Political Parties – Challenges and Perspectives

Mexico's PAN

An Opposition Party with the Potential to Govern?

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The Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) can look back at 81 years of history and tradition, although it has spent most of this period in opposition. In the run-up to Mexico's super election year of 2021, the party is once again keen to demonstrate its ability to govern at local and state level. In this way, it aims to position itself as a real alternative at the national level for the next presidential elections in 2024. However, the challenges it faces are immense in light of the country's structural problems and of the historical peculiarities of the Mexican party system.

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2021 is set to be a super election year in Mexico, and both candidates and parties are already gearing up for the election campaign. All 500 members of the national parliament are up for re-election, along with 15 of 32 governors, more than 1,000 members of state parliaments, as well as city councils and mayors in almost 2,000 municipalities.[1] The Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) is under particular pressure to field candidates with strong programmes, personal credibility, political experience, and good communication skills. It also has to find ways of forging strategic alliances. Currently the strongest opposition party, it plays a vital role in standing up to the governing party, the Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (MORENA) and its ubiquitous media presence. It has to attempt to crack MORENA's almost unchallenged majority in the Chamber of Deputies, and to prevent its growing influence at the local and regional levels. Should it fail in this task, the incumbent president Andrés Manuel López Obrador could rule with little or no opposition and few political constraints or counterweights until 2024. This would have alarming consequences for Mexican democracy.

The Mexican Party System

In order to understand more about the development of the PAN, one must look back at the last 100 years of Mexican party democracy. This necessarily includes the history of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which spent more than 70 of those years in government.

Its dominance has led to 20th century Mexico being described as a "perfect dictatorship". For many years, politicians were not allowed to stand for re-election in an attempt to prevent long terms of office and multiple mandates,[2] but the party perfected the art of transferring posts within the party cadre. Transfers between the three branches of government also flowed freely for many years. Even employee and employer associations and civil society organisations resembled party organisations more than independent bodies.

Looking back at Mexico's history, the Mexican Revolution (1910 to 1920) led to political instability, characterised by political feuds and frequent transfers of power. In 1929, the PRI[3] managed to consolidate power and formed stable governments that lasted for decades. But the policies of these governments were not always focussed upon the welfare of the people. Particularly under Lázaro Cárdenas (President from 1934 to 1940), they had a strong socialist and populist bent and harnessed different sectors of society for their own purposes: for example, workers' associations and traditional landowners were instrumentalised for political ends. This was in contrast to the vision of Manuel Gómez Morin, one of PAN's founding fathers. He considered establishing a new party early on, calling for long-term policies, stronger institutions and a departure from the political *caudillo*.[4] He believed social measures should be guided by the principle of subsidiarity and the interests of the nation as a whole, and that the

common good should take precedence over the supremacy of the state. Voter participation as an element of securing the political rights of the individual and the promotion of civic education were key concerns for Gómez Morin, who went on to set up PAN.

PAN was officially founded in 1939 and originally had a strongly conservative and Christian-democratic identity, although the secular nature of the party was emphasised. The party attracted middle class voters – particularly academics and entrepreneurs, who had a decisive influence on the party's orientation.

Over the following decades, the PRI continued to build its hegemony by being generally omni-present in the lives of Mexicans – and through repeated electoral fraud. Despite this, Gómez Morin (who remained a strong influence within PAN) held firm to his conviction that political participation can only be consolidated through elections, and so PAN continued to field candidates, particularly at the local level. A local PAN deputy was elected for the first time in 1947 (Alfonso Hernández Sánchez in Zamora, Michoacán).

PAN went through a (not always linear) process of establishing its identity.

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In the years that followed, PAN went through a (not always linear) process of establishing its identity. The party became a key gathering place for government opponents. As time went by it was influenced by staunchly Catholic, rather nationalist, tendencies, and then by groups that espoused a more left-wing approach towards social assistance. But PAN continued to attract supporters and, despite the growing political repression instigated by PRI governments, it managed to build its political influence in local parliaments, particularly in the northern states.

