

AL GIORDANO

MEXICO'S

PRESIDENTIAL SWINDLE

WHEN BALLOTING STOPPED on the evening of July 2nd at the end of Mexico's 2006 presidential election, the eyes of the nation turned to the two main TV networks to await the result of exit polls. Most unusually, Televisa and tv Azteca both announced they would not reveal their figures. At 11pm the chairman of the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE), Luis Carlos Ugalde, appeared on screens across the country to say he would be withholding the agency's own 'fast result' tally. But the IFE's 'preliminary results' were made available on the internet and constantly updated throughout the night. According to these data, the presidential candidate of the ruling National Action Party (PAN), Felipe Calderón, initially led by five points, but with each new update the tally of votes for Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the centre-left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) rose steadily, while Calderón's sank in equal proportion. By 1.20am, the difference was 1.4 per cent. Had those trends continued, López Obrador would have been in the lead by 4am. But the next morning, the IFE announced a razor-thin lead for Calderón, 'with 98 per cent of precincts reporting'. Here was the electoral agency's first obvious lie: it had withheld more than 8 per cent of precincts—3.5 million votes—from its '98 per cent' tally.

Over the next few days, a pattern of fraud began to emerge. Journalists, mathematicians, internet bloggers and ordinary citizens began poring over the 'preliminary results' and found hundreds of cases in which pro-Calderón precincts had been counted twice. Photographs of official precinct tally sheets began to circulate on the web, revealing dozens of discrepancies with the results posted by the IFE: votes had repeatedly been 'shaved' from López Obrador—two here, four there, in some cases

even 100 or 200 votes were misplaced—while Calderón’s total had been ‘padded’. On July 4th, 10 ballot boxes, supposedly guarded by the armed forces, were found in a garbage dump in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, a poor area outside of Mexico City; more ballots were found in another dump in Xalapa, Veracruz. The next day, a data-entry employee at the IFE’s office in Saltillo, Coahuila, resigned, saying that his boss had forced him to enter only results favourable to Calderón into the computer.

By July 5th, with popular anger building, there was still no official result. Despite the discrepancies and irregularities reported by PRD representatives in numerous precincts, IFE officials in each of the agency’s 300 offices around the country insisted on counting the 130,000 precinct tally sheets, rather than recounting the actual ballots in the areas concerned. In the less than 1 per cent of precincts where they did allow a recount, Calderón lost more than 13,000 votes of his supposed lead. Extrapolating this difference nationwide, López Obrador would have won the election by more than one million votes: 1,056,900, to be precise. On July 6th, however, IFE chairman Ugalde proclaimed Calderón the official winner by a margin of 0.58 per cent.

On July 8th, López Obrador called a demonstration in Mexico City, where a 500,000-strong crowd of his supporters demanded a full recount, ‘*voto por voto, casilla por casilla*’—vote by vote, precinct by precinct. At the rally, an audio-tape recording was played of a phone conversation on July 2nd between Elba Esther Gordillo, president of the notoriously corrupt national teachers’ union, and the PRI governor of the northern state of Tamaulipas, Eugenio Hernández Flores. The tape revealed that, with their party’s candidate Roberto Madrazo definitively out of the presidential race, many governors from the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)—which had effectively ruled the country from 1929 to 2000—colluded with the PAN and Gordillo’s own fledgling New Alliance Party to cut López Obrador’s lead. False vote counts were conducted in those precincts where the PRD and other parties did not have poll watchers, primarily in the north. In PAN strongholds in central and northern Mexico, official tallies in many precincts indicated more votes cast than there were voters.

Mexican television networks and other major media turned a blind eye to all these proofs of fraud, instead opting to repeat, ad nauseam, that the elections were ‘the cleanest in Mexican history’—a theme echoed by

observers from the EU and OAS, and the international press. The Bush Administration had rushed to congratulate Calderón on July 7th—a full two months before the result announced the previous day was due to be confirmed by Mexico’s supreme electoral authority, the Federal Electoral Tribunal (TRIFE). But White House spokesmen rapidly back-pedalled in face of growing popular mobilizations against the fraud. A second march called by López Obrador on July 16th drew over a million people; on July 30th he was joined by an estimated 2 million. Mexico City’s central square, the Zócalo, now became a permanent encampment. Tents, blankets and policing were laid on by PRD authorities, while protesters milled around in an atmosphere reminiscent of a summer festival. López Obrador took up residence in the Zócalo pending the outcome of his appeal to the TRIFE, to whom he had on July 9th presented 36 boxes of evidence, demanding a full recount of all precincts or, at minimum, a recount in the 72,000 precincts where irregularities were documented.

The TRIFE, the ultimate arbiter of elections in Mexico, is a panel of seven judges. It was established in 1996 as the result of reforms implemented in the wake of the notoriously fraudulent election of 1988, which had threatened the already shaky legitimacy of the system. Selected by the Supreme Court, the judges serve four-year terms, and their appointments—with a salary of \$415,000, higher than that of the president—are submitted to the Mexican Congress, where the three major parties gave unanimous approval. The president of the panel, Leonel Castillo, is a former Supreme Court Justice and career federal judge, accompanied by six little-known legal academics and former judges: Berta Alfonsina Navarro, Alejandro Luna, Jesús Orozco, Eloy Fuentes, Fernando Ojesto and Mauro Miguel Reyes Zapata. The constitutional responsibilities of the country’s electoral authorities are laid out in Article 41, Paragraph 3 of the Mexican Constitution, which stipulates that they should conduct their work with ‘certainty, legality, independence, impartiality and objectivity’ as ‘guiding principles’. In the event of a conflict between the IFE and the TRIFE, Article 99 makes it clear that the TRIFE has the final say: ‘legal challenges that are presented regarding the election of President of the United Mexican States . . . will be resolved exclusively by the [TRIFE’s] High Chamber’.

