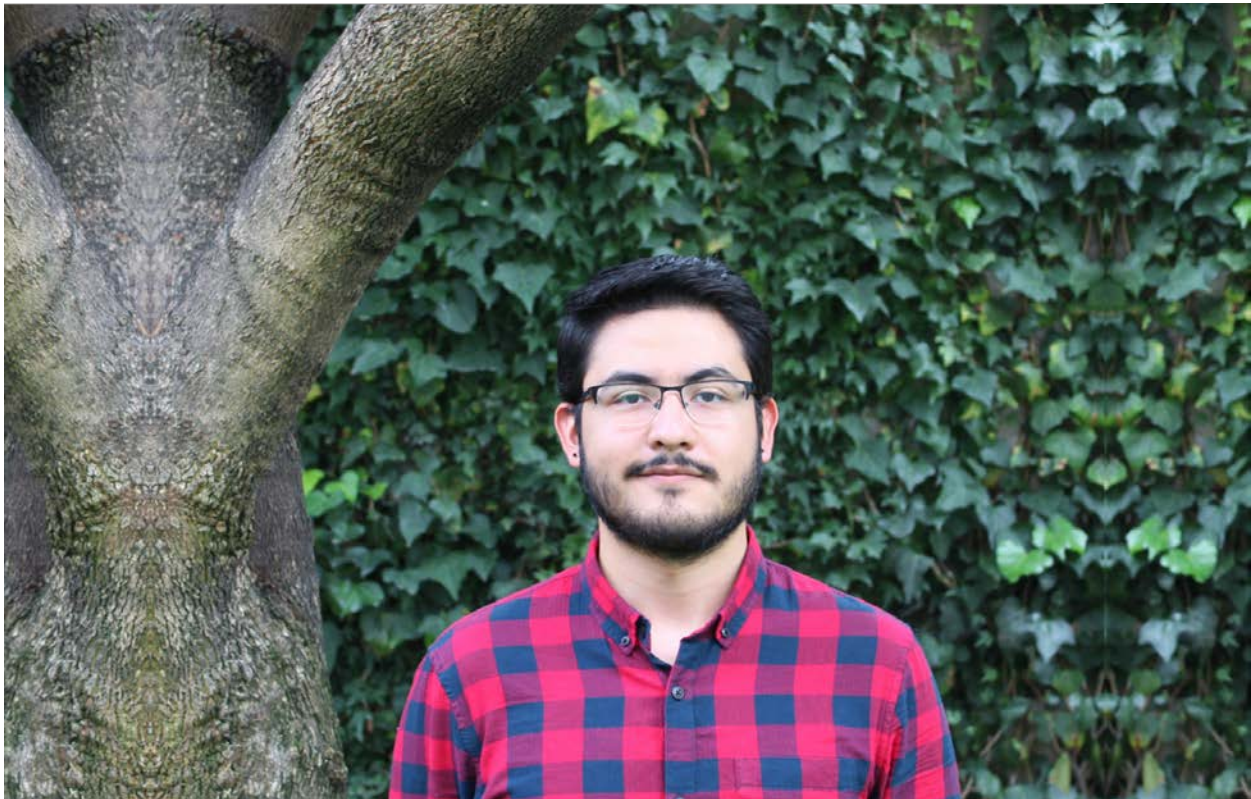


**MEXICO:** ‘We seek to influence the public policies of the next administration to help solve the country’s problems’

*As part of our 2018 report on the theme of [reimagining democracy](#), we are interviewing civil society activists, leaders and specialists about their work to promote democratic practices and principles, the challenges they encounter and the victories they score. CIVICUS speaks to Emanuel Johansen Campos, Coordinator of the Fondos a la Vista programme of Alternativas y Capacidades, a Mexican civil society organisation (CSO) dedicated to strengthening the advocacy capacities of organised civil society, promoting strategic social investment and strengthening citizen participation in public affairs.*



**What are the key conditions for a fully functioning democracy? How do you assess the situation in Mexico against these criteria?**

First, a fundamental element of a fully functioning democracy is the existence of a civil society that is actively involved in political life at the local, regional and national levels. In Mexico, the trend towards citizen involvement in the political arena has been gaining momentum since the last decades of the 20th century, but a huge leap forward has taken place in recent years. The abundance of voices of denunciation and the collaborative work of activists, independent media and CSOs have made it possible to give visibility to acts of corruption at all levels of government. As a result, citizens are increasingly suspicious of the information disseminated by the media and are much more willing to mobilise and occupy public spaces to demand changes

in their governments, especially concerning the struggle against corruption and impunity, and for security, justice and social development.

Second, an infrastructure must be in place to promote collaboration among civil society advocacy initiatives to influence public policy. Greater articulation of long-term objectives is required, as well as collective work to give continuity to the fulfilment of these objectives. Collaboration mechanisms must be decentralised and adapted to a wide diversity of contexts and needs at the regional and local levels.