However, PAN's growing presence in local government was accompanied by internal struggles about its direction, with independent candidates joining PAN in the hope of gaining political power rather than on the basis of shared convictions. Internally, the party was riven by constant arguments about its direction, fuelled by sociopolitical issues, values, and also by strategic concerns (coalitions with other parties, cooperation with the PRI) or its proximity to specific target groups (e.g. the Church, business).

Meanwhile, the PRI was finding it increasingly difficult to maintain its hegemony. The incapacity of PRI-led corporatist state structures became increasingly apparent, especially after the 1985 earthquake, the debt crisis of the 1980s ("the lost decade"), and the currency crisis of 1994/1995. Mexico began opening up its economy to the outside world, culminating in the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. This had a major impact on the country and called into question its many years of party hegemony. At the 1988 elections, the PAN significantly increased its influence by winning 101 of 500 seats in the national Parliament. The PRI also lost ground to the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD),[5] a left-wing splinter of the PRI, formed in 1989. This led to a noticeable increase in pluralism in Mexico's party-political system.

PAN won its first gubernatorial election in 1989 when Ernesto Ruffo Appel was elected in Baja California Norte. By the mid-1990s, PAN provided six of Mexico's 32 governors.

Twelve Years of PAN Government

In the years that followed, PAN chose the pragmatic path of *gradualismo*, a gradual approach to gaining government responsibility that was a departure from its hitherto rigorous opposition stance. It cooperated with the PRI on specific political projects, which stirred up controversy, but which increased its political influence.

In a lost position? The escalating violence and the drug cartels' growing strength – who Felipe Calderón's administration openly declared war on – had a major impact on the country, with PAN being apportioned most of the blame. Source: © Daniel Becerril, Reuters.

It all culminated in the election of Vicente Fox in 2000 – for the first time, a PAN politician became the president of Mexico. This led to an almost euphoric sense of excitement, but also a heavy weight of expectations. His first term in office was followed by another (much narrower) victory by PAN's Felipe Calderón, who remained in office until 2012, meaning that PAN spent twelve years in national government.

The challenges for both PAN administrations were immense: corruption, nepotism, and political cronyism remained deeply rooted in the political system and in the entire state apparatus. The PRI – now an opposition party – blocked most of the planned reforms in Parliament, and PAN's lack of a parliamentary majority made it difficult to push through its agenda. Concessions from the opposition (particularly the PRI) were

few and far between, and generally very hard won. As the years went by, the Mexican people began to feel that many PAN politicians had simply joined the corrupt elite rather than standing up to them. Felipe Calderón's administration openly declared war on the drug cartels, but they continued to grow in strength and the violence escalated. Combined with the economic and financial crisis of 2008/2009, this had a major impact on the country, with PAN being apportioned most of the blame. The ongoing US court case against Genaro García Luna, the security minister in the Calderón government, also reinforces the impression that the fight against the drug cartels has not only taken its toll in terms of bloodshed but also involved concessions and collusion with the cartels themselves.

> ## The incumbent president Andres Manuel López Obrador is a prototype of the Mexican caudillo.
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PAN was punished for this in 2012, and a new PRI president came to power in the shape of Enrique Peña Nieto. The "Pacto por México" between his government, the PRI, the PAN and the PRD, which had also grown in strength, allowed the backlog of reforms to be addressed. In Parliament, this PRI government was also dependent on opposition support, but many Mexicans felt this led to an excessive rapprochement between the PRI and the PAN. The current president, Andres Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), subsequently took advantage of this in his election campaign.[6]

Diversification of the Party Landscape

The Mexican party system is now much more diverse. The PRD, the Movimiento Ciudadano, the Partido Verde Ecologista de México, and the Partido del Trabajo (PT) were largely established in the 1990s (mainly as a result of PRI splits) and compete with each other in shifting coalitions and local strongholds. The PRI is currently rather quiet at the national level, but it can look back on 90 years of broad-based structural development. It currently provides eleven out of 32 governors, and still has a strong local presence in many areas of Mexico, although current polls indicate further losses on the horizon. The main beneficiary of these is likely to be the MORENA, which has also been joined by numerous former PRI politicians.

