

Mexico: Election dispute threatens breakup of PRD

Kevin Kearney
7 May 2008

The results of the March 16 election for president and general secretary of Mexico's Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) are still unknown, and it is increasingly unlikely that the final results will ever be determined.

Within 24 hours of the vote, accusations of electoral fraud—intimidation of voters, stealing and stuffing of ballots boxes, interfering with counting and the like—were made by representatives of the party's two rival factions: the NL (New Left), and the UL (United Left) or "Encinistas," whose candidate, former Mexico City mayor Alejandro Encinas Rodríguez, is close to the PRD's 2006 presidential candidate, Andres Manuel López Obrador. Tensions between the two factions sharpened quickly after the vote, fueling confusion about what actually happened and who was responsible.

On March 17, two polling firms—Mitovsky and Instituto del Mercadotecnia—named Encinas the winner by 5 to 8 percentage points, pending a final count. Nonetheless, Encinas made formal complaints to the party's Electoral Commission of voter fraud perpetrated for the benefit of Jesús Ortega Martínez, the opposition NL candidate. Despite the fact that Encinas had been declared the winner, Encinas's UL demanded that Ortega agree to a "vote by vote" recount in order to remove any doubts about the outcome.

Specifically, Encinas supporters reported that several ballot boxes had not been installed at polling places and that others had been stolen and even destroyed, most notably in Oaxaca state. It appeared that in several states more ballots were returned than were distributed in the first place. PRD Electoral Commission member Edmundo Casillas also reported that media representatives and international observers had witnessed NL members purchasing votes with food and other household necessities in the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz.

A week after the election the allegations of electoral fraud had extended to polling places in at least 10 states—predominantly in Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Mexico states—calling into question the authenticity of at least 100,000 ballots, purportedly cast for Ortega. The vote tally was then discontinued in nine states, six of which showed a majority for Ortega.

PRD founder and symbolic head Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas told the press that the Electoral Commission should annul the election given the misconduct charges and factional fighting. He said that the problem was so great that the "formal leadership" of the party, "had lost the ability to preserve basic statutory legality and as a result could not maintain an ethical and civil relation, not only in relations between the factions but between all party members generally." Although Cárdenas ostensibly avoided taking sides in the dispute, his comments were clearly aimed at the NL faction, who had won a majority of party leadership positions in the months preceding the election.

Instead of determining the winner of the election, Cárdenas urged the party's National Executive Committee to simply declare the new president, assign him broad powers and then dissolve itself, along with all existing structures of governance, so the party can "start over."

As the counting continued, the vote had begun to appear to favor Ortega. Thus, annulling the election and installing a president would most likely favor Encinas's UL faction, which had been declared the winner early on. This would leave Encinas as the person presiding over the proposed dissolution of all party structures, a majority of which are presently dominated by the NL. As party president, Encinas could largely eradicate the influence of Ortega and the NL.

Ironically, Cárdenas's annulment proposal would terminate further investigation into the allegations of fraud—as occurred in the contested 2006 election for president of Mexico, when López Obrador's fraud charges were rebuffed.

Ortega immediately opposed the Cárdenas proposal. He declared that only the PRD Electoral Commission had the authority to annul the election, and only after all the votes had been counted and all investigations had been concluded. Ortega also asserted that there was no need to annul the election since 96 percent of the ballot boxes had been installed and irregularities were limited to a few states.

With the escalating allegations of voting fraud, factional tensions reached a boiling point. Emilio Ulloa Pérez, a federal deputy and president of the PRD's cultural commission, told the daily newspaper *La Jornada* that he shared the opinion of Cárdenas because there were people who "should not be in the party." He singled out Miguel Barbosa—secretary of legislative affairs for the National Executive Committee and an NL partisan—calling him "a real criminal," based on allegations that he participated in the manufacture of up to 70,000 votes for Ortega in the state of Chiapas.

In response, Graco Ramirez, Ortega's campaign manager, accused the UL of seeking to cancel the vote by means of a media coup, and by inciting violence within state-level vote delegations. "But we're not going to let them [get away with it]!" he declared.

The PRD's Electoral Commission first announced that the election results would be resolved by March 23. But that date passed without a resolution. Some began to suggest that the crisis was so severe that a recount, and even a new election, would be impossible. PRD Senator and Elections Commissioner Arturo Nuñez admitted to *La Jornada*, "The PRD is in profound crisis...and the election for national director is the clearest proof of it."

Two weeks after the election, the Electoral Commission admitted that it was unable to make a final calculation of the results on the national level. The Commission attributed this to fierce partisan division among state-level delegations, manifested in an outright refusal to cooperate with the Commission's efforts to determine the winner.

PRD electoral commissioner Arturo Nuñez described the situation thus: "The members of the Electoral Commission are hostages to the partiality of the delegates."

Needless to say, the election crisis has raised serious questions about the continued viability of the PRD as a party. It is unclear whether there will be anything left to preside over when, and if, the dispute ever ends.

As of April 30, six weeks after the vote, the party's "National Commission of Guarantees" declared Encinas the victor, attempting to provide some formal resolution to the dispute. However, this declaration was based on a computation of only 84 percent of the ballots cast. Moreover, the decision is subject to formal challenges and formal approval by other party bodies.

