

Council On Hemispheric Affairs

MONITORING POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND DIPLOMATIC ISSUES AFFECTING THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE

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Regarding the upcoming Mexican presidential election: COHA's Mexican specialist Michael Lettieri is available to offer reporters who will be covering the elections briefings and commentary, in either English or Spanish, both before their departure and during their time in Mexico.

Lettieri will also travel to Mexico to serve as the head of COHA's observation mission during the elections. While in Mexico, he will be reachable by both phone and email. To contact him, please call COHA's office at (202) 223-4975 or email coha@coha.org

COHA REPORT ON THE MEXICAN ELECTIONS:

Part of COHA's ongoing coverage of Mexico's 2006 Presidential Elections. Other articles in this series include:

[Flirting with Danger: Mexican Presidential Campaign Grows Tense](#) (June 6, 2006)

[Mexican Campaign Turns Dirty as López Obrador Stretches his Lead \(March 20, 2006\)](#)

[Mexico's Important Presidential Campaign: Behind the Smiling Faces and Big Talk \(January 26, 2006\)](#)

[Madrazo-Gordillo Split Poses a Serious Problem for the PRI and for Mexico \(September 6, 2005\)](#)

Mexico Steps Back from the Electoral Brink, but Perilous Days Likely to Lie Ahead

- **Calderón, López Obrador, Madrazo: the presidential race goes to the wire**
- **With less than three weeks remaining until Mexico's July 2 presidential ballot, the tone of the campaign remains irredeemably nasty**
- **The June 13 signing of a "civility pact" among 6 of the 7 parties contesting the 2006 national elections may limit a potentially explosive post-vote dispute, although this is far from certain**
- **What the agreement does not resolve, however, are the acrimonious divisions provoked by the main parties' depressing negative campaign strategies, typified by PAN candidate Felipe Calderón's vicious attack ads**
- **New violence in Oaxaca suggests that social tensions have hardly abated in recent weeks, only heightening the possibility of post-election instability, including street violence**
- **It appears increasingly likely that lingering bitterness could make governing after July 2 a difficult prospect at best, irrespective of who wins**

With the July 2 national election looming, Mexico's presidential race has been consumed by vitriolic *ad hominem* attacks which have deeply scored the finish of the country's newly-minted democracy. As negative tactics have continued undiminished, and tit-for-tat corruption allegations seize center

stage, it appears evermore likely that the legacy of the presidential race will be that of a deeply divided country. This has become an all too immediate reality: a June 16 survey by the Mexico City daily *Excelsior* found that at least half the country expects that one of the three major presidential candidates will not passively accept the results of a narrow defeat.

With conflicting polls suggesting that the top two candidates – Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* and Felipe Calderón Hinojosa of the *Partido Acción Nacional* – are locked into an unusually tight race, such a disputed outcome seems all too plausible. Even if such a crisis is avoided, the eventual winner on July 2 will inevitably be forced to navigate a heavily mined political battleground and deal with a sharply divided legislature. Making the situation all the more tenuous is the probability that the incoming president will have won only a thin plurality of votes, as no candidate has topped 40% in national surveys in recent weeks. As the country hurtles towards election day, one thing is certain: the path both before and after July 2 is bound to be treacherous.

Another Eruption

In the past three months, pervasive unrest has challenged the stability of President Vicente Fox's remaining days in office. The violent suppression of a steelworkers strike in Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacan and the bloody resolution of a standoff between police and vendors in San Salvador Atenco, compounded fears that social tensions were fast approaching a breaking point. On June 14, police units brutally attempted to break up a protest by approximately 40,000 teachers who had occupied the central plaza in the city of Oaxaca for nearly a month. The demonstrators, whose strike already had successfully disrupted the school year, were demanding an increase in wages to compensate for the rising living costs in the state. As negotiations with Oaxacan governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz became increasingly hostile, the teachers began to demand his resignation, citing "his incompetence and fascist nature." The clash with the police hardened the conflict, as the protestors remained in the city center, promising more mobilizations.

