

Film on Mexico's Disputed '06 Election Stirs Emotions

The New York Times
December 2, 2007

MEXICO CITY, Dec. 1 — A documentary about last year's disputed presidential election has drawn big crowds and generated controversy here, after its director, [Luis Mandoki](#), waged a long battle to find a distributor willing to take on a politically charged film.

Last year's race was a virtual tie, but electoral officials determined that the conservative candidate, [Felipe Calderón](#), had edged out a left-wing populist, [Andrés Manuel López Obrador](#), by 243,000 votes, out of 41 million cast.

The election officials, who all belonged to parties opposed to Mr. López Obrador, rejected calls for a complete recount and strictly interpreted the law to limit the number of ballot boxes reopened. The courts later upheld Mr. Calderón's victory in the face of mass protests by Mr. López Obrador's supporters.

One of the many Mexicans who contend the election was flawed enough to merit a recount was Mr. Mandoki, a successful director and filmmaker here and in Hollywood. In the period before the election, Mr. Mandoki made a glowing biographical film about Mr. López Obrador, a populist who promised to end tax breaks for the rich and break up monopolies.

The new film, "Fraud, [Mexico 2006](#)," lays out in detail the arguments of leftists who say the combination of a smear campaign and fraud at polling places swung the election to President Calderón. Mr. Mandoki got financial backing for the movie from Federico Arreola, a journalist, entrepreneur and close campaign adviser to Mr. López Obrador.

The film contends that several powerful business executives; [Vicente Fox](#), then the president; and Mr. Calderón waged a negative campaign against the leftist candidate, despite restrictions in Mexican law on mudslinging and on campaigning by current officeholders. In advertisements on television, radio and the Internet, they asserted that Mr. López Obrador was a potential left-wing authoritarian who would destroy the economy. Some spots suggested he was like the autocratic president of Venezuela, [Hugo Chávez](#).

The large number of people going to see the film — more than 300,000 in the first two weeks — showed that the controversy has not been put to rest and that a good part of the population still feels something went awry in the balloting.

The film has stirred up deep emotions. Standing ovations and shouting matches were not uncommon in the 230 theaters where it is showing. On Nov. 24, a dispute broke out between employees of a Cinemex theater in Mexico City and the audience when one of the reels broke 20 minutes into the film. The audience accused employees of censoring the film. The employees shouted insults at the audience and chanted, "Calderón! Calderón!"

“I am very surprised and happy,” Mr. Mandoki said in a recent interview. “At a premiere, people often stand at the end, but here, in all the theaters, the people not only applaud but they stay until the credits are over.”

So far, Mr. López Obrador’s supporters have made up the bulk of the people going to the film. For many of them it has only confirmed what they felt in their gut last year.

“I always have thought there was fraud,” said Sandra Quiñones, a 36-year-old city employee, who saw the film in Mexico City. “I would have thought that as a documentary it was boring. But, no, on the contrary, the truth is you come out angry, the great anger of knowing they stole the presidency.”

Others with different political leanings remain in quiet thought long after the film has ended. “I voted for Calderón,” said Araceli Pliego, 23, a student, as she left a Mexico City theater. “At the time, I liked his proposal and I still say he’s not bad as a governor, but after seeing the film, I have a lot of doubts about what happened last year.”

The film does not present new evidence of fraud. But it does assemble for the first time a chronology of all the factors leading to Mr. López Obrador’s defeat. It also shows how election officials rigidly interpreted the law to prevent a wider recount.

The spine of the film is a long interview with Mr. López Obrador in which he contends that an oligarchy of business leaders that has ruled Mexico for generations did everything possible to keep him out of office. He also admitted, for the first time, that he had misjudged the power of the negative advertising against him. Mr. Calderón declined to be interviewed by the filmmakers.

The film also presents images suggesting dirty tricks. At some polling places, ballot boxes were apparently opened illegally; at others, more ballots were apparently cast than there were voters on the lists.

The film falls short, however, of demonstrating that the problems were extensive enough to nullify the results. The courts found the irregularities cut both ways and were not numerous enough to change the outcome.

“It’s a partial vision of the events that happened in 2006,” Gonzalo Altamirano, an official in Mr. Calderón’s party, told the newspaper Reforma. “It’s a repetition of the arguments that the candidate, López Obrador, used at the time.”

Mr. Mandoki said he had seldom had such trouble getting a film distributed. According to Mr. Mandoki and Mr. Arreola, the head of the Warner Brothers subsidiary in Mexico, Juan Manuel Borbolla, agreed in mid-June to distribute the film and said his bosses in Hollywood were enthusiastically on board.

But Warner Brothers pulled out in late August, and Mr. Mandoki and Mr. Arreola say the decision was political. They say Mr. Borbolla told them that he had been warned he would make enemies at Televisa, the dominant Mexican television network, if he distributed the film. Televisa owns Videocine-Distribucion, the company with which Warner Brothers has a distribution partnership in Mexico.

Televisa officials denied that they exerted pressure on Warner Brothers to drop the film, other than to warn that the documentary would not make a profit. (It has grossed about \$1 million at the box office, the producers say.)

Mr. Borbolla has insisted politics played no role in the decision. "I decided not to distribute the film because it was not good business, because in Mexico, documentaries don't sell," he said at a news conference in September. A spokeswoman for Warner Brothers Entertainment in California, Andrea Marozas, said in a telephone interview that officials at the company's headquarters had determined that the film would simply not be profitable.

In the end, none of the major distributors in Mexico would handle the film, the producers said. Mr. Mandoki and Mr. Arreola turned to a small company, Decine S.A. de C.V., which agreed to help the producers distribute the film for a fee, as long as the payments from the four main Mexican movie chains went directly to the producers instead of the distributor.

The unusual arrangement allows Decine to maintain some distance from the project and protect its future relationship with Televisa, said Richard Ham, one of Decine's owners. "The problem with this film is that it is not a little bit more even-keeled," Mr. Ham said.

Still, he said the film was powerful and predicted that it would do well at the box office. "I think it's pretty cool," he said. "People are emotional enough to talk to the film, to shout at the screen."