

Mexicans Vote to Return the PRI to Power

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Enrique Peña Nieto of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) has won the Mexican presidential elections with a plurality of 37 percent of the vote, returning to power the party which ruled Mexico as an authoritarian one-party-state for decades. Peña Nieto defeated the left-of-center Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) who got 31 percent of the vote and Josefina Vázquez Mota of the conservative National Action Party (PAN) who received about 26 percent.

Peña Nieto, who had the tacit support of the powerful Televisa network and of the PRI's powerful political machine, faced a rising challenge in the month before the election from a new student movement which criticized his links to the mass media and his record of political repression in Mexico State where he had been governor. But the student movement, known as "I am #132," which grew rapidly and attracted attention from throughout the country, was still too little and too late to change the election victory for Peña Nieto and the PRI which had been predicted for months by the polls.

Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who claimed to have won the presidential election in 2006, abandoned the more radical rhetoric of that campaign which led the media to compare him to Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, this time portraying himself as a moderate reformer who would follow the example of Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva, the former president of Brazil. López Obrador sought to win the confidence of the Mexican business establishment and of Mexico's middle classes, as well as of his traditional base among working people, peasants and the poor. The move to the right clearly failed to improve on his 2006 performance.

The Institutional Revolutionary Party has its origins in the Mexican Revolution, created in 1929 by President Plutarco Elías Calles as the party of government functionaries and transformed by President Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s into a mass party of workers and peasants. By the 1940s the PRI had become an authoritarian and corrupt party with a nationalist economic program; it oversaw the state banks and industries, encouraged private capital and used its control of the labor unions and peasant leagues to ensure labor peace. During the 1980s, however, the PRI abandoned its nationalist economic program and adopted neoliberal policies to encourage foreign investment, open markets to free trade, cut the social budget, and weaken labor unions. Since the 1970s, the PRI had loosened its hold on the political process and by the 1980s there were growing political parties left and right.

In 2000 Vicente Fox, a Coca-Cola Company executive, businessman and rancher, ran as the National Action Party's candidate for president and won, ending over 70 years of rule by the PRI. In terms of political program, Mexicans could find little difference between the PRI and the PAN. Presidential candidates Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and López Obrador of the left-of-center Party of the Democratic Revolution offered an alternative, but the PRI and the PAN used their political power, corruption, and—many believe—electoral fraud to keep the leftist candidates from winning.

For the last six years, Felipe Calderón, also of the conservative PAN, has held office, overseeing Mexico's economic crisis and pursuing a war against drug dealers that saw the deployment of 40,000 soldiers and thousands of police officers, widespread violations of human rights, 50,000 killed, 10,000 disappeared, and thousands forced to leave their homes for other states. Tremendously unpopular with the Mexican people, PAN candidate Vázquez Mota faced an uphill battle in the attempt to represent her rightwing party, and she was ultimately defeated by the legacy

of Calderón.

With the PRI back in power, many Mexicans will be asking themselves is this a case of back to the future? Will Mexico become once again a one-party state ruled by an authoritarian party? Mexico's left, which invested so heavily in the rightward-moving López Obrador must ask itself whether it made a mistake and might not have done better pursuing some other alternative. The Mexican right, the National Action Party, will find it hard to compete with the nearly equally conservative PRI and overcome the legacy of Calderon's military policy. The question of the moment, for most Mexicans, is what will the PRI be able to do about the economic crisis and the drug war? The PRI may have its honeymoon period, but one suspects that the honeymoon will be short.