

Divided Mexico

By Denise Dresser

Mexico today is a house divided against itself. A place where, months after the presidential election, a daily battle is still taking place between those who supported Andrés Manuel López Obrador and those who supported Felipe Calderón. And even though Calderón has been declared the official winner, confrontations persist among Mexicans who think the election was absolutely clean and Mexicans who talk of monumental fraud; among people who insist that the country's institutions are perfect and people who insist they must be completely overhauled. These are the mental maps of two entrenched armies; the inflexible views of two different tribes; the confrontational stances of a country that continues to be at war with itself. A country inhabited by the millions who hate López Obrador and the millions who would be ready to give their life for him. A country where recent polls show that half the population supports Felipe Calderón and that a third will never accept him as president. There they are, two different Mexico's: fighting, marching, denouncing each other, unconditional supporters of the causes they espouse so passionately.

The 2006 election and the post-electoral conflict it produced have revealed a split electorate. In its ranks, many continue to endorse market-led reform while others are calling for a return to state intervention. Many support the economic model of the past 20 years while others, who voted for AMLO, reject it. Many believe in the guiding principles of the Mexican Revolution, and others think they need to take into account a globalized world. There is no clear consensus in Mexico today with respect to the path the country should follow. The electorate is genuinely at odds, and the close election underscored that fact. Thirty-five percent of voters chose change while 35 percent chose continuity. Felipe Calderón did not manage to impose his vision nor did Andrés Manuel López Obrador manage to broaden his own base of support. The National Action Party (PAN) appealed to constituencies which had benefited under the Fox government, and the Party of the

Democratic Revolution (PRD) appealed to those who felt disappointed by it. But neither candidate nor his party received overwhelming support, and that fact in itself is quite revealing. In a polarized election, each party held on to its piece of the country, its portion of the electorate. While northern Mexico sees itself represented by Felipe Calderón, parts of southern and central Mexico believe he is an illegitimate president.

This is the bitter political reality that Calderón will have to deal with by calling for negotiation, by advocating consensus, by understanding that he did not receive a broad mandate and that he needs to build one. In order to govern successfully, Calderón will have to construct a broad, multifaceted political coalition, with enough room for the ideas of even his worst adversary. It must be a roof capable of providing economic and political shelter for all Mexicans, especially for those who did not vote for him.

A Contentious Election

During the campaign, both Felipe Calderón and Andrés Manuel López Obrador spoke to their hard-core bases of support in the hope of getting them out to the polls. Each candidate addressed his particular part of the country without trying to reach out to those who didn't form part of it. They both gambled on polarization and, as a result, were not able to garner the votes of centrist voters. In an election defined by polarized leaders, partisan voters and centrist citizens, there was no overwhelming winner. Calderón and López Obrador reached election day constrained by the limits of the political model they chose to run with.

Calderón did everything he was told to do in order to win. He set up a "war room," hired foreign campaign consultants, ran focus groups and devised a highly negative, yet effective, campaign. Throughout the race, he behaved as the more professional politician: disciplined, prepared, hard-hitting. He was advised to conduct a campaign of contrasts, and he set himself to that task. He focused on why he was not Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who he



Photo by AP Wide World.

portrayed as an irresponsible populist. He promised to brandish a “strong hand” in order to establish the rule of law and offered continuity to those who would benefit from it. Calderón positioned himself as the candidate of stability, common sense and comfortable, gradual change.

Calderón’s campaign slogan: “López Obrador: A danger for Mexico,” undoubtedly turned the election in his favor because fear transcended class divisions. It became a kind of universal corrosive that cut through different groups and different regions. Many voters — including the poor — remembered the years of instability and didn’t want to relive them. Many remembered the times of crisis and didn’t want to resurrect them. Fairly or not, Calderón’s message had the resonance and impact it sought. However, his strategy was not enough to win the election by more than half a percentage point, according to official results. Calderón won by sowing fear of his adversary instead of addressing the causes that explain AMLO’s existence.

Paradoxically, something similar happened to Andrés Manuel López Obrador. The plan for the nation that he put forward during his campaign was just as exclusionary, just as monochromatic. It seemed as though the country he wanted to

govern only had room for the poor. He behaved as a polarizing candidate who never once said what he would do for the middle class or how he would foster its growth. He constantly offered to relieve poverty but did not put forth proposals on how to create wealth. He behaved as a social leader not as a professional politician in a tight race whose outcome would be defined by centrist, independent voters. As a result, López Obrador never understood the need to move toward the center of the political spectrum and lead a modern left from there. He never grasped that this renewal of the left is what led politicians such as Tony Blair, Ricardo Lagos and Felipe González to power.

