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## **PAN Front Runner Margarita Zavala Leaves Party to Launch Independent Candidacy**

*by Carlos Navarro*

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Margarita Zavala—once considered the front runner to gain the presidential nomination for the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN)—has left the party to run as an independent. Zavala is now one of more than two dozen candidates who are seeking the presidency without a party affiliation in the election to be held on July 1, 2018.

Most of the names on the list, including several lawyers, entrepreneurs, academics, and a retired Navy lieutenant, are not well known. The prominent candidates who have formally registered for the election as independents include Nuevo León Gov. Jaime Rodríguez Calderón, Sen. Armando Ríos Piter of Guerrero, and journalist and news anchor Pedro Ferriz de Con. Rodríguez Calderón is the first politician in Mexico to win a major race without the benefit of party affiliation ([SourceMex, June 24, 2015](#)).

Another prominent name on the list is María de Jesús Patricio Martínez, also known as “Marichuy,” a Nahua medicine woman from Tuxpan, Jalisco, who was selected by a council of the national indigenous congress (Congreso Nacional Indígena, CNI), with support from the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, (Zapatista National Liberation Army, EZLN), to represent the indigenous movement in the 2018 election ([SourceMex, June 7, 2017](#)). The list also includes Patricio Martínez García, who served as governor of Chihuahua from 1998 to 2004.

Other high-profile individuals who had initially expressed interest in running as independents in the end decided not to seek the presidency. They include columnist and political analyst Denise Dresser; Jorge Castañeda Gutman, a former foreign relations secretary; human rights activist Emilio Álvarez Icaza; and sociologist and former legislator Gerardo Fernández Noroña ([SourceMex, April 6, 2016](#), and [May 18, 2016](#)).

The independent candidates are running at time when distrust of the major political parties among the electorate is very high because of corruption. However, the anti-establishment sentiment became evident in the most recent major elections in a vote for the other party rather than in a big show of support for independents ([SourceMex, June 15, 2016](#)).

### ***Both sides lose***

Zavala’s departure from the PAN puts both her and the party at a disadvantage. “Both the PAN and Margarita Zavala are weakened by this move,” analyst Enrique Toussaint of Universidad de Guadalajara said in an interview with the business publication *Expansión*.

Toussaint said the departure had left the PAN without its most prominent candidate, which greatly hurts its chances in 2018. Conversely, he said, Zavala is now running without the PAN brand, and under those circumstances, she is not a strong candidate.

According to observers, the rupture appears to be final, even though there has been talk among party faithful of allowing Zavala to return to the fold if she so chooses. “Without a doubt, both

sides are losers," said Jorge Javier Romero, a political science expert at Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM).

"She loses all possibility of becoming the PAN candidate, which would give her a more solid political and institutional cover than an independent candidacy," Romero said. "The PAN loses because Zavala would take away some votes from the party in an election that is expected to be very close."

Zavala, who is the wife of former President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), spent her entire political career in the PAN. She served as a member of the Chamber of Deputies for three years and became the first lady when her husband was elected to the presidency in 2006. Zavala's departure was rooted in an internal PAN feud among factions supporting and opposing current party president Ricardo Anaya. Zavala and several senators have accused Anaya, who also has presidential ambitions, of subordinating the party base to his agenda ([SourceMex, Sept. 6, 2017](#)).

"Anti-democratic conditions took hold in the PAN just like we had criticized in the PRI and other parties," Zavala said in reference to Anaya.

Zavala has also raised concerns about the PAN's decision to forge a coalition with two center-left parties, the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) and the Movimiento Ciudadano (MC). Because of the alliance, known as the broad front (Frente Amplio, FA), Zavala was not assured of getting the nomination despite her high standing in most polls, which had her running second to Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the center-left Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena).

"It is clear to me that my closest competitor has seized the key decision-making powers of the party while turning over to others the important decisions that belong to the PAN," Zavala said in reference to the move to forge the alliance with the FA.

A public opinion survey released by the polling organization Mitofsky in August showed a broad rejection of the FA, with 24% of respondents supporting the move and almost 40% rejecting the coalition. The survey, which polled 1,000 potential voters throughout Mexico, also contained surprising results. The poll showed the FA with 22% support, compared with about 17% for a Morena-Partido del Trabajo (PT) coalition, and 16% for an alliance forged by the PRI with the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM), the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL) and Encuentro Social.

Most respondents who said they backed the FA said they viewed Zavala as the best candidate to represent the coalition. Mexico City Governor Miguel Mancera, a member of the PRD, was the second choice, followed by Anaya.

## *Who benefits?*

There are mixed opinions on who would benefit with Zavala's decision to run as an independent. The most common perception is that the weakening of the PAN and the FA would greatly benefit López Obrador, who is seen as the non-establishment candidate who can stand up to US President Donald Trump, ([SourceMex, Feb. 22, 2017](#)).

In a speech shortly after the news of the Zavala-PAN rupture emerged, López Obrador told the audience that he respected the decision of the former first lady. He also took the opportunity to criticize the political establishment. "In these times when charlatans prevail ... there are no

principles, ideals, or ethics in the practice of politics," he said in an implicit criticism of Anaya and the PAN.

However, some hold the view that Zavala's departure would benefit the PRI more than Morena.

Some PRD leaders who supported the creation of the coalition with the PAN said they regretted Zavala's decision. "I had hoped that the [former] first lady would show more political maturity and recognize that her decision would reinforce the PRI's strategy of dividing the opposition," said Ángel Ávila, a member of the PRD national council.

Other PRD members suggested that the FA would welcome Zavala if the polls show her performing poorly as an independent. "We've got to keep the door open," said Fernando Belaunzarán Méndez, who served in the Chamber of Deputies between 2013 and 2016 and was a leading advocate for the creation of the coalition.

Anaya made his position known via a video message in which he said he respected Zavala's decision, but also suggested that her departure was a mistake that would only benefit the PRI.

"I believe that this is the wrong decision because the candidacy that she was seeking had not been decided," said Anaya, pointing out that her request that she be anointed as the PAN candidate was not possible to grant.

"We cannot modify the statutes of the electoral law," he said.

-- End --