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June 2019

Users Working Paper

SERIES 2019:21

THE VARIETIES OF DEMOCRACY INSTITUTE



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# Mexico: Political Change and Delegative Democracy

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## **Abstract**

The scenario resulting from the 1 July 2018 presidential election is configuring in Mexico a delegative democracy with wide support for incumbent, rapid growth of hegemonic power and uncertain consequences for the nation's sociopolitical life.

# Introduction

*“Citizens are mistaken less frequently than politicians.  
The people possess an accurate instinct, a wisdom: (let there be)  
consultation with the citizenry, and let the citizen tell us, ‘I want this’ or ‘I don’t want that.’  
In a democracy, it is the people who govern, who decide.”*  
Andrés Manuel López Obrador

Based on studies and the methodology developed by the V-Dem project, political scientists Anna Lührmann y Staffan I. Lindberg warn of the coming of a third wave of autocratization. Unlike the two previous ones – during the period of 1926 to 1942, and from 1961 to 1977 – the current wave, which took off in the mid-1990s, affects a majority of established democracies. And it traverses moments that encompass recession, when the early autocratizing process takes place within democracies; rupture, when the qualitative leap from democracy to autocracy is produced; and consolidation of autocratic regimes (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). National contexts, the leaderships and strengths of the opposition, civil society, and democratic political culture, among other factors, mark the trajectories of each case.

Within the current wave, erosion becomes the model tactic of aspiring autocrats. These attain power legally – by way of elections – and gradually degrade democratic norms and institutions, without suppressing them. In fact, close to 70% of all contemporary autocratizing episodes are driven by leaders whose democratic legitimacy of origin is unquestionable. To change constitutions, control electoral arbiters, weaken the opposition, harass the civil society, and persecute the critical media: a menu for autocratization is replicated, irrespective of cultural and national substrates, on a global scale.

This eroding process is connected to the recent discoveries by political scientists Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, Nicolás Schmidt and Daniela Vairo, which reveal the existing relationship between the phenomenon of presidential hegemony – understood as the capacity of the executive to control the legislative and judicial powers – and the processes of democratic deterioration in Latin America. Covering an historical period from 1925 to 2016, these academics analyzed the duration of democratic regimes in 18 countries of the region. The study concludes that presidential hegemony has been a relevant factor in the instability of Latin American democracies (Pérez-Liñán, Schmidt & Vairo, 2019).

As cause and consequence of successive deteriorations of democratic quality, hegemonic presidents use their control over other powers to weaken the opposition. And, upon weakening it, they expand their control over other democratic institutions: a kind of perverse Russian roulette

that diminishes civic counterweights and agency in the face of an all-powerful executive. A process whereby political polarization reaches beyond the original dispute between executive and opponents and encompasses the entire society. As the work of Pérez-Liñan and his colleagues explains, all unified control of the executive over the other powers enables the leader to degrade the democratic process. Such power imbalances embolden the ruler when redefining, even, the boundaries of what is outlined under the current constitution.

Likewise, contemporary political phenomena, be it democratic erosion or presidential hegemony, can be seen by way of that type of political regime that Guillermo O'Donnell identified as delegative democracy (O'Donnell, Iazzetta & Quiroga, 2011): a mode of conceiving and exercising political power characterized by, among others, the following traits:

