

WHY MEXICO IS NOT ON THE BRINK

Viridiana Ríos

Viridiana Ríos is a Mexican scholar and author of No es normal: The Rigged Game That Fuels Mexico's Inequality and How to Change It (2021).

In a historic landslide, Mexican voters on 2 June 2024 chose Claudia Sheinbaum to be their country's first female president. Her left-leaning coalition, comprising the National Regeneration Movement (Morena), the Workers' Party, and the Green Party, secured 59 percent of the vote, defeating the center-right coalition led by Xóchitl Gálvez by 32 points. Sheinbaum achieved a record-breaking number of votes for a Mexican presidential contender. At the time of this writing in early June, her coalition is expected to secure a supermajority in the 500-member Chamber of Deputies while falling just three seats short of a supermajority in the 128-member Senate, something not heretofore seen in the history of Mexico's electoral democracy.

The extent of Sheinbaum's victory is truly unprecedented. She won across all demographics—gender, age, income, education, and profession—except among businesspeople and college-educated voters, who represent only 16 percent of Mexico's population of about 130 million. Her coalition triumphed in 31 of the 32 Mexican states, with the sole exception being Aguascalientes, one of the least populous. Additionally, the coalition secured seven of nine governorships, including Yucatán, a state that had never been governed by a left-leaning coalition.

In the realm of politics, Sheinbaum's profile is also an anomaly. She is a scientist who boasts a doctorate in energy engineering from one of Mexico's more prestigious public universities. She has coauthored dozens of academic papers, including the Nobel Prize-winning report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. When she is inaugurated on October 1, Mexico will become the first North American nation to have elected a female head of state, and will boast one of the globe's largest assemblages of female legislators as well.

The world's focus, however, is not on this critical moment for Mexi-

co's emerging democracy or the successful empowerment of women in politics. Instead, eyes are on a much more ominous concern: whether Mexico's democracy might be backsliding, and may do so further under a Sheinbaum presidency.

Fears stem from her political lineage. Sheinbaum is the loyal successor of outgoing president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), a career politician who considers himself the incarnation of "the people" waging a crusade against what he calls the "mafia of power." AMLO publicly bashes the press and civil society, even when they have valid critiques, and has implemented austerity measures that have degraded the effectiveness of some institutions and ultimately empower the military to become responsible for critical civilian matters. As a result, AMLO's critics accuse him of "destroying democracy from the inside," "subverting the institutions that have upheld Mexico's democratic achievement," and paving the road for Mexico to "be the next Venezuela."¹

In truth, claims that Mexico is autocratizing are an overstatement.² Indeed, AMLO's term has raised some legitimate concerns about the strength of certain aspects of Mexican democracy, such as its capacity to limit the exercise of executive power. Yet Mexico is not experiencing autocratization, regularly understood as "the decline of democratic regime attributes,"³ nor is it on the verge of democratic breakdown. On the contrary, the country continues prominently to feature all the basic aspects associated with a democracy such universal suffrage; free and fair elections for the legislature and executive; freedoms of the press, expression, and organization; mechanisms of accountability that can check executive power; and civilian control over the armed forces.

As of now, Mexico's case resonates with an emerging body of scholarly literature that underscores the prevalence of democratic resilience, understood as "the ability . . . to prevent or react to challenges without losing its democratic character."⁴ As Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way have shown, most democracies with roots in the global "third wave" that began in 1974 have weathered challenges without suffering reversions to authoritarianism.⁵ Even in countries that elect populist leaders, the vast majority do not experience significant democratic deterioration.

This does not mean that Mexico's democracy is entirely safe. Sheinbaum has scored a supermajority while campaigning on behalf of reforms that would concentrate power in her electoral coalition. These include popular elections to fill the eleven-member Supreme Court and the National Electoral Institute (INE), as well as the elimination of proportional representation in Congress. Unlike AMLO, Sheinbaum will have the power to change the constitution or even create a new one, and she will rule with an unprecedentedly powerful popular mandate over a country where half the populace prefers making decisions without interference from Congress or the courts. She will also confront a country grappling with rising organized crime and an army now handling

tasks previously managed by civilian agencies, a shift resulting from AMLO's policies.

