

Democracy, Mexican Style

Review article

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Part I Historical Background

What do these presidential elections all have in common: Mexico, 1988, US, 2000, US, 2004, Colombia and Peru, 2006 and the just concluded Mexican election on July 2? In each case, the outcome was “arranged” and known in advance before voters went to the polls. They’re what economist and media and social critic Edward Herman calls “Demonstration Elections” – the characterization and title he gave his 1980s book analyzing and documenting sham elections in the Dominican Republic, El Salvador and Vietnam. Professor Herman is an expert, and although his book was written over 20 years ago, it’s clear little has changed except for the added sophistication gained since then in the ability of officials to make elections turn out the way they wish. The same fraud occurs in many countries, and Professor Herman might have included many others besides the ones he chose but had he done so he’d have had to have written a book with no end.

Elections that only appear democratic happen throughout the developing world wherever the US has a strategic interest, which these days means everywhere. But they also happen in at least some developed countries, most notably the last two US presidential elections. We know it thanks to the superb investigative work of UK based journalist Greg Palast who analyzed those elections and documented how each was stolen in his important new book *Armed Madhouse*. Palast went on to state his belief that based on information he’s uncovered the plans are now in place to steal the 2008 US presidential election, and he explains how it’ll be done. It’s in his new book, reviewed in detail and can be read at sjlendman.blogspot.com.

With this sort of “democracy” in America, what could we expect south of the border where longtime Mexico observer and writer John Ross says the fine art of election theft was perfected. It certainly was in evidence on July 2 as that election just completed with final results announced on July 6 looked just like the one held there in 1988 when Cuauhtemoc Cardenas (son of the country’s last leftist president from 1932 – 38) ran against the US choice Carlos Salinas of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) that dominated Mexican politics as a virtual dictatorship for over 70 years until it lost the 2000 presidential election to current President Vicente Fox of the National Action Party (PAN). Both these parties represent wealth and power so it’s of little consequence to the US which of them runs the Mexican political system.

In 1988, Salinas was declared the winner with 51% of the vote in an election Cardenas clearly won. To achieve victory, the PRI never counted the votes from thousands of voting stations, stole and burned the contents of selected ballot boxes, falsified voter tally sheets

and falsely claimed computers tabulating votes had crashed and couldn't be restored for 10 days following the election by which time Salinas was declared the winner. Following the announcement, few people believed it, and hundreds of Cardenas' supporters were killed in political violence opposing it in street protests over the next few years.

At this time, there's no way to know what will happen next following the just-announced final vote count. After the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) reported the final count on July 6 showing ruling PAN candidate Felipe Calderon with a small but insurmountable lead, opposition candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) rejected the official count as "flawed." He called on his supporters to take to the streets in a mass show of strength on July 8 in both Mexico City's historic central square as well as around the country to protest the announced result and demand a ballot-by-ballot recount. At present, with 99.91% of votes counted, Calderon was said to have 35.87% of the votes to Obrador's 35.32%. But with the ruling authority in charge of the vote count, a miss, as they say, is as good as a mile, and that one-half percent difference is more than enough to likely assure another election theft.

Why? In claiming he won the Sunday election, Lopez Obrador cited many clear irregularities including manipulating preliminary vote totals, initially never counting 3 millions votes and then in hindsight only counting 2.5 million of them, ignoring 900,000 supposed void, blank and annulled ballots declared null, discarded and never included in the official totals, also never counting over 700,000 additional votes from missing precincts, denying the right to vote to many voters in strong Obrador precincts, and much more. As a result, Obrador announced "We have decided to challenge the election process and to ask the Electoral Court of the judicial branch of the federation for a recount of the votes because we cannot accept the results" officially announced by the IFE. Obrador said he will ask that the ballot boxes be opened and all votes be recounted. Campaign advisor Federico Arreola added "Building a democracy has cost a lot in this country and we are not going to give it up easily. There is no reason for Lopez Obrador to back out or defend a system that he doesn't belong to." He might have also added there's no reason to accept an election result contrary to the voice of the Mexican people that no doubt will show they spoke for Mr. Obrador as their president and not Felipe Calderon if an honest tabulation of votes is made.

The procedure going forward now is that the Federal Electoral Institute will submit the final vote count to the Electoral Tribunal for approval on Sunday, July 9. Lopez Obrador then has four days to present his case for a recount. The Tribunal, known as Trife, then has until September 6 to issue a ruling. The new president takes office on December 1 so it's possible the electoral challenge could change the result as now known. Trife has in the past reversed some local elections, but it's very unlikely it will reverse this one given the overwhelming pressure on it which in Mexico may include real and intimidating physical threats officials take seriously based on past history. Also, according to Mexico expert George Grayson of the US College of William & Mary, Virginia, the rules for the Tribunal's decision are vague - "It's going to be somewhat like the US election in 2000, where you have the Supreme Court justices voting without clear guidelines." If Grayson is right, look for lots of commotion and probable violence ahead but in the end the people of Mexico will again be denied their democratic right to elect the president of their choice - just the way it now is in the US. So much for democracy. In Mexico it's democracy, Mexican style which is the same way it works for their dominant northern neighbor - none at all.