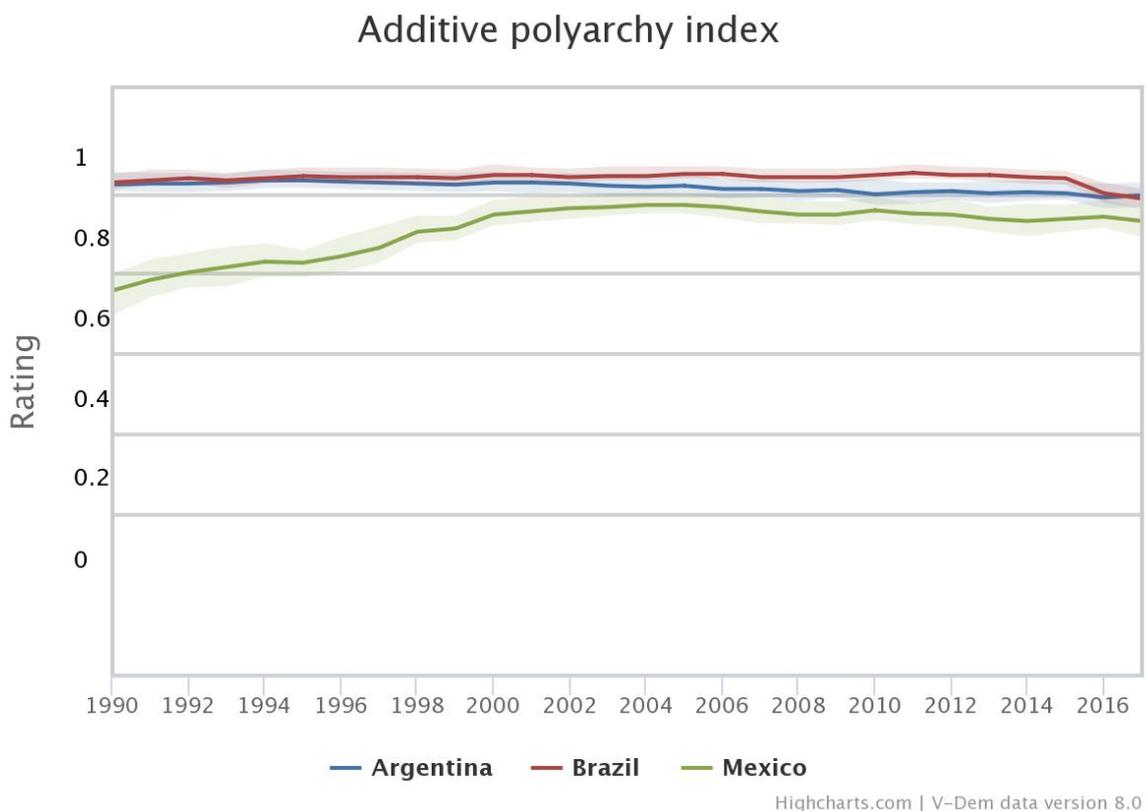
- a) *Contentious emergency*, as a response to grave national crises of socioeconomic and political type;
- b) *(Widespread) democraticness of origin*, via elections, with broad popular supports;
- c) *(Restricted) democraticness of functioning*, via the maintenance – even in conditions of conflict – of basic political freedoms, such as those of expression, assembly, press, association, and movement;
- d) *Personalism* based on the irreplaceable leader, who sets himself up as the principal interpreter and embodiment of the nation's interests, being above the diverse “parts” of society;
- e) *Decisionism*, which considers those counterweights emanating from the legislative and judicial powers – as well as from *horizontal accountability* institutions (special prosecutors, auditors, public defenders, etc.), along with news media and autonomous social organizations – as a hindrance to the Executive's political actions; all of which leads to efforts to annul, coopt and/or control those entities;
- f) *Limited consultativeness and deliberation* in the adoption of public policies, driven from the Executive;
- g) Official *movementism*, whereby the president is conceived more as the leader of a mass and heterogenous movement than as a state or party leader;
- h) The presence of populism, in its double condition as moment and movement, as characteristic of the nation's political history;
- i) Sustained, discursive polarization: the *delegative* leader is born in crisis and nurtures it, dichotomizing the political arena into “them” as anti-national, and “us” as popular; and

- j) Contingent alliances with minor and subordinate political forces and actors.

Our hypothesis is that the scenario resulting from the 1 July 2018 presidential election is configuring in Mexico a delegative democracy of rapid growth and uncertain consequences for the nation's sociopolitical life.

