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Mexico's 2018 election

Irving W. Levinson
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, irving.levinson@utrgv.edu

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MEXICO'S 2018 ELECTIONS

OPENING NOTES

On July 1, 2018, Mexico will hold elections for the presidency, for all seats in the federal Chamber of Deputies, and for one third of the seats in the federal Senate.

Currently, nine political parties hold seats in one or both of the two houses of the federal legislature. Their names and the initials used in the following comments are:

INITIALS	PARTY NAME IN SPANISH	PARTY NAME IN ENGLISH
MORENA	*Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional*	Movement of National Regeneration
MV	*Movimiento Ciudadano*	Citizen Movement
NA	*Nueva Alianza*	New Alliance
PAN	*Partido Acción Nacional*	National Action Party
PES	*Partido Encuentro Social*	Social Encounter Party
PRD	*Partido de la Revolución Democrática*	Party of the Democratic Revolution
PRI	*Partido de la Revolución Institucional*	Party of the Institutional Revolution
PVEM	*Partido Ecología Verde de Mexico*	Green Ecology Party of Mexico
PT	*Partido Trabajo*	Party of Work

THE CURRENT SITUATION

Given the large number of political parties in Mexico, these nine parties formed alliances and in each case united behind a single presidential candidate. The alliances are:

*La Coalicion por México al Frente (*CMF) – translates as the Coalition for Mexico to the Front. This alliance includes the PAN, the PRD, and the MV.

Juntos Haremos Historia (JHH) – translates as Together We Will Make History. This alliance includes MORENA, the PT, and the PES.

Todos por México (TPM) – translates as All for Mexico. – This alliance includes the PRI, the PVEM, and the NA.

The presidential candidate of the CMF is Ricardo Anaya Cortés, who is a member of the conservative PAN. The candidate of the JHH is Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who is a member of the leftist MORENA. The candidate of TPM is José Antonio Meade Kuribreña, who is a member of the ruling PRI.

THE FIRST QUESTION FROM THE U.S. AND CANADA

When those of us who live north of the Rio Grande look at this election, we naturally focus on figuring out why there are so many political parties in Mexico when the U.S. has only two and Canada gets along with three. My answer is that after eight decades of rule by one party (the PRI), Mexicans fiercely embrace the variety of opportunities provided by a more open political system. To begin at the beginning…

From 1920 to 2000, the PRI, under one name or another, dominated Mexican politics and repeatedly won the national, state, and local elections. For the early decades, they did so using a combination of electoral appeal, corruption, popular programs, and intimidation. The party had left, right, and center wings.

The first major organized opposition to the PRI emerged in 1938 with the founding of PAN as a Mexican counterpart of the Christian Democratic parties of Europe. The PAN grew to include other factions of Mexican Conservatives.

Following the 1968 massacre of more than 400 leftists by the PRI regime of President Gustavo Diaz Ordaz at Tlaltelolco Plaza in Mexico City and the subsequent disappearance of hundreds more in the following days, the left wing of the PRI began to leave the party. In 1988, these dissidents formed a nationwide opposition coalition, the *Frente Democratica Nacional* (Democratic National Front). Although the FDN was leading in the 1988 presidential election vote count, a computer crash temporarily shut down the nationwide vote tabulation system. Following the rebooting, PRI candidate Carlos Salinas led the vote total by a very small margin and subsequently emerged as the winner. He then ordered the burning of the ballot total sheets.

The FDN leaders subsequently founded the PRD, which emerged as Mexico's leading socialist party. Following losses in two successive presidential elections, the PRD fractured and another leftist party, MORENA, emerged under the leadership of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO). In 2018, MORENA allied with the Marxist PT. At this point, almost all of the leftists who wished to retain the socialist emphasis in the original 1917 version of Mexico's Constitution have left the PRI.

For additional detail, let us now turn to a look at the major players in the 2018 election.

THE PRI AND TPM COALITION

The term of Mexico's current President, Enrique Peña Nieto, has not been a successful one and that reality places his party, the PRI, at a disadvantage in the 2018 balloting.

He won the presidency and his party made significant gains in both houses of Mexico's federal legislature in the 2012 campaign by marketing themselves as *El Nuevo PRI* (The New PRI). Specifically, this meant that the violence, corruption, catastrophic inflation, and mass emigration that characterized the final decades of the PRI's twentieth century reign (1970-2000) would not characterize the party's conduct in the future. That did not prove to be the case.

