

What the Election of AMLO's Protégé Means for Mexico

written by Dan La Botz | August 6, 2024



By a more than two-to-one margin, on June 2, 2024, voters in Mexico elected Claudia Sheinbaum, a protégé of outgoing president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), to the nation's highest office, the first woman and the first Jew to hold the post. She ran as the candidate of AMLO's Morena party. Under AMLO, Morena (the Spanish acronym for the National Regeneration Party) stood on the left of the Mexican political spectrum, a populist party with a leader who spoke in a nationalist voice to the masses, but in an authoritarian manner—though AMLO's administration never had anything like the more anti-democratic character of Daniel Ortega's dictatorship in Nicaragua or of Nicolás Maduro's repressive government in Venezuela. Unlike those countries, where the constitutions were changed to permit the presidents to stay in power, the Mexican Constitution still prohibits reelection to the presidency, though AMLO may seek to continue to exercise power through his successor.

So Sheinbaum's election poses three major questions: Will she be a puppet of the former president? Will she continue his policies founded on authoritarian populism and increasing militarism?¹ And, finally, has AMLO recreated a new corporatist state that Sheinbaum will perpetuate?

The Mexican federal elections took place in less-than-ideal circumstances. There were by the end of April, some 30 assassinations of candidates, a dozen kidnappings, dozens of other death threats, and scores of violent attacks on political events and candidates. All of this is an expression of the pervasive criminal violence in the country due to the drug cartels that sometimes assassinate candidates who are not to their liking. In the state of Chiapas, rife with violence that AMLO has failed to prevent,² in a shocking incident, Sheinbaum herself was stopped at a checkpoint by armed men, one of whom told her, "When you get to power, remember the mountains, remember the poor people. That's all we have to say. We are not against the government; we are here so you see the disaster that is Comalapa." Comalapa is a small town in the Lacandón Jungle on the Guatemalan border that has been the scene of violence. AMLO dismissed the incident as "propaganda."

The fairness of the election also remains in question. In 2022, AMLO's supporters in Congress carried out a "reform" of the electoral system opposed by many sectors of society and particularly by human rights groups that warned the reform would make elections less fair. In addition, the new, weaker National Electoral Institute (INA, formerly IFE), had its budget and staff cut largely due to AMLO's governmental austerity program, and became less effective. Though there was little doubt that Sheinbaum would win the election by an enormous margin, the INA's reforms and lack of resources may affect congressional and local races.

There is also AMLO's Trump-like domination of the media, working in the last few months to promote not only himself as usual, but also Sheinbaum's campaign. His *mañaneras*, or morning press conferences, held nearly every morning for six years, were watched with love by 13 million people, about 10 percent of the population. They were also streamed by major media such as UnoTV, Grupo REFORMA, MILENIO, and NMás, often getting 70 million views in a nation with about 90 million adults. On Wednesdays, the *mañaneras* was dedicated to the questions "*¿Quién es quién en las mentiras?*" (Who's who in the lies?) in which AMLO denounced the media and the reporters that dared to question him and his policies. He called them fake journalists, biased, even "scum journalists." This in a country where during his presidency 37 journalists have been murdered and five more disappeared, often because they were reporting on the cartels and sometimes on their ties to government officials.

The Candidates and Coalitions

The left—that is, democratic forces, progressive social movements, and grassroots working people—had little or no role in this election. A small group of far-left political groups, unions, feminists, and LGBTQ activists have created what they call "an Independent, anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal Left Bloc,"³ but no left party has been able to achieve ballot status and no far-left candidates were up for election to major offices. Three candidates stood in the election held on June 2. Sheinbaum headed up the coalition called *Suigamos Haciendo Historia*, "Let's Keep Making History." The second candidate, Xochitl Gómez, heads the "*Fuerza y Corazón por México*," or "Strength and Heart for Mexico," made up of three former ruling parties, the National Action Party (PAN), the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). And, third, Jorge Máynez represents the *Movimiento Ciudadano* or Citizens Movement Party.

We have to say a few words about the several parties that support these various candidates, though they will not be very nice words because there is little good to be said about them. Let's take them up in reverse order, from the weakest to the strongest.

