Policy Brief

June 2024

Mexico After Andrés Manuel López Obrador: Challenges and Opportunities

By Nizar Messari

PB - 29/24

On June 2, 2024, Mexico held the biggest election in its history. Over 97 million eligible voters elected 20,375 federal officers, including the president, all 500 members of the Chamber of Deputies (the lower legislative chamber), and the 128 members of the Senate (the higher legislative chamber). Moreover, for the first time in Mexico's history, the top candidates were two women, meaning that from December, Mexico will be governed by a woman for the first time. This paper sets out the issues and challenges that have dominated the current election cycle, and places them beyond the legacy of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) and within a historical context to emphasize that some of those issues and challenges are neither new nor surprising, and that they have arisen in the context of Mexican and Latin American history. The paper also emphasizes some striking parallels between Morocco and Mexico: their great histories, their grandiose ambitions, their involuntary statuses as transit states for migrants coming from the south, and the complexity that creates for their relationships with their wealthy northern neighbors.

10 YEARS
POLICY CENTER FOR THE NEW SOUTH

Introduction

On June 2, 2024, Mexico held the biggest elections in its history. Over 97 million eligible voters elected 20,375 federal officers, including the president, all 500 members of the Chamber of Deputies (the lower legislative chamber), and the 128 members of the Senate (the higher legislative chamber). On top of the federal positions, the Governors of no fewer than nine states are up for election that same day. To add to the unprecedented character of that election, according to all credible opinion polls, two women are the top candidates and one of them won, meaning that starting December, Mexico will be ruled, for the first time in its history, by a woman. In a widely male-chauvinist country and political culture, where women earned the right to vote only in 1953, this aspect deserves special attention and analysis.

One last intriguing aspect of the election is that the two parties that dominated Mexican elections during the last few decades, the PRI (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional* or Revolutionary Institutional Party) and the PAN (*Partido Acción Nacional* or National Action Party), and who were traditionally adversaries in Mexican politics, are allies in the current election cycle. The third member of their alliance is the PRD (*Partido de la Revolución Democrática*, or the Democratic Revolution Party). The current president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (commonly referred to as AMLO), had previously run twice for the presidency as PRD candidate, losing on both occasions. He then left the PRD and founded a new party, sweeping him to victory in 2018. Although a PRI-PAN-PRD pact is not necessarily a new development, it is the first time they have constituted an electoral alliance, which is an irony of history.

It is also relevant to note that despite his impressive popularity, AMLO—like all presidents before him—has not attempted to change the constitution and allow himself to run for a second consecutive mandate. That is an indication of how strong that tradition is in Mexican politics, how deeply anchored it is in Mexican minds and habits, and how respectful of the rules Mexican leaders have been. In other political systems, both north and south of Mexico, respect for term limits has not received the same kind of acceptance (from Michael Bloomberg in New York City, to Carlos Menem in Argentina and Fernando Henrique Cardoso in Brazil, to name but a few).

Besides these important local and national aspects, the elections in Mexico have regional and an international significance. Regionally, Latin America has been split between left-wing presidents (Gabriel Boric in Chile, Gustavo Petro in Colombia, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil) and right-wing presidents (Daniel Noboa in Ecuador, a country with which Mexico broke diplomatic relations in April 2024 due to an episode that I will discuss later, and Javier Milei in Argentina, with whom AMLO has traded insults). Given the weight and importance of Mexico in the region, the results of the election will be significant for Latin America especially if Donald Trump is elected president of the U.S. in November. Indeed, relations with the U.S. have consistently carried a heavy weight for Mexico, because of their long and complex history. The widespread saying "*pobre Mexico, tan lejos de Dios y tan cerca de Estados Unidos*" (that can be translated as "*Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the U.S.*"), whose authorship does not matter here, reflects only one part of the story, since it is possible to argue that Mexico has sometimes benefited from that proximity (approximately 3,150 kilometers of shared borders), although it has sometimes also paid a high price for it.