Part II

There's much happening in Mexico in the aftermath of the nation's most contentious election ever, but it began many months before the first vote was cast. The popularity of leftist opposition candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) scared the ruling National Action Party (PAN) enough to get them to try to deny him the right to run for president in the election just concluded. In April, 2005, a commission of four members of the Chamber of Deputies (Mexico's Congress) held there was sufficient cause to suspect Obrador committed a crime when he ordered the construction of a service road to a hospital ignoring a judge's order against doing it. Obrador said he was just widening the road and stopped when he learned of the court order. The full Chamber ignored his explanation and then voted to strip him of his government immunity from prosecution so he could be indicted, have to stand trial and be constitutionally barred from holding or running for high office. The transparent scheme didn't work because the people of Mexico wouldn't tolerate it and turned out in mass street protests to support him.

That mass support succeeded in getting the ruling PAN to back down from its attempt to keep Obrador off the ballot but not in the shoddy campaign tactics they decided to use against him. Because of his popularity, Obrador was a serious candidate who would likely win easily in a fair election. But there's nothing fair about Mexican politics where the notions of dirty tricks and hardball tactics could have been invented. From early on in the campaign, the Mexican corporate media and ruling business-friendly right wing parties attacked Obrador viciously as an evil twin of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, falsely accusing him of receiving campaign funds from the Venezuelan President and being guilty of corruption during his time as mayor of Mexico City. The ads also accused him of being a "danger" for Mexico. In addition, government instigated street violence in an attempt to break a teachers strike in Oaxaca and to disrupt events in San Salvador Atenco created tension, stoked fear and were effectively used as political and PR tools to turn enough of the public against Lopez Obrador to erase his once insurmountable lead in the polls to a slim one on election day - an advantage easily overcome with the shenanigans the ruling party had in mind to use to assure its candidate won.

But Lopez Obrador was lucky PAN officials and their conspiratorial Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) allies didn't intend for him what state officials plotted and pulled off against two other noted state adversaries in the past who paid dearly. General Emiliano Zapata, the Mexican peasant rebel leader who supported agrarian reform and land redistribution in the battles of the Mexican Revolution (a Mexican Simon Bolivar), was assassinated by government troops in 1919. Then in March, 1994, leading opposition candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio met the same fate on the campaign trail in Tijuana. Obrador survived the shabby scheme to keep him off the ballot, was able to run as the opposition candidate, and only paid the price of a defeat at the polls (so far) in an election clearly stolen from him.

At this point Lopez Obrador is not going gently "into that good night." Given the clear election irregularities, he's demanded the ballot boxes be opened and all votes be recounted manually. He has every right to ask for that and more with what already is known about the fraud committed against him. The preliminary vote totals were manipulated to show PAN candidate Felipe Calderon would be the winner, initially 3 million votes were never counted and only in hindsight 2.5 million of them were added to the totals, 900,000 supposedly void, blank and annulled ballots were declared null, discarded and never included in the official totals, 700,000 additional votes disappeared from missing precincts, thousands of voters were denied their franchise in strong Obrador precincts and much more.

In addition, it was learned that Felipe Calderon's brother-in-law Diego Hildebrando Zavala

wrote the vote-counting software, and it's already been hacked. This new discovery is especially disturbing as whoever controls the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) computer systems can manipulate the vote process, control which votes get counted, which ones don't, and what the final vote tally will be. The opportunity and temptation for fraud was therefore in the hands of the declared winner's close family member and ally with every reason to believe he'd take full advantage. Why wouldn't he and the ruling party as well given the history of Mexican elections and the underhanded and hardball tactics the country's entrenched power interests are known to use. They'd never be willing to give up what they've always had an iron grip on and won't if they can get away with their scheme. But the way to stop them is with a full, vote-by-vote independently supervised manual recount and do it before any cast, counted or discarded votes are manipulated or destroyed. That's the only antidote for computer fraud as well as to be able to salvage and include in the total as many of the known uncounted and valid discarded votes as possible. It all sounds like Florida, 2000 *deja vu* all over again, but we know how that one turned out.

Still, Lopez Obrador said he'll contest the election and demand a full recount. If he follows through on his challenge, he'll have to await a ruling by the Electoral Tribunal, known as Trife, which has until September 6 to consider his case. The new president takes office on December 1 so it's possible the electoral challenge will succeed. In the past, Trife has reversed some local elections including one in Obrador's home district of Tabasco in 2000, but it's very unlikely to reverse this one given the overwhelming pressure against it which in Mexico may include real and intimidating physical threats officials take very seriously.

