

Near-tie election deepens Mexico's crisis

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No clear winner has emerged from the July 2 presidential election in Mexico. Officials of Mexico's Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) refused to declare a victor until all ballots are counted this week. A virtual tie between the leading candidates, Felipe Calderón and Andrés Lopez Obrador, mirrors the country's social and geographic polarization, which have reached crisis proportions. This week's election results can only serve to push Mexico closer to a social explosion.

On Monday, preliminary results seemed to give the victory by a small margin to the candidate of the National Action Party (PAN), Felipe Calderón. He had 14,027,214 votes, or 36.38 percent, ahead of Andrés Lopez Obrador, candidate of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), who had 13,624,506 votes, or 35.34 percent of the total. Roberto Madrazo of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) received 21.57 percent of the vote. Two other parties, Nueva Alianza (a split-off from the PRI) and the Democratic-Peasant Alternative (ADC) plus independent candidates received about 4.5 percent of the vote.

Lopez Obrador challenged the results, however, claiming that some three million votes had not been counted, based on the difference between the reported number of voters and the number of votes counted for president. On Wednesday, it was announced that indeed there were 2.5 million votes, from 11,184 precincts, that had purposely not been counted on the grounds that they were "too inconsistent" to be included in the preliminary count. When those votes are included, preliminary results reduced the margin between both candidates to 0.64 percent, some 250,000 votes. By late in the day, the results appeared to have handed the lead to Lopez Obrador, by fully two percentage points.

The accusations of fraud do not stop there. *La Jornada*, a Mexico City daily, charged authorities with having dumped ballots in a city landfill and compared it to similar events that occurred in July 1988 when—as is

now widely acknowledged—the PRI fraudulently engineered a victory for its candidate Carlos Salinas over the PRD's Cuahutemco Cárdenas. The ten ballot boxes belonged to four different precincts, three that voted for Lopez Obrador, one that voted for Calderón.

In this election, the PRI, which ruled the country for more than 70 years before losing power in 2000, suffered a defeat of historic significance. A stunned Madrazo addressed the press on July 4, amidst reports that PRI leaders contacted the PAN to negotiate an alliance between the two political parties.

The PRI, founded in December 1928 by General Plutarco Elías Calles, from the beginning was organized as a corporatist structure that ruled on behalf of the Mexican bourgeoisie, while regulating its excesses managing Mexico's industrialization. The unraveling of this corporatist system, a result of the increasing social polarization and the breakdown the national economy under the impact of capitalist globalization beginning in the mid 1980s, led to the loss of the presidency in 2000.

Unreconciled to this loss of power, the Madrazo and the PRI had made no secret that they intended to win the presidency this electoral season. Now, however, for the first time in its history, the PRI has lost its congressional majority.

No one party will have a majority in the legislature. The PAN will control the largest block of representatives and senators in Congress (199 and 41). The PRI will have 122 and 29 seats in the respective houses of the legislature. The PRD and its coalition partner, the Workers Party (PT) will have 26 Senators and 166 representatives.

Both the apparent vote fraud and the electoral impasse itself reflect a nation that is split in two, geographically and along class lines. A comparison of two maps—representing how each of Mexico's 31 states voted in 2000 and 2006—would best illustrate the

collapse of the PRI. In 2000, 10 out of Mexico's 31 states voted for the PRI; 18 voted for the PAN; 3 plus the Federal District (Mexico City) voted for the PRD. By contrast, last Sunday's results show 18 states for PAN, 13 plus the Federal District for the PRD and none for the PRI. The PRD's Lopez Obrador was victorious in 10 out of the 15 southernmost states. Calderón's PAN won all six states that share a border with the United States, plus 9 out of the 12 central states.

The geographic division reflects real differences between the more industrialized north and the impoverished, agricultural south. The north has been the main focus of the free trade agreement with the US and Canada and of direct investment by transnational corporations that have integrated Mexico's northern factories with American manufacturing. The less industrialized and less productive south is dominated by grinding poverty and threatened by US agricultural exports.

The Mexican working class, however, has failed to benefit from Mexico's integration into the global market. Condemned to stagnating wages, poor benefits, and dangerous working conditions; living in substandard housing and enduring high levels of unemployment, many workers undoubtedly look toward Lopez Obrador as a solution to their plight.

Ongoing struggles, protests and strikes by miners, utility workers, oil workers and public employees threaten the ability of Mexico's elite to rule. Mexico has been called the Latin American "champion of social inequality." It stands out in a region characterized by some of the highest levels of inequality in income and wealth. Nearly 40 percent of Mexico's 107 million inhabitants live below the poverty line. Alongside them there live some of the richest men in the Americas. By one estimate, there are more billionaires in Mexico than in all of France.

Vicente Fox became president in 2000 promising to create the one million jobs per year needed to keep up with the growth of the labor force—at a time in which the number of unemployed exceeded 12 million. His promise remains unfulfilled. Mexico's anemic economic growth of about 2 percent per year has resulted in growing levels of unemployment that drive tens of thousands of desperate emigrants into the United States, some 2.5 million since 2000.

In itself, this dismal record would have ensured

PAN's defeat in the elections, or so it seemed. Last November, Calderón was 10 percentage points behind Lopez Obrador, and the PAN was tied with the PRI in opinion polls. Calderón came from behind by presenting himself as tough on crime, distancing himself from his party's clerical right wing and aggressively attacking Lopez Obrador. At the same time, he positioned himself as a pragmatist who would attempt to forge coalitions with the PRI and PRD in Congress.

There is no doubt that Calderón is the darling of Mexico's business elite. During the administration of Ernesto Zedillo (the last PRI government), he helped negotiate the rescue of the Mexican banks, when the government assumed their private debts, a giveaway that at the time was denounced as "the fraud of the century." Central to his economic program is the expansion of Mexico's energy sector through private investment including facilitating drilling for oil in the Gulf of Mexico by transnational corporations.

Meanwhile, the discovery of evidence of fraud has stripped the electoral authorities of their credibility. Mexico's Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) began to count the ballots on Wednesday in an atmosphere of distrust. Protests are planned across Mexico by Lopez Obrador supporters to pressure the IFE. Given the exceedingly narrow margin of victory, it is expected that the final count will not emerge for several days.



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