This paper sets out the issues and challenges that have dominated the current election cycle. Some of these issues and challenges are neither new nor surprising. Indeed, to readers from Morocco or from the Middle East and North Africa, I would compare Mexico to Egypt, which calls itself Oum Al-dunia (the mother of the Universe), which used to be a leader and key player in what used to be referred to as the Arab World, but which has progressively looked inward and focused on its own challenges, though from time to time, it tries to claim that older mantle of leadership it used to carry. That applies to some extent to Mexico in Latin America.

Some striking parallels between Morocco and Mexico can be emphasized: their great histories, their grandiose ambitions, their involuntary statuses as transit states for migrants coming from the south, and the difficulties that creates for their relationships with their wealthy northern neighbors. Of course, there are limits to the comparison, but those are certainly striking similarities.

The elections

As well as the sheer size of Mexico's electorate and the number of federal mandates up for election, another novelty in the presidential electoral process should be underlined: the confirmation of the end of 'Dedazo', or 'big finger'. What was that? It was a tradition according to which the president would handpick his successor, hence the image of the finger[1]. The president would do this taking into consideration several factors, from electability to competence, not to mention political balances of force among PRI players. But the external image that remained was that of a powerful president who would choose his successor. President Ernesto Zedillo ended that tradition at the turn of the century, when he declined to choose his successor and allowed the party to choose its candidate (who eventually lost the presidential election in 2000). AMLO brought back a version of the tradition and established a *sui-generis* competitive process that resulted in the choice of the candidates. That process consisted of relying on national opinion polls to indicate the top candidate in each alliance. Although there were suspicions about the transparency of those polls, the process, which was encouraged by AMLO, signaled a departure from traditional Mexican politics.

There were three candidates for the Mexican presidency in the June 2, 2024, election. Only two were really in the race. And polls indicated that only one had a significant chance to win the presidential election. The three candidates were: 1) former Mexico City Mayor Claudia Sheinbaum, a physicist with a doctorate in environmental engineering, representing the coalition *Seguiremos Haciendo Historia* (or Let's Keep Making History), which is led by MORENA, the party of President AMLO; 2) Former Senator Xóchitl Gálvez, an engineer with indigenous roots (daughter of an Indigenous Otomí father and a mestiza mother), from the main opposition coalition alliance, *Fuerza y Corazon por México* (or Strength and Heart for Mexico), which is a coalition of the PAN, PRI, and PRD; 3) Deputy Jorge Álvarez Máynez, who represents the *Movimiento Ciudadano* or the Citizen's Movement (MC).

1. 'His successor' because up until now, all presidents have been male.

A Little Bit of History

The 1910-1920 Mexican revolution and its aftermath have had a long and sustained impact on the country, in many ways. One of the most prominent impacts, although it did not emerge immediately after the revolution, was the long grip of the PRI on power: an uninterrupted 71 years ruling the country. Another significant consequence was the land reform, which also was not immediately put in place, but which created a social and economic dynamic in the country that is undisputable. But the country also went through several crises, which resulted in a relatively smooth evolution of the country to what it is today.

Land reform was mandated by the post-revolution constitution of 1917. The land reform was part of a larger and ambitious reform established by that constitution which included labor reform (establishing minimum wages for workers as well as the right to strike), and the right to social security, public health, and education[2]. It also established national ownership of subsoil resources. President Lázaro Cárdenas, who was elected in 1934, led Mexico to take a radical left turn. He enforced land-reform programs as he created communal cooperatives and gave them the status of ejido. He also brought education to rural areas and nationalized the railways. More significantly, he nationalized the oil industry, and made *Petróleos Mexicanos* (Pemex) the main administrator of that industry in Mexico. Those reforms, despite their shortcomings, resulted in a significant transformation of Mexican politics and society, as it established in power the then PRM (Party of the Mexican Revolution), which became later the PRI, for a ruling stretch that ended only in 2000[3]. Those reforms, added to the industrial transformation that took place in the 1940s in the country, also led to a long period of relative economic growth and prosperity.

