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The (failed) construction of a far-right actor: Mexico's Frenaa and its media representations

La (fallida) construcción de un actor de extrema derecha: la Frenaa en México y su representación en los medios de comunicación

A (fracassada) construção de um ator de extrema direita: a Frenaa no México e suas representações na mídia

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ABSTRACT

Claudia Sheinbaum's decisive electoral victory in 2024 allowed her to assume the presidency of the country, thus giving continuity to the Fourth Transformation – the period inaugurated by Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) that aligns with the independence, reform, and revolution movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. Thus, the right-wing rhetoric that has emerged in countries like Brazil, Argentina, and Chile does not seem to affect Mexico's political reality. However, the far-right agenda in Mexico has been present for decades in the press and other spheres of power, such as corporations and the Church. It is characterized by ideological conservatism rooted in Catholicism and economic neoliberalism, manifested in the thinking and actions of business groups, some intellectuals, and part of the press. With the emergence of the National Anti-AMLO Front (Frenaa, by its Spanish acronym) in 2020, an organization arises which embodies many of the characteristics of today's far right: anti-establishment, racism and xenophobia, nativism, anti-communism, and religious conservatism. This organization is the successor of the National Citizen Congress (Conaci) founded by businessman Gilberto Lozano in 2009 and is based on the same values. This article explores Frenaa's rhetoric and representation in the national press regarding six inductively structured axes: (i) Frenaa's mobilization strategies; (ii) its ideological composition; (iii) Frenaa as a far-right actor; (iv) Frenaa as a business elite; (v) the legitimacy of Frenaa; and (vi) challenges to Frenaa's status as a political actor. To do so, it analyzes the country's major national newspapers, conducts a content analysis of articles and/or columns mentioning Frenaa, and uses inductive coding to identify defining characteristics related to the three aforementioned dimensions.

Keywords: Far right, Mexico, National Anti-AMLO Front/Frenaa, Fourth Transformation, Mexican media.

RESUMEN

La contundente victoria electoral de Claudia Sheinbaum en 2024 le permitió asumir la presidencia del país. Con ella continúa la Cuarta Transformación – el periodo iniciado por Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) que se inscribe en la línea de los movimientos de independencia, reforma y revolución de los siglos XIX y XX. Así pues, los discursos de derecha que han surgido en países como Brasil, Argentina y Chile no parecen afectar a la realidad política de México. Sin embargo, la extrema derecha en México ha tenido una agenda presente desde hace décadas en la prensa y otras esferas de poder, como las empresas y la Iglesia. Se caracteriza por su conservadurismo ideológico arraigado en el catolicismo y su neoliberalismo económico, materializados en el pensamiento y las acciones de grupos empresariales, algunos intelectuales y parte de la prensa. Con la aparición del Frente Nacional Anti-AMLO (Frenaa) en 2020, surgió una organización que encarna muchas de las características de la extrema derecha actual: antisistema, racismo y xenofobia, nativismo, anticomunismo y conservadurismo religioso. Esta organización es la sucesora del Congreso Nacional de Ciudadanos (Conaci), fundado por el empresario Gilberto Lozano en 2009, basado en los mismos valores. Este artículo analiza el discurso y la representación de Frenaa en la prensa nacional en torno a seis ejes estructurados de forma inductiva: (i) las estrategias de movilización de Frenaa; (ii) su composición ideológica; (iii) Frenaa como actor de extrema derecha; (iv) Frenaa como élite empresarial; (v) la legitimidad de Frenaa; y (vi) los cuestionamientos al estatus de Frenaa como actor político. Para ello, analiza los principales periódicos nacionales del país, realiza un análisis de contenido de los artículos y/o columnas que mencionan a Frenaa, y utiliza la codificación inductiva para identificar las características definitorias relacionadas con las tres dimensiones antes mencionadas.

Palabras clave: Extrema derecha, México, Frente Nacional Anti-AMLO/Frenaa, Cuarta Transformación, medios de comunicación mexicanos.

RESUMO

A decisiva vitória eleitoral de Claudia Sheinbaum, em 2024, permitiu-lhe assumir a presidência do país. Com ela, dá-se continuidade à Quarta Transformação – período inaugurado por Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), que se alinha aos movimentos de independência, reforma e revolução dos séculos XIX e XX. Assim, os discursos de direita que emergiram em países como Brasil, Argentina e Chile não parecem afetar a realidade política mexicana. Ainda assim, a agenda de extrema direita no México mostra presença há décadas na imprensa e em outras esferas de poder, como as corporações e a Igreja. Caracteriza-se pelo conservadorismo ideológico enraizado no catolicismo e pelo neoliberalismo econômico, materializados no pensamento e nas ações de grupos empresariais, alguns intelectuais e parte da imprensa. Com o surgimento da Frente Nacional Anti-AMLO (Frenaa), em 2020, desponta uma organização que incorpora muitas das características da extrema direita atual: antissistema, racismo e xenofobia, nativismo, anticomunismo e conservadorismo religioso. Tal organização é sucessora do Congresso Nacional Cidadão (Conaci), fundado pelo empresário Gilberto Lozano em 2009, com base nos mesmos valores. Este artigo explora o discurso e a representação da Frenaa na imprensa nacional em torno de seis eixos estruturados de forma indutiva: (i) as estratégias de mobilização da Frenaa; (ii) sua composição ideológica; (iii) a Frenaa como ator de extrema direita; (iv) a Frenaa como elite empresarial; (v) a legitimidade da Frenaa; e (vi) os questionamentos ao status da Frenaa como ator político. Para tal, analisa os principais jornais nacionais do país, realiza uma análise de conteúdo de artigos e/ou colunas que mencionam a Frenaa e utiliza codificação indutiva para identificar características definidoras relacionadas às três dimensões acima mencionadas.

Palavras-chave: Extrema-direita, México, Frente Nacional Anti-AMLO/Frenaa, Quarta Transformação, mídia mexicana.

Introduction

In recent years, actors associated with the far right have become increasingly visible in the political life of numerous countries across Latin America and the world. This trend has been intensified by widespread disenchantment with democracy, high levels of inequality, polarization fueled by digital social media bubbles, and the success of certain individuals and groups – from influencers to political parties – in shifting the terms of public debate toward the far-right end of the political spectrum. What until recently seemed unthinkable as a social, cultural, and political expression has not only become acceptable but has also entered the mainstream. Consequently, scholars have begun to analyze such mainstreaming as a form of normalization rather than a deviation (Krzyżanowski & Ekström, 2022; Brown et al., 2023; Mondon, 2025). Xenophobic, homophobic, and reactionary slogans are once again circulating widely, flooding social media platforms both in their public manifestations (such as TikTok or Reddit) and in more opaque spaces (the deep web, where oversight by authorities is far more limited). From this vantage point, the catalytic role of social media has become evident, even though the global political ascent of the right has been consolidating for more than a decade. These media have also been crucial in the construction of anti-migrant and anti-gender discourses by appealing to so-called traditional family values, including opposition to abortion. They have contributed to the resurgence of nativism and ethno-nationalism, the contestation of democratic and constitutional boundaries, and discursive anti-elitism or populism. Finally, social media have been instrumental in fostering a far-right transnationalism, expressed in symbolic, ideological, and organizational alliances across countries.

Yet the present moment appears to differ in important ways from the early phases of far-right populism. On January 31, 2025, in a podcast produced by The New York Times as part of the *Matter of Opinion* series, Steve Bannon – one of the leading ideologues of the U.S. far right – remarked, in reference to Donald Trump's second presidential term:

> Now we are completely different… Over those four years, for the first time, there will be serious public intellectuals thinking seriously about alternative policies in military strategy, national security, foreign policy, the economy – everything. There will also be something just

> as important as political ideas: political art – people who have begun to work as teams, to build networks. Remember that they are forming teams and networks of issue experts and people who know how to work together. This is very different.[1]

According to Bannon, what distinguishes the current phase is not a transformation of ideas per se, but the consolidation of expert networks and the necessity of such assemblages to design and implement far-right public policies. In this context, it becomes crucial to examine the role played by assemblages of actors who operate within – and actively shape – the far-right milieu, both locally and internationally.

