

MEXICO - "Urbane" Debate Reveals Contrasts in Mexican Candidates (by Laura Carlsen, IRC)

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[IRC](#) - If one took the June 7 televised presidential debate at its face value, it would be difficult to understand what's at stake in Mexico's upcoming presidential elections. The heavy use of cosmetics and canned speeches left the viewers to read between the lines of what was actually said to ascertain the political proposals being sold over a medium that has indeed become the message.

The test of a televised debate is not what the candidates say but how they do. This makes the end result look more like soap opera auditions than a public forum of ideas. It is doubtful that Tuesday night's spectacle swayed much of the coveted "undecided vote." Predictably, everyone pronounced their own candidate the "winner," with the exception of the two filler campaigns led by Patricia Mercado and Roberto Campa, whose major aspiration seemed to be to just get through the two-hour ordeal.

All eyes were on the frontrunners, Felipe Calderon of the rightwing National Action Party (PAN) and Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). The PAN campaign has focused on smearing its opponent over the past few months so the prospect of a public brawl brought out the morbid interests of the populace.

But those who expected blood were disappointed. The debate was civil to the point of boredom and with the exception of a few pointed accusations and counter-accusations the duel was with the camera itself.

The themes established for this second debate were a grab-bag that included crime, corruption, federalism, and foreign policy. Despite the media spin to the whole affair, Calderon and Lopez Obrador outlined two "projects for the nation" that followed fairly traditional center-left and rightwing precepts. Although both lack specific details and much remains to be seen about how either would govern, the political proposals presented reveal important differences between the two candidates.

Lopez Obrador emphasized his intentions to reform economic and social policy so that the poor become the priority for government support and intervention. On this point, he has studied well recent events in Latin America. The message that the wealthy elite has benefited too much and too long from economic policies has been toppling conservative ruling parties throughout Latin America.

Despite oil money, despite NAFTA (and in large part because of it), it is a message that even Mexico-considered a stalwart of neoliberal policies in the region-appears ready for. Deemed "populist" by its detractors, the proposal "first the poor" reaffirms the obligation of the state to assure a decent standard of living to all its citizens.

The concept, which used to be taken for granted, has become radical in the context of corporate globalization and contrasts sharply with Calderon's plea "to make Mexico a winner" in a competition that has long ago revealed itself to be unfair, uneven, and have dire consequences for the least advantaged. While Lopez Obrador insisted on the role of the state in generating employment, taxing the wealthy, and providing pensions to the needy, Calderon predictably promoted private investment and the ability to compete in the market as the solution to Mexico's continued poverty and joblessness.

The right-left division came out clearly in the discussion on security. Calderon insisted on the need to use a "firm hand" against delinquency several times and attacked Lopez Obrador for crime rates in Mexico City. Lopez Obrador responded by stating that the only long-term solution to crime was a "social focus" to "combat poverty, family disintegration, and unemployment."

The politics of fear, which has been applied so successfully by the right in the United States, made frequent appearances during the debate. Coached by U.S. consultants, manipulating fear has been a cornerstone to the Mexican right's campaign. Calderon called the elections a choice between "violence or peace" (although he did not explain why) and repeated the campaign slogan that has been ruled illegal by the Elections Institute that "Lopez Obrador is a danger to Mexico."

As sparks flew between the top two candidates, the candidate of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), Roberto Madrazo, made an attempt to mark out his coalition's territory as the experienced center between two conflictive poles-the "radical left" and the "intolerant and repressive" right. Although he tried to distance himself from "73 years of stability" of one-party rule by claiming that the "regime was over," it is hard to overlook the fact that the "experience" of the PRI was precisely what led to the PAN victory in 2000, when voters from both the left and right decided that enough was enough. His claims to represent a safe middle road rang false in the context of this vast history of corruption and impunity in which Madrazo has played a central role.

The aftermath of the debate has centered on Lopez Obrador's accusation that Calderon's brother-in-law, Diego Zavala, benefited from government contracts, several granted by Calderon when he was Secretary of Energy. In addition, Lopez Obrador illustrated the system of privileges for the rich by asserting that despite huge profits, Zavala's company paid no taxes.

A move by Mercado and Campa for all candidates to agree to respect the results of the vote has also caused controversy. The PRD fears that the Fox administration, already admonished by election institutes for violating rules on the use of the government for partisan purposes, will launch a major campaign in favor of the PAN candidate in the last days before the elections on July 2. The party is reluctant to tie its hands in protesting any illegal measures that could occur.

Many questions remain before the voters. How can Calderon's "law and order" platform be reconciled with the violence induced by the PAN administration in Atenco, where the day after the debate another victim died of wounds inflicted last month by federal and state police repression? More generally, how can the contradiction between Calderon's recognition of the profound problems facing the nation and his call to continue current policies be resolved?

For Lopez Obrador supporters, the question is: how far is he willing to go to challenge the powers that be? Is it a proposal to actually invert a model that was structured to favor the rich into a model that generates benefits for the majority through new productive cycles that feed back into society? Or is it a proposal to cast a wider safety net for the millions that fall through the holes of the current model? If it aims to be the former-the only sustainable alternative possible-how can it be implemented from the top down?

This has been the great weakness of Lopez Obrador's campaign. At a critical juncture last April-with an enormous following after the government's scheme to eliminate him from the ballot by prosecuting an old Mexico City expropriation case-Lopez Obrador chose to construct a centralized campaign built on his own persona rather than a broad-based coalition for social change that could have brought in organized sectors of society. The decision gave him more latitude for defining his campaign and his future government, but effectively eliminated the opportunity to develop important mechanisms of public accountability and participation.

This debate there was no empty chair on stage, as there was in the first debate that Lopez Obrador did not attend. Perhaps there should have been one this time too. It would be the chair for Mexican civil society. Because, once again, society-the workers who suffer unemployment and wage erosion, the migrants forced to leave their homes, farmers "competing" in impossible conditions-have been often referred to as the objects of political platforms but given no voice as the subjects of political change. Until they come up on stage, the rest will be mostly show.

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