There are reasons, however, to remain optimistic about Mexico's democracy. To one degree or another, Mexico has many features regularly associated with democratic endurance, such as courts able and willing to check executive power, robust competition among parties which themselves must contend with internal strains, and the existence of civic education, organized ethnic minorities, and independent media.⁶ Research tends to show that urbanization, democratic neighbors, and economic development help to rule out autocracy.⁷ Mexico is mostly urban, shares a border with the United States, and among Latin American countries comes in behind only Costa Rica and Chile in per capita Gross National Product.

In addition, Sheinbaum has consistently affirmed her commitment to democratic values, including in her victory speech, and unlike AMLO, she does not have a populist demeanor. She faces a higher likelihood of legislative-coalition fracture, fragmentation within Morena itself, and popularity backlash. She will also face significant institutional constraints such as the mandatory revocatory referendum that allows voters to remove the president after three years.

Sheinbaum's Landslide

The 2024 election was the largest that Mexico has ever held, both in terms of the number of voters who took part and the number of offices that were on the ballot. Not only was the presidency on the ballot, but also 628 seats in the national Senate and Chamber of Deputies as well as nine governorships and twenty-thousand local offices. The INE successfully oversaw it all, helped by 1.3 million volunteers who set up 170,000 polling places across three-hundred electoral districts.

The election was mostly free and fair. As in every balloting Mexico has held, there were breaches of election laws. In part, this happened because Mexico's electoral regulations are notably stringent, banning activities that in other countries are deemed normal. The outgoing president, for instance, cannot endorse his own party. AMLO clearly broke this rule, as his predecessors always did.

AMLO was pivotal to Sheinbaum's candidacy because throughout his tenure, he consistently suggested that she was his rightful successor. When she won the Morena primaries—oddly, the party holds them via opinion surveys of the public at large—AMLO even handed her a wooden totem reminiscent of indigenous traditions. This “bastón de mando” (baton of command) became a motif of Sheinbaum's campaign and was prominently displayed at her events.

Yet Sheinbaum's victory was far from being AMLO's sole doing. Three additional factors played a role: the tangible outcomes Morena

delivered to its support base, a favorable international environment for Mexico's economy, and a widespread rejection of opposition parties.

First, Morena's improvements of the socioeconomic landscape for working-class families cannot be minimized. Under AMLO, the minimum wage doubled nationally and tripled in places near the U.S. border, benefiting 17 percent of the formal workforce. Labor reforms empowered workers, fostered democratic unions, streamlined labor disputes in the courts, curtailed outsourcing, hiked paid annual leave, and increased protections for workers.⁸ As a result, per capita labor income rose 24 percent above inflation, reaching a historic high, and the share of workers living in poverty dipped to its lowest level in sixteen years. Under the two presidencies before AMLO came to office (totaling twelve years), per capita labor income had decreased by 9 percent.

Morena's economic policies also yielded substantial reductions in poverty levels. Between 2018 and 2022, the share of Mexico's people in poverty fell from 42 to 36 percent, the sharpest decline in sixteen years. Inequality also declined, with the share of national income held by the top tenth of households falling from 62 to 58 percent. Morena boosted social spending (especially via cash transfers), though the share of extremely poor households receiving cash dipped slightly due to flawed administration. Despite these flaws, however, by 2022, cash transfers were lifting 3.5 million people out of poverty every year, 52 percent more than previous administrations. (Mexico has 47 million people living in poverty.)

AMLO redirected investment to the poorest regions of Mexico. Public funding went to a tourist railway, a large oil refinery at Dos Bocas (Tabasco), several airports, and an interoceanic rail corridor for freight and passengers across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, where the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean are fewer than two-hundred kilometers apart. Additionally, he implemented an ambitious program to rehabilitate urban spaces in poor neighborhoods nationwide.