In Mexico, developments have echoed trends observed elsewhere. On July 9, 2024, the newspaper *La Jornada* warned of a "concerning resurgence of the far right in Mexico," noting a "significant increase in acts against LGBTQ+ communities and connections with […] a transnational network of extremism" ("Preocupante resurgimiento…", 2024, July 9). Between 2021 and 2023, 231 members of the LGBTQ+ community were murdered in Mexico (Segob, 2024), while between 2016 and 2023 there were 2,096 crimes related to migrant smuggling (Segob, 2025). From 2018 to 2021, 2,823 migrants were killed in Mexico's southern states (Lemus, 2021), and in 2023, 636 deaths were recorded along the northern border (IOM, 2024), alongside the killing of 19 environmental activists (Cemda, 2024). Between 2018 and 2024, 46 journalists were murdered (HRW, 2025). Discourses of hatred heighten the vulnerability of already at-risk groups, with conditions worsening as such narratives become normalized and ultimately inform public policies in areas such as security, health, and migration. Beyond the circulation of hate speech, Mexico today is a territory traversed by conflicts of diverse kinds, ranging from the assassination of land and water activists and migrants in transit, to disappearances attributed to drug and human trafficking cartels, and femicides occurring in contexts of high levels of impunity (Anaya Muñoz et al., 2024; Montes-Orozco et al., 2025; Enamorado et al., 2016). These dynamics have undoubtedly eroded democratic life and heightened interest in more extreme political positions, particularly on the right.

Understanding how far-right groups emerge, seek consolidation, and intervene in the public sphere is therefore of critical importance. In this regard,

[1] Full podcast episode available at https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/31/opinion/steve-bannon-on-broligarchs-vs-populism.html. Accessed on December 17, 2025.

this article contributes to the field by examining public perceptions – through the lens of the national press – of one such group: the National Anti-Andrés Manuel López Obrador Front (Frenaa). In particular, the article interrogates how Frenaa is publicly constructed in the national press, and how this mediated portrayal diverges from accounts centered on ideology or organizational self-definition. By shifting the analytical focus from what Frenaa *is* to how it is mediated and framed, the article intervenes in debates on the media representation of far-right actors, demonstrating that media visibility does not straightforwardly translate into awareness or political recognition. Rather, such coverage may also produce effects, such as a caricature and banalization, that complicate processes of legitimation.

In recent years, the media representation of these types of groups has become a particularly relevant object of analysis. Milonas (2025) emphasizes that such coverage is often characterized by sensationalism, the exaggeration of personalities, the simplification of discourse, and the softening of political positions. According to Brown and Mondon (2020), media portrayals of this kind tend to normalize extremist parties in the eyes of broader audiences. At the same time, Castelli and Froio (2024) show that media coverage frequently depends on the forms of collective action deployed by these groups during protests, thereby reshaping the public agenda in relation to the issues they advance. In the present case, we observe that media strategies are more closely aligned with the ridicule of the movement, accompanied by a critical stance toward its protest repertoires. This framing undermines both its credibility and its capacity to influence or disrupt the public agenda. From this perspective, examining Frenaa is particularly instructive, as it constitutes a relatively unsuccessful organization – both in terms of its ability to secure sustained media attention and its capacity to mobilize protesters. As such, it offers a useful vantage point from which to reflect on the contentious strategies of these groups and on their potential for success in other Latin American contexts.

To examine Frenaa in context, the article unfolds in six parts. First, we present a literature review focused on the Mexican case, while situating it within broader transnational trends. The methodology section then details our approach to the Mexican press, paving the way for an extensive empirical analysis in which the material is organized around six inductively derived axes: (i) Frenaa's mobilization strategies; (ii) its ideological composition; (iii)

Frenaa as a far-right actor; (iv) Frenaa as a business elite; (v) the legitimacy of Frenaa; and (vi) challenges to Frenaa's status as a political actor. We discuss these findings in light of the literature on the far right and its media representation and conclude with a preliminary conceptual proposal alongside a synthesis of the article's main arguments.

Literature review

Recent scholarship on the contemporary far right converges on the idea that it should be understood less as a marginal political deviation and more as a transformation internal to liberal democracies. This argument is developed most systematically by Cas Mudde (2021), who conceptualizes the far right as a "pathological normalcy" rooted in mainstream ideological elements, and by Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter (2020), who describe the rise of "reactionary democracy," in which exclusionary and authoritarian projects are articulated through democratic vocabularies such as popular sovereignty, freedom of expression, and anti-elitism. Rather than rejecting democracy outright, these actors seek to redefine it in majoritarian and exclusionary terms, legitimizing racism, sexism, and authoritarianism as expressions of popular will. Complementing this perspective, Steven Forti (2021) emphasizes the recurrent and adaptive nature of the far right, arguing that its current visibility reflects not novelty but renewed legitimacy under conditions of political crisis and disaffection. From a sociocultural angle, Cynthia Miller-Idriss (2020) shows that the far right operates through everyday practices, affective communities, and cultural infrastructures that extend well beyond parties and elections, while Reguera (2017) highlights the role of digital cultures, irony, and futurist imaginaries – particularly within the alt-right – in reshaping far-right mobilization and aesthetics. Together, these works depict the far right as normalized, culturally embedded, and structurally enabled by democratic and media institutions.

A second body of literature foregrounds the internationalization of far-right dynamics while warning against the uncritical transfer of Euro-Atlantic frameworks. Estrada Campos (2023) argues that the "international turn" in far-right studies has revealed shared repertoires – authoritarian populism, moral conservatism, conspiratorial thinking – but also deep contextual

asymmetries shaped by national histories and institutional configurations. From a geopolitical perspective, Herz and Summa (2021) frame the far right as a threat to global governance, stressing its capacity to undermine multilateralism, human rights regimes, and democratic norms from within state and non-state arenas. Focusing on Latin America, Bolcatto and Souroujon (2023), alongside Octavio Rodríguez Araujo (2003), show that right-wing and far-right formations in the region often emerge as elite-driven, morally conservative, and anti-redistributive reactions to progressive governments, frequently articulated through religious symbolism and anti-communist narratives rather than mass-party institutionalization. Taken together, this literature suggests that the far right should be analyzed as a transnational phenomenon whose concrete expressions depend on local political cultures. This framework is particularly useful for understanding the Mexican case, where far-right mobilizations such as Frenaa combine globally circulating discourses with nationally specific histories of conservatism, elite politics, and media mediation.

The literature on the far right in Mexico is characterized by a persistent paradox: despite the sustained growth of publications over the past two decades, the field continues to be marked by conceptual ambiguities, categorical overlaps, and normative uses of analytical terms. Categories such as right, far right, extreme right, conservatism, and fascism are frequently used interchangeably, without clearly specifying the criteria that would allow them to be empirically distinguished or systematically compared. This problem is not merely terminological. It directly affects the delimitation of objects of study, case selection, and the possibility of theoretical accumulation. As Uribe (2008) early on warned, the reemergence of actors located at the right margins of the Mexican political spectrum compels scholars to question not only their novelty, but also the very meaning of the categories used to describe them. In her analysis, she emphasizes that Mexican conservatism has deep historical roots, predating even the Revolution of 1910, and that not every conservative rearticulation can be automatically classified as far right without falling into analytical simplifications (Uribe, 2008, pp. 41-43). This warning remains highly relevant, as a significant portion of the recent literature tends to collapse conservatism, radical right, and extreme right into a single label, thereby weakening conceptual precision. The problem becomes more acute when the notion of fascism comes into play. Savarino

(2017) offers one of the most systematic critiques of the inflationary use of this concept in the Mexican and Latin American context. According to the author, since the 1920s the term "fascism" began to be employed as a generic synonym for authoritarianism, repression, or political violence, progressively losing its historical and ideological specificity. In contemporary academic debates, this legacy translates into an imprecise usage that conflates fascism with militarism, clericalism, or simple reactionary conservatism. Savarino warns that this conceptual operation turns fascism into a polemical rather than an analytical category, "so superficial and generic that it becomes problematic for serious and rigorous studies" (Savarino, 2017, p. 150). This critique is particularly pertinent in relation to recent works that resort to the category of neo-fascism to characterize contemporary actors. The article by Loyola, Figueroa, and Moreno (2023), for instance, argues that the National Anti-AMLO Front (Frenaa) constitutes a "neo-fascist pioneer" in Mexico, insofar as it combines ultra-nationalism, authoritarianism, anti-communism, xenophobia, and anti-feminism – features the authors consider equivalent to those of classical fascism adapted to the present. While this reading rightly highlights the reactionary and transnational dimension of the phenomenon, it also reopens the question raised by Savarino: to what extent does the use of "neo-fascism" describe a clearly delimited analytical ideal type rather than a retrospective historical analogy.

