

Democratic Erosion in Mexico: Authoritarian Repertoire and Innovations (2018-2024)

Erosión democrática en México: repertorio e innovaciones autoritarias (2018-2024)

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Abstract: Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) won the presidential election in Mexico in 2018 and, despite his promises aimed at improving the quality of democracy, multiple authors have found that his government accelerated a process of democratic erosion. In light of this, the central question is: How have AMLO's actions and discourse fostered democratic erosion? To answer, I conduct a review of literature on the subject and systematize it using the concepts of "authoritarian innovations" and "authoritarian repertoire". The findings highlight eight innovations within AMLO's authoritarian repertoire. In addition to providing a general overview of the literature on democratic erosion in Mexico, this paper supports the analytical usefulness of two recently proposed concepts and helps identify the practices and rhetoric used by democratically elected political leaders to undermine the quality of democracy.

Keywords: democratic erosion, autocratization, democratic backsliding, de-democratization, Mexico.

Resumen: Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) ganó la elección presidencial en México en 2018 y a pesar de sus varias promesas dirigidas a mejorar la calidad de la democracia, múltiples trabajos han encontrado que en su gobierno se aceleró la erosión democrática. Frente a estas circunstancias, la pregunta de este trabajo es: ¿cómo las prácticas y los discursos de AMLO fomentaron un proceso de erosión democrática? Para responder, realizo una revisión de la literatura sobre este tema y la sistematizo con base en los conceptos de "innovaciones autoritarias" y "repertorio autoritario". Los hallazgos destacan ocho innovaciones en el repertorio autoritario de AMLO. Además de presentar un panorama de la literatura sobre la erosión democrática en México, el texto respalda la utilidad de conceptos recientemente propuestos y ayuda a identificar las prácticas y los discursos que los líderes políticos electos democráticamente utilizan para dañar la calidad de la democracia.



Palabras clave: erosión democrática, autocratización, deslizamiento en reversa, desdemocratización, México.

Introduction¹

After losing in 2006 and 2012, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) won the 2018 Mexican presidential election with just over 30 million votes. The other three candidates received 12.6 million, 9.2 million, and 2.9 million votes, respectively. In other words, even if the votes for the other candidates had been combined, they would not have been enough to defeat AMLO. During his campaign, AMLO adopted a conciliatory discourse, but one that distanced him from the traditional elites. Some of his main promises included pacifying the country by shifting away from the militarized security model, punishing corruption without restriction, combating poverty, respecting freedom of expression, opening the country to international observation on human rights, and, broadly, strengthening democracy. Far from fulfilling these promises, AMLO's government took a turn in the opposite direction and, as several studies have found, his administration was characterized by an erosion of Mexico's already highly problematic democracy (Aguilar Rivera, 2022; Dussauge Laguna and Aguilar Arévalo, 2021; Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023c; Petersen and Somuano, 2021).

Under these circumstances, this text addresses the following question: How did the practices and rhetoric of former Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador foster a process of democratic erosion? To answer this, I review the literature on the topic and systematize it using the concepts of "authoritarian innovations" and "authoritarian repertoire", proposed respectively by Curato and Fossati (2020) and Monsiváis-Carrillo (2023d). Broadly speaking, the former refers to novel, contextually situated governance practices that limit accountability, while the latter encompasses the speeches, actions, decisions, and strategies rulers use to undermine the democratic attributes of a political regime.

My main argument is that AMLO's government fostered the erosion of democracy in Mexico through: 1) the aggrandizement of the executive branch and the hyper-personalization of political power,

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2) populist and polarizing rhetoric, 3) disinformation strategies and the rejection of public deliberation, 4) attacks on and co-optation of institutions, coupled with austerity as a disciplinary tool, 5) the weakening of public administration and policy processes, 6) the militarization of public administration and security, 7) the political use of participatory democracy mechanisms, and 8) ambiguous legality.

It is crucial to clarify that I am not arguing Mexico's democracy was strong before 2018. As Cadena-Roa (2019: 123) notes, the country's democratic transition "failed" because, while electoral processes became relatively robust after 2000, other areas —such as transparency, accountability, and human rights— remained deeply flawed, preventing a clean break from authoritarianism (Cadena-Roa and López Leyva, 2019b). That said, this text does not evaluate pre-2018 democratic quality or analyze the conditions of AMLO's victory. However, the context aligns with the factors Lührmann (2021) identifies as conducive to democratic erosion: an inadequate political party offer (Cadena-Roa and López Leyva, 2019a), declining satisfaction with democracy (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2019), and the presence of a populist-personalist leader who capitalized on this discontent while polarizing the country (Castro Cornejo and Langston, 2023; Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2022a).

In addition to presenting an overview of the literature on democratic erosion in Mexico since 2018, this text aims, on the one hand, to support the theoretical and empirical usefulness of two recently proposed concepts and, on the other, to help identify the types of practices and discourses that democratically elected leaders can use to undermine the quality of democracy in other regions. The remainder of the text is divided into three sections. First, I discuss democratic erosion and define "authoritarian innovations" and "authoritarian repertoire". Second, I systematize AMLO's erosion-facilitating practices and rhetoric as identified in the literature. Finally, I summarize the findings and present my conclusions.