Second were the favorable external circumstances that helped Sheinbaum to victory. The onset of the covid-19 pandemic in 2020 brought a dramatic increase in remittances from Mexicans who were employed abroad, creating a cash boom for some of Mexico's poorest regions. Remittances are now Mexico's biggest source of foreign income, and the country lags only China and India as a receiver of such payments.

Rising U.S.-China tensions moved investment away from Beijing's ambit and toward U.S. ideological allies, the southern neighbor among them. Growth expectations took fire as industrial parks near the Rio Grande hummed and Mexico became the top U.S. trading partner. In addition, a substantial U.S.-Mexico interest-rate differential bolstered the value of the peso relative to the U.S. dollar.

A third factor contributing to Sheinbaum's electoral triumph was the opposition parties' strategy. The single front that they formed to com-

pete with Morena (excluding only one small social-democratic party) diluted their ideologies, bred internal conflict, and tainted their reputations via the inclusion of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)—the party that had ruled without a break from 1929 to 2000, and which is widely seen as corrupt. Polls showed that, without the PRI, the front could have gathered the support of as much as 77 percent of the voters.⁹ With the PRI, opposition support was only 34 percent.

The right-of-center National Action Party (PAN) had been the opposition leader whose standard-bearer Vicente Fox had bested “el PRI” for the presidency in 2000, but in the years since, PAN had become too identified with its onetime rival in the eyes of many voters. The PAN-PRI entente was one of the main factors explaining AMLO’s 2018 victory.¹⁰ Repeating such a highly unpopular alliance in 2024 was not a good strategy, particularly because the opposition front would be campaigning on the premise that Mexicans had been better off before AMLO.

Most voters, however, felt that the economy was improving, the country was heading in the right direction, and the federal government was more trustworthy. According to *Latinobarómetro*, by 2023, among Mexicans of all income levels, only the upper-middle classes disapproved of AMLO’s administration. This must certainly follow from the fact that they had been affected by AMLO’s redistributive policies, including some changes in labor and tax regulations, the elimination of upper-level jobs in the federal bureaucracy, and the replacement of mostly income-regressive study-abroad scholarships by local support to state universities. As one upper-middle-class Mexican told me, “When AMLO talked about taking from the rich to give to the poor, we didn’t imagine he was thinking about us.”

Mexico’s Resilience Under AMLO

Some of AMLO’s actions posed a challenge to the integrity of Mexican democracy. During his daily press briefings, he exhibited a notable sensitivity to criticism and often expressed disapproval of civil society and the media. At times, AMLO has engaged in actions perceived as retaliatory against journalists, such as disclosing their phone numbers or incomes.

AMLO also strove to exert sway beyond the executive branch. Sometimes he went around the rules, such as when he brushed off selection procedures to place a loyalist atop the Human Rights Commission. In other cases, he blocked the naming of officials to head autonomous institutions—or cut their budgets—as a means of hampering bodies that he could not influence. Late in AMLO’s term, he proposed to absorb many autonomous entities into the executive branch. In certain instances, this consolidation could be considered a good idea, such as in the

cases of the antitrust commission and the council that evaluates social-development policy, where executive involvement mirrors practices in many other countries. In the instance of the National Institute of Transparency, however, the proposal was a strategic ploy to stifle oversight of AMLO's administration.

More gravely, AMLO sowed the seeds of a huge problem by handing civilian governance tasks to the military. Initially, AMLO entrusted the army with several projects because it built faster and at a better price than private enterprises. Soon, however, the army went from building things to controlling more than thirty state-owned companies, including airports, seaports, customs offices, the Mexicana airline, and even a Pacific island for ecotourists (Isla María Madre, the site of a former prison).¹¹ In 2019, he made the Federal Police part of a militarized National Guard that has become known for human-rights violations.¹² The army is now estimated to control 4 percent of the federal budget, 19 percent of federal tax collection, and all intelligence services.

