

Mexico before the election storm

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Mexico's federal elections will be held on July 1, 2018, and the following federally elected offices will be renewed: the President of the Republic, 128 members of the Senate and 500 members of the Chamber of Deputies. ***Español***



A follower of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) holding a flag with the image of AMLO, September 9, 2012 at the Zocalo in Mexico city, Mexico. Photo: Susana Gonzalez/dpa/ef PA Image. All rights reserved. Although the electoral campaign officially opens in March, the main candidates for the presidency of Mexico are already defined and take advantage of the pre-candidacy period within their parties and coalitions to proselytize and position themselves in the race.

Thus begins a marathon campaign: six months of wasteful spending of public resources, showers of promises, spots, adverts, posters, slogans, chants, debates, discrediting, accusations, rumors, intrigues and, given the country's context and the actors who inhabit it, also some episodes of violence whose magnitude and scope are difficult to foresee.

Progressive candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO for short) got into the pre-election struggle early, as is his custom, and has been intensifying his touring of the country since last year and working on the design of the program and his campaign team - both, by the way, noticeably more conservative than in his previous two runs for the presidency.

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AMLO is currently leading the polls, to a large extent because of his early start, because this is his third try, because of the visibility and the media exposure he gets for his charisma and the attacks of his opponents, and because he has created a national party fashioned in his image and likeness. The Movement of National Renewal (Morena) has displaced the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and taken its place in the center-left of the political spectrum.

Within the available range of progressive options, AMLO has chosen a rather less leftist and more popular-national and plebeian profile, with a hint of anti-neoliberalism and democratization calls in an anti-oligarchic sense. Within his party, however, political practices are still tinged with autocracy, centralism, and a lack of open debate and participation. And party patriotism, to some degree, is hindering alliances and non-instrumental approaches to other actors of organized and mobilized civil society.

Heterogeneity of origin and political leanings is the main characteristic of AMLO's party leaders, who owe their position to their avowed allegiance to the former mayor of Mexico City. Over a background in all shades of grey, their sensibilities range from conservative to progressive, as former members of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) coexist with former members of the PRD, and leaders of organized popular sectors with businessmen and leftist intellectuals.

But despite this great sociological and ideological diversity assembled under AMLO's leadership, Morena is seen by a large proportion of Mexico's subordinate classes as the only real option in the current context. So, many of those who feel the need and the urgency to participate politically in the face of the country's dramatic situation, be they critical, resigned or enthusiastic about this political instrument and its leader, end up gathering behind the candidacy of the Tabasco leader and the great electoral machinery which Morena is turning into.

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While for sympathizers and rank-and-file militants, as for AMLO himself and the left wing of his party, their one and only purpose is to finally beat what they call the "Mafia in power", many Morena leaders, particularly those who have joined the party recently and have recycled themselves looking for a post, would be quite happy to just keep their jobs in public institutions, to enlarge Morena's benches so that they can secure a federal parliamentary seat, and to conquer enough states and city halls so that they can access a significant portion of public resources.

In particular, the results of the election of the President, the Chamber of Deputies and Mexico City's delegational mayors will give a measure of the relation between Morena's growth and settling and the PRD's terminal crisis - or its capacity for survival. For the last 20 years – ever since the election of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in 1997 -, Mexico City has been a showcase for both the outreach and the limits of the center-left opposition not only in electoral terms – that

is, the outreach and the limits of the continuing influence of progressivism in Mexico's capital city, in contrast with its historical difficulty to obtain substantial support in other parts of the country -, but also in terms of its political project and its ability to translate it into policies.

In fact, the mandates of the four consecutive progressive mayors - Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Marcelo Ebrard and Miguel Ángel Mancera – have not been in fact very different, both in form and content, from the PRI's traditional combination of social handouts, patronage and neoliberalism, except for some praiseworthy but isolated redistributive initiatives in the shape of public works and expansion of rights, particularly during AMLO's tenure (2000-2006).

Morena shows its best face in Mexico City, where it fields Claudia Sheinbaum, an academic from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) who combines leftist credentials, personal virtues and a political career always close and loyal to López Obrador. Even more than AMLO's, her profile should attract important sectors of young and enlightened progressive middle class people, whose weight is important not only in terms of votes, but for the conformation of public opinion.

