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The Rise of Evangelical Conservatism in Mexican Politics

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Abstract

This article documents the rise of the Evangelical movement in Mexican politics. Unlike historical Protestantism (Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists, etc.), which contained many elements that could be considered progressive, the Pentecostal-Evangelical denominations are characterized by a strongly conservative agenda. This paper argues that the rise of Evangelicalism in Mexican politics in recent years implies an attempt to shift the way secularism has historically been treated in the nation, characterized by the strict separation between the church and the state.

Keywords: Mexican politics, state-church relationship, Protestantism, Evangelicalism, Pentecostalism

Introduction

To ignore what happens inside the Churches is to ignore a remarkable part of the spirit of the century and the factors of national life (Gabriel Le Bras).

This article belongs to the field of the politology of religion, which is the study of how religious beliefs impact and interact with political practices and institutions. This subdiscipline of political science emerged quite recently; it developed in the 1990s from the need to explain the conflicts and peace-building processes that many regions of the globe were experiencing (Miroslub). The central hypothesis of this article is that the rise of Evangelicalism in Mexican politics in recent years implies an attempt to shift the historic treatment of secularism in Mexico (by strictly separating the church and the state) to accommodationism. This occurred because recent public iterations of Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity are strongly conservative, unlike historical Protestantisms that had many elements that could be considered progressive.

Christianity in itself is not left- or right-wing. The religion can be interpreted in such diverse ways that it can inspire ideological traditions or political movements that are very different from itself. Christianity can be the source of liberation theology or popular revolutionary uprisings, such as the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in Mexico (Gómez 2006), but can also be the banner of fascist dictatorships, such as Franco's regime in Spain. This is why it is important to explore – conceptually and historically – the specific kind of Protestantism that has been gaining positions in Mexican politics in recent decades, explaining where it comes from, what its agenda is, its relationship with the Mexican state in different eras of national history, and above all, why it can be considered a “conservative” or “right-wing” political movement.

The last is particularly relevant because, for much of Mexico's modern history, the state (with the liberals in the 19th century and revolutionaries in the 20th) has supported Protestantism and has associated it with a “progressive spiritual force” that would help the nation to successfully implement its developmental and secularizing projects. However, the specific type of Protestantism that has flourished in Mexico is not the so-called “historic Protestantism” (Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists, etc.), but is the Evangelical and Pentecostal type that emerged in the post-war United States, which is characterized by a strongly conservative agenda and could be considered a threat to the secularism of the Mexican state.

The article is divided into five sections. The first section provides a theoretical explanation of the two different conceptions of the church-state relationship: separationism and accommodationism. The second clarifies Pentecostal Evangelicalism. The third section analyzes the relationship that developed between the Mexican state, the Catholic Church, and Protestant denominations. The fourth section provides an exposition on the growth and empowerment of various Evangelical and Pentecostal groups in Mexico's politics. The fifth section explains the Evangelical agenda that these religious groups intend to introduce into public policy. The article concludes with an elucidation on the political power of the Evangelical churches. Despite being a minority in demographic terms, they have become a relevant political actor in Mexico, especially through the Social Encounter Party or Partido Encuentro Social (PES) and the government of the current president of the republic, Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

Perspectives on the Secular State: Separationism and Accommodationism

The meaning of a “secular state” has been the subject of great theoretical, ideological, legal, and partisan debates. Even though there are multiple interpretations, two have dominated contemporary discourse in Mexico: separationism and accommodationism.

Separationism is a political and legal doctrine that considers the need for a “wall of separation” between the state and the church. This vision of separation between the spheres of civil government and religion has been dominant in Mexico since liberalism monopolized political power in the second half of the 19th century.

The conceptualization of the church-state separation varies by the country. In Mexico, it has often been similar to Jacobin and anticlerical positions, which tried to extirpate religiosity from Mexican society rather than seek religious and thought plurality. Furthermore, on many occasions, anticlerical positions also intended to eliminate religiosity from the private lives of

the citizens (Pérez-Rayón). Church-state separation does not necessarily mean anticlericalism, but in the case of Mexico, history has often linked those positions with liberal groups. The anticlerical position taken by a large number of Mexican liberals will be explored in the following sections of this article. Until very few decades ago, the Catholic Church held a virtual religious monopoly in Mexico, and the clergy was characterized by integrism and deployed very hostile positions against the liberal project, even taking up arms and waging a civil war against the government of the republic on more than one occasion. Above all, because the Catholic clergy effectuated a strong political activism from the very birth of Mexico as a nation, Mexican liberals considered the Catholic Church an obstacle to the instauration of the republic (Gómez 2007).

For separationists, the secular state is violated when the civil government has links or ties with religious organizations. They believe that a secular state invariably implies the exclusion of religion from public life. Concordats, or agreements between the civilian government and churches, are often denounced by separationists as “threats to the secular state.” Good examples of this position are García 1993, Barranco and Blancarte, and Poulat. For them, the existence of freedom of belief or religious plurality does not necessarily lead to a secular state, but to a “multi-confessional State” or a “concordant State” (Blancarte 2001: 846-847).

Perhaps the greatest expression of the Mexican separationist doctrine is found in the original Article 130 of the country’s constitution. The article, in addition to denying the churches any legal recognition and prohibiting them from having properties, stipulated that Mexican citizens would have no political rights if they exercised as ministers of worship.