Democratic Erosion, Authoritarian Innovations and Repertoires

Recently, a growing body of research has examined how some countries halt or reverse their democratization processes after electing a government democratically. This phenomenon has been described using various terms: de-democratization, autocratization, democratic

backsliding, and democratic erosion, among others (Bermeo, 2016; Del Tronco and Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2020; Diamond, 2015; Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019; Mechkova *et al.*, 2017; Merkel and Lührmann, 2021; Tomini and Wagemann, 2018; Waldner and Lust, 2018). These terms are interrelated and overlapping, and there is no absolute consensus on their use. For instance, Monsiváis-Carrillo (2022a) considers erosion, democratic deterioration, and backsliding to be processes of autocratization, which he defines —drawing on Lührmann and Lindberg (2019)— as the negative transformation of a regime’s democratic attributes. Similarly, Waldner and Lust (2018) link democratic erosion to autocratization but note the latter is broader in scope. Somer *et al.* (2021), for their part, define autocratization as the gradual erosion of democratic quality, while Haggard and Kaufman (2021) use the term backsliding to describe the incremental weakening of democratic institutions, rules, and norms by democratically elected governments. Rhodes-Purdy and Madrid (2020), in turn, argue erosion occurs when elected governments systematically violate democracy’s core principles.

Following other scholars (Del Tronco and Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2020; Guillén *et al.*, 2019b; Laebens and Lührmann, 2021; Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019), I use the concept of democratic erosion, which captures the gradual deterioration or loss of attributes inherent to a democratic system, regardless of its degree of institutionalization and without necessarily culminating in the establishment of an autocracy (Del Tronco and Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2020). As Guillén *et al.* (2019a: 12) note, erosion represents “a gradual expression of autocratization” that reveals “authoritarian advance within democratic regimes”. Unlike the now-rare coups d’état (Bermeo, 2016), democratic erosion occurs episodically (Boese *et al.*, 2021) and can unfold in both regimes with authoritarian traits —by undermining the democratic aspects of their governance practices— and in democracies —by diminishing their overall quality— (Waldner and Lust, 2018).

Although slower than coups, democratic erosion can be equally destructive over time (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). In this regard, Waldner and Lust (2018) argue that political actors driving erosion may, for example, limit electoral competition without banning participation outright, obstruct the functioning of autonomous institutions without dismantling them, and restrict both formal and informal accountability mechanisms. However, like democratization

(Tilly, 2007), democratic erosion is multicausal, multifaceted, and nonlinear (Lührmann, 2021), and can therefore lead to different outcomes at varying speeds (Bermeo, 2016). Furthermore, because erosion is gradual and processual, it is often difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when a political system ceases to be primarily democratic (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018).

Yet erosion is not unobservable. In their conceptual review, Waldner and Lust (2018) identify six main perspectives from which this phenomenon has been studied: agency, culture, institutions, political economy, political coalitions, and international factors. Regardless of which factor is emphasized, they argue that backsliding —or, using the terminology of this text, democratic erosion— can be observed in the deterioration of three core democratic dimensions: competition, participation, and accountability. In parallel, Haggard and Kaufman (2021) stress the importance of monitoring the integrity of electoral processes, the protection of civic and political freedoms, and the strength of horizontal accountability mechanisms.

Curato and Fossati (2020) contend that contemporary authoritarian practices aim, above all, to limit accountability and political participation by restricting access to information and weakening dissenting voices. To achieve this, governments resort to what they call “authoritarian innovations”: tools, actions, rhetoric, and policies that may not be new in themselves, but which are implemented in novel ways to strengthen control over other branches of power and target audiences. In other words, these practices are innovative not because they are entirely unprecedented, but because of how they are adapted to undermine democratic principles. For instance, authoritarian regimes may simulate accountability mechanisms while systematically hollowing them out (Morgenbesser, 2020). By analyzing patterns in these innovations, we can trace how erosion undermines participation, institutional checks, public deliberation, transparency, and governance efficacy (Curato and Fossati, 2020).

Drawing on social movement studies —especially the work of Tilly (1978)— Monsiváis-Carrillo (2023d:12) introduces the concept of “authoritarian repertoire” to refer to the set of strategies, policies, discourses, decisions, initiatives, and actions “that transgress, violate, or eliminate the democratic attributes of the political regime, governance, and public culture”. These material, discursive, and symbolic practices not only “transgress, weaken, reduce, or eliminate the exercise of civil

liberties and democratic accountability”, but also reinforce “opacity, discretion, and arbitrariness in the configuration and exercise of state power and governmental authority” (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023d:15). Paradoxically, it is common for leaders with authoritarian tendencies to frame these discourses and actions as efforts to enhance democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018).

In sum, given the risks posed by democratic erosion, it is vitally important to identify the practices and discourses of political leaders who claim to defend democracy while in fact undermining its foundations. Doing so not only contributes to theoretical refinement in a relatively new field of study, but also strengthens the case for an open political regime, one in which citizens can hold their rulers accountable, enjoy protection of their rights, and fulfill their civic responsibilities (Del Tronco and Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2020).