The electoral authorities, then, are constitutionally required to provide certainty as to election results, and to assure their own impartiality. Given the widespread doubts about the validity of the results declared on

July 6th, the TRIFE had absolute legal grounds to take any measures necessary to restore public confidence in the election's outcome. A recount was the sole means of establishing the certainty required by law. To demand one would not only have been within the TRIFE's power: it was its constitutional duty.

Thwarting the recount

Within Mexico, forces other than the PRD calling for a recount were few in number. The pro-PRD daily *La Jornada* and the Yucatán-based *¡Por Esto!* were among them, while the liberal *Proceso*, Mexico's leading news weekly, strongly denounced the conduct of IFE chairman Ugalde, concluding that the agency had been 'an ally of the federal government in its goal of avoiding, at all costs, the arrival of Andrés Manuel López Obrador to the presidency.'¹ The bulk of Mexico's media—above all the two main TV networks—rehearsed arguments that it would be logistically impossible to conduct a recount, and unnecessary, given the much-trumpeted fairness of the vote. Overseas establishment media were more cautious: on July 7th the *New York Times* observed that 'there are enough problems to warrant a complete recount', and the *Financial Times* argued on August 8th that 'a full recount . . . offers the best way to ease political tensions, ensuring that whoever emerges as Mexico's new president is not only legal but is also seen to be legitimate.'

The TRIFE rode roughshod over such concerns, ordering on August 5th a recount of only 9 per cent of precincts. Conducted from August 9–13th by judges in the 300 electoral districts, it was not transparent by any reasonable standard. The press was barred from the count, and only party representatives could attend. The latter were allowed to challenge specific ballots, which then were sent to the TRIFE for review. However, the TRIFE never disclosed its ruling on the contested ballots, nor even a precinct-by-precinct result. The partial recount did show that, out of 11,839 precincts recounted, 7,442 either had ballots missing or ballots above the number of people who had voted there. Had the TRIFE annulled those precincts—a precedent set in its review of past state and municipal elections—López Obrador would have been declared president-elect. Instead, on August 28th the TRIFE announced that it had annulled 237,736 votes, without specifying which or how many ballot

¹ Jesusa Cervantes and Jenaro Villamil, 'Un operativo de estado', *Proceso*, 3 July 2006.

boxes these came from. The result was to reduce Calderón's margin of victory by a mere 4,183 votes.

Three days later, President Vicente Fox arrived at the congressional hall to deliver his annual state-of-the-nation message. Eight thousand riot police surrounded the building, snipers were positioned on nearby rooftops, and water cannons and metal fences at the entrances to Congress. Police blocked dozens of senators and deputies allied with López Obrador from entering. The PRD legislators nevertheless managed to break through police lines and inside, as Senator Carlos Navarrete condemned the police tactics, 153 representatives from the PRD and the Workers' Party swarmed onto the podium waving Mexican flags and banners that labelled Fox a 'traitor to democracy'. Arriving shortly after, Fox spent six minutes in the building's lobby before deciding to turn back; he delivered his address two hours later from the presidential library.

On September 5th, the TRIFE duly anointed Calderón president-elect, and the following day the PAN's candidate was ushered past thousands of riot police through the back entrance of the Supreme Court building to receive his paper certification, as protesters threw eggs at the front door. The TRIFE's final decision eliminates all possibility of an official vote recount or annulment of the elections. Despite a request filed by *Proceso* magazine and other organizations under Mexico's freedom of information act to inspect the ballots, on September 7th the IFE ruled that the ballots were not public documents, and would be burnt in a fortnight—in effect, covering the tracks of its collusion with the PAN and PRI. Extensive documentation of electoral fraud has vastly undercut public belief in the officially declared result. The transparent failure of the IFE and TRIFE to comply with their mandates shattered the thin veneer of legitimacy attached to the state's 'democratic' institutions.

Ghosts of 1988

For Mexicans, the events of this summer inevitably recalled another stolen election, eighteen years ago. In July 1988, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas—son of the populist president Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40), who had instituted land reforms and nationalized oil—ran for the presidency against the PRI's Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Cárdenas and his left-reformist supporters within the party had broken from the PRI in 1987, having despaired of reforming the *priísta* machine from within. Together with former

PRI chairman Porfirio Muñoz Ledo and a range of small left parties, he founded the National Democratic Front (FDN) early in 1988 to contest that year's election. When the returns came in on July 6th, Cárdenas was in the lead: the 55 per cent of tally sheets in the possession of FDN poll workers showed Cárdenas with 40 per cent to Salinas's 36; government tabulations showed similar results. But then came the moment that has defined public responses to the current electoral crisis: the PRI interior minister announced on national tv that the vote-counting computer had crashed. When the system was back up again later that night, suddenly Salinas was ahead.

Millions took to the streets to protest the fraud. The PRI regime flatly refused to make the remaining precinct tally sheets public, but when 30,000 ballots marked for Cárdenas were found dumped in rivers and forests in the southern state of Guerrero, popular anger erupted. During a demonstration in the Zócalo attended by upwards of three million people, some of Cárdenas's aides pressed him to seize the National Palace. But he recoiled from such a radical course, opting to negotiate with Salinas in private. In exchange for some concessions, including the formation in 1990 of the Federal Electoral Institute, Cárdenas dropped his challenge, prompting bitter divisions within the FDN that continue to haunt the party formed from its demoralized components in 1989, the PRD.