The ministers of cults may never, in a public or private meeting, nor in acts of worship or religious propaganda, criticize the fundamental laws of the country, the authorities in particular, or the government in general; they will not have an active or passive vote, nor the right to associate for political purposes (CPEUM).

In 1992, Article 130 was reformed, eliminating the denial of the right to vote to the ministers of worship. However, the prohibition against criticizing the country’s laws or institutions continued.

In opposition to liberal separationism, there is another position that interprets religious freedom and the secular state very differently and is associated with the conservative ideology and legal interpretations: accommodationism. Accommodationism is the interpretation of freedom of religion and the secular state (non-confessional state) as the “non-preference” of the government towards a particular religious denomination. Accommodationists conceive of the secular state as a “neutral state” in the religious sphere, not as the exclusion of religiosity from the public space.

In Mexico, the accommodationist approach is a very recent phenomenon. Debates around the church-state relationship were dominated by the struggle between clericalism and anticlericalism, confessionals and separationists for decades. Accommodationism originated in the United States, a nation that since its inception has had a wide variety of religious denominations, with none more dominant than the other. In Mexico, by contrast, the Catholic Church has enjoyed an overwhelming majority, although that has begun to change.

As will be explained in detail in the third section of the article, Mexican politics was virtually monopolized for almost a century and a half by liberals and revolutionaries who, in their different modalities and nuances, shared the precepts of the separationist doctrine of church-state relations. It was not until the overwhelming hegemony of the Institutional Revolutionary Party or *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) was broken, that Mexico witnessed a rise in opposition to the historical Mexican anticlerical liberalism. Some politicians consider anticlerical liberalism a part of the Mexican identity, but others began demanding a different relationship between the state and religious denominations. These demands led to the recent rise of accommodationism in Mexico. However, in the 19th and 20th centuries, the groups that opposed separationism and Jacobinism in Mexico were not accommodationists, but supporters of clericalism. They wanted the Catholic Church to take the lead in the construction of the national identity.

Accommodationists are against clericalism, which means they are opposed to the existence of an official religion or the promotion of a specific religion by the state. They are also opposed to the civil government showing hostility towards religious denominations. In contrast to separationists, accommodationists believe that freedom of speech and belief allows a relationship of mutual benefit and cooperation between the civil government and the various religions. According to this conservative interpretation of church-state relations, the government is permitted to promote religious beliefs, but not religious organizations (Ravitch: 87; Wilson: 82).

Therefore, accommodationists do not see it as an attack on secularism when an electoral candidate uses biblical references in their speech, when an oath in a trial is taken on a holy text, or when a politician blesses his nation in the name of God.

Accommodationism was introduced in Mexico through the Evangelical and Neo-Pentecostal churches. Missionaries who came to Mexico from the United States not only carried religious teachings, as Daniel Ramírez has explained, but also political practices and values that made Mexican Neo-Pentecostal organizations deploy positions similar to those of the “Christian right,” who sought to influence politics to implement their conservative “pro-family” agenda (Wald and Calhoun-Brown: 207-40).

What is Neo-Pentecostal Evangelicalism?

The term “Evangelical” refers to religious groups as old as Protestantism itself. At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century in the United States, however, the word “Evangelical” referred to a specific group of Protestants who openly opposed the liberal and progressive theology held by many American Protestant churches at the time. In opposition to moral relativism, materialism, and hedonism that they called “modernism,” the Evangelical movement defended a literal interpretation of the Bible, which they considered a text not inspired by God, but literally the word of God, as if God had written it himself (Balmer: 20-32).

The Evangelical movement also opposes the idea that only individuals can face salvation or divine punishment. They believe there are sinful societies that will be punished by God when they deviate from righteous and virtuous actions. Thus, instead of churches moving away from “worldly” and political action, as promoted by historical Protestantism, the

Evangelical movement believes that Christian churches must commit themselves to fix the world and fight the evil in it (Case).

Against the optimistic and positive vision of human progress, the Evangelical movement has a pessimistic perspective in which humankind walks a path of decadence and destruction. This contrasts with historical Protestantism that gave metaphorical or symbolic meanings to apocalyptic events. The Evangelical movement, instead, has a prophetic and fatalistic outlook on the apocalypse. They believe the Great Tribulation, the Rapture (a kind of ascension of the righteous), the War of Armageddon, and other apocalyptic events will occur in the future (Case).

Between 1915 and 1920, the Evangelical movement published a collection of texts against modernism, named *The Fundamentals*, in which an appeal was made to return to the foundations, the origins, the original path from which people had deviated toward the modern, liberal, and hedonistic society. It was not from Islam, as is sometimes believed, but from these Christian books that the term “fundamentalism” was coined, to refer to the practices of radical opposition to modern secularized society (Dollar: 34-42). However, the movement did not spread much within American society. For decades, their works were reduced to indoctrination in seminaries and Bible institutes. All that changed with the Cold War, the sexual revolution, and mass media such as television in the post-war period. The Evangelical movement strengthened ties with a certain branch of Protestantism for its greatest expansion: the Protestant branch of Pentecostalism.

