

How Mexico's far right is slowly awakening



Frustrated Mexicans provoked a left-wing populist landslide in 2018 after the centre-right neoliberal consensus failed. The emergence of insurgents like Jaime 'El Bronco' Rodríguez and the FRENAAA movement suggests that voters could easily flock to the far right in 2024 if they feel that AMLO has failed them too, writes [Rodrigo Aguilera](#).

The rise of far-right populist regimes in liberal democracies has been one of the most troubling political trends over the past decade, and it still shows no sign of abating. With its long history of populism (from both the left and right), it is no surprise that Latin America has once again fallen under the populist spell, as evidenced most clearly by the success of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil.

Concerns that politicians like Bolsonaro could set a template for others to follow are fuelled by other factors such as the rise of evangelicalism, opposition to left-wing populism, and the prevalence of socially conservative attitudes in the region. Populism also tends to arise in the wake of crises, with the ongoing pandemic and associated recession providing fertile ground.



"The country's last 'true' 20th century populist was Lázaro Cárdenas (1935-40)" (pictured here after nationalising the railways in 1937, [Doralicia Carmona Dávila, CC BY 2.5](#))

Yet, on paper at least, Mexico would appear one of the Latin American countries least susceptible to far-right populism. For starters, it recently elected a left-wing populist government following decades of discontent with its centre-right administrations. It also lacks any modern historical antecedent to far-right populism.

The country's last "true" 20th century populist was Lázaro Cárdenas (1935-40), who actually helped solidify the institutional underpinnings of Mexico's one-party regime: a rather un-populist thing to do. His policies were also largely redistributive in nature, and so more in line with left populism. Although Mexico joined the rest of Latin America on the free market bandwagon in the 1980s, even then it avoided the personalistic neoliberal populism seen in countries like Brazil under Collor de Mello, Peru under Fujimori, and Argentina under Menem.

Green shoots of radicalism: Jaime 'El Bronco' Rodríguez

Despite the lack of historical precedent, there are incipient signs of the kind of far-right attitudes that propelled Bolsonaro to power in Mexico.

An early warning shot came in the form of [Jaime “El Bronco” Rodríguez](#), a businessman who successfully ran to become governor of Nuevo León in 2016, one of Mexico's most affluent and economically important states. That he did so as an independent was a particularly impressive achievement, and behind it lay his self-styling as a kind of free-market *caudillo*, or strongman. Though more likely to be seen on horseback than in a pinstripe suit during his campaign, he still managed to appeal to his state's entrepreneurial spirit. At the same time, however, his rugged image relied on [highly sexist and homophobic views](#), punitive attitudes towards crime, and a personalistic style of leadership that all come straight from the populist playbook.



“Jaime ‘El Bronco’ Rodríguez, now governor of Nuevo León, was more likely to be seen on horseback than in a pinstripe suit during his presidential campaign” ([Pepe Flores, CC BY-SA 4.0](#))

Rodríguez was not only the first independent governor in modern Mexican history, he also ran for president in 2018 and managed to obtain the largest vote share of any minority candidate ever (5.2%). In an election that was largely defined by support or opposition to Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), Rodríguez's result should be taken more seriously than it has been to date.

Rodríguez's template is not new. It was strongly influenced by that of Vicente Fox, the man who managed in 2001 to break the Institutional Revolutionary Party's 71-year stranglehold on power. Fox was also known for his rancher get-up, colloquial mannerisms, social conservatism, and free-market tendencies. Unlike Rodríguez, however, Fox ran under the banner of the established National Action Party (PAN). And, unlike most populists, he attempted to shift power away from the presidency rather than towards it.

Far-right extremism from the grassroots: the National Anti-AMLO Front

Much like López Obrador, Rodríguez plays the outsider even though the clothes don't really fit: in reality El Bronco was a lifelong member of the PRI until he ran for governor. But even if this brand of populism was able to emerge from such a traditional political background, there are signs that far-right populism could also emerge from the grassroots. The ongoing protest movement against López Obrador is representative of this possibility, and it shows some highly troubling signs of extremism that go far beyond simply offering a voice to AMLO's detractors.

The “Anti-AMLO” movement began soon after his election and has largely focused on portraying him as a “Bolivarian dictator” who intends to turn Mexico into a communist state; this tactic of linking AMLO to Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez has been used successfully since the fractious 2006 presidential race against Felipe Calderón. Anti-AMLO protests have taken place repeatedly in Mexico City and other major cities, but most of the protesters are affluent white Mexicans demanding López Obrador’s resignation. Since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, [many of these protests have taken the form of motorised processions](#), echoing the tactics of Spain’s far-right political party Vox.

