

US election meddling in the age of the Internet

How Google, Facebook and Twitter are manipulating the Mexican presidential elections—Part 2

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This is the second article in a two-part series. The first article was published on April 28.

Andres Manuel López Obrador and claims of “Russian meddling” in the Mexican elections

Recent deals between the Mexican National Electoral Institute (INE), the organization charged with carrying out elections in Mexico, and Google, Facebook and Twitter are aimed at manipulating the outcome of the upcoming election on July 1.

The deals are intended to help powerful sections of the Mexican and US ruling classes advance the lie that “left” candidate Andres Manuel López Obrador, who is currently the heavy favorite to win the election, is a pawn of Russia and Vladimir Putin.

López Obrador is not a Russian agent, willing or otherwise. He is a tried and tested bourgeois politician who has been a major political figure for over two decades. He ran unsuccessfully for the presidency in 2006, losing by less than 1 percent in what is widely regarded as a stolen election, and in 2012 against the current president, Enrique Peña Nieto.

In what is now his third run for the presidency, López Obrador is running his most nationalist, right-wing and explicitly anti-socialist campaign to date. His campaign has benefited from the crisis of all the deeply discredited major parties, while his populist slogans against the “mafia in power” and talk of reversing the Peña Nieto administration’s energy and education “reforms” have won a hearing among millions who are deeply dissatisfied with falling living standards and over 11 years of the “war on drugs.”

López Obrador has sought to reassure both domestic and foreign capital that his administration represents no real threat to their interests. Addressing a meeting of the Association of Mexican Banks in March of this year, he stated: “We are not going to confiscate assets nor are we going to carry out expropriations or nationalizations.”

His advisers have also signaled that he is backtracking from his previous promises to reverse the country’s 2013-14 oil privatization legislation. In February, López Obrador’s chief economic adviser noted that “it would be an error for the next administration to cancel all that has been accomplished in this one ... We are changing the perception that we are closing the door on the energy reform and all the economic benefits it has provided.”

At the same banking convention, López Obrador reassured his

paymasters that he would not seek to organize the working class in the case of electoral fraud. He said, “A fraud would release a tiger, and I won’t stop it.” He would simply choose to retreat to his million-dollar *hacienda* in Chiapas.

Despite these efforts, the political instability resulting from the Trump administration’s attacks against immigrants and his threats to pull out of the NAFTA agreement have convinced dominant sections of the US and Mexican ruling elite that López Obrador is not the best candidate to suppress social unrest in the coming period.

Facing the historic crisis of US capitalism, Washington has made clear that it will prevent any new “left” bourgeois governments in its “backyard”—like those associated with the so-called Latin American “pink tide”—that might try to exploit an upsurge of popular, anti-imperialist sentiment to seek closer ties with Washington’s rivals in the region, principally China.

These geopolitical considerations are at the root of recent statements by the US military-intelligence apparatus, which is seeking to use the anti-Russia campaign in an effort to prevent López Obrador from winning the election.

Then-US national security advisor Gen. H.R. McMaster signaled the start of this campaign in December 2017 when he warned that there were “initial signs” of Russian interference in Mexico’s elections, allegedly through “subversion, misinformation and propaganda.”

In February, a group of US senators, including Republican Marco Rubio and Democrat Tim Kaine, issued what amounted to a demand for direct US intervention in Mexico’s elections, claiming that Russian “meddling” was “simply the latest chapter of Russia’s malign influence throughout Latin America that threatens to destabilize the region.”

For its part, the corporate media parroted the unproven claims of the military-intelligence apparatus to add fuel to this campaign. The *Washington Post* led the pack by claiming that Moscow was aiding López Obrador by “amplifying the message on social media” that Mexico’s “democracy is flawed and their politicians are prone to corruption,” as if these facts of life were a Russian invention. Urging social media companies to protect their platforms from “foreign meddling,” Bloomberg wrote: “Facebook, Twitter and Google are important sources of information for many Mexicans ... Mexico needs to learn from the US experience and safeguard its electoral process from outside tampering.”

The Mexican ruling class is confident that US imperialism will be successful in installing its hand-picked candidate. As recently as February, Bloomberg reported that a stock market boom and favorable credit ratings seemed to indicate that “the business and finance elites are discounting [López Obrador’s] possible win.” In a survey of senior Mexican

executives (CEOs, CFOs, COOs and CIOs) surveyed by Santander Bank, 85 percent predicted that López Obrador would be defeated in the election.

