rid of uncertainty, and we are ensuring that the electoral process of 2006 will be one in complete accordance with the law."

The night before, the country's attorney general in charge of Lopez Obrador's prosecution had resigned, and Fox had called for a negotiated agreement that would allow the Mexico City mayor to run for president in July of next year.

The "uncertainty" that Fox referred to was both the threat of political upheavals in Mexico itself and the growing nervousness on the international markets that the confrontation would generate a protracted period of economic and social instability. Fox told the assembled businessmen that he had decided to lift the threat against Lopez Obrador in large part to restore investor confidence.

Yet there is no doubt that the underlying concern was that popular anger over the government's actions would prove uncontrollable. On Sunday April 24, 1.2 million Mexican citizens had mobilized in a massive "March of Silence" to repudiate the government's attempt to prosecute the Mexico City mayor. The demonstrators walked the 6 kilometers (3.5 miles) between the Archeological Museum and the historic Zocalo Square, the city's political center.

Workers, peasants, students and middle class people from as far away as Oaxaca in southern Mexico participated in what was the largest political protest ever in Mexico City. The turnout exceeded by far the predictions of up to 300,000 made by its organizers in Lopez Obrador's Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). In attendance were former supporters of President Vicente Fox and of his National Action Party (PAN) and of the Revolutionary Institutionalist Party (PRI) as well as trade union contingents, such as nuclear power workers, petroleum workers, electricians, and government employees.

The PRI, created in the period following the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917), ruled Mexico continuously for 70 years. It was defeated in the 2000 elections by Fox and the PAN.

The march was meant to be silent; organizers distributed 200,000 face masks, symbolic of the protest. This did not prevent people from chanting in support of Lopez Obrador and against President Fox. Among the slogans inscribed on banners were: "They did it in Ecuador, why not in Mexico," a reference to the popular demonstrations that forced the removal of Ecuadorian President Lucio Gutierrez last month; "Defend the right of suffrage;" and "Defend Democracy." Other signs called for a massive vote against the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the PAN in next year's elections.

The decision by the Mexican House of Deputies to strip Lopez Obrador of his immunity from criminal prosecution was widely seen as a cynical ploy to prevent the Mexico City mayor—who places first in the presidential polls—from running for president. The alleged offense involved a petty dispute over land that the city government had expropriated in order to build a public road. While Lopez Obrador's political opponents claimed he had abused his authority and defied a court order in taking the land, for Mexicans who have seen immense corruption by other politicians go unpunished, the case was clearly a pretext.

The action sparked protests across the country, with demonstrators dogging President Fox wherever he went, including Guadalajara, Mexico's third largest city, generally considered a PAN stronghold. Polls indicate that 65 percent of the public disapproved of Fox's handling of the matter.

The Fox administration vacillated in the days following the March of Silence, but finally caved in. On Monday, April 25, Fox's press secretary Ruben Aguilar denounced Lopez for disregarding the House of Deputies' decision and going back to work as Mexico City mayor. "I will simply say that we consider this a provocation and a violation of the law," declared Aguilar. Aguilar downplayed the March of Silence and insisted that it would not affect Lopez Obrador's indictment. Yet he indicated that the government was open to a compromise solution, based on negotiations between government authorities

and the mayor.

In answer to a reporter's question, Aguilar categorically denied that the government was pressing for the resignation of the nation's Attorney General, Rafael Macedo, for supposed procedural errors in preparing an indictment against Lopez Obrador.

Toward the end of the week, Emilio Chuayfett, of the PRI, who led the impeachment effort in the House of Deputies, advised legislators that the vote by the lower house did not include removing Lopez from office. This interpretation was in marked contrast to what was actually said during the debate on April 7, when PRI members insisted that Lopez had been removed from office. While defending the vote as "impeccable," Chuayfett called for reversing that decision.

On the day before the march, former PRI President Humberto Roque warned of divisions within the military on the Lopez Obrador crisis. In an interview with the Mexican daily *La Jornada*, he denounced attempts by Fox to use the army to interfere with the protests, comparing it to what President Diaz Ordaz had done in 1968, when soldiers were called out to massacre students in Tlatelolco Square.

The Secretary of National Defense Gerardo Vega vehemently denied Roque's charge the following day. According to Vega, Fox ordered the military to stay out of the streets. Less than one year ago, on June 2004, retired officers within the School of Cadets let it be known that they were ready to intervene on Fox's behalf, and called for a him to apply a heavy hand, if necessary.

Clearly the depth of popular support for Lopez and revulsion over the political maneuvers to deprive Mexican voters of the right to vote for the PRD candidate forced Fox, the PAN and the PRI to back down. Their fear that the crisis could yield a social explosion is based not merely on the latest political events, but on the profound changes within Mexican society over two decades.

Since the 1980s, there has been a huge social polarization between Mexico's capitalist class and the workers. Mexico boasts some of the richest men in Latin America, billionaires who acquired enormous wealth thanks to their political connections and links to foreign capital. While a handful of Mexican billionaires make the Fortune 500 list each year, some 30 million Mexicans have virtually nothing, earning less than the US $135 a month necessary to buy the Basic Indispensable Breadbasket (CBI,) a minimal level of consumption by Mexican standards. In 1980, the CBI was the equivalent of a minimum wage. In today's prices, a minimum wage only buys 28 percent of a CBI. Over 30 percent of Mexico's workers earn less than two minimum wages. Many are forced to work two, sometimes three, jobs. The buying power of industrial wages is now 70 percent of what it was in 1976.

The situation is far worse outside of the main industrial centers. Out of the impoverished southern states of Michoacan, Guerrero, Oaxaca, a steady stream of migrants inundates Mexico City; many others cross the border into the United States. The mobility of capital in the global economy makes it possible for the wealthy to protect their assets simply by transferring them to another country. No such easy options are available to workers and peasants, many of whom fall pray to smugglers and get sick or die trying to cross the US-Mexico border.

The flight of peasants into the large cities, the growth of *maquiladora*—export oriented sweatshops—and the integration of industry into the global economy have transformed the Mexican working class. A section of workers, still somewhat protected by corporatist arrangements between the PRI-controlled union bureaucracy and the government (such as oil workers, public employees, sugar workers, and utility workers), has managed to cling to a modicum of job security, pensions and stable wages set by union contracts.

The rest of the working class, directly tied to the global market, faces conditions of virtually no job security, of variable wages and working conditions based on the profit needs of corporations, with minimal benefits, and little chance of a decent retirement. In many cases wage increases have been replaced with productivity bonuses. While factories such as the Ford Motors assembly plant in Hermosillo, Mexico rank among the most productive in the world, wages average less than three dollars an hour. French economist Alain Lipietz reports that, instead of higher wages, high-performance workers at the plant are typically rewarded with trinkets such as tape recorders and radios.

At the rally that capped the March of Silence, Lopez Obrador declared that his Alternate Program for the Nation puts poor people first and called for a commitment by all social classes to return to a welfare state, organized by the federal Government in the context of the global economy. Obrador's populist program is based on the illusion that somehow a return to the conditions that existed prior to 1982 and the onset of the Mexican debt crisis is possible.

Behind the empty promises of a revival of economic nationalism, Lopez Obrador and the PRD are themselves quite conscious that the country is turning into a social powder keg. The "silent" character of the march is indicative of the cautiousness with which they attempted to mobilize support, while discouraging the voicing of demands that they have no intention of meeting.