

Mexico's Historic Election Brings Hope for Change

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Juntos haremos historia. Together we will make history. This was the campaign slogan of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, better known by his abbreviated name AMLO, in the presidential elections in Mexico held on July 1, 2018. The election results are a clear indication of a historic outcome, one that has the potential to address long running problems of corruption, insecurity and inequality, while also offering a more proactive effort to protect the rights of Mexican immigrants in the US and those of Central American migrants in Mexico.

AMLO headed a coalition of three parties: his own party, *Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional* (MORENA), and the smaller *Partido de Trabajo* (PT) and *Partido de Encuentro Social* (PES). MORENA is a center-left party that was formed just four years ago, following AMLO's decision to split from the *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD) due to the latter's decision to support the government's "Pact for Mexico." This pact was negotiated between the PRD and President Enrique Peña Nieto of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), a party well-known for its long history of electoral fraud and corruption, as well as the center-right *Partido de Acción Nacional* (PAN), which had ended the PRI's seven decades of rule in 2000, only to see the PRI return to power in 2012. AMLO and MORENA opposed the Pact for Mexico, seeing it as a package of neoliberal reforms that sought to continue the privatization of the economy, including the reduction in national control over Mexico's oil industry.

While Peña Nieto and the PRI had tried to portray an image of unity and economic potential through the Pact for Mexico, the problems of insecurity and corruption in the country continued unabated and came to a head with the forced disappearance of 43 students of the rural teacher's college in Ayotzinapa, Guerrero, in September 2014. The failure of the government to properly investigate this crime led to widespread protests and a steady decline in Peña Nieto's acceptance among the population. Public outrage was furthered by revelations of corrupt dealings by Peña Nieto in providing lucrative contracts to a company to build a luxurious multi-million dollar house, the *Casa Blanca*, for him and his wife.

MORENA grew in strength in subsequent years as the incumbent PRI and the PAN were increasingly seen as either complicit or inept in dealing with the spread of cartel-related killings and disappearances across many regions of the country. By the time the candidates began their formal campaigns in the spring of 2018, it was clear that AMLO held a substantial lead in the polls over his main rivals, Ricardo Anaya (PAN, in coalition with the PRD and the smaller *Movimiento Ciudadano* (MC) and José Antonio Meade (PRI, in coalition with two small parties, the *Partido Verde Ecologista de México* (PVEM) and the *Partido Alianza Nacional*, PANAL). This lead tended to grow in AMLO's favor following three televised

debates and AMLO's position was strengthened further by mutual accusations of corruption between the PRI and the PAN which ruled out any chance of a last minute anti-AMLO alliance behind Anaya or Meade.

The major candidates and parties therefore went in to the July 1 elections with a strong tendency in favor of MORENA that could only be prevented by massive electoral fraud. In the months prior to the election, many instances of fraud were documented and denounced by citizen observer groups and political parties. These included vote buying, negative ads, and the use of public programs for poverty relief by government agencies in order to condition resources to votes for particular candidates. On top of this, the election was marked by violent attacks on candidates from across the political spectrum, including the assassination of 48 candidates and another 84 political workers.¹

In this context, non-partisan civil society organizations renewed or created initiatives to prevent electoral fraud. One of these is the *Red Universitaria y Ciudadana por la Democracia* (RUCD), a network of Mexican and international academics, students and human rights advocates that emerged from a conference held in Mexico City in February 2018. The conference was organized by scholars of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) as part of a project to identify challenges to democracy amid the rise of authoritarian tendencies in Mexico and around the world.²

As part of more than 700 international observers and 19,000 Mexican observers, my wife and I participated in a RUCD brigade that documented fraud on Election Day in Iztapalapa, a densely populated poor district in southeastern Mexico City that has been governed in recent years by the PRD. The rise of MORENA in this area was seen as a threat by PRD leaders and we noticed several people who had been offered money in exchange for their vote. The key identifying factor was the use of colored wrist bands that individuals who had accepted payment for their vote wore as they entered the polling station. When they were in the voting booths they took pictures of their marked ballots together with their wrist band. They would then deposit their votes and leave to go to a "Casa Amiga" where they would collect their payment or goods from a local party leader if they could show the photo of their marked ballot. Several individuals approached our team of observers to denounce this practice as it clearly is an electoral crime to coerce the vote in a particular way. Another problem was the late opening of one of the polling stations we visited. Instead of opening at 8.00 am, this station opened an hour late, leading many who had queued up early to become frustrated and leave for work without being able to vote.

