

A New Revolution in Mexico

Jon Lee Anderson

The New Yorker, June 25, 2018

Sick of corruption and of Trump, voters embrace the maverick leftist Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

The first time that Andrés Manuel López Obrador ran for President of Mexico, in 2006, he inspired such devotion among his partisans that they sometimes stuck notes in his pockets, inscribed with their hopes for their families. In an age defined by globalism, he was an advocate of the working class—and also a critic of the *PRI*, the party that has ruthlessly dominated national politics for much of the past century. In the election, his voters' fervor was evidently not enough; he lost, by a tiny margin. The second time he ran, in 2012, the enthusiasm was the same, and so was the outcome. Now, though, Mexico is in crisis—beset from inside by corruption and drug violence, and from outside by the antagonism of the Trump Administration. There are new Presidential elections on July 1st, and López Obrador is running on a promise to remake Mexico in the spirit of its founding revolutionaries. If the polls can be believed, he is almost certain to win.

In March, he held a meeting with hundreds of loyalists, at a conference hall in Culiacán. López Obrador, known across Mexico as *AMLO*, is a rangy man of sixty-four, with a youthful, clean-shaven face, a mop of silver hair, and an easy gait. When he entered, his supporters got to their feet and chanted, "It's an honor to vote for López Obrador!" Many of them were farmworkers, wearing straw hats and scuffed boots. He urged them to install Party observers at polling stations to prevent fraud, but cautioned against buying votes, a long-established habit of the *PRI*. "That's what we're getting rid of," he said. He promised a "sober, austere government—a government without privilege." López Obrador frequently uses "privilege" as a term of disparagement, along with "élite," and, especially, "power mafia," as he describes his enemies in the political and business communities. "We are going to lower the salaries of those who are on top to increase the salaries of those on the bottom," he said, and added a Biblical assurance: "Everything I am saying will be done." López Obrador spoke in a warm voice, leaving long pauses and using simple phrases that ordinary people would understand. He has a penchant for rhymes and repeated slogans, and at times the crowd joined in, like fans at a pop concert. When he said, "We don't want to help the power mafia to . . .," a man in the audience finished his sentence: "keep stealing." Working together, López Obrador said, "we are going to make history."

The current Mexican government is led by the center-right [President Enrique Peña Nieto](#). His party, the *PRI*, has depicted López Obrador as a radical populist, in the tradition of Hugo Chávez, and warned that he intends to turn Mexico into another Venezuela. The Trump Administration has been similarly concerned. Roberta Jacobson, who until last month was the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, told me that

senior American officials often expressed worry: “They catastrophized about *AMLO*, saying things like ‘If he wins, the worst will happen.’ ”

Ironically, his surging popularity can be attributed partly to Donald Trump. Within days of Trump’s election, Mexican political analysts were predicting that his open belligerence toward Mexico would encourage political resistance. Mentor Tijerina, a prominent pollster in Monterrey, told me at the time, “Trump’s arrival signifies a crisis for Mexico, and this will help *AMLO*.” Not long after the Inauguration, López Obrador published a best-selling book called “[Oye, Trump](#)” (“Listen Up, Trump”), which contained tough-talking snippets from his speeches. In one, he declared, “Trump and his advisers speak of the Mexicans the way Hitler and the Nazis referred to the Jews, just before undertaking the infamous persecution and the abominable extermination.”

Officials in the Peña Nieto government warned their counterparts in the White House that Trump’s offensive behavior heightened the prospect of a hostile new government—a national-security threat just across the border. If Trump didn’t modulate his behavior, the election would be a referendum on which candidate was the most anti-American. In the U.S., the warnings worked. During a Senate hearing in April, 2017, John McCain said, “If the election were tomorrow in Mexico, you would probably get a left-wing, anti-American President.” John Kelly, who was then the Homeland Security chief, agreed. “It would not be good for America—or for Mexico,” he said.

In Mexico, remarks like Kelly’s seemed only to improve López Obrador’s standing. “Every time an American politician opens their mouth to express a negative view about a Mexican candidate, it helps him,” Jacobson said. But she has never been sure that Trump has the same “apocalyptic” view of *AMLO*. “There are certain traits they share,” she noted. “The populism, for starters.” During the campaign, López Obrador has decried Mexico’s “pharaonic government” and promised that, if he is elected, he will decline to live in Los Pinos, the Presidential residence. Instead, he will open it to the public, as a place for ordinary families to go and enjoy themselves.

After Jacobson arrived in Mexico, in 2016, she arranged meetings with local political leaders. López Obrador kept her waiting for months. Finally, he invited her to his home, in a distant, unfashionable corner of Mexico City. “I had the impression he did that because he didn’t think I would come,” she said. “But I told him, ‘No problem, my security guys can make that work.’ ” Jacobson’s team followed his directions to an unremarkable two-story town house in Tlalpan, a middle-class district. “If part of the point was to show me how modestly he lived, he succeeded,” she said.

