

# Presidential race reflects a Mexico torn

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**MEXICO CITY** - The front lines in the battle over Mexico's presidency run from the slums ringing Mexico City to the palatial homes of the capital's richest neighborhoods.

With Felipe Calderon vowing to continue the ruling party's free-market economic policies and Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador promising to govern for the poor, the still-disputed race has laid bare Mexico's class divisions, putting painful, centuries-old inequalities at the top of the national agenda.

Mexico is now home to at least 10 billionaires, but half of its 103 million people live in poverty - a social and cultural gulf that was the cornerstone of Lopez Obrador's campaign.

Like it or not, the next leader faces the overwhelming task of making the country more egalitarian before things explode.

"Mexico is a time bomb," said Sergio Ernesto Josue, a 65-year-old former chauffeur with stained and broken teeth. "All these people have made their fortunes off this country. Mexico has the natural resources, but they've been very poorly distributed. Those on top have set a bad example for what this country could be."

It remains in doubt who will succeed President Vicente Fox, whose single six-year term ends on Dec. 1. Violent street protests seemed possible as Lopez Obrador challenged Calderon's apparent victory Tuesday, demanding a vote-by-vote recount. A preliminary count gave Calderon a 400,000-vote lead, but electoral officials can't declare a winner before an official tally beginning Wednesday.

Josue, looking for clients in his taxi outside the stone-walled mansions of the posh Las Lomas neighborhood, said sneaking into the United States is the only way for poor people like him to get ahead. He cast his vote for Lopez Obrador, hoping the leftist might finally spread Mexico's wealth more evenly.

This year's campaign offered such hopes and more to Mexico's poor. Invigorated by Fox's stunning 2000 victory that ended seven decades of authoritarian, single-party rule - then let down by Fox's failure to deliver millions of jobs - many poor Mexicans have fervently believed Lopez Obrador would finally put them first.

Social and economic inequalities have remained profound throughout Mexican history, but the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, stifled those divisions, absorbing nearly all ideologies and social classes during its 1929-2000 hold on power. CEOs, street vendors and intellectuals all sang the party song.

Mexico's social classes also showed remarkable unity in kicking the PRI out of power after a peso devaluation ruined the economy.

That unity has now vaporized, and the poor for whom Lopez Obrador campaigned feel empowered. Surrounded by maids and farmers, street vendors and blue-collar workers, the former Mexico City mayor vowed to expand social programs and pay for them by going after wealthy tax deadbeats and cutting the inflated salaries of bureaucrats and politicians.

Calderon spoke from the other side of this divide: A Harvard-educated technocrat, he said little about challenging the status quo, and promised to maintain the stable economy that has enabled a growing number of middle-class Mexicans to obtain low-interest loans and other benefits.

But for many, such gains remain elusive. Along the palm-lined streets of Las Lomas, maids clean million-dollar homes, then return in rickety buses to cement hovels on the capital's outskirts. Their bosses strap on diamonds to shop for clothes at the mall while bodyguards drive their children to private schools in armored cars.

Lopez Obrador's strongholds include much of Mexico City and the surrounding slums, where millions live without electricity and running water. Calderon does better in Las Lomas: The results posted outside one polling place showed he had 243 votes to just 43 for his rival.

"The poor and the rich think differently," said Daniel Somoano, a stock broker in pinstripes eyeing a \$45,000 painting for sale at an art gallery. "They supported a candidate who was not very clear and who told them lies. They think, well, he'll give me 800 pesos a month, so I'll vote for him. But his economic plan was archaic, and he was going to move the country back 20 years."

Walking nearby, Marta Hernandez wore a Calderon campaign T-shirt. But it was a handout, and the 50-year-old maid said her vote went to Lopez Obrador.

"He's given me hope that someone wants to help the poor," she said.