

MEXICO - A Country with Three Presidents (by Diego Cevallos, IPS)

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IPS - Mexico's left plans to re-lay the foundations of the country with a symbolic "government" chosen by its followers, working through social activism, and a party coalition acting through the country's institutions. The challenge it faces is to persuade the Mexican people, among whom approval of the left is declining, to support its goals and strategies, observers say.

The opposition movement, which is easily "big enough to force concessions from the regime," will catalyse "grievances of all varieties" and create difficulties for the government of the conservative president-elect, Felipe Calderón, to consolidate its power, Manuel Camacho, one of the leaders of the left, told IPS.

At an assembly dubbed the National Democratic Convention, which according to its organisers drew a million people together on Saturday in the capital, the left designated former Mexico City mayor Andrés López Obrador as the country's "legitimate president.." The former candidate lost the Jul. 2 elections because of fraud, his supporters say.

The Convention, born of a proposal set forth by López Obrador on Aug. 13, met for nearly four hours on Saturday and will reconvene on Mar. 21, 2007. Delegates from every Mexican state took part, some of whom had been elected in party assemblies, although anyone can register to participate.

Commissions will be set up to debate issues like national policy, civil resistance and proposals to rewrite the constitution. Despite predictions from the ruling National Action Party (PAN), the assembly was held without incidents.

So today, Mexico has an incumbent president, Vicente Fox, a president-elect, Calderón, who will take office in December, and a third proclaimed at a public meeting.

The proclamation of López Obrador as president was received in very different ways. Some observers considered it a farce, others greeted it with enthusiasm, and there were also those who saw it as something that could polarise Mexican society even further..

"The new leftwing movement is part of a process of identification that is highly valid in a democracy, but to go on to say that López Obrador is the legitimate president is quite a different thing," Silvia Alonso, head of the non-governmental Civic Alliance, told IPS.

"Although the present scenario is touchy, it opens up opportunities. Hopefully the right will recognise the role of the left, and manage to create an atmosphere conducive to reaching agreements," said the director of Civic Alliance, a group that has promoted social participation in public affairs since 1994, and acts as an independent observer in elections.

The Fox administration played down the left's strategy Monday, while the PAN, to which Calderón belongs, said that in refusing to recognise the established institutions, López Obrador was doing harm to the country.

There is only one constitutional president in Mexico and he is Fox, and there is a president-elect who is Calderón, so that "if any private citizen puts himself outside of our own laws (by declaring himself president), only he can take responsibility for that," said government spokesman Rubén Aguilar.

Miguel Granados, a columnist for the leftwing weekly Proceso, said that "instead of mocking or quaking in fear, the outgoing and incoming governments and their party" should make an effort "to understand the essence and the significance of this post-election period."

Granados maintains that the challenge faced by the left is for the "strong tide of citizens who follow López Obrador, who form part of, but not all of, the Mexican people," to persuade the rest of society to accept their goals.

López Obrador, the candidate of the Coalition for the Good of All, which brought together his Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) along with the small Convergencia and Trabajo parties — and as of Thursday is known as the Progressive Broad Front — won the votes of 20 percent of the 71.3 million Mexicans on the electoral roll in the July elections.

After his refusal to recognise defeat by Calderón — who took 20.8 percent of the vote — and his acts of resistance including the 48-day occupation by his supporters of the main Zócalo square and Reforma avenue in Mexico City, support for the left among the population has been waning, according to opinion polls.

"Even though the civil resistance he led has decreased his popularity, there is no doubt that he still has the support of several million Mexicans. If he is determined to destabilise the country, as he has threatened to do, there is good reason to believe that he would be able to do so," wrote a columnist for the newspaper Reforma, Sergio Sarmiento.

The only foreign government that has indicated that it will not recognise Calderón is that of Venezuela, whose President Hugo Chávez said that the right had perpetrated a fraud in Mexico.

But López Obrador says that to accept Calderón as president would go against his principles and the "true will of the people."

After being proclaimed "legitimate president," López Obrador said he accepted the symbolic post because it represents "an act of peaceful civil resistance," and a warning to his opponents "that they should learn to respect the will of the people."

He said he would take up the position in November and will appoint a cabinet. Together they will travel around the country and take note of the demands of the people. In some aspects, the proposal is similar to the shadow cabinets that function in certain democracies.

He will also mark Calderón's every move in an attempt to throw up obstacles for his administration.

The leader of the left believes that Calderón will be a spurious president, a "puppet of the right" as he has called him. He states that he will neither enter into discussions nor negotiate with Calderón nor with the PAN.

But leftwing political parties, legislators and local authorities, apparently, are willing to do so. Before the National Democratic Convention was held, the parties in the Coalition for the Good of All announced they would unite in a Progressive Broad Front.

Camacho, who served as foreign minister in the administration of Carlos Salinas (1988-1994) of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) — which ruled Mexico from 1929 to 2000 — later became a close collaborator of López Obrador's. He explained that through the Front and the Convention, the left will push forward the political and economic changes that the country needs.

The former candidate will be a "legitimate president" who will take a critical stance towards the "legal president," but will be above all someone "who listens to the people, comforts them and provides leadership in the defence of their cause," he explained.

Meanwhile, the Progressive Broad Front will carry on the struggle within the institutions "against the

opposite, rightwing pole."

Among the left's goals are to curb free trade and privatisation, and encourage the fight against poverty. It also wants to reform the constitution and the country's electoral institutions, which it sees as serving the interests of the economic elites. (END/2006)

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