

# Mexico's long transition to democracy

**Pilar Villela Mascaro**

**M**exico was not only the first country to have a revolution in the twentieth century; it also built its most long-lasting one-party government. When Vicente Fox of the PAN (National Action Party) was elected in 2000, he was the first president not to belong to the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), which had ruled Mexico for more than seventy years. His election was viewed with enthusiasm by large sectors of the population, who believed it represented the advent of an effective ‘democracy’: once the PRI had been thrown out of office, and a complex and expensive apparatus had been set in place in order to guarantee the transparency of elections – especially regarding the non-intervention of the party in government – the advent of democracy could be celebrated and its advantages enjoyed. Also, and for the first time in Mexico, Fox’s government had to work with a plural legislative power, which would not entirely comply with the dictates of the executive. On 2006, the PAN won the election again, but it did so in one of the most conflictual and contested processes in the modern history of the country. The following is a short narrative of Mexico’s so-called ‘transition to democracy’ in the light of two of the conflicts that arose during the last election: one in the arena of institutional politics, the other in that of popular movements.

### **Andres Manuel López Obrador and the PRD**

The Mexican political system that is currently collapsing derives directly from the order established after the 1910 revolution and the laws expressed in the 1917 Constitution. The PRI was also a direct outcome of the revolution – a complex and long-lasting civil war in which more than a million people died. The party that was to become the PRI was founded by President Plutarco Elías Calles, who managed to pacify the country by establishing allegiances with the chieftains of the strongest belligerent factions in the revolution, eliminating the weakest ones, and negotiating with both trade unions and businessmen. The resulting system was based on the almost absolute power of the presidential figure, whose term of office was six years and who was not open to re-election. Rather, the president chose his successor as the official candidate of the PRI, and the PRI managed – with dubious methods – to win every presidential election from its foundation in 1929 until 2000. Nevertheless, there was always an opposition, and the peace of the country often came at a very high price. The media were co-opted by the government and – except for certain crises – dissent was violently but not too visibly repressed.

This system, which carried with it a brutal inequality of income, unbridled and generalized corruption, and devastating economic crises every six years, began to fracture during the government of Miguel de la Madrid (1982–88), the first president to implement neoliberal economic policies and ‘open the country’ to globalization.

In those years a group of dissidents, under the leadership of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, separated from the PRI. This group, allied with the main left-wing parties, constituted the FND (National Democratic Front), which contested the 1988 presidential elections with the iconic Cárdenas as its leader. His main opponents were Manuel Clouthier from the old right-wing party, the PAN, and Carlos Salinas de Gortari from the PRI. Salinas appeared as the winner, but many Mexicans still consider that Cárdenas won that election.

For years, the PRI had built an elaborate system to guarantee them the majority of the votes. General elections were held regularly, but the full force of the state was legally and illegally geared towards making sure the PRI won each and every time. Under the PRI, the entire country was run (and perhaps still is) through a set of unofficial, illegal rituals and institutions which mirrored, or were mirrored by, the authoritarian presidential system of hidden loyalties, negotiations and small-scale violent repression, which extended to every aspect of Mexican life. Back in 1988, for instance, the computing system that was to count the votes ‘collapsed’ immediately after the election. Since the law considers that the ballots on which the citizens have voted should be destroyed after a certain period, the votes were never counted again, and there will never be a way to prove whether Carlos Salinas was, indeed, a spurious president.

Salinas, who was president from 1988 to 1994, took the neoliberal project even further, and disarticulated many of the old institutions and principles – factual or merely rhetorical – which came from the Revolution and its aftermath. For instance, he privatized state-run companies, re-established official relations with the Vatican and gave legal status to churches, amended the constitutional laws protecting the *ejidos* (communally owned farming lands) signed NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) with the USA and Canada, and supported an economy mainly based in attracting speculative foreign capital. With the surplus generated by the sale of state companies and the international money passing through Mexican banks, the first years of his government created an illusion of prosperity, supported by an intensive marketing strategy aimed at attracting foreign investment. Although Salinas’s policies followed international trends, they also disrupted the internal and unofficial system of loyalties that had sustained PRI-run governments. Within the party, there was a struggle between the ‘dinosaurs’ – the authoritarian elites that maintained the order inherited from the Revolution – and the American-educated liberal-oriented ‘technocrats’. The latter won.

