

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador Promises the “Rebirth of Mexico”

December 4, 2018



Andrés Manuel López Obrador took the presidential oath on December 1 and then gave an hour and a half oration to the legislators as well as another lengthy speech to the people of Mexico City gathered in the *zócalo*, in which he reiterated his campaign promises to end corruption, to bring about economic prosperity, and to lead Mexico into a new historic fourth period of Mexican history, a period of “rebirth.” The speech made clear that AMLO, as he is called by his initials in the press, is a reformer, but not a radical and certainly not a revolutionary as his opponents have claimed. His call for an end to neoliberalism and to corruption are accompanied by invitations to Mexican and foreign capitalists to invest and make a profit.

AMLO’s challenges are many. He must deal with the country’s powerful economic oligarchy that working with the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the National Action Party, have for a hundred years dominated the country. He must confront the powerful, multi-billion dollar drug cartels that have penetrated and permeated the government and police and even infected the military and whose armies of gun thugs and assassins contributed to the deaths and disappearances of over 300,000 people since 2006. He must find a *modus vivendi* with the Colossus of the North and deal with its maniacal rightwing and racist president. And finally, he must now find a way to meet the needs and even more important satisfy the new aspirations of the Mexican people—who may be more radical than he is—without jeopardizing his reformist program. He will for the next six years have to both wrestle with the oligarchy and both mobilize and reign in the plebeians if he is to be successful in his own terms.

The Challenge of Trump and the Economy

With a certain irony, AMLO thanked out-going president Enrique Peña Nieto for not interfering in the elections and stealing them as had happened to AMLO twice before and to others many times over the more than seven decades of the rule of Peña Nieto’s Institutional Revolutionary Party’s rule. With Peña Nieto sitting beside him, AMLO blamed the country’s problem on the combination of the thirty-six years of the neoliberal economic model and the unbounded government corruption during that same period.

AMLO recognized Ivanka Trump who was present, sent as her father-president’s emissary, and he thanked President Donald Trump for his message of friendship. Turning directly to the new U.S., Mexico, Canada Agreement (USMCA, which replaces the former North American Free Trade Agreement or NAFTA)) and which was foisted on him by Trump and Peña Nieto—AMLO stated that he wanted to go beyond to USMCA and see new investment agreement between all three countries

that would help to develop Central America as well as Mexico and in that way deal with the migration issue that in the form of the migrant caravans has dominated the news recently.

Ivanks Trump, by the way, committed the faux pas of referring to AMLO's wife Beatriz Gutiérrez Müller as the "first lady," a title she has rejected, saying that the title suggested the superiority of one woman over others.

López Obrador in these speeches promised once again, as he had so often in his campaign, that the investments of Mexican and foreign stockholders would not only be safe in Mexico, but would make decent profits under his honest administration. He promised that with the rule of law, clear rules, and economic growth there would be economic confidence.

AMLO told the legislators and the people that he was being given a country in bankruptcy, and he asked them to be patient with him and to have confidence in him. He complained particularly about the economic situation of the Mexican Petroleum Company (PEMEX), but promised with the help of the workers and the technical employees of PEMEX and of the Federal Electrical Commission to rescue those two great national corporations of the Mexican people. He declared that there would be no increases in gas or electric prices beyond the rate of inflation and, ignoring the issue of carbon fuels and global warning, promised to build a new refinery to make possible the lowering of gasoline prices.

An End to Corruption and Impunity

Taking on the question of corruption, AMLO told the assembled lawmakers that anyone who "trafficked on the poverty of the people" by buying votes or engaging in electoral corruption would go to prison without bail. And he declared an end to the use of private planes and helicopters by high government functionaries and said he would be selling off the presidential plane immediately. To confront the country's tremendous violence, a result largely of the drug cartels, and recognizing the uselessness of the existing police forces to deal with them, he called for the creation of a new National Guard.

He argued that while the Mexican military was not without its problems, it had not formed corrupt groups within it such as in other parts of the Mexican government. And unlike in other countries, the military did not form part of the oligarchy, he said. He promised that during his administration the president would never use the military to oppress the Mexican people nor cover up such repression—a strong implicit condemnation not only of the Peña Nieto administration but of the entire history of modern Mexican governments, from the assassinations of the immediate post-revolutionary period of the 1920s, through the 1968 Tlatelolco student massacre, to the kidnapping and murder of the Ayotzinapa student teachers in 2014.

There were three demonstrations during the speech in the national legislature. When at one point in his speech, AMLO said he would not persecute those in the old government, a demonstration brokeout among his own supporters who stood waving white handkerchiefs and began counting from 1 to 43 for the victims of the Ayotzinapa murders and kidnappings. AMLO has created a truth commission to investigate the disappearances of the 43 students. At another point, when foreign dignataries were being mentioned and the name of Nicolás Maduro was called, the rightwing legislators began chanting "dictator," though in fact Maduro's plane was late and he was not in the hall. Finally, the rightwingers also raised signes calling for a reduction in the "IVA," the value added tax.

As he was bringing his inaugural speech to a conclusion, López Obrador told the story of a boy on a bicycle who had come up to him shortly before and said, you cannot fail us, and the new president

told the legislators, I have a responsibility not to fail you. He talked of his confidence in the people of Mexico and in their culture—in their cultures—a hardworking people, as demonstrated by the emigrants to the United States who sent \$30 billion a year home to their families. AMLO expressed his optimism and his faith that with the Mexican people's support he would succeed in bringing about Mexico's rebirth.

Finally, López Obrador promised that he would never seek reelection—something forbidden by the Mexican Constitution—and that in two and half years he would submit to the Mexican people a referendum asking them if they wanted him to continue in office.

The new president will face challenges from the old political parties. The National Action Party, historically the religious and pro-business party, is already carrying out a leafleting campaign with a flyer that compares AMLO to Stalin, Hitler, Nicolás Maduro, Hugo Chávez and Kim Jong-un and promises to defend freedom. And at the same time, the Institutional Revolutionary Party, for seventy years the ruling party, has called for a united front of the people to resist AMLO's proposed reforms and what they say will be the militarization of the country. Both parties compare AMLO to Maduro and point to the disaster of the dictatorship and disintegrating economy there. AMLO will have his hands full.

After the last twelve years of violence and the hundreds of thousands of dead and disappeared, one has to hope that AMLO will be able to end the violence and the corruption and that the people of Mexico will take advantage of a new safer and more democratic life to push forward their own demands for their needs and desires, going beyond the reforms that the new president envisions.