Established as recently as 2011 by López Obrador and others, the MORENA views itself as a "movement" rather than a party. It still lacks established structures and is characterised by two key factors: firstly, its leader, the incumbent president López Obrador as a prototype of the Mexican *caudillo*; and, secondly, a mish-mash of extremely heterogeneous groups and politicians who believed MORENA provided a real opportunity for change, or perhaps an opportunity to achieve their own political goals. However, at the national level, the party members of both these groups have now reached the limits of their influence and the party is increasingly beset by cracks or even trench warfare. This is currently manifesting itself in a fierce dispute over the party leadership between the former founding father of the PRD, Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, and the current leader of the MORENA faction in the Chamber of Deputies, Mario Delgado (also from the PRD).[7]

PAN's Current Situation – National Opposition and Local Government

The 2018 Election Defeat: A Continuation of the Downward Spiral or a Chance to Rebuild?

PAN's rather unconvincing result in the 2012 presidential election, when their candidate Josefina Vázquez Mota won only 25.68 per cent of the vote, can be attributed to the party's exhaustion after twelve years in government and voter disappointment. In 2018, its performance was even worse, when Ricardo Anaya stood as the PAN candidate. Aged just 39, he brought great verve and dynamism to the campaign but failed to unite the country's desire for change (*cambio*) and for a new kind of politics. In the end he

attracted just 22.36 per cent of the vote and was roundly defeated by 64-year-old López Obrador, who won 53.19 per cent of the vote.

Following this defeat, and the gruelling election campaign involving numerous external attacks, and, above all, the internal conflicts – triggered by the fact that Margarita Zavala, the wife of former PAN president Felipe Calderón, decided to stand as an independent – the party was left facing some major challenges. It needs to overhaul its programme and personnel, face up to MORENA's threatened omnipotence, and reposition itself as an alternative governing party. In this context and faced with the task of halting the previous downward spiral, Marko Cortés overcame significant internal party disputes to be appointed its leader in early 2019.

The coronavirus pandemic has placed PAN under heightened scrutiny in the federal states. But this is where it can prove its capacity to govern.

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Local Government Responsibility

MORENA undeniably dominates the national stage at present, with coalition majorities in both chambers of Congress, the omnipresence of the president, and clear agenda setting through a daily press conference (known as *mañaneras*). However, PAN remains the strongest opposition party in Congress[8] (though it has very limited influence in real terms) and is still a strong and significant player at the state and municipal levels. It currently provides around 400 of the country's 2,500 mayors and nine out of 32 governors.[9]

It should be stressed that the impact and challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic have brought PAN governments closer together. They have not only had to find individual solutions for their very different states, but have also adopted a joint position towards the national government in the form of the Asociación de Gobernadores de Acción Nacional (Association of PAN Governors, GOAN). Their role is not insignificant because of the power they enjoy in the regions, but it is limited by the fact that Mexico's states are financially dependent on federal budget allocations. A radical opposition can quickly be controlled by the federal government through subtle or not-so-subtle financial measures, such as budget cuts in the security sector.

The importance of PAN's regional presence is enhanced by the fact that all the latest polls relating to public satisfaction with the performance of mayors and governors have PAN politicians clearly ahead. For example, in the governors' ranking they occupy four of the top five positions.[10] The picture is similar among the mayors of larger cities.

The ruling party traditionally benefits in times of crisis, so PAN is under heightened scrutiny in the federal states. This is where it can prove its capacity to govern and demonstrate that it is able to set up and implement successful policy programmes that benefit the population (at present this mainly relates to controlling the pandemic and reviving the economy).

Image and Acceptance Problems

A significant challenge for the PAN continues to be the involvement of civil society in its decision-making processes, as well as the debate on its orientation. All too often it is perceived as an elitist party that does too little for ordinary citizens. It is true that PAN's national leadership has taken steps to involve more civil society actors, but the results are often unconvincing. PAN's political opponents seize on its traditional proximity to the business community to emphasise its elitist image. On the other hand, this closeness provides the party with an opportunity to position and present itself as a counterweight to the current government's rather anti-business stance. However, this also has its difficulties, partly because business circles have set up their anti-government movements and are not prepared to be co-opted by PAN.