## I. Antecedents

The Mexican political regime emanated from the year 2000 transition can be defined as a *low-quality democracy* and *fragile rule of law* wherein were combined, on the federal level, modest levels of attainment of the basic elements that define a polyarchy (among them, quality of elections and party life) with sub-national political systems (which include cases of *delegative democracy* with quasi-absolute leaders capable of imposing limits on regional political life) and authoritarianism, with its quota of repression and use of violence (Russo & Chaguaceda, 2016). All this within a complex political frame that positions Mexico below comparable nations within the region.



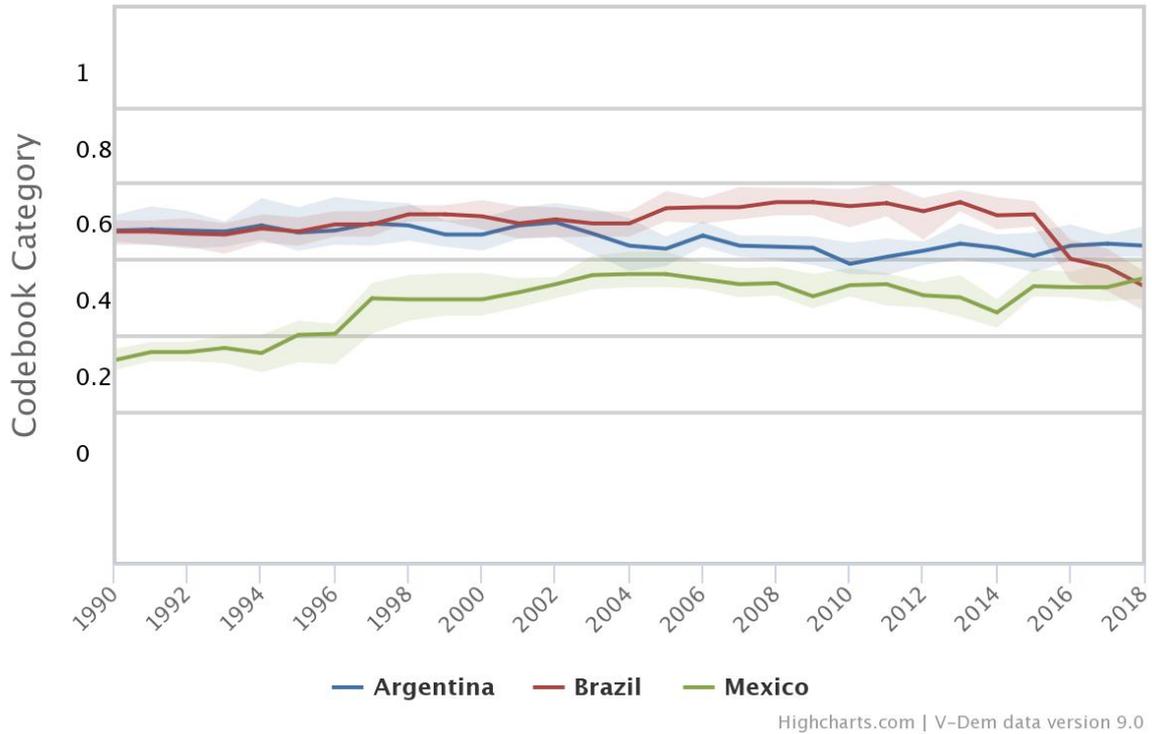
Source: <https://www.v-dem.net/es/analysis/VariableGraph/>

This is the result of a dilated democratizing process fundamentally focused on electoral issues and insufficient to fully replace the constitutional, institutional and cultural foundations of the old regime. In the process, the former opposing parties – the right-wing National Action Party (PAN), which attained national governance – and the left-wing Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), which won in various states including the capital – ever-increasingly reproduced the customs and practices of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)'s way of doing politics. In particular, traditional political culture, with its generalized clientism, particularism and corporatism, was reproduced – same as had been the basis of the relationship between the authoritarian PRI regime and the post-revolutionary society. This way, electoral democracy did not signify an important change in the lives of Mexicans, except for a certain political liberalization (with a zigzagging presence, and not in all states), more-contested elections, and a few new faces in the politics of certain local and state spaces.