At first glance, the protests have reflected little more than an almost comical disconnect between Mexican elites and the rest of the population. It was not uncommon, for example, to see protesters calling López Obrador’s supporters scroungers because of their support for welfarist policies, yet all the while their own signs were [being carried by their maids](#). Attendance at these protests has also been far smaller than expected, and the numbers certainly pale in comparison with AMLO’s own massive rallies. Many of the signs also bore religious slogans.



Tents fill the main square in Mexico City during protests in which the National Anti-AMLO Front played a key role (Gill Figueroa/Shutterstock.com)

More recently, protesters have set up tents on a supposedly permanent basis in Mexico City’s main square, just as López Obrador’s followers did after the disputed 2006 election. This time around, however, most of the tents [have been found to be empty](#).

Despite this, the anti-AMLO movement has become more organised, with the National Anti-AMLO Front (FRENAAA) at the forefront of the recent tent protest. Its leader and founder, Gilberto Lozano, is a white businessman from Monterrey who is known for [misogynist, homophobic, and racist](#) comments. Given this backstory, it would be easy to dismiss FRENAAA as a virulently anti-left segment of the Mexican elite appealing especially to a Mexican north that has often felt culturally and racially separate (not least when the #Nortexit hashtag calling for northern Mexico’s independence [started to trend on Twitter earlier this year](#)). But even if someone like Lozano is unlikely ever to gain mass support, the sentiments that he plays on are far more widespread.

Mexico’s alt-right

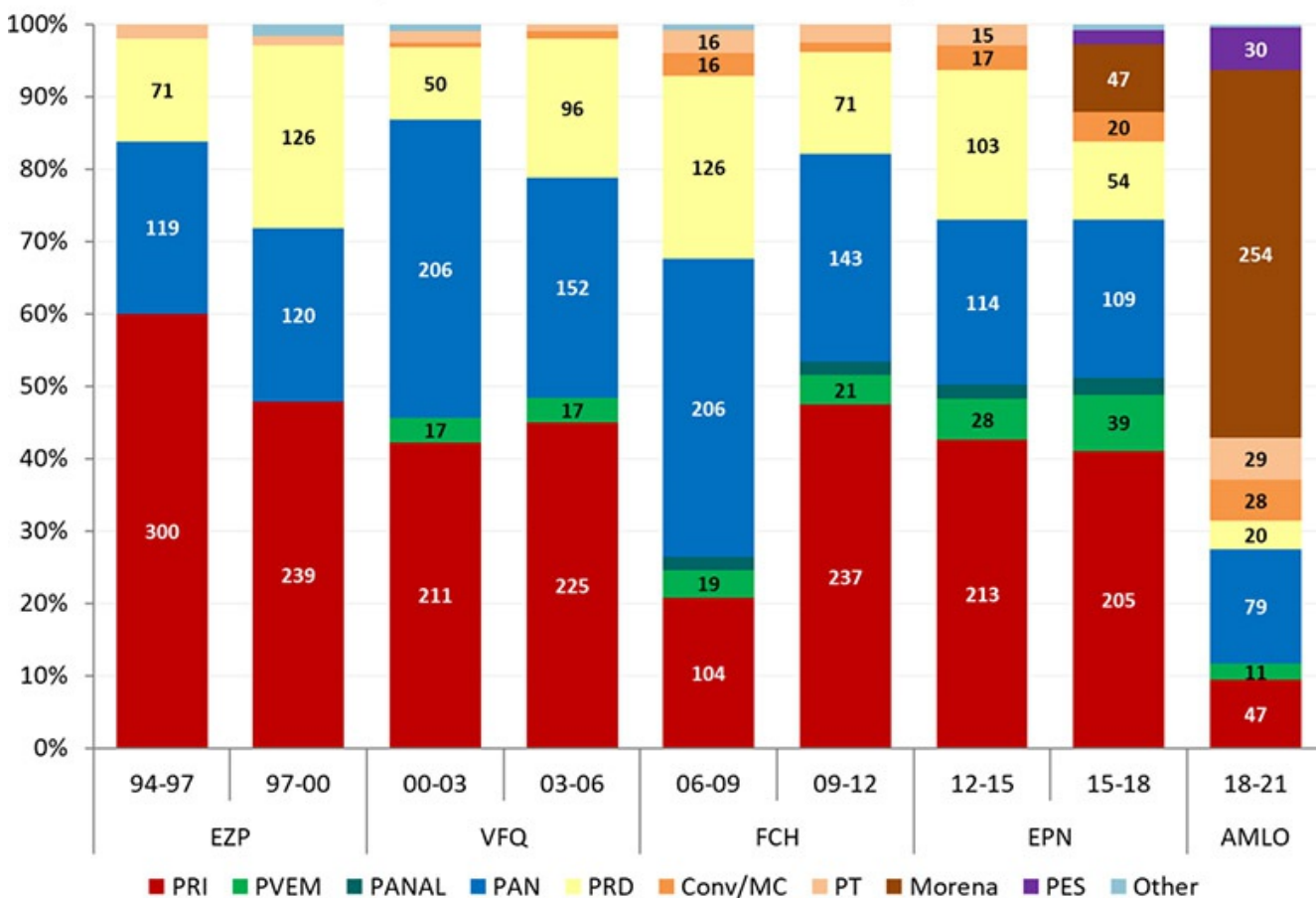
Neither has Mexico, which boasts the fifth largest Facebook user base in the world, escaped the emergence of internet-based hate speech and far-right indoctrination. A passing glance at the comments section of most Mexican news sites reveals an endless stream of vitriolic rants on politics, even when the subject of the article itself is not political. This is especially true of themes that relate to identity politics, where you can find unrestrained homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, anti-Semitism, and the rest. As I noted in a [2017 article for the Huffington Post](#), there are many similarities between Mexicans' online behaviour and that of the alt-right in the United States, including the widespread use of memes and coordinated mass trolling of the type that emerges from sites like 4Chan. Things have only gotten worse in recent years.

