

Mexico: Presidential Elections, Drug Trafficking, and Corruption

Pablo Cabañas Díaz*



Mexico is currently gearing up for the 2012 presidential elections, and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the ruling party from 1929 until the end of 2000, is leading in the polls. Apart from a new president, 500 federal deputies, 128 senators, four governors, 561 mayors, and 434 local deputies in 11 states will also be elected.

The “war on drugs” launched by Felipe Calderón’s government is entering its sixth year; it has divided the army, plunged the economy into a crisis, and increased insecurity. Thousands have been killed and Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, founder of the Sinaloa cartel, reigns supreme and even made the *Forbes* list. The elections are also taking place with a backdrop of a humanitarian crisis and constant human rights’ violations affecting civilians, particularly the most vulnerable,

such as women and migrants, victimized by the authorities and organized crime alike.

Public support for the “war on drugs” is waning since the violence began to surpass the 1910 Mexican Revolution in terms of fatalities; 50 000 have been killed at the time of writing; this, added to an economy facing adverse international headwinds, can severely hurt the electoral prospects of the ruling National Action Party (PAN). Meanwhile, Felipe Calderón’s government argues that the violence is due to the cartels having previously been left to grow unchecked, whereas his administration is taking them on. In this context, the *New York Times* reported that U.S. law enforcement agencies like the DEA had recently infiltrated Mexican cartels with secret informants, supplying enough information to lead to the capture or take-down of at least about 20 medium-level and high-ranking drug traffickers.¹

In July 2012, violence will still be intense. Threats to public officials’ safety, especially at a local level, are set to increase.

* Professor at the Communication Studies Center, UNAM School of Political and Social Sciences (FCPyS).

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Attacks on national and foreign companies will be a latent risk. Everything suggests that cartel-related violence, especially in the border region, will make it increasingly dangerous to travel to the United States. These trends are the result of the “war” declared by President Calderón, whose main aim was to legitimize a questionable victory in the 2006 presidential elections.

Calderón believed that to consolidate his presidency, it would be enough to crush the Mexican drug cartels in an easy, quick, and cheap offensive. He badly miscalculated. At the end of his term in office and after thousands of deaths, the president has failed to finish either the cartels or the consumption, sale, and distribution of drugs, with Mexico continuing to be a stable market.

Although the PRI lost the presidency to Calderón’s party in 2000, and despite its tarnished reputation as a political force that kept itself in power through arbitrary methods and high levels of corruption, some voters consider that it could still reduce the level of violence. Broad sectors of the population believe that the violence seen today did not exist during the PRI’s time in office. Mexico’s president was even quoted in the *New York Times* as saying that the PRI negotiated with drug traffickers, stirring up a scandal 11 days into the electoral process.² In a press release, the president’s office denied that Calderón had told the newspaper that the PRI would make deals with the cartels should it win the elections.

Prior to the 2006 presidential elections, the political atmosphere was poisoned by mutually defamatory accusations leveled by the various political parties and candidates. The election was marked by violence and tension among political groups. Some hailed Andrés Manuel López Obrador as a savior, yet his opponents in the PAN perceived him as a threat to Mexico. The Federal Electoral Institute (IFE), which had enjoyed prestige and legitimacy as an independent constitutional body created 20 years ago to organize elections and count ballots, has been plagued by contradictions and divisions since 2006. It is missing three councilors and its reluctance to perform its duty properly as electoral referee is keenly felt among the political elite.³

The executive’s concerted efforts to stop the PRI from regaining the presidency in the upcoming elections has led the opposition to demand that it must quit meddling with the electoral process. Even members of the PAN itself complain about the president’s interference in the workings of his party and the continuation, in the presidency, of authoritarian schemes redolent of the PRI.

To be fair, during its first four decades in power, the PRI managed to boost Mexico’s economy and resisted the dictatorial tendencies seen elsewhere in Latin America, especially in Central America, during World War II and the Cold War. However, its last administrations (José López Portillo [1976-1982], Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado [1982-1988], Carlos Salinas de Gortari [1988-1994] and Ernesto Zedillo [1994-2000]) brought on strong devaluations of the peso that caused widespread unemployment.