The continuity of institutions and of authoritarian culture was favored also by the lack of alternative projects for the basic structures of the Mexican state. No party proposed the radical reform of a sick federalism, especially of its weakest link, the municipality, nor the creation of a truly effective and operational career civil service – save for exceptions such as the foreign service and the farm bureau. The creation of autonomous organisms (an achievement of the transition) for matters of democratic relevance such as access to information and electoral reform, became dysfunctional, given their colonization by the major parties – by way of job distribution – and their limited power.

Mechanisms for citizen participation – i.e. councils in various areas of public policy – and institutionalized requests for accountability in diverse departments and branches of government, have produced meager results. This is due, in great measure, to their hasty creation in response to global trends, tied to international congresses and contexts wherein the Mexican state inserts itself, and to their utilization as entities for legitimizing political figures and agendas. Recently, initiatives such as independent candidacies and mechanisms for direct democracy, while they have signified the promise of a (partial) reform of the monopoly of political representation, shows the threat of their utilization by old politicians – from the traditional parties – identified with (neo)populist forms of governing, while they generate resistances by the executives, congresses and parties threatened by the emergence or irruption of new actors and citizen demands.

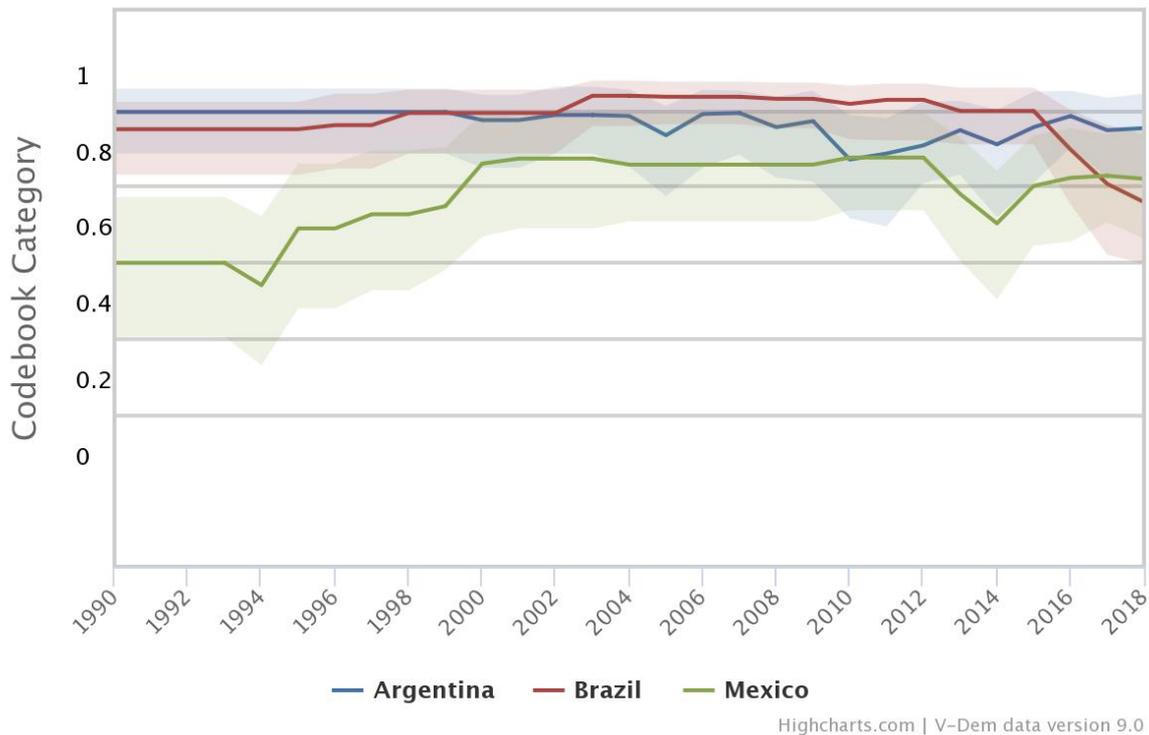
## Participatory Democracy Index



Source: <https://www.v-dem.net/es/analysis/VariableGraph/>

A similar state of affairs can explain why the state of the nation's citizenry presents, currently, a series of grey areas. Both in the individual dimension and in the citizenry's collective – and in its civil, political and social expressions – these encompass the unequal distribution of resources, the distance between formal rights and real practices, and the differences between progress in political rights associated with the process of transition to democracy and stagnation (and regression) with regard to civil