Innovations in Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s Authoritarian Repertoire

Drawing on the concepts of “authoritarian innovations” (Curato and Fossati, 2020) and “authoritarian repertoire” (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023d), this section systematizes the literature on democratic erosion in Mexico since AMLO’s 2018 election. The review encompasses English- and Spanish-language journal articles and book chapters (published up to December 2023) that contain the terms “democratic erosion”, “erosion of democracy”, “autocratization,” “backsliding”, “de-democratization”, and “authoritarianism”, and their translations. It is important to clarify that my aim is not to assess the specific arguments of each publication, but rather to organize them in a way that deepens our understanding of the challenges Mexico is currently facing and to demonstrate the analytical value of the concepts of authoritarian innovations and authoritarian repertoire for broader application. Accordingly, I will not examine in detail the evidence or examples provided in each work; for that, the reader may consult the original texts. Furthermore, while distinguishing between authoritarian innovations is useful for analytical purposes, in practice these phenomena often overlap and intertwine. Finally, I do not intend to suggest that previous governments did not engage in some of these authoritarian practices. Rather, as this review shows, AMLO’s administration implemented them in distinct ways —often framing

them as efforts to enhance democratic processes— while in fact weakening accountability and undermining political participation.

Executive Aggrandizement and Hyper-Personalization of Political Power

A central threat to Mexican democracy, as identified by Monsiváis-Carrillo (2022b: 436), lies in “the desire of the head of the Executive Branch to serve as the ultimate authority for political decision-making and popular representation”. The aggrandizement of the Executive Branch is one of the most common forms of democratic erosion, especially in presidential systems (Bermeo, 2016; Laebens and Lührmann, 2021). According to Aguilar Rivera (2022), this gradual and progressive concentration of power systematically weakens checks and balances and limits the ability of organized social groups to challenge government actions. In other words, it entails the dismantling of institutional controls that, under normal conditions, should ensure the Executive Branch exercises power impartially and transparently (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023b).

AMLO has a long trajectory as a *caudillo*-style, populist politician, whose discourse has consistently included messianic and redemptive elements (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2022b, 2022a). He grounded the legitimacy of his government not only in alleged performance but above all in his personal authority and ideology (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2022b). As Monsiváis Carrillo (2023b:115) argues, AMLO’s administration was marked by a hegemonic ambition defined by “a deliberate strategy of centralizing power, in which the separation of powers and... institutional checks and balances are subordinated to or controlled by the Executive Branch”. This ambition was rooted in AMLO’s personalist and populist leadership, his affinity for the presidential style of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) —where he began his political career— and the broad electoral margin by which he won the 2018 election.

In this context, the administration framed AMLO as “the sole and exclusive representative of popular sovereignty” (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023b: 117). Drawing on Rhodes-Purdy and Madrid (2020), Monsiváis-Carrillo (2022a) argues that AMLO’s administration constituted a personalist dyad: a government led by a personalist, populist president backed by a political party that was poorly institutionalized,

dependent on him, and gave him unconditional legislative support. I return to this later.

Under the pretext of dismantling the legacy of the so-called “neoliberal order”, AMLO centralized decision-making and, as I will discuss later, used budgetary control as a tool of political discipline. According to the presidential narrative, only a strong leader capable of controlling the entire government apparatus could root out corruption by leading through example (Sánchez-Talanquer, 2020). Petersen and Somuano (2021) analyze this centralization through AMLO’s interactions with two autonomous institutions: the National Electoral Institute (INE) and the National Institute for Transparency, Access to Information, and Protection of Personal Data (INAI). They conclude that AMLO’s administration fostered a form of hyper-presidentialism that expanded the president’s informal powers. This aligns with Monsiváis-Carrillo’s (2022a) argument that AMLO’s government aimed at exercising political power discretionally and without effective checks and balances.

Beyond the governmental concentration of power, several scholars emphasize AMLO’s political relationship with Morena, the party he founded and through which he became president.² Monsiváis-Carrillo (2022b: 423) describes it as a “poorly institutionalized party dependent on its founding leader”, with a structure and decision-making process that consistently align with AMLO’s interests (see also Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2022a). According to Petersen and Somuano (2021), the party likely remains weakly institutionalized because AMLO deliberately prevented it from developing internal counterweights, thereby retaining control over its decisions. Alternatively, they suggest that Morena’s leadership simply lacked the capacity to coordinate party discipline independently. In either case, Sánchez-Talanquer and Greene (2021) argue that AMLO showed no interest in building a party with institutional strength capable of constraining his power. This political dynamic is especially important because, as Rhodes-Purdy and Madrid (2020) note, leaders who emerge from and dominate weak parties are more likely to adopt policies that erode accountability and horizontal checks on executive authority.

² The party’s name comes from the political organization that preceded it: *Movimiento Regeneración Nacional* (National Regeneration Movement).

Populist and Polarizing Rhetoric

From an ideational perspective, populism is a morally Manichean worldview that frames politics as a struggle between good and evil, personified respectively by “the people” and “the elites” (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017a, 2017b). Populism is not inherently anti-democratic, but the limitations imposed by its Manichean vision can generate anti-democratic consequences. As Monsiváis-Carrillo (2023d: 21) explains, “the populist notion that the government must be consistent with the will of the ‘people’ implies assuming that only a political order in which the ‘people’ govern unrestrictedly can be legitimate”, which means that any social group not included in this abstraction of “the people” can be ignored in governmental decision-making. Thus, populism can favor the erosion of democracy because it adapts to the practices and discourses of those who seek to concentrate political power and present themselves as supreme and unrestricted authorities who can ignore the formalities and procedures of pluralism (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2022a, 2023d, 2023c).