It is relevant to note here that this revolutionary, left-leaning Mexico, with its relative political stability and its relative economic endurance, became an attractive safe haven for the engaged, activist, and vibrant individuals in Latin America. It provided Latin Americans with a safe space to express themselves, solid academic institutions—such as the prestigious UNAM, *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*—and venues to debate and publish, as shown by the famous publisher *Siglo XXI Editores*, among others. It was not only Leon Trotsky who sought refuge in Mexico, but many others, from around the world, especially Latin America, throughout the decades of the twentieth century. These included Fidel Castro before the success of his revolution in 1959 (and before him, José Martí, already in the nineteenth century). Before that, there were the famous Peruvian thinker and ideologist Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, the Allende family after Pinochet's coup, and more recently, the Guatemalan Nobel Peace winner Rigoberta Menchú. And although Mexico was not part of the Non-Aligned Movement, in part because of its imposing neighbor in the north, it was aligned with many of that movement's principles and political actions. For instance, Mexico never agreed to participate in the U.S.-imposed boycott of Fidel Castro's Cuba.

The 1970s saw shifts in the Mexican economy, eventually leading to political changes in the 1980s and 1990s. If the first world oil crisis in 1973 did not hit Mexico directly, it allowed Mexico to borrow money extensively and at *a priori* very low interest rates. That apparent

2. In 1928, the presidential mandate was extended from four to six years, and the principle of no-re-election was confirmed.

3. Right after the revolution that ended the long rule of José de la Cruz Porfirio Díaz Mori, mostly known and referred to as Porfirio Díaz (1877 – 1911, although with brief interruptions when he ceded power to trusted allies), the National Revolutionary Party (*Partido Nacional Revolucionario*, PNR) was established. It later became the PRM or *Partido de la Revolución Mexicana* (the Party of the Mexican Revolution) under President Lázaro Cárdenas. Finally, under President Alemán (1946 -1952), it acquired its current name: *Partido Revolucionario Institutional*, or the Revolutionary Institutional Party.

bonanza turned into a curse with the second oil crisis and the hike in those misleadingly low interest rates, resulting in what is known as the foreign-debt crisis of 1982, with the direct consequence that President Portillo—a lame duck president by that stage—had to declare in August 1982 a six-month moratorium on the repayment of Mexico's foreign debt; he nationalized the country's banks in September of that same year. Although that was the most dramatic point in that crisis, it was only a step in what ended up being known in Mexico, and in the rest of Latin America, as the lost decade.

Political changes started taking place in the 1980s. With the intensity of the economic crisis, the conservative PAN started to compete with the PRI, although most of its growing influence was limited to states in the north. More significantly maybe, there was a growing dissidence within the PRI. One of the leaders of that dissidence was Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas Solórzano, a former Senator and Governor of the state of Michoacán[4]. Cárdenas, with others, constituted *la Corriente Democrática* (Democratic Current), a dissident group within the PRI, which aimed, among other objectives, to defend a more leftist political identity in the PRI, as well as to dispute the Dedazo, and to fight to establish a democratic procedure to select the party candidate for the presidency. In 1987, Cárdenas left the PRI and subsequently ran for the 1988 presidency for the *Frente Democrático Nacional* (National Democratic Front), obtaining over 30% of the votes against the PRI candidate Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Despite widespread suspicions of fraud, no recount was carried out, and Salinas de Gortari was declared the winner of the election.

Later that same year, Cárdenas launched a new left-wing party, the *Partido de la Revolución Democrática*, PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution), on behalf of which he ran again for the presidency in 1994, coming third behind the winner, Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León, who represented the PRI, and the PAN candidate. In this sense, the younger Cárdenas played a key role in the pluralization of Mexican politics, first by leading a dissident grouping within the PRI, then by running for presidential elections against the PRI and performing well, and last by creating a credible political party to the left of the PRI, in which he brought together several activist groups—outside the PRI—that were small but vibrant, along with the dissdents from inside the PRI[5].

