

Voters should curb Mexico's power-hungry president

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Mexico's false messiah

Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador pursues ruinous policies by improper means

Leaders

IN A WORLD plagued by authoritarian populists, Mexico's president has somehow escaped the limelight. Liberals furiously condemn the erosion of democratic norms under Hungary's Viktor Orban, India's Narendra Modi and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, but barely notice Andrés Manuel López Obrador. This is partly because he lacks some of the vices of his populist peers. He does not deride gay people, bash Muslims or spur his supporters to torch the Amazon. To his credit, he speaks out loudly and often for Mexico's have-nots, and he is not personally corrupt. Nonetheless, he is a danger to Mexican democracy.

Mr López Obrador divides Mexicans into two groups: "the people", by which he means those who support him; and the elite, whom he denounces, often by name, as crooks and traitors who are to blame for all Mexico's problems. He says he is building a more authentic democracy. It is an odd creature. He calls a lot of votes, but not always on topics that are best resolved by voting. For example, when legal objections are raised to one of his pet projects—moving an airport, building a pipeline, blocking a factory—he calls a referendum. He picks a small electorate that he knows will side with him. When it does, he declares that the people have spoken. He has even called for a national

referendum on whether to prosecute five of the six living ex-presidents of Mexico for corruption. As a stunt to remind voters of the shortcomings of previous regimes, it is ingenious. It is also a mockery of the rule of law.

The president's scorn for rules is one reason the elections on June 6th matter. He is not on the ballot; his single six-year term expires in 2024. But the national legislature is up for grabs, as are 15 of 32 governorships, most state assemblies and thousands of local posts.

Voters have a chance to rein in their president by rejecting his party, Morena. It is not clear that they will. Most are dissatisfied with the way the country is being run, but 61% approve of Mr López Obrador himself. Many feel that he cares about ordinary people, even if he has not materially improved their lives. The opposition parties have failed to offer a coherent alternative. Morena is slipping in the polls, but may retain its majority in the lower house, with the help of its allies. The more levers he controls, the further Mr López Obrador can pursue his plan to transform Mexico.

He has done good things, such as bumping up pensions and subsidising apprenticeships for the young. Though a leftist, he has kept spending and debt under control, so Mexico's credit rating remains tolerably firm. But he suffers from what Moisés Naím, a Venezuelan journalist, calls "ideological necrophilia"—a love of ideas that have been tried and proved not to work.

He has fond memories of the 1970s, when a government-owned oil monopoly spread largesse around his home state. He is trying to recreate something similar, by all but banning private investment in hydrocarbons and forcing the grid to buy power from state sources first, no matter how costly and filthy they are. He likes railways, so he is ploughing \$7bn into a diesel-burning boondoggle in his home region. Frustrated with officials who fuss about rules and putting contracts out to tender, he enlists the army to build his railway, run ports and fight crime. In other countries, inviting the men with guns to handle huge sums of public money with scant supervision has proved catastrophic, as any Egyptian or Pakistani could warn him. But Mr López Obrador is notorious for not listening to advice. His catchphrase in cabinet meetings is "Cállate!" (Shut up).

His disdain for expertise has made government less competent. His tree-planting scheme has encouraged farmers to chop down old trees so as to be paid to plant new ones. His policy of "hugs, not bullets" for gangsters has failed to reduce a stratospheric murder rate. For all his railing against graft, Mexicans report as many demands for bribes from officials as before.

He was woefully slow to respond to covid-19 and spent far too little on cushioning its economic effects. According to *The Economist's* estimates, Mexico has suffered 477,000 excess deaths from the pandemic, one of the worst rates in the world; and its GDP shrank by 8.5% last year. The country should be poised for galloping growth. Multinationals are eager to diversify their supply chains away from China, and Mexico is a manufacturing hub next to the United States, which is entering a stimulus-stoked post-covid boom. Yet investors are wary.

They fear the uncertainty of rule by presidential whimsy. Mr López Obrador is undermining checks on his power. He leans on advertisers not to support fault-finding media. He cuts the budgets of watchdogs, or stuffs them with his supporters. Last week he said he would replace the central-bank governor with someone who favours “a moral economy”. He has threatened the body that runs elections.

The next three years will determine the depth and duration of the damage he does to Mexico and its democracy. He is barred from seeking re-election, but is trying illegally to extend the term of a friendly supreme-court judge. Critics fear he wants to set a precedent for himself. Mexico’s institutions are strong, but may buckle under sustained assault by a zealot with popular support. The country escaped de facto one-party rule in 2000. Given the risk, voters on June 6th should support whichever opposition party is best placed to win, wherever they live. The opposition parties should work together to restrain the president.

Learn from your mistakes

They should learn from him, too. He is popular partly because they did a poor job of helping those left behind during the long boom that followed economic liberalisation in the 1980s; and also because much of the ruling class really is corrupt. Mr López Obrador’s ad hoc, lawless approach has not made Mexico cleaner, but he has highlighted the need for a clean-up.

The United States needs to pay attention. Donald Trump did not care about Mexican democracy. President Joe Biden should make clear that he does. He must be tactful: Mexicans are understandably allergic to being pushed around by their big neighbour. But America ought not to turn a blind eye to creeping authoritarianism in its backyard. As well as sending vaccines, unconditionally, Mr Biden should send quiet warnings. ■

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