The election results tended to confirm most predictions as AMLO and MORENA won in a landslide victory. Shortly after the polls closed, the PRI candidate Meade recognized AMLO as the victor. Soon after, the PAN's Anaya announced that he too accepted AMLO's victory. By the time the National Electoral Institute announced the official preliminary results at 11 pm, many AMLO supporters in Mexico City were already congregating at the Zócalo, the main square in front of the Cathedral and National Palace, ready to celebrate a historic victory. The preliminary results showed that AMLO was winning with 53% of the vote, some 31 points ahead of Anaya at 22%, while Meade of the PRI was at just 16%.

¹ <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/06/27/americas/mexico-political-deaths-election-season-trnd/index.html>

² <http://dialogosdemocracia.humanidades.unam.mx/red-universitaria-ciudadana-la-democracia-rucd/>

By the evening of July 2, this same distribution of votes had held, with all polling stations reporting. In addition, MORENA and its allies had won a majority of seats in both chambers of the national Congress, with 312 of the 500 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 69 of 128 seats in the Senate. This is the first time the president's party has had a majority in the legislative branch since 1997 and will allow AMLO and MORENA to pursue its agenda more easily. Meanwhile, the PRD, PVEM, PES, MC and PANAL were in danger of losing their registration as political parties as their share of the national vote hovered below the 3% threshold. For their party, the PAN and PRI were severely weakened by the results and will be unable to mount any serious opposition in the national Congress. The PRI itself may even be on the road to extinction as many of its members look to abandon ship and join MORENA. Such an outcome will only underscore the historic nature of this election.

In addition to winning the presidency and a majority in the national Congress, MORENA also won the majority of votes in 31 of 32 states in Mexico (the exception being Guanajuato, where the PAN won). MORENA's candidates for state governor won in five of the nine states where governorship races were also held on July 1 (in Chiapas, Tabasco, Veracruz, Morelos and Mexico City).

It is clear that history has been made in this election. The capacity of the economic elites in Mexico to rule in alliance with the leadership of both the PRI and the PAN has finally been challenged by a party that has developed out of a grassroots movement to end corruption and reduce the persistent inequalities that have led to desperation, violence, drug trafficking and forced migration. The challenge now is to turn this hope for change into reality. AMLO has recognized the need to act quickly and will convene a group of human rights workers, religious leaders and MORENA members to design an alternative policy approach to dealing with drug cartels. His goal is to provide a more humane and potentially more effective response that would provide alternatives to young people who have been abandoned in terms of job opportunities and access to quality education. By cracking down on corruption, AMLO hopes to recuperate funds that can be put to productive use without needing to raise taxes.

Many Mexicans (more than 24 million) expressed their hope for change at the voting booths on July 1st and AMLO will have to make some early gains once he assumes office on December 1st in order to sustain the momentum in his favor. It remains to be seen how successful he will be, but at least there appears to be stability and potential for change that contradict the fear-mongering of those who said that Mexico would be in danger of becoming like Venezuela if AMLO were to win. However, as the Mexican political scientist Denise Dresser put it, the real danger now is not that Mexico become another Venezuela, but rather that Mexico just continues to be Mexico, without any perceptible change in corruption, insecurity and inequality.³ If such a fate is to be avoided, AMLO and MORENA would do well to recognize that they have made history with this election, but enacting change will require constant and deep-rooted connections to social movements and communities for whom the transformation of Mexico is now entering a promising but uncharted terrain.

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<https://aristeguinoticias.com/0207/mexico/triunfo-de-amlo-resultado-de-una-rebelion-meyer-es-el-destripamiento-del-dinosaurio-priista-dresser/>