

# What Does López Obrador's Cabinet Say About His Upcoming Presidency?

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*On July 2, **Andrés Manuel López Obrador** (AMLO) of the recently formed Morena Party swept to victory in [Mexico's presidential election](#) with 53 per cent of the vote, the first time since 1982 that a candidate won more than half the vote. His closest competitor, Ricardo Anaya of the National Action Party (PAN), took 22 per cent, while **José Antonio Meade**, candidate for the PRI though not a member of the party, finished with 16 per cent. Morena also replaced the PRD as the leading party in Mexico City, capturing the Mayor's office and a majority of the local assembly. Mexico City's Mayor is often considered the second most important political figure in the country.*

AMLO was ahead in polls throughout the campaign, but even so, the breadth of the victory, including majority control in both houses of Congress, caught many observers by surprise, although apparently not Mexico's political class. Prior to the election, and at the invitation of López Obrador, many previous stalwarts from the opposition abandoned their parties to run on the Morena ticket. Even important elements of the business class joined the Morena effort, led by Monterrey industrialist Alfonso Romo, who will serve as AMLO's Chief of Staff. During his first two presidential runs, López Obrador faced opposition from a united business class. This time he made sure to highlight his pro-capitalist credentials in the proper forums, guaranteeing that he would not challenge privatization of petroleum or the construction of a new airport. These will likely be Mexico's biggest boondoggles ever.

After six years under PRI **President Enrique Peña Nieto**, probably Mexico's most unpopular President, preceded by 12 years of PAN leadership that resulted in historic violence related to an uncontrollable "war on drugs," Mexicans were ready for change. But will they get it?

## **New Party, New Affiliations**

In Mexico, politics is practically synonymous with corruption. López Obrador ran on a platform denouncing corruption, electoral fraud and economic mismanagement, yet many Morena candidates came straight out of the PAN, PRD and PRI. AMLO himself started his political career in the PRI in his home state of Tabasco, then moved to the PRD for his first two presidential runs and his stint as Mexico City mayor, before founding [Morena](#) (Movimiento Regeneración Nacional) in 2014.



Almost immediately AMLO's former party, the PRD, began to see defections. By July 2017, some 45,000 PRD militants had renounced their membership to join Morena. Even founders of the PRD abandoned the party, including Rey Morales Sanchez, a party leader in Oaxaca; Pablo Gomez, arrested during the 1968 student movement and later a career politician holding elected posts at the federal level and in Mexico City; Dolores Padierna, another career politician based in Mexico City; Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, a former PRIista (as are many PRDistas) who held many government posts under both parties; and even Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, widely considered the founding father and moral leader of the party. Party switching is not uncommon in Mexico, where political leaders are often interested in government positions that pay high salaries and offer opportunities for illicit enrichment no matter the party banner, but party switching at this level has no precedent. With the formation of Morena, the PRD became a shadow of its former self, to the point where the ostensibly leftist party aligned itself with the right-wing National Action Party (PAN) in this year's presidential election and many state-wide races.

This spurred further defections, both from the PRD and the PAN, resulting in some surprising alignments as former PANistas joined the populist Morena. The PAN is similar to the Republican Party (before Trump) in the U.S. with its base in big business, the petty bourgeois, and the religious right. Tatiana Clouthier, daughter of the founding father of the PAN, became AMLO's campaign manager. PAN stalwarts, particularly in northern historically conservative states like Nuevo Leon, filled Morena electoral ballots at local and state levels. Defections included former party leader Manuel Espino Barrientos, the political operator behind the election fraud that cost AMLO the presidency in 2006, and his successor German Martinez. PAN Senator Gabriela Cuevas quit after party officials could not guarantee her a federal representative's position in the future. This proved to be a common reason for party resignations. Shrinking party influence is leading to reduced budgets and less electoral posts, inspiring power-hungry politicians, often in the prime of their careers, to seek out López Obrador. He filled Morena with opportunists, leading some observers to question Morena's ability, or even will, to make serious political changes.