First, the state-sanctioned violence returned. The most glaring example took place in Guerrero state. There, forty-three college students preparing to become teachers tried to stage a peaceful march protesting the allotment of open teaching positions to politically favored applicants. Local and state police arrested and then executed them all. Guerrero's PRI government and the federal government made no serious effort to apprehend and arrest the criminals.

Second, the federal and state governments failed to control non-state violence. Two aspects of this situation merit comment. The fracturing of several major drug cartels did not lead to a decline in their activities. Instead, smaller syndicates emerged and narcotics-related violence consequently continued. Lethal violence against journalists increased to the extent that some publications closed. In addition, the weakness of local police forces enabled criminal groups engaged in a variety of activities such as robbery and kidnapping to function with greater impunity than in the past. During the first six months of 2018, slightly more than 22,000 Mexicans died violently.

In addition, the corruption traditionally associated with the PRI re-emerged into public view with the jailing of five former and current state governors, all of who were PRIistas. Scandal also touched Peña Nieto's family with the discovery that the construction firm responsible for building the multi-million dollar house of Peña Nieto's wife prior to their marriage subsequently received major government contracts. The circumstances under which the builder received those contracts proved so unsavory that public opinion forced the government to void the contracts.

Finally yet importantly, comes economic growth. Although Mexico's economy grew at a more rapid rate than did that of the United States during part of this president's *sexenio* (six-year term), forty per cent of the population still lives in poverty and this situation shows little sign of changing. In summary, the ruling party will be at a disadvantage in the coming elections.

The PRI's candidate and the leader of the TPM coalition is José Antonio Meade Kuribreña. Trained as a lawyer and as an economist, he has served as Secretary of Foreign Relations,

Secretary of Finance and Credit, Secretary of Energy, and Secretary of Social Development. His path to the presidential nomination is a typical one for the current generation of PRI leaders: lengthy service in the federal bureaucracy and no excessive contact with the public.

The two smaller parties in this alliance are the PVEM and the NA. Both parties hope for a share of power should the TPM alliance win. On their own, neither one of them could hope to win a plurality let alone of majority of the vote. The PVEM focuses on ecological issues. NA, founded by Elba Ester Gordillo following her expulsion from the PRI on charges of (excessive) corruption, remains a party whose power base is the very powerful and corrupt teachers' union Elba leads.

MORENA AND THE JHH COALITION

The opposition party most likely to benefit from the overall situation is the relatively new MORENA group and the JHH alliance. Led by the former mayor of Mexico City, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, this party is leftist in that it favors a central economic role for the government, stricter taxation and regulation of corporations, stronger labor unions, and more funding and attention given to the forty per cent of Mexicans still living in poverty. MORENA embraces the socialism that lies at the core of much the 1917 Constitution as originally written.

Many of MORENA's supporters are former members of the PRD who left that party for two reasons. First, they objected to the PRD's cooperation with the current PRI administration. In addition, fierce factional infighting among PRD leaders destroyed most of that organization.

MORENA's main coalition partner is the Marxist PT. The other coalition member, the PES, is a religiously oriented party - Politics indeed does make strange bedfellows. As of mid-March, MORENA - JHH hold an opinion pool varying between ten and fourteen points.

Some observers raise questions about how far to the left an AMLO administration would take Mexico. Here, one guide might be his conduct as mayor of Mexico City. In that role, he first directed substantial expenditures to his political base, but later focused on programs directed primarily at middle class citizens, such as an extension of commuter rail lines in the suburbs.

Recently, representatives of the opposition alliances suggested that AMLO would devastate Mexico's economy and political liberties as have the Chavistas in Venezuela. Obviously, I have no access to Lopez Obrador's private thoughts. With that said, my best guess is that an AMLO presidency would be, in the words used to describe a former Mexican president, "…left within the constitution" To me, AMLO resembles former Mexican president Lazaro Cardenas far more than he does former Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez or current Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro.

THE PAN AND THE CMF COALITION

The conservative opposition, led by the PAN, hopes to repeat victories in which they won the presidency in 2000 and 2006. However, the PAN confronts several significant problems.