A less essentialist conceptual alternative can be found in works that approach the far right through the notion of political culture. Salgado (1996) proposes defining the extreme right not as a homogeneous entity or as a set of permanent traits, but as a position situated within a specific political spectrum, characterized by particular cognitive, affective, and evaluative orientations. From this perspective, the "extreme" character does not refer to an essence, but to a relational location within a given political field. Based on this approach, the author identifies different types of Far-right political cultures in Mexico – Catholic, nationalist, neoliberal, PRI-linked, and PAN-linked – which can be combined and reconfigured according to specific historical conjunctures (Salgado, 1996, pp. 55–56).[2] This framework has two important analytical virtues: on the one hand, it allows for capturing the

[2] PRI is the acronym for the Institutional Revolutionary Party, and PAN for the National Action Party, both of which held power from the 1930s until 2018.

internal heterogeneity of the far right; on the other, it avoids retrospectively projecting rigid categories onto changing phenomena. Nevertheless, even this approach leaves open the tension between empirical description and conceptual delimitation, a tension that runs through much of the literature.

Concern with the historicity of the right constitutes another central axis of the field. Far from interpreting the extreme right as a recent anomaly, numerous studies insist on the existence of long-term continuities linking conservatism, clericalism, anti-communism, and neoliberalism. Ramírez Zaragoza and Jurado Zapata (2023) have systematically developed this perspective and proposed analyzing Mexican right-wing formations through the notion of a historical continuum. From this standpoint, the right is understood as a plural and contradictory set of actors and ideas, connected through a recurrent opposition to projects of social transformation and defense of economic, moral, and cultural hierarchies. In their characterization, Mexican right-wing actors promote an elitist vision of society based on individualism, meritocracy, and traditional moral order, while simultaneously endorsing a procedural and restrictive conception of democracy (Ramírez Zaragoza & Jurado Zapata, 2023, pp. 8-9). This proposal makes it possible to situate contemporary phenomena within broader historical genealogies, thereby avoiding conjunctural or exceptionalist readings.

Within this genealogy, the Catholic Church emerges as a fundamental transhistorical actor. Gómez Peralta (2005) shows how, throughout the twentieth century, the Church maintained a predominantly right-wing stance vis-à-vis liberal and socialist reforms, while strategically adapting its discourse to political change. Far from being a monolithic actor, the ecclesiastical institution shifted from a frontal opposition to modernity toward the selective appropriation of values such as religious freedom and freedom of conscience, without abandoning its defense of a conservative moral order (Gómez Peralta, 2005, pp. 64-65). This adaptive capacity partly explains the persistence of moral and religious agendas within contemporary right-wing formations, as well as their links with diverse political and social actors. At the same time, the emphasis on historical continuity raises analytical challenges: if everything is read as continuity, there is a risk of diluting ruptures, innovations, and specific recompositions of the present.

These problems become particularly visible when analyzing the organizational forms of the extreme right. Unlike in other national contexts, where far-right parties are the focus of analysis, Mexican literature has paid greater attention to opaque organizations, informal networks, and conjunctural movements. The paradigmatic case is El Yunque, extensively documented in the journalistic work of Álvaro Delgado (2004). According to Delgado, El Yunque constitutes a secret, hierarchical, and anti-democratic organization that coordinates multiple front organizations and has achieved significant infiltration within the National Action Party, as well as in businesses and civil organizations. Although this is a journalistic investigation rather than an academic one, its impact on the scholarly literature is undeniable, insofar as it provides empirical evidence that is difficult to obtain through other means, and it has decisively shaped understandings of organized extreme right-wing activity in Mexico (Delgado, 2004, pp. 5–6). This case illustrates one of the central features of the field: its dependence on non-academic sources for the analysis of clandestine or semi-clandestine organizations.

More recently, scholarly attention has shifted toward visible and media-oriented actors, such as Frenaa or the movement led by Eduardo Verástegui. In these cases, the extreme right adopts more fluid organizational forms, relying on charismatic leadership, transnational alliances, and strategies of symbolic mobilization. The analysis by Loyola *et al.* (2023) emphasizes the transnational dimension of Frenaa, situating it within the global rise of, what they call, neo-fascism and the reaction against progressive governments in Latin America. For her part, Campos López (2024) analyzes the emergence of a radical Mexican right that is pro–United States, pro-evangelical, and connected to international conservative networks such as Vox or Trumpism, highlighting both the internal fragmentation of the Mexican right and the struggle over the recomposition of the ideological spectrum. These studies show that contemporary extreme right in Mexico is not organized exclusively around party structures, but rather through hybrid infrastructures that combine digital activism, religious networks, private funding, and transnational connections.

Finally, the literature review highlights the problematic position of Mexico in comparative studies of the extreme right. Unlike Europe or

the United States, Mexico frequently appears as a marginal case, being weakly theorized or treated as an exception. Recent state-of-the-art reviews explicitly acknowledge this situation. Ramírez Zaragoza and Navarro Rivera (2023) note that, despite the quantitative growth of academic production, significant comparative gaps remain, along with a tendency to privilege empirical description over theoretical elaboration. This asymmetry is reinforced by the uncritical importation of analytical frameworks developed in other contexts. The study by Gómez and Ochoa (2021) on polarization and new media clearly illustrates this point: many assumptions derived from the U.S. case – such as the centrality of informational bubbles – do not hold empirically in Mexico, where ideological polarization associated with social media use is limited and mediated by other factors, such as partisan identification (Gómez & Ochoa, 2021, pp. 1-2). Another relevant case of success of far-right actors in Latin America, Brazil, also presents major differences. The Mexican case under examination is crucial for distinguishing the role of the press in Mexico from that observed in other contexts where mass media actively facilitated the rise of far-right leadership, as in the case of Jair Bolsonaro. In this regard, the Brazilian experience presents a stark contrast. As Araújo and Prior (2021) argue, major Brazilian newspapers, by juxtaposing Bolsonaro with left-wing candidates and endorsing neoliberal policy frameworks, contributed to shaping public opinion in his favor – even while acknowledging the potential risks associated with his candidacy. Similarly, Feres Júnior and Gagliardi (2021) demonstrate that mainstream media coverage of corruption scandals – marked by a pronounced bias against the center-left government – significantly influenced the electorate, thereby helping to pave the way for Bolsonaro's electoral success. This patterned bias not only reinforced the anti-establishment climate that enabled Bolsonarism to gain traction (Queiroz *et al.,* 2021) but also contributed to the normalization of Bolsonaro's conduct. By persistently framing his actions in comparative terms vis-à-vis predecessors from the Workers' Party (Brazil) (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT), the press effectively diluted the perceived gravity of his authoritarian tendencies, thereby constraining its own capacity to mount a direct and sustained opposition to his political project (Gagliardi *et al.,* 2023).

In this article, the far right is conceptualized as an entanglement of ideas, values, and actors characterized by two defining features. First, it is anti-egalitarian, insofar as it rejects the equal dignity and treatment of all individuals – across gender and other social differences – and opposes the institutional mechanisms designed to secure such equality. Second, it is ethnopluralist, grounded in a form of cultural essentialism that treats ethnic groups as fixed and bounded entities rather than as socially constructed formations, and consequently denies "non-natives" recognition as equal political subjects. Adopting a network perspective makes it possible to account for degrees of consolidation within this entanglement. Where connections remain loose, unstable, or only partially linked, what emerges are proto-far-right formations. These denote configurations in the making, in which certain actors, discourses, and strategies are already identifiable, yet their political effects, collective agency as an entangled formation, and durable patterns of interaction have not fully coalesced. While the concept of proto-far right refers to a stage preceding the full consolidation of far-right formations, it should not be understood in teleological terms. That is, proto-far-right networks do not necessarily culminate in fully developed far-right configurations; in some historical instances, they have failed to stabilize or to sustain coordinated action among their constituent actors. The analytical value of the concept, therefore, lies not only in capturing a particular moment in the formation of such networks, but also in foregrounding the practical possibility of targeted anti-far-right interventions. These may prove more effective when undertaken during this incipient phase, before patterns of coordination, legitimacy, and durability have fully taken shape.

On Frenaa

Frenaa (Frente Nacional Anti-AMLO) emerged in Mexico in 2020 as an explicitly reactionary collective organized around opposition to the presidency of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, in a context of intensified political polarization and social uncertainty. Its formation coincided with the consolidation of a progressive government that was framed by its opponents as a threat to liberal democracy and national sovereignty.