These attitudes and behaviours are not neatly split along ideological lines: López Obrador's supporters frequently engage in the same kinds of hate speech as his opponents. It certainly does not help that López Obrador himself is a social conservative and has often been at odds with groups that typically enjoy the support of the left, such as feminists. It appears that even in a country with such stark political divisions, the one thing that can unite most Mexicans is a venomous hostility to identity politics. And as we know from the alt-right, this is often the most effective way to introduce people to a wider range of right-wing views.

A far-right populist in 2024?

The belief that far right populism could not make inroads into Mexico's highly entrenched party system ignores the fact that the 2018 election dramatically reshaped Mexico's political system after three decades of rigid tri-partisanship (as illustrated below). If voters remain as angry in 2024 as they were in 2018, it is far from inconceivable to think that independent or minority candidates, especially those pushing a populist message, could take a bigger slice of the pie than ever before.

Composition of Mexico's Chamber of Deputies



EZP = Ernesto Zedillo, VFQ = Vicente Fox, FCH = Felipe Calderón, EPN = Enrique Peña Nieto, AMLO = Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador. Note: based on seats at the start of each legislative period. The appeal of such candidates will largely depend on their image and messaging. Rodríguez's cowboy antics may appeal to northerners, but most other Mexicans would be wary of a second Vicente Fox, whose presidency is largely seen as a failure. Lozano and his FRENAAA supporters, meanwhile, are too white and too affluent to represent most Mexicans, although a desperate PAN may be tempted to embrace someone like him if it more moderate potential candidates come across as insipid and unappealing, as they want to avoid a repeat of the electoral losses of 2012 and 2018. Modern far right populism is staunchly economically liberal (if not borderline libertarian), but a free-market fundamentalist message remains unlikely to appeal to an electorate that flatly rejected three decades of neoliberalism in 2018.

Instead, a successful far right populist could present a cocktail of grievances: economic crisis (particularly if López Obrador's economic agenda fails), a broken society afflicted by crime, and a loss of national identity and values. This has proven to be a winning formula for virtually every successful far-right populist of recent years, and there is no reason to think it wouldn't work in Mexico too. The Janus-faced discourse of far-right populism – claiming to be the voice of the people while acting for the benefit of elites – will also ensure plentiful support from the more affluent sectors of Mexican society.

Ultimately, we have already seen frustrated Mexicans provoke a left-wing populist landslide in 2018 after the disappointments of the centre-right neoliberal consensus. It is not inconceivable that they will flock to the far right if they feel that AMLO's leftist transformation of Mexico has failed them too.

Notes:

- *The views expressed here are of the authors rather than the Centre or LSE*
- *This article draws on ideas about the emergence of far-right populism drawn from the author's book [The Glass-Half Empty: Debunking the Myth of Progress in the Twenty-First Century](#) (Repeater Books, 2020)*
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