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Lorenzo Meyer "The End of Mexico's Transition?"

April 12, 2000

Will the 2000 elections succeed in changing the nature of Mexican politics? According to Lorenzo Meyer, a leading voice on U.S.-Mexico relations and a professor with the Center for International Studies at El Colegio de México, this process of change has already begun and has increasingly gained momentum over the past two decades. In a charismatic lecture given at CLAS on April 12, Meyer outlined the past and present transformations taking place in Mexican politics, pointing out the unique characteristics that make the July elections a decisive moment in Mexican history.



Lorenzo Meyer

Meyer began his talk by referring to the historical lack of democracy within Mexican politics. Prior to the Mexican Revolution, he noted, elections in Mexico were controlled by the elite or by the military, two entities that were often one and the same. Although the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) emerged in the 1920s in a spirit of democracy, the PRI ideology soon became entrenched in the Mexican psyche, and by the 1940s the PRI formed part of what Meyer referred to as a "smooth-running, state-party machine." Due in part to the relative economic successes achieved by Mexico following World War II, the PRI was able to remain in power virtually unopposed.

In the 1980s, however, the political climate began to change. The economic growth and relative stability experienced by Mexico since World War II came to an abrupt end with the crisis of 1982, an economic collapse that led many Mexicans to call into question the effectiveness of the ruling party. This discontent manifested itself in the emergence of urban political groups, like the National Action Party in the north (in Chihuahua), that were willing to challenge the PRI. In south and central Mexico, the National Democratic Front (FDN) - which was to become the present-day Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) - was created by a left-wing faction of the PRI that had become disgruntled with the PRI's neoliberal, anti-nationalist policies.

The election of 1988 was a "critical moment" in Mexican political history, according to Meyer. For the first time in the 20th century, an opposition movement rose to challenge the dominant political party. Despite the PRI's presidential victory that year - in what is widely considered a fraudulent election - the opposition movements did not gradually disappear following the elections. Rather, the PAN and the PRD have remained prominent political forces in Mexico to the present day.

According to the latest poll, Meyer said, PAN candidate Vicente Fox and PRI candidate Francisco LaBastida are running neck-in-neck, while PRD candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas trails behind. A possible reason offered by Meyer to explain the PRD's third-place position was Cárdenas' reputation as a weak and inefficient mayor of Mexico City, as well as the fraud associated with the PRD's internal elections last year. Meyer pointed out that Fox, the center-right candidate of the PAN, does not adhere to traditional PAN ideology; he is supported primarily by conservative, pro-business "Foxistas" who outnumber PAN party members.

Although opposition to the PRI has been mounting since the 1980s, the upcoming election is a decisive moment in Mexican history because, for the first time, the opposition actually has a fair chance of