

NAVIGATING THE POLITICS OF POPULIST UPHEAVAL

Consider Oaxaca, where a crooked governor won't pay off unions, teachers take over the capital, partisans burn buses and police shoot up barricades.

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Mexico today, like much of Latin America, is caught between parallel realities. The country is trying to decide whether the populist in their midst is a saviour or just a sore loser.

Is Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, runner-up by 0.6 per cent of the vote in last month's presidential election, the noble victim of electoral fraud? Or is he no more than a nice-seeming thug with a credulous legion of peasants at his back?

It depends on which paper you read. What's certain is that he and his supporters have laid siege to Mexico City's famous *zocalo*, or main plaza, grinding business to a crawl in one of the world's largest city centres. Lopez Obrador is saying: Trust me, they cheated. Just give me a hand recount of those 41 million votes and you'll see.

The results of the partial recount granted him so far are already in dispute. Conservative Felipe Calderon, the nascent victor, claims they consolidate his win. There were but a handful of inconsistencies, he says. But Lopez Obrador asserts that this handful adds up to fraud, and is enough to change the result. The federal tribunal put in charge of the mess has yet to pronounce its conclusion. Once it does, Mexico's Supreme Court will make a final decision: a full recount, a new election or Calderon sworn in as president.

The court has until Sept. 6 to think about it, and until then there's little to do but wait. Unless, that is, you belong to that other populist uprising in Mexico. You know — the one that's stormed the other *zocalo* in the other capital, thanks to the other disputed election. The one in Oaxaca.

The governor

With 3.5 million people and 17 indigenous groups spread across arid mountains, lowland jungle and a mangrove-studded coastline, the state of

Oaxaca occupies Mexico's southwest horizon. It is among the most diverse and beautiful of the country's 31 states. It is also one of its poorest. Despite abundant natural resources, it has one of Mexico's lowest minimum wages — approximately \$5 a day — and a child mortality rate five times higher than Canada's. More women die during childbirth in Oaxaca than anywhere else in the country. Illiteracy here is twice the national average.

The romantic state capital, Oaxaca de Juarez, hides such realities beneath its well-maintained colonial architecture and a thriving arts scene. Tourists love it here. But operating just beneath the bustling surface is one of the more corrupt regimes in the country.

I caught my first glimpse of that corruption two years ago, when I came to work for a local daily. The governor, Jose Murat, was caught staging an assassination attempt on himself. He was trying to garner sympathy for his party in the face of an impending election.

Murat passed the torch to Ulisses Ruiz, whose campaign seemed poised for defeat until computers crashed halfway through the vote count. When the system came back up, the competition found itself in second place and Ruiz on top.

Another demonstration of Oaxaca-style politics is the annual teachers' strike. Each May for 26 years now, the teachers' union has obliged thousands of members from across the state to camp out in the capital's main square, ostensibly to demand better working conditions. They descend on the city's charmed streets with tarps and graffiti, filling the historic downtown core with overflowing port-a-potties and piles of uncollected garbage.

This yearly influx alienates a huge share of local citizens — interrupting transit, service deliveries and tourism dollars, to say nothing of leaving a million or so children idle. After two or three weeks, the state government would strategically pay off a few union leaders, and everyone would go home.

This year, however, the governor tried a different tack. In the pre-dawn hours of June 14, three weeks into the strike, Ruiz sent in the riot police. Instead of running for the hills, however, the teachers dug in their heels. They also turned on their camcorders.

You can now buy the DVD in the same *zocalo* where the action occurred, and see for yourself how police fired tear gas from helicopters at sleepy men, women and children. What began as a yearly annoyance suddenly became something much, much bigger.

The people

Two months later, Ruiz has a lot more to worry about than a petulant union. The teachers are now but a part of the Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca (APPO, in its Spanish acronym), a broad coalition representing dozens of unions, indigenous groups, aid organizations and municipalities. Shortly after the June 14 debacle, a series of "mega-marches" convulsed Oaxaca de Juarez; the last and biggest stretched 15 kilometres and was estimated to involve 500,000 people. The protestors' unconditional demand was no longer a wage hike, but rather the removal of Ruiz from office. They've already kicked him out of the city.

Today, Oaxaca de Juarez is in a balanced state of anarchy. City hall has been seized; the APPO flag is flying from the roof. Shifting street barricades force commuters to constantly find a new route to work, and every few days the protestors seal Oaxaca off from the rest of the country by parking buses on the major highways and setting them on fire. Nine of the city's radio stations have been hijacked — walk through the city and you'll hear amateur, revolution-minded broadcasts coming from corner shops, mom-and-pop restaurants and park benches. Sales of mini-radios are booming in the markets.

Still, it's a long way from Beirut. By day, things almost seem normal. Traffic moves on most of the streets; couples kiss in most of the parks.

Tourists can still be found in the cafe's and galleries. They look a little stunned, but they're fine. Some two-thirds of the businesses in the city centre remain open, and the artisans and beggars who come down from the mountain villages still tug your sleeves as you walk by.