The people of Mexico may have other ideas though. As many as 500,000 Obrador supporters (the corporate media lied and reported 100,000) held a mass protest demonstration against the announced election outcome in Mexico City's huge Zocalo plaza on July 8 to demand a full recount. The huge crowd chanted "No to fraud," and "You're not alone," as Lopez Obrador announced plans for a "national march for democracy" to begin on July 12 in each of Mexico's 300 election districts, converging in Mexico City on July 16, again in the Zocalo. He also accused President Fox of violating Mexican law that stipulates a president can't endorse or campaign for a candidate which the PAN did by running government sponsored advertisements touting its achievements. He went on to call President Fox a "traitor to democracy" and said the "stability of the nation" is at risk if a full vote recount isn't taken. Mr. Obrador also told an assembled news conference "I am going to defend our victory. This isn't over." The people of Mexico who support him certainly hope so.

The July 2 elections were also to elect members of Mexico's Chamber of Deputies. According to the official IFE count on July 7, the PAN won 206 of the 500 seats, followed by For the Good of All coalition consisting of the PRD and smaller Workers Party (PT) and Convergence Party with 160 seats. The Alliance for Mexico comprised of the PRI and small Green Ecological Party of Mexico (PVEM) won 121 seats. An incomplete final count in the Senate projected the PAN with 53 seats, 38 for the PRI coalition, 36 for the PRD coalition and 1 for PANAL.

Part III Update

The issue of resolving the winner of the disputed Mexican election is now in the hands of the Federal Election Tribunal (or Trife) which has the power to overturn the final count announced on July 6 by the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE).

The Trife was established as an autonomous judicial body in 1996 in the wake of accusations of fraud in a series of state elections.

0. It's a special seven judge court that has in the past used its authority to annul the Institutional Revolutionary Party's (PRI) victory in Tabasco state's governor's race in 2000 because of PRI interference and tampering with campaign material.

It acted again to overturn the PRI's victory in Colima state's governor's race in 2003 because of interference by the outgoing governor. It also ordered the ruling National Action Party (PAN) to repeat a primary election in Estado de Mexico (or State of Mexico which is one of the 31 states in the country) because of first round violations.

The Trife has thus shown it will use its authority against entrenched power when justified. But it's one matter to intervene in regional state elections and quite another to decide a national one, especially with tensions running so high on both sides. The ruling authority in Mexico has always had enormous power and influence, and it may take a near act of God to unseat them.

But Lopez Obrador intends to try... He began his campaign to do it last Sunday in Mexico City's huge Zocalo plaza addressing a mass crowd of about 500,000 supporters chanting cries of "No to fraud" and "You're not alone."

It began what some in the country call "the second election in the street" to win their demand for a full recount of all votes cast. And it points out the great class divide in Mexico pitting the people Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos calls the "people the color of the earth" mostly in the poor South against those more well-off in the industrialized North.

On July 9, Lopez Obrador called on the people of Mexico to begin a national march on July 12 in all 300 of the country's electoral districts that will converge on the capitol on Sunday, July 16.

Given the heightened feelings, it may turn out to be the largest public demonstration in Mexico's history topping the 1.2 million that massed in the Zocalo in April, 2005 in opposition to the ruling PAN's fraudulent scheme to keep Obrador off the presidential ballot.

It worked then when the PAN backed down, and Obrador supporters hope their nationwide show of support will win the day this time as well when it counts the most.

It won't be easy though if the Trife's chief magistrate Leonel Castillo holds to the comment he made to Milenio weekly before the July 2 election. In an interview with the news magazine he said the law doesn't allow a total recount of all districts. "Some may ask for a total recount, but when that petition (for a full recount) arrives here we're going to say no."

If that's the view of the court's majority, Lopez Obrador will need all the street support he can get as well as enough convincing evidence of fraud he claims he has. He cites video evidence of ballot box stuffing and hundreds of thousands of votes never counted or disappeared and more.

In addition, it was learned that Felipe Calderon's brother-in-law Diego Hildebrando Zavala wrote the vote-counting software that gave him the power and incentive to manipulate the vote process. Obrador also has what some call a wild card in his claim that the ruling PAN and its president Vicente Fox campaigned illegally for its candidate and that

announced winner Felipe Calderon exceeded his legally allowed campaign spending limits to run an illegal negative campaign.

For Mr. Obrador it's an uphill fight to convince the court, and he'll need all the ammunition he can muster along with the mass protest voices in the streets crying out for the "justicia" they deserve but so seldom ever get.

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