Salinas's presidency of 1988–94, dogged throughout by the illegitimacy of his election, represented the nadir of the PRI's rotten one-party rule. The privatization of banks, telecommunications, transport, media and other previously public industries conducted by his government put vast swathes of the nation's patrimony into the hands of a new layer of entrepreneurs and venal politicians. Poverty levels remained at 36 per cent overall in 1994, rising to 47 per cent in rural areas.² Corruption mushroomed, and the deregulation of finance provided ample opportunities for money laundering on behalf of increasingly powerful drug traffickers: police, politicians, military officials, bankers were bought off with suitcases of cash. Selective enforcement of the US-imposed 'war on drugs' only strengthened some criminal factions at the expense of others, leading to an escalation of violent turf wars between traffickers, and with debilitating effects on public safety as a whole.

² Data from ECLAC, *Anuario estadístico de América Latina y el Caribe*, 2001.

Presiding over all this was Salinas himself, whose family is reported to have salted away as much as 14 billion dollars of state funds, and who fled the country after his term of office ended in 1994, fearing prosecution. His brother Raúl was incarcerated in 1995 in connection with the murder of José Francisco Ruiz Massieu, himself the brother of the man appointed to investigate the 1994 assassination of PRI presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio; rumours abounded as to the president's own degree of involvement in both events. His economic legacy was disastrous: the country's vulnerability to speculative capital flows, coupled with uncontrolled corruption and a 1994 public-spending splurge aimed at boosting the PRI's electoral fortunes, culminated in the December 1994 peso crisis and a devaluation in which the currency slid from 3.4 to the dollar to 7.2—plunging millions of Mexicans into debt. Bailed out by the Clinton Administration and the IMF, who contributed \$20bn and \$17bn respectively, Mexico's incoming PRI government under the free-market technocrat Ernesto Zedillo stuck to the neoliberal course charted by Salinas. Though an economic recovery had begun to take shape by the late 1990s, the underlying conditions created by *salinismo* remained in place.

The keystone of Salinas's presidency was the North American Free Trade Agreement with the United States and Canada, signed in 1993. The treaty eliminated duties on a broad range of US goods, and opened Mexico's markets to foreign products, ownership and, notably, agribusiness—destroying Mexican small farmers, who could not compete with heavily subsidized American crops. The exodus from rural areas grew not only toward the United States, but also to Mexico City and the surrounding metropolitan area, to the Caribbean coast of Quintana Roo and other places where a living could be eked out through construction work or subsistence trade in the informal economy. In the northern border regions, two million of the unemployed found precarious, badly paid work in the *maquiladoras*, where transnational corporations profited from NAFTA's lax labour provisions and climate of corporate impunity.

The political consequences of the Salinas–Zedillo years were a further fragmentation of PRI support, both to the left and to the right. The traditionally Catholic and conservative PAN, enemy of the anti-clerical PRI from its beginnings in the late 1930s, had modernized its image and extended its base from the largely rural states of the north and the central Mexican agricultural region known as the Bajío. Given the widespread public disappointment with Cárdenas and the PRD for failing to contest the fraud of

1988, the PAN appeared the only viable and resolute electoral opposition to the PRI. The PRD went into partial eclipse. It did not win a single new governorship until 1997. Cárdenas himself failed to draw the obvious conclusion and insisted on standing again as the PRD's candidate in 1994 and once again in 2000, both times drawing only 17 per cent of the vote. The PRD also suffered large-scale repression at the hands of the state: under Salinas, more than 600 local PRD leaders were assassinated, an average of one every three-and-a-half days. It was against this dismal backdrop that on January 1st, 1994—the day NAFTA became law—a new force erupted on Mexico's political scene. The Zapatistas' dawn rebellion in Chiapas drew the nation's attention once more to the long-standing marginalization of the country's indigenous population, and the lyrical-sardonic pronouncements of the movement's spokesman, Subcomandante Marcos, were soon reverberating far beyond Mexico's borders.

The man from Tabasco

The electoral fraud of 1988 had proved a turning point in López Obrador's political career as well. Born in 1953 in the tropical, swampy and oil-rich southern state of Tabasco on the Gulf of Mexico, López Obrador was the son of shopkeepers who moved several times during his childhood, some of which was spent in Chiapas. As a teenager in Palenque, site of the famous Mayan ruins, López Obrador started a political newsletter called *El Chol*, after one of the region's indigenous ethnic groups. After studying political science at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma in Mexico City, he returned to Tabasco in 1976 as a PRI campaign worker for the poet Carlos Pellicer's run for the Senate. He was rewarded with the directorship of Tabasco's small Indigenous Institute—a political post from which he began to rise through the ranks of the PRI, eventually winning a position at federal level at the National Consumer Institute in 1984.

In 1988, however, López Obrador joined the exodus from the PRI, following Cárdenas and others into the FDN. In August of that year—a month after the PRI's fraudulent victory—he returned to Tabasco to run for governor on an FDN slate. Emboldened by success on a national scale, the PRI felt it could repeat its vote-rigging tactics state by state, and the official tally in Tabasco went against López Obrador. His response was to publish a book documenting the PRI's electoral crimes.³ When

³ López Obrador, *Tabasco: Víctima del fraude electoral*, Mexico City 1990.

municipal elections in Tabasco were rigged in 1991, López Obrador—by this time chairman of the PRD's state branch—led a long protest march to Mexico City, but the outcome was unaltered. Running for state governor again in 1994, López Obrador was officially beaten by the PRI's Roberto Madrazo, who was to finish a distant third in 2006. Armed with receipts proving that the PRI had exceeded legal campaign spending limits fifty times over, to the tune of \$74 million, and citing the motto *corazón tropical, mente fría*—tropical heart, cool head—López Obrador led another march on Mexico City; but again the electoral authorities refused to budge.⁴