Despite AMLO's populist tendencies, Mexican democracy has proven to be more resilient than many skeptics expected. The country has shown a considerable capacity to address or mitigate the challenges posed by AMLO without substantially compromising its democratic nature.

Mexico has preserved electoral competition, universal suffrage, and the capacity of citizens to influence their rulers' destiny by voting. Since 2018, many elections have taken place and been deemed mostly fair and transparent. Morena lost races in key Mexico City districts and the influential states of Nuevo León and Jalisco, to say nothing of several governorships, and admitted these setbacks without condemning the results as fraudulent. AMLO will step down when his presidency ends. There is no doubt that Sheinbaum will do so too.

The country has freedom of association, and opponents can present alternative views on matters of political relevance. Morena's adversaries have exercised their rights to organize and protest, achieving notable successes that have been respected. In 2024 alone, Mexico City witnessed two significant demonstrations: one in February to express support for clean elections and opposition to AMLO, and another in May to back the candidacy of Xóchitl Gálvez. Both events filled the Zócalo, the large central square—the measure of a successful rally for a national-scale cause in Mexico.

Despite AMLO's bluster about the press and his doubters generally, Mexico's media remain free to critique the government. Political opponents and journalists are not arrested or silenced, and no media outlets have been forced to close. Media outlets both private and public feature dissenting voices and give ample space to opposition perspectives. Some of Morena's measures have enhanced freedom of expression; these include the repeal of a 1917 law that made insulting the president

a crime, and a reduction in the amount of public discretionary funding for private media.

With respect to civil society groups, even if AMLO spoke harshly of some of them and made fiscal changes that they disliked, according to the U.S. State Department, “government officials were mostly cooperative and responsive to the views of these groups,” and NGOs generally “[operate] without government restriction to monitor or investigate human rights conditions or cases and publish their findings.”¹³

Mexico’s Supreme Court has remained independent. Even justices whom AMLO named have played prominent roles in rejecting his reforms, whether on constitutional or procedural grounds. Of AMLO’s five appointees, only three remained mostly loyal to Morena’s agenda. The president, true to form, condemned judges who opposed him as enemies of the people, yet AMLO did not deploy a plebiscite to circumvent their rules. Still less did he ever contemplate closing the Court or convening a constituent assembly to eliminate it. He responded to the Court’s rejections of his initiatives with new proposals to Congress, or with searches for other procedural or legal ways to achieve his goals. When, near his term’s end, AMLO did bring forward the idea of making the justices popularly elected, he was stopped cold in Congress.

The most important event demonstrating that Mexico’s democracy was not eroding under AMLO was the fate of an electoral reform that he first proposed in 2020. The initiative contained worrisome features such as the election of electoral-oversight authorities by popular vote. The Supreme Court twice rejected the proposal, both times on procedural grounds. When AMLO came back with a third version of the initiative—this time with many more worrisome features—Congress stopped him cold again.

Claims that Mexico was nearing democratic breakdown under AMLO often sketched hypothetical scenarios in which he gained a congressional supermajority and went rogue. Yet this never happened. Even at its height in 2018, Morena’s coalition counted only 307 deputies, far below the 334 needed to pass a constitutional amendment in the Chamber. After Sheinbaum’s landslide victory this has changed.

Mexico’s Democracy Under Trial

The resilience of Mexico’s democracy will now be tested anew. Before the 2024 election, Morena’s coalition controlled 56 percent of the Chamber and 58 percent of the Senate, far below the two-thirds required for constitutional changes. Estimates now suggest that Sheinbaum’s coalition will control 69 or 70 percent of the Chamber and 59 to 69 percent of the Senate. This is unprecedented. The last time something close to this happened was in 1994, during the era of PRI dominance. Morena’s coalition also rules twenty-three states. The risk is that, with an electoral

coalition this large, Sheinbaum has the power to change the constitution in undemocratic ways.