López Obrador was “friendly and confident,” she said, but he deflected many of her questions and spoke vaguely about policy. The conversation did little to settle the issue of whether he was an opportunistic radical or a principled reformer. “What should we expect from him as President?” she said. “Honestly, my strongest feeling about him is that we don’t know what to expect.”

Video From The New Yorker

This spring, as López Obrador and his advisers travelled the country, I joined them on several trips. On the road, his style is strikingly different from that of most national politicians, who often arrive at campaign stops in helicopters and move through the streets surrounded by security details. López Obrador flies coach, and travels from town to town in a two-car caravan, with drivers who double as unarmed bodyguards; he has no other security measures in place, except for inconsistent efforts to obscure which hotel he is staying in. On the street, people approach him constantly to ask for selfies, and he greets them all with equanimity, presenting a warm, slightly inscrutable façade. “AMLO is like an abstract painting—you see what you want to see in him,” Luis Miguel González, the editorial director of the newspaper *El Economista*, told me. One of his characteristic gestures during speeches is to demonstrate affection by hugging himself and leaning toward the crowd.

Jacobson recalled that, after Trump was elected, López Obrador lamented, “Mexicans will never elect someone who is not a politician.” This was telling, she thought. “He is clearly a politician,” she said. “But, like Trump, he has always presented himself as an outsider.” He was born in 1953, to a family of shopkeepers in Tabasco state, in a village called Tepetitán. Tabasco, on the Gulf of Mexico, is bisected by rivers that regularly flood its towns; in both its climate and the feistiness of its local politics, it can resemble Louisiana. One observer recalled that López Obrador joked, “Politics is a perfect blend of passion and reason. But I’m *tabasqueño*, a hundred per cent passion!” His nickname, El Peje, is derived from *pejelagarto*—Tabasco’s freshwater gar, an ancient, primitive fish with a face like an alligator’s.

When López Obrador was a boy, his family moved to the state capital, Villahermosa. Later, in Mexico City, he studied political science and public policy at *UNAM*, the country’s premier state-funded university, writing his thesis about the political formation of the Mexican state, in the nineteenth century. He married Rocío Beltrán Medina, a sociology student from Tabasco, and they had three sons. Elena Poniatowska, the doyenne of Mexican journalism, recalls meeting him when he was a young man. “He has always been very determined to get to the Presidency,” she said. “Like an arrow, straight and unswerving.”

For a person with political aspirations, the *PRI* was then the only serious option. It had been founded in 1929, to restore the country after the revolution. In the thirties, President Lázaro Cárdenas solidified it as an inclusive party of socialist change; he nationalized the oil industry and provided millions of acres of farmland to the poor and the dispossessed. Over the decades, the Party’s ideology fluctuated, but its hold on power steadily grew. Presidents chose their successors, in a ritual called the *dedazo*, and the Party made sure that they were elected.

López Obrador joined the *PRI* after college, and, in 1976, he helped direct a successful Senate campaign for Carlos Pellicer, a poet who was friends with Pablo Neruda and Frida Kahlo. López Obrador rose quickly; he spent five years running the Tabasco office of the National Indigenous Institute, and then leading a department of the National Consumer Institute, in Mexico City. But he felt increasingly that the Party had strayed from its roots. In 1988, he joined a left-wing breakaway group, led by Lázaro Cárdenas's son, that grew into the Partido Revolucionario Democrático. López Obrador became the Party chief in Tabasco.

In 1994, he made his first attempt at electoral office, running for governor of the state. He lost to the *PRI*'s candidate, whom he accused of having won through fraud. Although a court inquiry did not lead to a verdict, many Mexicans believed him; the *PRI* has a long record of rigging elections. Soon after the election, a supporter handed López Obrador a box of receipts, showing that the *PRI* had spent ninety-five million dollars on an election in which half a million people voted.

In 2000, he was elected mayor of Mexico City, a post that gave him considerable power, as well as national visibility. In office, he built a reputation as a ruffled everyman; he drove an old Nissan to work, arriving before sunrise, and he reduced his own salary. (When his wife died, of lupus, in 2003, there was an outpouring of sympathy.) He was not averse to political combat. After one of his officials was caught on tape seeming to accept a bribe, he argued that it was a sting, and distributed comic books that depicted himself fighting against "dark forces." (The official was later cleared.) At times, López Obrador ignored his assembly and governed by edict. But he also proved able to compromise. He succeeded in creating a pension fund for elderly residents, expanding highways to ease congestion, and devising a public-private scheme, with the telecommunications magnate Carlos Slim, to restore the historic downtown.

