

Mexico: A Country in Crisis

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Mexico is grieving after more than 38 toddlers perished in a fire at a pre school day care centre in Hermosillo on Friday (05/06/09). But perhaps even worse for some fanatical football fans the national team lost 2 to 1 in a World Cup qualifying match to El -Salvador over the weekend. It seems only appropriate that as I write this piece, the national university's philharmonic is performing that mournful choral work by Anton Dvorak his "Sabat Mater". This might be a musical remedy to sooth the wounded pride of a nation, already battered by a constant barrage of bad news lately. Most recently by the devastation and fall out from the H1N1 epidemic and as well an economic collapse and now more unfathomable losses befall the nation.

Mexican May Day in June

There is a sense of rage and fear for the future in the country, which I have not seen (the ubiquitous surgical masks worn everywhere by almost everyone during the flu outbreak last month) nor felt in my 20 years of travels to Mexico . Those who I have talked to over the past two months, the taxi drivers, the barbers, the waiters and newspaper vendors seem more fed up with the 9 year rule of the PAN (National Action Party) then they were, back in 2000, when I was here covering the 2000 presidential race, which saw the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) ousted after a 71 year old monopoly on power by the PAN candidate Vincente Fox. One other visible sign are the almost daily street demonstrations. Last Monday, protestors from various public sectors of the economy marched into the main city square or Zocalo. They came out to protest on June 1st, a month after May Day marches were banned due to the H1N1 virus epidemic. They numbered according to the public security secretariat over 14,000.

I was able to again access with my foreign press card to the speaker's tribune. Behind us stood the old presidential palace and in front of this venue, we could see the throngs of telephone and railway workers, miners, university administrators, firemen, pilots and farmers. All of them came to demand a change of direction economically speaking, an increase in salaries and yes, even a renegotiation of the North American free trade agreement. This is a tall order indeed. As a union leader spoke there were men dressed in oil rig workers' outfits. Their faces smeared with grease and fake 50\$ dollar bills were stuffed in their overall pockets.

They handed out leaflets to me and the rest of us on this huge stage or platform. There were also two men wearing masks of Barak Obama and Felipe Calderon in business attire, behind them was a scaled down replica of a drilling derrick. The two leaders hugged like old pals to the roaring laughter and rapturous applause of the crowd. But the message to all was clear: no matter how cozy the current regime is with Washington , Mexico 's oil wealth

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Abstention in the July Mid-term elections?

On July 5, in midterm elections, Mexicans will elect 500 federal deputies to the lower house in Congress. As well, local balloting will take place in 11 states, six of which will elect new governors to six-year terms. Governors are due to be elected or reelected in states such as Campeche , Colima, Nuevo Leon, Queretaro, San Luis Potosi and finally Sonora . However, a large abstention rate is anticipated which could mar the whole process. As columnist Patrick Corcoran explains (1): The abstention and null-vote enthusiasts (the latter favoring a blank ballot, the former arguing that no vote at all is best) base their position on the premise that no Mexican politician is worth a vote, all of them being basically the same. He then goes on to quote a leading advocate of abstentionism in Mexico, Jose Antonio Crespo who says: “My posture is that, based on the behavior of all of the parties in recent years, you can conclude that there isn’t a substantial difference between them.” The economist and academic wrote recently in the “Excelsior” daily (05/18/09): “What is commonly called “active abstentionism, or civic” can easily be confused with apathetic abstentions or indifference....” And reminds readers that Mexico, unlike other some might say more established democracies does not even recognize (or perhaps even tabulate) a vote invalidated as a protest action by a citizen at the polling booth.

Another outspoken voice for the null and void vote is Gabriel Hinojosa Rivero who is leader of the (G2G) or the Second Generation Government. “By annulling the vote we are saying that the system is not working and that we want to change it, and we hope the message will be so strong as to eventually force the politicians to begin to reflect on reforming it”. He told Proceso, the weekly news magazine (05/31/09). That’s wishful thinking perhaps, but already the idea is catching on among frustrated voters as the elections approach. Parts of the rebellious citizenry plan on striking a huge cross or “X” on the ballot slip or even putting the name of a national cultural or historical icon such a Pancho Villa, Frida Kahlo or Benito Juarez on the ballot as a kind of “none of the above” gesture.

Disfunctional Democracy: A Government Devoid of Legitimacy

Not all agree with these tactics which effectively call for a nation wide boycott of the mid term elections next month. One columnist, Andres Pascoe Rippey (La Cronica , De Penes tristes y votos nulos, 06/06/09), compares the “null vote” to self mutilation. By not voting or casting an invalidated ballot Mexican are mutilating themselves and their fledgling democracy. Not voting only serves the current power structures in place and undermines democracy he argues in this crude metaphor on Mexican politics. But then most politicians here are much less than very refined these days. He concludes his commentary by exhorting readers and potential voters not to cut their penis, symbolically speaking that is, but to use it and its power instead and go out to vote on July 5th.

(1) Mexico ’s Midterm Elections, Abstention and Party Picks by Patrick Corcoran, 05/06/09, Mexidata.info.

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