First, we have Jorge Máynez, the smiling, handsome young candidate of the Citizens' Party, a middle-class party that claims to stand for political reform, but Máynez's record belies that. He began his political career in 2010 in the *Nueva Alianza*, New Alliance Party, created by the powerful, ambitious, corrupt, and unscrupulous union bureaucrat Elba Esther Gordillo; his candidacy for the state congress of Zacatecas was also supported by both the corrupt PRI and the opportunistic Green Party. Later he was elected to the Mexican Congress, serving from 2015 to 2024, not noted for anything special, and then became head of the Citizen's Party of which he was the presidential candidate.

Then we have Xochitl Gálvez, a businesswoman, the candidate of the "Strength and Heart" coalition made up of three former governing parties of Mexico. First, PRI, the party that governed Mexico under various names from its founding in 1929 until 2000, a nationalist, developmentalist, corporatist party that reached an accommodation with the bourgeoisie, dominated peasants leagues and labor unions, established a *modus vivendi* with the drug cartels, and ruled through corruption and violence. Second, PAN, the party of the Roman Catholic Church and big business, which governed Mexico from 2000 to 2012. And third, PRD, which originated from a reform movement founded by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas within the PRI, and which later became an independent party in 1989—but within a decade became corrupt. (AMLO who had been a PRD leader left with a good chunk of its members and founded his party, Morena). These three parties making up the Gálvez coalition had become utterly discredited in the minds of a majority of Mexicans who deserted them to support AMLO and Morena. Gálvez played the populist card, claiming that her humble background gives her a better understanding of the common people and she promised to keep all social programs for the poor in place and to improve them. She failed to convince the Mexican

people, most of whom saw her as the representative of the corrupt parties of the past.

Finally, we have Sheinbaum, the candidate of Morena, the handpicked successor to AMLO and dependent upon him. To understand her, we must know him. AMLO was for decades the charismatic, authoritarian leader of a populist party. He and his party have a broad base of support among Mexico's working people and the poor, buttressed in part by the social programs he has promoted. Morena is full of ordinary people, peasants, workers, school teachers, and the lower middle classes who have put their faith in AMLO. At the same time, he made it clear over his entire political career and especially during his six years as president, that he wanted to be in the good graces of the U.S. government and to promote foreign and domestic capitalist investment. To call AMLO's and Morena's policies social democratic would be a mistake both because there is nothing democratic about him or the party and the social aspect is limited. This is the populist leader and the principal political party that has put Sheinbaum in power.

The other two parties in Sheinbaum's coalition, are both politically corrupt satellites: the Green Party and the Labor Party. Mexico's Green Party (PVEM) is an opportunist outfit that was previously allied with the then-leftist PRD and then later with the right-wing PAN. The Greens have no principles. The Labor Party (PT) has nothing to do with labor unions or socialist politics, but is a small Stalinist sect that once had a base among poor people in Chihuahua. Its thuggish leader Alberto Anaya sent greetings to Kim Jong Un in 2019, saying, "The Korean people's heroic struggle for the country's sovereignty and the dignity of the nation and peace of the Korean Peninsula and the rest of the world serves as a model of all the revolutionaries and the progressive peoples struggling for global independence." Ugh.

Sheinbaum herself has many assets. She is a highly educated woman, trained as an environmental scientist. She is a youthful and attractive-looking 61-year-old woman, charming in her way, comfortable speaking to the press and to business groups, able to read a speech, if rather stiffly. Though she lacks the common touch, she can take selfies with supporters and gladhand the crowd. She was capable of holding her own, against Xochitl Gálvez in the national debate as each slung mud, accusing the other of corruption.

Antisemitism is pervasive in Mexico, and Sheinbaum has been the victim of it, though she doesn't assert her religion or ethnicity. Mexican Jews work to keep a low profile. Former PAN president Vicente Fox baited her for being both Jewish and a foreigner because her grandparents were Bulgarian Jewish immigrants. Sheinbaum, her eyes on the political prize, responded by saying that her parents were born in Mexico and that she is "100 percent Mexican."