Another pressing issue for Mexico's democracy is the army's empowerment. Sheinbaum's infrastructure agenda is even more ambitious

To preserve democracy, the Mexican state must deliver public services, control corruption, keep the peace, and support the development of the economy. In other words, it must govern—something that in the past it has too often failed to do.

than AMLO's. Yet she has fewer resources and less capacity to acquire debt. She will undoubtedly collaborate with the army as AMLO did. The military can build quickly, secretly, and cheaply. As more public resources flow into army hands, however, the civilian government's ability to control the officer corps may weaken.

The army is already operating on its own, sometimes to the detriment of the government itself. According to the hacker group Guacamaya, which leaked official defense-ministry

documents, the army has been spying on journalists, human-rights defenders, and even cabinet members and politicians. It has also been accused of obstructing investigations into cases that could tarnish its image. These cases include the 2014 assassination of 43 students from Iguala, or drug-trafficking charges that were filed against retired general and former defense secretary Salvador Cienfuegos, then dropped.

An outright military coup is highly unlikely. The real concern is that militarization will reduce transparency and accountability. Army doings are regularly classified as "matters of national security," which limits civilian oversight. Access to information is restricted, and the ability to prosecute is too. The military has special courts that are separate from the rest of the judicial system, and it is often hard to make military personnel appear in civilian courts. Lack of accountability could lead to deepening corruption and then a crisis of legitimacy.

Finally, another significant risk to Mexico's democracy is organized crime. A weak rule of law means a democracy that is predisposed to authoritarian regression.¹⁴ Mexicans need look no farther than nearby El Salvador under President Nayib Bukele to see such a dynamic in action. In recent decades, Mexican criminal organizations have expanded from selling drugs in the United States to controlling all kinds of businesses, legal and illegal, within Mexico itself. They make informal vendors pay to sell in local markets, run taxi and bus networks, and take a cut of avocado, lime, and even corn-tortilla production. Organized crime forces locals to buy overpriced products, and kidnaps migrants to extract ransoms from their families in Central America.

To commit price-gouging and abductions with impunity, it helps

greatly to control local governments, so the corrupting political effects of these illegal activities can well be imagined. This journal published an essay on the “criminal subversion” of Mexican democracy ten years ago,¹⁵ but the gravity of matters was grimly underlined by the murders of 31 candidates during the 2024 campaign season. More than three-hundred other instances of political violence happened, while nearly fourteen-hundred candidates resigned before the election was over.¹⁶

Mexico’s Resilience Under Claudia

There are some aspects, however, that may make Mexico’s quarter-century-old democracy more resilient than some observers anticipate. The primary one is the potential instability of Morena’s legislative coalition. Two-fifths of the Chamber is allocated according to a system of proportional representation. To achieve its supermajority, Morena strategically distributed districts among its coalition members to maximize the share of these two-hundred seats it could win. The distribution gives Morena direct control over only two-thirds of legislators, making its supermajority dependent on the loyalty of its allies. This loyalty is questionable, particularly in the case of the Green Party (PVEM). The PVEM was allied with Morena’s opposition until 2018, and is known for frequently switching coalitions to serve its interests.

Sheinbaum’s capacity to control the Morena legislative coalition will not match AMLO’s. Morena’s ranks include many diverse politicians, sometimes with starkly opposing ideologies. AMLO was the glue that held the party together; with his departure, seams are beginning to show. After Sheinbaum won the primaries with 39 percent in a multicandidate field, former foreign minister Marcelo Ebrard, a rival, called her election fraudulent and vowed “we will not submit to that lady.”¹⁷ Ebrard and former Senate president Ricardo Monreal have since enlisted 18 percent of Morena’s deputies for their caucus inside the party—enough to mean that no federal budget can pass without their consent.

Morena’s “big-tent” strategy will further contribute to internal instability. Increasingly, Morena has wooed politicians from other parties to become Morena candidates. These new politicians tend to be less disciplined, and internal divisions have resulted when original Morena members have come to feel excluded. There have been splits and protests in Chihuahua, Guanajuato, Puebla, Yucatán, and the State of Mexico. In the small south-central state of Tlaxcala, Morena activists campaigned openly for the opposition in 2024. In Durango, some insiders think that a new party will be formed by those who feel alienated by Morena’s decisions.

