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November 15, 2016

Special Report

The Race for the Mexican Presidency Begins

Amid the turmoil emanating from the U.S. election, Mexico is entering its own presidential transition period. Though political reforms have shortened the length of the formal campaigns (which don't commence until early 2018), and placed some restrictions on media access by the political parties, for all intents and purposes the 2018 race is already in the go mode.

More than a year and a half before Mexicans go to the polls, a dozen possible successors to Enrique Pena Nieto are the focus of voter surveys, public and private meetings and increased media attention. At least two of the potential presidential contestants could be women, though the candidacy of one of them has yet to be decided.

Plenty of time remains for dark horses to prance onto the scene, and changed conditions by 2018 could greatly shift the parameters, personalities and politics of the campaign, but as of late 2016 the favorites are already shining in the spotlight.

For the conservative National Action Party (PAN), which hopes to regain Los Pinos (the Mexican White House) after losing it four years ago to the Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI) following 12 years of PAN rule, the current hopefuls include Margarita Zavala, the wife of former President Felipe Calderon; party chief Ricardo Anaya; Rafael Moreno Valle, the controversial governor of Puebla state; and Ernesto Ruffo, who's regarded as a historic figure for his Baja California victory that made him the first PAN governor elected in the country back in 1989.

For the ruling PRI, the names topping the list include Interior Minister Miguel Angel Osorio Chong; Eruviel Avila, governor of Mexico state, the crime ridden and most populous political entity in the country; Education Secretary Aurelio Nuno, whose career has been defined by a bitter-and bloody- battle with the National Coordinator of Education Workers over unpopular reforms; former Sonora governor Manlio Fabio Beltrones, longtime pillar of the Mexican political class; and Finance Minister Jose Antonio Meade, the overseer of the latest round of budget cuts.

On the center-left, Mexico City Mayor Miguel Mancera is repeatedly mentioned as the leading possibility for the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), while two-time presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the Morena

party is aiming to make three his lucky number.

Other prospective candidacies could give the 2018 election a different flavor than preceding ones. Talk is rampant of now-permitted independent candidacies outside the framework of the oft-criticized political parties, of which nine exist at the national level at the moment. In this vein, the governor of the northern border state of Nuevo Leon, Jaime "El Bronco" Rodriguez Calderon, has already signaled his interest.

And in a surprise development, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) and National Indigenous Congress (CNI) have declared their intention to consult the organizations' grassroots bases on whether to run an Indigenous woman candidate for the presidency.

Pollsters are assessing the fortunes of the political figures basking in the media. Commissioned by El Universal daily and reported by other Mexican media outlets, an October 28 poll of 1,500 people by the Buenida and Laredo firm asked potential voters for whom they would cast ballots if the election was held now. Zavala came out on top with 30 percent, Lopez Obrador second with 25 percent, Osorio Chong third with 16 percent, Mancera a distant fourth with 6 percent, and Governor Rodriguez at the bottom of the heap with 5 percent.

In a question posed differently, potential voters were asked their preferences if the political parties formed coalitions. While Zavala and the PAN still held an edge with 33 percent, Lopez Obrador's total grew to a safer striking distance of 29 percent if he is postulated as the standard bearer of a three way Morena-Labor Party-Citizen Movement alliance, Osorio Chong drew 19 percent at the helm of a PRI-Green Party-National Alliance Party ticket, and Mancera stayed at 6 percent with the PRD.

It's important to note that Lopez Obrador, who split from the PRD to found Morena, is still on the outs with the PRD leadership, but sectors of the party, including former Michoacan governor Leonel Godoy, are increasingly favoring a unified front of all the center-left parties with Lopez Obrador as the presidential pick.

Internal debate is likewise mounting in the PAN, as Zavala and some party leaders press Anaya to either remain party chief or resign so he could pursue his presidential ambitions unfettered. For the moment, Anaya has only said he is focused on winning several state elections in 2017. Zavala, meanwhile, was quoted this week saying her supporters were under pressure in Puebla.

"Many Panistas here have had to confront some threats for being with me," she said during a conference held in Puebla. "Many of them are afraid to express what they think...."

In primary contests, the El Universal poll had Zavala besting Anaya 42 percent to 21 percent and Osorio Chong in the lead for the PRI at 28 percent- far ahead of his closet potential rival, Eruviel Avila, who only garnered 13 percent. Beltrones, Meade and Nuno all polled single digits.

Lopez Obrador is highly unlikely to face serious primary opposition in Morena, and it remains to be seen if the center-left Labor Party, Citizen Movement and PRD parties go solo or throw in their lot with the former Mexico City mayor, as they did in 2006 and 2012.

At this stage, of course, polls have to be taken with a grain of salt since new factors and faces could break onto the scene next year or even in early 2018, but the measurements of early voter preferences do constitute a process of shaking out

that is well underway.

Dismissed as a political corpse by pundits and rivals after his earlier defeats, Lopez Obrador has shown an uncanny ability to bounce back, gaining, for example, more votes in 2012 than he did in 2006.