Populism’s binary division of reality can also lead to forms of polarization that are potentially dangerous for democracy. Polarization is the process by which communities are divided into extremes due to political, ideological, or identity-based reasons (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021) and has been one of the main tools of actors with autocratic objectives (Somer *et al.*, 2021). Pernicious polarization —that is, polarization rooted in mutual distrust between political identities— can fuel democratic erosion by creating a context in which undemocratic measures are justified against opposing groups perceived as threats to the country (Somer *et al.*, 2021).

AMLO consistently sought to shape public opinion through a Manichean populist lens that divided the political field between his supporters and so-called “adversaries” (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023b). He positioned himself as an “honest” leader serving the “people”, endowed with superior moral values that set him apart from his opponents (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2022b). Furthermore, Dussauge-Laguna (2021) points out that AMLO’s populist rhetoric was marked by a discourse of double standards. For example, while his political agenda was framed in leftist terms, its implementation often relied on mechanisms more commonly associated with the right;³ centralization of decision-

3 For more, see Centeno (2021).

making was justified as a means to combat inefficiency and corruption, but it simultaneously weakened institutional autonomy; and austerity was promoted as a guiding principle, yet flagship presidential projects received unrestricted funding. The material consequences of this populist doublespeak were significant: institutions were marginalized and later staffed with allies loyal to the president; checks and balances, along with autonomous organizations, were delegitimized as anti-democratic; public resources were allocated discretionally to advance presidential priorities; bureaucratic capacity was further eroded; loyalty was rewarded with high-level appointments; and administrative norms and legal procedures were frequently disregarded (Dussauge-Laguna, 2021).

Through statistical analysis, Monsiváis-Carrillo (2022b) finds that political polarization intensified over the course of AMLO's presidency. Furthermore, Sánchez-Talanquer and Greene (2021: 60) argue that AMLO was able to increase his supporters' "tolerance for his democratic transgressions through the skillful use of populist rhetoric", portraying himself as the embodiment of the fight against corrupt elites. Moreover, as is the case with other populist rulers whose results have not been positive, AMLO and his party were able to maintain electoral successes by presenting themselves, as if they were still in the opposition, in a "permanent campaign" against the elites that prevented them from governing (Sánchez-Talanquer and Greene, 2021: 67).

Disinformation Strategies and the Rejection of Public Deliberation

The liberal model of democracy emphasizes the electoral and partisan dimensions of the political system. However, democratic decisions are not considered legitimate solely because they enjoy majority support, but because they emerge from deliberative processes in which individual and collective actors freely exchange arguments and opinions (Della Porta, 2020). Ideally, democratic governments engage in evidence-based discussions grounded in public interest. When they abandon these deliberative dimensions, they risk sliding toward autocratization. Moreover, disinformation and misinformation degrade the quality of political discourse by undermining the role of factual evidence and truth standards (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021).

AMLO and his administration systematically disseminated “false, distorted, or misleading information with the intention of causing harm” (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023c:154). A key example was his repeated attacks on the National Electoral Institute (INE), which he accused —without evidence— of electoral fraud and of being one of the most expensive electoral authorities in the world. These accusations formed part of a broader effort to delegitimize the INE to justify its reform (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023c). I return to this point later. Similar patterns of contradictory and false information were evident in the government’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023b).

The administration’s communication centered on AMLO’s weekday morning press conferences. These events became platforms from which the president disseminated biased and misleading information, attacked critics and opponents, issued instructions to his cabinet and supporters, and dismissed dissenting voices —frequently slandering them without allowing rebuttals— (Dussauge Laguna and Aguilar Arévalo, 2021; Sánchez-Talanquer, 2020).

When a president resorts to polarization, falsehoods, and the systematic discrediting of interlocutors, the space for public deliberation is drastically reduced (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023b). AMLO rarely supported his opinions with reasoned arguments. When others pointed out contradictions or inconsistencies in his positions, he often responded by attacking them, labeling independent media and critics as “conservatives” or “neoliberals” who ignored the “other data” he claimed to possess, always asserting that they were part of a broader conspiracy orchestrated by conservative elites (Dussauge Laguna and Aguilar Arévalo, 2021; Sánchez-Talanquer and Greene, 2021). Several studies also document AMLO’s antagonistic relationship with civil society organizations, which he routinely dismissed as “useless” and “corrupt” (Petersen and Somuano, 2021), and which he attacked with a litany of insults and slanders (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2022a).

When governments routinely attack or censor the media, they undermine the freedom of expression that is essential to democratic life (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2022b). Likewise, disparaging civil society organizations contradicts democratic principles, as it can dissuade social participation and encourage hostility toward government critics (Ibarra del Cueto, 2023; Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2022b). By delegitimizing all critical actors —regardless of their arguments— AMLO effectively

eliminated the possibility of meaningful dialogue. Everything he stated was framed as a “de facto truth” (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023b:119). In sum, under AMLO’s administration, the willingness of political authorities to engage with counterarguments diminished, and the trend of presidential intolerance —already observable in prior administrations— intensified (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2022b).

