

Mexico: President Fox puts legislature under siege

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Mexican President Vicente Fox had to cancel his final state of the union speech before the country's Congress September 1, after legislators protested a massive police/military mobilization against anti-government demonstrators by seizing the podium. This is the first time in modern Mexican history that a sitting president has been prevented from addressing the opening session of the legislature on September 1.

Fox provoked the conflict by ordering the deployment of thousands of troops to block a demonstration by supporters of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, the presidential candidate of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), who was declared the loser in the July 2 vote by a narrow margin of 240,000 votes.

The PRD candidate has rejected preliminary rulings of the federal election tribunal in favor of Felipe Calderon, the candidate of Fox's conservative National Action Party (PAN). The tribunal is expected to declare Calderon the victor officially on September 6, clearing the way for his inauguration as Fox's successor December 1.

The military occupation, unprecedented in modern Mexican history, opens up a dangerous stage in Mexico's political and social crisis. The PAN government, through this measure, delivered a message to Lopez Obrador to give up his demands for a recount and accept the decision to declare Calderón the president-elect. This security operation represents a serious warning to the Mexican working class of the government's intentions to repress economic and social struggles.

A no-fly zone for helicopters was imposed over a twelve mile radius from the Legislature at San Lázaro Square in Mexico City, where the Congress building is located, preventing them from flying over San Lázaro, the president's mansion, and the El Zocalo square. The no-fly zone lasted 23 hours, from 10 a.m. on Friday to 9 a.m. on Saturday.

All the streets leading into San Lázaro were closed with police barricades manned by 2,840 members of the Preventive Federal Police, 800 troops from the Presidential

Corps, and 200 from the Group for Special Operations. These forces were armed with 40 anti-riot tanks, equipped with water cannons. Caged dogs were brought in. All those entering the security zone, including legislators, were stopped by canine units that inspected the underside of cars with mirrors.

More barricades were stationed in the vicinity of the Zocalo square, where demonstrators were assembling to march on San Lázaro as part of the mobilizations to protest the pro-Calderon election rulings. Given the massive show of force by army and police and in order to avert a potential bloodbath—as tens of thousands of demonstrators marched against the army barricades—the Lopez Obrador camp cancelled the march.

The police/military operation caused an explosion among the congressional delegates from the opposition parties. A few minutes before the speech was to begin, scores of legislators from the Party of the Democratic Revolution and its coalition partner, the Workers Party (PT), took over the podium, demanding that the security forces be removed. The legislators referred to article 29 of the Mexican constitution, which guarantees the people's right to protest.

At that point, President Fox announced that he would not address the legislature. Instead, he handed in his report to the nation and left. Two hours later, at 9 p.m., he delivered a taped version of his speech in which he declared that Mexico was a stable democracy and on the road to solving many of its social problems. He emphasized low inflation, stable and low interest rates, and a balanced budget that has led to a wave of home buying and the expansion of consumer credit.

Without mentioning either Lopez Obrador or his opponent Felipe Calderon, Fox defended the results of the election, declaring them "transparent," and called on every segment of Mexican society to put aside partisan differences and work toward a greater Mexico. His speech had clearly been prepared in advance, in anticipation of a protest, since it was broadcast interlaced with pre-recorded and emotive images such as well-groomed, happy children in school, workers drilling for oil, and children waving Mexican flags.

President Fox declined to explain in his speech what had led him to call for such a massive presence of police and army troops. Despite their huge size, demonstrations of Lopez Obrador supporters have been peaceful. There was no reason to believe that this one would be different. The military/police provocation was a signal to Lopez and the PRD to end their protests, accept Calderon's victory and either negotiate an accommodation with the regime or face state repression.

Instead, the mobilization of repressive forces produced an angry reaction inside the legislature. PRD legislators, holding signs saying "Fox Traitor," and denouncing the president for his dictatorial measures, refused to leave the podium. Following the event, PAN leaders threatened to push for the decertification of the PRD as a political party. Felipe Calderón and the PAN leaders have made it clear that a similar disruption will not be tolerated during Calderón's swearing-in at the same location on December 1.

The conflict between the PAN and PRD over the result of the July 2 elections takes place in the context of rising popular opposition and growing social discontent. The cost of stability and low interest rates for a better-off segment of the Mexican population, has been the economic marginalization of millions of others. In his speech Fox did not mention that a tiny minority, associated with transnational financial and industrial capital, has become fabulously wealthy. In passing, toward the end of the speech, he barely acknowledged conditions of massive unemployment and underemployment that push hundreds of thousands every year into the underground economy and to emigrate to the United States.

Fox also ignored the events in Oaxaca State, where thousands of striking teachers and their supporters have occupied the center of town and are demanding the resignation of Ulyses Ruiz, the corrupt state governor and a member of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The Oaxaca conflict, now on its fourth month, is on the brink of armed conflict. At least two demonstrators were killed in June and many more were injured when police attempted to clear out strikers from the center of town. One other was killed August 10 at a march. Vigilante and police elements destroyed a TV station used by strikers to explain their struggle and broadcast their demands.

Only a few hours before the September 1 events in Mexico City, a leader of the teachers union in Oaxaca was pistol-whipped by vigilante elements supporting the governor.

There is every reason to assume that the military mobilization in Mexico City had been endorsed by the Bush White House. Despite its concerns in the Middle East, the US government has not forgotten Mexico. A column by Greg Palast, investigative reporter for the British newspaper

Guardian, reported that the Calderón camp received campaign advice and tactical support from the International Republican Institute (IRI), a sinister organization created in the 1980s as part of Washington's support of repressive regimes in Central America. The IRI has also been linked to the attempted coup against Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and to the opposition to the Aristide regime in Haiti. IRI President Lorne Cramer denied that the organization that he heads "meddled" in the Mexican elections; "they asked for our help," said Cramer.

There are signs of increasing concern by US business interests. An August 31 front-page article in the *Wall Street Journal* raises the possibility that Mexico will "become a headache in its growing list of global problems," for the United States. The article denounces what it calls "mob rule" in Oaxaca and criticizes President Fox's unwillingness to use force in Oaxaca and against Lopez Obrador. The Oaxaca struggle developed independently of the PRD mobilization, but the *Journal* made an amalgam of both struggles. It quotes a PAN official claiming that the Oaxaca protests and strikes are "a blueprint for the PRD to force Calderón out of office."

The *Wall Street Journal's* advice to Fox notwithstanding, the Mexican government has not shied from using violence to repress the struggles of workers. It was directly involved in the assault on metal workers at the Sicartsa steel mill last April, where two workers were killed, for instance. What this mouthpiece of the US business elite is demanding is even more force, a heavy hand to repress any social struggle that stands in the way of US corporate interests.



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