


Seven Questions: Mexico's Presidential Race

Posted June 23, 2006  WEB EXCLUSIVE

Mexico's summer is especially hot this year as a tight presidential campaign races to a close. On July 2, Mexicans will choose their next leader and a new direction for the country. FP spoke with Michael Shifter, Vice President for Policy at the Inter-American Dialogue and adjunct professor of Latin American politics at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, about the campaign, disappointment with Vicente Fox, and the state of Mexican democracy.

FOREIGN POLICY: What are the big issues driving the campaign?

Michael Shifter: The main divisions have to do with economic policy and the best way for Mexico to grow. [The campaign] really is focused on national issues, not on foreign policy. It is focusing on Mexico's strategy to become a competitive economy, to grow and to better distribute the benefits [of growth] to the vast majority of Mexicans. Job creation has to be regarded as a central issue.

FP: Are U.S. debates about immigration reform playing a role in the election?

MS: I think they are playing a role but this is not the issue that most sharply divides the candidates. Mexicans are paying attention to the debate in the United States, but there is essentially pretty broad agreement among the candidates on immigration issues and what they would like from the United States. So it's not an issue that really distinguishes one candidate from the other, whereas economic policy does.

FP: Does the U.S. congress' decision to delay immigration reform help López Obrador's campaign?

MS: On the margins, yes. Calderón is associated with the current Fox government and represents continuity, so if congress fails to reach an agreement that's certainly seen as a setback for the Fox administration and benefits López Obrador.

FP: Fox was unable to move forward on many aspects of his reform agenda. Are Mexicans generally disappointed with their post-PRI experience?

MS: Yes. I think they had high expectations and they have been let down. Maybe they had unrealistically high expectations when Fox came in. Seven decades of PRI rule were behind them [and they thought] it would be easy to transform the country. It proved to be much more difficult, and Fox proved to be much less effective than people thought he would be. So,



A future voter sizes up Felipe Calderon.

yes, there has been a sense of disappointment and the crucial reform agenda is still pending. I think it is going to be hard for any government to get it through.

FP: Mexico was under one party rule until 2000, so in some ways Mexican democracy is really only six years old. Is Mexico a fragile democracy?

MS: No. It is becoming stronger - I would put it that way. While it is true that the 2000 election was the first time in seven decades that you had a Mexican president not from the PRI party, there has been a gradual building of electoral reform and political reform in Mexico over the years. This is a process that is much more stable and more secure than people would think. There is a broad consensus in Mexican society to move forward on a democratic path. Clearly, there are serious weaknesses and there are a lot of strains particularly related to violence and drugs. Political institutions are not robust, but I don't think there is a high risk of a breakdown. [Whoever] wins, I think they are going to continue on a slow but steady path to building stronger institutions.

FP: Would a López Obrador victory signal a rejection of U.S. policy in the region when considered with the election of other leftist leaders in South America?

MS: López Obrador is somebody who, unlike Hugo Chávez, has been a politician his entire career. I think he is going to be pragmatic. His central agenda is to deliver on his promises to Mexicans and he is smart enough to know that he is not going to be able to do that unless he has good relations with the United States. It doesn't mean that he is going to surrender and be an unconditional ally on all issues. There likely will be areas of disagreement, but he understands that the connections between the U.S. and Mexico are profound.

FP: Are Mexicans learning American-style negative campaigning?

MS: It does bear a resemblance and there are some parallels in the campaign practices. It came out in the debate when López Obrador accused Calderón of making payments to his brother-in-law, and then in [Calderón's] association of López Obrador with Chavez. This is something new for Mexico. Unfortunately, some of the less admirable aspects of U.S. campaigns are creeping into the Mexican system.