When he left office to prepare for the 2006 Presidential elections, he had high approval ratings and a reputation for getting things done. (He also had a new wife, a historian named Beatriz Gutiérrez Müller; they now have an eleven-year-old son.) López Obrador saw an opportunity. In the last election, the *PRI* had lost its long hold on power, as the Partido de Acción Nacional won the Presidency. The *PAN*, a traditionalist conservative party, had support from the business community, but its candidate, Felipe Calderón, was an uncharismatic figure.

The campaign was hard fought. López Obrador's opponents ran television ads that presented him as a deceitful populist who posed "a danger for Mexico" and showed images of human misery alongside portraits of Chávez, Fidel Castro, and Evo Morales. In the end, López Obrador lost by half of one per cent of the vote—a margin slim enough to raise widespread suspicions of fraud. Refusing to recognize Calderón's win, he led a protest in the capital, where his followers stopped traffic, erected tented encampments, and held rallies in the historic Zócalo and along Reforma Avenue. One resident recalled his giving speeches in "language that was reminiscent of the French Revolution." At one point, he conducted a parallel inauguration ceremony in which his supporters swore him in as President. The

protests lasted months, and the residents of Mexico City grew impatient; eventually, López Obrador packed up and went home.

In the 2012 election, he won a third of the vote—not enough to defeat Peña Nieto, who returned the *PR*I to power. But Peña Nieto’s government has been tarnished by corruption and human-rights scandals. Ever since Trump announced his candidacy with a burst of anti-Mexican rhetoric, Peña Nieto has tried to placate him, with embarrassing results. He invited Trump to Mexico during his campaign and treated him as if he were already a head of state, only to have him return to the U.S. and tell a crowd of supporters that Mexico would “pay for the wall.” After Trump was elected, Peña Nieto assigned his foreign minister, Luis Videgaray, who is a friend of Jared Kushner’s, to make managing the White House relationship his highest priority. “Peña Nieto has been extremely accommodating,” Jorge Guajardo, a former Mexican Ambassador to China, told me. “There’s nothing Trump has even hinted at that he won’t immediately comply with.”

In early March, before López Obrador’s campaign had officially begun, we travelled through northern Mexico, where resistance to him is concentrated. His base of support is in the poorer, more agrarian south, with its majority indigenous population. The north, near the border with Texas, is more conservative, tied both economically and culturally to the southern United States; his task there was not so different from presenting himself to the Houston Chamber of Commerce.

In speeches, he tried to make light of his opponents’ accusations, cracking jokes about receiving “gold from Russia in a submarine” and calling himself “Andrés Manuelovich.” In Delicias, an agricultural hub in Chihuahua, he swore not to overextend his term in office. “I’m going to work sixteen hours a day instead of eight, so I will do twelve years’ work in six years,” he said. This rhetoric was backed by more pragmatic measures. As he travelled through the north, he was accompanied by Alfonso (Poncho) Romo, a wealthy businessman from the industrial boomtown of Monterrey, whom López Obrador had selected as his future chief of staff. A close adviser told me, “Poncho is key to the campaign in the north. Poncho is the bridge.” In Guadalajara, López Obrador told the audience, “Poncho is with me to help convince the businessmen who have been told we’re like Venezuela, or with the Russians, that we want to expropriate property, and that we’re populist. But none of that is true—this is a government made in Mexico.”

At a lunch with businessmen in Culiacán, the capital of Sinaloa state, López Obrador tested some ideas. “What we want to do is to carry out the transformation that this country needs,” he began. “Things can’t go on as they are.” He spoke in a conversational tone, and the crowd gradually seemed to grow more sympathetic. “We’re going to end the corruption, the impunity, and the privileges enjoyed by a small élite,” he said. “Once we do, the leaders of this country can recover their moral and political authority. And we’ll also clean up the image of Mexico in the rest of the world, because right now all that Mexico is known for is violence and corruption.”

López Obrador spoke about helping the poor, but when he talked about corruption he focussed on the political class. “Five million pesos a month in pension for ex-Presidents!” he said, and grimaced. “All of that has to end.” He noted that there were hundreds of Presidential jets and helicopters, and said, “We’re going to sell them to Trump.” The audience laughed, and he added, “We’ll use the money from the sale for public investment, and thus foment private investment to generate employment.”

During these early events, López Obrador was adjusting his message as he went along. His campaign strategy seemed simple: make lots of promises and broker whatever alliances were necessary to get elected. Just as he promised his Party faithful to raise workers’ salaries at the expense of senior bureaucrats, he promised the businessmen not to increase taxes on fuel, medicine, or electricity, and vowed that he would never confiscate property. “We will do nothing that goes against freedoms,” he declared. He proposed establishing a thirty-kilometre duty-free zone along the entire northern border, and lowering taxes for companies, both Mexican and American, that set up factories there. He also offered government patronage, vowing to complete an unfinished dam project in Sinaloa and to provide agricultural subsidies. “The term ‘subsidy’ has been satanized,” he said. “But it is necessary. In the United States they do it—up to a hundred per cent of the cost of production.”

