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Independent Candidates Lining Up for 2016 and 2018 Elections

by Carlos Navarro

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The upcoming gubernatorial and local elections on June 5 could serve as a measuring stick of voter discontent with the traditional political establishment in Mexico. Some analysts also believe the trend from this year’s election could serve as a harbinger of the presidential and other national elections in 2018.

The electoral reforms of 2012 and 2013 opened the door for candidates not affiliated with any political party to run for office (SourceMex, Aug. 8, 2012, and Dec. 11, 2013). The impact made itself felt in July 2013, when a small town in Zacatecas elected a mayor with no political affiliation (SourceMex, July 17, 2013). The bigger impact came in the 2015 vote with the election of unaffiliated candidates as governor in Nuevo León and as mayors in the cities of Morelia in Michoacán, García in Nuevo León, Zapopan in Jalisco, and Comonfort in Guanajuato (SourceMex, June 24, 2015). In addition, voters in one district of Sinaloa chose an independent candidate to represent them in the Chamber of Deputies in that same election.

Nearly 500 independent candidates seek office in June elections

Even though independent candidates remain a very tiny percentage of all the candidates for elected offices in Mexico, the reforms have opened up a new option for citizens. According to the daily newspaper El Universal, at least 483 independent candidates initially qualified to get on the ballot in the June 5 elections for governor, mayor, and state legislature in 13 states. In this group, 30 independents are seeking the post of governor, while another 246 hope to compete in mayoral elections and 203 are vying for a position in a state legislature. Four other unaffiliated candidates are seeking a municipal leadership post (síndico municipal).

The report in El Universal pointed out that the number of independent candidates is similar to 2005, when about 500 people without affiliation sought to get on the ballot. The one difference this year is that there are no elections scheduled for the federal Congress, and only 13 states are holding gubernatorial and/or municipal and/or state legislative elections.

Veracruz is the state where the most independent candidates applied to run for office this year, including three people seeking the governor’s seat and 91 others filing to run for the state legislature. However, only two of the gubernatorial hopefuls and 54 of the applicants to run for state legislature met the requirements needed to qualify to seek office.

Candidates for municipal posts received a boost from the federal electoral court (Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federación, TEPJF), which ruled in early May that unaffiliated candidates had the same rights as members of political parties in mayoral and other city elections. According to the TEPJF ruling, independent candidates should receive the same treatment as their affiliated counterparts in votes for directly elected seats. Furthermore, they should be considered for at-large posts when these seats are distributed based on the percentage of the popular vote.
Prominent individuals could run in 2018

Some observers believe the brewing discontent with the established parties could spill over to the presidential and congressional elections in 2018. “We believe there will be at least one independent candidate in the presidential race,” said the online site Pienso, Luego Voto. “The citizen vote will, therefore, be very important. If the political parties do not convince you, you would have alternatives.”

At least two prominent individuals have hinted that they might seek the presidency as independents: former foreign relations secretary Jorge Castañeda Gutman and political scientist and journalist Denise Dresser. Castañeda served during the administration of ex-President Vicente Fox (2000-2006), but was not affiliated with the center-right Partido Acción Nacional (PAN). “I am considering this option,” Castañeda said during an appearance at Universidad del Valle de México (UVM) to promote his new book, Sólo así: Por una agenda ciudadana independiente. “I want to see how I am received by university communities, business leaders, activists, and civil society. I will make my decision based on whether I receive support [from these groups].”

According to Castañeda, it is important at this stage for many qualified independent candidates to express their interest. However, he suggested that in the end, only one unaffiliated candidate should emerge, in order not to dilute the vote from disaffected citizens.

Prominent journalist and academic Denise Dresser, who teaches at Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM), said she was weighing the possibility of making an independent run for the presidency in 2018 if no candidate addresses Mexico’s most pressing problems. Dresser writes columns for the weekly news magazine Proceso and the daily newspaper Reforma. She has also contributed pieces to a handful of US publications, including La Opinión, Los Angeles Times and The New York Times.