Mass protests and Internet censorship

Mexico ranks among the most unequal countries in Latin America. A recent study by the United Nations revealed that the top 10 percent controls two-thirds of the country's wealth and 80 percent of financial assets. Meanwhile, half of the population lives in poverty, with over 2 million more falling below the official poverty rate during the Peña Nieto administration.

Against the context of these explosive social conditions, mass protests have shaken the country in recent years. In 2014, tens of thousands took to the streets after the disappearance of 43 student teachers at the hands of the military, while 2016 saw mass protests by teachers in the state of Oaxaca against the Peña Nieto administration's education "reform."

The year 2017 opened with country-wide protests against a 20 percent oil price hike, which was dubbed the *gasolinazo*. According to *Aristegui Noticias*, a study by the digital analysts Espinosa y Asociados found that hundreds of thousands of workers and students took to social media, with 51 percent of *gasolinazo* tweets aimed at convoking marches against the privatization of the country's oil and for Peña Nieto's resignation. It also reports that Facebook erased pages and groups on the pretext that they were calling for looting, while the Peña Nieto administration created bots to share false information to quell demonstrations and bury oppositional content.

For a sweeping expansion of these efforts, the Mexican Senate has been discussing changes to the Federal Penal and Civil Codes to force US Internet corporations to censor all deliberations that are critical of the ruling elite. A bill was unanimously approved in the Chamber of Deputies to make it criminally unlawful to share any information "truthful or untruthful" and on any electronic means that "discredits" or "exposes to contempt" any individual.

Amid a resurgence of working class militancy internationally, several South American governments facing explosive levels of social unrest have also taken steps toward censoring the Internet:

- Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro demanded "authority over social media" after deadly protests last year, and banned oil workers in February from following "prohibited" pages on social media.

- The Ortega government in Nicaragua, which is now deploying the military in a deadly crackdown on student and worker protesters, recently called on social media access to be revised since it harms "the ability to live in harmony."

- In response to mass protests against an electoral fraud last November that shook the foundations of the Honduran death-squad regime, that country's Congress has been discussing a bill to censor social media content.

- This year, the Colombian elections chief, Armando Novoa, said the popular vote against the 2016 peace accord with the FARC guerrillas "was the product of social media and that is something that needs to be controlled." In response to such concerns, Google told that country's *El Espectador* in March, two months before the May presidential elections,

"if we find evidence [of deceptive behavior in the platform], we'll take action."

- Ahead of the October polls, Brazil's High Electoral Court has used the "fake news" and "Russian interference" hysteria to promote censorship as a "national security issue," meeting regularly with Google, Facebook and Twitter representatives to guarantee that oppositional content is blocked or downgraded.

- Blaming "fake news" online for losing the 2016 constitutional referendum on a new bid for reelection, Bolivia's Evo Morales declared earlier this year that "social media takes down governments." The legislators of the ruling party MAS are currently preparing a bill to "regulate" social media use.

- In May 2017, the Ecuadorian president introduced a bill to demand that social media platforms remove all content which the Internet corporations or the government deem "illegal" within 24 hours. In March 2018, the government blocked all Internet and other communications to Julian Assange, who has been confined in Quito's embassy in London for six years.

As the ruling elites in Mexico and across the region further intensify the exploitation of a restive working class and US imperialism seeks to reaffirm its hegemony globally against geopolitical rivals, freedom of speech and political discourse online are coming under wholesale attack.

The defense of the right to free use of the Internet is clearly tied to the defense of the basic right to vote. In its efforts to subjugate Latin America to the *diktats* of the banks and corporations, American imperialism is updating its methods for repression and foreign interference to keep up with the technological advances.

For the working class, on the other hand, social media and the Internet are tools for the organization of protests, demonstrations and strikes. They provide workers with connections around the world and access to information like never before in human history. For this reason, the ruling classes believe it must be shut down or censored.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is leading the fight for the formation of a coalition of socialist, antiwar and progressive websites, organizations and activists to expose this criminal conspiracy and organize against it. We urge people in Mexico and across Latin America to sign our petition demanding Google halt its censorship efforts, read our Open Letter to Google and join the fight to build the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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