Support for indigenous rights played a key part in López Obrador's emergence as a national political figure. In November 1994, following the PRD defeat, López Obrador accompanied Cárdenas to the Lacandón jungle in Chiapas to meet Marcos, who reciprocated by calling Cárdenas a 'legitimate interlocutor' for indigenous rights on the national level. In February 1995 the EZLN and Cárdenas joined forces to form the Movement for National Liberation (MLN). In early 1996, López Obrador led a four-week occupation of Tabasco oilfields by Chontal indigenous farmers protesting against environmental damage. Federal troops crushed the protest, and images of López Obrador drenched in his own blood were aired on national TV, while the Zedillo government issued a warrant for his arrest. Launching his outsider candidacy for the national chairmanship of the PRD later that year, he told *La Jornada* that 'We will never betray the indigenous movement'. He went on to win the chairmanship against two more established PRD leaders. The year 1996 also saw the indigenous movement score a breakthrough when, after long negotiations with the PRI government—represented by Manuel Camacho Solís, who would become a close adviser to López Obrador in 2006—the EZLN and Zedillo signed the San Andrés Accords. The treaty accepted autonomous land rights, recognized indigenous forms of justice and administration, and granted legal protection to the community traditions of Mexico's sixty-two native ethnic groups. But the treaty languished for five years in Congressional limbo, and was eventually torpedoed by legislators.

As PRD chairman, López Obrador immediately went on the attack, denouncing a string of financial crimes facilitated by Mexico's bank insurance protection law, known as FOBAPROA. Banks loaned money

⁴ López Obrador, *Entre la historia y la esperanza: corrupción y lucha democrática en Tabasco*, Mexico City 1995.

to front-men and paper companies, who defaulted on the loans, which the government was then obliged to pay back to the banks. Such scams accounted for hundreds of billions of dollars, but in 1998, PRI and PAN legislators approved a bank bail-out that has sopped up an estimated 15 per cent of the annual federal budget ever since. López Obrador led demonstrations against the bail-out, and became a magnet for incriminating documents of the fraud, which he published in book form.⁵ In public statements, he would single out the miscreants by name: powerful organizations like Banamex (the former National Bank of Mexico, now part of Citigroup) and TV Azteca, and their owners.

He also developed a reputation for winning elections. From the outset, the PRD consisted of a collection of warring factions, and divisions apparent at its birth—notably between Cárdenas and co-founder Muñoz Ledo, over the former's climb-down in 1988—remained a constant source of tensions. Adding to ideological rifts was a rising tide of opportunism: the PRD's soul had always been defections from the PRI—some in the initial wave of 1988, other *priistas* following in a slow migration over the years, whenever it seemed that electoral opportunities would be enhanced by changing colours. As party chairman, López Obrador managed to keep the lid on faction-fighting, and in the congressional elections of July 1997 the PRD became the second largest bloc in the federal assembly, after the PRI. An alliance with the PAN and other smaller parties saw Muñoz Ledo elected as the first non-PRI Speaker in Mexican history. At the same time, the first-ever gubernatorial contest for the Federal District of Mexico City—previously a central government appointment—was won by Cárdenas.

During López Obrador's three-year watch, the PRD also won governorships in the states of Zacatecas, Aguascalientes and Baja California Sur, and would have claimed another in Guerrero in February 1999 but for further fraud by the PRI. A 20,000-strong 'Exodus for Democracy', with López Obrador in front, walked to Mexico City from that state's capital, Chilpancingo, arriving in the Zócalo just as workers from electrical and other sectors and unions were demonstrating against the privatization of the power industry. Masked Zapatista delegates also addressed the crowd, and with 6,000 Zapatista cadres dispatched to municipalities across the country, it seemed as if all the forces of the left—parliamentary, union,

⁵ López Obrador, *Fobaproa, expediente abierto: reseña y archivo*, Mexico City 1999.

indigenous—were coming together into a single force that could put up a real challenge in the 2000 presidential elections.

Foxismo

The overriding theme of the 2000 campaign was revulsion against the PRI. With the PAN better placed to take the presidency, former Cárdenas allies encouraged a ‘useful vote’ to eject the party that had ruled the country since 1929. Muñoz Ledo, then running for president for a minor party, dropped out to support the PAN’s candidate, Vicente Fox. A maverick former Coca-Cola executive, Fox had acquired the reputation of a combative outsider, pitted against the PRI system in 1991, when he organized highway blockades and occupied government buildings in Guanajuato in protest at the PRI electoral fraud that had robbed him of the state’s governorship. An interim appointee was installed and, four years later, Fox was duly elected as Guanajuato’s governor. He gained the PAN nomination in 2000 by sidelining the party’s Catholic business magnates and the religious right; forming his own campaign group, *Amigos de Fox*, independent of the traditional PAN hierarchy; and cultivating a non-ideological image by bringing in former Cárdenas aides such as Jorge Castañeda and the late Adolfo Aguilar Zinser as advisers. A vote against the PRI was seen as a vote against corruption, poverty, unemployment and social breakdown. Two-thirds of Mexicans declared themselves in favour of ‘a change’ in economic and social policy. For the first time, important us forces swung behind an anti-PRI candidate and Fox found support in Washington, where the PRI’s abuses and corruption had finally become an embarrassment to its former backers. Texan political consultant Rob Allyn, close to us oil and electric industries seeking entry into Mexico’s nationalized energy sector, helped Fox with campaign strategy; as did millions of laundered us dollars. Under the banner of democratization, Fox could sweep away the hated PRI—to deliver an even more savage capitalism.

