

Beyond the natural disaster: How the earthquakes shook Mexican politics

Tuesday 3 October 2017, by [SANCHEZ Edgard](#) (Date first published: 2 October 2017).

Repercussions from September's earthquakes—which left almost 300 dead, thousands injured and hundreds of thousands homeless—are deepening an already advanced social and political crisis in Mexico. Coming on the 32nd anniversary of a 1985 earthquake that helped splinter Mexico's long-ruling one-party state, the disasters of the last month have helped push President Enrique Peña Nieto's popularity ratings to near historic lows, while relief and reconstruction efforts have brought widespread governmental corruption to the surface.

Edgard Sánchez Ramírez, a leading member of the Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT), assesses the damage caused by the earthquakes and the potential for a social and political challenge to arise from the massive efforts of ordinary people to rescue their neighbors, provide relief for survivors, and stand up against the despised regime, in an article originally published on the PRT's website and translated by Todd Chretien.

WE ARE not cursed, nor do we suffer from divine punishment or mere natural disasters, but from the consequences of a savage capitalism and the policies of the governments that defend it.

Just after September 7, when the first big earthquakes hit southern Mexico, the Senate announced it had opened a bank account to collect donations to support survivors in Chiapas and Oaxaca. They didn't receive a single donation from Mexican citizens, and hardly any from the senators themselves. By contrast, Section 22 of the CNTE [the radical section of the Mexican teachers' union] transported tons of goods and first aid materials from Mexico City and beyond to the affected areas to share them directly with the people of Oaxaca.

When President Enrique Peña Nieto [or EPN as he is known] went to Oaxaca to promise aid, Section 22 had already distributed the better part of what had been collected. And after the earthquake hit Mexico City and central Mexico on September 19, there were widespread calls for the public to give aid directly to social organizations and movements that are independent of the government and the institutional political parties.

Centers have opened all over Mexico City—in ordinary families' homes, union halls like the electrical workers union (SME), and artists' studios such as Oaxacan painter Francisco Toledo—to collect aid, bypassing the state and delivering it directly to neighborhoods, towns, and communities who are in desperate need of it. People have offered food, water, child care and even their electrical outlets so volunteers can charge their cell phones.

Obviously, this brings to mind the tremendous people's response after the earthquake in 1985 that killed up to 10,000 people in Mexico City. Tens of thousands of people have volunteered for brigades to rescue people, remove debris, carry food, clothes and water, reinforce damaged houses, provide tools for digging, etc. The spontaneous rebirth of this tradition is all the more remarkable because the great majority of these brigadistas were not even born in 1985!

It is as inspiring as it is hopeful to see a huge number of youth helping rescue people and offering aid to the survivors. Groups of young people—who previously belonged to no organization, but came together as classmates, friends or even strangers who just happened to find each other—are taking to the streets with backpacks slung over their shoulders, their personal information written on their arms in magic marker, and cell phones charged to 100 percent, looking for somewhere to help.

ALL OF THIS STANDS in sharp contrast to the scandalous inefficiency, cynicism and corruption on display at all levels of the government.

Osorio Chong, the secretary of state, is shouted down and quickly scurries away from the ruined Bolívar and Chimalpopoca factories. A city councilor from Xochimilco flees one of the hardest-hit neighborhoods under a chorus of boos and a reign of water bottles launched by residents.

Graco Ramírez, the governor of the state of Morelos [hit badly just to the south of Mexico City] is told off by brigadistas and neighbors in Tetela del Volcán—after which he and his wife, Elena Cepeda, are denounced in the press for hoarding relief materials sent by civil society. In Oaxaca, people discover a shop run by the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) filled with goods intended for distribution to victims being diverted for political patronage, so they seize the relief and deliver it to the intended recipients.

On top of all this, there is widespread condemnation of Peña Nieto's response. Before the earthquake, when EPN traveled for the first time while in office to the city of Oaxaca, Section 22 of the teachers' union organized a big protest against him. As is common in Oaxacan protests, they set off fireworks and skyrockets, one of which managed to reach a helicopter in the president's entourage (transporting reporters), forcing it to make an emergency landing.