There is little doubt that the dispute will continue. Upon hearing the declaration of the Commission, an Ortega representative told the press that Ortega would challenge any final decision of the PRD in Mexico's federal courts. At a subsequent press conference, Ortega said, "I'm sure that institution (the federal court) will adhere to legality...it will show that I won the election, and it will demonstrate that the resolution of the Commission is an authentic felony."

The bitter struggle within the PRD reflects the underlying economic and political crisis in Mexico. Skyrocketing food prices, particularly for corn, are strangling the Mexican working class. US imperialism's search for cheap labor and energy resources further aggravates political instability across the country, particularly with its efforts to open up investment in PEMEX, Mexico's national oil company.

The dramatic increase in the price of corn, a staple of the Mexican diet, has provoked riots and widespread anger in a country where 53 percent of the population of 104 million people already live in poverty, according to the World Bank, with 24 percent living in extreme poverty.

In the north, copper miners continue a months-long strike for decent pay and working conditions, in spite of the fact that the Mexican military—already massively deployed across the country, purportedly to fight drug trafficking—has been set against them. In tandem with a shift to military repression of labor and political groups around the country, military cooperation with US imperialism continues to grow.

On April 22, the head of the US Department of Homeland Security, Michael Chertoff, signed a bi-lateral agreement with the Calderon administration to share anti-terror technology, including more domestic spying equipment and biometric identification programs for mass application.

Calderon's drug war increasingly takes the form of a "preemptive strike" against social movements and organized labor. And Mexico's right-wing press persists in trying to link the drug traffickers with Mexican popular movements like the APPO and with guerilla groups.

The inability of the PRD to seriously address any of these issues is the root cause of its election crisis. It has rapidly lost popular support. This bourgeois left party—dominated by former Stalinists and ex-members of the notoriously corrupt PRI party—cannot represent the interests of the working class; nor, in reality, does it wish to do so.

Although the dispute between the NL and UL factions was considered by most to be a referendum on the leadership and populist maneuvering of López Obrador, popularly known as AMLO, he has shown little interest in it. Instead, AMLO has occupied himself with a campaign against the privatization of PEMEX, amassing a 20,000 strong "brigade in defense of PEMEX" as part of larger Mexico City protests on that issue.

López Obrador has coordinated his PEMEX campaign within the "Broad Progressive Front"—a loose alliance of the PRD and other token left parties such as the Workers Party, and other radical groups organized around AMLO and his supporters. On April 10, López Obrador led Congressional deputies from this coalition in a seizure of both houses of Congress, in an attempt to forestall a debate on President Calderon's PEMEX privatization legislation. The occupiers chained shut the doors to Congress and barricaded the doors with tables and chairs.

López Obrador called for a four-month debate on the legislation. The PAN, PRI and the Green Party wanted debate limited to 50 days. The occupation was called off after two weeks after PRD deputies who opposed it negotiated a 71-day debate period.

In response, last week AMLO announced the "second phase" of his

"popular movement in defense of Mexican oil," stating that he planned to organize up to 200,000 more "brigadistas" to help him spread the word to "10 million families."

Speaking of Calderon's efforts to privatize PEMEX, Claudia Sheinbaum, national coordinator of the "brigadistas," and the secretary of AMLO's self-described "legitimate government," a parallel, shadow "cabinet" he formed after his loss of the presidency, told *La Jornada* "we will never quit our civil, peaceful resistance in defense of the oil, the constitution and the fatherland (patria)."

AMLO's lack of interest in the PRD election crisis and his coordination with the Broad Progressive Front demonstrates that he is prepared to move on, regardless of the fate of the PRD.

Many involved in the PRD election crisis have drawn parallels to Mexico's presidential election crisis in 2006. Although the comparisons are strained in some respects, both instances revealed an institutional incapability to carry out the most basic task of bourgeois democracy—an election.

In both instances, the dispute pitted the political representatives favoring greater military, economic and political cooperation with US imperialism, against the politicians of the old order of Mexican politics that existed for decades under the former ruling party, the PRI.

AMLO, himself a former high-level PRI functionary, and the UL hearken back to that old order, which is characterized by populist demagoguery, national chauvinism, blatant corruption and a showy, but hollow, hostility to US imperialism.

In contrast, the NL is more open to compromise with Calderon and the PAN party. It seeks to base itself on the Mexican petty bourgeoisie (including Mexican expatriates in the US with voting rights) to effect a severe curtailment of popular involvement in official politics.

In the 2005 crisis, PAN's Calderon defeated AMLO, but not without severely undermining the credibility of the Mexican government in the eyes of millions. The PRD now stands discredited before the Mexican masses.

AMLO is poised to seek other political channels. But López Obrador is no less an opportunist than the leaders of the other tendencies within the PRD. His differences with the NL are merely tactical: he correctly foresees mass upheavals of the working poor and seeks to ride them to the presidency, whereas the NL wants to distance itself from the masses and make peace with the political elite.

With his focus on the defense of PEMEX, López Obrador hopes to turn the destabilizing antipathy of masses of Mexicans to the entire Mexican government into a purely nationalist, single-issue campaign, and thereby expand his popular backing before the next presidential election.

Despite his populist credentials and revolutionary posturing, in the final analysis AMLO represents the last line of defense for the ruling elite in Mexico. His brand of popular demagoguery—like that of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua—is designed to direct growing, mass anger safely back into bourgeois political channels.



To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wswp.org/contact