Pentecostalism emerged from schisms within the Methodist Church, which was the most popular church in the United States by the end of the 19th century. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church in the 18th century, claimed that liturgical rituals were less important than personal conversion experience.¹ However, the meaning of “conversion” became the subject of heated debates. Various groups began to emerge in Methodism that considered liturgical rituals as part of the conversion “experiences of grace” and a “baptism of fire” manifested in the form of mystical trances, spasms, speaking in tongues (glossolalia), healing by imposition of hands (thaumaturgy), dances, and even the expulsion of demons (exorcisms), in addition to water baptism and the acceptance of Christ as their Lord and Savior. Within Protestantism these spiritual expressions have always existed, but were somewhat marginal. In contrast, these expressions were the center of the religious identity and rituality of Pentecostalism when it separated from the Methodist Church at the beginning of the 20th century.

Pentecostalism originated in the southwestern states of the United States. The Pentecostal Church² became famous partly because of the African-American pastor William Seymour in Los Angeles, California. The movement soon spread throughout the United States, followed by the rest of the world, and became particularly prominent in Latin America (Medina).

¹ The expression “Methodist” was originally a derogatory term used to refer to John Wesley and his followers as a result of his severely fervent and disciplined behavior.

² The name “Pentecostal” has its origin in the Bible (Acts 2:2-4 and 2:17-21) in which the author narrated that on the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came down and caused believers to speak in unknown languages.

A “Fourth Great Awakening” was characterized by the popularization of television in the 1960s and 1970s. In those decades, “televangelists” spread in the United States, giving birth to the Neo-Pentecostal movement formed by people who came from Evangelicalism, Pentecostalism, Episcopalianism, Lutheranism, and even the Catholic Church. Doctrinally, the differences between Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism are virtually non-existent. However, Neo-Pentecostalism uses marketing to attract converts and a liturgy that contains many artistic and musical elements (there are even hip-hop, pop, or heavy metal Christian groups), as well as a very strong control over their parishioners. Neo-Pentecostalism emerged especially after 1969, when *The Rockefeller Report on the Americas*, a report penned by Nelson A. Rockefeller, advised the U.S. government to support the dissemination of different religious expressions in Latin America. The objective was to diminish the power of Catholicism in the region since the Catholic Church had a strong liberation theology presence at the time and was vulnerable to a “subversive penetration,” which mobilized the peasant masses against U.S. interests (Rockefeller: 290-92).

Neo-Pentecostalism adopts the liturgical and religious elements of Pentecostalism with the addition of a strong charismatic movement based on the personalities of their leaders and preachers (like those of John Osteen, Robert Tilton, Oral Roberts, and Jimmy Swaggart). With access to mass media by these new churches, and pastors with the oratorical ability to move the masses, Neo-Pentecostalism has been propelled to increasingly higher levels of membership. Mass media has become an integral part of the Evangelical and Pentecostal dissemination strategy. At present, it is very difficult to draw a clear line of separation between Evangelicals and Neo-Pentecostals within the charismatic movement. However, it is necessary to point out that the difference between Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal Evangelicals is purely academic. The believers assume themselves to be Evangelicals or just Pentecostals.

Pentecostalism was introduced to Latin America by American missionaries who arrived in Chile in 1910, in Brazil and Mexico in 1914, and in Colombia in 1931 (Bastian 2006: 38-54). Thus Pentecostalism had already had a marginal presence in Latin America for decades before the arrival of Neo-Pentecostalism in the 1960s and 1970s. Now Pentecostals, in one of many variants, comprise approximately 85 percent of Latin American Evangelicals (Bastian 2006: 54).

Neo-Pentecostalism in Latin America has a wide appeal among low-income individuals. The charismatic movement preaches “prosperity theology,” in which economic success is considered a sign of blessing. In these churches, social networks that help the material progress of parishioners are promoted (Schäfer; Bastian 2005). This is why conversion to Evangelical Pentecostalism is more common among the poorest and most marginalized sectors of Latin American societies. In particular, indigenous communities have proven to be a fertile field for Pentecostal evangelization. This is because many religious elements, such as healing through mystical rituals and the marriage of spiritual leaders, are already present in the worldview of many Latin American indigenous communities. The Catholic clergy has often been hostile to this “popular religiosity” typical of the native peoples of the Americas, but these elements are highly compatible with Pentecostalism (De la Luz: 37).

The Ideological and Programmatic Affinities between Mexico's Liberals and Revolutionary Elites with the Protestant Churches

In 1867, Maximilian of Habsburg, the monarch of the Second Mexican Empire, was killed by the Republican Army of Benito Juárez. This marked the end of years of armed struggle between liberals and conservatives, republicans and monarchists, to rule Mexico. The liberal party took full control of the Mexican state and a permanent liberal republic was established. The Catholic Church in Mexico officially lost its political and educational power. Furthermore, its possessions were expropriated by the reform laws that the liberals promulgated between 1855 and 1863. The conservative party was dissolved.

Thereafter, for decades, no conservative in Mexico could hold a high political position. Liberalism became the official ideology of the State (Blancarte 1992). The conservatives were not only banned from the electoral field and public administration, but were also called “anti-Mexicans,” “betrayers of the nation,” and the enemies of the Mexican people because they received the support of the French Empire. It did not matter that the Mexican liberals had won with the support of the United States, a country they admired and dreamed of imitating (Knight).