Culiacán is a former stronghold of the brutal Sinaloa cartel, which has been instrumental in the flood of drug-related violence and corruption that has subsumed the Mexican state. Since 2006, the country has pursued a “war on drugs” that has cost at least a hundred thousand lives, seemingly to little good effect. López Obrador, like his opponents, has struggled to articulate a viable security strategy.

After the lunch in Culiacán, he took questions, and a woman stood to ask what he intended to do about narco-trafficking. Would he consider the legalization of drugs as a solution? A few months earlier, he had said, seemingly without much deliberation, that he might offer an “amnesty” to bring low-level dealers and producers into legal employment. When critics leaped on his remark, his aides tried to deflect criticism by arguing that, because none of the current administration’s policies had worked, anything was worth trying. To the woman in Culiacán, he said, “We’re going to tackle the causes with youth programs, new employment opportunities, education, and by tending to the abandoned countryside. We’re not only going to use force. We’ll analyze everything and explore all the avenues that will let us achieve peace. I don’t rule out anything, not even legalization—nothing.” The crowd applauded, and *AMLO* looked relieved.

For López Obrador’s opponents, his ability to inspire hope is worrisome. Enrique Krauze, a historian and commentator who has often criticized the left, told me, “He reaches directly into the religious sensibilities of the people. They are seeing him as a man who will save Mexico from all of its evils. Even more important, he believes it, too.”

Krauze has been concerned about López Obrador ever since 2006. Before the Presidential elections that year, he published an essay titled “The Tropical Messiah,”

in which he wrote that *AMLO* had a religious zeal that was “puritanical, dogmatic, authoritarian, inclined toward hatred, and above all, redemptory.” Krauze’s latest book—“[El Pueblo Soy Yo](#),” or “I Am the People”—is about the dangers of populism. He examines the political cultures in modern Venezuela and Cuba, and also includes a scathing assessment of Donald Trump, whom he refers to as “Caligula on Twitter.” In the preface, he writes about López Obrador in a tone of oracular dismay. “I believe that, if he wins, he will use his charisma to promise a return to an Arcadian order,” he says. “And with that accumulated power, arrived at thanks to democracy, he will corrode democracy from within.”

What worried Krauze, he explained, was that if López Obrador’s party won big—not just the Presidency but also a majority in Congress, which the polls suggest is likely—he might move to change the composition of the Supreme Court and dominate other institutions. He could also exercise tighter control over the media, much of which is supported by state-sponsored advertising. “Will he ruin Mexico?” Krauze asked. “No, but he could obstruct Mexico’s democracy by removing its counterweights. We’ve had a democratic experiment for the past eighteen years, ever since the *PRI* first lost power, in 2000. It is imperfect, there is much to criticize, but there have also been positive changes. I’m worried that with *AMLO* this experiment might end.”

Over dinner in Culiacán one night, López Obrador picked at a steak taco and talked about his antagonists on the right, alternating between amusement and concern. A few days earlier, Roberta Jacobson had announced that she was stepping down as Ambassador, and the Mexican government had immediately endorsed a prospective replacement: Edward Whitacre, a former C.E.O. of General Motors who happened to be a friend of the tycoon Carlos Slim. This was a nettlesome point for López Obrador. He had recently argued with Slim over a multibillion-dollar plan for a new Mexico City airport, which Slim was involved in. The scheme was a public-private venture with Peña Nieto’s government, and López Obrador, alleging corruption, had promised to stop it. (The government denies any malfeasance.) “We are hoping it doesn’t mean they are planning to interfere against me,” López Obrador said, of Whitacre and Slim. “Millions of Mexicans would take offense at that.”

Recently, the Peruvian novelist and politician [Mario Vargas Llosa](#)—who serves as an oracle for the Latin American right—had said publicly that if *AMLO* won office it would be “a tremendous setback for democracy in Mexico.” He added that he hoped the country would not commit “suicide” on Election Day. When I mentioned the remarks, López Obrador grinned and said that Vargas Llosa was in the news mostly for his marriage to “a woman who always married up, and was always in *Hola!* magazine.” He was referring to the socialite Isabel Preysler, a former wife of the singer Julio Iglesias, for whom Vargas Llosa had abandoned his marriage of fifty years. López Obrador asked if I’d seen his response, in which he’d called Vargas Llosa a good writer and a bad politician. “You notice,” he said wickedly, “I didn’t call him a *great* writer.”

