

Not a Game for Angels

By Jean Spencer



Photo by AP/Wide World

In the aftermath of the contested presidential election, Mexico faces a crisis of legitimacy that will test the capacity of its institutions. So argued Manuel Camacho Solís in his Berkeley talk. Speaking just a few weeks after the Electoral Tribunal formally declared Felipe Calderón of the National Action Party (PAN) president-elect, Camacho Solís — who served as the primary political strategist for the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador — repeatedly emphasized the need to move forward to solve the crisis rather than to rehash who was at fault.

Given that Mexico is so closely divided — the election was decided by .5 percent of the electorate with both the PAN and the PRD receiving roughly 35 percent of the vote — the ruling party must take into account the concerns of the people represented by López Obrador. Camacho Solís presented two alternate futures for Mexico. In the first, the institutions of government fail to cope with the conflict, resulting in a descent into “confrontation,

instability, institutional paralysis, lack of economic growth, anarchy...” In the second, more hopeful, scenario the political crisis prompts real reform. This reform, according to Camacho Solís, would need to occur in four areas: democracy, economic growth, social justice and honesty in government.

Democracy

Camacho Solís presented several concrete ideas as to how Mexican democracy should be reformed. To start with, he argued that the process by which people are appointed to the Electoral Tribunal must be changed if that body is to have legitimacy. Under the current system, two parties are able to join forces to create a majority and successfully nominate members of the Tribunal without the participation of the third party. In this case, the PAN and the Institutional Revolution Party (PRI) were able to push through their nominees, and the PRD had no representatives on the Tribunal. Camacho Solís insisted that in a close election

The wrestler “Little Ray of Hope” raises his fist in support of AMLO.

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a Tribunal created without the input of the country's second largest party cannot hope to be seen as legitimate.

Election funding is another issue that must be addressed. This year's election was awash in money of dubious provenance which, according to Camacho Solís, mostly benefited the PAN. More money was spent per capita than in the United States, and this in a country with an economy only 5 percent the size of that of the U.S. Camacho Solís suggested that using public funds for the elections in imitation of the European model was a way to avoid the corruption that big money brings.

Media concentration was repeatedly criticized by Camacho Solís as incompatible with true democracy. In Mexico, two companies monopolize television, and both depend on the government for lucrative contracts, giving the incumbent a huge advantage. Camacho Solís asserted that his candidate was not seen on TV and couldn't get air time to respond to attacks against him. He excoriated the current system saying, "Soviet-type television in a country that presumes to be democratic does not help to legitimize politics."

A move from a strictly presidential to a semi-parliamentary system of government was also suggested by the speaker. In a three-party country as evenly divided as Mexico, it is almost a given that the president's party will be unable to form a majority in congress. The president is then "obliged by the structure of the institutions to use illegal means to maintain control of the country." Among the "illegal means" decried by Camacho Solís are the use of budget funds to control the media and the giving of concessions to various groups to get crucial support on important votes. A semi-parliamentary system would mitigate these evils by facilitating the creation of coalitions which would be able to form a majority in congress.

Economic Growth

If Mexico is to extricate itself from its current crisis, economic development is key. The economy has stagnated for the last 25 years, and even now, when international economic

conditions are in Mexico's favor, jobs remain scarce. If Mexico isn't soaring when oil is at three times its average historic price, interest rates are low and remittances totaling \$20 billion are pouring in, what can be done? Camacho Solís contended that growth could be achieved by increasing competition, reducing monopolies and improving the quality of government. He also pointed to the lack of available credit as a problem hindering development and stressed that the government should invest in education, science and technology in order to take part in the knowledge economy.

Social Justice

López Obrador rose to prominence because he articulated the needs of the poor and the marginalized. Camacho Solís urged the PAN not to let their narrow electoral victory blind them to the needs of the people that the PRD candidate represented. He advocated a system based on the Chilean model where sound macroeconomic policies are balanced with social investment in areas such as health and education. While acknowledging that Mexico cannot afford a social welfare system like that of the EU, he insisted that there must be a "floor" or minimum level of welfare that is ensured by "some kind of scheme of social justice." He did not elaborate on what that scheme would entail.

Honesty in Government

Rampant corruption impedes the development of democracy in Mexico. There are no restrictions on conflict of interest or influence peddling, and members of congress openly work for private interests instead of the public good, he maintained. Government needs to "recover a sense of austerity and honorability and ethics" before it will be viewed as legitimate by its citizens.

While acknowledging that the current crisis is the worst he has experienced in many years in government, Camacho Solís maintained that reform in these four key areas would be enough to convince the public that the institutions of government can still function. The campaign and the post-electoral crisis have

had a polarizing effect on Mexico. However, Camacho Solís pointed to an MIT study which found that voters were less influenced by their membership in a particular social class than by the political history of their state as evidence that the country is not as divided as political speechmakers would have it. These divisions could become deeply entrenched, he warned, if the crisis is not solved, or if the government uses repression to contain dissent.

