Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) recently brought turkeys, ducks, pigs, and other livestock to a news conference to highlight the alleged animals-for-votes giveaway by Enrique Peña Nieto, candidate of the once-dominant Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), who recorded a 6.6 percent advantage in the July 1 presidential showdown. The Noah’s Ark gambit came after the leftist candidate had suffered one legal setback after another in protesting the comparatively huge campaign expenditures, $7.50 food coupons, manipulated opinion polls, and biased media coverage for the widely acknowledged winner. The final blow came on August 31 when magistrates in Mexico’s electoral tribunal unanimously recognized Peña Nieto’s victory—a decision AMLO quickly denounced.

Before this, U.S. president Barack Obama, Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez, and scores of other world leaders, the global business community, the mainstream media, most academic pundits, and the opposition National Action Party (PAN) and New Alliance Party (PANAL) have recognized Peña Nieto’s triumph. The only bitter-enders are elements of the leftist parties that backed AMLO, factions of the #YoSoy132 youth crusade, radical unions, and leading sensationalist publications, *La Jornada* and *Proceso*.

Why does AMLO continue to tilt at the establishment’s churning windmill when Mexico’s congress has ratified Peña Nieto, the attractive former governor of Mexico State, who will don the red, white, and green presidential sash on December 1? What are the similarities between this year’s protests and the one that López Obrador waged six years ago when he claimed the mantle of “legitimate president” and refused to recognize the gnat-sized victory of the PAN’s Felipe Calderón. How does 2012 differ from 2006, and what does it portend for the 2018 presidential elections?

**A Messianic Calling**

From the time of his youth, López Obrador had a number of character-shaping experiences. At age 15, he accidentally killed his younger brother when horsing around with a pistol—a tragedy that he refuses to discuss, but which undoubtedly affected him deeply. From 1965 to 1968, he attended Federal Secondary School No. 1 in Villahermosa, Tabasco. There he met Maestro Rodolfo Lara Lagunas, who lectured his students about Mahatma Gandhi’s civil disobedience, Fidel Castro’s overthrow of the Batista dictatorship, and U.S. aggression in Vietnam. Lara told me that AMLO was “a quiet and attentive boy,” a good student but not outstanding. “I never imagined that he would grow up to be a leader,” he confided. Then, as a university student, he nearly drowned while swimming near Palenque, where his family operated a small hotel. On being snatched from the water, he said he was unafraid of death, but feared that he would not be able to fulfill his “mission.”

Later, AMLO and his first wife Rocío spent five years among the Chontales, impoverished Tabascan Indians in the Nacajuca municipality of oil-rich Tabasco. As local head of the government-financed National Indigenous Institute, he and Rocío lived in a one-room *choza* or hut, working alongside the Chontales from sunup to sundown building clinics, schools, and terraced farming plots. He became known to the local population as *lesho*—a term that signifies love verging on adoration. Meanwhile, he reportedly neglected his wife’s health concerns, never finding time to take her to a specialist as promised. Friends say that he loved her, but he lived frugally, made personal sacrifices, and expected Rocío and members of his entourage to forgo creature comforts for the greater good. In early 2003, she died of lupus at age 46.

Although originally a PRI activist, he gravitated to the leftist-nationalist Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) in the late 1980s. A talented rabble-rouser, López Obrador apparently viewed himself as a political liberator and the spiritual shepherd of a flock. He mobilized deracinated peasants and fishermen to block wells drilled by Pemex, the notoriously corrupt national oil company, whose ubiquitous exploration and processing had polluted the state. The monopoly heaped *danegeld* on him to lift the barricades. He then used the payola to furnish legal services, health care, housing, and textbooks to the disadvantaged, acquiring a reputation as a patron who took care of his followers.

In 1991 and 1994, AMLO was organizing showy “exodus” marches to Mexico City, to castigate the political and ecological contamination of his state. At one point, lawyer
and ally Rafael López Cruz said that he had recommended that López Obrador consult an array of experts to assess the harm that oil production had inflicted on the state’s air, water, and land. López Cruz reasoned that AMLO could sue Pemex for the cost of cleaning up the streams and lagoons, decontaminating the soil, and restoring vegetation and wildlife. If successful, he could compensate injured parties. AMLO dismissed the idea as “too legalistic.” “Besides if we solve all the problems, who will join our demonstrations?” he asked his adviser.

After twice losing the Tabasco governorship because of “fraud,” he moved to Mexico City to successfully head the national PRD en route to becoming the capital’s mayor in 2000. His campaign slogan gave a modern rendering of the Biblical saying: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of Heaven” (Luke 6:20). AMLO’s version was: “For the Good of All, Above All the Poor.” Once in office, he christened the capital “the City of Hope,” and nicknamed himself “the Little Ray of Hope.”

Seemingly allergic to democracy, López Obrador defined the law as the “will of the people.” He paid lip service to orthodoxies while continually reinterpreting statutes. As mayor, he reportedly gave short shrift to bills approved by the city council; on some occasions, he simply failed to promulgate legislation, and at other times, he substantially changed the language before officially publishing an act.