On April 1st, López Obrador officially launched his campaign, before a crowd of several thousand people in Ciudad Juárez. On a stage set up in a plaza, he stood with his wife, Beatriz, and several of his cabinet picks. “We have come here to initiate our campaign, in the place where our fatherland begins,” he said. The stage stood under a grand statue of Mexico’s revered nineteenth-century leader Benito Juárez, an avowed hero of López Obrador’s. Juárez, a man of humble Zapotec origins who championed the cause of the disenfranchised, is a kind of Abraham Lincoln figure in Mexico—an emblem of unbending honor and persistence. Looking at the statue, López Obrador said that Juárez was “the best President Mexico ever had.”

In López Obrador’s speech, he likened the current administration to the despots and colonists who had controlled the country before the revolution. He attacked the “colossal dishonesty” that he said had characterized the “neoliberal” policies of Mexico’s last few governments. “The country’s leaders have devoted themselves . . . to concessioning off the national territory,” he said. With his Presidency, the government would “cease to be a factory that produces Mexico’s nouveaux riches.”

López Obrador often speaks of admiring leaders from the nineteen-thirties—including F.D.R. and the *PRI* head Lázaro Cárdenas—and much of his social program recalls the initiatives of those years. In his launch speech, he said that he intended to develop the south of the country, where the agricultural economy has been devastated by inexpensive U.S. food imports. To do this, he proposed to plant millions of trees for fruit and timber, and to build a high-speed tourist train that would connect the beaches of the Yucatán Peninsula with Mayan ruins inland. The tree-planting project alone would create four hundred thousand jobs, he predicted. With these initiatives, he said, people in the south would be able to stay in their villages and not have to travel north for work.

Across the country, he would encourage construction projects that used hand tools rather than modern machinery, in order to boost the economy in rural communities. Pensions for the elderly would double. There would be free Internet in Mexico’s schools, and in its public spaces. Young people would be guaranteed scholarships, and then jobs after graduation. He wanted “*becarios sí, sicarios no*”—scholarship students, not contract killers.

For many audiences, especially in the south, these proposals are appealingly simple. When López Obrador is asked how he will pay for them, he tends to offer a similarly seductive answer. “It’s not a problem!” he said, in one speech. “There is money. What there *is* is corruption, and we’re going to stop it.” By getting rid of official corruption, he has calculated, Mexico could save ten per cent of its national budget. Corruption is a major issue for López Obrador. Marcelo Ebrard, his chief political aide, says that his ethics are informed by a “Calvinist streak,” and even some skeptics have been persuaded of his sincerity. Cassio Luiselli, a longtime Mexican diplomat, told me, “I don’t like his authoritarian streak and confrontational style.” But, he added, “he seems to me to be an honest man, which is a lot to say in these parts.”

López Obrador has vowed that his first bill to Congress would amend an article in the constitution that prevents sitting Mexican Presidents from being tried for corruption. This would be a symbolic deterrent, but an insufficient one; in order to root out corruption, he'd have to purge huge swaths of the government. Last year, the former governor of Chihuahua, charged with embezzlement, fled to the U.S., where he is evading efforts at extradition. More than a dozen other current and former state governors have faced criminal investigations. The attorney general who led some of those inquiries was himself reported to have a Ferrari registered in his name at an unoccupied house in a different state, and, though his lawyer argued that it was an administrative error, he resigned not long afterward. The former head of the national oil company has been accused of taking millions of dollars in bribes. (He denies this.) Peña Nieto, who ran as a reformer, was involved in a scandal in which his wife obtained a luxurious house from a developer with connections to the government; later, his administration was accused of using spyware to eavesdrop on opponents. According to reporting in the *Times*, state prosecutors have declined to pursue damning evidence against *PRI* officials, to avoid harming the Party's electoral chances.

With every major party implicated in corruption, López Obrador's supporters seem to care less about the practicality of his ideas than about his promises to fix a broken government. Emiliano Monge, a prominent novelist and essayist, said, "This election really began to cease being political a few months ago and became emotional. It is more than anything a referendum against corruption, in which, as much by right as by cleverness, *AMLO* has presented himself as the only alternative. And in reality he is."

For months, López Obrador's team crisscrossed the country. Arriving in a tiny cow town called Guadalupe Victoria, he told me that he had been there twenty times. After a long day of speeches and meetings in Sinaloa, we had dinner as he prepared to travel to Tijuana, where he had a similar agenda the next day. He looked a little weary, and I asked if he was planning a break. He nodded, and told me that, during Easter, he'd go to Palenque, in the southern state of Chiapas, where he had a *ranchito* in the jungle. "I go there and don't come out again for three or four days," he said. "I just look at the trees."

For the most part, though, communing with the crowds seemed to energize him. In Delicias, it took him twenty minutes to walk a single block, as supporters pressed in for selfies and kisses and held up banners that read "*AMLOVE*"—one of his campaign slogans. Appearances with his opponents and encounters with the media suit him less. At times, he has responded to forceful questions from reporters with a wave of his pinkie—in Mexico, a peremptory no. In 2006, he declined to attend the first Presidential debate; his opponents left an empty chair for him onstage.