Mobilizations by teachers' groups traditionally have carried strong political significance, and this case appears no different. Ruiz, an old-school *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) politician who won the governorship amidst a torrent of fraud allegations, is closely aligned with that party's presidential candidate, Roberto Madrazo Pintado. The national teachers union, for its part, largely backs PRI defector Elba Ester Gordillo, who experienced an acrimonious split from the party during its primary process and is now Madrazo's sworn enemy. As the striking teachers have threatened to disrupt the election if their demands are not addressed, the situation could bring on tumultuous times for both the state and federal governments in the next few

weeks, although Fox may blithely choose to let the PRI absorb the public relations blows rather than risk the street violence of another Atenco.

The potential political implications of the Oaxacan situation for the PRI's short-term fate in the final days of the current presidential campaign are not insignificant. Despite damaging internal party divisions, a penchant for scandal, and a notorious personal reputation for corruption, Madrazo has not completely fallen out of the race. Yet while the *priista* now lurks out of the spotlight, Calderón and López Obrador continue to jockey for an edge in a torrid dead heat.

Anticlimactic Showdown

One opportunity to gain a decisive electoral advantage came early this month. The June 6 debate had long been pegged as a potential turning point in the campaign, since it would be the first meeting between all five presidential candidates, as López Obrador had abstained from an earlier event. While the debate attracted widespread attention, it did not turn out to be the cataclysmic end game some had anticipated. Compared to the slander-filled run-up to the event, a minimum of personal attacks marred the dialogue: it was only Calderón's persistent jabbing at López Obrador that gave any indication of dispute, as the *panista* reiterated charges that his PRD opponent was a "danger for Mexico." Yet while the debate underscored the ideological differences between the two men, as each laid out contrasting visions for Mexico's future, it failed to give either a definitive advantage, even if it perhaps provided Mexicans with the opportunity to again witness Calderon's propensity to take the low road when he thinks it's worth the effort.

The event was hardly without intrigue, however. López Obrador delivered a potent response to attacks against him, revealing at the end of the debate that Calderón's brother-in-law, Diego Zavala, had received lucrative contracts while the PAN candidate was energy secretary, and that Zavala's company had systematically avoided paying taxes. López Obrador's claim, which Calderón was unable to forcefully refute, struck at the heart of the *panista*'s oft-repeated campaign slogan of having "clean hands," again underlining the fiction that corruption and nepotism have disappeared under Fox's presidency.

A Welcome Truce

The Zavala allegations were an effective strategic move, and López Obrador seemed to recover some momentum in the days after the debate. They also furnished more than a grain of payback. The *perredista* had seen his lead chipped away largely by the unremitting mudslinging of both Calderón and President Fox, with both of the *panistas* eventually drawing warnings from the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) for their hard-ball antics. Such attack strategies, which featured inflammatory ads slyly comparing López Obrador to Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, directly contributed to a sharp polarization of

the country's politics and instilled considerable bitterness among party foot soldiers.

In response to this intensifying volatile climate, the seven parties participating in the elections renewed talks on a "civility pact," which was envisioned as a way to temper pre-vote rancor and avoid post-vote conflict. In principle, the six point agreement, which was eventually finalized and signed at a June 13 ceremony, bound the contenders to obey electoral law, respect the judgments of the voting authorities, and to accept the official results of the election. The accord also reinforced existing prohibitions on intervention by incumbent office holders into races at all levels. It should be noted that while only five candidates are contesting the presidency (beyond López Obrador, Calderón and Madrazo there are Roberto Campa Cifrián of *Nueva Alianza* and Patricia Mercado Castro of *Alternativa Socialdemócrata y Campesina*), three important small parties – the *Partido Verde Ecologista de Mexico* (PVEM), *Convergencia*, and the *Partido del Trabajo* (PT) – are in official alliances with the major parties, with the former joining up with the PRI and the latter two with the PRD.

Although the small *Nueva Alianza* party, whose candidate is a no-hoper, declined to sign the accord – supposedly due to concerns over the verification of voter lists – the agreement nevertheless succeeded in uniting the country's major political adversaries behind ethical campaign practices. Central to the accord were assurances from PAN party president Manuel Espino Barrientos that President Fox would now remain on the sidelines. Non-participation by the nation's chief executive, who turned out to be PAN's most ardent electoral bomb thrower, was, in the words of Mexico City daily *La Jornada*, "the axis of the agreement." Rightfully so: Fox's repeated intrusions into the race – principally to bludgeon López Obrador – had become a prime irritant for the country's political tempers, and which, with increasing frequency, tested the limits of legality and good sportsmanship. At the same time, these interjections displayed a species of executive energy seldom previously seen in Fox's languorous management style.

