

MEXICO - Dirty Democracy Sullies Mexican Presidential Campaigns (by Laura Carlsen, IRC)

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[IRC](#) - Mexicans have fought long and hard to bring democracy to their country. That's why the spectacle of the current presidential elections is particularly lamentable.

As the July 2 vote nears, the level of campaigning has descended. Felipe Calderón, candidate for the National Action Party (PAN), has been criticized for a series of nasty television spots—one that compares front-runner Andrés Manuel López Obrador with Hugo Chávez, and another that inexplicably attacks Elena Poniatowska, a Lopez Obrador supporter and one of the nation's most renowned journalists and authors.

The PAN's latest campaign states darkly that Lopez Obrador is "a danger to Mexico." In a political context where the memory of the assassination of the 1994 presidential candidate remains fresh, this message has been viewed as going beyond the accepted practice of attacking an opponent's political platform and contributing to a climate of potential violence.

In response, Lopez Obrador has called for a truce on public denunciations of opponents, but not before calling the president a "chachalaca," or noisy bird. The third major candidate, Roberto Madrazo of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), has also been called to the carpet for name-calling.

The presidential debate on April 25 did little to tone down the insults or encourage more constructive discussion. Lopez Obrador refused to participate and the other candidates spent much time attacking each other and little on concrete policy proposals.

Although federal electoral law prohibits using the media or election materials to denigrate opponents, Mexico's still-fledgling electoral institutions have done little to stop the mud-slinging. The Federal Elections Institute (IFE) approved a PAN campaign pamphlet destined to voters abroad that claims that as mayor of Mexico City Lopez Obrador decreased employment and implies that if he is elected president the result will be financial instability and crisis.

Amid criticism of the IFE's lax attitude toward enforcing its own rules, the judiciary branch has taken a slightly more assertive stance. The Electoral Tribunal overruled the IFE, declaring the PAN pamphlet a violation of the rule that electoral material "must contain objective information on the candidates directly related to their electoral platforms."

Other recent rulings order PAN President Fox to cease commercials that imply that public works carried out under his presidency are achievements of his political party and require the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) to bring more transparency to its procedures for selecting internal candidates. That party has been hampered throughout the campaign period by its own internal divisions and public feuds.

To further muddy the waters in this pre-electoral period, the Congress recently passed a law to reform state regulation of the media. Dubbed the "Televisa law" after one of the two broadcast media giants that effectively gain monopoly privileges under the new law, the law also relaxes equal-access and public service requirements and makes it more difficult for public broadcasting systems to be licensed and operate. The owners of the two television conglomerates have long been major players in politics and opponents fear that the power granted them under the law will lead to even greater bias in the media during the campaign season. The law currently faces a constitutional challenge.

Mexico's path to fair elections has been rocky. In 1988 an opposition leader, Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, won the popular vote in Mexico for the first time in nearly a century. But Cardenas was not allowed to take office and the PRI government extended its more than half-century run by installing its own candidate, Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Later a transition began that led to the establishment of institutions to assure rules-based and fair elections, and eventually to the end of one-party rule. Many lives have been lost along that road. Today Mexico's electoral institutions are still imperfect and subject to manipulation, and full citizen rights have yet to be realized.

With viable candidacies from all three major parties and platforms that present a greater range of options than in the past, citizens have more power to make a difference in these elections than ever before. But the 2006 elections-the first to be presided over by an opposition part-have proved a great disappointment so far. The failed attempt to remove Lopez Obrador from the running by subjecting him to a legal prosecution as mayor stained the process even before it began. The recent rulings indicate that the president and his party have been operating at the edges of the country's fragile electoral legality.

A fair, informed, and participatory election is an important vehicle toward achieving a real democracy. It would be a shame for it to get stuck in the mud.

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