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Mexico's authoritarian restoration

President López Obrador is planning to re-centralise power. To achieve this, he wants to put a leash on Mexico's independent electoral institute

Unlike in Germany and many other countries in the world, in Mexico there is no such thing as an identity card. Various governments have made attempts to introduce them, but they have failed due to resistance on the part of a population that does not trust those in power to handle their data responsibly. The electoral registration card, which is issued by the independent electoral institute INE and comes with the holder's photo, therefore serves as a substitute and is popularly known by the same name as the institute. An 'INE' is what you need to open a bank account or take out a mobile phone contract. Public and legal authorities also accept this document as proof of identity.

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Established in 1990, the independent electoral institute – then called IFE – symbolises the hard-won victory of the people over their political elite, represented by the state Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which had been in power continuously since 1929. The PRI had its own trade unions and its own entrepreneurs, and even a tailor-made opposition which simulated pluralism without posing a threat. This is why Mario Vargas Llosa, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, spoke of it as a 'perfect dictatorship'. In the 1980s, however, its political dominance gradually crumbled, in parallel with the growing pluralism and differentiation within the society. In 1988, the PRI was only able to pull off a victory in the elections thanks to a power cut during the vote count. Although the opposition candidate was still in the lead just before the blackout, afterwards it was suddenly the PRI candidate who was ahead.

Thus, the PRI once again emerged triumphant, but it was discredited and weakened, and eventually had to agree to the establishment of an independent electoral institute. In addition to pressure from civil society, the negotiations with the US over a free trade agreement and the accession negotiations for joining the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) also played a role. Both processes required the modernisation of state institutions. The electoral institute was part of this, and its work was instrumental in ensuring that in 2000, an opposition candidate won the presidency for the first time.

Attempts to curtail the INE's powers

The electoral institute INE has endured several crises and underwent a major reform in 2014 but is now considered one of the country's most respected institutions. Over the past nine years, it has organised 330 elections – including the last presidential election in 2018, from which Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the left-wing nationalist Morena umbrella party emerged as the undisputed winner. The INE has faced frequent criticism, for example on account of its failure to effectively combat money laundering in the campaigns or to stop violence against candidates.

However, López Obrador's persistent criticism of the INE has nothing to do with these issues. His rhetoric mainly revolves around personal allegations against the leadership. Its officers, he claims, are elitist and corrupt money-grubbers. He has already made three attempts to curtail the institute's powers. His so-called Plan A involved a constitutional amendment which – among other things – would have introduced electronic ballot boxes and simplified plebiscites, as well as reduced the size of the institute and made its membership subject to elections. However, this proposal, submitted in April 2022, failed in the face of united resistance from the opposition. Despite various attempts by the ruling Morena party to co-opt or blackmail individual opposition politicians to obtain the necessary two-thirds majority.

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Plan B, presented in November, appeared to be a simple administrative reform but would have cut the Institute's budget to such an extent that it would no longer have been possible to guarantee the proper organisation of elections due to a lack of staff. This simple administrative reform passed through Congress thanks to the absolute majority enjoyed by the ruling party, but was suspended by a judge through an

injunction after an immediately challenge by the opposition. Although the detailed review now still has to go through the courts, for the time being – which will include the general election in 2024 – the reform will not be implemented.

Simultaneously, the government pushed ahead with Plan C, which consisted of placing its supporters in the four posts due to be filled by regular rotation. Nominations for these posts are normally made in Congress and from a list of candidates previously vetted for competence by a committee. This time, however, the parliamentarians could not reach an agreement, so the posts were drawn by lot from among the 20 places on the list. Because the Supreme Court had ruled shortly beforehand that, for reasons of balance, a woman had to head the INE this time around, and because Morena had the foresight to nominate significantly more women than the opposition, the chair fell to Guadalupe Taddei. She belongs to a family closely associated with Morena. Morena also managed to secure a second post.

Picking a fight with the INE

The president's manoeuvres against the INE caused massive public protests that breathed life into an otherwise rather divided and uninspired opposition. According to a survey by the Saba Consultores Institute, the president's popularity temporarily fell from 64 to 55 per cent in the course of this power struggle. Concerns were voiced in the US by Congress and think tanks, as well as leading media outlets such as The New York Times, which declared democracy to be under threat from the assault on the INE.

The US government threatened punitive tariffs and arbitration panels as mandated by the free trade agreement. The bilateral dispute over genetically modified maize and the expansion of renewable energy that was halted by López Obrador has been simmering for some time, but the fact that it is now escalating is probably no coincidence. Mexico's economy could suffer as a result – and thus damage the ruling party's chances in the 2024 election. And although López Obrador remains very popular, he himself is not allowed to run again because of the constitutional ban on re-election. He has therefore nominated three presumptive heirs, but the extent to which he can transfer his popularity to them – especially in difficult economic times – is unclear.