Rather than constituting an electoral actor, Frenaa took shape as a mobilizational response that brought together long-standing conservative, anti-communist, and moralist traditions, rearranged through the language of national emergency and regime breakdown. As several authors note, this positioning situates Frenaa within a longer genealogy of Mexican right-wing mobilization – particularly Catholic and anti-left traditions – while marking a rupture with earlier patterns of discreet influence or clandestine organization by embracing open confrontation in the public sphere (Loyola et al., 2023; Aragón-Falomir, 2022).

Organizationally, Frenaa operates as a loosely structured movement rather than a formal political party, privileging protest, symbolic occupation of public space, and media visibility over institutional competition. Its internal configuration combines centralized leadership with informal coordination mechanisms, sustained by a single, non-negotiable objective: the removal of the sitting president. Empirical studies emphasize the movement's reliance on marches, setting up camps, performative actions, and intensive use of digital platforms and encrypted messaging services, which allow it to amplify its presence beyond its limited numerical base (Loyola, 2022). This hybrid organizational form links street politics, digital communication, private funding, and transnational symbolic references. It also helps explain the disproportionate media attention Frenaa has received, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, when fear, uncertainty, and distrust toward institutions intensified (Aragón-Falomir, 2022).

From an ideological perspective, the literature consistently situates Frenaa within the far-right spectrum, identifying ultranationalism, authoritarianism, moral conservatism, and a strong anti-communist orientation as its core elements. Frenaa's discourse constructs politics as an existential struggle against internal enemies – primarily the federal government and its supporters – and external threats associated with globalization, migration, and progressive social agendas. Pluralism and political mediation are framed as sources of national decay, while order, hierarchy, and moral restoration are presented as necessary conditions for national survival. While authors diverge on the analytical appropriateness of labeling Frenaa as neo-fascist, there is broad agreement that its political relevance lies less in its institutional capacity than in its role as a discursive

and symbolic catalyst within the contemporary Mexican far-right landscape (Loyola et al., 2023; Loyola, 2022; Aragón-Falomir, 2022).

In the broader state-of-the-art on the Mexican right, Frenaa can be further characterized as a predominantly reactive and defensive actor, whose political intervention is structured less around a positive program than around opposition to a perceived threat. As noted in analyses of the post-2018 reconfiguration of the Mexican right, movements such as Frenaa mobilize through narratives of moral panic, national decline, and democratic erosion, presenting themselves as guardians of legality and order while simultaneously questioning the legitimacy of elected governments they oppose (Ramírez Zaragoza & Jurado Zapata, 2023). This mode of action situates Frenaa within a recurrent pattern in the historical continuum of Mexican right-wing mobilization, in which moments of political transformation trigger opposition framed as civilizational defense rather than partisan competition. In addition, the literature highlights Frenaa's ambiguous social composition, which complicates elite-centered interpretations of the far right. While leadership and support networks are largely associated with upper-middle and elite sectors, Frenaa also draws symbolic adhesion from segments of the middle and popular classes through culturally resonant appeals to meritocracy, moral conservatism, anti-corruption discourse, and opposition to redistributive policies (Ramírez Zaragoza & Navarro Rivera, 2023). Finally, rather than operating as an isolated anomaly, Frenaa appears as part of a broader radicalization of right-wing opposition under progressive governments, contributing to the normalization of more extreme discursive registers within the Mexican public sphere without displacing traditional right-wing actors such as parties, business organizations, or religious institutions (Ramírez Zaragoza & Jurado Zapata, 2023).

Methodology

To conduct this research, a sample of news articles was compiled from Mexico's mainstream regional and/or national newspapers. The criterion for including an article in the sample was that it contained information directly related to Frenaa, regardless of its journalistic genre. The media outlets reviewed were the following:

Table 1. Media sources with their political position and readership profile

Media	Predominant political position	Audiences / readership profile	Number of sampled news items
El Economista	Technocratic-liberal, pro-market	Specific audience: economic elites, entrepreneurs, technocrats	6
El Universal	Moderate, right-wing	Wide audience, urban middle classes, national, general readership	23
La Jornada	Progressive, left-wing	Politicized audience, scholars, social movements, unions	110
Milenio	Pragmatic center	Massive urban audience, general readership, emphasis on news, current events	20
El Sol de México	Conservative, institutional	Traditional audience, popular and regional readership	4
Diario de Yucatán	Conservative, regional	Regional audience emphasis on local and community affairs	58
Total			221

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The differences in the number of articles are directly attributable to editorial criteria. In other words, the numerical differences in media coverage are explained by the editorial interests of each media outlet in giving space or relevance to Frenaa. While some outlets devoted considerable attention to the movement, others rendered it largely invisible. The analysis of this corpus served two main purposes. First, to trace actors and arguments surrounding the public discussion of the Frenaa movement – identifying spokespersons, detractors, and predominant discourses. Second, to map the media debate around Frenaa in order to understand its scope and reach.

To examine the narrative articulated by actors in the media, the news articles were analyzed using a constructivist narrative analysis (Esin *et al.*, 2014), which focuses on narratives about events – in this case, Frenaa's actions, including remarkable statements by its main leaders. The aim was to understand the movement as constructed and narrated through a multiplicity of voices and actors in the media. Narratives are conceived as co-constructed by different actors, rather than as exclusive property of a single speaker in a given event (Riessman, 2008). The analysis of these materials sought to identify the social and political meanings through which the movement is constructed socially and in the media. These textual references were grouped thematically as emergent codes, as shown below:

Table 2. Topics, codes and sub-codes used for qualitative analysis

Topic	Code	Sub-code	Definition
Frenaa's positioning	Ideology	Anti AMLO, anti-populism	Criticisms to the government (corruption, incompetence, authoritarianism)
		Religion and public morality	References to Catholicism, values, family.
		Antagonism	Appealing to agonic politics (they vs. all, AMLO vs. the people, etc.)
		Nationalism and fatherland	Use of patriotic language for legitimation
		Threats	Violence, destabilization
	Organization	Main actors	Actors who represent Frenaa's values
		Structure	How Frenaa works and gets financed
	Action strategies	Street mobilization	Covering of protests, demonstrations, *plantones*, caravans, etc.
		Digital and media campaigns	Reference to social media and mass media
		Alliances	Organizations with which Frenaa is related: Catholic church, political organizations, etc.
Media representation	Framings	Frenaa as the far right	Semantic labels such as coup plotters, fanatics, and far right
		Frenaa as legitimate organization	Representation of authentic citizen mobilization
		Frenaa as entrepreneurial elite	Links between Frenaa and individual entrepreneurs, groups, and elites
		Questioning Frenaa	References that ridicule Frenaa's actors and actions
	Governmental reactions		

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Table 2 presents the codes that emerged from the corpus. This means that, after reading the selected news articles and columns, relevant codes were generated that accounted for the discursive dynamics surrounding Frenaa. The emergent codes are organized into two broad themes. On the one hand, Frenaa positioning refers to how the dimensions of ideology, organization, and action strategies are presented across different media outlets. On the other hand, media representation seeks to show how particular interpretations of the Front are mobilized and advanced within media discourse. In doing so, this article seeks not only to build on previous empirical work on actors of Mexico's far right but also to deepen the analisys of unsuccessful media articulation that was crucial in disrupting these extremist groups and actions.

Empirical analysis

The media analysis, based on the identification of Frenaa as a central actor in the Mexican political scene in recent years, was inductively structured around six axes: (i) Frenaa's mobilization strategies; (ii) its ideological composition; (iii) Frenaa as a far-right actor; (iv) Frenaa as a business elite; (v) the legitimacy of Frenaa; and (vi) challenges to Frenaa's status as a political actor. Below, we present the empirical findings derived from opinion pieces and news articles in the Mexican national press, which are subsequently discussed in light of the preceding literature review.

(i) Frenaa's mobilization strategies

Frenaa is portrayed in the press as a rather disruptive actor. It has no formal presentation and is depicted as a headless group, without clear leadership or organizational structure. Its first protests took place amid the Covid-19 pandemic. This dynamic was identified using Frenaa's organizational code. Mobilization included motorcades of cars and motorcycles, with flashing lights, toward the Zócalo.[3] Its main demand was AMLO's resignation

[3] The *Zócalo* is the main public square of Mexico City, formally known as the *Plaza de la Constitución*. One of the largest urban plazas in the world, it has been the political and symbolic center of Mexican public life since the colonial period, hosting state ceremonies, mass demonstrations, and civic rituals.