Mexican society is also extremely heterogeneous, which presents a challenge to political parties of every hue. Parties would need to engage more intensively with the 20 per cent of the Mexican population that consider themselves as indigenous, as well as more generally with low income groups. However, PAN is currently doing very little to address the concerns of these groups, and fails to include their views and representatives in its decision-making and political processes. The party has a great deal of catching up to do in this respect.

The involvement of civil society in decision-making processes and the debate on PAN's orientation is a significant challenge.

It is, therefore, not surprising and indicative of the current balance of power that PAN stands at just 24 per cent in the latest polls on voting intention,[11] well ahead of the PRI (just under 12 per cent), but also far behind MORENA (40 per cent), which is reaping the benefit of the president's ongoing popularity (around 50 per cent).

Policies and Communication

Overall, PAN can still be classified as a conservative and Christian democratic party, although its policy orientation is not unanimously supported within the party. Work is currently underway on a new party manifesto, which will be adopted this year and provide a basis for the 2021 election campaign. Its orientation is based on humanist principles and on Christian, conservative values, with a focus on families, sustainable economic and social policies, international responsibility, domestic security and combatting corruption. However, the way this is put into practice tends to cause friction between the party's arch conservatives and its more liberal wing.

There is also room for improvement as regards the party's communication ability and media presence – a fact that was already evident during the 2018 election campaign. During the coronavirus crisis, certain PAN politicians have been very proactive and skilful at communicating via digital means, but this has not yet had an overall impact on the PAN as a party.

Leadership and a New Competitor

In President López Obrador, MORENA has a clear advantage that PAN still lacks: a leader that is perceived as a contender for the highest government office. PAN's two former presidents have turned their backs on the party (Calderón with his resignation, Fox with a more or less explicit show of disinterest, despite showing up at the PAN anniversary celebrations in 2019 and 2020). The most recent presidential candidate, Ricardo Anaya, accepted a teaching position in the US after the election debacle of 2018, but made a surprise return in late September when he announced his desire to re-enter politics, although it can be assumed that he will focus mainly on his home state of Querétaro. The party's current national leader, Marko Cortés Mendoza, is concentrating on the party's structural work – a sensible and much-needed task.

Looking ahead to the 2024 elections, the party still has some time to groom new leaders. The governors provide a good source of potential candidates, such as the youthful but successful governors of Yucatán and Guanajuato, Mauricio Vila and Diego Sinhue. Another positive development is the union of 15 former governors, mayors and current PAN deputies in the Unidos por México initiative. The specific aim of this organisation is to support PAN from within by engaging with the public, making policy proposals, and identifying candidates for the upcoming elections. PAN has the advantage that many of this organisation's members have served as governors and are respected both within the party and externally. However, none of PAN's leading politicians have yet actively positioned themselves at national level (something that is understandable and sensible from a tactical point of view, given that the next presidential elections are not until 2024).

Politically relevant player: MORENA undeniably dominates the national stage at present; however, PAN remains the strongest opposition party in Congress and is still a strong and significant player at the state and municipal levels.
Source: © Henry Romero, Reuters.

However, a new challenger to PAN has emerged from within its own ranks. Former President Felipe Calderón and his wife Margarita Zavala have founded their own movement, México Libre (ML), which is courting conservative voters. President López Obrador likes to engage in political skirmishes with Calderón, which has only increased ML's popularity. ML is already at around ten per cent in the latest polls. However, in order to be able to run in the 2021 elections, ML had to be registered as a party by the INE, the national electoral authority, and its efforts to achieve this seem to have failed. The INE has refused to register it as a party because it has failed to clearly account for more than five per cent of its income.[12] ML appealed to the Supreme Electoral Court, but this was also rejected in mid-October 2020, so all legal avenues now seem to have been exhausted. It is unclear what Calderón, Zavala, and their not inconsiderable number of supporters plan to do next. The PAN leadership have invited them to re-join the party, but this is unlikely to be accepted, at least by Zavala and Calderón, due to fierce differences of opinion. However, PAN is the party set to reap the greatest benefit from the absence of ML at the 2021 elections.

