

Mexico and the PRI

Democracy and democratic growth are very relevant problems in Latin American countries, including Mexico. This is a country that moved from an authoritarian regime to democracy in the year 2000. Since then, though, unlike the robust democracies of Chile and Brazil, Mexico's democracy has failed to grow. On the contrary, it has been on the decline. While it might seem strange that a country that transitioned has not had any progress in its democracy, it is not surprising given the circumstances that Mexico is in. For starters, Mexico has an authoritarian successor party in the PRI. The PRI regime was the authoritarian regime that was in place before the transition to democracy. After the transition, it became a very strong party. Mexico is also a victim of organized crime because of the cartels. These cartels have much power, especially at the local level, and usually sway elections. Finally, although this is a more recent development, since 2018, the party MORENA came to power under former President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, a left populist party which has caused democratic backsliding. All these factors weaken institution and democracy unlike Chile and Brazil.

In the transition from the PRI authoritarian regime to democracy, "which came to an end in 2000; the PRI as a party did not disappear. On the contrary, the PRI made a relatively smooth transition from authoritarian ruling party to authoritarian successor party" (Flores-Macias). Authoritarian successor parties are very relevant in Latin America and are ones defined as parties that remained after an authoritarian regime transitioned to a democracy. Although in Brazil there were also authoritarian successor parties, they were checked by the constitution and a single-party system and in Chile, Pinochet era polices, and parties were gone after his era ended. In Mexico, the problem with the PRI lies mostly at the local level.

Ever since 2000, the PRI has maintained many governorships and control of local elections. This is a problem as “authoritarian successor parties spread the difficulty of building by simply inheriting a brand from the former dictatorship” (Loxton). If the authoritarian party rules at the local level, its ideals and agenda are easily spread which is the case in Mexico. It makes it hard for new parties to rule and takeover which undermines democracy. There are also “rules that privilege larger existing parties” (Greene and Talanquer). A lack of parties naturally leads to a lower level of democracy, Mexico’s rules make it hard for other parties to emerge and be victorious, that is until MORENA came up with Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador at the center of it.

Much of the dominance at the local level also stems from a problem in organized crime within the country. Mexico is widely known for its problems with its cartels and organized crime. It has one of the highest homicide rates in the world with “confrontations between armed groups causing more than a thousand deaths” (Scheider 7). Unlike Brazil and Chile, Mexico has a higher homicide rate and doesn’t have the institutions to fight organized crime such as those that Angeli highlights in Chile. This homicide rate and the crime organized by the cartels causes fear at the local level as well as leads to the death of any politicians that might try to oppose the cartel.

When it comes to organized crime, the cartels install fear in citizens which might sway them to vote in a certain way. The reason that the cartels do this is they have people in the government that work in their favor. When professor Trejo came to explain this phenomenon, he called it a gray area. Not all politicians are working for the cartels, but some are, and it is hard to remove them because of the power that the cartels have at the local level. They might shutdown or kill people at any protests, threaten business owners by having them pay taxes, or simply just

killing or tormenting anyone who goes against them. The politicians and judges in the “gray area” will then be more likely to be re-elected as an opposition would be quickly shutdown when it comes to voting. It is just not worth it for some people to vote against the people in the “gray area” if it means that their life is at risk. Even journalists who try to speak out are killed, in fact, Mexico has the highest rate of journalists killed in the world.

Furthermore, there is a problem in that politicians at the local level tend to be killed if they say they are against the cartels at all. Many politicians and journalists have tried to speak against the cartel and get elected to try and put an end to them. While it seems like a good idea, “drug cartels use targeted lethal violence against mayors and local party candidates to develop subnational governance regimes” (Trejo and Ley 252). It is clear how democracy cannot develop if politicians, members of the judiciary, journalists and anyone who tries to claim and sort of power against the cartels is killed. There is no democracy if there are no other options, especially if the other options are rid of by an unofficial local regime. While although not in Mexico, Professor Trejo was a great example of someone who tried to stand up against the crime but was persecuted.

Professor Trejo tried to run for President in Nicaragua, his home country but was later sent to jail for many years because of it. He was a political prisoner and thankfully was spared. This is like what happens in Mexico, but the individuals are not so lucky, they get killed. Now, why is this not a problem in Brazil or Chile? Again, this has much to do with the fact that Chile and Brazil both have strong institutions, checks and balances and police forces that would deal with any such problems. While the homicides are still high in Brazil, there is not as much of a problem with people infiltrated in the government trying to dismantle checks and balances and take control.

