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Presidential Candidates Pursue Indian Vote

by LADB Staff
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[The author is a freelance journalist who has written on Mexican political and economic affairs for many years] As the tightest presidential election in Mexican history hits the homestretch, the front runners are beating the bushes for every vote they can get. This means Mexico's 10 million to 20 million Indians a constituency ordinarily ignored when it comes to matters of national importance have suddenly become the center of attention for candidates Francisco Labastida of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and Vicente Fox Quesada of the center-right opposition Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). On June 13, Labastida rented 1,000 buses to transport 30,000 residents of indigenous communities to the Otomi Ceremonial Center in a mountainous resort in Mexico state. Labastida, known as "Hermano Mayor" or "Big Brother" among the Otomis or Nnanhu People, pledged to the audience gathered at the Otomi center that he would continue to provide assistance to indigenous communities via the government's Progresa program. But the PRI candidate carefully avoided the word "autonomy," a concept advocated by the more radical Indian factions, led by the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) in Chiapas. Labastida did not have to offer his audience more than a continuation of government handouts. The ruling party, through pork-barrel subsidy programs like Progresa, dominates the indigenous vote and captured 57% of all majority Indian municipalities in the 1994 presidential race. On the same day that Labastida was asking the Otomis and thousands of other indigenous communities to vote again for the PRI, Fox invited representatives of Mexico's 56 distinct Indian peoples to a forum at the luxurious Fiesta Americana hotel in Mexico City. Only 14 representatives showed up. Skepticism about Fox's motives is justified. In his speeches on indigenous issues, the PAN candidate has sounded paternalistic and even racist. In one speech, Fox promised that his administration would create an office of Indian affairs, which would be "right next to mine" in the Mexican presidential palace of Los Pinos. In that same speech, Fox said he was committed to providing "what every Indian desires," which is a television set, a Volkswagen Beetle, and a store front. Fox, Cardenas support San Andres accords Still, Fox has attempted to draw distinctions with the PRI regarding the conflict in Chiapas.

He promises to respect the accords on indigenous rights negotiated by the government's former Chiapas peace negotiator Manuel Camacho Solis and EZLN representatives at San Andres Larrainzar in 1996 (see SourceMex, March 21, 1996). President Ernesto Zedillo has refused to recognize the agreement, which would guarantee limited autonomy for all of Mexico's indigenous communities. Fox also promises to send to Congress for approval the same version of the San Andres accords that was drawn up by the special Chiapas legislative commission (Comision de Concordia y Pacificacion, COCOPA). While Fox's support for the San Andres accords is welcomed by some supporters of the EZLN, others are openly skeptical, especially with the PAN candidate's unrealistic promise to settle the conflict "within 15 minutes." "Fox is an opportunist," said Magda Gomez, an EZLN supporter and former legal director of the government's Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI). "Until now, there has been no place in his marketing schemes for the Indians." Many EZLN supporters view the positions of Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, presidential candidate for the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), as more in line with the needs of...
indigenous peoples in Mexico. Cardenas has long supported the San Andres accords. Cardenas is the only one of the three leading candidates to meet with the EZLN. Of the other presidential candidates, only Camacho, representing the small Partido del Centro Democratico (PCD), has had face-to-face discussions with EZLN leaders in his previous role as the government's chief Chiapas peace negotiator. "Labastida and Fox are integrationists, but Cardenas endorses an autonomy that allows us to become truly a part of Mexico on our own terms," said attorney Adelfo Regino, a Mixe Indian who works for the Congreso Nacional Indigenista (CNI), which is working to make the San Andres accords the law of the land. Cardenas recently took his campaign to the Chiapas highlands community of Acteal, where he demanded that the Mexican government make a commitment to peace by pulling back the military and the federal police (Policia Federal Preventiva, PFP) from the conflict zone. Acteal is the site of a massacre in which paramilitary forces sympathetic to the PRI killed 45 Tzotzil Mayan supporters of the EZLN in December 1997 (see SourceMex, January 7, 1998). The Army and PFP sent reinforcements to the area earlier this year allegedly to disarm paramilitary groups (see SourceMex, May 24, 2000).