and social rights. At the national level, with particular rootedness in certain zones, the exercise of citizenship is supplanted by forms of recognition and access to goods and services with marked signs of particularism, corporatism and clientelism, which deepen the exclusion of the weakest, poorest and most disorganized (Instituto Nacional Electoral y Colegio de México, 2015). Consequently, the participation of citizens from Mexican civil society has been, until recently, relatively weak to have impact, in a democratizing way, on the national political life.

## Civil society participation index



Source: <https://www.v-dem.net/es/analysis/VariableGraph/>

On the other hand, diverse powers that be – criminal, media, ecclesiastical – gain ground in the face of the state’s weakness and omission at the hour of exercising regulatory functions in diverse domains of social life. A particularly grave situation is in the case of organized crime, which becomes a dominant actor in the grey areas of Mexican institutionality, territoriality and society, in which formal legality coexists with, or is supplanted by, paralegal and violent conflict-resolution mechanisms, redistribution of resources, and regulation of community life.

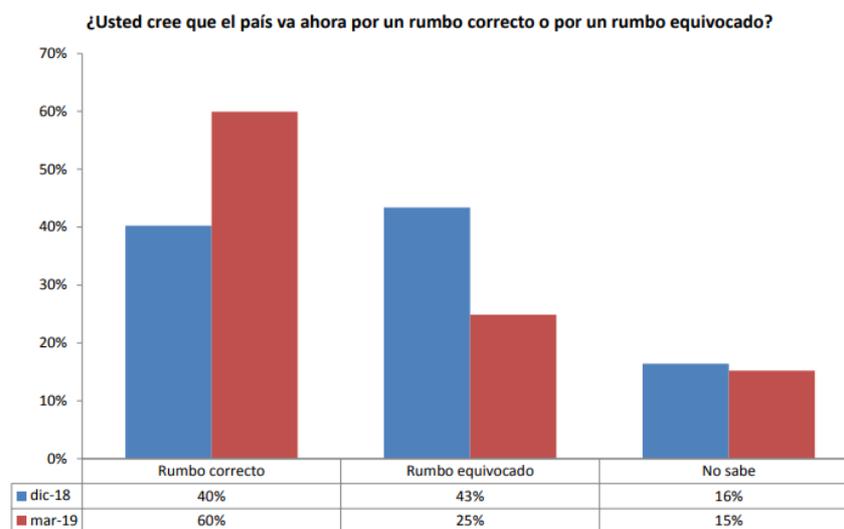
The socioeconomic background of this political order is that of three decades of neoliberal politics and the State’s retrenchment from its responsibilities towards society, expressed in a minimally effective manner, and with little inclusion of public policies. With an insufficient annual economic growth (slightly more than a 3% average during the last three decades), earnings of barely 11% of the GDP (which explains a public investment below 6% of the GDP), a workforce based on low-skill labor, low unionization, massive casualization (around 60% of workers) and paltry salaries that are insufficient to cover basic necessities. Thus, in the last two decades, national wealth increased and became concentrated – with 1% of the population controlling 43% of the national wealth – while poverty levels remain flat or are growing in certain demographic segments,

reaching to 53:3% of the population. And the minimum wage, so needed to cover the citizenry's basic necessities, shows signs of a prolonged and dramatic fall (Esquivel, 2015).