There were many in the PRD who wanted López Obrador to be their party’s candidate for president in 2000. But Cárdenas, despite his poor showing in 1994, retained much support in PRD ranks. His plodding style was in sharp contrast to Fox’s brash rhetoric, and Cárdenas came a disappointing third. PRD support fell from 26 per cent in 1997 to 17 per cent in 2000, with some 2 million tactical votes switching to the PAN. But Fox’s ‘historic victory’ in ousting Mexico’s ruling party from the presidency soon lost its lustre. The hoped-for changes failed to occur, and

disillusion set in fast. The PRI still formed the largest bloc in Congress. Many of Fox's free-market reforms were also stymied, due to popular and congressional opposition. The economy remained stagnant, and the promised job growth did not materialize, held down in part by Fox's fiscal austerity. A turning point came in early 2001, when the Zapatistas' bus tour of the south and central parts of the country, building pressure for the implementation of the San Andrés Accords, culminated in a masked Comandante Esther addressing a joint session of Congress, broadcast on national television. Instead of conceding to indigenous demands that the Accords be implemented, however, Congress gutted them of any provisions that interfered with business or state interests. Key PRD legislators either supported the evisceration of the treaty—as in the case of Lázaro Cárdenas Batel, son of Cuauhtémoc—or, like López Obrador's 2006 campaign manager Jesús Ortega, skipped the vote altogether. The Zapatistas broke relations with all political parties, resenting most bitterly the PRD's betrayal, and spent the following years back in the jungle constructing their own autonomous municipalities.

Managing the metropolis

López Obrador, meanwhile, had fought and won the governorship of the Federal District in the 2000 elections, despite attempts by the PRI and PAN to block his candidacy through the courts, claiming that as a *tabasqueño* he did not meet the residency requirements—though the capital had, until three years earlier, often been governed by out-of-town PRI appointees. As governor of Mexico City, López Obrador combined showy infrastructural projects with hardline policing, and a series of populist measures that gained him much support among the city's poor. His social programmes, granting monthly stipends of 700 pesos (\$60) to the elderly, handicapped and single mothers contrasted sharply with Fox's tightening of the federal budget, which only worked to increase existing inequalities. At the same time, López Obrador's gentrification of the city's historic centre mainly benefited those who owned real estate there, notably the telecommunications magnate Carlos Slim, Mexico's richest man. It was above all wealthier layers that gained from López Obrador's largest infrastructural project: elevated highways connecting well-off neighbourhoods with the airport and with each other, while those going to and from working-class areas remained mired in traffic jams below. The governor's response to elite fears over security was to hire former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani as a consultant, binding Mexico

City's police forces to the latter's infamous policy of 'zero tolerance'. Much of López Obrador's activity in the capital was geared to his 2006 presidential bid, which opinion polls showed him well positioned to win. He began to hold press conferences at 6.30am, setting the news agenda not only for the capital, but also for the nation. Following Kirchner and Lula's victories in 2001 and 2002, the defeat of the anti-Chávez coup in Venezuela and the ousting of pro-Washington governments in Bolivia and Ecuador, it seemed that the continent-wide wave of Latin American revolt might soon be lapping the banks of the Rio Grande.

It could be said that the opening shots of the 2006 presidential election were fired in April 2005 when, with López Obrador holding a double-digit lead over his nearest rivals, sections of the Mexican political and business elites, the PAN and PRI allied in an attempt to prevent him from running. The pretext was a dispute over a hospital driveway in Mexico City and a court injunction to down tools, which the city appealed while its bulldozers continued working. Fox's Attorney General, Rafael Macedo de la Concha, filed contempt charges against López Obrador and the city government, and Congress then stripped the Governor of his rights to hold—or be a candidate for—elected office, a pre-emptive impeachment measure known as a *desafuero*. Though he had not been convicted of any crime, nor accused of anything more than an administrative glitch, the presidential frontrunner would have been taken out of the race.

López Obrador mobilized large-scale protests in the capital's streets. The flagrant political purpose of the *desafuero* angered many outside the PRD: an independent youth movement, championed by *La Jornada* columnist Jaime Avilés, leafleted vigorously, while Subcomandante Marcos called the *desafuero* a coup d'état. Foreign newspapers editorialized against it, urging respect for Mexico's 'fledgling democracy'. Protests followed Fox wherever he went. Under pressure from the continuing mobilizations, the President finally fired his Attorney General in May 2005 and had all charges against López Obrador dropped. This was the second time in five years that the Mexican political establishment had tried and failed to block him from running.

López Obrador's campaign

Nevertheless, Mexico's business elite had little to fear from a López Obrador presidency. His programme combined a commitment to

macro-economic stability, a ‘disciplined’ monetary policy and respect for the autonomy of the central bank, with (unquantified) pledges to fight poverty, raise the minimum wage and ‘modernize without privatizing’ the gas and oil sectors. As the elections loomed, his strategists sought to assure investors that fiscal discipline would be maintained, inflation kept in check and spending strictly controlled.⁶ Brokerage firms regularly issued statements indicating that they saw no threat. The example of Lula, initially further to the left than López Obrador had ever been, showed the advantage of having a ‘man of the people’ to push through reforms favourable to capital while defusing the anger of workers and the poor. López Obrador might fulfil a similar function: by tackling certain Mexican monopolies, he could unblock the paths for foreign capital even as he muffled labour protests.

The power base from which López Obrador launched his bid for the presidency in 2006 was one he had assembled for himself in Mexico City. His main tactical adviser was Manuel Camacho Solís, the former PRI governor of Mexico City who negotiated for Salinas in Chiapas, but broke with the PRI after failing to secure the party nomination as presidential candidate in 1994. Camacho most likely played the lead role in recruiting other *priístas* to the cause, among them Arturo Núñez, a former PRI Speaker in the Congress; Muñoz Ledo is also a key member of the retinue. Of his fifty-point electoral platform, the main point López Obrador stressed was tax exemption and government credits for all those earning 9,000 pesos (\$800) or less a month—almost exactly half of the population. He also promised compliance with the San Andrés Accords for indigenous rights, though this would in practice have required congressional ratification. But the PRD candidate otherwise made comparatively little effort to expand his support base—perhaps believing it unnecessary: in poll after poll, his ratings towered over those of Roberto Madrazo, his old rival from Tabasco and now PRI candidate, as well as those of Fox’s hand-picked successor, the lacklustre Interior Minister Santiago Creel.

