Marichuy: the indigenous woman who tried and failed to become Mexico’s new President

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On February 14, 2018, a white minivan barrelled off a highway in the Mexican state of Baja California Sur.

Photos showed the vehicle resting upside-down amongst desert shrubbery, its windows blown out. One person died. Another (the critical payload) was Mexico’s first indigenous female presidential hopeful, a woman called Marichuy – real name María de Jesús Patricio Martínez. She suffered a broken arm. Five days later, her campaign was over.

At rallies in small towns and villages before the crash, Marichuy, 54, called for an end to drug-related violence, the desecration of indigenous lands by multinational corporations, and the patriarchal machismo culture which silences women and girls. 2017 was Mexico’s most violent year on record, and Marichuy had no shortage of criticism for the central state which, she said, was powerless to stop the epidemic.

The crash in Baja California was an accident. But it came at the culmination of weeks of frantic campaigning. The approaching July 1, 2018 Presidential election was to make history; it would be the first ever to allow independent candidates to run without major party backing. But there was a catch. To get onto the ballot, Marichuy had to collect 866,593 signatures from 17 different states. For other independents – mainstream politicians who failed to clinch their parties’ nominations – that was a surmountable inconvenience. For Marichuy, it was a mountain.

The sheer number of signatures required wasn’t her only obstacle. The National Electoral Institute of Mexico stipulates that signatures must be collected via a phone with a good camera and a high speed data connection, ostensibly to reliably scan voters’ ID cards. A phone of such quality costs around 12,000 pesos. Mexico’s minimum wage is little over 2,000 pesos per month.

Marichuy’s target audience was effectively disenfranchised. To make matters worse, the app was reportedly blocked in several municipalities on her shoestring nationwide tour. Even when the app worked, volunteers struggled to connect to the Internet. Marichuy complained that banks had refused to open an account for her – a prerequisite to run as an independent.

By the February 19 deadline, Marichuy’s candidacy was over. She failed because the odds of Mexican politics were, and continue to be, stacked against the poor indigenous voters whose voices she tried to amplify. It was a setback to a movement which for over two decades has attempted to improve the lives of Mexico’s disenfranchised.

In 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation famously declared a rebellion in the southern state of Chiapas, later establishing autonomous rule over thirty municipalities to successfully provide the public services they claimed the state was failing to provide.
Marichuy counted Zapatistas amongst her supporters, but eschewed their masked machismo in favour of inclusive rhetoric steeped in feminist intersectionality that wouldn’t be out of place on college campuses in the west. “I think the appeal of the Zapatistas has certainly grown in the last decade,” says Benjamin Smith, a historian of Mexico at the University of Warwick. “Partly because of the feminism aspect, but mostly because the Zapatista zone is clear of major criminal groups.”

The crime rate in Mexico shows no sign of decreasing in 2018, and violence is high on the agenda for the July election. Marichuy never expected to win that contest, but the fatal wreck of her candidacy illustrates the continuing structural discrimination the Mexican political system imparts upon the poor, the indigenous, and the women of the nation. Her bid for the presidency is part of a larger story the Zapatistas began to write in 1994, one which will only end when all Mexicans count themselves safe from violence, poverty and patriarchy.

Image: ProtoplasmaKid / Wikimedia Commons (modified)

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