During the question and answer session, Camacho Solís underlined his support for a peaceful resolution to the crisis wherein reform would be enacted through the institutions of government. The PRD is currently divided between those who believe that institutional reform is possible and those who believe the system is too corrupt to be reformed. If the PAN does not respond to calls for reform or if it stoops to repression, then moderates like himself will be discredited, and those who favor more radical means will gain the upper hand, he cautioned.

Camacho Solís was also asked pointed questions about his years as a PRI operative and his role in the widely disputed 1988 presidential election. In response, he portrayed himself as a

man who has pushed for the opening of Mexican politics from the inside, working within the existing system to create institutions, like the Electoral Tribunal, that allowed for ever-increasing levels of democracy. When asked point-blank how progressives could trust former *priistas* or “chameleon politicians,” Camacho Solís responded, “Politics is not a game for angels; it is a game for human beings... If you want only pure symbols, you will be completely ineffective.”

One can only hope that the human beings involved in Mexico’s current political crisis will find a way out of the labyrinth they have created.

Manuel Camacho Solís is the primary strategist for former presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador. He has been the mayor of Mexico City, a congressman and president of the PRI. He spoke at CLAS on October 18th.

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Manuel Camacho Solís speaks with students after his Berkeley talk.

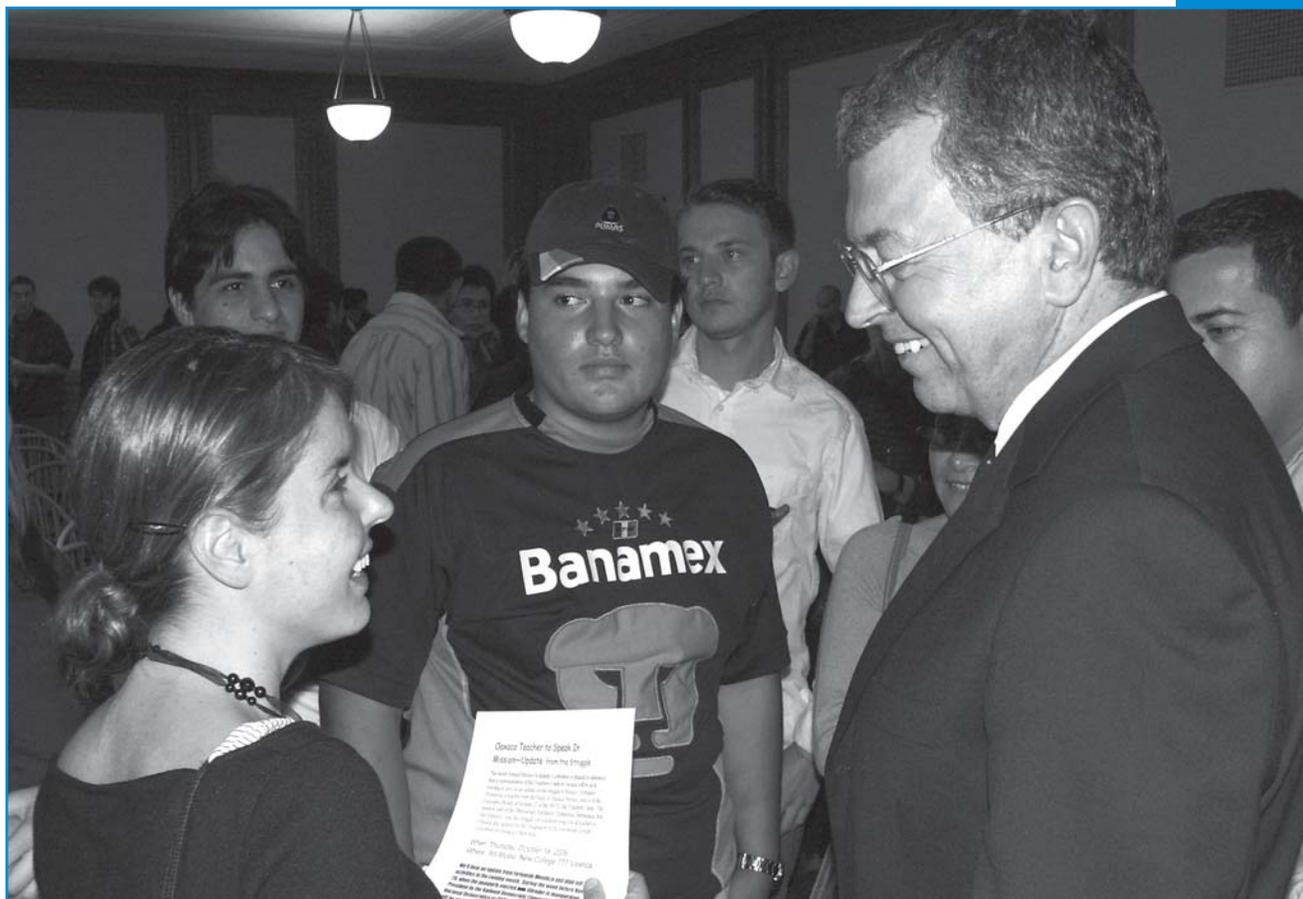


Photo by David R. León Lara.