Sheinbaum claims to be an environmentalist, the science in which she has been trained. Yet she has supported AMLO's spending of several billion dollars for the construction of the new Dos Bocas oil refinery, arguing that it will make Mexico energy self-sufficient and provide cheaper gas for cars. Nor did she speak out when AMLO spent billions to upgrade several older refineries. Still, she says she will emphasize green energy alternatives in the future.

Though she has called herself a feminist, she has spent the last six years working with AMLO who has been widely criticized by the feminist movement, particularly for disregarding and even denying the problem of femicide, the high rate of murders of women that persisted during his presidency. And Sheinbaum has had little relationship to feminist activists, proving incapable of communicating with them. During her term as mayor of Mexico City, she came into conflict with the women's movement activists of Okupa Cuba who had taken over a human rights office and radio station on Cuba Street in Mexico City to call attention to the issue of violence against women. Sheinbaum approved the dispatch of the police to evict them.⁴

Sheinbaum and the Legacy of AMLO

Sheinbaum is fundamentally an apparatchik and politician, a creature of the party and the state who dutifully worked her way up, first elected as head of a borough of Mexico City, later serving as AMLO's secretary of the environment, and then as head of the Federal District, effectively the mayor of Mexico City. She inherits the role as head of the government, but she has not demonstrated any personal charisma and has so far not had an opportunity to govern independently. Some believe that AMLO, with his enormous popularity will continue to be the power behind the presidential throne. Mexicans may think back to the era of Plutarco Elías Calle, who served as president from 1924 to 1928, but then between 1928 and 1934 pulled the strings of three puppet presidents (Emilio Portes Gil, Pascual Ortiz Rubio, and Abelardo L. Rodríguez). Will AMLO pull Sheinbaum's strings, or will she be her own person?

In any case, Sheinbaum is inheriting the governmental structures, the bureaucracy, policies, and the successes and failures bequeathed to her by AMLO. The most important development of AMLO's six years as president was the increased militarization of the country. AMLO initially said he would deal with the cartels "*con abrazos, no balas*," that is, with hugs not bullets, but the continued violence that took the lives of thousands led him to create a new national guard, originally made up of 60,000 soldiers that quickly grew to 100,000. This is in addition to the 260,000-member Mexican Army, and about 100,000 sailors and marines, and 500,000 notoriously corrupt police officers. Under AMLO, the army, the navy, the marines, and the national guard dealt with the cartels, handled immigration, owned and managed banks that distributed social welfare payments, and ran the airports and the new Maya Train.

All of these military and police forces failed to end the violence that has characterized Mexico since former president Felipe Calderón unleashed the drug wars in 2006. Conflicts among cartels and between the cartels and the authorities have since then taken an estimated 300,000 lives in addition to 100,000 or more kidnappings, and there are about 30,000 homicides every year. (The U.S. population of 333 million is more than two and a half times that of Mexico's 127 million, but has about 26,000 homicides per year.)

The cost to the citizens of all this policing has been great. The United States under both presidents Trump and Biden maintained a close relationship with Mexico and its justice system. Yet the U.S. State Department itself reports that,

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: unlawful or arbitrary killings by police, military, and other governmental officials; forced disappearance by government agents; torture or cruel, inhuman, degrading treatment or punishment by security forces; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest or detention; restrictions on free expression and media, including violence against journalists; serious acts of government corruption; insufficient investigation of and accountability for gender-based violence, including domestic or intimate partner violence; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons; and crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting persons with disabilities.

Impunity and extremely low rates of prosecution remained a problem for all crimes, including human rights abuses and corruption. There were reports some government agents were complicit with international criminal gangs, and prosecution and conviction rates were low for these abuses.⁵

AMLO proved unable to eradicate the cartels. Far from it. The drug cartels, one of Mexico's five biggest sources of income (together with manufacturing, tourism, oil, and immigrant remittances),

earn profits estimated between \$13 billion and \$50 billion per year and are believed to employ 175,000 people. There are no indications that Sheinbaum will reduce the role of the military nor that she has any other approach to dealing with the drug cartels.