Attacks on Institutions, Austerity and Cooptation

In addition to the traditional separation of powers, Mexico’s political regime includes autonomous institutions tasked with overseeing the exercise of governmental authority, making a full return to the hyper-presidential model of the 20th century more difficult (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023b). Nonetheless, in tandem with his attacks on critical sectors of civil society, AMLO persistently targeted other branches of government —particularly the Judiciary and its highest authority, the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation (SCJN)— as well as autonomous decentralized institutions, notably the INAI and the INE. I will focus only on the latter. Beyond discrediting these institutions rhetorically, the president sought to exert control over them through austerity measures and co-optation strategies.

Ríos Figueroa (2022) notes that leaders who drive democratic erosion often prioritize capturing the judiciary early in their tenure. AMLO was no exception. He employed various strategies to “politically intervene and subordinate” federal and state courts (Ríos Figueroa, 2022: 190) to serve his political interests (Sánchez-Talanquer and Greene, 2021). From Ríos Figueroa’s (2022) perspective, AMLO’s government succeeded in influencing the SCJN to some degree, as the court issued controversial rulings favoring his agenda. Monsiváis-Carrillo’s (2022b) data further suggests a decline in judicial independence since 2018.

Villanueva Ulfgard (2023) identifies five key episodes that illustrate the pressure AMLO exerted on the SCJN: the extension of the term of the then-president of the court (who later joined the campaign of Morena’s presidential candidate Claudia Sheinbaum in late 2023 and secured a role in her administration), the debate on energy reform, the referendum to criminally investigate former presidents, the recall referendum, and the attempted electoral reform. The first case demonstrated AMLO’s desire to shape the Court through loyalist

appointments; the second highlighted the pressure placed on justices nominated by his administration; the third exposed the Court's vulnerability in defending constitutional order; and the last two episodes underscored the executive's ongoing attacks on electoral institutions, particularly the INE (Villanueva Ulfgard, 2023).

Ibarra del Cueto (2023) adds that, in 2022, AMLO sought congressional approval for two major constitutional reforms, one concerning energy policy and the other targeting the electoral system. Though both initiatives ultimately failed, the president and his party engaged in harassment, public discrediting, and intimidation of members of the legislative and judicial branches, thereby undermining the principle of separation of powers.

Regarding autonomous institutions, the INE faced relentless verbal attacks, baseless fraud allegations, and budget cuts justified by unsubstantiated claims of excessive costs (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023c; Sánchez-Talanquer, 2020). Beyond rhetorical attacks, AMLO attempted to transfer the INE's functions to the Executive Branch. This involved proposed constitutional amendments and secondary legislation designed to reshape the institute's structure and operation. These reforms, if implemented, would have undermined equal electoral competition, compromised the independence of electoral administration and justice, and dismantled the professional civil service that underpins the INE's credibility (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023c; Villanueva Ulfgard, 2023).

Although his constitutional reform initiatives failed in Congress, AMLO openly called on voters to deny "a single vote" to the "conservatives" in the 2024 elections in order to secure the legislative supermajority needed to amend the Constitution during the next presidential term. However, his plan "also progressed in the General Council of the INE, with the appointment of at least two of the four new advisory members aligned with" the president's party, including the Council's president (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023c: 174). I will revisit this institutional co-optation later. The attacks on and attempted reforms to the INE stand out in the literature because they sought to tilt the electoral playing field in favor of the president's party, ensuring its hegemony and enabling direct government control over elections (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2022b, 2023c; Sánchez-Talanquer, 2020).

AMLO refused to acknowledge the technical role of autonomous institutions, instead viewing them as obstacles that restricted the Executive Branch's power while wasting public resources and protecting political and economic interests (Petersen and Somuano, 2021). From this perspective —and under the guise of so-called “republican austerity”— he argued that their budgets should be slashed to a minimum. Notably, this austerity policy was not guided by efficiency criteria or grounded in evaluative data; rather, it stemmed solely from presidential will (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023c).

Sánchez-Talanquer (2020) identifies two key manifestations of AMLO's commitment to “poor government”: First, drastic cuts across all state sectors and services, though, as Dussauge-Laguna and Aguilar Arévalo (2021: 151) note, “significant cuts affected health, culture, the environment, human rights, science, and technology, while budgets for energy and the military grew substantially”. Second, budgetary control was centralized as a disciplinary tool. In this vein, Sánchez-Talanquer and Greene (2021) argue that AMLO wielded the federal budget to reward loyalty and punish dissent. They cite the dissolution of numerous trust funds —including those designated for disaster relief, higher education, scientific research, the arts, and the protection of human rights defenders— so that the president could reallocate these resources at his discretion to support his flagship initiatives. Ibarra del Cueto (2023) similarly underscores how, when unable to fully reform or control autonomous institutions, AMLO retaliated by imposing severe budget cuts and appointing loyalists to key positions.

Regarding appointments, AMLO's administration relied on patronage networks, prioritizing loyalty over competence (Dussauge-Laguna and Aguilar Arévalo, 2021; Sánchez-Talanquer and Greene, 2021). A prominent example in the literature is the appointment of the head of the National Human Rights Commission, a former Morena party member selected through an irregular legislative process (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023b; Sánchez-Talanquer and Greene, 2021). Simultaneously, the president incorporated party activists into the public administration to allocate, often without transparency or clear criteria, social program benefits (Dussauge-Laguna, 2021; Sánchez-Talanquer, 2020).⁴ Moreover, AMLO's anti-corruption discourse functioned less as a tool for strengthening institutional integrity and

4 For an analysis of the “Servants of the Nation,” (*Servidores de la Nación*), see González-Vázquez *et al.* (2023).

more as a mechanism to delegitimize critics and neutralize counterweights. Corruption within the administration was often justified, downplayed, or ignored when it involved officials aligned with the president's project or party (Sánchez-Talanquer and Greene, 2021).