(Saldierna & Bravo, 2020, May 31). These were never massive marches. The press reported that around 1,500 people participated in this form of protest, which disrupted the pandemic management rules in Mexico. While the organization stated it aimed to reach 10,000 people, AMLO ironically said that, if they reached 100,000, he would resign (Hernández López, 2020, Oct. 5). Clearly, these forms and dynamics of pressure were not taken seriously by the executive branch.

In addition to these marches, a second form of pressure was the occupation of the Zócalo during 2020. Around 700 campaign-style tents were set up to pressure AMLO to resign. The tents generated recurring conflict with police. Although AMLO declared that they had the right to protest within the limits established by the police, protesters further defied him, disregarding certain restricted spaces. On November 11, 2020, an incident occurred, which was reported by *La Jornada*: the police were due to raise a flag to mark national mourning in the context of the ongoing pandemic, but Frenaa demonstrators prevented them from doing so. This protest lasted close to 50 days, after which the movement's leader, Gilberto Lozano,[4] called for an end to the occupation due to the low number of protesters.

Frenaa also used more performative tactics to advance its agenda. In early March 2021, protesters collected signatures demanding the president's resignation and the holding of a citizen trial (Chan, 2021, March 8). In that same month, for instance, a fictional citizen trial against AMLO was staged, which, as we will show in the following sections, is challenged in media coverage.

> Upon reaching their destination, the right-wing leader took the floor and called for a national economic shutdown, as well as a boycott of tax payments – measures aimed at leaving President Andrés López Obrador without funds and forcing him to resign. This is how Mr. Lozano expressed himself, from whom the cloven-hoofed ungulate mammals are moving away by means of a Dantesque procedure (an elegant way of saying that he is seriously losing his grip) (Ajenjo, 2020, Oct. 24).

As this quote suggests, Frenaa is not a traditional movement. That is, rather than seeking sustained representation through spokespersons in mainstream

[4] Gilberto Lozano is a Mexican businessman and political activist, founder and principal leader of the National Anti–Andrés Manuel López Obrador Front (Frenaa). Formerly an executive at Fomento Económico Mexicano, S.A.B. de C.V. (Femsa), he also founded the National Citizen Congress (Conaci) in 2009, a precursor organization that adopted anti-communist, pro-market, and socially conservative positions.

media, it aims to cultivate citizen loyalties against AMLO. For this reason, its main forms of mobilization are street-based, likely coordinated through social networks, although this coordination does not typically appear in newspaper coverage. Precisely because it is not traditional, it relies on less conventional methods to press its claims, using performative measures such as occupations, political trials, and signature drives.

(ii) Ideological composition

The first dimension of Frenaa's ideological composition is its explicit anti-AMLO stance. To organize this, we conducted a systematic review of the codes associated with Frenaa's ideology, as presented in the methodology. As we will see, opposition to AMLO, antagonism, and nationalism are gaining strength. They function as a unifying signifier aimed at aggregating citizens against the president by portraying him as embodying what is deemed undesirable in Mexican society. AMLO is challenged through three main imputations: as a dictator, as incompetent, and as having an alleged moral agenda.

The first imputation is highly visible in press coverage. AMLO is described as a "dictator and tyrant" (También apoyan a la Corte…, 2023, May 29), a "communist, inept, and traitor to the nation" (Cano, 2020, Oct. 4), and a "danger, manipulator, and repressor if you do not support the Fourth Transformation" (Unidos contra AMLO, 2020, Sep. 27). In this framing, he represents the opposite of the sovereign will of the Mexican people. The second imputation concerns AMLO's governing capacity: he is portrayed as someone for whom "the position was too big, [who] is a danger to Mexico" (Saldierna & Bravo, 2020, May 31), as leading a "mediocre, failed, and improvised government" (Ceballos Alvarado, 2020, Aug. 20), and as presenting "evidence of theft, betrayal, abandonment, and indifference toward sick people" (Chan, 2020, Aug. 24). Thus, in addition to acting against the will of Mexicans, he is depicted as incapable of governing. The third imputation is more explicitly ideological, centered on the claim that AMLO is imposing a moral agenda contrary to Mexican interests. In particular, the promotion of abortion is questioned and associated, in protesters' discourse, with characteristics attributed to communist regimes (Sierra Medina, 2020, Nov. 29).

A second dimension of Frenaa's ideological composition is antagonism, constructed by equating AMLO with communism in opposition to the rest of

Mexican society. Beyond identifying AMLO as a dictatorial and inept figure, he is portrayed as an ally of communism and therefore as acting against popular will. Frenaa's leaders describe themselves as representatives of "all" the people.

> [It is] a public, not a private, initiative made up of people from all parties, from all social classes, from all levels – students and professionals, businesspeople – and it is a group that, just as the coronavirus, did not distinguish between rich and poor, students or professionals, we want Frenaa to be the trigger so that before December 1 Mr. López Obrador goes home and we save this country (García Soto, 2020, May 9).

The use of the Covid-19 metaphor is noteworthy, as it frames Frenaa as a force capable of altering the course of Mexican history. Polarization is further intensified through narratives depicting a latent danger to Mexican society, particularly in critiques of AMLO's reforms. AMLO is presented as part of a conspiracy linked to the São Paulo Forum, allegedly aiming to install a communist regime (Jiménez, 2020, June 15; Jarquín Ramírez, 2020, Oct. 3). Thus, communism becomes a label equated with AMLO, as an extreme ideology that drives the degradation of Mexican society. This explains references to the government as a dictatorship (Frena exige que renuncie AMLO, 2022, Dec. 5) and slogans such as "Join Frenaa, not communism" ("Queremos que se vaya…", 2020, June 28), as well as attempts to equate AMLO to Chávez, Maduro, and Castro (Gresca en un plantón, 2020, Sept. 23).[5]

This reveals an antagonistic logic in which AMLO is equated with communism, and which is anchored in a broader narrative of Frenaa as the savior of Mexico's destiny. Communism operates as a narrative of degradation and, by contrast, positions Frenaa as a force of salvation, as expressed by its leaders: "Those who wish to stop this catastrophe in our beloved Mexico, which is facing the worst economic, health, employment, poverty, corruption, and above all security crisis, should seize the opportunity that other countries have taken to stop a bad government" (El Frena defiende polémico sondeo, 2021, Aug. 22).

[5] The allegation that AMLO represented a danger to Mexico was not new and had already been successfully mobilized by right-wing groups. In 2006, it was strategically deployed by the National Action Party during the first presidential campaign in which the left-wing leader participated. Then, an aggressive and wide-reaching media campaign spread the slogan "*a danger to Mexico*" among citizens, reinforcing the notion that such a radical change posed a threat to the achievements attained by Mexican democracy following the transition that began in 2000 (see Hiller 2011).

Two additional dimensions – less prominent but still part of Frenaa's ideological composition – are nationalism and religion: "The march ended a short while ago, a green march with the national soccer team's jersey, filled with national flags and banners of the Virgin of Guadalupe" (Cano, 2020, Oct. 4). This quote encapsulates the close intertwining of both values. Nationalism is expressed through practices such as singing the national anthem and through narratives portraying AMLO as betraying the nation by undermining family values central to Mexican identity (Jiménez, 2020). Appeals to nationalism also seek to halt the alleged degradation caused by AMLO's betrayal of Mexican society.

> It is a shame that my little brothers and sisters are asleep. If they woke up today and realized that the new administrator we appointed just 20 months ago – because we were fed up with other looting traitors and he committed to recovering our house, putting it back on its feet, and repairing what was destroyed – if they noticed this new betrayal, they would not allow it […] With this pandemic, it is better to die of coronavirus than to die of shame when telling our grandchildren "I was there and did nothing" (Sierra Medina, 2020, Sept. 8).

Religiosity constitutes a powerful symbolic foundation for Frenaa. Newspapers frequently report the presence, during protests, of symbols such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, Saint Michael the Archangel, banners reading "*Viva Cristo Rey*" (Long Live Christ the King) (Ajenjo, 2020, Nov. 24), and crucifixes. Some outlets describe this as militant Catholicism, with participants denouncing communism and engaging in public prayer, what reportedly helped secure support from the archdiocese (Canalizar reclamos…, 2020, Oct. 5). At the same time, religiosity is a contested element in media coverage; for instance, *La Jornada* characterizes Frenaa's use of hymns and religious symbols in public space as anachronistic (Hernández López, 2020, Sept. 21).