Salinas’s government irretrievably damaged the old system, but there was nothing to replace it. Drug traffic increased to unprecedented levels; the banking system went bankrupt and had to be rescued by the state; Luis Donaldo Colosio, the candidate of the PRI – virtually the president – was shot during his campaign; and a new guerrilla-like movement, the EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation), spectacularly appeared in Chiapas on the precise day that NAFTA came into force. Once party discipline disappeared, and democratizing measures such as increased press freedom were advanced, the struggles for power of different factions, ranging from trade unions to the Catholic Church, and business organizations, were carried out in the open. The informal rules for political negotiations were broken and the formal institutions lacked the strength to act as mediators. With the structure weakened, the next PRI president was to be the last.

The death of Colosio, and other violent political assassinations, created an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, which once again brought the PRI to the presidency. This time the president was Ernesto Zedillo, a considerably less charismatic man than Salinas. He pushed hardline neoliberal policies still further with the ensuing dissolution of the old regime. By 1999, after years of struggles and negotiations, a series of institutions had been created to guarantee the transparency of the elections. Vicente Fox, the tall ex-CEO of Coca-Cola Mexico, ran for the PAN; and when elected president, he

offered the illusion of a change in direction, from the one offered by the single-party government that had outlasted even the Soviet Union.

Fox's government was disastrous for most Mexicans, but not for all. The richest became richer, and the economy complied with the iron rules set by the IMF and the World Bank, geared towards stabilization of the macroeconomy and ignorant of everything else. On the other hand, the dismantling of the institutions, begun by Salinas, carried on. When Fox started his presidency, he made a series of promises as fantastic as any in Coca-Cola advertisements. He didn't offer a refreshing pause, but famously said that he would solve the Chiapas conflict in fifteen minutes, have an economic growth of 7 per cent annually, reach a migratory agreement with the USA, tackle insecurity and poverty, and carry out an integral reform of the state.

The changes never arrived. Fox's sympathizers blamed Congress for tying his hands. The Chiapas conflict is still there and spreading to other parts of the country. The macroeconomy is stabilized by neoliberal policies, but the main source of income for the country is the money sent home by migrant workers in the USA. Not only did Mexico not reach an agreement with the USA, but on October this year President Bush signed the Secure Fence Act, authorizing a 700-mile extension of the barrier that divides the countries, and promised to increase the number of border patrol agents to 24,000 by 2008. In the first part of 2006 more than a thousand people were killed in drug-related incidents – probably Mexico's largest export business aside from oil and human beings. Unemployment and informal labour have increased. Corruption is as bad as ever. Ex-president Fox's family is exemplary of it.

After the 1988 'defeat', Cárdenas's FDN became the PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution). Cárdenas had run for president again against Ernesto Zedillo in 1994 and lost. But in 1997 he was elected head of government of Mexico City, or the Mexico Federal District. Previously the head of the district wasn't elected but directly appointed by the president. Cárdenas quit this job to run for president in the 2000 election and again came third after the PRI and the PAN. That same year, another politician who had been in the PRI and was now in the PRD ran for Mexico City: Andres Manuel López Obrador.

López Obrador, another charismatic personality keen on publicity, was attacked by the media, as well as by the PAN–PRI alliance, from the outset. He made some reforms in the city, although the endemic problems remained. Nevertheless, measures such as government aid for the elderly and single mothers made him popular, especially with the poorest sectors of society. His policies were far from being radical, but that didn't prevent the attacks he received from the Right. Probably the strongest was the so-called *desafuero*, or withdrawal of immunity. In May 2004, Congress asked for the withdrawal of immunity over the expropriation by the Mexico City government of some metres of land to build a road, and in the beginning of April 2005 the PRI–PAN majority in the Congress voted for immunity withdrawal. When, on 20 April, the Procuraduría General de la República started the penal process against him, two PAN congressmen, lucidly avoiding granting him martyr status, immediately paid the bail. On 22 April a judge cancelled the arrest order, and on the 24th more than a million people gathered in the Zócalo – the main square of Mexico City – to show their support for López Obrador. In spite of the media attacks, and several other scandals involving the PRD, as the presidential elections of July 2006 approached his popularity was soaring.

