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Mexico: Democracy Under Threat

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To get a sense of the danger hovering over Mexican democracy, consider these numbers: In the 681 years between the founding of the Aztec empire in 1325 and the present day, Mexico has lived for 196 years under an indigenous theocracy, 289 years under the absolute monarchy of Spain, 106 years under personal or party dictatorships, 68 years embroiled in civil wars or revolutions, and only 22 years in democracy.

This modest democratic 3 percent of Mexico's history is divided over three periods, far separated in time: 11 years in the second half of the 19th century, 11 months at the beginning of the 20th century, and the past 10 years. In the first two instances, the constitutional order was overturned by military coups.

Scarcely 50 years ago, armed groups of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (known as the PRI, its initials in Spanish) attacked polling stations with pistols and submachine guns, gunning down suspect voters and stealing ballot boxes. Scarcely 20 years ago, the PRI -- which had refined its methods -- prided itself on being a nearly infallible machine. The government and the PRI (symbiotic entities) controlled every step of the elections, from the preparation of voting rolls and the discretionary issuing of voter registration cards to the counting of votes. Many bureaucrats and members of worker and peasant organizations were carted to polling stations where they were instructed to vote in mass for the official candidate chosen by the outgoing president. The voters were given sandwiches and gifts; their leaders were given government posts, sinecures and money. Many times the ballots were marked in advance and stuffed days before the election into "pregnant" ballot boxes; the establishment of secret polling places was common, and some people were registered many times over.

This shameful situation ended in 1996 when President Ernesto Zedillo set in motion a deep democratic reform. Elections at all levels were no longer controlled by the government, becoming the jurisdiction of an independent Federal Electoral Institute (IFE), subject to a Federal Electoral Tribunal. At great cost, detailed voter rolls were drawn up with a registration and voter ID system that made it possible to correlate physical presence, identity and registration at the polling places. The IFE very soon gained remarkable credibility. All over the country, citizens began to vote freely in fair and transparent elections. Few were surprised when in 1997 the PRI lost the majority in the Chamber of Deputies for the first time and the leftist candidate, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, attained the extremely important post of mayor of Mexico City. Three years later, the PRI lost the jewel in the crown, and the crown itself: Vicente Fox of the National Action Party (PAN) won the presidency.

On July 2 this same independent electoral organization, made up of 909,575 citizens (not government employees), oversaw an orderly, peaceful election in which more than 41 million people voted. It's important to note that almost a million representatives from all parties participated, as well as nearly 25,000 national observers and 639 international observers. At the end of the day, the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) presidential candidate came away with more votes than any other leftist candidate in Mexican history; in fact, he fell just 240,000 votes short of winning the presidency.

What happened next has left Mexico on the verge of social upheaval. What would an American think if, after a campaign as heated as the Kerry-Bush race, the losing candidate had declared himself the winner the night of the election, claimed "massive fraud" a few days later and orchestrated a sit-in of his followers (many of them directly paid by the local PRD government) on the Mall in Washington, blocking access to the neighboring streets and affecting businesses and government offices? That is exactly what Andrés Manuel López Obrador has done.

In articles and interviews published in the international press (written in a misleading tone of civility, far from that of his incendiary speeches), López Obrador has seriously damaged Mexico's young democracy by trying to sustain the unsustainable: that Mexico today is the same as Mexico in the days of PRI rule. He fails to mention that:

- He spent more on television advertising than any other candidate.
- In the same election he calls "a filthy mess" his leftist coalition managed to become the second-most-powerful force in the legislature, considerably increasing its presence in both chambers, while the coalition's candidate for mayor of Mexico City won with 47 percent of the vote.
- The polling places where the Federal Electoral Tribunal ordered a recount (9 percent of the total) weren't a random sampling, which would have been more than sufficient to determine whether there was generalized fraud. They were instead a selection weighted in López Obrador's favor because he chose the polling places where he hoped to show that there had been fraud -- unsuccessfully, since the resulting difference has been minimal, according to the tribunal's ruling.
- He has said that even if there were a recount in 100 percent of the polling places, he wouldn't accept the results if they were not in his favor.

Today, many citizens who voted for López Obrador are not only disappointed but fearful. According to recent polls, the majority of the country disapproves of his actions and supports the Federal Electoral Tribunal's performance. If the presidential elections were held today, Felipe Calderón of the National Action Party would win with 54 percent to López Obrador's 30 percent.

López Obrador has complained about his opponents' fear-mongering, but he's the one stirring up real fear, by declaring that "Mexico needs a revolution" and comparing the situation to the circumstances that led to the Revolution of 1910. The historical comparison is completely wrong: López Obrador isn't the heir of liberal democrats Benito Juárez and Francisco I. Madero, but of Porfirio Díaz and Victoriano Huerta, the coup leaders who smothered Mexico's two initial attempts at democracy.

What comes next? If, as is likely, the final ruling of the Electoral Tribunal of the Federal Judiciary confirms Calderón's victory, López Obrador will do as he has warned: On Sept. 16, Mexico's Independence Day, he'll gather tens of thousands of people in the central square of Mexico's capital to declare him "president" by acclaim. He may even try to control "his territory" in the southern states of Oaxaca, Chiapas, Tabasco and Guerrero, and the capital itself. His aim for the near future will be to lay siege to the institutions he despises ("let them go to hell," he said recently) and force Calderón to resign.

It is crystal-clear that López Obrador is not a democrat. He's a revolutionary with a totalitarian mentality and messianic aspirations who is using the rhetoric of democracy to try to destroy this third historic attempt at democracy in Mexico. Eighty-six years ago, Mexico brought an end to a revolution that cost a million lives. Since then it has lived in peace. It's a country still plagued with injustice and poverty, but it has made significant progress in its economic transformation, social programs and political life. It would be a sad thing for it all to end in dictatorship or revolution: the 97 percent of our history. Mexico isn't just another democracy: it's the neighbor and partner of Canada and the United States and the counterweight on the scale tipping Latin America toward the example of Brazil and Chile and not Cuba and Venezuela. It's more important than ever that the democracy we've achieved has the support and understanding of international opinion.

Enrique Krauze is the author of "Mexico: Biography of Power" and editor of the magazine Letras Libres. This article was translated by Natasha Wimmer.

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