Operation Calderón

Few paid attention to Creel’s rival for PAN nomination, Felipe Calderón, a 44-year-old technocrat and former energy secretary, who was relatively unknown outside of his native state of Michoacán. Son of one of the

⁶ Interview with Rogelio Ramírez de la O, *Financial Times*, 4 April 2006.

PAN's founders, Calderón comes from the party's Catholic old guard. As Fox's energy secretary, he had incrementally privatized those aspects of the state oil company, PEMEX, that could be sub-contracted out—skirting congressional opposition by bureaucratic means, and quietly dismembering the national cash cow bit by bit.⁷ Calderón's close-knit campaign team included his wife, Margarita Zavala, a PAN deputy; and his brother-in-law, Diego Hildebrando Zavala, a big shareholder in Hildebrando, a software company with many federal contracts—including the IFE. Calderón had also been one of few national politicians to attend the wedding of IFE chairman Luis Carlos Ugalde in 2003. *Proceso* reported on April 29th that Fox's political consultant, Rob Allyn, was an advisor to the Calderón campaign, suggesting that the latter might serve as a Trojan horse for US oil majors keen to carve up PEMEX.⁸ But when the PAN held its *consulta*—a kind of primary—in early 2006, the old guard's Calderón outmanoeuvred Creel to secure the party's nomination. The PAN closed ranks, and concentrated its firepower on López Obrador.

Calderón's platform soft-pedalled the prospect of opening up the energy sector and instead promised that he would be 'the jobs president', and would use a 'firm hand' against crime. Like Fox, Calderón also undertook to secure an agreement with the US on immigration. The real focus of his efforts, however, was to attack López Obrador as a 'Mexican Chávez'. A multi-million-dollar advertising campaign labelled him a 'danger to Mexico' who would unleash social revolution and usher in authoritarian rule. López Obrador's track record of leading popular protests, his apparent lack of interest in self-enrichment and Spartan lifestyle were all indications of a messianic streak, according to official intellectual Enrique Krauze.⁹ There was a simultaneous barrage from overseas: on April 3rd, Dick Morris published a column in the *New York Post* titled 'Menace in Mexico', stating that

rumours have abounded for months that López Obrador's campaign is getting major funding from Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez . . . Chávez

⁷ In early 2003, when President Chávez was facing a shutdown of parts of Venezuela's oil industry, Fox reportedly asked if there was anything he could do to help. Chávez asked if Mexico could lend Venezuela some oil tankers—whereupon Fox, according to press reports, apologized, explaining that Mexico had leased all its tankers to private companies. This is part of Calderón's legacy as energy secretary.

⁸ José Gil Olmos, 'Estrategas mercenarios . . . Sin rival', *Proceso*, 29 April 2006.

⁹ Enrique Krauze, 'El mesías tropical', *Letras libres*, June 2006.

is a firm ally of Cuba's Fidel Castro. López Obrador could be the final piece in their grand plan to bring the United States to its knees before the newly resurgent Latin left.

This kind of us-style negative campaigning was new to Mexican presidential contests, and shocked many. The intensity of the media campaign mounted against the frontrunner was remarkable: all major tv stations and most newspapers declared against López Obrador. tv coverage of the presidential campaign—never particularly balanced—now tilted decisively towards Calderón, after the passage in March 2006 of legislation known as the 'Televisa Law'. The law massively favoured the two main media conglomerates by opening the airwaves to the highest bidder, and requiring new companies to fulfil bureaucratic requirements that would not apply to Televisa or tv Azteca. It was unanimously approved—without debate, in an incredible seven minutes—by the lower house of Congress, as each of the three main parties sought to curry favour with the media; it was also passed by the Senate, despite now being opposed by the PRD and some renegade PRI legislators.

With a seemingly unassailable lead in opinion polls, López Obrador did not initially respond to the attacks. He also skipped the first televised presidential debate on April 25th, fuelling accusations of arrogance. In early May, polls began to appear in the press purporting to show Calderón gaining on López Obrador, or even ahead—though many of the organizations supplying the polling data were previously unheard of, and it is widely known in Mexico that opinion polls can be bought tailored to a pre-ordered result. While the attack ads did weaken López Obrador's support somewhat, the surge in Calderón's poll ratings is far more likely to have been due to conservative PRI supporters realizing Madrazo could not win and switching to the PAN.

Below and to the left

What was the impact of criticism from the left on López Obrador's campaign? Subcomandante Marcos had in June 2005 characterized López Obrador's programme as a 'continuation' of Salinas's 'social liberalism', and contended that the image of Salinas constructed by the PRD candidate 'is in reality a mirror'.¹⁰ Many López Obrador supporters blamed

¹⁰ Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, 'La (imposible) ¿geometría? del Poder en México', *La Jornada*, 20 June 2005.

the Zapatistas for undermining the PRD, but the EZLN in fact rejected proposals from various organizations to run an alternative candidate or to promote voter abstention. Its communiqués repeatedly urged its supporters to vote according to their own wishes or not at all. Instead, in early 2006 the EZLN launched the ‘Other Campaign’, a tour of central and southern states during which Marcos listened to the testimony of Mexicans whose needs were being sidelined by the major parties. By February, when La Otra arrived in the *maquiladora* regions of the state of Puebla, it was evident that the Zapatista movement was beginning to reach the ‘new proletariat’ of industrial and sweatshop workers—raising the possibility, Marcos hoped, of extending the rural model of collective land expropriations, developed by indigenous Zapatistas in Chiapas, into ‘expropriations of the means of production’ in the industrial sphere.