During these years, the liberals forged strong alliances with the Protestant churches. They believed that if they allowed Protestant missionaries to enter Mexican territory, several of their national goals would be achieved (K. Ramírez: 328-29):

- a) The social bases of their conservative enemies would be diminished and the forces of a hostile, militant, and combative Catholic Church would be reduced;
- b) The peasant and indigenous population of Mexico would be socialized through the cultivation of a work ethic and a desire for material development (a capitalist ethos);
- c) Many of the “social diseases” that the Mexican liberals believed had spread into the Mexican society (alcoholism, gambling, poor hygiene, lust, laziness, etc.), would be combated, removed, and replaced by the ideal of a “rational citizen” who was needed to complete their democratic and secular republican project.

More than half a century prior to the publication of Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's famous study on civic culture, Mexican liberals already believed that for Mexico to industrialize, have scientific and technological development, and become a democratic republic, it was not enough to just have liberal institutions and a constitution almost exactly copied from that of the United States. Many liberals believed that it was essential that the Mexican population ceased to have conservative, traditionalist values, and instead have a secular, democratic, rational, and entrepreneurial political culture. Although liberals of the 19th century did not use the concept “political culture,” they wrote about the values, ethics, symbols, feelings, passions, attitudes, and citizen practices of the Mexican people (Gómez 2017: 173-90).

Many of the great Mexican liberal leaders of the 19th century were Freemasons. Some of them, like Ignacio Ramírez or Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada, were openly anticlerical with Jacobin tendencies. There were many other liberals who were Catholics. Nevertheless, they believed that the Catholic Church had become corrupt and wanted it to be transformed, modernized,

and updated to align with modern times. These liberals, like General Porfirio Díaz (president from 1876 to 1880 and again from 1886 to 1911), believed that if the Catholic Church lost its monopoly and faced competition with the Protestant churches, it would have to reform and renew itself and adapt to modernity (K. Ramírez: 214).

Conversely, leaders of the Protestant churches naturally allied with the Mexican liberals. The secularizing project of the liberals implied freedom of worship, which was a vital element for the existence of Protestantism. The Mexican liberal state became the best ally of the Protestant churches of the 19th century. Before the liberal Constitution of 1857, the previous constitutional texts (1812, 1824, and 1836) stipulated that “the Catholic religion is the official one of the Republic, without tolerance of any other.” In opposition, the 1857 Constitution did not even mention the Catholic Church. Other liberal policies were quite attractive to the Protestants of that time, such as the secularization of cemeteries, civil registration, and the establishment of secular education. This broke the monopoly the Catholic Church had in the formation of public conscience.

The proliferation of Protestantism in Mexico was quite discreet. The churches could finally settle down and count on the power of the state for protection from harassment by the Catholics. It is impossible to know exactly how many Protestants there were in Mexico in that period because the censuses of the time did not require that specific data. However, there are scholarly studies that have documented the proliferation of new Protestant missions, especially the Methodist Church, in Mexico in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These churches promoted the politicization of their believers in favor of liberal governments (Martínez; Ruíz; Téllez).

Protestantism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was a minority phenomenon and almost exclusively urban. However, the initial rapid growth of Protestantism in Mexico began decelerating as the 20th century approached, largely as a result of the Mexican state reconciling with the Catholic Church (Bastian 2015). During the regime of General Porfirio Díaz, both the state and the Catholic Church abandoned radicalism and confrontation. This changed with the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution.

The Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), especially the Constitutionalist Army that won the civil war, was anticlerical. The Constitutionalist leaders blamed the Catholic Church for the coup d'état that overthrew the democratically elected government of Francisco I. Madero (Correa; O'Dogherty). Therefore, when the new constitution was created by the revolutionaries in 1917, the Catholic Church lost all juridical recognition. Subsequently, all kinds of prohibitions were imposed on it, from reducing the number of its ministers of religion to prohibiting it from owning property (Gómez 2012: 21). Although the makers of the Constitution of 1917 had an anti-Catholic Jacobinism in mind, the laws placed the rest of the churches in the same legal situation, including, of course, Protestant churches.

The climax of the confrontation between the new revolutionary state and the Catholic Church was a bloody civil war, commonly called the Cristero War, between 1926 and 1929. The conflict ended with a pact called *Modus Vivendi* between the Catholic hierarchy and the government of President Emilio Portes Gil, which consisted of the deposition of weapons by Catholic believers. In return, though the federal government did not change the constitution and the regulatory legislation in terms of the church-state relationship, it tolerated public

worship and religious education in private schools, and stopped persecuting Catholic priests and parishioners (García 2006). What consequences did this have for Protestant denominations?

Like the liberals of the 19th century, the revolutionaries of the 20th century, upon discovering that they could not defeat the Catholic Church by force, opted for a long-term strategy that consisted of seeking to educate Mexican society. In a slow but constant process, they adopted secular and progressive values in the conception of industrial progress made by the revolutionary elites of that time (Gómez 2017).

The secular and anticlerical public education taught in the schools of the Mexican state was the result of that plan. Facilities were also provided to install various “non-Catholic” religious organizations in the national territory. An example of this is the Summer Linguistic Institute (SLI) created during President Lázaro Cárdenas’ rule between 1934 and 1940.