In sum, the post-transitional Mexico that held elections on 1 July 2018, was one in which the state of the different political and citizens' rights institutions are under severe dispute. This is the scenario in which, product of public apathy, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) and his political project – known as the *Fourth Transformation* (4T) – come to power.

## II. Delegative Democracy in Rapid Construction

Coming back to the above-identified elements of delegative democracy, the AMLO government demonstrates, a few short months after taking power, traits that place it on the path of being classified as that type of regime. Its *contentious emergence* is produced as a result of socioeconomic stagnation and the widespread reexamination of the system by parties and the dominant elites. At the same time, the (*widespread*) *democraticness of origin* was expressed with the support at the polls of 30,046,000 votes – a 53.17% of total ballots cast – a percentage of support that has increased in the first months of government.



Graphic II. Considerations over the direction of the country (Grupo de Economistas y Asociados e Investigaciones Sociales Aplicadas, 2019)

It maintains a (*restricted*) *democraticness of functioning*, being that basic political freedoms are conserved, albeit stressed by allegations of punitive use of auditing institutions (Carretto, 2019; Garciaheredia, 2019; López, 2019; Morales, 2019), the cyber-bullying of critics of the 4T (Redacción Aristegui, 2019; Signa\_Lab ITESO, 2019), as well as the discursive *polarization* which, from the official narrative, separates the government's supporters (the "good people") from its opponents (vilified as "conservatives," either of the left or the right) and even from civil society (El Financiero, 2019). In March 2018, the then-candidate asserted: "I greatly mistrust everything that is called civil society or independent initiatives. The problem is that much has been pretended under the guise of civil society, just like those independent candidacies that are independent of the people, not of the mafia of power" (Milenio, 2018). Since then, following his installation as President, the interrogations have continued in the same vein (Agencia El Universal, 2019).

In addition, the President insists on playing against the reviled representative democracy the virtuous participative democracy, when pointing out: "There are two types of democracy: there is a representative democracy, which is that of the Congress, and there is – and should be – also a participative democracy. It is not that democracy ends, or runs out, when constitutional elections occur, when the deputies, the senators, even the president, are elected. I will submit to a referendum on my mandate; every two years, the citizens will be asked, 'Do you want the President to go, to resign?' because the people give and the people take away" (Milenio, 2018).

Personalism and decisionism have marked the entire period from 1 December 2018 to date. The President's morning conferences determine the government's position – and, to a great extent, its media and social stance – on diverse matters of national life, the development of public policies, and the national political dynamic (Najar, 2019). The administration's format, the leader's responsive style, and the recently announced restrictions on press access, position it as an echo chamber, with little room for dialogue, of the official discourse (Forbes, 2019).

In terms of movementism, the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA) is conceived – and operates – as a highly centralized party-movement, lacking internal currents, and with debates restricted to the decisions and urgencies of its leadership (Arroyo, 2018; Bolívar, 2014; Espinoza y Navarrete, 2016). In MORENA's foundational ideology, the paradigm of *revolutionary nationalism* and the leader-mass nexus suggests the *populist* tradition rooted in the national political culture (Ackerman, 2018). It does not affect the *contingent alliances* with the evangelicals of the Social Encounter Party, the leninists of the Labor Party, and the defectors of the Green Party.

The *limited consultativeness* and *deliberation* in governmental decisions relative to public investments and policies have been made patent, among other cases, in the ad hoc call for popular

consultations, driven by the Executive. The consultation did not comply with the law: the President-Elect, who initiates it, was not in-office; the Congress, dominated by MORENA, did not issue the call, and it took place outside of election season.<sup>2</sup> In that regard, AMLO stated: “If we waited, we would have to make the request for a consultation as Article 35 of the Constitution establishes, and it was going to take us three, four or six months to apply it, and this would mean extending the time of capital outlays already in-process and not taking a prompt decision” (México Decide, 2018; Sandoval y Welp, 2018).