Rather than harming the PRD candidate, the Other Campaign’s efforts to construct an alternative outside the electoral domain provided him with a clear path. By early May, López Obrador’s support was rising again, bolstered by public revulsion at police brutalities in Texcoco and San Salvador Atenco, not far from Mexico City; it was Atenco that had humiliated the Fox Administration in 2002 by blocking construction of an international airport. On May 3rd, 2006, when police violently ejected flower-growers from the Texcoco city market, a group from Atenco came to their aid and drove the police away in a pitched battle. Later that day, hundreds of state and federal reinforcements swarmed back, leading to a struggle for control of the highway that connects the two towns, which was broadcast live—via traffic-monitoring helicopter footage—on national tv. Police shot and killed a 14-year-old boy, Javier Cortés, but lost the battle for the highway. The following dawn, 3,500 federal and state police raided Atenco and conducted house-by-house searches, beating and mutilating the citizenry. They also detained dozens of Other Campaign supporters who had arrived the night before—Marcos having announced a ‘red alert’, suspended the tour and promised all aid to Atenco. A total of 217 people were arrested. Alexis Benhumea, a 20-year-old student from Mexico City, was fatally injured when a tear-gas canister hit him on the head; he died some weeks later. The Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Centre reported that police had raped and sexually tortured 27 of the 43 women arrested. In the following days and weeks, the testimonies of those women and eyewitnesses to their rapes brought back terrible memories of past repression.

This was a defining moment for Calderón, whose cold sneers about Atenco revealed an authoritarian tendency hitherto concealed. He justified the police clampdown and dismissed the reports of rapes as ‘unfounded’. In the subsequent presidential debate he specifically vowed to wield a ‘firm hand’ against the lawless *macheteros* of Atenco. López Obrador failed to challenge his rival on this in the debate, but an unintended consequence of Calderón’s tough talk was to persuade many voters not previously enamoured with López Obrador or the PRD to turn out to vote for him against Calderón, once the latter had bared his teeth.

Atenco militants with their trademark machetes had been part of the Other Campaign since its 2005 inception, touring the country with Marcos to explain how they had defeated the state in 2002. Another region where rebellion from below exploded into the presidential campaign was in the majority-indigenous state of Oaxaca. In the state capital of the same name, six hours’ drive south of Mexico City, a long-running teachers strike has escalated since May 2006 into a confrontation that has pitted the state’s repressive PRI governor, Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, against a coalition of over 90 labour organizations and social movements known as the Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca (APPO). When La Otra visited Oaxaca in February 2006, Marcos pressed the teachers’ union and other movements to join forces and start talking—and listening—to each other. The cross-pollination of movements would bear fruit three months later. The striking teachers—encamped for the summer in Oaxaca’s historic downtown—were joined by indigenous organizations and leftist groups.

On June 14th, the governor sent 3,000 riot police in an attempt to dislodge the 15,000 protesters, but they were forced to withdraw after three hours of hand-to-hand combat. What the state had hoped would be another Atenco now took a different turn. The teachers radicalized their stance and ceded control of the strike to the larger APPO assembly, which made Ruiz’s resignation the central demand. The APPO took over the state tv channel and began broadcasting. When paramilitary squads backed by the governor attacked the tv mast, the protesters switched to occupying private radio stations, from which they continue to broadcast. At the time of writing, the situation remains tense, with scattered arrests of social leaders, and paramilitaries in civilian clothes sniping at the protesters. Two APPO participants have been assassinated. The governor has been declared *persona non grata* in various parts of Oaxaca, includ-

ing his home town, and his administration is barred from its own state buildings. On September 21st, a 5,000-strong APPO caravan left Oaxaca for Mexico City to voice its demands on the national stage.

In late June 2006, López Obrador had cancelled a campaign stop in Oaxaca; but in spite of the distance he kept from the conflict, he was the beneficiary of a massive punishment vote against the PRI and PAN there, besting the governor's political machine. The struggles this year in Oaxaca, as in San Salvador Atenco, Chiapas and elsewhere, did not, as some pro-PRD intellectuals complained at the time, harm their candidate's campaign. On the contrary, in most of those states—as in the sum total of the 20 states through which the Other Campaign passed—the PRD won its largest (in many cases, first ever) victories in the party's history, even according to the fraudulent official count. Where the rebellions from below were hit hard by government repression, an electoral backlash against the regime added to López Obrador's totals.

The outcome of Mexico's 2006 election has only exacerbated the country's deep social fractures. López Obrador supporters who placed their faith in the ballot box have seen their votes literally trashed by the IFE, the official guardians of the count, with the backing of TRIFE, the constitutional guarantor of Mexico's 'democracy'. Their outrage looks set to grow as the consequences of the electoral fraud convert into government policy. Millions have lost any hope of changing institutional or electoral paths. Struggles like those of Oaxaca, Atenco and the Other Campaign begin to look more pragmatic to many than participating in rigged elections.

