

Tens of Thousands of Students March in Mexico Against Growing Fraud Scandal and the Imposition of PRI's Peña Nieto

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Carrying signs denouncing fraud, tens of thousands of students and other voters marched through Mexico City on July 7 to protest what they see as the government's imposition on the country of presidential candidate Enrique Peña Nieto of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Peña Nieto received 38 percent of the vote, compared to 32 percent for Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the left-of-center Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), and 25 percent for Josefina Vázquez Mota of the conservative National Action Party (PAN). López Obrador claims that the election was fraudulent and has called upon the election authorities to investigate claims of vote buying.

Students, however, have led the protests. In addition to the mass march in Mexico City, they also marched in smaller numbers in several other major Mexican cities, including an impressive demonstration by an estimated 7,000 in Guadalajara two days ago. The protest was organized largely through social media by the "I am #132" movement which has dogged Peña Nieto for two months, criticizing in particular his close ties to the powerful Televisa television network.

The Mexican Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) has declared Peña Nieto the winner, though final tallies are still not in. IFE says it is investigating alleged vote buying. Students carried signs reading IFE: Institute of Electoral Fraud. The protest, after rallying in the Zócalo, Mexico's national plaza, ended up at a wedding of television stars being broadcast by Televisa.

Imposition Claimed in 1988 and 2006

The idea of the government imposition of a candidate resonates in Mexico where many believe that the government imposed candidates who actually lost the presidential election in 1988 and in 2006. In 1988, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas may have actually defeated Carlos Salinas de Gortari who was declared the winner. Cárdenas told me in 1996 that he had not led a national movement to demand that his victory be recognized because he feared violence that might end in a bloodbath. Similarly, there is good reason to believe that Andrés Manuel López Obrador may have won the 2006 election, though the IFE declared Felipe Calderón to be the winner by a margin of 0.58% of the vote. Protesting that decision López Obrador mobilized his followers who rallied in Mexico City by the hundreds of thousands and eventually a million blocking the city's major thoroughfares, while leftist legislators attempted to block Calderón's inauguration in a chaotic Congress where representatives of the rival parties came to blows. Calderón was finally smuggled in by a back door and sworn in before Congress to the applause of the right and the chanting and jeering of the representatives of the left.

Vote Buying Scandal Grows

The students protest came as the PRI's alleged vote buying scandal continued to grow with well substantiated allegations that the PRI had spent hundreds of millions of dollars (estimates range from \$250 to \$500 million) to purchase plastic gift cards worth approximately \$7.00 each which were used by PRI operatives to buy votes. The PRI apparently bought the cards from Soriana, Mexico's largest retail chain, and distributed them to voters in exchange for the promise to vote for

Peña Nieto. The dispersal of so many cards led to long lines of customers at stores in some areas.

The PRI, which ruled Mexico from its founding in 1929 until 2000, is infamous for its political machine and for corruption. Throughout much of its history it ruled a one-party-state where workers in government industries, public employees, workers in the private sector and peasants were taken to the polls to vote under the eyes of their employers and the political bosses. Soldiers' ballots were sometimes filled out and cast by their officers. The PRI machine bought other votes with barbeque and beer or with promises of metal lamina for the roofs of concrete block houses and milk for children. The PRI claims to have become a modern and democratic party, but it seems to many that simply means that they use a plastic gift card with a magnetic strip rather than a taco and a bottle of beer to buy a vote.