In an unusual and even melancholy statement published last weekend, "El Peje" vowed to refrain from future political runs if he doesn't win in 2018 and regroup at his ranch in Palenque, Chiapas, colorfully and ironically named "La Quinta La Chingada," or "The Estate of the Screwed One." There, in the tropical shadows of the old Mayan gods, he would perhaps reemerge as the moral leader of one pole of Mexican politics.

In explaining his decision, Lopez Obrador, who just turned 63 and has already suffered one heart attack, compared himself with Mexico's great reformer and republican presidents.

"I would say that I wanted to be like Juarez, Madero and Lazaro Cardenas, and wasn't able to or didn't know how to do it. While I live I won't stop struggling for justice or for an authentic democracy, but I will retire from political protagonism and go on to be able to say to my adversaries who want to hear it, with humility and cockiness at the same time, 'Now you see, I'm not an ambitious crude one.' It's only important for me to be okay with myself, with my conscience, with the creator, with the nation, and with history..."

Going into the 2018 race, longstanding and emergent political, social and economic forces, both foreign and domestic, are sculpting the electoral landscape, not the least among them food inflation, diminishing wages and a weakening peso.

The unpopularity of President Enrique Pena Nieto (who received a 26 percent approval rating in a recent poll by the GEA-ISA firm) and his PRI party, exemplified by the party's defeats in this year's state and local elections mainly by a resurgent PAN, and combined with the fragmentation of center-left parties prone to internecine squabbles, all hint strongly at a tilt even more to the right if current trends continue.

A more politically interventionist Catholic Church, as well as Protestant sects, is another ingredient to take into consideration, illustrated by the mass protests of recent months by conservative Catholics and fundamentalists against President Pena Nieto's initiative to legally recognize gay marriages and adoption rights nationwide.

On November 9, members of the PRI, Green Party, PAN, PES and National Alliance parties rejected the legislation in a key commission of the lower chamber of the Mexican Congress. A second wedge issue, marijuana legalization, also might play a role in the 2018 elections, especially if the Trump Administration allows states like California to move forward with new laws contrary to the federal prohibition on weed.

Writing in La Jornada, Mexican analyst Javier Flores predicted political repercussions in Mexico from the legalization trend in El Norte. The entire west coast of the United States, he wrote, stands to become one long belt of high quality marijuana production worth billions of dollars "while here in Mexico we continue killing each other. Our neighbors could become net exporters of the herb, even to Mexico."

As FNS reported last week, the election of Donald Trump threw Mexico into a tizzy. Mexican officials such as Foreign Minister Claudia Ruiz Massieu and Rodolfo Figueroa Pacheco, Baja California National Migration Institute delegate, have since soft-pedaled the possible impacts of the Trump win, downplaying the Republican candidate's statements on mass deportations and the border wall as unrealistic campaign promises and stressing the countless ties between Mexico and

the U.S. that transcend an individual political administration.

Ricardo Villareal Garcia, the PAN mayor of San Miguel Allende, Guanajuato, has now even withdrawn an earlier "not welcome" municipal designation awarded to Trump and invited the U.S. president elect to his city, home of many U.S. and Canadian expatriates.

Still, any future actions of a Trump White House perceived as hostile to Mexico by public opinion will certainly influence the 2018 elections. Depending on the course it takes, the Trump Administration could serve as a hot conveyor belt feeding endless grist into the Mexican political mill and strengthening or weakening the positions of actors in and out of government, including the Catholic Church, which in a strongly worded editorial in the Mexico City archdiocese's weekly magazine, called for firmness in defense of Mexican migrants and interests while criticizing Mexican diplomats for being way too passive. Trump's election, the magazine editorialized, shamefully exposed Mexico's dependence on the United States.

For 2018, another unexpected element is on the horizon if the Mayan-based EZLN and CNI go ahead and run an Indigenous woman candidate for president, presumably as an independent. If the candidacy materializes, it will mark a sharp departure from the EZLN's historic policy of boycotting official elections.

News that such a candidacy was under serious consideration prompted derision by some pundits and stirred nervousness among Lopez Obrador supporters fearful that an Indigenous woman contender could play a spoiler role by siphoning left-leaning votes away from the veteran politician.

In response, EZLN Subcomandante Moises lambasted the negative reactions as not only racist, sexist, elitist and individualist, but also rife with ignorance of the collective process of political autonomy and empowerment both the Zapatistas and the CNI are pursuing and deepening.

"It is hurtful from those who have spoken out in writing in the newspapers and on social media, considering that they are doctors or 'honorary doctorates,' as they are called. But really, they do not know how to read or write; in fact, they don't understand a thing," Moises said.

Sources: El Sur, November 13, 2016. Article by Benito Jimenez/Agencia Reforma. El Universal, November 10 and 15, 2016. Articles by Horacio Jimenez and Suzzete Alcantara. La Jornada, November 8, 12, 13, and 14, 2016. Articles by Javier Flores, Carolina Gomez Mena, Elio Enriquez and Roberto Gonzalez Amador. Lapolaka.com, November 3, 2016. Proceso/Apro, September 23, 2016; November 7, 13 and 14, 2016. Articles by Alvaro Delgado, Armando Guzman, Gabriela Hernandez, Veronica Espinosa, and editorial staff.

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