First, their twelve-year tenure in the presidential palace (*Los Piños* – The Pines) did not yield the results they promised. Both President Vicente Fox (2000-2006) and President Felipe Calderon (2006-2012) sought to end drug-related violence by deploying the army to augment state and local police. Although that effort did not end the drug trade, the increased levels of violence that resulted in more than 40,000 deaths during those twelve years. That does not constitute a record of success. The failure of the current PRI government to curb rising violence remains a major campaign issue.

The PANistas also failed to dent the structural poverty within Mexico in spite of an increase in foreign investment and steady growth in the gross national product. This growth did not enable most of those who wanted jobs paying a decent wage to find such employment. Much of the population continues to live in poverty.

To the great surprise of many, including me, the conservative, free-market and often-religious PANistas formed an alliance with the leftist and rather secular PRDistas. Presumably, the PRD hopes to receive a number of cabinet positions in the event the coalition wins. However, I think that mixing two such ideologically different groups is rather like mixing oil and water: you can put both into a single bucket, but they cannot become one.

In answer to the obvious question of why the leftist PRD would choose to affiliate with the rightist PAN rather than the fellow-leftists of MORENA, I first offer the explanation I offered before: MORENA members have not forgiven the PRD for the limited support they gave the current PRI government and consequently do not want a PRD association. An additional explanation would be that the bitterness arising from the dispute about which leftist party's candidate would receive the presidential nomination in a MORENA-PRD alliance proved so intense that an alliance was impossible.

The PAN - CMF presidential candidate, Ricardo Anaya, is a lawyer who served in the Mexico's federal *Camera de Diputados* (Chamber of Deputies), which is Mexico's equivalent of the U.S. House of Representatives. In addition, he served as president of this Chamber.

THE INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES

Two other candidates also were to be on the ballot. Margarita Zavala, the spouse of former president Felipe Calderon, initially sought the PAN's presidential nomination. After failing in that effort, she decided to defy the party and run as an independent candidate. Subsequently, she withdrew from the contest.

Jaime Heliodoro Rodriguez Calderon, a former member of the PRI, left that party during December 2014 and subsequently ran a successful campaign for governor of the state of Nuevo Leon as an independent candidate. Known informally as *El Bronco*, his presidential campaign suffered two self-inflicted wounds. During a national debate, he advocated chopping off the hands of public employees who stole government funds. His subsequent suggestion that recent earthquakes might be result of the nation's liberality similarly raised questions about his fitness for public office.

MY PREDICTIONS

Since comments on a pending election always ought to include a prediction or two, I give Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador even odds of winning the presidency in spite of his current lead in the polls. Even a week is a long time in politics. Whichever candidate wins will not do so with a majority of the votes, but with a plurality.

In the Chamber of Deputies, I do not believe that any party will win a majority. Mexican voters are increasingly willing to leave established political parties and affiliate with new ones and show considerable readiness to shift allegiances from one established party to another.

POST-ELECTION NOTE

To my surprise, AMLO indeed did cross the fifty percent line, earning 53.9% of the popular vote. Mexicans thus rejected the two established political parties. So a leftist government now will have the challenge of addressing the corruption, poverty and violence that cost the PRI the presidency.

OTHER DETAILS

For those interested in such details, present federal political representation of the parties mentioned in this article follow:

PARTY	CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES SEATS	SENATE SEATS
MORENA	50	0
MC	20	0
NA	13	1
PAN	108	34
PRD	52	7
PRI	203	55
PES	10	1
PT	0	19
PVEM	39	6
Independent	5	7

There are 500 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 128 in the Senate.

CAMPAIGN TACTICS

As the campaign proceeds, the accusations made by the competitors become more strident. MORENA's opponents in both rival alliances accuse that alliance of being irresponsible populist demagogues who will take the nation on a path to economic ruin and authoritarian rule. In turn, MORENA accuses the opposition of having already ruined Mexico and already having taken the nation into a regime of corruption, violence, and authoritarianism.

As is the case with some elections north of the Rio Grande, the final weeks of the campaign were not be the most elegant sort of spectacle.

Dated July 2, 2018

The opinions expressed in this article are my own and do not represent those of the University of Texas – Rio Grande Valley history department or of the University of Texas system.