The SLI was the Mexican branch of the Wycliffe Bible Translators founded by Cameron Townsend in Santa Ana, California, between 1920 and 1930. Its objective was to translate the Bible into the native languages of Mexico; not to rescue indigenous cultures, but as a conversion and assimilation strategy. Mexican Protestantism was thus accused of being an instrument of the ideological penetration of the United States (Rodríguez 1982; ALAI). Along with the SLI, other “faith missions” arrived in Mexico in the 1950s and 1960s. These “faith missions” functioned as religious transnational corporations with substantial funding, and they were even promoted by the United States Department of State by providing resources from the U.S. Agency for International Development (Santoyo and Arellano).

The Mexico of the 21st century is still mostly Catholic. However, since the 1980s, there has been a remarkable rise in non-Catholic denominations, especially Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and Neo-Pentecostals (Blancarte 2010: 109-11). The demographic growth of Protestantism in Mexico has been territorially unequal. There are states of the republic, such as San Luis Potosí or Guanajuato, with almost no Protestant presence. In others, mostly from the southeast, the poorest and most underdeveloped areas of the country, Protestant churches have reached high growth rates. Mexico is a federal republic comprised of 32 states, but almost 70 percent of Mexican Protestants live in only eight of them: Guerrero, Oaxaca, Chiapas, Veracruz, Tabasco, Campeche, Yucatán, and Quintana Roo (INEGI). All of these states lie in the southeast zone of Mexico. How did these Protestants get into Mexican politics?

The Political Emergence of Evangelicalism in Mexico

The rise of Evangelicals in politics is not something exclusive to Mexico. Evangelicalism has achieved a strong electoral and party position in other Latin American countries as well. Scholars and journalists have detected a robust Evangelical activism, both in the electoral triumph of Jair Bolsonaro (it is estimated that 199 deputies and four senators make up the “Evangelical Caucus” in Brazil), and the fall of Evo Morales, with activism by the Santa Cruz Civic Committee, which united Catholic conservatives and Protestants alike (Passarinho).

In Brazil alone, more than 30 million people have converted from Catholicism to some Protestant denomination. A majority chose Evangelicalism. The Assemblies of God has 22 million members, and the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, with more than 5 million members, owns the second largest television station in the country. In some Central American

countries like Honduras, Guatemala, and Costa Rica, Evangelical churches have average annual growth rates of 35 percent (Gil). In only 10 years, the number of evangelical groups registered by the federal government in Mexico has increased by 400 percent (SEGOB).

It is estimated that there are about 20 million Evangelicals in Mexico (INEGI). However, because of the heterogeneity of the Evangelical movement, there is no Evangelical vote base in Mexico, or at least no evidence that suggests Evangelicals vote for a specific party. Unlike the United States where Evangelicals have a clear preference for the Republican Party, Evangelicals in Mexico were close to the PRI for many years. But with the transition to a democracy in 2000, Evangelicals forged relations with other political parties, and some Evangelical leaders even created their own parties. The Social Encounter Party or *Partido Encuentro Social* (PES) is a prime example.

Official data from the Mexican government indicates that about 10 percent of the total believers in the country are part of the Evangelical churches, especially Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism (INEGI), but activism by Mexican Evangelicals is quite noticeable. Even though their political force does not lie in being an electoral bloc, they have still succeeded in converting various political leaders, or in other cases persuading certain leaders to implement their agenda. This can also be witnessed in the case of the current president of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (often called by just his initials, AMLO).

As noted above, Protestants were close to the secular liberalism of post-revolutionary governments during the hegemony of the PRI. Except for individual non-collective activism, Evangelicals were far from partisanship and electoral activism for decades, as they considered these activities deviations from Biblical principles. However, the rise of progressive movements in the late 20th and early 21st century (third-wave feminism, the LGBT movement, the pro-choice movement, etc.) generated an Evangelical reaction. This materialized in a close relationship between the government of Felipe Calderón Hinojosa (2006-2012) from the right-wing National Action Party or *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN) and the “House on the Rock Movement,” one of the most notorious Evangelical denominations in Mexico (Rodríguez 2011).

Historically, the Mexican Catholic Church had always been hostile and aggressive with Protestantism. But now, in the 21st century, when its conservative views and values were challenged by the advancement of feminism and LGBT movements, the Catholic Church was willing to ally with the Evangelicals to face a common enemy. In recent years, Catholics and Protestants in Mexico walked side by side in “pro-life” rallies and in parades exclusively in defense of heterosexual marriage. Since the 1980s, attacks by the Mexican Catholics have been focused on socialists and statist left-wingers (Gómez 2012: 30-32). This has allowed contemporary Catholics to easily make ideological alliances with Evangelicals and defend the social conservative agenda (although they may have serious differences in the economic field). At the same time, the majority of contemporary Mexican Protestantism is Evangelical and Pentecostal, not the historical Protestantism that was promoted by the secular post-revolutionary state. This has been the breeding ground for the formation of a new Mexican Christian right-wing, composed of a Catholic and Evangelical side.

