

Mexican Protestants and politics

by [Lynda Kristen Barrow](#) in the [February 28, 2001](#) issue

Mexico's popular culture is Catholic, but its politics and state are secular. Vast majorities demonstrate both immense respect for the Roman Catholic Church and firm opposition to the political involvement of religious leaders or symbols. During the recent presidential campaign, Vicente Fox Quesada raised hackles by waving the flag of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The *Cristianos Evangélicos en la Alianza por México* responded by inviting evangelical Christians to vote for Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas Solorzano, the presidential candidate for the center-left coalition, in part because Cárdenas had "not used religious symbols" in his political campaign.

Despite Mexicans' expressed desire to keep church and state separate, the two institutions are inextricably bound together in more traditional/indigenous communities. Many such communities are still ruled by *caciques* (local strongmen) according to "uses and customs," which may fly in the face of such constitutional rights as religious freedom. Because Protestant inroads in such areas threaten the religious, political and economic powers-that-be, conflict may result, with local political authorities turning a blind eye to the harassment of Protestants.

This is the contradictory and delicate religio-political setting in which Vicente Fox became the first non-PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) president in more than 70 years. Certainly Protestants are as ready for political change as their Catholic neighbors, yet they have expressed two rather specific concerns about Fox, who, unlike most of his predecessors, is a practicing Catholic. One is that his party, the National Action Party (PAN), has long been associated with Catholic sympathies. Protestants worry that Fox might change the balance of church-state relations to the benefit of the Catholic Church and to the detriment of other churches. In particular, Protestants fear that under free-marketeer Fox public and secular education will be privatized and infused with religious (i.e., Catholic) doctrines. The other concern has more to do with style than substance. Some are offended by Fox's "groserías," perceiving his blunt style as occasionally sliding into coarseness and vulgarity.

Fox has tried to reach out to Protestants and to allay their concerns. In a campaign speech to Protestant ministers he likened the Catholic Church to the PRI, saying that

both had long had a monopoly on power. Today, these once-solid religious and political monopolies are confronting stiff competition.