

# Civil Government?

By Rafael Fernández de Castro



Photo by AP/Wide World.

Mexican legislators brawl in the Congress building just days before the inauguration of Felipe Calderón.

Despite having an officially-elected president, Mexico continues to be submerged in a post-election conflict that has revealed serious deficiencies in Mexican democracy. The Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) was not the supreme, impartial and infallible electoral machine that the rest of the world assumed it to be. We also now know that, despite the exorbitant costs of the Mexican electoral process, an equitable electoral system is not yet in place. Access to the media, especially to television, continues to be unbalanced, to say the least. The private financing of campaigns shows evidence of irregularities, which means that Mexico has the worst of both worlds: campaigns which are very costly for taxpayers and yet are influenced, perhaps decisively, by private contributions. Thirdly, an attempt has not even been made to regulate the influence of the outgoing president on the electoral process. Why wouldn't Vicente Fox get involved in the electoral process if, for the last 70 years, his

predecessors have done so to the point where they chose their own successors?

Beyond the institutional and procedural changes that are urgently needed for Mexican democracy to flourish, there is something else that has been practically ignored and has a profound effect on the situation: Mexicans do not have a political culture of plurality and tolerance. There is neither a political language nor the forms and practices needed to foster it. Why would there be if the PRI imposed a "perfect dictatorship" for several decades? Why would there be if the existence of social fissures and racial, cultural and sexual discrimination has been denied?

The lack of an adequate and correct political language has shown up time and again in the post-electoral conflict. For example, mere weeks after the elections, when the Electoral Tribunal was still deliberating over the results of the vote, President Fox insisted on calling Felipe Calderón the "president-elect." This only added



Photo by Michale Gibbs

fuel to the fire. The same opinion was voiced by academics, university professors and even my own students: “Since Calderón is going to win anyway, we might as well call him the ‘president-elect.’” Given this, all chances for dialogue were wiped out, and there was no further talk of conciliation with Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s team.

During the past two months, the crisis of legitimacy that surrounded Felipe Calderón has dissipated, but the environment in Mexico is still tense. Calderón, for his part, initiated his foreign policy with three important trips abroad: to Central America, Canada and the United States. With these visits, he has begun his official duties as president-elect. However, López Obrador has set out an action plan as the “legitimate” president and in clear opposition to the man he considers a “false” president. In fact, he declared himself president and “took office” on November 20th in Mexico City’s central square before a large group of his followers.

Moreover, ungovernability and the conflict in Oaxaca have turned into catalysts for social discontent in Mexico. The lack of a solution to the situation is, to all intents and purposes, a time bomb for the incumbent government and, as is often the case, the politicians seem

determined to politicize the problem instead of seeking a solution to the conflict. The recent attacks on IFE offices and on a bank are deplorable and should be a wake-up call for politicians to assume the responsibility for organizing a dialogue as soon as possible.

Without a political culture that makes a point of using language that includes rather than offends and the experience of using political debate rather than force, the discussions tend to become personal and the conflicts more serious.

Twenty years ago, near the beginning of my postgraduate studies in the United States, I had the opportunity to do an internship in the heart of American democracy, the Capitol. I found myself taken aback at a hearing on the Central American conflict. The Republican witness was advising invasion; the Democratic speaker, on the other hand, said that intervention by the Nicaraguan “Contra” forces was so serious as to legitimate the participation of Cuba and the former Soviet Union in the region. To my surprise, the speakers battled it out in a heated debate, but, at the end, came down from the podium and shook hands with each other as if nothing had happened. The same situation, in Mexico, would have ended in blows, not a handshake.

Federal police guard Oaxaca’s central plaza.

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Photo by AP Wide World.

Stopping to watch the presidential debate.

Paradoxically, political tolerance in the United States has been decreasing while in Mexico it has been increasing, although the goal is still a long way off. Over the past decade, and especially under the government of George W. Bush, the United States has seen the disappearance of a policy that was known by the slogan, “politics ends at the water’s edge.” That is, when dealing with foreign policy outside U.S. territory one did not brandish the party line but rather supported the national interest. This is no longer the case. In the era of Al Qaeda terrorism, the Bush administration calls those who criticize the government “traitors” and labels opponents of their policies as “soft on terrorism.”

Nonetheless, despite this closing of ranks, Americans continue to preserve some cultural practices that we would do well to emulate. For example, in the eighties a practice known as political correctness arose that was fostered by liberals as a legacy of the civil rights movement. This tendency seeks to eradicate the discriminatory connotations that are implicit in

daily language. For example, one should not use the terms “colored people” or “Negro,” but rather, “African American.” One should also not refer to undocumented immigrants as “illegals” but rather as “undocumented” persons, since being illegal has pejorative connotations. Of course, this tendency quickly became excessive in the United States. Today, there are no longer any fat or obese people, only people who are overweight, and there are no more midgets, only persons of short stature.

Mexico should borrow the positive elements of political correctness. We demand that our politicians watch their language and practices to facilitate a respectful, inclusive, open and mature dialogue about our differences.

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