So why is he picking a fight with the INE at this delicate juncture, even at the risk of upsetting his most important trading partner? Three reasons are involved. One is personal. López Obrador's political career has for

decades now been a struggle against the establishment. He began as a provincial politician in the PRI, which valued his common touch but repeatedly marginalised him in important appointment decisions. This is why in 1989, he was part of the group that split off and founded the social democratic PRD. He advanced his career in the social democratic party and was convinced that he had won the 2006 election. According to the official count and the recount, he was defeated then by a margin of 0.58 per cent, or 250,000 votes. López Obrador never conceded that defeat and blamed the INE as the stooge of the economic elite.

The goal of López Obrador's political project is to restore the one-party state while at the same time regaining state control over strategic resources such as oil, electricity supply and lithium.

The second is tactical. In the last parliamentary elections in June 2021, there were already signs suggesting an electoral pact between the Sinaloa cartel and Morena in return for immunity from prosecution and efforts to repatriate the cartel boss Joaquín 'El Chapo' Guzmán, who is in prison in the US. The accusations that party funding has been infiltrated by organised crime also come from within the party's own ranks, for example from ex-party leader Porfirio Múñoz Ledo. This is why the opposition is urging the INE to tighten supervision. In 2021, there was not enough evidence to challenge the results of the elections before the electoral authorities and courts. But in the meantime, concerns are also growing in the US that Mexico could turn into a narco-state. Some Republican US senators want to have Mexican cartels designated as terrorists.

The third is strategic. The goal of López Obrador's political project is to restore the one-party state while at the same time regaining state control over strategic resources such as oil, electricity supply and lithium. The president has declared his enemy to be 'neoliberalism', which in the 1990s led to a weakening of the PRI's ability to exercise state power from the centre. New actors took advantage of this to enrich themselves while workers and peasants were being impoverished by economic globalisation. López Obrador sees himself as the avenger of these marginalised groups.

Following a step-by-step strategy

The loss of control led to violent conflicts between traditional interest groups and new ones in which criminal, political and economic interests were intertwined. This is illustrated by the case of the conservative ex-

governor Rafael Moreno Valle, he has since died in a helicopter crash, who had forged an alliance with the petrol mafia. Or by the now-imprisoned ex-PRI governors Javier and Cesar Duarte and Humberto Moreira, who were all in league with cartels.

The entanglement of the mafia with politics is nothing new in Mexico, but under the PRI, it was centralised in the hands of the military and the Ministry of the Interior, who acted as a kind of management level. According to political consultant Rubén Aguilar, López Obrador's security strategy of 'embracing instead of shooting' is aimed at the restoration of this 'Pax Narca'.

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The military plays a key role in this because it is the only institution that López Obrador trusts, on the grounds that it represents 'the people' and not the elite, as he constantly asserts. Meanwhile, the military has become a state within a state: it controls airports and seaports, builds trains, guards banks, plants trees and hunts down migrants. Today, according to one study, the military fulfils 223 functions, 100 of which have nothing to do with public security. Just over half of these tasks were allocated to it under López Obrador. The armed forces' budget grew by 163 per cent between 2006 and 2021. At the same time, the military is not subject to any kind of de facto control. Human rights violations committed by the armed forces are rarely punished, and human rights activists who investigate such cases are spied on by the military – evidently without any checks or controls, as recent publications such as those resulting from the #GuacamayaLeaks show.

In order to achieve this re-centralisation of power and simultaneous militarisation, under the pretext of combating drug trafficking, democracy, pluralism and independent institutions with a supervisory and monitoring role must all be weakened. López Obrador has pursued this goal from the beginning, following a step-by-step strategy that culminated in the conflict with the INE. He first cut state subsidies to universities and civil society organisations (such as crèches and migrant shelters) and replaced them with direct monetary welfare payments, which were criticised by the opposition as a form of clientelism. Meanwhile, 30 million Mexicans are now in the happy position of receiving welfare payments, which are handed out by party loyalists with

no strings attached, accompanied by party propaganda.

The Attorney General's Office, the Central Bank, the Money Laundering Authority and top judges' posts were all filled with minions whose loyalty is the most important criterion. Those he trusts were not replaced even when it became obvious to all that they were abusing their posts to pursue private vendettas (the Attorney General) or that they were entirely unsuitable (plagiarism in the doctoral thesis of a judge). This strategy is flanked by a permanent propaganda campaign that stokes envy and hatred and is used to discredit critics – whether journalists, judges, politicians or scientists – as a corrupt establishment.

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The opposition is trying to push back. In 2021, they succeeded in wresting the two-thirds majority in Congress from Morena in the mid-term elections, which made it difficult for the president to push through his agenda. Like Morena, the opposition has a very diverse programme. However, whereas in Morena this is held together by the power factor and the prospect of appointments to important posts, the opposition, which ranges from social democrats to right-wing conservatives, is always liable to explode. Another problem is the failure to renew the opposition leadership. Their uncharismatic veteran politicians, often tainted by corruption, are an easy target for López Obrador.

Investigative media (such as *Latinus*), civil society organisations such as feminist groups, research institutes and bodies like the anti-corruption initiative *Mexicanos contra la corrupción y la impunidad* now serve as a counterweight. But although they offer a credible counter pole to presidential propaganda in the public perception, in the long run, they cannot replace the work of a political opposition. It is unclear whether the opposition will find a convincing strategy against the authoritarian restoration by the time of the 2024 elections.



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