An Uneasy Peace

Though the civility pact had a somewhat calming effect on political tempers as the presidential race entered the home stretch, it was no guarantee of a total détente. Even the accord's signing ceremony was marred by verbal jousting between Espino and his PRD counterpart, Leonel Cota Montaña. While the pact may put a damper on polarizing polemics, it will by no means end them, and mudslinging is certain to continue, if not mount, in the remaining days.

Nor will the accord guarantee that uncertainties will be avoided after July 2. A post-ballot dispute would most likely be predicated upon allegations of electoral malfeasance which would instantly nullify the agreement in the eyes

of party's *bona fide* militants, if not for the party officials themselves. In the event of even isolated incidents of contested results in what could be an extremely close election, the IFE would face tremendous pressures to resolve the dispute quickly, as Mexico's youthful democracy is unlikely to weather gracefully anything resembling a scenario similar to the 2000 Florida recount.

Beyond the Ballot

Even if Mexico does survive the July 2 gauntlet, the sharp social and political divisions revealed by the campaign, as well as fostered by it, can only have troubling ramifications for the country's future. The incoming president will be forced to try to harmonize multiple factions, some of whom will hold venomous resentment over a defeat that some may be perceived as the product of more guile than fairness. This need for diplomacy will be heightened by the victor's palsied mandate – likely less than 40% of the vote with a high degree of abstention – and the divided congress he inevitably will have to face. One poll estimated that the PRI would net between 189 and 203 seats, with the PAN obtaining between 147 and 165, and the PRD between 135 and 151, indicating that neither of the two frontrunners can look forward to a legislative majority. This combination could severely complicate prospects for the country's governability well after the campaign posters are ripped down and the parties' paraphernalia is stored away for the next election.

Many Mexicans, however, are unlikely to cast their ballots for any of the candidates. If the country has become polarized, it also has become somewhat disinterested. Some polls suggest that more voters will choose to abstain rather than endorse whoever wins the presidency. Such disenchantment is deeply troubling, and augers ill for the future vibrancy of Mexican governance. According to a 2004 study, 54 percent of Fox supporters in 2000 were dissatisfied with democracy, and a May 2006 survey by Mexico City daily *El Universal* saw 55 percent of respondents express unhappiness with the functioning of Mexican democracy. This dissatisfaction coincides with a widely held perception that the country has failed to move forward under the Fox administration. June polls on Fox's popularity published in *El Universal* showed that 63% of the population felt that the country had either stalled or was moving backwards. Regardless of the specific outcome of the election, if July 2 ignites a political firestorm and the economy stagnates, an attitude of profound alienation on the part of the citizenry could tighten its hold on the nation.

A Moment for Democracy

Mexico is struggling to find its future. Under Fox, the country suffered a litany of missed opportunities in one arena after another. Economic growth has come slowly and selectively, and has done little for the large percentage of the population living in poverty. Foreign policy blunders did grave damage to Mexico's hemispheric standing, as Fox's cozy photo-ops with Bush led many

Mexicans to see their president and his administration as being too closely aligned with Washington, while underserving its own national interests. Simultaneously, then foreign minister, Jorge Casteñada, was readying himself to be Washington's informal second Secretary of State, so valuable were his many services to the Bush Administration (even if it meant the demise of Mexico's cherished interlocutor status between Latin America and the U.S.).

A decade ago, a political transformation was set in motion in Mexico that eventually brought Fox to the presidency. But it remains patently incomplete, with the taint of corruption still ineluctably linked to the ruling party. Tragically for Fox, if he oversaw the first glimmer of democracy, he failed to propel its flowering. For a man perhaps overly sensitive to his place in history, the unavoidable conclusion that the progression of Mexico's democratization has stalled after 2000, should be a painful realization. The 2006 election may yet prove a blessing for Mexican politics; however it is now equally likely it could prove to be its curse.

This analysis was prepared by COHA Research Fellow Michael Lettieri

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