Looking Ahead to 2021 and 2024: Challenges and Opportunities

Against this background, Mexico is gearing up for a super election year. An adjustment to the legislative periods means that more positions than ever before will be up for re-election in June 2021: 500 national MPs, 15 governors, more than 1,000 local MPs, and almost 2,000 mayors.[13] At present, MORENA has a majority in Parliament, along with its coalition partners, but the party only has six governors, so its political majority could shift drastically.

PAN has two clear objectives: to work with the other opposition parties to overturn MORENA's majority in the Chamber of Deputies, and to consolidate or expand its own government presence at the regional level.[14] These are both ambitious aims, particularly in view of the fact

that PAN has a very mixed history when it comes to alliances and coalitions, including the recent negative experiences of 2018. However, in purely mathematical terms it is clear that a united opposition is the only way to halt the advance of MORENA.

This will require the right policies, communication strategies and the ability to attract popular support, but it will also depend on the party successfully closing ranks and presenting a united front. However, the new option of re-election has made this more difficult than expected in

some regions. Power struggles have already flared up in traditional PAN strongholds. The relationship between governors and mayors harbours particular potential for conflict.

The 2021 elections will set the tone for Mexican politics in the years to come. Today, however, the country's politics and democracy urgently need a convincing, powerful opposition and a political alternative to MORENA and to President López Obrador for 2024. Without this strong opposition, Mexican democracy could be on course for a very one-sided and increasingly authoritarian future.

PAN has to be proactive rather than reactive at the federal level. If it is to stand a fighting chance at the 2024 presidential elections, it has to focus on good governance, modern policies and developing future leaders. It is likely that the mistrust felt by many Mexicans and the fact that the party is still trying to establish its identity will make PAN's journey back to government much more difficult in 2024 than it was in 2000. Only time will tell whether it will succeed.

–translated from German–

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1   Instituto Nacional Electoral 2020: Calendario Electoral 2021, 10 Aug 2020, in: https://bit.ly/37m6mUC [18 Aug 2020].

2   The electoral reforms of 2015 ushered in a process of change. 2018 was the first time that mayors were allowed to stand for re-election, and the same will apply to members of the national Parliament in 2021. Governors and the president are still not eligible for re-election.

3   At that time, it was still called the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR).

4   Charismatic populist leaders who come to power using somewhat dubious methods but who claim to represent the people, whereas in reality they are more interested in bolstering their own power than in the welfare of their citizens.

5   The PRD was formed in May 1989 by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and Porfirio Muñoz Ledo. The current president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, was also involved, running for the PRD without success in the 2006 presidential elections. In 2012, López Obrador left the PRD to set up a new movement called MORENA. He stood as its presidential candidate in 2018 and, this time, was successful.

6   During the 2018 elections he coined the term "PRIAN", alluding to the closeness between the two parties. This closeness is based less on the substance of their policies than on similarities in terms of corruption.

7   As at: 16 Oct 2020.

8   PAN currently has 83 of 500 deputies in the Chamber of Deputies and 23 of 128 senators in the Senate.

9   PAN currently provides the governors of Aguascalientes, Chihuahua, Querétaro, Guanajuato, Tamaulipas, Durango, Baja California Sur, Quintana Roo, and Yucatán.

10 Ranking de Gobernadores 2020: Ranking de Popularidad, Jun 2020, in: https://bit.ly/3jctLKI [20 Oct 2020]; in terms of popularity and governance, four PAN governors are in the top five places, with Mauricio Vila (Yucatán) coming out on top.

11 Encuesta Massive Caller, 11 Aug 2020, Porcentaje Nacional de Intención de voto.

12 In August 2019, the electoral authority INE ordered ML to account for non-identifiable payments via the CLIP application. However, ML continued to accept donations in this way until Jun 2020.

13 Instituto Nacional Electoral 2020, n.1.

14 In 2021, elections will be held in four of the nine states that have a PAN governor: Baja California Sur, Chihuahua, Nayarit and Querétaro.