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## Nahua Woman to Represent Indigenous Communities in Mexico's 2018 Presidential Race

by Carlos Navarro

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A council of the Congreso Nacional Indígena (National Indigenous Congress, CNI) supported by the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista National Liberation Army, EZLN) selected María de Jesús Patricio Martínez to represent the indigenous movement during Mexico's 2018 presidential elections. The assembly that elected Patricio Martínez in late May was composed of 848 delegates from 32 states, representing 58 indigenous communities. The decision to run an indigenous woman as a presidential candidate was made nearly a year ago, on the 20th anniversary of the formation of the CNI ([SourceMex, Oct. 19, 2016](#)).

Patricio Martínez, of Nahua descent, is known as "Marichuy" and is an expert on herbs and natural medicines. For the past 22 years, she has collaborated with a program at the Universidad de Guadalajara to promote and preserve important aspects of indigenous culture, particularly native medicine. Through the program, known as Unidad de Apoyo a Comunidades Indígenas (Support Unit for Indigenous Communities, UACI), she created a pharmacy that dispenses traditional medications for a wide variety of ailments.

In nominating Patricio Martínez, the council called for a government that is anti-capitalist and free of corruption. "We don't seek to administer power; we seek to dismantle it," the council said shortly after nominating her.

### *An independent candidacy*

The nomination does not automatically place Patricio Martínez on the ballot, because she is not representing a registered political party. This means she will have to gather signatures equivalent to 3% of the total voter rolls in Mexico to participate. As of the 2015 mid-term elections, Mexico had more than 87 million registered voters, according to the Instituto Nacional Electoral (National Institute of Elections, INE). Other requirements for independent candidates to get on the ballot include the creation of a civic association (in lieu of a political party), opening a dedicated bank account for the campaign, and registering with the national tax system (Servicio de Administración Tributaria, SAT).

A handful of prominent individuals have announced plans to run as independents in the 2018 presidential elections, including political scientist and columnist Denise Dresser and Jorge Castañeda Gutman, who was secretary of foreign affairs in 2000-2003 ([SourceMex, April 6, 2016](#), and [May 18, 2016](#)).

The decision of the EZLN to play such an active role in the 2018 election is a change of strategy for the Zapatistas, who have frequently denounced Mexico's electoral system as corrupt ([SourceMex, June. 28, 2000](#), [June 29, 2005](#), [July 19, 2006](#)).

While the CNI and EZLN acknowledge that Patricio Martínez has very little chance of winning the presidency, her presence on the ballot would offer an opportunity to raise issues that are important to indigenous communities around Mexico. An indigenous candidate would also bring up the

issues that affect all disadvantaged communities around the country, EZLN leader Subcomandante Galeano said in November 2016, shortly after the plan to nominate an indigenous woman was announced.

According to Galeano, representatives of the various indigenous groups around the country understand the central purpose of running a candidate. "We told them that it wasn't important whether we won or not," he said in November. "What matters is our sense of irreverence toward the system, our lack of submission to authorities..."

Galeano faulted the political right for perpetuating the image of indigenous people as street beggars. He also criticized what he called the "institutional left," which he said has not sought "true change."

### *Highlighting indigenous concerns*

As recently as 2012, indigenous communities represented about 6.5% of Mexico's national population, and they made up at least 40% of the population in 30 of Mexico's 300 electoral districts, including 28 with indigenous majorities. "Nevertheless, the indigenous and original communities often find themselves outside of the agenda and the proposals offered by those who seek the Mexican presidency," CNNMéxico noted that year.

The indigenous rights agreements reached between the government and the EZLN in San Andrés Larráinzar in February of 1996 ([SourceMex, Feb. 21, 1996](#)) would have created a system that would have given indigenous communities in Mexico more political power. Those agreements proposed changes to Article 53 of the Mexican Constitution, which would have altered the boundaries of electoral districts to give indigenous communities greater representation.

The agreements were never enacted ([SourceMex, March 12, 1997](#), and [March 3, 1999](#)), and the accords that were finally approved by Congress and signed by former President Vicente Fox (2000-2006) in 2001 were a watered-down version of the original text ([SourceMex, Aug. 22, 2001](#)).

Still, even the diluted agreements created some beneficial change for indigenous communities. "While the reforms were rejected by the EZLN and the Congreso Nacional Indígena, the accords paved the way for a redistricting plan in 2004 and 2005 that preserved the territorial integrity of indigenous communities in 11 states," columnist Pascal Beltrán del Río wrote in the daily newspaper *Excelsior* in October 2016.

Some indigenous leaders agreed that issues that are important to their communities are rarely brought up during presidential campaigns. "For Mexican politicians, the indigenous peoples do not exist," said Gabriel Hernández, leader of one of the Mixtec communities in Oaxaca. "In some cases, they represent a number of votes that must be attained." The Mixtecs are the third largest indigenous community in Mexico, with about 800,000 members.

"We are certain that compañera Marichuy will not sell out or surrender, since she is one of the creators of the CNI," a member of the indigenous leadership group (Consejo Indígena de Gobierno, CIG) told CIMACNoticias, an online site that covers women's issues.

### *Impact on political parties*

Some analysts believe she Patricia Martínez's candidacy could likely take away votes from the center-left parties as well as the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM).

A recent report from the government's statistics institute (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, INEGI) indicated that roughly 7.4 million people in Mexico primarily speak an indigenous language. Of this, 2 million are minors, which leaves about 5.4 million potential indigenous voters.

A major question is whether the presence of an indigenous candidate would have much impact on the surging Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena) founded by Andrés Manuel López Obrador. According to Beltrán del Río, if an indigenous candidate only attracts indigenous votes in the 28 indigenous districts with indigenous majorities, then the impact would be very small on Morena. The party took 242,000 votes in those 28 districts in the 2015 mid-term elections. That total in the indigenous districts—including eight in Oaxaca and four in Chiapas—represents a fraction of the 3.68 million votes that Morena received nationwide in 2015.

"In other words, if Morena had not received a single vote in the 28 indigenous districts, the party's total would have declined by only 0.6 %," Beltrán del Río said.

López Obrador, who is again seeking the presidency after two unsuccessful attempts, has managed to build a viable alternative to the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD). According to preliminary results from the June 4 state elections, Morena was very competitive in México state, coming within a few percentage points of defeating the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in one of its stronghold states. Morena appears to have turned in a strong performance in Veracruz state as well, where incomplete results show it won mayoral elections in two cities, Xalapa and Coatzacoalcos, and could win in Poza Rica and Minatitlán.

According to Beltrán del Río, the center-left has other worries besides the indigenous vote. "It's possible that the vote of the left will already be fragmented, especially if the PRD and Movimiento Ciudadano decide to run their own candidates," he said.

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