

# MP-IDSA *Commentary*

## Claudia Sheinbaum as First Woman President of Mexico: Promises and Challenges

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### **S***ummary*

The euphoria following Claudia Sheinbaum's swearing in as the first woman president of Mexico is reflective of the people's expectations from her.

Claudia Sheinbaum was sworn in as the first woman President of Mexico on 1 October 2024. Sheinbaum was the Mayor of Mexico City prior to her election as president. She succeeds Andrés Manuel López Obrador, popularly known as AMLO, whose approval ratings has never been less than 60 per cent.<sup>1</sup> Both Obrador and Sheinbaum belong to the democratic left-wing Morena Party that was founded and nurtured by AMLO. Obrador had to demit office due to Mexico’s constitutional limit on presidential terms.

Sheinbaum campaigned as a candidate for ‘continuity with change’,<sup>2</sup> and secured 60.7 per cent of the vote share in a landslide victory.<sup>3</sup> She improved the Morena party tally both in terms of vote percentage and the number of seats acquired in the two houses of the Mexican Parliament. Obrador had secured about 53 per cent of the popular votes in 2018.<sup>4</sup> Sheinbaum also achieved a supermajority in the Lower House (Chamber of Deputies) of the Parliament, falling just three seats short in the Upper House (Senate). Given that two opposition senators flipped to her side recently, she needs to convince only one more member to make any constitutional changes.<sup>5</sup>

For a party (Morena) which began as a social movement in 2011 and formally registered with the National Electoral Institute (INE) only in 2014, the two consecutive presidential victories successively improving parliamentary seat tallies are nothing short of a historic and meteoric rise. The stage for Mexico to get its first woman president was almost set when another woman Xóchitl Gálvez became the presidential candidate of the main opposition, a coalition of the traditional old parties—National Action Party (PAN), Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD).

President Sheinbaum in the past had worked as a climate scientist representing Mexico in the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). She was a member of the panel when it received the Nobel Prize in 2007. Given her administrative and technocratic experiences, there are expectations that there could be improvements on policies related to the economy, war against narcotics, militarisation and climate change. She portrayed herself as a candidate who will continue AMLO’s legacy with changes, promising Mexicans a non-discriminatory and investor-friendly government.

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<sup>1</sup> Carin Zissis, “[Approval Tracker: Mexico's President AMLO](#)”, AS/COA, 13 September 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Chantal Flores, “[Will Mexico’s President Sheinbaum Depart from Predecessor AMLO’s Policies?](#)”, *Al Jazeera*, 2 October 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Kylie Madry and Valentine Hilaire, “[Mexico's Sheinbaum Wins Landslide to Become Country's First Woman President](#)”, *Reuters*, 3 June 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Marilia Brocchetto, James Griffiths and Samantha Beech, “[Lopez Obrador Scores Landslide Victory as Mexico Votes For Change](#)”, *CNN World*, 2 July 2018.

<sup>5</sup> “[Grasshopper Senators Put Morena Just 1 Vote Away from a Senate Supermajority](#)”, *Mexico News Daily*, 28 August 2024.

## Economic Policies

Sheinbaum inherits successes of AMLO’s economic interventions that has brought poverty to a historic low (36.3 per cent in 2022) bringing millions out of poverty.<sup>6</sup> The average income of the people has increased while the minimum wage has doubled.<sup>7</sup> However, the number of people in extreme poverty and inadequate access to health have also increased.<sup>8</sup> The public expenditure in the country is at an all-time high and fiscal deficit is at its highest (5.9 per cent) in the last four decades.<sup>9</sup> Sheinbaum has promised not only to continue AMLO’s direct cash schemes to the poor Mexicans but also to expand the net and bring in those who are still outside.

Sheinbaum seems determined to adhere to fiscal discipline which was not under control in the later part of the AMLO administration.<sup>10</sup> Given the expectations of the people with rising government expenditure, it may be challenging for her to balance the promise of bringing the fiscal deficit down to 3.5 per cent and make Mexico attractive for further investments.<sup>11</sup> The Mexican Peso saw further decline with President Sheinbaum reaffirming continuation of the economic policies of her predecessor.<sup>12</sup> Her economic and political astuteness is to be tested as the US, Spain and Canada and several other countries are wary of the policies of the Morena party.

## Constitutional Amendments

AMLO had pushed for 18 constitutional changes which he could not implement in the absence of the required two-thirds majority in both the houses. Electing the judiciary, integrating National Guard with the defence ministry, eliminating proportional representation in parliament, ending autonomy of several constitutional agencies were the most controversial proposals among them.<sup>13</sup> But the elections in June 2024 provided him the opportunity to carry out these changes with the support of President elect Sheinbaum. He enacted the judicial as well National Guard reforms through constitutional amendments in the last month of his tenure before handing over the reins of government to his protégé.

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<sup>6</sup> [“Mexico Overview”](#), The World Bank, 9 October 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Anne Vigna, [“In Mexico, President ‘AMLO’ Leaves His Successor a Dynamic Economy But a Failing Security Record”](#), *Le Monde*, 1 October 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Chantal Flores, [“Will Mexico’s President Sheinbaum Depart from Predecessor AMLO’s Policies?”](#), no. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Also see [“Reining in Deficit and Pemex among Key Challenges for Mexico’s New Administration”](#), *Fitch Ratings*, 3 June 2024.

<sup>10</sup> [“Sheinbaum Vows to Continue AMLO Legacy as She Takes Over Mexico”](#), *Live Mint*, 2 October 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Craig Mellow, [“Mexico’s New Leader Can Keep the Economy Afloat despite Huge Deficits”](#), *Barron’s*, 3 October 2024.

