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LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE 2006 ELECTIONS

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On Wednesday November 1st, 2006, the CSIS Mexico Project hosted a breakfast discussion titled, "Lesson's learned from the 2006 Mexican elections," featuring the President of Mexico's Federal Electoral Institute, Dr. Luis Carlos Ugalde. Ugalde discussed the role of citizens in the Mexican elections, the importance of technical competence, allegations of electoral fraud, potential future problems and prospects for reform.

Dr. Ugalde explained how in administering federal elections the IFE relies on citizen participation and technical competency to prevent electoral fraud. In the 2006 federal elections, citizen participation was relatively high, as roughly 42 million people cast their votes on Election Day, in which the IFE acted as the administrator. Additionally, as mandated by Mexico's electoral code, randomly selected, trained citizens acted as poll workers, counted ballots, served as electoral observers, and participated as members of state-level and district-level electoral councils. From a logistics standpoint, the IFE ensured clean elections by correctly installing 99.99% of the planned polling stations, and produced electoral ballots and documents with cutting-edge anti-counterfeit technology. Dr. Ugalde claims these measures resulted in extremely high and unprecedented levels of transparency and accuracy on Election Day.

Although the PAN maintained control of the Presidency, the left-of-center PRD coalition demonstrated impressive growth. The percentage of the total vote for the PRD increased from previous elections in all three categories: President, Senate, and Chamber of Deputies. In 2006, 35.33% of the total vote for President was for the PRD's candidate, whereas this figure was 16.64% in 2000 and 16.34% in 1994.

Dr. Ugalde contends that allegations of fraud made against the IFE are primarily due to the small marginal vote (0.56%) between the presidential candidates and to the IFE's failure to distribute the PREP (preliminary) results the night of the elections. Ugalde explained that the IFE was unable to unequivocally announce the winner of the presidential election at the end of Election Day because the small marginal difference in the PREP results made it necessary to count all of the electoral districts' tally sheets before announcing a winner. Dr. Ugalde dismantled the argument that the PREP results were tampered with by showing that the difference between the official tally sheet count and the PREP results was approximately 0.04 percent.

Ugalde also warned of the importance of considering the marginal difference of votes between the two presidential candidates when analyzing general socio-economic trends in Mexico. Dr. Ugalde contended the idea that the election results show Mexico is divided between the rich and poor, rural and non-rural, and, north and south, is incorrect. The small marginal difference in votes shows the PAN and the PRD coalition presidential candidates were extremely competitive across Mexico – North and South, rural and non-rural, and, rich and poor.

Ugalde examined the role of the media in the 2006 elections. Despite existing legal safeguards which aim to protect the integrity of the electoral system, this election demonstrated that reforms are needed. Some of the new problems observed in the 2006 elections included: political advertising prior to the official campaign period, negative advertising, political advertising by business and civil society organizations, and political advertising by the President and the public sector. Ugalde believes actions by media and the President in regards to political advertising and activism throughout and prior to the actual campaign period is questionable. However, due to a lack of legal mechanisms to restrict and sanction questionable behavior by the media or government officials, the IFE could not effectively control such activities. In order for the IFE to ensure clean elections and remedy these problems, Dr. Ugalde calls for a defined Mexican law specifying the different aspects and controls of political advertising to ensure fair and clean future elections.

Ugalde concluded by stating that Mexico's electoral organization and management is in good shape. He noted the importance of recognizing the distinction between clean and fair elections. Mexican law and the IFE guarantee clean elections. However fairness must will depend on how Mexico defines its democracy and the laws it establishes especially pertaining to the role of the media and government officials.