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A matter of trust

All over Latin America, parties are using questionable tactics to cling to power

Even though nobody had yet put an exact price on the damage September's strong earthquake caused in Mexico, it was already clear who people thought should shell out for rebuilding. More than 1.8 million Mexicans signed a Change.org petition calling on the country's political parties to pay it out of their funds.

Politicians are an easy target these days, widely considered corrupt, unaccountable and inefficient. At the end of 2016, an annual survey on trustworthiness by the consultancy Mitofsky placed them last in a list of 17 Mexican institutions, alongside the police and the unions. The country's citizens are most likely to place their trust in universities, the church and the military.

The current party of government, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI) saw an opportunity in the crisis, sending out its leader, Enrique Ochoa, to proclaim that it would make all the state funding it receives until the end of the year available for victims of the earthquake. Moreover, the PRI would try to pass a reform withdrawing public subsidies for political parties and get rid of seats in parliament elected by list, halving the number of members and saving 11bn pesos (about €500m) according to PRI figures. The reform would come into effect before the presidential and parliamentary elections next year.

The first part of that declaration got the public cheering so loudly (a survey by radio station Imagen said that 90 per cent of Mexicans were in favour of the proposal) that the second part – and the effect it will have – was drowned out. While the other parties were still scraping around trying to work out what was going on, PRI grandees were already in attack mode on social media. 'The other parties are not fulfilling their promises to the victims,' Ochoa tweeted.

Protest, if any, came from a small number of intellectuals, warning Mexicans against the diabolical package of measures. 'I don't think the

people of this country really want political campaigns to be financed by the drugs mafia and corporates,' said Lorenzo Córdova, head of the national electoral commission, adding that it was not advisable to change the rules of a campaign that was already underway. Political scientist José Antonio Crespo at the Centre for Economic Research and Teaching said this kind of reform would 'very clearly favour the PRI. Removing public financing will remove parties' ability to operate autonomously, while scrapping proportional representation will benefit the biggest party most – ie the PRI.'

Turning fewer votes into more seats is, of course, exactly what the former state party is looking to do now that scandals and embezzlement have depleted its political capital. In the 1990s, it was still able to form governments alone with an absolute majority; now, its electoral base has shrunk to 25 per cent according to most recent surveys.

Nevertheless, in a political landscape like Mexico's, this kind of base brings many advantages – especially since the Partido Acción Nacional (National Action Party, PAN) is tearing itself apart due to internal conflicts while the left-wing Partido de la Revolución Democrática (Party of the Democratic Revolution, PRD) has long been suffering from the loss of its most radical wing, Morena, under Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who has announced his intention to stand for president.

Then there are the independents, looking to throw their hats into the ring for the first time and profit from the visible wear and tear suffered by the established parties. The 2014 electoral reform allows independent candidates; when the PRI put it through, it was already thinking about how to fragment the party landscape. The PRI, however, already profits from considerable advantages: it has a well-structured nationwide grass-roots organisation and access to the federal budget (and thus the means to finance political campaigns and open vote-buying). What it didn't like, however, was the proposed two-round voting system put forward by political scientists and citizens' groups. The PRI refused to put it through, and it's obvious why. In Mexico, there is a clear anti-PRI majority, but its potential cannot be realised without a second round of voting.

And Mexico is no isolated case: Brazil is seeing a similar attempt by discredited established parties to ensure their political survival in the face of approaching elections in 2018, by any means necessary. In Brazil, too, it is widespread corruption that has soured the country's voters on existing parties; the difference is that the country's largely independent judiciary is having a clear-out, arresting hundreds of politicians and businesspeople following a scandal involving the state oil concern

Petrobrás and private corporations in sectors such as construction and meat, all of whom had been pouring money into a well-organised illegal party donations scheme.

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Almost all parties from left to right are affected, and – in another contrast to Mexico – the Brazilian Congress features a colourful and diverse mixture of parties who must be corralled into majorities so that a president can get a majority. Interim President Michel Temer, for instance, now finds himself in the crosshairs of the corruption taskforce and stands accused of collusion to commit criminal acts; at 3 per cent, his (un)popularity ratings have beaten all previous records in the country, yet he remains in power because enough deputies in the Congress refuse to support impeachment. News channel O Globo has named it 'the pact of the corrupt'.

In a system in which a relatively weak president faces a congress similar to a jigsaw puzzle, there is little chance of real political renewal. The left-wing opposition in the form of the workers' party (PT) doesn't have a lot to offer: its symbolic figurehead, former president Luiz Inácio 'Lula' da Silva, is also mired in legal proceedings, accused of corruption, and there is no potential successor in view who could revitalise the party in terms of its personnel and its manifesto. Protests and strikes occur every now and then and are, at times, violently suppressed or just peter out. For most Brazilians, politics is a dirty business on which they have turned their backs, disappointed and ready to flirt with authoritarian systems such as a military dictatorship – or at least a right-wing populist who advocates one, such as former army officer and member of Congress Jair Bolsonaro, who got the most votes in the Rio de Janeiro congressional elections of 2014.

Operating in isolation from the population, the political elite is trying desperately to secure its survival – and is using every trick in the book in the attempt. Temer, for example, has weakened the progress of the case against him by putting in allies when existing justices retire. Meanwhile, the Congress is working on electoral reform that, inspired by Vanuatu and Afghanistan, will introduce per-district balloting and thus offer an advantage to candidates who are well known – ie current deputies – while their opponents' votes count for nothing. Temer is pursuing the same goal as Mexico's PRI (the survival of the current political elite) but using the opposite strategy: given that the established parties are losing

votes, he wants to put as many obstacles as possible in the way of new parties.

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The public rarely has a full grasp of the effects of electoral systems and the extent of campaign financing, and this means the established parties may well get what they want in the short term. Yet they are playing with fire as, in the medium term, voter dissatisfaction increases. Crucially, who knows where it will end? When does manipulation become criminal? Where does democratic legitimacy end? These are not just theoretical questions, as we are seeing in almost every Latin American country; if anything, the issues are set to become even more serious in the coming months.

The prospects are not exactly rosy. The continents' democracies are navigating rough waters, torn between general dissatisfaction with the parties, societal instability and big-talking types who sell themselves as saviours – and who mostly turn out to be authoritarians. In Venezuela, for instance, the population's rejection of the two corrupt parties which were traditionally the two options on offer in 1998 led to the 'Bolivarian socialism' of Hugo Chávez. Chile's former president, social democrat Ricardo Lagos, talks of 'a major caesura', explaining that 'there are many reasons why people have lost trust in democracy, but none is a passing phenomenon: corruption, violence, marginalisation, inequality. Citizens expect more than they did ten years ago,' he writes in the newspaper *La Tercera*. The political elite makes a show of finding solutions it doesn't have, resorting to polarisation whenever it is not willing to compromise. It's the market against the state, racism against multiculturalism, technocrats versus populists.

Latin America is at a fork in the road. On the one hand, there is a potential return to authoritarian populism; on the other, a democratic quantum leap towards more participation, transparency, the rule of law and social equality. What is urgently needed are political movements with leaders who are genuinely anchored in the population and are credible advocates of new solutions. This will only work if the population doesn't succumb to apathy and turn its back on politics: the continents' citizens will need to get interested, get informed, and get involved.



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