Perhaps the biggest threat to Mexico democracy and the reason as to why it has been on the decline rather than growing is the election of President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. “He [AMLO] comes from the PRI’s authoritarian timber” (Mainwaring and Perez-Linan). He had tried to run for President many times with the PRI but was unsuccessful. He then separated himself from the party and formed his own party called MORENA which set itself apart as a leftist populist party. AMLO has been a good president (or so it seems) to the Mexican people. He has gotten many people in country out of poverty and has made it seem as though he is a new hope for the Mexican people. What they do not realize, is the democratic backsliding that such a president has on the country. AMLO has time and time again undermined checks and balances. Just recently, he reformed the judicial system so that justice and judges can be elected. With the problems mentioned above, it is clear why this will be a problem going forward, not to mention that it is a clear violation of checks and balances.

Democratic backsliding under Chavez was what lead Venezuela to the authoritarian regime that it is today. Many have wanted to conclude that Mexico will end up like Venezuela. It is an argument that “left wing populists of the left command greater strength and has more policy tools” (Weyland) and that is why left-wing populism is so dangerous. Although it might seem as though Mexico is on the same path as Venezuela it is difficult to see such a breakdown happening, considering the decline has been relatively small. Although not as big, democratic backsliding is still a problem in Mexico.

Although Lopez Obrador was democratically elected, he has many undemocratic qualities. The main overlying quality is trying to take more power as the executive. He has slashed funding from institutions and undermined the autonomy of government agencies. Undermining institutions, agencies and checks and balances is a classic part of the populist

playbook and can quickly lead to backsliding in a country where the institutions are already weak to begin with. There is “a link between conflict and ineffective state institutions and state building and governance” (Schwartz). With institutions being weakened, it is harder for democracy to survive, and here is another difference between Mexico and Chile/Brazil.

In Chile, according to Alan Angeli, the institutions are very strong. A correlation can be made between these strong institutions and Chile’s high level of democracy. Since Chile’s institutions are strong, they have been able to progress democracy even further after the transition after Pinochet. In Brazil on the other hand, although the institutions are not as strong as they are in Chile, they will have the power to combat corruption. This can be mainly seen in the Lava Jato corruption scandal. There was much corruption within the Brazilian government, but it was later exposed and dealt with. This is not true in the Mexican case. The Mexican case shares a similarity in that there is corruption within the government but differs in the tools that it has to combat it. In fact, Brazil has strategies that can prevent mistakes that have been made before such as “having powerful agents block policies that can prevent economic breakdown” (O’Donnell 1367). Unfortunately, Mexico has no such tools because of the corruption, organized crime, traces of authoritarianism and its new party undermining checks and balances.

Although Lopez Obrador is gone at this point, there was just recently an election in the year 2024 which elected Claudia Sheinbaum, Lopez Obrador’s right hand woman. She used to be mayor of Mexico City and is Mexico’s first female president. Under her, backsliding will only continue as she seeks to continue the work that Lopez Obrador started. Through her election, MORENA also came to control many levels of the Mexican government including the legislature. With this much control all over the government, and the new policy for the courts,

the new President of Mexico is likely to continue Lopez Obrador's democratic backsliding tendencies.

Brazil and Chile were a bit luckier than Mexico and that explains why they have such robust democracies in comparison to Mexico. When it comes to organized crime, both countries have the institutions and the police force to be able to combat it. Arguably, they also have a stronger constitution which prevent as much organized crime to happen in the first place, let alone the absence of the cartels. Authoritarian successor parties, either were completely removed or lost power in both Chile and Brazil. Their power and therefore their authoritarian tendencies were mostly gone. Finally, while both cases might have had leaders that incorporated democratic backsliding into their regime, they were quickly either removed from power as was the case with Brazil and Dilma or the country moved away from them and voted for someone else as the case with Boric in Chile. Much of this has to do with the fact that these two countries have the proper institutions to combat these issues, something which Mexico lacks and will continue to lack if it continues down the path that it is currently on.

While Mexico transitioned to democracy from authoritarianism in the year 2000, it has had a difficult journey and the democracy has never really grown, but declined, especially during the past few years. The main problems that have led for this to be the case is the organized crime within the country, the existence and power of the authoritarian successor party in the PRI and the election of a new party with a president that has caused democratic backsliding in AMLO. While comparisons can be made to Brazil and Chile, those countries have stronger institutions than Mexico which helps them combat any instances of the problems highlighted. With the election of Claudia Sheinbaum, it is unclear in which direction Mexico is headed, but its democracy seems to be in increasing danger.