The PRI, historically Mexico's most powerful party at all three levels, did not escape the defection parade. In February, Enrique Ochoa, president of the PRI, used the racial epithet "prietos" to characterize the thousands of PRI militants who were leaving for Morena. With his party in rapid decline, he resigned his post in May, at the height of the presidential campaign.

Other PRI leaders joined AMLO, including Esteban Moctezuma, former Secretary of Interior under Ernesto Zedillo and an arch enemy of the Zapatista movement; Manuel Bartlett, former Secretary of Interior under Miguel de la Madrid, former Governor of Puebla, and the main operator behind the electoral fraud in 1988 that brought PRIista Carlos Salinas de

Gotari to the presidency; Armando Guadiana, a major mine owner in northern Mexico; and even the family of Elba Esther Gordillo, the disgraced and (until recently) imprisoned former head of Mexico's powerful teacher's union, the SNTE. In a political class known for corruption, Gordillo is a case apart - a multi-millionaire aligned, at times, with the PRI, the PAN and now, apparently, Morena.

Tamaulipas, a northeastern border state and long a bastion of the PRI and PAN, is exemplary of the electoral composition of Morena. The mayoral candidate for Reynosa, Tamaulipas' biggest city, was a former PANista from the local assembly and brother-in-law to the PAN Governor. Morena's contenders for the cities of Nuevo Laredo, Matamoros and Tampico were all ex-PRI. Omar Salomon, a local Morena activist, claimed "imposition" of candidates went too far and Morena was at risk of being overrun by opportunists.

### **"Leftist" or "Populist"?**

López Obrador has been considered a "Leftist" by the mainstream press. The Zapatista movement disagrees, characterizing López Obrador as the furthest right of the three main candidates. It is probably accurate to call him a populist nationalist with modest tendencies toward redistribution to stabilize a decaying society without threatening the fundamentals of capital accumulation. As Mexico City Mayor from 2000 to 2005, he was best known for three programs designed to keep everyone happy. His "segundo piso" was a massive highway infrastructure project that sped the trip from tony suburbs to downtown Mexico City. His redevelopment of the historic city center provided real estate tycoons, particularly Carlos Slim, one of the world's wealthiest men, with unparalleled opportunities for gentrification and immense profits. His small monthly cash handouts to single mothers, seniors and handicapped citizens were straight out of the PRI clientelist playbook but without the corporatist organizational intermediaries. AMLO built a direct and uncharacteristically personal relationship with his "viejitos" who eventually formed part of Morena's electoral base.

Mexico's chattering class, pretty much across the political spectrum, is concerned about Morena's overwhelming victory. Along with two smaller allied parties, Morena will control the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. They also won five of nine governor's races, including the crown jewel of Mexico City where a quarter of the nation's population lives, and Veracruz, the second most populous state. In Morelos, famous soccer star Cuauhtemoc Blanco beat the sitting PRD governor, and Morena candidates also won in Tabasco and Chiapas. López Obrador is the undisputed leader of Morena and his political agenda dominates the party - up to a point.

While AMLO presents a clean public persona (he drives an older model sedan, lives in a modest apartment and eschews a personal security detail), the same cannot be said of his many new allies imported from the PRI, PAN and PRD. Mexican politics is widely understood as a path to wealth and López Obrador knows how to play the game. During his years as Mayor of Mexico City, AMLO surrounded himself with some questionable characters. Perhaps best known was Rene Bejarano, AMLO's principal political operator in the Mexico City Legislative Assembly and the husband of Dolores Padierna. In 2004, Bejarano was videotaped accepting wads of cash from businessman Carlos Ahumada, most likely for AMLO's presidential campaign. He spent eight months in jail before being exonerated (well-connected political operatives seldom spend much time in prison, whatever their crimes), then spent the next 13 years keeping a low profile as a PRD agent, and, at least publicly, at a healthy distance from AMLO. López Obrador claimed Bejarano was working "on his own"

when he accepted the money, a claim that is difficult to reconcile with the facts. In any case, now he's back, supporting his old boss and with a likely future in an AMLO administration.