The Social Encounter Party (PES) was founded by Evangelical pastors in 2014. It collaborated with the Secretariat of Social Communication of the Evangelical Christian

Churches and had a close relationship with the National Confraternity of Evangelical Christian Churches (CONFRATERNICE) and the current president of Mexico. These were clear signs that certain Evangelical groups opted for political-electoral activism to boost their social agenda, especially that which renounced induced abortion and defended the “natural and traditional family” model.

CONFRATERNICE is not committed to a specific political party, but with all political players that allow it to implement its social agenda – it has good relations with all parties in Mexico, be it left- or right-wing. However, in the 2018 elections, they openly supported the current president.

Mexican Evangelicals have been characterized as having a high level of electoral pragmatism. While the PES is led by Evangelical pastors, many of its militants come from the PRI. For example, Alejandro González Murillo, the coordinator of the PES legislative group in the Chamber of Deputies from 2015 to 2018, is the nephew of José Murillo Karam, former governor of Hidalgo and one of the electoral pillars of the PRI. When the PES was founded, many journalists from the Mexican press indicated that the party was sponsored by Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong (also former governor of the state of Hidalgo), secretary of governance during the last national government formed by the PRI (2012-2018) (Miguel; Delgado; Riva; López). During PRI rule, it was common practice to support the creation and maintenance of “satellite” parties to fragment the opposition vote (Rodríguez 2005).

When Osorio Chong could not obtain the PRI nomination for the presidency of the republic, the PES acted with total freedom to seek electoral and legislative alliances. In 2017, the PES allied with the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA), a left-wing party, to support the candidacy of AMLO.

AMLO won the presidential election and the coalition won a parliamentary majority in 2018. The PES did not gain enough votes to maintain the national registry, but held a strong presence in some key states. Its greatest triumph was that it welcomed eight senators and 56 federal congressmen, with 1,038,325 votes. Thus, the PES became an important player in accomplishing the constitutional reforms that the new government wanted to implement. What does the PES agenda consist of and why is it considered conservative?

The Ideological Position of the Social Encounter Party

In Mexico, being a conservative is anathema in politics and, therefore, in the electoral field as well. The liberal and revolutionary hegemony of the 20th century ensured that conservatives were seen as enemies of the people and national development. Therefore, unlike U.S. Evangelicals, Mexican Evangelical leaders who entered politics refused to be labeled as “conservatives.” On the contrary, they claimed to be liberals, more specifically “juaristas,” and invoked Benito Juárez (1858-1872), a Mexican president who was considered progressive, liberal, and Jacobin. He was also considered the father of the secular state.

In the economic field, Evangelicals belonging to CONFRATERNICE are liberal. CONFRATERNICE brings together more than 7,000 religious associations and is the Protestant group with the most political activism in Mexico. It has a close relationship with the PES. Hugo Eric Flores Cervantes – founder, ideologue, national president of the political party until March 2019, and pastor of the “House on the Rock” Neo-Pentecostal church – has

frequently appeared in mass media and argued that the PES was not a conservative organization.

Official PES documents claim that they are liberal in their economics. In its declaration of principles, the PES claims to be a “liberal-juarista party.” This is supported by its defense of the economic model based on a free market, private property, and business freedoms. Does that make the PES a liberal party? It must be remembered that conservatism in the late 1970s and early 1980s suffered a mutation where the economic core of liberalism was incorporated into the conservative moral corpus, giving birth to what is known as neo-conservatism. In fact, the distinctive feature of Thatcherism and Reaganism is having a (neo)liberal ideological stance in economics, but a conservative one in the social sphere.

Morality, especially in sexual aspects, is the distinctive flag of the PES and Evangelicals in politics. They claim to defend the traditional family and openly reject abortion and same-sex marriage. However, the PES argue that this is not an attack on the secular state as no Evangelical church participates in the politics of the party. Instead, it is the decision of Christian believers, as individuals, without being ministers of worship (at least during the time they occupy a public office), to exercise their constitutional right to participate in political activism. Moreover, congruent with their “juarista” discourse, they are against the participation of any church in electoral campaigns.

In a national television interview, the president of the PES was once questioned about the moral position of his party to undermine the rights of sexual minorities, as is the case with homosexuals. He replied that:

Non-Catholic Christians are the greatest guarantors of the secular State. There must be freedom and also respect. On the issue of same-sex marriage we respect what these people may think, but we do not believe in that kind of family. . . . When I was a federal congressman, we succeed in criminalizing religious discrimination and religious persecution. Today, everything has only been discrimination based on sexual orientation or sexual diversity. But there are other discrimination behaviors in this country and we are trying to denounce them. That is our struggle (Barranco 2018).

The leaders of CONFRATERNICE and the PES say they are not conservative or right-wing because they also have a “social agenda” of improving the material living conditions of their members. Is this a social agenda? It is a “prosperity theology,” in which the church fulfills the functions of economic aid and provides labor or business networks so that people can enjoy material well-being (Bowler). Thanks to this, Pentecostal groups became attractive within the low-income communities. The family and religious community, instead of the state or the market, provide welfare and economic support.

It is no coincidence that during the last few decades, when Mexico was characterized by various crises and low economic growth, Pentecostalism in the nation grew exponentially. In a neoliberal context of social exclusion and increasing inequalities, Pentecostalism provided the indigenous communities and slums a space to relaunch their lives, and to facilitate social network aggregation and emotional protection.