A brief step back is necessary at this stage to shed light on a major development. The election of Salinas de Gortari in 1988 resulted in a shift to the right in the PRI and in Mexico at large. The then new president launched neoliberal reforms in the economy in general, from privatization to the progressive liberalization of foreign trade. He declared his skepticism regarding the ejido system, which had structured land owning and the agricultural sector since the presidency of the Senior Cárdenas in the mid-1930s, and in 1992, he signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the United States and Canada, which went into effect on January 1, 1994. As a reaction to the intensive liberalization of the Mexican economy, a very significant socio-political development took place, on the same day NAFTA went into effect. An obscure leader from the state of Chiapas, who introduced himself to Mexico and to the world as Sub-comandante Marcos, declared the start of a rebellion by the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN; or Zapatista National Liberation Army). The Zapatista reference was to emphasize that the main demands of the

4. It is relevant to note here two points about Mr. Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas Solórzano. First, he was the son of Lázaro Cárdenas del Río, the former popular and influential president. This gave him name recognition and also prestige and a network to support him. It is also important to note that his first name, Cuauhtémoc, is the name of the last Aztec Emperor, who resisted Spanish occupation and was executed by Cortés. The choice of that name symbolized Mexican pride and a claim to a mantle of legitimacy that went beyond the Spanish and other European Conquistadores and reached the Aztec Empire.

5. Jorge G. Castañeda analyzed this critical moment in the history of the Mexican left in his book *Utopia Unarmed – The Latin American Left after the Cold War* (1993).

movement were for social justice for Mexico's poor people in general, and the indigenous people in particular. This neo-Zapatista movement gained the sympathy of large segments of the Mexican population, and the successive governments struggled to extinguish the EZLN. The movement and its initially enigmatic leader was somewhat romanticized, as it was considered one of the first post-modern social movements in Latin America. It brought together a nuanced balance between politics and armed resistance, in a way that was initially considered unprecedented (Beverley and Oviedo, p. 12, 1995).

The election of Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León as president in 1994 confirmed a few trends in Mexican politics. The first was the rise of political violence, as the PRI's initial candidate, Luis Donaldo Colosio, and the PRI secretary-general, José Francisco Ruíz Massieu, were both assassinated during the campaign. Violence in general, and political violence in particular, began to mark Mexican politics, and have continued to do so until today. The second trend confirmed by the election of Ernesto Zedillo was the neoliberal pivot of the Mexican economy and its increasing closeness and dependence on the U.S. The third trend that was confirmed with that election was the continuing liberalization of the Mexican political system. As noted earlier, PAN and PRD candidates did well in the elections, and Cárdenas made the new party to the left of PRI an established reality of the Mexican political system. This political evolution forced President Zedillo to show openness and pragmatism. He appointed a cabinet member who was not a PRI member, started an electoral reform in concert with the opposition parties, and did not appoint his successor, thus starting to put an end to the legend of the Dedazo. The consequence of these changes were quick to materialize: in the midterm elections of 1997, the PRI lost control of the Chamber of Deputies, and Cárdenas became the first elected mayor of Mexico City. Change also inevitably ended up happening in the presidential election of 2000, when PAN candidate Vicente Fox Quesada was elected, ending a the 71-year uninterrupted streak of PRI presidents.

After three failed runs as PRD candidate, Cárdenas stepped aside and left the field to new PRD leadership. Andrés Manuel López Obrador—AMLO—who had been elected as governor of the Federal District for the PRD, seized the opportunity and became his party's candidate in the 2006 presidential election. Although he ran a formidable campaign, he lost to the PAN candidate, Felipe Calderón, and called the process a fraud. In fact, both AMLO and Calderón initially claimed victory, but when the electoral judicial authorities confirmed the victory of the PAN candidate, AMLO rejected the results, declared himself the legitimate president, and formed a parallel government.