Weakening of Public Administration and Policy Processes

AMLO repeatedly and openly opposed implementing regulations or programs that he considered associated with the “neoliberal period” (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2022b). This, coupled with the justification of “republican austerity,” led the president to significantly reduce the capacities of the federal public administration, particularly through the disappearance of social institutions and programs (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023b). The most notable case in this regard is the elimination of *Seguro Popular* (Popular Insurance), which was replaced by the Institute of Health for Well-being (*Insabi*, in Spanish). This institution would also disappear later in his six-year term. This case, Petersen and Somuano (2021) point out, reflects how AMLO eliminated or dismantled institutions linked to the “neoliberal period” without ensuring the construction of others to efficiently replace them.

Dussauge-Laguna (2021) argues that AMLO's decisions were characterized by a lack of diagnostic studies or evidence to suggest that the proposed changes were useful or even appropriate. For example, the same author argues that the narrative about austerity was never accompanied by an explanation of how salary cuts in various areas of the administration would improve the government performance, nor was there any analysis offered of the ineffectiveness or corruption of the institutions and programs he decided to eliminate.⁵ In contrast, the distribution of resources responded to the need to obtain more funds for the president's personal priorities (Dussauge-Laguna, 2021).⁶

5 This disregard for the use of evidence in decision-making was also reflected in the response to the Covid-19 pandemic, as the president not only dismissed the relevance of the health crisis, but also rejected all international recommendations based on scientific studies to prioritize his personal beliefs (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023b).

6 An example of how the government's science and technology policy legitimized institutional violence against academic groups that did not sympathize with the president while the federal administration appropriated the sector's resources for its own interests can be found in Reyes-Galindo (2023).

In the fight against poverty, AMLO increased the nominal value of direct transfers to several economically disadvantaged sectors, but—in addition to the almost absolute control that the president had over the transfers—the implementation of the programs was not based on any diagnosis, had no rules or evaluations, and sought primarily to foster political support for the president's party by associating the programs directly with his image (Dussauge Laguna and Aguilar Arévalo, 2021; Dussauge-Laguna, 2021; Sánchez-Talanquer, 2020; Sánchez-Talanquer and Greene, 2021). Since, as mentioned above, the presidential narrative framed AMLO as the sole legitimate representative of the will of the “people”, whose words were indisputable truths, “in the face of the presidential will, legal norms, technical knowledge, or the quality of evidence take a backseat” (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023b: 119). Thus, this supposed understanding of the needs of the “people” was sufficient for him to omit any type of technical explanation or political justification for his decisions (Dussauge-Laguna, 2021).

Dussauge-Laguna (2022) argues that AMLO distorted every stage of public policy process to the detriment of democratic standards. In defining the government's agenda, the president presented his priority issues as “the will of the people”, thereby rejecting the importance of other problems and delegitimizing actors who promoted alternative issues. In policy formulation and design, AMLO also relied on his supposed understanding of popular needs and the electoral support he received to claim that “the people” supported his decisions, even though these were based on spontaneous impulses rather than reasoning grounded in in-depth analysis. Implementation was characterized by centralization in the Executive Branch, the performative inauguration of unfinished projects, and the use of parallel administrative structures composed of networks of supporters who declared themselves loyal to his project. Evaluation was based on ignoring and attacking the recommendations and criticisms of independent experts to ensure that the government had “other data” on the success of the programs and policies. Finally, the termination of public policies entailed the systematic and unjustified disappearance of institutions, public offices, and policy tools to replace them with others based on the president's will (Dussauge-Laguna, 2022).

With these impacts on the public policy process, AMLO also effectively controlled the legislative process (Monsiváis-Carrillo,

2023b). Another notable example highlighted in the literature for its implications is linked, once again, to the INE. Faced with the failed constitutional reform to eliminate the institute, AMLO presented a “Plan B” in Congress. The proposal bypassed standard legislative procedures, was not discussed or negotiated with opposition parties, and —given the haste with which it was approved— it is unrealistic to suggest that ruling-party legislators even read or evaluated the measures they voted into law (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023c). This example is particularly significant because, as Haggard and Kaufman (2021) warn, control of the legislature is a crucial step in the collapse of the separation of powers. A congress dominated by an autocratic executive can amend laws to serve the leader’s agenda (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021).

Militarization of Public Administration and Security

The trend toward militarization in Mexico began before AMLO’s six-year term (Ibarra del Cueto, 2023; Pansters and Serrano, 2023); however, the armed forces were among the few sectors of government that avoided budget cuts and instead saw systematic increases in resources and responsibilities. In this sense, Ibarra del Cueto (2023) notes that AMLO advanced his agenda by deploying the military in diverse security and public administration tasks. This involvement deepened as the armed forces took on managerial roles in public services and federal bureaucracy, with newly created or modified institutions —ostensibly civilian— placed under military or naval command (Dussauge Laguna and Aguilar Arévalo, 2021). By integrating the military into civilian functions, public service becomes opaque due to these corporations’ resistance to transparency (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023b).