There were three debates scheduled for this campaign season, and they were *AMLO*'s to lose. By May 20th, when the second one was held, in Tijuana, polls said that he had an estimated forty-nine per cent of the vote. His nearest rival—Ricardo Anaya, a thirty-nine-year-old lawyer who is the *PAN* candidate—had twenty-

eight per cent. José Antonio Meade, who had served Peña Nieto as finance secretary and foreign secretary, trailed with twenty-one. In last place, with two per cent, was Jaime Rodríguez Calderón, the governor of the state of Nuevo León. An intemperate tough guy known as El Bronco, he has made his mark on the campaign by suggesting that corrupt officials should have their hands chopped off.

With López Obrador in the lead, his opponents' debate strategy was to make him look defensive, and at times it worked. At one point, Anaya, a small man with the buzz-cut hair and frameless glasses of a tech entrepreneur, walked across the stage to confront López Obrador. At first, *AMLO* reacted mildly. He reached for his pocket and exclaimed, "I'm going to protect my wallet." The mood lightened. But when Anaya challenged him on one favorite initiative, a train line connecting the Caribbean and the Pacific, he was so affronted that he called Anaya a *canalla*, a scoundrel. He went on, using the diminutive form of Anaya's first name to create a rhyming ditty that poked fun at his stature: "Ricky, *riquín*, *canallín*."

When Meade, the *PRI* candidate, criticized López Obrador's party for voting against a trade agreement, *AMLO* replied that the debate was merely an excuse to attack him. "It's obvious, and, I would say, understandable," he said. "We are leading by twenty-five points in the polls." Otherwise, he hardly bothered to look Meade's way, except to wave dismissively at him and Anaya and call them representatives of "the power mafia."

Nevertheless, his lead in polls only grew. Two days later, in the resort town of Puerto Vallarta, thousands of fans surrounded his white S.U.V., holding it in place until police opened a pathway. On social media, video clips circulated of well-wishers bending down to kiss his car.

Ever since he lost the election of 2006, López Obrador has presented himself as an avatar of change. He founded a new party, the National Regeneration Movement, or *MORENA*, which Duncan Wood, the director of the Mexico Institute at the Wilson Center, described as evocative of the early *PRI*—an effort to sweep up everyone who felt that Mexico had gone astray. "He went around the country signing agreements with people," Wood said. " 'Do you want to be part of a change? Yes? Then sign here.' " *MORENA* has an increasing number of sympathizers but relatively few official members; last year, it had three hundred and twenty thousand, making it the country's fourth-largest party. As López Obrador's campaign has gathered strength, he has welcomed partners that seem profoundly incompatible. In December, *MORENA* forged a coalition with the P.T., a party with Maoist origins; it also joined with the *PES*, an evangelical Christian party that opposes same-sex marriage, homosexuality, and abortion. Some of his aides intimate that López Obrador could sever these ties after he wins, but not everyone is convinced. "What terrifies me most are his political alliances," Luis Miguel González, of *El Economista*, told me.

At a rally in the town of Gómez Palacio, some of these alliances collided messily. In an open-air market on the edge of town, P.T. partisans occupied a large area near

the stage—an organized bloc of young men wearing red T-shirts and waving flags with yellow stars. Onstage with López Obrador was the Party's chief, Beto Anaya. One of López Obrador's aides winced visibly and grumbled, "That guy has quite a few corruption scandals." (Anaya denies accusations against him.) As local leaders gathered, a young woman walked to the microphone, and boos erupted from the crowd. The aide explained that the woman was Alma Marina Vitela, a *MORENA* candidate who had formerly been with the *PRI*. The booing gathered strength, and Vitela stood frozen, looking at the crowd, seemingly unable to speak. López Obrador strode over, put his arm around her, and took the microphone. "We need to leave our differences and conflicts behind," he said. The booing quickly stopped. "The fatherland is first!" he shouted, and cheers broke out.

With the P.T. partisans in the audience, López Obrador's speech took on a distinctly more radical edge. "This party is an instrument for the people's struggle," he said, and added, "In union there is strength." He went on, "Mexico will produce everything it consumes. We will stop buying from abroad." After each of his points, the P.T. militants cheered in unison, and someone banged a drum.

Over dinner that night, we spoke about *MORENA*'s prospects. López Obrador boasted that, although the party remains considerably smaller than its rivals, it was able to reliably mobilize partisans. "There are few movements on the left in Latin America with the power to put people on the street anymore," he said.