López Obrador couldn’t, or didn’t want to, act this way. He insisted on making history when he should have been practicing politics. He insisted on talking about his Alternative Plan for the Nation but did not articulate credible and viable proposals to achieve it. He insisted on addressing only those at the bottom, alienating those at the top and ignoring those in the middle of the class spectrum. He thought it would be enough to offer what he did: fight corruption, penalize the privileged, eliminate influence-peddling, help out those who had been left behind. López Obrador believed he

Andrés Manuel López Obrador speaks at a campaign rally.

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Photo by AP Wide World.

Felipe Calderón holds up a newspaper proclaiming his victory.

could win given the justice of his cause and therefore never focused on the practical public policies needed to achieve it. He never thought that he needed to convince; he assumed it was enough to exist.

AMLO in His Labyrinth

The undeniable fact that the Mexican left must contend with — independently of what happened on election day — is that Andrés Manuel López Obrador had a lead for over three years that he ended up squandering. AMLO's world view convinced some segments of the electorate but alienated others, mainly stake-holders in the system who felt they had something to lose. The fear campaign provoked a national epidemic because López Obrador had not vaccinated himself against it. On the contrary, he fed the closing of the ranks against him by espousing the incessant rhetoric of class division. He also stoked the animosity of moderate voters through a series of campaign mistakes: not attending the first presidential

debate; referring to President Vicente Fox as a “*chachalaca*” (chattering bird); and refusing to carry out a media campaign when he was getting slaughtered by the media. He did not know how to counter-attack with a modern electoral campaign in a tight race, and this weakened him. And it's true that Vicente Fox campaigned in favor of Felipe Calderón, as did most of the business class. And the Federal Electoral Institute undoubtedly made mistakes on election day and in the weeks prior to it. But López Obrador's own failings contributed to the outcome he now shuns.

Given his behavior since July 2nd, many in Mexico have come to believe that López Obrador has simply gone mad. His fiery speeches, his increasingly anti-institutional stance, his decision to create a “parallel government” and name himself the president of it, all seem to suggest a man who has gone off the deep end, dragging the country behind him. Yet there is method to the apparent madness. López Obrador has chosen the path of unabated

confrontation because he wants to bring the government of incoming president Felipe Calderón down, or at least make it very difficult for him to govern. López Obrador doesn't want to be the Al Gore of Mexico; he'd much rather be its John Brown.

The slash and burn approach López Obrador has taken since the election suggests that he has renounced his presidential ambitions and is not positioning himself for the next race in 2012. Quite the contrary: All of his decisions underscore that instead of governing Mexico he wants to make sure nobody else can. From this perspective, his increasing radicalism makes sense. The takeover of Mexico's main avenue and the massive sit-in there. The parallels López Obrador constantly draws between the current situation and the tension that preceded the Revolution of 1910. The call for a National Democratic Convention that will draw up a new constitution. The refusal to accept the Federal Electoral Tribunal's ruling against him. The calls for peaceful, civil resistance accompanied by the veiled threats of ensuing violence. The speech in which he yelled, "To hell with your institutions."

All this points to a man who doesn't want to work within the existing institutional framework but instead burn it down. He doesn't want to win elections but become the combative, critical, radical conscience of a country that is changing, but not fast enough for his taste. He doesn't want to ever reach the National Palace but to confront its occupants from the public square. And, unmoored by the constraints of conventional politics, he can do what he knows how to do best: fight, denounce, mobilize. Become a permanent thorn in the political system's side. Go down in history not as just another president, but as a revolutionary icon like the ones he so admires.

The problem is that López Obrador is calling for the destruction of a political system in which the left just achieved its largest gains ever. He is shunning the very institutions that his party helped build and are an integral part of. López Obrador's maximalist, scorched-earth stance runs counter to the kind of modern, tolerant, institutionalized left that Mexican democracy needs. A left that seeks to do more than block, sabotage and bring down the government, but rather works to make it increasingly accountable. A left willing to renounce the easy immediacy



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of confrontation for the difficult, long-term commitment of changing Mexico law by law, institution by institution. A left willing to fight for a better cause than Felipe Calderón's political demise. Because the kind of deep transformations that will benefit the poor and strengthen Mexican democracy will not occur by merely fueling legitimate grievances but by addressing them. And Mexico will not end up in a better place if hatred of a flawed political system precludes the possibility of reforming it.

What Next?