(iii) Frenaa as a far-right actor

This dimension emerges directly from those codes that address the representation or framing of Frenaa in the media. In other words, it stems from the interpretation of how the media constructed the idea that Frenaa is

a far-right actor. In line with the literature, this research found that the press depicts Frenaa as a far-right movement, which is commonly positioned as an actor advancing an openly coup-oriented discourse. Frenaa is repeatedly characterized in press coverage as a noisy and disruptive far-right movement that congregates conservative, ultra-Catholic, and business sectors. Its discourse includes demands for banning abortion and same-sex marriage, as well as an explicit rejection of the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (Valdés Ugalde, 2020, Nov. 1), at times reaching formulations interpreted as coup-oriented (Hernández López, 2020, Sept. 24; Montero, 2020, Sept. 28; García Alcocer, 2020, Sept. 28; Dueñas Gómez, 2020, Sept. 28). Media accounts also emphasize connections with business elites and the United States, reinforcing the perception of a strategy that extends beyond the national arena.

Frenaa's public expressions are described as forms of right-wing adventurism, centered on a constant discursive radicalization that prioritizes media impact over the development of clear programmatic proposals. Unlike other right-wing movements of the past, Frenaa does not appear as an organization with a defined political platform, but rather as a phenomenon of aggressive mobilization whose sole objective is the obsessive pursuit of the removal of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (Trujillo Bolio, 2020, Sept. 26). At the same time, it is not portrayed as an isolated case, but as part of a set of "variegated groups" (Hernández López, 2020, Sept. 28) of far-right fanatics that include Catholic middle sectors, fanatic organizations, and ultraconservative groups. For a president who has both emerged from and consistently demonstrated the ability to lead massive popular mobilizations, the potential for street protests instigated by this group never seemed to pose a serious threat. This perception likely stemmed not only from the limited number of participants but, above all, from the weak connection between the protesters and the influential power players on the far right, who might have posed a genuine challenge to governance.

Frenaa is further described as carrying an openly violent and potentially dangerous discourse, as it aims to instigate confrontation that could lead to physical aggression against political adversaries (Hernández López, 2020, Sept. 24). Its actions are perceived as deliberate provocations and performative mobilizations rather aimed at creating "scenarios of destabilization that allow for the continuity and supposed final triumph of

underlying interests – those of large national and foreign business groups" (Hernández López, 2020, Sept. 24) – than at opening spaces for dialogue and democratic deliberation. This depiction is further underpinned by portrayals of Gilberto Lozano, one of Frenaa's leaders, who perceives the camping tents as akin to a military occupation: "Far right, militant Catholicism, and the flamboyant leader Lozano understand the campaign tents as a military campaign, in search of clashes and victims" (Hernández López, 2020, Sept. 30).

Comparisons with other groups further place Frenaa at the extremes of the political spectrum. On the left, it is juxtaposed with the EZLN,[6] various intellectuals, and radical environmentalists, while on the right it is grouped with Sí por México and opposition parties. All these groups are portrayed as holding anachronistic ideologies and petty interests, alongside those who "uncritically support the Fourth Transformation" (Toledo, 2020, Nov., 17). References to the extreme right exhibit repeated comparisons of Frenaa with Sí por México and, on the left, it is compared with the EZLN, both entities described as advancing visceral, fantastical, and calumnious discourses (Toledo, 2021, Feb. 9). López Obrador himself has compared Frenaa to other far-right entities, drawing parallels with figures he described as "similar buffoons" representing right-wing populism, such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, and Boris Johnson (Salgado Borge, 2020, Sept. 27). Likewise, AMLO has used Frenaa as a point of comparison when referring to other movements, such as the Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (National Coordination of Education Workers, CNTE), suggesting, according to Hernández López (2021, Aug. 30), that their leaders act "out of self-interest and commit the quasi-sin of exposing the ineptitude and apathy of the indulgent governor, Rutilio Escandón, brother-in-law of the current Secretary of the Interior".

(iv) Questioned legitimacy

One of the main challenges faced by Frenaa in press coverage concerns its performance in the Plaza de la Constitución (Zócalo). Both columnists and President Andrés Manuel López Obrador have remarked and mocked

[6] EZLN is the acronym for Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatist Army for National Liberation)

Frenaa's actions, underlining that its campaign tents remain empty and it has failed to mobilize the number of participants it claims to expect. Occupying the Zócalo is also portrayed as a derivative and imitative act, inspired by earlier protests led by López Obrador himself following the 2006 election.

Those already described events – the so-called "citizen trial," the occupation of the Zócalo, and the newly erected yet empty campaign tents – are portrayed by the press as shameful spectacles, emblematic of a hollow opposition that has ultimately failed (Hernández López, 2021, March 22; Velázquez, 2020, Nov. 17). In a similar tone, *La Jornada* notes:

> After so many varied protests and political and civic demonstrations, the Plaza de la Constitución could have awarded Frenaa the all-time prize for ridiculousness, its esplanade populated by multicolored empty campaign tents, without social presence or any significant activism beyond a handful of people trying to keep the winds from blowing the uninhabited shells through the air (Hernández López, 2020, Nov. 16).

López Obrador has likewise insisted that the tents are more of a spectacle than an action backed by genuine citizen support. He has remarked that, unlike his own past protests, Frenaa's leaders do not stay overnight in the encampment but instead leave for hotels (Magaña Peralta, 2020, Sept. 24; Mejía, 2020, Sept. 21). In light of Frenaa's limited mobilization capacity, the president has even encouraged them to keep trying, drawing on his own decades-long experience as an opposition leader and recommending "perseverance" (AMLO opina…, 2020, Nov. 17). He has also stated that once the Covid-19 pandemic subsides, the government will need to reclaim the occupied space (Propone compartir…, 2020, Oct. 10). López Obrador has gone so far as to applaud the protest itself:

> That is why I am happy, because – imagine – if conservatives did not protest, I would even feel frustrated; I would say, 'we are not doing anything, there is no change.' But truly things are changing, and proof of this is precisely those protests by those who previously made a living from profiteering and looting, those who dedicated themselves to keeping what belongs to all the people (Mejía, 2020, Sept. 21).

Other commentators evoke 2006 protests in the Zócalo, led by López Obrador, to speak ironically about Frenaa's practices. On the one hand,

they suggest that Frenaa has enjoyed facilities and protections that López Obrador himself did not have at the time, including assurances that their right to protest would be safeguarded (Mejía, 2020, Sept. 21). On the other hand, Frenaa is portrayed as appropriating protest tactics long associated with the Mexican left, such as occupying the Zócalo and setting up encampments along Avenida Juárez (Monreal, 2020, Sept. 22). These practices are read as mimetic, combining references to the Spanish *Indignados* movement with tents as a practice "with an unmistakable native, López-Obradorist connotation". In this sense, Frenaa's attempt to become the president's nemesis results in "memesis" instead, that is, it comes down to "memes" or a pirated version of the original (Monreal, 2020, Sept. 22).

Another dimension through which Frenaa is questioned concerns its principal representative. Gilberto Lozano is portrayed as the movement's "general manager" (Hernández López, 2020, Nov. 16), lacking charisma and embodying an empty form of extremism (Campos Suárez, 2020, Sept. 22). He is further described as a political dead-end (Velázquez, 2020, Nov. 17) and as an "intermittent tactical leader in political adventurism – that is, in the launching of dangerous and irresponsible ventures, without any substantive basis for his proposals" (Hernández López, 2020, Nov. 23), as well as being devoid of political and civic responsibility (Hernández López, 2020, Sept. 21). We return to Lozano's relationship with the business elite in greater depth in the following section. In the same vein, Frenaa itself is described as "puppets of the Mexican far right" (Bravo & Quintero, 2020, Oct. 4), as the spearhead of an empty right wing (Velázquez, 2020, Nov. 17), and as something that "resembles a parody more than a movement with social legitimacy" (Lezama, 2020, Oct. 10a). Its demonstrations in the Plaza de la Constitución are said to express a weak, patriarchal nationalism (Trujillo Bolio, 2020, Sept. 26), often mobilizing participants primarily through cars, with "a couple of hundred vehicles in such a way that the rolling ostentation masked the very limited number of demonstrators" (Hernández López, 2020, Sept. 21). By adopting protest forms previously used by López Obrador, Frenaa is seen as contesting him on the terrain he knows best – social mobilization – while paradoxically reinforcing his legitimacy: "Frenaa gives legitimacy to the president […] From the Zócalo, Frenaa dips its wand into soap and blows its bubbles in our faces" (Lezama, 2020, Oct. 10).