Three projects epitomize AMLO’s militarization agenda due to their prominence: the National Guard, the Felipe Ángeles International Airport, and the Maya Train (Dussauge-Laguna and Aguilar Arévalo, 2021; Ibarra del Cueto, 2023; Pansters and Serrano, 2023). The National Guard, initially conceived as a civilian-led police force, was swiftly restructured under AMLO to operate under military personnel and command (Pansters and Serrano, 2023). Regarding the airport and the train, the army was entrusted with leading their construction and operation, and their economic profits will be primarily allocated to the armed forces (Ibarra del Cueto, 2023).

Without evidence or rationale, AMLO justified the inclusion of the army and navy in multiple projects and public works with the unsubstantiated idea that the armed forces are not corrupt, but rather “people in uniform” who will protect the projects if the “conservatives” return to power (Ibarra del Cueto, 2023).

For Pansters and Serrano (2023), AMLO accelerated and deepened the militarization of the country due to the problems associated with the activities and violence of organized crime, pressure from the United States, and his centralist and hierarchical vision of government operations. In any case, his alliance with the military was further evidenced by his unwavering defense of their actions—including espionage, intimidation, and violence—and his concealment of information related to serious human rights violations, especially in the case of the disappearance of 43 students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers’ College (Ibarra del Cueto, 2023). Thus, as Sánchez-Talanquer (2020) highlights, AMLO’s decision to resort so extensively to the armed forces not only marked a shift in the opposite direction from his campaign promises, but also represented a sharp break with human rights organizations and social movements led by families of victims of violence.

Political Use of Participatory Democracy Mechanisms

Since becoming president-elect, AMLO increasingly relied on public consultations and referendums on a range of issues. These alleged exercises of direct democracy disguised the president’s decisions as popular decisions (Sánchez-Talanquer, 2020). Ibarra del Cueto (2023: 304) argues that the popular consultations implemented by the Executive Branch in Mexico were intended to flex its “plebiscitarian muscle” to suggest that its agenda was that of the “people” and that, ultimately, any actor who opposed—whether the consultation itself or the issue being discussed—lacked legitimacy. Dussauge-Laguna (2021) concurs and points out that ad hoc public consultations were systematically used to argue that the president “listens to the people” and that the public trusted him and his decisions.

The purpose of referendums can be rendered meaningless if populist governments manipulate information about the topics being consulted and the wording of the questions (Dussauge-Laguna and Aguilar Arévalo, 2021). In this sense, the referendums promoted by

AMLO were problematic in their design, communication, and implementation because their “legality, legitimacy, and effectiveness” in terms of public policy were unclear (Dussauge-Laguna and Aguilar Arévalo, 2021: 162). For instance, AMLO argued that the referendum on the closure of construction work on the so-called New Mexico City International Airport was intended to let the “people” decide, but its implementation failed to respect applicable laws and involved not state institutions but rather Morena activists (Sánchez-Talanquer, 2020). Added to this is the fact that the citizen consultations implemented by AMLO did not stem from grassroots demands unrelated to political parties or the government, but were linked to the presidential agenda. Furthermore, they were used to discredit the INE because in no case did legislators from the president’s party guarantee the necessary resources for the institute to implement them properly (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023c).

In short, for Aguilar Rivera (2022: 369–370), the popular consultations implemented by AMLO contributed to the autocratization process in at least two ways: first, because they functioned as instruments “of electoral manipulation and mobilization by the regime” against the autonomous electoral authority; second, because they had a “detrimental effect on the autonomy of the judiciary”, particularly in the case of a consultation on the impeachment of former presidents, in which the SCJN failed to curb the Executive Branch’s intention to consult on judicial proceedings and associated rights.

Ambiguous Legality

Dussauge-Laguna and Aguilar Arévalo (2021: 157) point out that AMLO displayed “an unorthodox relationship” with the legal principles and procedures that define the “rule of law”, while Monsiváis-Carrillo (2022b) finds that, although respect for the Constitution had already declined under the two previous administrations, the problem worsened under AMLO. This “ambiguous legality” (Dussauge-Laguna, 2022: 787) was observed not only in the president’s actions but also among his party’s legislators, members of his cabinet, and several Morena governors who openly violated laws prohibiting them from participating in political campaigns (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2022a).

An example that is rarely discussed in the literature, but notable for its implications, is the violation of the principle of separation between church and state. AMLO's discourse was deeply infused with religious references, and his alliances with evangelical churches were frequently reiterated publicly (Sánchez-Talanquer, 2020). Furthermore, the president violated the principle by including evangelical churches in the distribution of his "moral primer" (Dussauge-Laguna and Aguilar Arévalo, 2021). Additionally, a fundamental part of the government's narrative was the promise of an "authentic democracy" for the "people". However, as Monsiváis-Carrillo (2023c) points out, this idea, on the one hand, automatically discredited current laws and regulations and, on the other, concealed the fact that AMLO's government was seeking to dismantle the laws that guaranteed the institutional autonomy of the electoral democracy built over decades.