Yet perhaps the most significant incident symbolizing the mass rejection of Peña Nieto occurred in the state of Mexico [the state surrounding Mexico City where the PRI recently stole the statewide election] when a man interrupted a public appearance by EPN to demand that the president "pick up a shovel," as a way to challenge his demagogic promises. The president's executive staff wanted to have the man arrested, thereby provoking a group of young students from the Autonomous University of the State of Mexico (UAEM) to protect the man and begin a protest against EPN.

In response, perhaps losing control of himself upon realizing that protests dog him even in the state of Mexico, Peña Nieto launched into a threatening speech in the style of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz—the PRI president of Mexico who oversaw the 1968 massacre of hundreds of students at Tlatelolco—denouncing "professional agitators" with "foreign ideas." EPN went on to say, "Sometimes there are strangers who come to stir up trouble and provoke [anger]...We have seen a lot of misinformation in social networks, sometimes false information, false news that really hinders aid work...Do not be deceived, do not be confused."

Of course, we shouldn't be surprised by the young students' reaction to Peña Nieto. We only have to remember how he ridiculed students in 2012 at the Ibero-American University who charged him with electoral fraud. His claim that there were "no more than 131" protesters launched the #yosoy132 ("#Iam132") mass student movement that shut down campuses and clogged highways for months.

Today, thousands of young brigadistas are responding that they are not troublemakers—on the contrary, it is the government and institutional parties that are to blame for blocking aid by diverting it for political purposes, or by preventing the free passage of solidarity vehicles and trucks trying reach affected communities.

EPN's Díaz-like threats hang in the air: "strangers" are rioters. These insinuations seek to recreate the kind of fear whipped up by the state after 1968. Tragedy followed when five university workers were accused of being "outside agitators" and lynched in the small village of Canoa in Puebla. However, the distrust the government and the collapse of its legitimacy are now intense, greater than they have ever been—and Peña Nieto's threats only increase the contempt with which he is held.

THE GOVERNMENT wants to impede, delay, and disrupt the process of self-organization taking place in society and among the survivors themselves to avoid a repetition of the political dynamics set in motion in 1985. They must prevent the rise of an autonomous movement, independent of the regime.

It's very common today to hear that the movement is outdoing the government in terms of providing relief. In 1985, the movement continued during the whole process of reconstruction, and it provides a precedent showing both social self-organization and governmental failure.

These dynamics spilled over into 1986 with a huge student strike [led by the University Student Council, or CUE]. Soon after, the PRI was split by a historic current headed by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in 1987—who subsequently ran for president in 1988 against the PRI one-party state and went on to found the center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD).

When officials confiscate aid collected by civil society, they do so not only because they are corrupt and seek personal enrichment. Rather, they are primarily interested in asserting control, so that all aid for survivors is delivered in the name of the government, especially the National System for Coordinated Family Development (SNDIF), represented in the media by Angélica Rivera, Peña Nieto's wife.

On September 20, when the earthquakes' terrible effects became known in the San Gregorio neighborhood of the Xochimilco region in Mexico City, thousands of volunteers converged there with the intention of volunteering.

A huge traffic jam occurred because so many people went to help, but also because there were various roadblocks set up by the Marines, Army, and municipal and central government authorities, telling people to go no further and leave relief supplies with them. Supposedly this was a way to centralize all supplies; in reality, it was an attempt portray the authorities as critical in the relief process and to try to prove that civilian volunteers were useless.

Certainly, the point is not about competing with state institutions to see which can secure more recognition in the eyes of the survivors. Rather, the only guarantee that the survivors have of winning their demands, especially the recovery and reconstruction of their homes, depends on them being organized, mobilized and fighting for these demands.

FORTUNATELY, NOT only in Mexico City, but also in Chiapas, Oaxaca and Morelos, there are rich experiences and strong traditions of struggle.

