

MEXICO - Dramatic Vote Count Lacks Credibility (by Laura Carlsen, IRC)

Wednesday 12 July 2006, posted by [Manuela Garza Ascencio](#)

[IRC](#) - Mexico's official vote count unfolded more like a suspense novel than an electoral process yesterday. Commentators and common citizens sat poised at television or computer screens as Andrés Manuel López Obrador's two-and-a-half point lead gradually dwindled until-at four in the morning-the conservative candidate, Felipe Calderón, pulled ahead. The final tally showed an unbelievably thin margin of just over half a percentage point.

The operative word here is "unbelievable." López Obrador's Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and large parts of the population have publicly questioned the results. In a morning press conference, López Obrador announced he will challenge the vote count in the Electoral Tribunal. "We cannot accept these results," he stated, citing "numerous irregularities-to put it mildly."

The center-left candidate placed blame directly: "Both the government and the rightwing candidate lacked democratic will and there are many doubts about the role of the Electoral Institute."

López Obrador criticized the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) for refusing to open electoral packets and count the ballots individually. Although some electoral packages were opened for a vote-by-vote count, most of the tally was done based on the official tally sheets drawn up at the polling places. His party is demanding a ballot-by-ballot count.

This is the scenario that everyone hoped to avoid. A close race opens up doubts about the legitimacy of the winner and leads to protests that the public will has been violated. Under optimal circumstances, where the rule of law reigns and public confidence is high, a single vote lead should be sufficient to declare a winner in a one-round, majority vote like Mexico's. But neither of those conditions characterizes Mexico today.

The problem is not just the extremely narrow base of the Calderón victory. It's that many Mexicans feel they have seen this scenario played out before.

In 1988, the center-left opposition that eventually gave birth to the PRD apparently won the presidential elections. Its candidate, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, showed a lead when the computer system "crashed"- according to official explanations. When it came back up, it was to pronounce Carlos Salinas of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) the winner. Following protests, repression and demands for a real count, the PAN and PRI voted together to destroy the ballots in 1991. The historic memory of that election, along with numerous cases of electoral fraud before and after, has created an understandable scepticism. Scepticism is greatest among the left, which has suffered the brunt of electoral trickery and post-electoral repression.

Low Public Confidence in Election Results

Even as the votes were still being counted, the PRD and reporters began presenting evidence of instances of alleged errors and manipulation in Sunday's election. López Obrador mentioned two examples to the press: manipulation of preliminary results that showed a consistent but narrowing Calderón lead, and the omission of thousands of polling place results until after the opposition protested. He did not go into detail but promised a full explanation on Saturday at an "informative assembly" called to be held in Mexico City's central plaza.

Although Sunday's voting was peaceful and turnout high, reporters in the streets and letters to the press

testify to the thousands of voters who waited in line for hours, only to be told that their polling place had run out of ballots. Thousands more were informed that their names had disappeared from the rolls. These people now complain that they were frustrated in the exercise of their civic duty by a system they suspect of bias. They are joined by millions more who are convinced that the whole process-from the campaigns to the count-was riddled with inequities.

Many factors feed into this lack of public confidence. The first is the blatant partisan involvement of the president and federal government. President Fox consistently violated a Mexican law that calls for the neutrality of government officials in carrying out their public duties, despite weak admonitions from the elections authorities.

The campaigns were not what Mexico's citizenry deserved. Calderón's campaign slogan "López Obrador is a danger to México" was low-level politicking and worked not to inform voters but to create a climate of fear until it was finally declared illegal by elections authorities. The veiled threats of the Business Council and dire warnings of economic collapse from Calderón were neither grounded in fact nor ethical as a campaign tactic. When fear-of loss of jobs, houses, or national stability-trumps reasoned choice, it's the nation as a whole that has lost the elections.

The PAN also made full use of the tactics of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Part of the political culture entails delivering votes to the highest bidder-the party that brings in building materials, a new basketball court, or cash payments. It is a civic vice that the Mexican political system as a whole has not yet overcome. After years of one-party rule, many citizens still view their vote as a commodity to be bartered and not a principled statement to chart a course for the nation. On the local level where vote-buying is most prominent, none of the major parties has done much to change this view. The flip side of vote-buying is vote coercion, or threatening to cut off goods or services for voting the wrong way.

Vote buying and vote coercion are tools primarily used by the government. Fox's "government of change," rather than eliminating this vestige of authoritarian rule, has refined it to a science. The first sign that this would be a major part of the PAN campaign came when Josefina Vázquez Mota, Secretary of Social Development was made campaign manager for Felipe Calderón. As secretary, she had access to detailed information on recipients of government assistance programs. An independent report commissioned by the government found that over four million people were susceptible to vote-buying or coercion due to the way government programs were used. During the campaigns, reporters gathered numerous testimonies of these practices in action.

The Authorities' Slipping Moral Authority

The Federal Electoral Institute has had credibility problems among PRD supporters from the outset. Formed in 1990 in response to the instability and inconformity that were the legacy of the '88 elections, the institute has slowly but surely built up a more transparent and rules-based electoral system. However, the current president and general council were selected in 2003 in a show of force by the PAN and PRI, over the protests of the PRD. In recent weeks the media has been digging up the many personal contacts and political contacts between the PAN candidate and the president of the electoral authority.