Unfortunately many members of the country's political and economic establishment do not know exactly how to deal with López Obrador.

Supporters of Andrés Manuel López Obrador fill the Zócalo to demand a recount.

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They think that it's enough to simply despise him. They think that by presenting the election as a done deal, they have weakened the position of AMLO enough so that he will self-destruct. But what many members of the political class and the business elite fail to comprehend is that López Obrador is a symptom of the deep problems that Mexico needs to address. Inciting hatred towards a man who is perceived as being close to the dispossessed won't eliminate their legitimate grievances. And that's the real danger for Mexico in the aftermath of the election: that in their efforts to disavow López Obrador, Mexico's ruling elites disregard the conditions that produced him.

López Obrador is a product of Mexico's failed efforts to modernize using half-hearted neoliberal reforms for the past 20 years. Mexico followed the path mapped out by the "Washington Consensus" but did it badly, with botched privatizations that transferred public monopolies into private hands, with economic reforms that benefited a handful of businessmen but few consumers and with poor results: an

economy that doesn't grow enough, a business elite that doesn't compete enough, an economic model that concentrates wealth and doesn't redistribute enough of it. As a result, 50 million Mexicans live on less than \$4 a day. For too many, the continuity offered by the National Action Party's Felipe Calderón means merely more of the same.

Therefore, it's no wonder that López Obrador continues to receive the support he does among 25–30 percent of the population. He is a providential politician created by a dysfunctional economic system. He exists because of everything that Mexico's business and political classes should have done a long time ago: create real opportunities for ordinary people by reforming Mexico's crony capitalism. They didn't do so, and the privileges for the few at the expense of the many explain why López Obrador's message resonates. It's as if he held up a mirror and forced the country to look at the reflection of the inequalities many refuse to acknowledge.

And that divide is what Mexico's elites should fear the most. More than hating the man, they should hate the conditions that created him. There are too many Mexicans for whom the status quo simply doesn't work. There are too many people who seek a profound transformation of a country that historically has excluded them or forced them to cross the border in search of the social mobility they can't aspire to at home. The election was a wake-up call, and those who ignore it do so at their own peril.

So, the question now becomes how to construct post-electoral consensus in a polarized Mexico. For healing to occur, those who abhor López Obrador need to understand the factors that explain the persistence of his political movement. López Obrador's rootedness is symptomatic of harsh realities some Mexicans simply do not want to face. The country of privileges that López Obrador has denounced is real. It exists. It is evident in every contract assigned in a discretionary manner; in every corrupt politician and the impunity he takes advantage of; in the "Chapultepec Accord" promoted by billionaire Carlos Slim, that doesn't even contain

Denise Dresser at
UC Berkeley.



Photo by Dionicia Ramos.



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the word “competition” among its proposals to modernize the Mexican economy. López Obrador doesn’t have the best solutions for these problems, but he should be commended for showing that they exist.

Meanwhile, Calderón deserves recognition for his emphasis on policies that have worked: fiscal responsibility, trade liberalization, macroeconomic stability. Calderón seems to understand the unavoidable challenge of globalization and how to contend with it. He seems to grasp the issues that explain Mexico’s connection with the world: everything that fosters competitiveness in an international environment where countries pay the price of ignoring it; everything that Mexico needs to do if it wants to change the parameters of its political economy. He has focused on the challenges Mexico faces if it wants to tread down the path that countries such as Ireland, South Korea, Chile and Spain are on today. Successful countries that have made the dual decision to grow and share, compete and educate, create wealth and distribute it more equitably. These are hard decisions that Mexico must make in order to become a more modern economy, a more representative democracy, a more equal place.

Given this reality, in which both contenders in a bitter feud are partially right, it becomes an obligation for those whose heart is tied to Mexico to remind them of the common ground they can traverse together. Mexican citizens must remind López Obrador, and those who support him unconditionally, that it is not enough to fight for a just cause: the PRD must do so with the proper tools and without destroying the country’s institutions. And Mexicans must also remind Felipe Calderón, and those who defend him so anxiously, that continuity alone is not enough; a more equitable country must be built upon what has been gained. In the aftermath of a divisive election, both sides have the responsibility to focus on the many things that can bring Mexicans together instead of tearing them apart.

[Denise Dresser is Professor of Political Science at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México and writes a political column for the Mexican newspaper Reforma and the weekly Proceso. She spoke on “Where is Mexico Headed?” on September 5, 2006.](#)

Andrés Manuel López Obrador is sworn in as Mexico’s “legitimate president” on November 20.