Sheinbaum herself does not have the charming personality of a populist; if anything, she resembles a technocrat. A full-time energy-engineering professor just a decade ago, she is regularly described as

tough, disciplined, and focused on delivering results. Sheinbaum does not have decades of experience at political mobilization. She is less confrontational than AMLO, and has more cordial relations with the press and political adversaries. She has announced policies aimed at building bridges to groups affected by AMLO's policies, including the upper-middle classes, artists, and academics.

Sheinbaum may not have the popularity required to orchestrate greater democratic backsliding. The tools that AMLO used to gain so much popularity, particularly among the working classes, will be far less available to Sheinbaum. She will not be able to raise the minimum wage as much as AMLO did, nor will she be able to increase social spending without imposing unpopular fiscal reforms. Sheinbaum inherits a dysfunctional healthcare system, as well as the growing problem of undocumented migration from South and Central America.

Furthermore, as a female politician she will face a stronger popularity backlash than a male counterpart would.¹⁸ This is surely true in Mexico, which according to the UN Development Programme's Gender Norms Index is still quite a sexist society. The empowerment of women in Mexican politics has occurred due to the deliberate construction of a legal framework fostering gender parity (including gender quotas imposed by courts and still bitterly resented by many male politicians), not because biases against powerful women have faded away. Distrust of female leadership remains common among the public. A third of Mexicans feel that "the country is not prepared" to have a female president, and 14 percent openly say that they would have preferred to elect a male president.

In addition to having to "row upstream" against biases that AMLO never faced, Sheinbaum will face significant institutional constraints such as the recall referendum. Promised by AMLO during his 2018 campaign, then passed and ratified as a constitutional change by Congress and the states, this will require a vote by the public, midway through the six-year term, on whether Sheinbaum should carry on as president. In April 2022, AMLO did extremely well in the first recall to be held, garnering more than 93 percent. Yet the vote was invalid because it failed to attract the necessary 40 percent turnout (only about 18 percent of Mexico's registered voters bothered to cast a ballot). A popular president will sail through, but the math means that, in theory, Sheinbaum could be shown the door by around twenty-million voters. Finally, Sheinbaum will have only four Supreme Court nominations, likely not enough to tip the balance of a body where it takes eight votes to rule a norm invalid.

In the long term, however, the only way to keep Mexican democracy is to eliminate the conditions that create a demand for populism in the first place. This demand springs not from ignorance or petty resentment, but from a legitimate feeling that a democracy has not sufficiently improved the lives of the vast majority. When democracy delivers, individuals will support it.¹⁹

To preserve democracy, the Mexican state must deliver public services, control corruption, keep the peace, and support the development of the economy. In other words, it must govern—something that in the past it has too often failed to do.

Mexico transitioned to democracy with the expectation that the turnover of political power would improve life for the majority. This did not happen. Governments after the transition were stupendous at creating sound electoral institutions, but they were a resounding failure at promoting economic inclusion. From 2000 to 2018, during the first three administrations following the transition, the richest 1 percent of Mexicans went from holding 12 percent of national income to holding 30 percent—the largest increase of income concentration among the 181 countries included in the World Inequality Database. It is only natural that, by the time AMLO won the presidency, 88 percent of Mexicans believed that the government mainly served elite interests.

During AMLO's term, Mexicans' satisfaction with democracy, confidence in representative democracy, and trust in political parties and the government increased significantly. This happened because he delivered real results to his base.

Yet, there is much work to do before Mexico can call itself a fair country. By some metrics, it is currently the fourth most unequal country in the world and third in terms of the power of organized crime. Maintaining democracy amid such harsh conditions is no easy task. As of now, Mexico has done it. Yet if Sheinbaum fails to carry on that accomplishment, Mexican democracy will feel the heat. Even a democracy as resilient as Mexico's can falter if its people continue to face injustice.

NOTES

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