Finally, Frenaa is characterized as an opposition movement that has crossed boundaries by calling for a coup d'état – something not seen since 1931 – shifting from the language of war to that of cruelty, in which politics is no longer about competing forces but about "imagining the infliction of pain on the other in order to create public terror and anguish" (Mejía Madrid, 2020, Oct. 10). At the same time, Frenaa's self-perception sharply diverges from these portrayals: the movement perceives itself as a social force confronting a communist threat allegedly emanating from the São Paulo Forum, seeking to characterize the government as a dictatorship and to denounce the negative implications of *lopezobradorismo* (Jarquín Ramírez, 2020, Oct. 3).

In sum, as expressed in *Milenio*,

> If anything is exciting about the Frenaa crowd, it is that, despite not knowing how to read or write, they have the ability to make a fool of themselves beyond what is ethically advisable by the UN. Not only do they follow the same leader who has shown time and again that he is one of those slick operators like Gilberto Lozano (a veritable collection of Freudian and Jungian traumas that would make specialists in shock therapies salivate), but they also applaud each and every one of his blunders, such as the idea of threatening to stop paying taxes – something they were not doing anyway (Calixto Albarrán, 2020, Nov. 23).

(v) Frenaa framed as a business elite

The press depicts Frenaa as a group representing the Mexican elite. Its interests are portrayed as class-based, aimed at maintaining the dominance of both national and foreign business sectors. It is also presented as representing graduates of private universities and individuals who believe their privileges no longer align with the current historical moment. Thus, the class interests Frenaa seeks to advance are depicted as reflecting its classist opposition to AMLO, as well as its "provocative mission, Pinochetist in orientation and imbued with a bellicose spirit."

Concomitantly, such a link with the Mexican elite is also problematized. Portrayals of Gilberto Lozano present him less as a member of the business elite than as subordinate to it. Lozano is described as an executive employee of Monterrey-based business groups, who also served the government of Vicente

Fox, while simultaneously mobilizing religious symbols and hymns in the encampments. Moreover, Frenaa's media visibility is attributed less to its political capacity to achieve its objectives than to "the assertive intensity of its business leader, Gilberto Lozano," whose statements generate disproportionate media attention relative to the movement's actual political effectiveness.

Another dimension of Frenaa's depiction as a representative of the business elite places the group within a broader project of conservative restoration. This view portrays Frenaa as seeking to revive protest and mobilization tactics that lack real social grounding, while attempting to "speak to the population, but in practice only addressing business, religious, and bureaucratic sectors threatened by AMLO." In sum, *La Jornada* encapsulates this portrayal as follows:

> The boyars lack ideology, which they confuse with classism. They ignore any sense of belonging other than to money. They honk their horns as their finest resource to proclaim: "we are the nation!" (Carrillo Olea, 2020, Oct. 2).

(vi) Frenaa as a legitimate organization

The representation of Frenaa as a legitimate organization is relatively limited in press coverage. Some media outlets argue that, just as Andrés Manuel López Obrador once camped and legitimately protested on Paseo de la Reforma (Gresca en un plantón, 2020, Sept. 23), and just as supporters of the Fourth Transformation might also do (Hernández López, 2020, Oct. 5), Frenaa is equally entitled to protest insofar as its mobilizations are presented as expressions of social malaise and disillusionment with what are described as the government's disastrous policies (Valdés Ugalde, 2020, Nov. 1). From this perspective, Frenaa's mobilization is deemed legitimate because institutions are seen as unable to integrate certain actors into the public sphere. Frenaa thus appears as a consequence of the fact that political parties have blocked institutional channels and failed to "resolve the major national problems" (Aguayo, 2020, Oct. 7).

López Obrador himself stated that "although he does not agree with the ideas of Frenaa's members, they must be protected," while at the same time criticizing the "discriminatory and violent language" that had been

heard during their mobilizations (González Alvarado, 2020, Oct. 6). This position acknowledges the right to protest while drawing clear boundaries regarding acceptable forms of public expression. Other media outlets, however, while recognizing that any citizen has the right to protest, adopt a more critical stance.

Discussion

The empirical findings regarding Frenaa complicate, rather than straightforwardly confirm, the dominant international theses on the contemporary far right. Authors such as Mudde (2021) and Mondon and Winter (2020) argue that far-right actors have become "normalized" through their incorporation into democratic vocabularies, institutional arenas, and mainstream media circuits – a process they conceptualize as pathological normalcy or reactionary democracy. While the Mexican press undeniably renders Frenaa visible and legible as a far-right actor, the data suggest that visibility does not necessarily entail normalization. Instead, Frenaa's mediated presence is persistently accompanied by delegitimization, derision, and representations of organizational incoherence. In this regard, the Mexican case partially contradicts the expectation – implicit in much of the Global North literature – that media visibility tends to stabilize or consolidate far-right actors. Here, media coverage often functions as an erosive rather than an enabling mechanism.

This finding aligns more closely with regional analyses that stress the fragility and conjunctural nature of far-right formations in Latin America. The diagnoses of contemporary right-wing politics by Bolcatto and Souroujon (2023) and by Rodríguez Araujo (2003) emphasize that many far-right actors in the region operate through episodic mobilization, moral panic, and elite-driven reactions rather than through robust party institutionalization. The empirical data on Frenaa strongly corroborate this view: the movement appears in the press as organizationally thin, leader-dependent, and reliant on performative repertoires (car caravans, symbolic occupations, staged trials) rather than sustained political work. In contrast to Miller-Idriss's (2020) account of the far right as an ecosystem capable of embedding itself in everyday institutions and youth cultures, Frenaa remains largely confined

to moments of spectacular protest, failing to translate cultural resonance into durable organizational depth.

At the ideological level, the findings strongly support Mudde's (2021) minimalist definition of the far right – particularly the centrality of anti-pluralism and moral authoritarianism – while also confirming the emphasis on historical continuities between older reactionary traditions and contemporary far-right discourses (Forti, 2021; Reguera, 2017). Frenaa's framing of AMLO as simultaneously dictatorial, incompetent, and morally deviant reproduces classic anti-communist and moral-panic narratives that have long characterized conservative mobilization in Mexico. However, unlike the cases discussed by Herz and Summa (2021), in which such discourses become embedded in state or para-state projects with geopolitical implications, Frenaa's ideological repertoire appears largely untethered from policy capacity or institutional leverage. The empirical evidence therefore suggests ideological intensity without corresponding political traction, a mismatch that is less emphasized in global threat-oriented analyses of the far right.

It is therefore analytically relevant to reflect on the factors that help explain why, in the Mexican context, the vocabulary mobilized by Frenaa failed to resonate with the broader public. As previously noted, the movement did not achieve significant traction among protesters. Instead, it appeared to consolidate the figure of AMLO, who openly ironized the movement. In this regard, we argue that the logic of antagonism is central: mobilizing a movement through antagonism against center-left governments that are electorally or socially weakened (as in the cases of Brazil in 2018, Argentina in 2023, or more recently Chile) differs markedly from doing so against a leader enjoying high levels of popular support.

The data also allow for a more precise engagement with the international literature on transnationalism. Estrada Campos (2023) highlights the growing tendency in far-right studies to emphasize cross-border networks, shared imaginaries, and ideological diffusion. While Frenaa's discourse clearly draws on transnational references – anti-communism, the São Paulo Forum, analogies to Chávez, Maduro, or Castro – the empirical record shows that these references function primarily as symbolic shortcuts rather than as indicators of sustained organizational linkage. In this respect, the Mexican case tempers stronger claims about the operational depth of far-

right transnationalism: ideological borrowing is evident, but institutional or strategic coordination remains weak. This places Frenaa closer to what Reguera (2017) describes as a "future-oriented" far right in discursive terms, yet without the infrastructural density that characterizes its European or U.S. counterparts.

