

Presidential nominee resurrects a holy ghost of Mexico's past

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With the support of ultra-right Catholics, Josefina Vázquez Mota is a divisive figure who uses controversial tactics

The [triumph of Josefina Vázquez Mota](#) in Sunday's primary election puts the final piece in place for Mexico's presidential elections, set for 1 July. The three main coalitions now each have their presidential candidates. Vázquez Mota won the governing National Action party (PAN) primary, making her the first woman to be nominated by the rightwing party for the post of head of state.

Vázquez Mota won despite not being the candidate preferred by President Felipe Calderón and his team. Her motto "change without rupture" presented her as the candidate for those citizens who want a new direction, without breaking with the ruling party. However, she did have the support of important federal and state officials who used public resources to sway voters in her favour.

Vázquez Mota, a federal representative, resorted (as did Ernesto Cordero, her main opponent) to the same old corrupt methods used for decades by the political party, which has ruled [Mexico](#) for most of the 20th century, the Institutional Revolutionary party (PRI); threats, giving food to poor voters and using public resources to favour candidates were all commonplace in PAN's primary.

Coming from a highly conservative, private sector guild, Vázquez Mota also enjoyed the support of an important coalition of ultra-rightist forces, among them the notorious El Yunque (the anvil), a secret society who want to "defend the Catholic religion and fight against the forces of Satan, even through violence" and to "establish the kingdom of God on Earth". Its members have infiltrated the federal government's ranks since PAN's Vicente Fox was elected president in 2000.

Throughout her campaign for her party's nomination, Vázquez Mota managed to gain sympathy from those who would welcome a female president. However, her religious fundamentalism disappointed those who, without being PAN supporters, do not trust the leftist candidate [Andrés Manuel López Obrador](#). On 31 January, the candidate told her party's members that on election day: "We all should get up early. First to mass, and then to vote. I ask you to go to 8am mass and then to vote." Many were disenchanted. Soledad Loaeza, author of the most important history of PAN, called it the "holy ghost vote".

Since the 18th century, Mexico has been riven by conflicts between the Catholic church and the state. From 1926 to 1929, there was an armed religious uprising against the federal government, known as the [Cristiada](#), which caused wounds that have not

completely healed. Vázquez Mota's call to mass was widely regarded as a call to a vanished past and as proof that the PAN is a religious party.

Vázquez Mota was also minister of public education during the first three years of the Calderón administration. There she established a close alliance with a group of powerful businessmen who promote the privatisation of education and the abandonment of secular teaching in schools, and who want to head an all-out offensive against the teacher's union and its members. Those Catholic businessmen put forward important financial resources for her campaign.

Like the other presidential hopefuls, Vázquez Mota confronts the challenge of overcoming the citizen's disenchantment with politicians and elections. Despite the fierce competition of PAN's primary campaign, the internal election attracted only 25% of the party's members registered to vote.

Even so, the primary election caused a real fracture in the party's ranks. The dirty war between the contenders left many open wounds. For Calderón, Vázquez Mota's victory is not good news. The fact that his party's nominee to succeed him was not his favourite adds to the sense that his government is now weak. For Vázquez Mota herself, things are not easy either. [Enrique Peña Nieto](#), PRI's candidate, is 20 points ahead of her in the polls. Her "change without rupture" proposal will be difficult to advance.

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