Third, the existence of a legal framework that facilitates and encourages the participation of citizens in decision-making processes is key. The federal government has acted on the premise that it is necessary to monitor closely the actions of CSOs, activists and social groups, especially if they are critical of government action. In the face of this, it is essential to promote new forms of interaction that allow for true collaboration and dialogue between CSOs and government. In this context, we have taken advantage of the electoral period to promote proposals aimed at improving the laws that apply to CSOs.

Fourth, there is a need to promote citizen candidacies for elected office. Although independent candidacies have been recognised since the introduction of constitutional amendments in 2012 and 2014, a large number of candidates who have sought to participate in this way have faced many difficulties. This happened, for example, to the candidates to Mexico City's Constituent Assembly in 2016; to [María de Jesús Patricio](#), better known as Marichuy, an indigenous woman and spokesperson of the National Indigenous Council, and an aspiring presidential candidate in 2018; and to the candidates from the [Wikipolítica](#) citizen political project, also in 2018. This is because the rules of electoral competition continue to treat political parties as the fundamental vehicles of representation and discourage any citizen participation beyond voting.

Fifth and final, effective mechanisms are needed to punish corruption and prevent impunity in the public sphere. This is undoubtedly one of the priority requirements for the strengthening of democracy in Mexico. Between 2012 and 2017 Mexico dropped from 34 to 29 points in Transparency International's [Corruption Perceptions Index](#). According to the [2017 National Survey on Government Quality and Impact](#), 91 per cent of Mexicans think that acts of corruption in the government agencies they deal with are frequent or very frequent. During the current administration, numerous corruption scandals involving government figures at all levels have come to light; however, in very few cases have effective responses and solutions been put forward.

### **What recent trends regarding democratic practices do you observe in your context?**

In recent years there have been public denunciations of illegal government surveillance and monitoring actions against activists, CSO members and opinion leaders, which have fractured trust and civil society participation in political life. In this context there was the denunciation of the use, by the Peña Nieto administration, of [Pegasus surveillance software](#) to monitor Mexican activists and journalists. In reaction against these espionage actions, in May 2017 a group of Mexican CSOs withdrew from the Open Government Partnership. The use of fiscal audit and monitoring mechanisms against CSOs and some media outlets in retaliation for criticism of

government policies has also been reported. This was pointed out in 2017 by organisations such as the [Mexican Institute for Competitiveness](#) (Instituto Mexicano para la Competitividad) and [Mexicans Against Corruption and Impunity](#) (Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad).

Activists and journalists have been repeatedly targeted with harassment, threats and murder, as documented by many human rights organisations. According to Article 19, between 2000 and 2018, 117 journalists have been killed in possible relation to their journalistic work, with 44 of them killed under the current administration. Additionally, a 2017 [report](#) by the National Network of Civil Human Rights Organisations 'All Rights for All' (Red Nacional de Organismos Civiles de Derechos Humanos 'Todos los Derechos para Todos y Todas') stated that between 2012 and 2016 at least 76 human rights defenders were murdered in Mexico, while 73 went missing. The recent elections were also marked by a high degree of violence that seems to have become normalised within Mexican society: during the electoral process - from September 2017 to June 2018 - between 114 and 120 politicians were assassinated, at least 43 of whom were candidates and pre-candidates for elected positions. On election day, acts of violence were reported in several districts throughout Mexico. Notable among them was the case of Puebla state, where violent groups stole at least 70 ballot boxes and electoral materials, in 60 per cent of cases using firearms.

On the other hand, Alternativas y Capacidades has identified some positive trends in Mexico's democracy. Civil society participation during the electoral process was very high, as evidenced by the significant number of initiatives not only to bring out the vote, but also to promote among the candidates public policy proposals arising from the experience and collective work of organised civil society. In June and July we conducted a [mapping of civil society initiatives](#) promoted within the framework of the electoral campaigns. Among them, we identified at least 38 advocacy actions in which CSOs and social groups sought to influence the presidential candidates, with aims ranging from the dissemination of information and public analysis of candidates' proposals to the preparation of public policy agendas on a variety of topics. There were also a large number of initiatives at the state and local levels. Further, although electoral abstention is still relatively high, 63.4 per cent of the electoral roll voted in the latest elections - the highest figure since the 2000 federal elections.

### **Do you see these elections as a milestone in the democratic history of Mexico?**

There is no doubt that the recent elections have been a milestone in Mexico's political life. While the 2000 elections brought an opposition party - the centre-right National Action Party (PAN) - to the presidency for the first time since 1929, the 2018 elections were the first federal elections in Mexico's modern history that saw the triumph of a party with a rather left-leaning ideological platform - the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA). This development represents both a strong desire for change among citizens and an intention to punish PAN and the Institutional Revolutionary Party, the two major parties, for the negative results of their past administrations. This is reflected in the fact that the MORENA candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, won the presidential election with 53.2 per cent of the vote and a difference of

30 percentage points over his closest contender, the highest share obtained in elections presidential since 1982.