At that moment two big political machines were being launched: on one hand, the IFE (Electoral Federal Institute) performed its role by measuring the time allotted on television for each candidate, verifying caps to donations, making sure that the voting lists were consistent, and preparing citizens as observers for the election on 2 July; on the other hand, the financial elites allied to the countries with strong interests in Mexico started a desperate campaign to secure the continuity of the neoliberal project.

For instance, the Consejo Coordinador Empresarial (Business Coordination Council) – a self-righteous conservative organization in which the most powerful Mexican businessmen are involved – launched an advertisement on television in which a black screen was suddenly splattered with blood, followed by the caption ‘López Obrador is a Danger for Mexico’. Later on, the IFE advised them to withdraw the ad. The CCE argued that they had the right to defend economical stability. The ‘vote of fear’ was being actively promoted once again.

In spite of that, López Obrador still had a good chance to win. The country was bitterly divided between supporters of Calderón and Obrador. The PRI had no hope of winning, especially since it had been hit by another internal fracture. Roberto Madrazo ran as candidate, but he fought with ‘The Teacher’, Elba Esther Gordillo, a woman who had come to public notoriety when – back in the days of Salinas – she had taken over as the leader of one of the strongest and most influential trade unions in the country, the SNTE (National Union of Education Workers), and been prominent in the PRI–PAN alliance. This became of particular importance in the conflict with the APPO.

When the preliminary results of the election began to appear, Obrador’s supporters claimed that something was wrong. Mathematicians from the National University stated that the results could not be the outcome of a random process, such as counting ballots, but were consistent with an algorithm that showed the system had been tampered with. Throughout the count, Calderón was ahead of Obrador by a minimum percentage. People were fighting on the streets, and families and friends who had supported different sides avoided each other. When the victory was awarded to Calderón, by a difference of less than 1 per cent, the PRD filed complaints to the Electoral Tribunal and demanded a recount of all the votes. The Tribunal alleged failures in the complaints procedure and disregarded most of the complaints. Massive demonstrations once again took place in Mexico City’s Zócalo. The Tribunal agreed to recount a representative proportion of the votes and, during that period, the supporters of López Obrador set up camp in the main avenue of Mexico City, closing it for weeks. The final verdict was that there had been inconsistencies, but not enough to justify recounting all the ballots or annulling the election. Calderón was the elected president and the ballots were to be destroyed.



With the memory of 1988 still fresh in the minds of many voters, the path chosen by López Obrador and his supporters was unorthodox: he decided to call for a National Convention and assume the presidency that he thought was his, constituting a parallel government. This measure was considered outrageous by the Right, and discouraged many of the supporters on the Left. To the Right it confirmed what they had always thought of this man – that he was a dangerous populist megalomaniac – although all the large demonstrations and sit-ins were peaceful. On the Left, many saw his moves as damaging, and considered that the best strategy would have been to accept defeat and continue working within the PRD, concentrating in the areas where they were elected and exerting pressure through their representatives in Congress, since Mexican institutional life needs to be strengthened. Others still support him. Accepting the defeat with his arms crossed would have meant following the strategy of 1988, which didn't allow the PRD to play an important role in the presidential elections for another eighteen years.

Despite the stories in the international press, López Obrador is not on the extreme Left, nor can he be compared to Chávez or Morales. Nevertheless he did offer a different project from Calderón (who may be considered on the extreme Right), albeit along the traditional lines of moderation marked out by the old PRI.

### **APPO and other popular insurrections**

The government of Vicente Fox started and ended with two serious popular insurrections – in addition to the ongoing Zapatista campaign. Both were brutally repressed. The first involved a town called San Salvador Atenco; I mention it because although it is not related to APPO, it did set a precedent in several ways. In 2001, the federal government saw the need to build an expansion to Mexico City International Airport. Given that the older airport had been engulfed by urban spread, the most reasonable solution was to build an airport elsewhere. The town of Atenco was chosen, not without serious environmental controversies. The government offered to buy the land from the local peasants at an outrageously low price, and promised modernization and development of the area in exchange. The local population refused. The conflict escalated to the point that local authorities fled the area and the people of Atenco marched into Mexico City sharpening their machetes against the pavement. Finally, on February 2002, the procedure for the expropriation of the land was declared illegal and the government decided instead to go ahead with the clearly insufficient works around the existing airport.