Not long before, a prominent Communist leader in the region had told me that the Latin American left was largely dead, because there were almost no unions anymore. Unions were once a powerhouse of regional politics, supplying credibility and votes; in recent decades, many have succumbed to corruption or internal divisions, or have been co-opted by business owners. López Obrador smiled when I mentioned it. The largest Mexican miners' union had recently offered to support his campaign. In 2006, the head of the union, Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, was charged with trying to embezzle a workers' trust fund of fifty-five million dollars; he fled to Canada, where he obtained citizenship and wrote a best-selling book about his travails. In López Obrador's telling, he had been punished for taking on mine owners. "They own everything, and they call the shots," he said.

Urrutia was exonerated in 2014, but he still felt that he was vulnerable to new charges if he returned. López Obrador took up his cause, offering him a seat in the Senate, which would provide him immunity from prosecution. López Obrador's critics were enraged. "You should have seen the outcry!" he said. "They really attacked me. But it's dying down again now." With a mocking look, he said, "I told them that, if the Canadians thought he was fine, then maybe he wasn't so bad after all." Rolling his eyes, he said, "You know, here they think the Canadians are all things good."

López Obrador told me that he also had the backing of the teachers' union, then hastened to clarify: "The unofficial one—not the corrupted official one." Peña Nieto's government had passed educational reforms, and the measures had been unpopular with teachers. "They are now with us," he said, then added, "The official—"

compromised, corrupted—teachers' union has also given me its support.” He grimaced. “This is the kind of support one doesn't really need, but in a campaign you need support, so we will go forward, and hope to find ways to clean them up.”

A few weeks later, I rejoined López Obrador on the road in Chihuahua, Mexico's biggest state. South of Ciudad Juárez and its dusty belt of low-wage factories, Chihuahua is cowboy country—a wide-open place of vast prairies and forested mountains. For several days, we drove hundreds of miles back and forth through the rangelands.

This territory had once been a base for Pancho Villa's revolutionary army in its fight against the dictator Porfirio Díaz; the landscape was dotted with the sites of battles and mass executions. One day, outside a men's bathroom at a rest stop, López Obrador looked out at the plain, waved his arms, and said, “Villa and his men marched all through these parts for years. But just imagine the difference: he and his men covered most of these miles by horse, while we're in cars.”

López Obrador has written half a dozen books on Mexico's political history. Even more than most Mexicans, he is aware of the country's history of subjugation and sensitive to its echoes in the rhetoric of the Trump Administration. When we stopped for lunch at a modest restaurant off the highway, he spoke of the invasion of 1846, known in the U.S. as the Mexican-American War and in Mexico as the United States' Intervention in Mexico. That conflict ended with the humiliating cession of more than half the nation's territory to the United States, but López Obrador saw in it at least a few examples of valor. At one point during the war, he said, Commodore Matthew Perry arrayed a huge U.S. fleet off the coast of Veracruz. “He had overwhelming superiority, and sent word to the commander of the town to surrender so as to save the city and its people,” he said. “And you know what the commander told Perry? ‘My balls are too big to fit into your Capitol building. Get it on.’ And so Perry opened fire, and devastated Veracruz.” López Obrador laughed. “But pride was saved.” For a moment, he mused about whether victory was more important than a grand gesture that could mean defeat. Finally, he said he believed that the grand gesture was important—“for history's sake, if for nothing else.”

We were interrupted by members of the family that ran the restaurant, politely asking for a selfie. As López Obrador got up to oblige them, he said, “This country has its personalities—but Donald Trump!” He raised his eyebrows in disbelief, and, with a laugh, hit the table with both hands.

Early in Trump's term, López Obrador presented himself as an antagonist; along with his condemnatory speeches, he filed a complaint at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, in Washington, D.C., protesting the Administration's border wall and its immigration policy. When I mentioned the wall to him, he smiled scornfully and said, “If he goes ahead with it, we will go to the U.N. to denounce it as a human-rights violation.” But he added that he had come to understand, from watching Trump, that it was “not prudent to take him on directly.”

On the campaign trail, he has generally resisted grand gestures. Not long before the speech in Gómez Palacio, Trump sent National Guard troops to the Mexican border. López Obrador suggested an almost pacifist response: “We’ll organize a demonstration along the entire length of the border—a political protest, all dressed in white!”

Mostly, López Obrador has offered calls for mutual respect. “We will not rule out the possibility of convincing Donald Trump just how wrong his foreign policy, and particularly his contemptuous attitude toward Mexico, have been,” he said in Ciudad Juárez. “Neither Mexico nor its people will be a piñata for any foreign power.” Offstage, he suggested that it was morally necessary to restrain Trump’s isolationist tendencies. “The United States can’t become a ghetto,” he said. “It would be a monumental absurdity.” He said that he hoped to be able to negotiate a new rapport with Trump. When I expressed skepticism, he pointed to Trump’s fluctuating comments about the North Korean leader, [Kim Jong Un](#): “It shows that his positions aren’t irreducible ones, but made for appearances’ sake.” Behind the scenes, López Obrador’s aides have reached out to counterparts in the Trump Administration, trying to establish working relationships.

