

Is Change Possible in Mexico?

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Mexicans, worse off than at any time in the last 100 years, are asking themselves as the July 2018 elections approach: Can Mexico change? Can an election change Mexico?

Mexico is a disaster. It has become increasingly violent, the economy grows too slowly to absorb the ever-expanding workforce, and wages are below those of China, though costs are more like those in the United States.

The Candidates

Today, Enrique Peña Nieto of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) sits in the Eagle Throne of the presidency, but the Mexican Constitution permits only one term. In the time honored method of the country's authoritarian ruling party he has "tapped" or "unveiled" his successor, chosen by the party's inner circle. While many had thought the candidate might be Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong, the Secretary of the Interior, in fact the Peña Nieto and the PRI leadership chose José Antonio Meade Kuribreña, the Secretary of the Treasury. Under Mexican law, Meade has to resign his current office into order to run for president.

The choice of Meade, a Mexican of Irish and Lebanese descent, represents an affirmation of Mexico's commitment to the neoliberal economic agenda that the country adopted in the 1980s. With the PRI's powerful patronage machine behind him and support from the media, Meade will be a strong contender for the presidency, though because of the country's disgust with Peña Nieto and the PRI he begins 14 points behind in the polls.

Leading in various polls by anywhere between 5 and 15 percent is Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the Movement for National Regeneration or MORENA Party, a populist candidate on the left. López Obrador was the head of the government of Mexico City (the Federal District) from 2000 to 2005, best known for the building of the second level of the city's freeway system and for establishing pensions for the elderly. He ran for president in 2006, when he is widely believed to have lost because of governmental fraud. He ran and lost again in 2012.

López Obrador, who argues that the country has been taken over a political Mafia, puts the emphasis of his campaign on ending corruption and, while promising austerity, also advocates an expansion of infrastructure programs to improve the economy. His recently released a 415-page platform called "Project for the Nation" calls for combatting poverty, restoring peace, financial viability and austerity, gender equality, national reconstruction, sustainable development and wholesome lives for all.

The National Action Party (PAN) is expected to nominate its president and unrivaled leader Ricardo Anaya Cortés. He will not only be the candidate of the PAN, but will head up the Citizens Front for Mexico, a coalition that includes the left-of-center Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and the centrist Citizens Movement (MC). Though he is the candidate of the historically religiously

conservative and pro-business party, Anaya, who is only 38 years old, has called for a universal basic income for all Mexicans that would allow them to live with dignity. Over the last few decades it has been common for the conservative PAN to align with the PRD, which is part of the Socialist International, in order to defeat the dominant PRI. Yet the creation of his coalition in a presidential race is unprecedented.

There is also a radical candidate in the race, currently gathering signatures to qualify. The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), which led an armed uprising in Mexico's southern-most state of Chiapas in 1994, and which has since then spent its time organizing autonomous communities in that state, is now putting forward an indigenous woman, María de Jesús Partricio, as candidate for president in the 2018 elections. Chosen as candidate by the EZLN and by 1,500 delegates to the National Indigenous Congress (CNI), María de Jesús Partricio of the Nahua people, known as Marichuy, is not a prominent national figure, but rather a traditional healer who works at La Casa de Salud Calli Tecolhuacateca Tochán, a community health center in Tuxpan, Jalisco.

While they are putting forward health worker Partricio for president, they are not actually trying to elect her. The Zapatistas hold the Mexican government and the country's political parties in utter disdain, both for their corruption and for their disregard for the people they supposedly represent. They also reject elections and voting on principle. Partricio's campaign will be symbolic and have virtually no impact on electoral politics.

Interestingly, the Political Organization of Working People (OPT), an alliance between the small Mexican Electrical Workers (SME), the Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT) and other working peoples and left organizations has backed the candidacy of Marichuy. In the 2012 election the OPT had supported López Obrador the candidate of MORENA. Today the OPT argues that Marichuy's campaign represents the candidate of Mexico's many movements of the indigenous, the farmers, and the workers, an alternative for Mexico's many exploited and oppressed peoples.

The Crisis

Who ever becomes president will find his or her self confronting the most challenging circumstance the country has faced since the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920. Violence is rife and poverty plentiful.

In the last several years, Mexico has seen about 30,000 people killed each year in the drug wars, or about 300,000 since the wars began in 2006. There have also been about 30,000 forced disappearances, that is, people who have been kidnapped and possibly murdered. So many women are disappeared or killed that they have a word for it: *femicidio*—femicide. Reporters are frequently killed in Mexico, some 39 since 1992 and five of them in 2017. Why don't the police do something, people frequently ask, but the police are frequently complicit in the killings and kidnappings, and routinely torture those they arrest to wring out of them false confessions for crimes the drug cartels or police themselves commit.

Mexico's economy remains stagnant. The Mexican GDP is growing at a rate of less than 2 percent, and in the last quarter available (July) it shrunk by 0.3 percent. While Mexico's official unemployment rate, which is highly unreliable, is only about 3.3 percent, some 60 percent of all Mexicans work in the informal economy. And wages are low. Some seven million Mexicans live on the minimum wage of \$3.86 per day, but even those who earn two or three times remain very low-wage workers. Food alone for a family of four costs about \$10.50 per day. It is this economic situation that has led almost 12 million Mexicans—that is 10 percent of the country's total population—to migrate to the United States to seek employment at higher wages.

The *clase política*, that is, the Mexican establishment made up of the upper echelons of PRI and PAN, serves the oligarchy of a dozen of Mexico's wealthiest families, all multi-billionaires, as well as protecting the interests of foreign banks and corporations, most of them American. This is the group that López Obrador calls the Mafia. It has no interest in solving the problem of poverty and no ability to solve the problem of violence except through the greater power of the military.

We can get a sense of the Mexican government's political program by looking at what's taking place in the country's Congress at this moment. Mexico's lower house just passed yesterday the Law of Internal Security, a piece of legislation that deals with the question of violence by the complete militarization of the country on a permanent basis. The vote found the PRI and the PAN united against MORENA, the PRD, and the MC, 248 in favor, 115 against, and 48 abstaining. Mexican human rights groups have warned that the law will lead to continuing military abuse of Mexican citizens, such as the extra-judicial killings, torture, and rape that have occurred over the decade of the drug wars.

As for poverty, the PRI and PAN would continue with the neoliberal free trade agenda, while MORENA seeks what has been called social liberalism, that is neoliberal with social reforms. And the Zapatistas hope the country will awaken, reject electoral politics, push capitalism away, and establish the self-governing community of the producers.

Can Mexico change? And can an election change Mexico? We will be watching on July 1, 2018.