Five years later, on 3 May 2006, there was a row between flower vendors and the local police, who wanted to evacuate them from the streets. The people of Atenco reacted by blocking one of the highways leading to Mexico City, where they had several clashes with the police and captured some of them. The next day, by dawn, in a massive operation, the entire town was raided, two people were killed, foreigners were deported and there were several accusations of human rights abuses, including the fact that the police had the instruction to rape the women they detained. The disproportion of the response was, at the same time, revenge, a warning, and valuable proof to the Right – in tense pre-electoral times – that the Left was indeed a violent threat for Mexico.

A few months later, in Oaxaca, a poor southern state on the Pacific coast with 3.5 million inhabitants and seventeen different indigenous ethnic groups, another conflict arose. The governor of the state, Ulises Ruiz of the PRI, had won another dubious election back in 2004. On 1 May 2006, the teachers of the 22nd section of the SNTE threatened to go on strike in support of a wage increase. Unlike his predecessors – for whom this kind of strike had been nothing but the usual preamble to government–union negotiations – the governor ignored them. As a response, they camped in the main square of Oaxaca City on 22 May. There was already unrest in the state because of

land expropriations from indigenous peasants in order to start the industrial works needed by the Puebla–Panama Plan. Opposition had been violently repressed. The teachers and their supporters blocked roads and called another massive demonstration. The governor issued an ultimatum to go back to classes, but the teachers refused. Their leaders travelled to Mexico City to negotiate, but it was useless. In June, the state police tried to evict the protestors from the main square and failed. By then, their allegiances with other groups were consolidated under an organization called the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO). They demanded the immediate resignation of Ulises Ruiz.

After the elections, the conflict intensified. Barricades sprang up in Oaxaca City and the protestors broadcast their own news from radio stations under their control. APPO announced that they were being attacked by paramilitary groups and policemen dressed as civilians. Violent provocations grew but APPO maintained its position, especially regarding the removal of Ruiz. By the end of September, while the electoral controversy still ran high in the rest of the country, military planes and helicopters were flying over Oaxaca. APPO continued protesting and occupying the streets until Ruiz – who had not been able to work in Oaxaca City for months – quit his post. An APPO caravan walked over 500 km to Mexico City, and some negotiations took place, especially regarding the intervention of the federal government in the conflict. But no agreements were reached because APPO refused to negotiate with Ruiz. It also considered that the issues relating to indigenous populations were not being recognized as part of the agenda. In September and October, there were several attacks by unknown armed men against the camps and radio stations controlled by APPO. The Federal Congress refused to declare an official cessation of powers in Oaxaca. The PAN government could not move a PRI governor without jeopardizing the alliance between the parties.

On 28 October, a particularly violent crisis arose when an American citizen, Bradley Roland Will, was shot. The PFP (Preventive Federal Police) took over Oaxaca's main square. APPO retreated into the State University. Finally, on 25 November APPO called another demonstration to surround the main square still occupied by the PFP. According to APPO, the demonstration was infiltrated and violence erupted again. This time the backlash was merciless. On 25 and 26 November, there were several arson attacks and most of the files containing the documents related to Ruiz's administration disappeared in the fires. The police arrested 138 people, who were sent to a jail in Nayarit, on the other side of the country, making their defence almost impossible for their impoverished relatives. According to information that has not been denied by Ruiz, about 80 per cent of those people were not related to APPO at all. Though the authorities only recognize seven casualties, APPO and human rights organizations claim that sixty people have disappeared and twenty were killed during the conflict. Although many of the prisoners have now been returned to Oaxaca, and most of them have been released, the new head of the Mexican equivalent of the Home Office has promised no forgiveness, and an iron fist.

The way in which the government dealt with this situation has been as blind and inept as in Atenco. As the condition for negotiations, the Home Office is demanding from APPO that it should be constituted as a legal organization, and that it must discipline its members: in other words, it has to acquire a political configuration which the government can deal with. This inability of the political establishment to deal with constituencies that do not follow its rules has been one of the most interesting features of the ongoing seventeen-year-old Zapatista conflict in Chiapas. In these respects, the current state of the Mexican political system is exemplary not only of the workings of a multi-ethnic and ‘post-colonial’ nation, or of a poor country which borders a rich one, but of a situation in which terms such as *legality*, *legitimacy*, *democracy* and *politics* itself are being actively redefined.