After two PAN governments, if Enrique Peña Nieto of the PRI succeeds in capitalizing on the July 3, 2011, midterm and local election results and on Mexicans’ displeasure with the current government, he should have no great difficulty in winning the presidency and returning his party to the position it occupied until a few years ago in Mexican politics. *Financial Times* correspondent Adam Thomson summed up his candidacy best by describing that the months leading up the elections appear “more like a minefield than an open highway to the presidency of Latin America’s second-largest economy.”⁴

The Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) has been significantly weakened as a political leftwing opposition force. Its internal schisms are such that they threaten its very survival. Given this scenario and the PAN’s fading fortunes during its most recent six-year term in office, the PRI is considered an alternative. Mexico’s current political situation is highly complex and demands effective government, a clear direction, continuity in public policies, and a positive attitude among citizens.

THEY SHALL NOT PASS:
CONTROVERSIAL ALLIANCES

In the July 4, 2009, elections, with a turnout of almost 39 percent, new local deputies were elected in 14 of the 32 Mexican states, along with 12 governors. The PAN and PRD’s decision to form coalitions in several places and their attempt to also incorporate the Labor Party (PT) and Convergence, traditionally associated with the PRD, created a scenario that is harder

to explain ideologically than it is electorally. This controversial alliance was created between the party of government and the leftwing opposition in five of the 12 states where governors up for election.⁵ This alliance or marriage of convenience, formed in the states of Durango, Sinaloa, Puebla, Hidalgo, and Oaxaca, was as unusual as it was electorally successful. Oaxaca was the clearest example of this great electoral alliance between the administration and opposition parties.

RISKS FOR DEMOCRACY

With this development, the PRI has found a rich political vein to mine, portraying itself as the victim of a colossal conspiracy whose sole aim is to keep it from power at all costs, and suggesting that democracy is the real victim of such a strategy. It therefore seems obvious that in political terms the electoral debate must center on the economy, security issues, and respect for human rights.

At other junctures in Mexican history, political parties have acted as guarantors of the country's security and stability. This no longer seems to be the case, except if we talk about the PRI, with, of course, reservations. For example, Humberto Moreira, former governor of the state of Coahuila, ran up debts of US\$350 million during his term in office by using false documentation. Given this amount of debt, Standard & Poors downgraded Coahuila's credit rating from A+ to BBB-. Today the state has the highest level of per-capita debt in the country: Mex\$11,633. And in absolute terms, it is the fourth most indebted state, with liabilities of Mex\$32 billion as of the third quarter of 2011.⁶

In 2012, Mexico will be one of Latin America's least dynamic economies, with poverty levels rising significantly and family incomes contracting 12 percent just in the last two years. Poverty, unemployment, and families' loss of purchasing power continues to grow, and that helps the PRI. The widespread drug-related violence and kidnappings keep the issue of public security at the top of the political agenda. Also the legal system, after the PAN's 12 years in government and just as it was during the PRI's rule, continues to be highly problematic.

With the PAN, attempts to bring to justice those responsible for human rights' violations have failed. Many people in socially deprived communities, particularly the indigenous population, continue to suffer discrimination, and their economic, social, and cultural rights continue to be violated.

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Within this complex economic and social context, as mentioned above, the leading candidate in the polls is the State of Mexico's former governor, Enrique Peña Nieto: he has strong media backing, especially from Televisa, and is an experienced governor who addresses the people directly, inspiring trust and security.

The PAN's future looks gloomy for two reasons: first, given the natural fatigue from their period in office, especially since they were under constant suspicion of only borrowing the presidency; and, second, due to their failure to achieve economic successes in a country where the economy will be the key to the elections. And the party's prospects are also damaged by its lack of a clear leader.

In the 2009 elections, Andrés Manuel López Obrador rejected making any pact with the PAN, so the media portrays him as the only viable left candidate. While the PAN and PRD leaderships defended their support for a coalition, López Obrador outlined his vision on core national issues—the failure of the so-called war on drugs, privatizations, and the *de facto* powers—and he has approached the 2012 elections by differentiating his stance from other leftwing positions. Unfortunately Mexico's left is riven by a deep internal crisis, and its divisions have caused fights as fierce—if not fiercer—than those the left as a whole wages against its rightwing opponents. ■■

NOTES

¹ *New York Times*, October 25, 2011.

² *New York Times*, October 18, 2011.

³ The three missing councilors were finally seated December 15, 2011, after this article was submitted. [Editor's Note.]

⁴ *Financial Times*, October 18, 2011.

⁵ The difficulty in understanding this type of alliance lies in the right-wing nature of the PAN, whose ideological spectrum even includes far-right groups, such as the Yunque, whose ranks include some well-known PAN leaders. [Editor's Note.]

⁶ *Reforma*, July 29, 2011.