Discussion and Conclusion

For Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), there are four aspects that allow us to observe a political leader's tendency toward authoritarianism: they reject, in word or deed, the norms of democracy or show weak commitment to them; they deny the legitimacy of their opponents; they tolerate or encourage violence; and they express willingness to restrict the freedoms of those they consider opponents. As these authors note, observing at least one of these four signs is cause for concern. Parallely, Haggard and Kaufman (2021) identify three interrelated mechanisms behind democratic backsliding: the pernicious effects of polarization, partisan realignments that strengthen the legislative influence of an elected leader, and incremental or gradual attacks on the democratic dimensions of a political system. To varying degrees, as this review shows, these issues were observable during AMLO's administration.

However, my objective was not to assess the degree of autocratization in Mexico since AMLO's arrival to the presidency; my goal was more modest: to identify the practices and discourses of this former Mexican president that are distinguished in the literature as promoting erosion, and to systematize them based on the concepts of "authoritarian innovations" (Curato and Fossati, 2020) and "authoritarian repertoire" (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023d). In this regard, I identified eight innovations in AMLO's authoritarian repertoire

whose relevance would be a mistake to minimize or dismiss: 1) the aggrandizement of the executive branch and the hyper-personalization of political power, 2) populist and polarizing rhetoric, 3) disinformation strategies and the rejection of public deliberation, 4) attacks on and co-optation of institutions, coupled with austerity as a disciplinary tool, 5) the weakening of public administration and policy processes, 6) the militarization of public administration and security, 7) the political use of participatory democracy mechanisms, and 8) ambiguous legality.⁷

As discussed previously, the erosion of democracy is not necessarily observed in all dimensions of this type of regime; rather, some components may show more deterioration than others (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2023b). It is important to highlight this because erosion can develop incrementally over several years, and its consequences are not seen overnight (Bermeo, 2016; Haggard and Kaufman, 2021; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Lührmann, 2021; Waldner and Lust, 2018). While this literature review does not conclude that Mexico has become fully autocratic, some authors are more optimistic than others. Before the 2024 elections—in which Morena again won the presidency and obtained an overwhelming majority in Congress—Ibarra del Cueto (2023: 301) considered that the “risks” of a “significant” backslide were “contained” and had been “overestimated” because, although the president and his party had tried to end some democratic mechanisms and processes, they had not managed to materialize their efforts. Yet, as Monsiváis-Carrillo (2022a: 51) cautions, the question persists: “How much is ‘a little’?” Curato and Fossati (2020) rightly emphasize that special attention should be paid to the early stages of erosion because this will make it possible to observe how authoritarian consensus forms. Furthermore, anti-democratic challenges are not events that occur in a single, clearly distinguishable moment, but rather are complex and dynamic processes whose end is not so obvious

⁷ In an essay published after the timeframe considered for this literature review, Peschard (2024) highlights several dimensions of democratic erosion in Mexico. Although her conclusions are not based on a systematic treatment of evidence, the author identifies issues similar to those documented in this text: the government “has damaged the foundations of our democratic institutions” in multiple ways, including “power concentration..., disregard for legality..., dismantling of state institutions..., militarization..., attacks on oversight bodies..., campaigns against critical thinking..., restrictions on civic spaces...” and “a social communication policy centered on a unanimist discourse” that fosters polarization (Peschard, 2024: 95).

(Volacu and Aligica, 2023). Thus, the 2024 election results have led to several efforts that were not completed during AMLO's administration becoming a reality with the arrival of the new president, Claudia Sheinbaum, for example, judicial reform and dismantling autonomous institutions.

We still need to study how and why Mexican democracy has demonstrated resilience (or failed to). In this regard, the book edited by López Leyva and Monsiváis-Carrillo (2024) is particularly relevant, as it analyzes democratic resilience from both institutional and social perspectives. Another important line of future research concerns AMLO supporters' attitudes toward democracy and their potential impact on democratic stability. Some studies have found that among AMLO supporters, there is a certain tendency to support anti-democratic measures (Castro Cornejo and Langston, 2023; Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2022a, 2023a). Therefore, given that the persistence and stability of democracy depend on the various actors in the political system upholding its rules and institutions (Guillén *et al.*, 2019a; Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2022a), it will be important to study how Morena supporters may or may not favor the stability of democracy in the country by demanding accountability from the new president.

However, I agree with Cianetti *et al.* (2018) that our attention should not only be directed at democratic stability, but also at the quality of democracy, because stability can be based, for example, on mechanisms of exclusion, elitist control of the system, and popular apathy. Future research on democratic erosion in Mexico should therefore incorporate recommendations for "democratic deepening", that is, improving the quality of a political system by expanding civil liberties, strengthening horizontal controls, and the rule of law (Rhodes-Purdy and Madrid, 2020).

Focusing on the role of populist leaders in the erosion of democracy, Weyland (2024) criticizes conceptual and analytical perspectives that overemphasize the discursive dimensions of populism because, for him, what populists do is more important than what they say. The concepts employed in this review—authoritarian innovations and authoritarian repertoire—contribute to observing and analyzing not only what populist leaders say and do, but also what any type of political leader with autocratic tendencies might enact. Thus, in addition to presenting an overview of the literature on the democratic erosion experienced in Mexico since 2018,

this article, on the one hand, supports the theoretical contribution and empirical usefulness of two recent concepts and, on the other, favors the identification of the practices and discourses that political leaders who come to power democratically can use to undermine the quality of democracy in other regions.

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