While Dresser has not actually committed to run, she said she is considering the possibility, given the lack of action by the current administration on an important issue: the resolution of the disappearance of 43 students from a teachers college (Escuela Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa Raúl Isidro Burgos) in Guerrero state in September 2014 (SourceMex, Oct. 15, 2014).

“Look, I ask myself that, and they ask me every day,” Dresser said in response to a question about her presidential aspirations from journalist Javier Risco, who hosts the television program “Sin lugar a dudas.”

Dresser said she started to give serious thought to a possible run after President Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration decided to end the mandate by a group of experts from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) that was sent to Mexico to investigate the case of the missing students (SourceMex, April 20, 2016). The IACHR group, known as the Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes (GIEI), said the administration presented many obstacles that prevented a thorough investigation.

Dresser said she attended the press conference where the GIEI experts presented their 20 recommendations to the Peña Nieto government. “[These recommendations] go beyond the Ayotzinapa case; they have to do with the rule of law, the independence of prosecutors, and the fight against corruption,” Dresser told Risco, adding that she asked herself, “Who is going to take up this banner, who is going to push these causes?”
At least one other journalist is considering a possible independent candidacy for president: broadcaster Pedro Ferriz de Con. “I’m convinced that someone from the citizenry and not the political parties will be the next president,” Ferriz de Con said in an interview with the Spanish news service EFE after announcing his plans in January. Ferriz de Con, who has worked for the Multivisión network and for Grupo Imágen’s XEDA-FM, has labeled his campaign “El candidato de México” (Mexico’s candidate).

Another potential independent presidential candidate is Jaime Rodríguez Calderón, alias “El Bronco,” who was elected as a non-affiliated candidate to the governor’s seat in Nuevo León in 2015. In a recent interview, Rodríguez Calderón said a decision at this point would be premature, and that his focus was on solving problems in his state. “If I don’t improve the situation in Nuevo León, even the citizens of the state will not support me in the presidential race,” El Bronco told reporters.

For some observers, the possibility of an independent candidate seemed almost impossible even just a few years ago. “In a country like ours, where the concept of democracy was always linked to a handful of political parties, the idea of opening the door to independent candidacies appeared very remote,” columnist Yuriria Sierra wrote in the daily newspaper Excélsior. “However, we accomplished this change, which was a much needed breath of fresh air to our electoral system.” Sierra cautioned, however, that the process of change is ongoing and pointed to laws still on the books whose only purpose is to create obstacles to a democratic process. “Much work remains to refine this system,” Sierra said. “There are some politicians who view independent candidacies as an alternative in case they don’t obtain the nomination from their party. Independent candidates, however, must completely embrace the agenda of the citizens as the most sensible strategy to remain competitive and trustworthy.”

**Political parties also gear up for 2018**

Regardless of who decides to run as an independent in the 2018 presidential race, he or she will have to face the well-organized and well-funded establishment parties. There are already unofficial front-runners among each of the established parties, even though the presidential election is two years away. For the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), the name that is mentioned most often is Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong, while the most prominent name associated with the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) is former federal legislator and former first lady Margarita Zavala de Calderón. For the left, perennial presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador of Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena) is viewed by some as the one who could emerge as the candidate of unity. However, the left is far from united, and the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) appears to be backing Mexico City Mayor Miguel Mancera.

Some political observers suggest that the vote in June could determine the strength of the established parties. “The upcoming June 5 election is important for the 2018 vote,” columnist Ivonne Melgar wrote in the daily newspaper Excélsior. “Beyond the impact of the actual results on the front-runners, they could define the strategies for the two major parties [the PRI and the PAN].”

According to Melgar, the PRI seems headed to a victory in the states of Hidalgo, Sinaloa, and Zacatecas in the June 5 election, but the other states appear less certain. “In other states where the PRI is favored, its candidates will have to battle to keep the opposition from advancing,” Melgar said. She noted that the PAN has fielded competitive candidates in Chihuahua, Durango, Oaxaca,
and Quintana Roo. In the latter three states, the center-right party is running in coalition with the PRD.

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