After narrowly suffering defeat at the hands of Felipe Calderón in 2006, he cried foul play, encouraged the erection of a tent city that strangled the capital’s tourist zone for weeks, declared himself the nation’s “legitimate president,” urged comrades to physically block Calderón’s “unlawful” inauguration, and began preaching his political gospel in the country’s 2,438 municipalities (roughly equivalent to counties). During his frenetic national tours, he unveiled a 12-member cabinet recalling Jesus’s disciples, issued his own form of identification card to some 2.8 million devotees, proposed new laws, and pressured moderate leftists in Congress to join the once-dominant PRI in thwarting most of President Calderón’s “illegitimate” legislative agenda.

2012: Similarities to the Past

Three days before the 2012 vote, López Obrador and the three other presidential aspirants formally agreed to accept the postelection results reported by the citizen-run Federal Electoral Institute (IFE). A Mexico City cartoonist was prescient when he depicted AMLO crossing his fingers behind his back when taking the pledge, even though the enormous expenditures by the Peña Nieto campaign were well publicized when this ballyhooed ceremony at IFE headquarters took place.

The preliminary outcome showed the PRI standard-bearer 3.3 million votes ahead of his leftist challenger. The earlier assurance aside, López Obrador wasted no time in denouncing the figures. “We will not accept the corruption that dominates national life. We fight for the moral rebirth of Mexico,” he was reported as saying. Needless to say, he did not question the fairness of congressional contests in which the Left fared well, picking up 136 seats in the 500-member Chamber of Deputies and 28 seats in the 128-member Senate. Nor did he raise a ruckus over leftist gubernatorial wins in Tabasco (Arturo Núñez Jiménez) and Morelos (Graco Ramírez Garrido), as well as the mayoral landslide in Mexico City (Miguel Ángel Mancera).

AMLO quickly became a perpetual motion machine, convening news conferences, hosting rallies, applauding sit-ins, and lodging judicial appeals. He attracted his walk-through-fire loyalists plus the #YoSoy132 coalition that arose from middle-class students at such prestigious universities as the Ibero-Americana, Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, and the Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey. A majority of these youngsters castigated Peña Nieto and the avalanche of support he received from the Televisa media conglomerate. Later, students from several dozen institutions of higher learning and the radical Mexican Electricians Union flocked to protest.

Running out of legal complaints, López Obrador may be expected to (1) rail against an “illegitimate,” elite-dominated system, (2) urge Senator Dolores Padierna, Deputy Silvano Aureoles Conejo, and other loyalists in Congress to block Peña Nieto’s energy, labor, security, and tax reforms, and (3) condemn as “traitors” moderates on the Left who exhibit a willingness to support sensible initiatives. After that, it remains to be seen whether AMLO will form his own party. In all likelihood, he will reprise his 2006 behavior, barnstorm the country preaching his political gospel, and lay the groundwork for yet another shot at the presidency in 2018.

Differences

Several key factors have changed the political tableau this year. To begin with, Peña Nieto’s 6.6-point margin of victory far exceeds Calderón’s 0.56-point lead six years ago. In addition, Peña Nieto’s support staff—led by ex-deputy and likely chief of staff Luis Videgaray Caso—is much more adroit than their Calderón counterparts, especially in using the media to tout their politician’s credentials and to denigrate AMLO as a “spoil sport” and “poor loser.” The Roman Catholic Church, business tycoons, TV stations and newspaper columnists, the international community, and other opinion makers have overwhelmingly endorsed Peña Nieto’s victory. And, while the PRD and small leftist parties appear to be standing firm with AMLO, the unity that existed in 2006 is no longer evident.

While loathe to break openly with López Obrador, outgoing Mexico City mayor Marcelo Ebrard enjoys widespread support among moderate leftists and independents for the 2018 nomination. In comparing the two men to the UK royal
succession, an astute Mexican analyst told me that the public has had enough of the aging, balding Prince Charles and now resonates to the dashing 30-year-old Prince William’s ascent to the throne. Ebrard may celebrate his fifty-third birthday on October 10, but he is a new face compared with López Obrador.

Other wannabes to succeed Peña Nieto include Miguel Ángel Mancera, the mercurial candidate of the Left who piled up 63 percent of the ballots cast, to take the reins of Mexico City’s government. Although ideologically closer to AMLO than to Ebrard, Mancera realizes that López Obrador can still deploy his machine to turn out crowds for allies and against enemies. Nevertheless, divisions and discord within the #YoSoy132 organization will hinder his ability to fill the capital’s Zócalo and other giant plazas.

A Reforma poll published on July 12 found that nearly two-thirds of respondents don’t want a repeat of the costly, traffic-snaring shenanigans orchestrated by AMLO in downtown Mexico City six years ago. PRI allegations that a front group, Austeridad Republicana, funneled Mexico City government funds into his campaign has further jolted López Obrador’s seemingly righteous stance. In fact, 76 percent of those surveyed stated that the savior from Tabasco should accept his setback and return to his family ranch, which he refers to as La Chingada, or the “The Violated One.”

Yet, retirement may not be an option for a man who believes that a higher force has summoned him to uplift the downtrodden. As one PAN official famously noted: “The only fair election that he will embrace is one that he wins.”

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