For instance, in Mexico City, a coalition of the survivors' organizations from 1985 finally came together in the unified council of survivors (CUD), becoming the officially recognized intermediary with the state in terms of reconstruction. And in Juchitán, Oaxaca, there is a long tradition of social

struggle, even if it is no longer embodied in the historic Worker, Campesino, and Student Coalition of the Istmo (COCEI), because it has been divided by the dynamic of institutionalization of the left via the PRD. Of more recent origin, we can look to the experience of the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) and the mass strike and struggle it led in 2006.

At the same time, we must not only safeguard the process of self-organization from maneuvers from the state and institutional political parties. Among sections of the left and social movements, there is also a sort of desperation when faced with the potential for the birth of a new, vigorous movement that enjoys tremendous legitimacy and national status, but remains disorganized.

Faced with the dangers of confronting the government and several cases of “low-intensity” repression [over the weekend of September 21-23, there were various clashes between police and rescuers or those transporting aid], certain left-wing currents are already striving to lead the movement, but are doing so by imposing themselves on the incipient forms of organization.

Clearly, the spontaneity of any movement is relative, and we always find, here and there, elements with political experience and even militancy. Yet any new social movement depends on a process of self-organization of those most affected, and not on those of us on the left speaking on their behalf.

For instance, when a powerful movement against a steep hike in gasoline prices erupted in January of this year, several pre-existing movements and organizations convened meetings and conferences and tried to raise their own slogans for the struggle to bring the new movement into their ranks. It didn't work.

NOW THERE is a similar risk in believing that our respective social organizations and movements can bring survivors and the earthquake solidarity movement directly into our ranks—and thereby ensure such a movement develops a political, even a radical, direction.

No doubt, even before the tremors in 1985, there were important urban movements that provided a precedent and were obviously able to merge their experienced cadre with the survivors' movement then. This previous experience was concentrated in the National Council of the Popular Urban Movement (CONAMUP) and the National Committee of the Plan de Ayala (CNPA).

But the movement of survivors in 1985 did not simply swell CONAMUP's component organizations. Instead, a new movement was created—new actors in the struggle with their own organization that finally converged in the Unified Council of Survivors (CUD). In fact, in some ways, the CUD's experience outgrew that of CONAMUP.

If a new, authentic movement of survivors grows up out of September 19, it will develop its own organizations—in fact, these may already be growing up in the first neighborhood assemblies. Social and political organizations must certainly offer their example, their experience and even their cadres, but they must do so by encouraging and respecting the survivors' own organizational forms and not trying to fit this movement into older organizations.

It is important that the people—the survivors and the volunteers—see these new groups taking action and building solidarity so that they can understand how different they are from the governmental agencies, but we must resist the urge to substitute for or co-opt the initial movement. It's hard because, at the same time, the movement must resist pressure from the government that aims to disorganize it and co-opt it, and to repress it if need be. However, if there is no autonomous movement, there is no possibility of success.

The survivors' movement of 1985, as we've already said, anticipated the 1986 student strike led by CEU in the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and the split in the PRI that was

carried to a conclusion in the 1988 elections, when the PRI's Salinas took office on the back of massive voter fraud.

The popular mobilization and massive rejections of the PRI that followed these developments are incomprehensible without taking these events into account. These experiences and the level of consciousness reached were primarily channeled at that time into the PRD, even though this party did not represent a genuinely radical change.

TODAY'S MOVEMENT of survivors, with all the moral authority it enjoys, may provoke repercussions in the midst of the regime's social and political crisis.

In fact, this is the worst moment in terms of legitimacy in the history of the Mexican regime, and it comes at a time when the alternative represented by the PRD has imploded, as the party has been assimilated as a collaborator. This is especially true after the PRD signed the Pact for Mexico in support of EPN's neoliberal program that only exacerbated the disasters of rampant femicide, ruthless violence against journalists, and the militarization of the war on drugs.

In reality, the crisis of the regime has found expression in nearly every year of EPN's administration, repeatedly raising the slogan "Peña out!": #yoso132 in 2012; mass protests against neoliberal reforms in 2013; the Ayotzinapa abductions in 2014; the boycott of 2015's midterm elections and the growth of the teachers' movement; a strike in teachers' colleges and high levels of abstention in the vote to reform Mexico City's constitution in 2016; and the "gasolinazo" protests against price hikes at the beginning of 2017.