Given these antecedents, the National Electoral Institute (INE) refused to handle a consultation taking place outside normative conditions; thus it contracted with a private enterprise and resorted to the work of thousands of volunteers to organize the polling sites. According to reported data, 761,681 participants supported the official project (renovate the Santa Lucia air base); 316,765 voted to continue construction of the Texcoco airport; and 10,562 ballots were null; resulting in a total of 1,089,008 voters – barely 1.19% of the voting public. Meanwhile, the law indicates that a popular consultation will be binding when total participation corresponds to, at least, 40% of the electorate.

Without an administrative body responsible for ensuring that equity of a consultation, there were many allegations of multiple voting and with no identity confirmation, enabling individual voters to register more than once. Neither were there guarantees of the safekeeping of votes, as these were transported to the homes of the volunteers manning the polling sites. Regardless, the government-elect declared that the results would have a binding effect. Based on the presumable objectives of legitimizing an already-taken governmental decision – and under the premise of delegating to the citizenry the responsibilities for its future impacts – the very low level of voting and the process’ lack of transparency and equity reveal an undue use of the democratic-participative mechanism known as popular consultation.

The preeminence of political affiliation for technical credentials within the frames of the current government is recognizable. In this regard, the marxist intellectual Carlos Illades declared: “The sophistication of some areas of the central administration, decentralized organisms, or state-owned companies in legal, technological, financial or scientific matters – versus the weakness, numerically and qualitatively, of the leftist intelligentsia – complicated the handing over of the government. The overwhelming victory at the polls generated great expectations surrounding the

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<sup>2</sup> The Federal Law of Popular Consultation (2014) allows this process of deliberation over issues of national transcendence, following a call by the Congress of the Union at the request of the President of the Republic; with 33% of the membership of either of the Chambers of Congress, or of 2% of the voters. Consultations are to be carried out the day of the federal election, which in this case would occur during the intermediate polls of 2021.

new government's managerial capacity, lacking sufficient and trained professionals to fill the gaps left in the public administration by the salary reductions imposed on the high-level bureaucracy" (Illades, 2019).

## Conclusions

When the formula headed by Andrés Manuel López Obrador prevailed on July 1, Mexico's political order changed radically. Within one sole government alliance and project were combined various *political-institutional* factors which – individually and especially in their totality – profoundly stress the precarious polyarchy constructed in recent decades. The first is AMLO's charismatic leadership. In second place, a party forged around the ruler wherein decision-making verticalism and loyalty to the maximum leader appear as principal axes of political action. Thirdly, the achievement of a majority in the Legislative branch and in a good part of the territorial government, which reduce the oppositional counterweight to a minimum expression – a factor aggravated by the decay, disorientation and demoralization visible in the great rival parties – PAN, PRI, PRD – versus MORENA's eventual hegemony.

To these elements let us add other, sociocultural, ones: a political culture little given to respect for the law and for democratic pluralism, in which radical representatives of the left, conservatives of the business world, and religious fundamentalists all coincide; a political culture that articulates itself to a public opinion hopeful for rapid and radical changes, which could foreseeably tolerate decisionism as a way to advance the "change agenda."

Not all bodes ill for the new government. A realignment of segments of the elite, the middle, and the working classes – with AMLO as the arbiter and MORENA as pivot – could possibly relaunch a certain national capitalism and expand the (today miserable) redistribution of wealth. However, the cocktail resulting from combining all of the above-noted factors tends toward *delegative democracy*. A model that, depending on the social resistances, internal adjustments and foreign pressures that may befall the new hegemonic bloc, will lead in the medium term (2024) to a democratic alternative or, in the worst scenario, to a *competitive authoritarianism*.

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**Paper originally wroted in spanish, translated by Alicia Barraqué Ellison,  
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