But at night, things get spooky. Street fires are everywhere. Armed groups of men —and women, too — stand guard around the blazes and at most intersections, clutching makeshift weapons — usually big sticks, sometimes poles or fragments of aluminum siding. Night is when the radios really come into play.

The government has been sending in nocturnal police squads to retake parts of the city, and each night you can tune in to find out where the action is. "Citizens, we need your help! They're attacking us at Colonia Reforma!" Even without a radio, however, you can tell when there's been an attack by the fireworks and church bells that sound the alarm.

The situation has escalated in recent days, but so far the government's only accomplishment has been to destroy a radio tower. In the process of changing nothing, however, the night squads have managed to kill two people, one of them shot four times in the back.

The other version

While all but the most partisan observers know what to think of Ruiz, APPO's true nature remains debatable. One hopes it is a grassroots uprising with nothing more than justice on its mind. But as Jose-Luis Quintana, director of the Oaxacan daily *El Imparcial*, reminded me recently: "Mexican politics are dirty. You can't trust anyone."

We were standing on the balcony of the graphic design studio to which *El Imparcial* has fled — all three papers in town have decamped to secret locations in fear of being hijacked.

"The People's Assembly is not the spontaneous, popular uprising it makes itself out to be," Quintana went on, explaining that when Ruiz took office, he dispensed with his predecessor's habit of paying off the unions and kept the money in party coffers. Confronted with a cheapskate, union leaders got together with the teachers and agreed to seize the first opportunity for revenge. On June 14, when troops entered the *zocalo*, Ruiz gave it to them on a silver platter.

The thousands of people who have spent three months on the streets may well believe they're fighting for their rights, Quintana declared, but they are little more than pawns in a Mexican chess game.

"Don't get me wrong," he said, leaning close as though the governor might be eavesdropping. "Ruiz truly is a son of a bitch. But the assembly's no better."

The trust test

Who to believe? The question — not just in Oaxaca, but in all Mexico, throughout Latin America and indeed much of the world today — comes down to this: When can you trust a populist?

In the absence of a lie detector, we can only resort to precedent. There's no lack of populists to choose from; a cursory look at why we trust some more than others reveals some useful guidelines.

Do they advocate violence, for example? By most standards, this is grounds for dismissal. It is the principal reason neither Hezbollah nor Hamas gets much sympathy from the West.

The clarity and logic of the movement's goals are worth examining, too. When Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declares that Israel must be wiped off the map, we can reasonably suspect him of ignoring the facts on the ground. A leadership whose rhetoric favours emotion over logic ought to be considered suspect. Finally, the social context of the movement deserves a once-over. Is the system truly broke and in need of fixing? Given that popular uprisings tend to involve a fair amount of social upheaval, (come visit Oaxaca and see for yourself), it better be.

The 'delinquents'

I met Flavio Sosa, one of the APPO's leaders and its principal spokesman, a few days ago on a hot afternoon in the *zocalo*. He hadn't left the spot for days because a website posted his picture and home address, along with those of several other APPO leaders. The site describes them as "delinquents" and exhorts the good citizens of Oaxaca to "detain them wherever you see them or get them in their homes." One of the faces is that of a teacher shot dead this month; it has a red X scrawled over it.

I asked Sosa what his response was to those citizens who were tired of the chaos and wanted to get back to work.

"That is a legitimate request," he replied, leaning back in his chair. He was wearing black jeans and a wrinkled T-shirt, and yawned throughout the interview. He hadn't been getting much sleep.

"But there are towns all over Oaxaca that suffer from hunger, where children die of curable diseases like diarrhea, and women die in childbirth. Towns with no electricity or running water — let alone potable water. So, I would say that if people in the capital have the right to ask for their businesses to open up again, to make lots of money, so do we have the right to ask for a better life."

I asked further what he thought would become of the Popular Assembly should it achieve its goal of kicking out the governor.

"It's too early to tell what APPO even is, let alone what it might become," he replied. "APPO may be a tool that lets communities take power; it might be a citizens' parliament; it might simply be an important experience in a chapter of state history."

We chatted for over half an hour in the shade of a laurel tree, and the longer we spoke the harder it was to believe that the man before me was on the take.

Perhaps I'm being naïve. This being Mexico, it's impossible to discount the possibility that some political conniving is going on behind the closed APPO doors. If Sosa isn't cashing in, the argument would go, then someone else is.

Perhaps one of the most damaging legacies of state corruption is the cynicism it breeds in the citizenry. Sadly, in Mexico, the cynics are often correct.

But if a few rotten streaks exist in the assembly — and they probably do — there remain some good reasons to give it the benefit of the doubt. Despite having sustained several armed attacks that resulted in murder, for example, the protestors have yet to shoot back.

Their leaders issue daily reminders that this is a peaceful movement. As well, this is unquestionably a healthy cross-section of society — doctors and engineers belong to APPO, too — and not everyone in it is a sucker.

History demonstrates that revolutions tend to turn the oppressed into tyrants. Whoever comes out on top in the struggles now taking place in Mexico, they will need to be watched.

But in what democracy is this not true? Watchfulness is the mechanism by which democracies keep themselves healthy.