The PES logo is composed of three circles of different colors: red on the left, purple at the center, and blue on the right. The circle in the center is larger than the rest. In anonymous interviews with leaders of the PES in July 2018, they claimed that the logo showcases ideological transversality that unites the left-wing (represented in the red) and the right-wing (represented in the blue) in an agenda based on family values, which, like every catch-all party, can be attractive to members of all social classes. In this setting, the PES tries to emerge as a centrist party.

The Evangelicalism and The Government of President AMLO

MORENA is a left-wing party with militants from organizations that were once socialists, leftist groups of the PRI and other popular associations, and feminists and LGBT activists who belonged to the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). Most of them have a strong secularizing tendency. However, its charismatic leader and founder, AMLO, has supported Evangelical groups, which has led to many disagreements with sectors of its own supporter base.

It is important to realize that the Mexican left-wing is a heterogeneous movement, not monolithic. So, instead of talking about “the left,” it is better to use the term “the lefts.” Carlos Illiades, one of the greatest scholars on the Mexican left, identifies three main left-wing traditions in the country: the socialist left, the nationalist left, and the Christian left (Illiades). MORENA comprises groups from all these different “lefts.”

Socialist left political organizations can be identified by their usage of some variants of Marxism as ideological referents. They have also been quite anticlerical.³ The nationalist left was mostly, but not exclusively, based within the PRI. It has been unionist and, although it is capitalist, is also Keynesian. It tries to use the state to develop a national industry and improve the living conditions of the working class. The Christian left is made up of religious groups linked to the social doctrine of the church and the theology of liberation, who believe that Christians have a moral duty to fight against injustice and “social sins.” They believe that “wild capitalism” is the embodiment of a perverse system of segregation. What kind of leftist politician is AMLO? How have conservative Evangelicals merged with MORENA and AMLO?

President AMLO has constantly been questioned by multiple journalists about his religious beliefs. He has always answered that he is a “Christian in the broadest sense of the word.” What does that mean? It is not a good electoral strategy to declare oneself a follower of a particular religion in a country like Mexico, which although mostly Catholic now enjoys an unprecedented Christian diversity with more than 20 million Protestants. Besides, most non-Catholic Mexicans live in the southeastern states that are the MORENA’s main electoral strongholds. President AMLO is from Tabasco, where only 63 percent of the population is

³ Multiple members of MORENA were part of the PRD, which was formed thanks to the registration of the Mexican Socialist Party (PMS). The PMS was founded by members of the old Unified Socialist Party of Mexico (PSUM) and the Mexican Workers Party (PMT). The PSUM was formed when the Mexican Communist Party split. It was influenced by the reformist agenda of “Eurocommunism,” which opted for a democratic-electoral path, as opposed to the revolutionary and violent path of Marxism-Leninism. The PMT was founded by progressive intellectuals and social activists.

Catholic, residing and co-existing with 174 different Evangelical churches (CONAPRED: 20-62).

Scholars such as Roberto Blancarte have pointed out that many politicians in Mexico have bought the thesis of the “Catholic vote.” Blancarte explains that Mexican politicians often deal with Catholic leaders as if the clergy has a great influence on the electorate even though there is no scientific evidence that bishops and priests can mobilize votes in modern Mexico (Blancarte 1996). In a similar way, there are signs that many Evangelical and Pentecostal leaders have managed to “sell the idea” and have convinced some Mexican politicians, even President AMLO, that it is convenient to take the churches into account.

The PES managed to formalize an electoral coalition with MORENA in 2018. Many journalists, intellectuals, and militants of MORENA considered the alliance of a left-wing party with a “far right-wing” party “non-natural.” Beyond the ideological discussion, once that coalition wins the Presidency and the majority of the Legislative branch, what would be the effects in terms of public policy?

Those public policies, influenced by private beliefs, have mainly been in three areas: a) it opened the possibility of granting mass media concessions to Evangelical groups; b) the president distanced himself from the policies of some members of his own party who are pushing to decriminalize abortion and legalize same-sex marriage; c) the federal government has used Evangelical organizations to promote the agenda of “civic moralizing.”

Mass Media Concessions

One of the main objectives of Pentecostals and Evangelicals is to own some mass media so they can widely spread their message. Owning mass media has proven to be quite profitable in terms of expanding their membership in countries such as the United States, Guatemala, and Brazil. Access to radio or television stations is something that many religious groups have achieved in Mexico. However, the churches still have not gained ownership of mass media. Catholic and Evangelical radio and TV programs have been aired in Mexico since the first decade of the 2000s, but are dependent on the leasing of space by big media corporations.

For many years, Evangelical churches have launched radio stations in indigenous communities in southeastern Mexico with the financial and technical support of their subsidiaries in the United States (Barranco and Blancarte: 144). However, they were operating illegally, as Article 16 of the Law of Religious Associations and Public Worship prohibits Churches from possessing or administering radio and television stations. With the new government in 2019, the number of Evangelical radio stations rose from 67 to more than 160. However, the surprising fact here is that they were now given official permits to operate by the Federal Institute of Telecommunications. This was achieved not by changing the law, but by changing its interpretation, claiming that the stations operated for “cultural and community educational” purposes (Barranco and Blancarte: 147-48).