However, maintaining administrative control of the City is of vital importance for the PRD, which has been bled by an exodus of cadres and members towards Morena, has lost its ideological contour by accepting President Enrique Peña Nieto's Pact for Mexico, and has been subsumed under the logic and practices of the Mexican political system - the "PRI way" of doing politics.

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With its support down to some clientelist bases in Mexico's capital city and a handful of other states, the PRD badly needs the oxygen that access to local government posts and public financing can provide, since the former center-left opposition party is rapidly becoming a small party destined, by the workings of the majority voting system, to sell itself to the highest bidder so as to ensure electoral registration and public financing.

To the PRD, *Obradorismo* has been and will be the enemy, for it is competing in the same geographic and political territory - which is quite an interesting fact for the regime, for both the PRI and the right-wing National Action Party (PAN), as it can erode and subtract votes from Morena. And the PRD, desperately needing to remain parasitically embedded in the institutions, has culminated its drift with an ideological "slip" by entering - as a minority partner - into an alliance with the PAN, called Mexico up Front.

Prospects are not very promising either for the PAN, after its two presidential terms which disappointed insiders and outsiders alike, although the party enjoys strong local electoral support in the center-north of the country. Their presidential candidate, young national leader Ricardo Anaya, has generated some resistance within the party and even a split with former president Felipe Calderón, who has decided to promote the independent candidacy of his wife,

Margarita Zavala. Another independent candidate, Jaime Rodríguez, known as *El Bronco*, is a former PRI member who combines a demagogic discourse against party politics and very traditional pragmatism as governor of the state of Nuevo León.

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To the left of the party spectrum, native *Zapatista* candidate Marichuy seeks to take advantage of the situation to revitalize, give consistency and broaden the visibility of the struggles which, particularly in the native territories and communities, are currently resisting the dispossession of common goods in rural and urban environments through devastating megaprojects.

Marichuy's anti-capitalist discourse for organizing resistance is aimed primarily at the subordinate classes, which are being aggrieved by the dismantling of social rights, by educational and energy reforms, and by the recently passed Internal Security Law. Unlike its Other Campaign of 2006, which *Zapatismo* organized in a more favourable context both in terms of opportunities and correlation of forces, the tone of Marichuy's pre-campaign is markedly defensive. Today's adverse atmosphere and the loss of *Zapatista* influence mean that even collecting the necessary 800.000 signatures for registering as an independent candidate is proving difficult.

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This multi-coloured pleiad of candidates foretells a dispersion of the opposition vote that will inevitably favour the PRI, which is the only true national party, given that the PAN traditionally fails to gather much support in some central-southern-western states, and the PRD and Morena do not have significant strength in several northern areas.

As Peña Nieto's term is nearing its end, however, the PRI does not have much to offer and bears, to a large extent, the historical and political responsibility for the degradation of the citizens' living conditions and of coexistence in Mexican society. Neither the PRI of bygone years nor the current one enjoy much prestige, but small and big interests take refuge in it.

Despite the fact that the support of the elites and the bureaucracy can be taken for granted, it will not be easy to build a national-popular image of their "citizen" candidate, José Antonio Meade, not a party member, a technocrat with an Anglo-Saxon surname who has been Secretary of Finance in the Peña Nieto cabinet but served also under the previous PAN administrations.

Notwithstanding, the PRI's manifold resources and the forceful support of the mainstream media could end up producing a nice and friendly *Pepe Toño* Meade, a candidate capable of taking a walk among the crowd and offering bread and circus in the morning and then, in the afternoon, going on to reassure the markets and collude with the employers' confederations,

the banks and the US government. We should remember how an uncharismatic candidate like Peña Nieto was manufactured six years ago, and how not even a powerful movement against him by the mobilized youth of #YoSoy132 was able to dismantle that sham.

Ultimately, if the campaign operations were to fail - media manipulation, the networked alliance with the powers that be, the massive use of resources and patronage control of the vote - there is always, as a last resort, the traditional and effective recourse to electoral fraud. That is, unless a democratic overflow prevents it.

In fact, recent history shows that, in the heat of the sexennial struggle, unpredictable extra-institutional phenomena often do happen. Blatant frauds in the face of the emergence of massive democratic movements, the fear vote against the Zapatista uprising, the murder of a PRI candidate: these are some of the repertoires chosen in the past. So, there is only one predictable thing: given what is at stake, the dispute is unlikely to stay within the narrow and flimsy frame of the rules of the electoral game.

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