Even if López Obrador wants to clean up Mexican politics, with so many experienced politicians accustomed to having their fingers in the honeypot, it would seem unlikely. AMLO is promising superficial reforms, including reducing the salaries of government officials, but this kind of high publicity/low impact change is unlikely to have much of a profound effect. Government spending greases the political machine. "Si no hay obras, no hay sobras" (if there are no government programs, there are no extras) is a widely repeated truism. As President, he'll try to manage an ideologically disparate coalition, including business-oriented PANistas, neoliberal PRIistas, and corporatist PRDistas. Even his own electoral coalition includes the liberal Labor Party (PT) and the conservative religious Social Encounter Party (PES), which is opposed to gay rights and abortion. López Obrador may not have a choice but to allow corruption to buy political peace.

### **Dangerous "Leftist"**

For the moment, let's assume AMLO can tame rampant government corruption. That still leaves the much more important "legal" robbery known as capitalism that allows a small class of owners to steal from workers. This kind of corruption is called exploitation, but AMLO never addresses it. López Obrador may be the most dangerous of "leftists," the kind that is convinced heart and soul that capitalism is not only inevitable, but can be just and productive for the majority of humanity under the right political conditions – and it just so happens that he has the secret recipe. Hence, his political program is populist (bread and circus for the masses), nationalist (though a particularly narrow form of nationalism in which he occupies the center of attention), and adamantly pro-capitalist (favoring those members of the capitalist class who are willing to support his brand of populism).

For U.S. residents, this formula sounds familiar, though Trump provides relatively more circus and less bread for the masses. Trump's nationalism has characteristics distinct from AMLO's as well, particularly its international aspects. Mexico doesn't play at the level of U.S. tariffs, military interventions and America-first alliance building/destruction.

In today's post-neoliberal world, pro-capitalism requires a strong nationalist tint, not unlike Germany under Nazi influence. Neoliberalism, defined by free trade and its accompanying international institutions like the IMF and World Bank, can no longer deliver annual growth rates of 4 per cent. Capitalist classes around the world are looking inward for their survival (read continued exploitation of labor), though with 2 per cent (or less) growth rates, they must face increasingly restless populations. The global South is a source of raw materials and a home for environmental destruction, walled off from the "developed" world where immigrant populations become scapegoats. Trump simply dismisses immigrants and minorities, while López Obrador will apparently try to buy them off with modest handouts, though he is likely to dismiss rural residents sitting atop important natural resources (read indigenous communities) if they won't play ball.

Either way, capitalism hasn't much future. The cyclical crises of over-production are historically resolved by war (World War II "rescued" the capitalist class from the Great Depression, but another world war might destroy us all), decapitalization of the working class (note the great recession of 2007 and post-crisis wage stagnation, which both raise the question, 'can the working class be squeezed any more?'), externalization of costs (not a long term viable option because of the burgeoning environmental crisis), or conquering new

markets (there aren't many left, and in any case, Mexico is among the conquered, not the conquering).

López Obrador and Trump are not the only leaders who harbor these kinds of populist-nationalist tendencies. Michel Temer in Brazil, Mauricio Macri in Argentina, and even Vladimir Putin in Russia are exemplary. England's Brexit is, at its heart, a nationalist anti-immigrant strategy, and other European countries are not far behind. Each case has its own peculiarities, but each country faces an international context that defines limited options. The response, so far, has been an ugly nationalism built on walls, both legal and physical, and scapegoats.

As is generally the case, the most thoughtful and comprehensive critique comes from Mexico's true Left (since when did pro-capitalists like López Obrador become part of the Left?) in the form of the Zapatista movement. [Subcomandante Galeano](#) recently remarked, "Faith, or the new faith that is developing at this moment, requires a [domineering] individual [read López Obrador - or Trump] and a mass that will follow him. This has happened in other parts of the world at other moments, and now it is happening here."

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