Outcomes

How does the balance of forces now stand? López Obrador is a verbally more combative figure than Cárdenas and, unlike his predecessor, he has refused to negotiate with his officially ratified rival. But his rhetoric and mobilizations, aimed at avoiding the outcome of 1988, have substantially produced the same result. Just as Cárdenas declined to seize the National Palace in 1988, López Obrador lost crucial initiative in the days immediately after July 2nd when, rather than leading the enraged voters in a direct onslaught against the corrupt electoral authorities—surrounding the IFE and TRIFE buildings and refusing to let the officials out until they had conceded the full recount the Constitution requires—López

Obrador set a more bureaucratic, stop-start tempo: one demonstration on July 8th, another on July 16th, and then the tent camp on the Zócalo, which the TRIFE could ignore with impunity. This was the path that led to the meek dismantling of the five-mile-long Paseo de la Reforma tent camp on September 15th, to clear the way for the state's show of force in the September 16th Independence Day military parade.

López Obrador has also been weakened by defections from within the PRD. Cárdenas first attacked him for hiring as advisers many of the perpetrators of the 1988 fraud and then, on September 18th, described López Obrador's conduct as 'harmful to the entire Mexican left', insisting that 'institutions must be respected'.¹¹ Among those institutions is the commission for the bicentennial of Mexico's Declaration of Independence, which Cárdenas was appointed to chair by Fox—leading both Marcos and Muñoz Ledo to deride him as Fox's 'employee'. On September 11th, the PRD governors of Baja California Sur, Guerrero, Michoacán and Zacatecas publicly stated that their constitutional mandate would override party loyalties; Michoacán's Lázaro Cárdenas announced he would respect the TRIFE's verdict and work with Calderón.

The PRD is notoriously faction-ridden, and it remains to be seen how many of its new senators and deputies will retain the spirit and unity of September 1st. As the level of popular mobilizations dips, it is distinctly possible that PRD legislators will settle for the role of loyal opposition. They have a stronger congressional representation than ever before, and currently hold six governorships, with a possible seventh should an October poll in Tabasco go their way—though if past is prologue, as in 1988, the success of a national electoral fraud will encourage attempts to do the same at state level. Nevertheless, López Obrador retains wide support in the populous capital—on a high 68 per cent turnout in the 11-million-strong Distrito Federal, he took over 58 per cent of the vote, as against 27 per cent for Calderón. A huge crowd attended his National Democratic Convention in the Zócalo on September 16th, where López Obrador announced his intention to form a parallel government, 'the beginning of the road to building a new republic'.

¹¹ 'Carta enviada por Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas a Elena Poniatowska', *El Universal*, 14 September 2006; and 'Un grave error, nombramiento de AMLO: Cárdenas', *El Universal*, 18 September 2006.

Mexican Congressional results, 2000–06

Senate (128 seats)

	2000	2006	Change
PAN	47	52	+5
PRI	59	33	–26
PRD	16	29	+13
Others	6	14	+8

Chamber of Deputies (500 seats)

	2000	2003	2006	Change, 2000–06
PAN	207	148	206	–1
PRI	208	201	106	–102
PRD	53	97	127	+74
Others	32	54	61	+29

Source: www.senado.gob.mx and www.diputados.gob.mx

Meanwhile, Calderón will be one of the weakest Mexican presidents ever to enter office. He faces a sluggish economy, and his liberalization agenda will have to be watered down if he is to avoid stoking further protests. His legitimacy as national leader is even shakier than that of Salinas. Rejected at the polls by the Mexican South, and in all probability dependent on ballot-stuffing to achieve his wins in many parts of the North, it remains to be seen to what extent Calderón will be able to impose his will. At a local level, much of the old PRI machinery remains in place. The party retains 17 out of 32 state governorships. And although the 2006 election confirms the PRI's shrinking hold at federal level—their representation in the lower house has been halved since 2000, from 208 to 106, and in the upper house cut from 59 to 33—Calderón will still be dependent on their votes in Congress. Above all the 2006 elections have shown that, despite the continuing decomposition of the PRI, the political culture of Mexico's elites—heavy-handed fraud, back-room deals, local caciquism, resort to armed repression—is still to be uprooted.

It is equally unclear how long López Obrador will remain at centre stage. His is not the only revolt gripping the land of the eagle and the serpent. The Other Campaign continues independently of the electoral cycle, and other non-electoral forces could play an important role: social movements in Oaxaca successfully blockaded the Pan-American highway for weeks as part of their efforts to oust the PRI governor. If simultaneous actions erupt in adjacent Veracruz, Puebla and Chiapas, the flow of food, oil and other goods from the fertile South to the arid North would be choked. On September 13th, militants symbolically blocked parts of those routes and also demonstrated in Hidalgo, San Luis Potosí and Mexico City, in solidarity with the APPO. Like Bolivia, Mexico has very few highways connecting north and south, and a co-ordinated strategy such as that deployed in the Andes could have a comparable paralysing effect. López Obrador, although he has sufficient and willing forces, has so far baulked at such tactics. If his calculations are confined to retaining enough PRD leadership backing to win the presidential nomination in 2012, without any way to guarantee his supporters that their votes will not simply be discarded again, they may be tempted to take matters into their own hands and join forces with more determined sectors of the Mexican left.

It was in this context that, on September 28th, indigenous *comandantes* of the EZLN headed out from Chiapas to join the fight to free the political prisoners of Atenco, as Marcos resumes the Other Campaign tour through the twelve northern states. La Otra plans to hold meetings in Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez with the increasingly mobilized Mexican immigrants and Chicanos from the United States. In its progress up to the wall along the border, the 'other' left is likely to reveal that Northern Mexico, land of Pancho Villa, is not the conservative Calderónist base that official wisdom suggests. In early 2007, more Zapatista *comandantes* will fan out—two by two—to live and organize in all 32 of Mexico's states, to work towards the 'national rebellion against the capitalist system' that the Other Campaign set out to spark. The IFE, TRIFE and other disgraced institutions responsible for the election fraud of 2006 will have no role in determining its outcome.

September 29th, 2006

Mexican Presidential Elections, 2 July 2006—official results