<sup>12</sup> [“Mexican Peso Weakens as Next President Vows to Forge Ahead With 20 Reforms - and Adds a Couple More”](#), Associated Press, 12 June 2024; Karin Strohecker and Rodrigo Campos, [“Mexican Peso, Stocks Tumble on Fears of Ruling Coalition Super-Majority in Congress”](#), *Reuters*, 4 June 2024.

<sup>13</sup> [“Constitutional Reforms in Mexico”](#), Wilson Centre, 5 October 2024.

The changes in judiciary recruitment have been intensely criticised by both professionals as well as members of the civil society. They do not expect any immediate change on the issue as Sheinbaum has initiated for secondary legislations to implement the reforms. She wants the electoral laws to be amended in line with the constitution so that the people could henceforth elect their judges from bottom to the top level of the judiciary.<sup>14</sup> The reforms have been highly divisive with concerns that the judiciary could be influenced by criminal groups, money power and electoral politics. Although the Supreme Court has accepted to consider a constitutional challenge to the enacted judicial reforms,<sup>15</sup> Sheinbaum's role and the outcome of the whole reform process will be keenly watched. The agenda for constitutional amendments is long and provocative, ranging from constitutionalising health, rights of indigenous people, new electoral powers, to expanding scope of preventive custody, etc. The bottom-line of these amendments is generally read as centralising of powers and more fiscal burden for the state.

## **War against Narcotic Drugs and Militarisation**

Mexico is experiencing a political and economic paradigm shift with the popularity of Morena party, and the momentum continues with President Sheinbaum. However, party policies on the issues of security and law and order have not received the expected applause even from quarters that are appreciative of the developmental successes of the Morena party. The party has been accused of continuing militarisation of the state, contrary to the promise made by AMLO when he was campaigning for his election.<sup>16</sup> The presence of the military in the civilian domain has only increased. The military has been handed over many civilian functions to keep the state machinery efficient. The number of homicides in Mexico has been higher than the years before AMLO, while violence by drug cartels continues unabashedly.<sup>17</sup> The recent elections also saw killings of many candidates by criminal gangs to influence the outcomes of the electoral process.

Drug cartels and disappearances of many citizens and migrants is a pandemic in Mexico. AMLO had promised to address the problem and put the military off the streets. People in Mexico believe that elements of military and police are complicit with the drug and criminal cartels responsible for these disappearances,<sup>18</sup> while

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<sup>14</sup> [“Mexico's Sheinbaum Sends Secondary Legislation on Judicial Reform Implementation”](#), Reuters, 7 October 2024.

<sup>15</sup> [“Mexico's Sheinbaum Sends Secondary Legislation on Judicial Reform Implementation”](#), Voice of America, 7 October 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Steve Fisher, [“Amlo Promised to Take Mexico's Army Off the Streets – But He Made It More Powerful”](#), The Guardian, 27 September 2022.

<sup>17</sup> [“Number of Homicides in Mexico from 2015 to 2023”](#), Statista, 5 July 2024; Diego Mendoza, [“Mexico Marks Another Record-Breaking Year for Murders”](#), SEMAFOR, 17 January 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Lizbeth Diaz, [“Mexican Armed Forces Were Complicit in Students' Disappearance, New Report Finds”](#), Reuters, 26 July 2023; Bess Twiston Davies, [“Security Forces ‘Complicit’ With Cartels, Says Mexican Bishop”](#), The Tablet, 30 July 2024.

AMLO is strengthening them. Civil society and social groupings in Mexico, especially the feminist groups, are unhappy with the government policy of militarisation to deal with the problem. To them, the cause cannot be the remedy, and they expect Sheinbaum to prioritise the issue of disappearances, putting the military and police under question for their complicity or failure. Bringing violence and disappearances down, especially against the women, is another daunting task before the new president.

## **Feminist and Environmental Policies**

Mexico takes pride in its identity of a country with a feminist foreign policy, which is now under a woman for the first time.<sup>19</sup> Sheinbaum, in her campaign as well as the inaugural speech, has put extra emphasis on her being a woman president. Ironically, violence against women in Mexico is rampant despite women being active, visible and functional at all the levels of society. AMLO had publicly fallen out with the feminist groups of the country on the issue of violence and disappearances. It is to be seen how President Sheinbaum responds to these criticisms and translates her promises into action.

Sheinbaum’s policies relating to the environment will be keenly watched. She is known for aligning with President Obrador’s hydrocarbon policies. However, in her first public speech on Zocalo square after being sworn in as President, she assured a return to energy transition policies discontinued by her predecessor. She promised a 45 per cent share of renewable sources in electricity production by 2030.<sup>20</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The euphoria following Sheinbaum’s swearing in as the first woman president of Mexico is reflective of the people’s expectations from her. She faces many challenges, though. On the economic front, these include the welfarist benchmarks left by AMLO. As the first female president who was also an environment scientist, her policies relating to energy transition and countering violence against women will be keenly watched. Sheinbaum has a difficult task of bridging the euphoria and reality, as Obrador has left office with historic popularity but at the cost of fiscal balance and civilian control. She has not come up with a clear policy against militarisation of the Mexican society, and it seems it will be difficult for her to shake off the tag of continuity, except on the issue of energy transition.

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<sup>19</sup> [“Mexico Promotes Feminist Foreign Policy to Address Global Challenges”](#), *Gobierno de Mexico*, 1 July 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Teresa De Miguel, [“Mexico’s New President Promises to Resume Fight against Climate Change”](#), *Associated Press*, 4 October 2024.

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