Regarding class and elite dynamics, the findings resonate strongly with Bolcatto and Souroujon's (2023) argument that contemporary far right mobilization in Latin America often expresses elite anxiety in populist form. Frenaa's portrayals by the press as an expression of the interests of business sectors and private-university graduates regarding their threatened privileges align with this thesis. However, the data also introduce a tension insufficiently addressed in the literature: elite association does not automatically confer authority or effectiveness. Gilberto Lozano is repeatedly framed not as an autonomous elite actor but as an executive subordinate to broader economic interests, which undermines his symbolic authority. This nuance challenges assumptions – implicit in some comparative accounts – that elite backing necessarily enhances far-right viability.

The empirical data presented here enter a direct and sustained dialogue with the growing body of Mexican scholarship on Frenaa and the contemporary far right. Studies such as Loyola, Figueroa Ibarra, and Moreno Velador (2023) conceptualize Frenaa as a pioneer neo-fascist actor in Mexico, emphasizing its ideological configuration – ultranationalist, authoritarian, anti-communist, anti-feminist – and situating it within the broader global resurgence of neo-fascism as a reaction to progressive governments in Latin America. This interpretation is further developed by reconstructing Frenaa's ideological genealogy, organizational repertoires, and transnational references, framing it as a militant social movement rather than an electoral organization (Loyola, 2022). Aragón Falomir (2021, 2022) complements these analyses by characterizing Frenaa as an emergent expression of the far right that capitalized on pandemic-era grievances, mediatization, and democratic disaffection, while simultaneously combining long-standing Catholic and conservative traditions specific to the Mexican context. Together, these works converge in identifying Frenaa as part of a broader far-right ecosystem marked by moral conservatism, antagonistic identity construction, and discursive polarization. The findings, however, extend beyond these observations. While such characteristics are indeed present,

Frenaa illustrates what we might describe as a proto-far right actor – that is, an actor only incipiently constituted as such, lacking decisive weight in public debate and unable to gather a broader front around itself. *Proto-far right* can thus be understood as a specific configuration of actors engaged in the process of political polarization, in which the contours of the most consequential actors have not yet been fully crystallized, although certain alliances, discourses, and tactics – thus far yielding only limited effects – are already discernible.

The contribution of the present article lies in shifting the analytical focus from ideology and organizational self-definition to the public mediation of Frenaa through national press coverage. Whereas prior studies tend to approach Frenaa as an emergent or potentially consolidating far-right actor, the empirical findings presented here show that press framing frequently operates as a mechanisms of delegitimization, derision, and symbolic containment, complicating assumptions about linear processes of mainstreaming. In this respect, the article relativizes the neo-fascist and mobilizational theses advanced by Loyola *et al.* (2023) and Aragón Falomir (2022) by demonstrating that heightened visibility does not necessarily translate into legitimacy, organizational consolidation, or political efficacy. At the same time, the findings align with the methodological cautions raised by Álvarez-Benavides and Toscano (2021), who argue that far-right actors must be analyzed relationally, taking into account the arenas in which meaning is publicly produced, contested, and neutralized. By foregrounding the national press as a key site of this symbolic struggle, this article contributes to a more differentiated understanding of Frenaa as a far-right actor that is highly visible yet politically marginal, and whose trajectory cannot be adequately captured without attention to the media.

Finally, the empirical material invites a reassessment of the mainstreaming thesis itself. Whereas Mondon and Winter (2020) warn that far-right ideas increasingly become common sense through repetition and accommodation, the Mexican press coverage analyzed here often produces the opposite effect: repetition accompanied by satire, moral condemnation, and trivialization. Rather than normalizing Frenaa, media framing frequently renders it politically unserious, even counterproductive to its own goals. This suggests that mainstreaming is not a uniform or inevitable process but one mediated by national political cultures, levels of governmental

legitimacy, and historically sedimented repertoires of protest. In this sense, the Mexican case does not reject the international scholarly literature but rather provincializes it, showing that far-right normalization is contingent, reversible, and deeply shaped by local political configurations.

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this study suggests that the proto-far right in Mexico is shaped by three key factors: first, the success of the left in power in terms of sustained popular support; second, the government's capacity to summon or interpellate the right wing that is positioned within political debate as "the past" or as a neoliberal order to be overcome; and third, the caricature of Frenaa as a political actor characterized as elitist and confrontational, often coupled with the portrayal of its objectives as implausible or absurd. Whereas in several South American countries the far right gained momentum – and in some cases ultimately reached power – through widespread public disenchantment with preceding left-wing governments, the Mexican case follows a different trajectory. Approval levels for the administrations of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018–2024) and, currently, Claudia Sheinbaum (2024 to present) have remained remarkably high, consistently exceeding 60 percent according to projections published by media outlets that are clearly not ideologically aligned with the government, such as El Financiero. This does not imply that the emergence and consolidation of far-right groups necessarily require the deterioration of progressive governments. However, the perceived success of these administrations – reflected in sustained approval ratings – clearly points to a far more adverse environment for any opposition strategy, whether moderate or extreme.

Second, the high levels of public support for the progressive governments of the Fourth Transformation have led their leaders – most notably López Obrador – to actively encourage, at least at the discursive level, the emergence of a right-wing opposition. For him, this opposition is not only the outcome of decades of neoliberal dominance in Mexican politics, but also a necessary and even functional construction within a broader project of defining "the popular." In this sense, the former president has not hesitated to stimulate

the formation of right-wing and far-right groups because, in his view, their visibility exposes a mode of thinking about society and politics that, prior to his rise to power, had been normalized as Mexican political common sense. Put differently, López Obrador has sought to push the right to assume its role as opposition and to occupy its place within the political spectrum, having successfully consolidated a political cleavage between "the people" and an economic and political oligarchy – also cultural and social – to which he frequently refers as *fifís*, the members of the affluent classes and sectors that benefited from neoliberalism. Unsurprisingly, this category is as vague and blurred as that of "the people" itself, yet it has proven highly effective as an articulating device for political cleavages.

Third, and here the press appears to have played a central role, Frenaa has been perceived less as a genuine threat than as something bordering on the absurd. This perception is largely due to the radicalization of its demands – most notably, calling for the resignation of an exceptionally popular president – and to its ineffective attempt to capitalize on discontent generated by pandemic-related restrictions in order to build a broad opposition front. While there is evidence that the handling of health policy during the most acute phases of the pandemic was, at the very least, debatable, and that a significant portion of the population perceived the government as struggling to manage the complexity of the health crisis, this discontent did not translate into political legitimacy or confer real agency upon those seeking to mobilize it. Even in media outlets critical of the government, and in the columns of strongly oppositional commentators, Frenaa's claims and several of its most visible figures ultimately proved functional to the government, insofar as they were widely perceived as ridiculous by the public. Rather than adopting an incremental strategy – one in which criticism of health policy might have served as a catalyst for broader political arrangements – Frenaa pursued a more abrupt course of action. It attempted to deliver a decisive "knockout blow" by hastily capitalizing on unease, frustration, and anger. At no point, however, did these sentiments crystallize popular support for those behind Frenaa, rendering such attempts at capitalization politically insignificant.

Is it plausible, then, as Morán Breña (2024) recently suggested in El País, that Mexico constitutes "the wall against which the far right crashes"? Her central hypothesis is that the political stability constructed over decades by

the PRI – and which effectively pushed the far right to institutionalize itself within the PAN – has left little room for political adventures at the margins. This is compounded by a level of economic stability that undermines the conditions for large-scale social upheavals, such as those witnessed in Chile in 2019 or those that silently underpinned Javier Milei's electoral victory in Argentina in 2023. The trajectory of Frenaa appears to make sense within this framework, in which the Mexican far right is seen as so marginal and residual that it verges on the ridiculous in public debate. As a result, it has been unable to gather a broader constellation of far-right actors around itself, or to emerge as a spokesperson capable of consolidating a more expansive and influential politico-ideological formation. Yet history offers a cautionary note. Figures such as Milei in Argentina, Bolsonaro in Brazil, or Trump in the United States were themselves widely caricatured or, at the very least, downplayed, prior to their ascent to power, with large segments of the political establishment convinced that such extremist ventures posed no real threat. Subsequent developments have shown that contemporary politics unfolds at a pace – and under a set of interacting dynamics involving electoral systems, party structures, social media, economic crises, and transnational networks of intellectuals and activists – that makes it virtually impossible to guarantee that no individual or collective will succeed in capitalizing on discontent. Such discontent, even if less visible, may still circulate as an underground current within Mexican society, no less weary of unfulfilled promises than its counterparts elsewhere in the region.

Disclaimer

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