AMLO's failure to deal with the country's violence forms part of a broader failing in terms of human right. Human Rights Watch's report on Mexico in 2023 stated:

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who took office in 2018, has made little progress in addressing Mexico's serious human rights challenges, including extreme criminal violence, abuses against migrants, gender-based violence, attacks on independent journalists and human rights defenders, torture, disappearances, and extrajudicial killings.⁶

And the Successes She Inherits?

Sheinbaum also inherits what are seen as the major successes of AMLO's regime. In foreign policy, AMLO's primary preoccupation, like that of all Mexican presidents, was to maintain Mexico's subordination to the United States on the best possible terms. For AMLO this meant a willingness to act to assist U.S. presidents Donald Trump and Joseph Biden in stopping Central American migrants on Mexico's southern border in order to reduce the pressure on the U.S. border. Sheinbaum has said, "The relationship with the U.S. must be one of respect without subordination." If so, she would be the first Mexican president to achieve that, but in reality, it is impossible given U.S. economic domination and political and military power.

Domestically AMLO focused on encouraging both Mexican and foreign investment in Mexico on completely normal capitalist terms. The United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), ratified during AMLO's term, provides the framework for \$1.78 trillion in trade between the three countries in 2022, growing by 27 percent since 2019. While there have been many disputes among the three and while there have been some improved protections for labor, this is a standard capitalist business arrangement and there is otherwise nothing particularly progressive about it. Speaking to a group of corporate executives during her campaign, Sheinbaum told them that maintaining Mexico's attractive climate for business was job number one.

The most frequently heralded progressive developments for which AMLO has been credited are the social programs, principally payments to the poor. As a candidate, AMLO had promised that he would put "the poor first." His government abolished many universal government social programs and instead gave cash payments to certain vulnerable groups, particularly the elderly and students under 15 years of age. Money for the poor is distributed through 13,000 banks run by the military. While left governments as part of their concern for working people generally create social programs, some view AMLO as cynically using these programs to build support for his party, himself, and now for Sheinbaum. As Vanessa Rubio wrote in *Americas Quarterly* in late 2023,

To cement his popularity, the president has used social programs for clientelist purposes with great effectiveness, along with an appealing (albeit polarizing) narrative and strong disenchantment with the traditional political class. Welfare and pension program spending has tripled, from \$8 billion in 2018 to \$24 billion in 2023. Most resources are allocated to AMLO's social programs, primarily a basic universal pension, youth education, and training program, "The Young Building the Future" (*Jovenes Construyendo el Futuro*).

But spending for these programs is expected to increase next year, an election year, by an additional 25%, reaching \$30 billion, according to the 2024 budget submitted by the Finance Ministry early in September for Congress' discussion and eventual approval. While their effectiveness is questionable—the programs reach a lower number of poor households

compared to previous administrations, and only 50% are deemed to have an adequate design according to independent evaluator Coneval—these social programs have proven to be a political and public perception success.⁷

AMLO's administration allocated billions to help the poor, but didn't always spend all of it. Records of what was spent for social programs were not transparent, making it difficult to really understand their impact. Some fear that such targeted programs contributed to corruption, though the evidence for that was not clear either.

Some programs simply failed. The Young Building the Future signed up a million young people to get jobs but found work for only 15,000. Máximo Ernesto Jaramillo-Molina in an article titled "More for the Rich, Less for the Poor" argues that government data shows that—while more funds than ever are going to social welfare programs—significantly more of that money is going to the rich and less to the poor.⁸ And in 2020 Oxfam reported that 60 percent of Mexico's poor were ineligible for three of the main social welfare programs. At the same time, military spending increased and often exceeded what had been budgeted.⁹

Mexico's poverty and inequality are also in large part a result of the existence of a large informal economy made up of businesses or the self-employed. In both cases these are untaxed, unregulated, and not participants in the government's social security institutions that provide workers with health care and pensions. These are men and women who work as street vendors, employees of small shops, or delivery workers directed by apps, among many others. Wages are generally low, but hard to measure. The informal sector represents 29 percent of the total economy, while informal employment represents 59 percent of total employment.