During his visit to Acteal, Cardenas was accompanied by gubernatorial candidate Pablo Salazar, who will represent a coalition of eight parties including the PRD and the PAN in the Chiapas elections Aug. 20. Salazar, a founding member of COCOPA, resigned from the PRI after Zedillo failed to honor the San Andres autonomy accords. The presence of Cardenas and Salazar in Acteal and other EZLN-controlled areas may not translate into many votes. The Zapatistas have chronically mistrusted all of Mexico's political parties as nonrepresentative and have recently rejected partisan elections, which they consider a divisive intervention in Indian communities. Rather, rebel autonomous municipalities vote by traditional customs in community assemblies in which those selected are committed to "mandar obedeciendo," or govern by obeying the will of the people. The EZLN would like to see this formula applied to national politics. The EZLN has not always stayed out of the electoral process. In 1994, the year the rebels went public and also a presidential-election year, the Zapatistas endorsed Amado Avedano, a newspaper publisher who was the PRD candidate for governor. The EZLN soured on the electoral process when Avedano was deprived of victory (See SourceMex, August 3, 1994). By 1995, the rebels had declared a number of municipalities autonomous and refused to participate in official elections. In the 1997 federal mid-term balloting, Zapatistas, enraged by Zedillo's refusal to implement the Indian Rights law accorded at San Andres, burned ballot boxes and chased off election officials. Zapatistas fear military attack after election. The EZLN has again pledged not to promote voting in 2000, although in a tight race ballots from supporters could be decisive in ending the seven-decade PRI dictatorship in Chiapas and the rest of Mexico. But EZLN leaders have also promised not to disrupt balloting in their area of influence. EZLN leaders view the elections as a threat to their physical integrity. They are concerned that a military attack could be imminent, regardless of whether Labastida or Fox wins.

Labastida has a negative reputation among the EZLN. As interior secretary appointed to whitewash the Acteal massacre, Labastida torpedoed the San Andres accords and was instrumental in dissolving the church-sponsored Comision Nacional de Intermediacion (CONAI). He is also said to have allowed interim governor Julio Ruiz Ferro to escape prosecution for allowing the Acteal massacre and for encouraging current Gov. Roberto Albores to dismantle Zapatista autonomous municipalities at gunpoint. In EZLN thinking, a Labastida victory would allow Zedillo enough political space to both take out an Indian guerrilla force that has taunted him every day of his six-year term in office and eliminate future problems for his hand-picked successor. In a communique...
issued June 2, EZLN leader Subcomandante Marcos urged Mexican and international civil society to help prevent the government from carrying out a post-election attack. The EZLN has been placed on red alert in preparation for a post-electoral military offensive. But the EZLN fears a Fox victory could also trigger a military offensive. Mexican generals, who historically have shown strong loyalty to elected PRI presidents, may not adopt the same stance with a president from an opposition party. There is concern the Army may move to quickly define its influence with the new administration by flexing its muscle through a military maneuver in Chiapas. Subcomandante Marcos says the timetable for attack is already fixed. If the PRI senses that it will lose July 2, an offensive could begin before election day. But a more likely time is between the Chiapas governor's election on Aug. 20 and the Dec. 2 inauguration of the new president. Diminishing rains during that period would facilitate access to rebel strongholds in the jungle and the mountains.

Longtime EZLN watchers like Luis Hernandez Navarro, a rebel advisor during the San Andres talks, anticipate a manufactured provocation to justify the military move and several are suggested: one is a major forest fire in the Montes Azules biosphere reserve where the government and international environmental organizations accuse Zapatista bases of destroying the last virgin stands of the Lacandon jungle. An assassination attempt on San Cristobal de las Casas Bishop Felipe Arizmendi could be another pretext for eliminating the EZLN before Labastida takes office. Initially thought to support the Zedillo-Labastida hard-line position in Chiapas, Arizmendi, who replaced Samuel Ruiz on May 1, has since met with the Zapatista autonomous council at Polho in the highlands. He also called for a military pullout in his first meeting with Diodoro Carrasco, Labastida's successor at the Secretaria de Gobernacion. A third and more plausible pretext for an army advance could be local violence. On June 13, seven indigenous police officers who were killed in a mystifying ambush in the EZLN autonomous municipality of San Juan de la Libertad El Bosque on the government map were buried in the highlands of Chiapas. The killings came on the second anniversary of an Albores-Labastida sponsored police and military assault on El Bosque in which ten were killed and a Zapatista unit opened fire on security forces for the first time since 1994. While Zedillo claims he has brought peace to Chiapas, 23 Indian and mestizo farmers and police officers have been murdered in Mexico's southernmost state during the first six months of 2000.

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