The monitoring and denunciation work undertaken by CSOs, citizen initiatives, activists, journalists and the media has been crucial for giving visibility to the alarming levels of corruption, impunity and insecurity that have prevailed in recent years. Examples of this were the 2014 investigations into the so-called '[White House](#)' acquired by First Lady Angélica Rivera from the Grupo Higa corporation and the possible conflict of interest represented by the participation of this company in the tender for the construction of the México-Querétaro railway line, an initiative put forward during the administration of her husband, President Peña Nieto. This news story was broken by the investigative team led by journalist Carmen Aristegui, earning them the 2015 National Journalism Award. Their reporting also contributed to the decision taken by the federal government to open an official investigation into this apparent conflict of interest, undertaken by the Ministry of Public Administration. In another instance, numerous human rights organisations denounced the 2014 disappearance of [43 teaching school students](#) in the town of Ayotzinapa, presumably at the hands of the army; from that year on, the parents of the disappeared students have repeatedly mobilised to demand justice, with the support and accompaniment of human rights organisations and networks throughout Mexico.

### **What is Mexican civil society doing to strengthen democracy?**

Thanks to the [Fondos a la Vista](#) (Funding in Plain Sight) transparency and information project on CSOs conducted by Alternativas y Capacidades, we now know that there are currently at least 160 CSOs directly involved in political advocacy. This number is small compared to the more than 40,000 CSOs listed in Mexico's main national CSO registries; however, there are numerous recent examples of civil society's efforts to monitor and denounce bad governmental practices in the exercise of power and promote public policy solutions.

When [two large earthquakes](#) shook the central and southern regions of Mexico on 7 and 19 September 2017, hundreds of people across the country joined forces and mobilised resources to help the affected population. Civil society exhibited a great capacity for organisation in times of urgency and need, as seen in the efforts to disseminate information and link volunteers to needs undertaken by movements such as [#Verificado19S](#). The emergency also highlighted a series of public problems that in turn motivated the emergence of organisations and movements that are still working on issues ranging from the reconstruction of physical infrastructure and the social fabric, monitoring and supervision mechanisms of government actions to address long-term reconstruction, the improvement of disaster prevention policies and investigation and reporting initiatives to identify those responsible and seek compensation for damages and losses resulting from irregularities, mismanagement and corruption.

Civil society has also promoted numerous advocacy actions in electoral contexts, such as the nomination of independent citizens to elected positions. In 2016, 21 independent candidates were able to compete in elections to Mexico City's Constituent Assembly. In 2018 Wikipolítica supported at least six independent candidates to compete for local and federal positions in



Mexico City and in the states of Jalisco, Nuevo León and Yucatán. Also in 2018, an independent candidate, Jaime Rodríguez Calderón, competed for the presidency of Mexico and obtained 5.2 per cent of the vote.

Of the many initiatives undertaken by civil society during the recent presidential campaign, the [Third Citizen Summit](#) (TCS) stands out. It was held during the latest presidential race and consisted of a process of dialogue aimed at building a civil society common agenda towards the realisation of democratic rule of law without corruption or impunity.

### **Would you describe the objectives, processes and results of the Third Citizen Summit?**

The TCS is a space in which various social organisations and movements seek to influence the public policies of the next federal government to contribute to the solution of Mexico's major problems. In holding the TCS, important lessons were drawn from the previous two summits, held in 2012 and 2015.

The TCS' first step was to create a common public policy agenda. For 10 months from early 2017, a broad and diverse group of organisations and networks compiled an agenda that included 56 public policy proposals grouped into seven thematic sections: the environment and sustainable development, community cohesion and participatory development, human rights, quality education, the strengthening of CSOs, justice and security. The TCS included 10 proposals to address challenges in civil society laws, such as simplifying administrative processes, reducing over-regulation of CSO activities and improving the rules for access to tax benefits and public resources. The agenda and proposals were approved by consensus by 59 organisations, after which other organisations and social movements were invited to subscribe online, either to specific proposals or to the entire agenda. By July 2018, almost 380 organisations and networks had endorsed the agenda.

The second step was to send the agenda to the four presidential candidates along with a request to indicate which proposals their coalitions subscribed to, which ones they supported with reservations and which they did not endorse, along with their reasons for expressing reservations or rejection. The four candidates [responded](#), and three of them also made their positions public during an event held on 29 May 2018, before an audience of more than 400 people from civil society.

Additionally, the TCS held a public dialogue with four candidates from various political forces standing for the federal Senate, with the aim of having them state their positions regarding a variety of agenda items, and it was agreed to open channels of dialogue once the next legislature takes office.

In the aftermath of the elections, the TCS is looking to contact the president-elect to hold a meeting with him and his team to follow up on the agenda proposals and establish dialogue mechanisms. Similarly, after 1 September 2018, when the new Congress begins in session, the TCS will establish contact with all the political forces represented in this body.

Civic space in Mexico is rated as 'repressed' by the [CIVICUS Monitor](#).

Get in touch with Alternativas y Capacidades through its [website](#) and [Facebook](#) profile, or follow [@fortalecemos](#) and [@manujohansen](#) on Twitter.