The electoral institutions created over the past decade are still weak. They were unable or unwilling to stop the PAN from violating electoral laws that forbid smear campaigns and the intromission of government officials in campaigns. Suspicions of collusion between authorities and the PAN were reinforced just days before the elections when Mexican journalist Carmen Aristegui demonstrated on national television that the PAN had developed a secret access code to the national registry of voters. Voter registration data is restricted by law to electoral authorities.

The preliminary vote count presented by the Elections Institute only increased distrust. Over 2.5 million votes-the majority in favor of López Obrador-were not counted in the preliminary results and were only tabulated following public complaints from the PRD. That the official tally came up with different figures and showed a totally different behavior from the preliminary results further deepened suspicions that the system was rigged in favor of the conservative candidate. The strange results taint both the preliminary and official tallies.

The upshot is that millions of Mexicans do not fully believe electoral authorities when they cite a final count that continues to favor Calderón. The refusal to open up for a ballot count only detracts more from the credibility of the elections. Those who remain unconvinced of the official results—mostly, but not all, López Obrador supporters—form a critical mass in a potentially explosive chain of political events.

Gap between the Rich and Poor

Another link in the chain is the polarization of Mexican politics that has taken place in recent years. The deep divisions did not begin with this year's presidential campaign. The issue at the center of Mexico's 2006 elections has always been the economy, and economic conditions are at the heart of the emotions unleashed during the elections.

The enormous gap between the rich and poor that has grown over the past decade has not surprisingly spilled over into politics. While there is some crossover between classes and a divided middle class in between, the poor overwhelmingly support López Obrador and the rich overwhelmingly support Calderón. The political platforms of the two candidates cater to their respective bases. López Obrador's "First the poor" program falls short of changing the economic model that his party's founding father called a "factory that produces poor people." But he has outlined a series of social programs that seek to cover the most pressing needs of vulnerable sectors of the population and he defends the right of the government to redistribute wealth. Calderón has called to continue with the free market policies that widened the income gap and to keep government's role to a minimum. Although he rhetorically recognized the need to address inequality and poverty in his pre-dawn statements, he roots his economic policy in Mexico's ability to compete on the international market and increase macroeconomic growth rates.

A full state-by-state breakdown of the vote is still not available, but the reason the Calderón vote rose in the last hours of counting is because the last states to be counted were located in the north and center of the country—PAN strongholds. As the gap between rich and poor has grown, so has the regional gap in Mexico. The north has generally benefited, while the poor and largely indigenous south has suffered. Much of López Obrador's support comes from the south. The exception is Mexico City, which has voted heavily for the PRD in local elections since 1998.

In a victory speech before dawn Thursday, Calderón offered reconciliation. "I will respond to the yearnings and aspirations of those who didn't vote for me as well as those who did," he stated in speech of premature largesse given to supporters before officially pronounced the victor.

But his claim is both unlikely and politically impossible. The political lines drawn correspond to deep fault lines in the social and economic terrain of the country. A new president will have to govern by negotiating these interests but will never be able to fully reconcile them.

The King is Dead, Long Live the King!

Since Monday's preliminary results gave him the edge, Calderón has been attempting to stitch his threadbare lead into a presidential mantle. He has had considerable help in his efforts, even before the official vote count proclaimed him the winner, from both the PRI and the media.

The PRI candidate, Roberto Madrazo, conceded defeat to Calderón before the official results came in. His party was left in ruins after Sunday's vote, decimated by an historic defeat that not only relegated it to a distant third in presidential elections but also eroded its legislative base. Madrazo's premature concession raised suspicions that the PRI is offering its support for the PAN candidate in his difficult task of consolidating legitimacy in return for power within the new government and a chance to recompose itself.

Within the PRI, a humiliated Madrazo will be forced to hand off power to his archenemy, Elba Esther Gordillo, leader of the powerful teachers union. Despite its electoral defeat, the party that single-handedly ran Mexican politics for over 70 years still holds many of the practical strings of power in the nation.

Much of the mainstream media has also been portraying a Calderón victory as a *fait accompli*, as part of a communications strategy which posits that repeating a supposition often enough will make it a fact. Their power has been somewhat curtailed by openly biased coverage of the campaigns and access to

independent media and Internet as alternative sources of information.

Efforts to simply pass the sceptre, as planned by the PAN government, have become enormously complicated. Regardless of intentions, at this point it's difficult to imagine reconciling political divisions that are based on differing economic interests and played out in a context of distrust in the political system itself. A full vote count is a minimum requirement for restored faith in the system. Investigations into what happened must also take place. What has changed much more than the electoral rules since 1988 is the attitude of the citizenry. The citizenry is mobilized and unlikely to desist in its demands for fair elections.

Laura Carlsen is director of the IRC Americas Program in Mexico City, where she has worked as a writer and political analyst for the past two decades. The Americas Program is online at www.americaspolicy.org.

<http://americas.irc-online.org/am/3344>