At the time of writing this article, CONFRATERNICE has directly requested AMLO to allow churches ownership of radio and television stations. This happened in two meetings in which the president received Evangelical leaders in official precincts. The legislative process to approve the request may take a long time, but AMLO’s immediate response was supportive of the Evangelical proposal: “I do not oppose the manifestation of all ideas, including religious

positions. We are part of a secular State, but must have also freedoms in the mass media so that all beliefs can be expressed, because I feel this is my personal opinion, that does not harm” (Morales).

Intra-Party Political Dissent

President AMLO has always avoided expressing his opinion on abortion and same-sex marriage in public. He has been asked for a statement of his position on multiple occasions. He always answers: “I am the owner of my silence.” With regard to gay marriage, he said “I’m respectful of the freedoms of others.” However, like the issue of abortion, he reiterated that he considered other problems more important and this topic was not his priority. This led to reactions of shock among the most leftist groups of his MORENA party.

Public policy is not only what a government does, but also what it does not do. AMLO’s silence on abortion and same-sex marriage, ironically, made a big noise. Even when he was head of government of Mexico City from 2000 to 2006, AMLO did not start any initiative that could be considered feminist or pro-LGBT. At that time, AMLO was busy militating the PRD, a left-wing party associated with Socialist International. The PRD had both abortion and same-sex marriage on its agenda. AMLO, however, froze the bill. Those issues were not approved in Mexico City until his term ended.

The president is pulled to the left by feminist and LGBT activism, and to the right by Evangelical groups. He has proposed a referendum as a solution to abortion and gay rights. At first glance, it may seem like AMLO took the decision not to get involved in issues that may polarize the Mexican public debate. However, we must keep in mind that the strategy of subjecting minority rights to popular vote in a referendum is exactly the proposal that has historically been held by the “pro-life” (anti-abortion) Evangelical groups (CONAPFAM).

Civil Moralizing

One of AMLO’s first actions as president was to invite the members of CONFRATERNICE to distribute a “moral booklet” consisting of a document to promote the values that the new government considered Mexicans should have. It addressed many of the problems of the republic, such as corruption and the lack of job opportunities, which were presented as a result of “the loss of cultural, moral, and spiritual values.” In the booklet, love and respect for the family and the traditional values of Mexico were emphasized. This moral booklet was distributed in religious communities and at mass gatherings (Barranco and Blancarte: 157).

Close members of the CONFRATERNICE elite also work as “Servants of the Nation” in the Secretary of Welfare, the department of the Mexican federal government in charge of social policy. The title is given to public officers who have been spread throughout the country to promote the federal government’s social programs. These officers simultaneously become promoters of AMLO’s party, especially in the poorest areas of Mexico (Hernández).

Alberto Barranco Chavarría, the Mexican ambassador to the Vatican, was questioned by journalists as many people began believing that the national government was being partial to one specific type of religious expression over the others. Given the special treatment meted out by AMLO to some Evangelicals, the ambassador replied: “He has chosen them for purely

propaganda issues, because he has a lot of interest in the moral reconstruction of society and he uses the moral booklet as a pivot.” He then added that the president of the republic “is being helped by the Evangelicals because in Mexico there is a very strong moral breakdown” (Savio).

Because of the historical confrontation between the Catholic Church and the state, making constitutional changes in religious matters in Mexico is very difficult. Approving modifications to laws that regulate and limit the churches is not something that happens frequently. Even though AMLO’s MORENA party has a majority of congressmen and senators and is composed of several factions belonging to both the nationalist and socialist lefts (both groups have a strong anticlerical record), it is a herculean task to approve new laws that give greater freedom to churches.

This is why the current federal government has chosen to modify its own internal regulations such that it does not require congressional approval and attracts less public opinion. A prime example of this was the amendment of Article 83 of the “Sub-department for Democratic Development, Social Participation, and Religious Affairs,” under the Secretary of Governance, in May 2019. The amendment, listed in subsection XIX, empowered the Unit of Religious Affairs, Prevention, and Reconstruction of the Social Fabric, to “collaborate with religious associations, Churches, groups, and other religious institutions and organizations, to participate in reconstruction projects of the social fabric and culture of peace” (Jiménez and Hernández).

Conclusions

This specific type of Protestantism that has gained political prominence in Mexico over the last few years is characterized by a strong social conservatism as well as a high electoral pragmatism that allows Evangelical leaders to make alliances with political parties of all kinds in order to achieve its objective of implementing a “pro-family,” anti-abortion, and anti-LGBT agenda.

AMLO’s approach with Evangelical groups, from the perspective of the Mexican liberal and revolutionary tradition, shocked most Jacobin groups who did not want any religious interference in the political life of the Republic. Given the history of church-state relations in Mexico, they believed state machinery could be used to promote and foster a particular vision of life and morality.

However, from the conservative viewpoint of the Evangelical and Pentecostal organizations, their political activism was not a violation of the principle of laicity. Why did they believe that? They held the same stance as their American “accommodationist” counterparts, who believed that government and religion can mutually benefit from each other without violating the principle of freedom of worship and the secular state, as long as all the different churches enjoyed these freedoms. Since its accelerated demographic growth in Mexico, it seems that Evangelical conservatism will play a major role in the Mexican political system in the 21st century and is here to stay.

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