A more aggressive position would give López Obrador little advantage over his opponents in the campaign. When I asked Jorge Guajardo, the former Ambassador, what role Trump had at this point in the election, he said, “Zero. And for a very simple reason—everyone in Mexico opposes him equally.” In office, though, he could find that it is in his interest to present more forceful resistance. “Look at what happened to those leaders who right away tried to make nice with Trump,” Guajardo said. “Macron, Merkel, Peña Nieto, and Abe—they’ve all lost out. But look at Kim Jong Un! Trump seems to like those who reject him. And I think the same scenario will apply to Andrés Manuel.”

In campaign events, López Obrador speaks often of *mexicanismo*—a way of saying “Mexico first.” Observers of the region say that, when the two countries’ interests compete, he is likely to look inward. Mexico’s armed forces and law enforcement have often had to be persuaded to cooperate with the United States, and he will probably be less willing to pressure them. The U.S. lobbied Peña Nieto, successfully, to harden Mexico’s southern border against the flow of Central American migrants. López Obrador has announced that he will instead move immigration headquarters to Tijuana, in the north. “The Americans want us to put it on the southern border with Guatemala, so that we will do their dirty work for them,” he said. “No, we’ll put it here, so we can look after our immigrants.” Regional officials fear that Trump is preparing to pull out of *NAFTA*. López Obrador, who has often called for greater self-sufficiency, might be happy to let it go. In the speech that launched his campaign, he said that he hoped to develop the country’s potential so that “no threat, no wall, no bullying attitude from any foreign government, will ever stop us from being happy in our own fatherland.”

Even if López Obrador is inclined to build a closer relationship, the pressures from both inside and outside the country may prevent it. “You can’t be the President of

Mexico and have a pragmatic relationship with Trump—it's a contradiction in terms," González said. "Until now, Mexico has been predictable, and Trump has been the one providing the surprises. I think it's now going to be *AMLO* who provides the surprise factor."

One morning in Parral, the city where Pancho Villa died, López Obrador and I had breakfast as he prepared for a speech in the plaza. He acknowledged that the transformation Villa helped bring about had been bloody, but he was confident that the transformation he himself was proposing would be peaceful. "I am sending messages of tranquillity, and I am going to continue to do so," he said. "And, quite apart from my differences with Trump, I have treated him with respect."

I told him that many Mexicans wondered whether he had moderated his early radical beliefs. "No," he said. "I've always thought the same way. But I act according to the circumstances. We have proposed an orderly change, and our strategy seems to have worked. There is less fear now. More middle-class people have come on board, not only the poor, and there are businesspeople, too."

There are limits to López Obrador's inclusiveness. Many young metropolitan Mexicans are wary of what they see as his lack of enthusiasm for contemporary identity politics. I asked if he been able to change their minds. "Not much," he said, matter-of-factly. "Look, in this world there are those who give more importance to politics of the moment—identity, gender, ecology, animals. And there's another camp, which is not the majority, but which is more important, which is the struggle for equal rights, and that's the camp I subscribe to. In the other camp, you can spend your life criticizing, questioning, and administering the tragedy without ever proposing the transformation of the regime."

López Obrador sometimes says that he wants to be regarded as a leader of the stature of Benito Juárez. I asked if he really believed that he could remake the country in such a historic way. "Yes," he replied. He looked at me directly. "Yes, yes. We are going to make history, I am clear about that. I know that when one is a candidate one sometimes says things and makes promises that can't be fulfilled—not because one doesn't want to but because of the circumstances. But I think I can confront the circumstances and fulfill those promises."

This is the message that excites his supporters and worries his opponents: a promise to transform the country without disrupting it. I thought about a speech he gave one night in Ciudad Cuauhtémoc, a neglected-looking mining town surrounded by mountains. Ciudad Cuauhtémoc was remote from most of Mexico's citizens, but people there felt the same frustrations with corruption and economic predation. The area was dominated by drug cartels, according to López Obrador's aides, and the economy was troubled. A local *MORENA* leader spoke with frustration about "foreign mining companies exploiting the treasures under our soil."

The audience was full of cowboys wearing hats and boots; a group of indigenous Tarahumara women stood to one side, wearing traditional embroidered dresses.

López Obrador seemed at home there, and his speech was angrier and less guarded than usual. He promised his listeners a “radical revolution,” one that would give them the country they wanted. “ ‘Radical’ comes from the word ‘roots,’ ” he said. “And we’re going to pull this corrupt regime out by its roots.” ♦

Jon Lee Anderson, a staff writer, began contributing to the magazine in 1998. He is the author of several books, including [“The Fall of Baghdad.”](#)