Human Rights Watch assessed the economic situation in 2023 in this way:

The poverty rate has fallen under López Obrador's presidency, from 41.9 percent in 2018 to 36.3 percent in 2022, according to the official poverty analysis agency. However, extreme poverty has remained unchanged and the number of people without access to health care has more than doubled. Analysts have pointed to a major increase in the minimum wage and a near-doubling of remittances from Mexicans abroad as possible contributors to the drop in poverty.¹⁰

The formal working class—people with regular jobs with legally registered employers—did better under AMLO. His administration increased the national minimum wage from around US\$4.40 per day to approximately US\$5.00. In the border region, closer to the United States where things are more expensive, the minimum wage was set at US\$9.00 per day.

Still, not all that much changed for the poor under AMLO. Julio Boltvinik, who writes the "Moral Economy" column for *La Jornada*, a paper that has supported AMLO, demonstrated that in August 2023 there were 98 million poor people in Mexico, just as there were when AMLO took office in 2018. And Sheinbaum plans to maintain AMLO's policies.

Taxes are a related issue. AMLO refused to carry out a fiscal reform that would provide more money for social programs and government projects. Mexico has among the lowest taxes in Latin America, and the OECD reports that tax evasion in Mexico has been estimated to be around 27 percent of the total revenue of the main taxes, accounting for 3 percent of GDP. AMLO has not raised taxes on the rich nor done much to end tax cheating, both of which would be good governance if not structural reform.

The other major progressive accomplishment attributed to AMLO is the establishment of what we

might call a new regime of labor union legality. And this is important and a genuine advance. When AMLO's term began, almost all of those workers were controlled by a corporatist system of labor relations where the state protected its "official" labor unions, which in turn protected employers from real unions, keeping productivity high and wages low. Most workers could not vote for the union they wanted, could not vote on the contract, and risked their jobs if they spoke up. For the first time since the 1920s, independent labor unions can achieve legal recognition, workers can engage in strikes, and unions have greater protections thanks to the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement. USMCA protects workers' rights to negotiate collective bargaining agreements without fear of state repression. USMCA provides a valuable tool. Most economists believe the general impact of the new treaty is negligible, but the USMCA Annex 23-A required Mexico to improve collective bargaining and Annex 31-A created the Rapid Response Labor Mechanism.¹¹

There is a good deal of debate about whether or not AMLO in his six years in office nearly succeeded in recreating a corporatist party like that of the PRI, that is, a party based on control of both the party and mass organizations such as the labor unions that it controls. AMLO's support for labor law allowed him to incorporate into his political operation reform-minded union leaders such as Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, head of the miners' union, giving Morena a labor contingent of some significance. AMLO will, no doubt, want to see this process strengthened and extended, which would enormously enhance his party's power. If under Sheinbaum the relationship between Morena and the unions strengthens, we could see the recreation of something like the PRI, but on the basis of an even more conservative political economy. The question is whether the unions can maintain their independence and internal democracy.

Perhaps once she sits on the presidential throne, Sheinbaum will become a strong independent leader and become the feminist and environmentalist she claims to be, capable of breaking with the authoritarian populist party and the militarist policies that AMLO has left her. Maybe she will prove to be a genuine progressive, left leader. But this seems pretty unlikely.

Notes

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3. Left Bloc, "The Mexican Election - For an Independent, Anti-capitalist and Anti-Patriarchal Left Bloc."
4. Elena Gilet, "The Trouble with Claudia Sheinbaum," *Ojalá*, Sept. 15, 2023.
5. U.S. State Department, "2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Mexico."
6. Human Rights Watch, "Events of 2023."
7. Vanessa Rubio, "AMLO's Big Fiscal Push Could Help Morena," *Americas Quarterly*, October 24, 2023.
8. Máximo Ernesto Jaramillo-Molina, "Corte de caja: la política social de la 4T," *Nexos*, July 27, 2023.
9. Ramón I. Centeno, "Not a Mexican Pink Tide The AMLO Administration and the Neoliberal Left," trans. by Mariana Ortega-Breña, *Latin American Perspective*, 2023.
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