

Latin American populism and what it means for Mexico

By Brian Levinson

When it comes to politics, more than a few academics have noted that Europeans spend too much time dwelling on the past, while Americans are too often willing to ignore it. Latin Americans, however, seem to have a different mindset. Caught between their own past and present, between developed and under-developed, between indigenous and modern, between agrarian and industrial, they sometimes find themselves spinning in a political circle.

This is evident in Mexico today, where people are coming down with an old-fashioned bout of Latin American populism. After 70 years of their oddly-termed "institutional revolution," and then having survived a peaceful transfer of presidential power four years ago, a large percentage of Mexicans are now fond of Mexico City mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who is both praised and pilloried as a populist. This begs the question: What exactly is a populist?

It is a label that has been used to describe politicians of all different ideological stripes — from Franklin Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan. During the Democratic primaries, Howard Dean could not raise his voice during a stump speech without being called a populist. But that's all small potatoes — mere cable news sound-biting — when looked at through a Latin American lens. From Mexico all the way down to the southern cone of South America, populist is not just a label, but a veritable institution.

That does not make it any easier to define. The most famous populist in history, Argentina's Juan Peron, gave birth to a major political party that is today stretched in so many different directions that no less than three peronista candidates ran for president last year. Another populist, Haya de la Torre, spent half a century in a futile quest to win the Peruvian presidency, but his views changed so much during those years that his

original platform had almost completely disappeared.

Nevertheless, during the middle third of the 20th century, at the peak of their popularity, there were certain common threads that tied together the various Latin American populists. These men were very nationalistic and resented cultural and economic incursions by



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the United States. They often practiced a politics of personality, with supporters rallying around the politician rather than his policies. Though not revolutionaries, they would circumvent government and financial institutions when they made important decisions. They were not closely tied with their political party, and preferred using it more as a vehicle to get elected than as a support structure of like-minded individuals.

Lopez Obrador very much fits this mold. Though a member of the Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), he is a maverick and has made enemies within his own scandal-laden party. He famously expropriated a piece of private land in order to build an access road to a new hospital — a move that was anything but institutional, and which has given birth to a career-threatening legal battle against him. Perhaps most visibly, Lopez Obrador rides a wave of anti-U.S. sentiment — much of it inspired by the Iraq war — while President Vicente Fox wallows in a pro-U.S. economic platform that continues to bear little fruit.

If Lopez Obrador governs like

a populist, he also enjoys the same kind of political support as a populist. His political base consists of blue-collar workers and many ideological leftists. But he has also made inroads in traditionally conservative Guadalajara. And though populists like Peron also counted on fervent support from their armed forces (at least for a time), this is somewhat irrelevant in Mexico. The military here is not extremely strong or well-funded, and it has much less political clout than regional counterparts.

The only problem is that populism has almost never been a sustainable form of governance. After the initial excitement of nationalizing industries, putting up barriers to trade or massively expanding social welfare programs, economics start to run out of gas. (The economic program of Mexico's Lazaro Cardenas, one of the few populists with a reputation that remains well intact, was very much saved by World War II and the demand it created for oil and other natural resources.) Populist leaders themselves often become polarizing figures, not only falling out of favor with important sectors of society, but also generating long-term instability.

This is not to say populism is a needless stage in a country's political evolution. It has, in some cases, helped to enfranchise and give a political voice to the lower classes and indigenous populations throughout the region. But Mexico already had its society-swirling day in the sun — a revolution no less — and, all things considered, the system that came out of it was not half bad. In the words of New Yorker reporter Alma Guillermoprieto, it "worked well enough to pull a largely rural and illiterate population into the twentieth century, insuring levels of education, health care, public services, and social mobility which comparable societies (Peru, Brazil, and Columbia, say) never achieved."

The next couple of years, as we approach the 2006 Mexican presidential election, will be interesting to watch. With the United States and Europe swaying to the right, and much of Latin America doing just the opposite, Mexicans — straddled in the middle — will have an interesting decision to make. Electing Lopez Obrador, however, might not represent a step in either direction, but rather a step back in time: when nationalism and rhetoric were more important than left and right labels; when people wanted a Mussolini to make the trains run on time, and a Castro to make sure everybody received a ticket. □