If the regime hasn't yet collapsed, this isn't because of its strength, but because of the movements' weaknesses. We had expected that the next explosion in this ongoing crisis would appear in July 2018, when, no doubt, the PRI attempts to cling to power through a new round of fraud in the presidential elections. However, the earthquake has shifted Mexico's social and political tectonic plates, and its energy may fracture the regime's rotten foundations.

Our aim must be to help find a way for the survivors' movement and the anti-neoliberal movements to develop a shared, anti-system perspective.

This is a complicated question. For example, just as the PRD has retreated as a political alternative, Andrés Manuel López Obrador [or AMLO, as the PRD's former presidential candidate and now an independent is known] and his new MORENA party [Movement for National Regeneration] have adopted the electoralist perspective once promoted by Cárdenas and the PRD.

AMLO now argues that all movements fighting against the regime should hold their fire and dedicate their efforts to electing him in 2018. Fortunately, none of the movements that arose against EPN have accepted AMLO's proposal to subordinate themselves to the elections and the institutional path.

Today's movements must deal with this political contradiction, although—in contrast to 1988—the perspective of simply "alternating" ruling parties has run its course, no matter how much MORENA hopes to generate new illusions in AMLO winning the vote in 2018 as a solution to all problems.

However, it must be said that, in desperation and out of hatred for the PRI, some sections of the movement do accept these electoralist illusions. At the same time, the recent elections in the state of Mexico only demonstrate that even if MORENA can win the majority of votes, the PRI is willing to resort to fraud to maintain power and AMLO's only alternative is to complain in the courts. In reality, the state of Mexico's elections are "chronicles of a death foretold" with respect to what we can expect in 2018.

TAKING ALL this into account, the survivors movement's potential force and energy means that 2018 won't necessarily be like 1988. If 1985 led to a crisis in 1988 that was resolved through the PRI eventually sharing power by alternating terms in office with other establishment parties [principally the pro-business National Action Party, or PAN] in defense of a fraudulent institutionalism, then 2017 does not automatically presage a repetition because the balance of forces is different and the regime's crisis is deeper.

Now there is a stronger expression of anti-capitalist forces that will not settle for political parties taking turns in office.

Although it is sometimes dispersed, an anti-capitalist consciousness has advanced within diverse union, social, and political movements. One example is the founding of the Political Organization of the People and the Workers (OPT) on the initiative of the electrical workers union (SME) in the midst of its desperate struggle against the neoliberal privatization of Mexico City's electrical system.

Yet this is only one option. The Zapata Army of National Liberation (EZLN or Zapatistas) proposed to the National Indigenous Congress (CNI) that it constitute a Governing Indigenous Council (CIG) and then presented its spokeswoman Marichuy, an Indigenous leader, as an independent candidate to stand in the 2018 presidential elections. The CNI adopted this plan of action in May and has begun working on putting it into practice.

Critically, the OPT's national meeting on September 9 agreed to support Marichuy and the CIG presidential campaign, signaling the potential for an important alliance—between Zapatismo and the CIG on the one hand, and the proletarian pole of the SME-OPT on the other hand. Taken together, they could put forward a social bloc as an alternative to the system.

Without doubt, the CIG and its spokeswoman's campaign will break out of the institutional electoral framework. As Marichuy has said, we are not going to chase votes. This will be a campaign based on struggle.

Thus, the regime's crisis will even find expression in the elections. Marichuy's campaign is very similar to Rosario Ibarra's presidential race in 1988 initiated by the Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT). However, today the balance of forces has changed. Back then, the major currents of the socialist left that emerged from the battles of 1968 capitulated to the Cardenista institutional perspective, even dissolving themselves in the PRD. The PRT refused to do so, but found itself isolated in those circumstances.

Despite this month's devastating tragedies, there are reasons to hope that, as they say in the social networks, the system suffers from structural flaws and is close to collapse. September's seismic tremors may awaken a social and political force that, like Marx's old mole of history, burrows up from underground with enough power to bring down the whole corrupt and decrepit edifice.

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P.S.

* October 2, 2017:

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