Meanwhile, violence continued to blight Mexico and its population, forcing President Calderón to consider the issue one of his highest priorities. He approved a reform of the judicial system and confronted drug cartels by launching a large national security operation that involved the armed forces to confront those groups. But those efforts were not very successful in controlling violence; annual deaths in Mexico under Calderón eventually surpassed 15,000, with some estimating that by the end of 2011, meaning in five years under Calderón, approximately 50,000 people were victims of the war on drug cartels launched by the president. Brutal images of massacres made the headlines constantly, as cartels were fighting each other as well as government forces, an ugly fight in which all sides committed human-rights violations.

The next presidential election cycle took place in 2012. A familiar name again participated and again was defeated, and again called the elections a fraud. The novelty of the elections of 2012 was the return of PRI to the presidency under Enrique Peña Nieto. President Peña Nieto, who was clearly aware of the weakness of the economy, and of the intensity and

violence of the war on the drug cartels, opted to build with the two main opposition parties, the PRD and the PAN, a national alliance, a sort of national pact, which consisted of a 95-point agenda and which he called the 'Pact for Mexico'. Despite the official signing of the pact by the two opposition parties, widespread dissent within PRD and PAN later led to AMLO breaking up with the party. Eventually, even one of the founders of party, and three-time presidential candidate on its behalf, Cárdenas, ended up distancing himself from it. Having said that, the pact allowed President Peña Nieto to pass legislation in the Chamber of Deputies and rule the country more efficiently. However, President Peña Nieto suffered several unexpected blows that took a hard toll on his popularity. First, in July 2015, a famous drug lord and inmate nicknamed El Chapo—whose capture in February 2014 had seemed to indicate that President Peña Nieto's politics were working—fled from a maximum-security Mexican prison, highlighting security breaches and widespread corruption in the penitentiary system. His re-capture in January 2016 came as a relief, although it indicated that the fight against the drug cartels was inevitably going to be long, violent, and messy. Second, two very powerful earthquakes, a few days apart, in September 2017, shook the country and put its resilience under major stress. Although relatively few lives were lost, despite the power of the quakes, national morale was badly hit.

All of this prepared the field for the election cycle of 2018 to be unprecedented. Gigantic by its size, it also took place after AMLO had left the PRD—as previously mentioned—and eventually founded in 2014 a new party he called MORENA, or *Movimiento Regeneración Nacional* (National Regeneration Movement). AMLO, who made fighting corruption the core of his campaign, won in a landslide, taking 31 out of the 32 states of the federation, and receiving 53% of the votes (more than 30 percentage points ahead of the second candidate). His party also won more than half the seats in the senate, more than three-fifths of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies, and five out of the nine governorships up for election. In sum, AMLO and his party became dominant in the Mexican political landscape.

The Legacy of AMLO

One way of looking at the landslide electoral victory of President López Obrador in 2018 is that the Mexican people were ready for change and were willing to give the left a chance. A slightly different perspective on that victory is to note that expectations were high, extremely high, for what AMLO could achieve as president. At the end of his mandate, it is hence right to evaluate his legacy. If it were up to the electoral and exit polls, the answer would be that he seems to have done well, since his party's candidate seems to have won the presidential elections easily. But this evaluation should be tempered by some nuances. What has AMLO achieved, and what have his failures been?

AMLO seems to have delivered on one of his most important electoral promises: to take care of the poorest Mexicans, which would eventually translate into the reduction of the gap between the wealthiest and the poorest Mexicans. Indeed, according to the New York Times, "[a]*bout 25 million families have benefited from direct cash transfers. The government has increased subsidies to lower fuel prices and electricity bills*" (NYTimes, March 1, 2024). AMLO also almost doubled the minimum wage and passed substantial labor reforms. Consequently, the percentage of people living in poverty declined from 41.9% in 2018 to 36.3% in 2022. In real numbers, that meant nine million individuals being raised out of poverty in Mexico in just two years (*El Pais*, August 10, 2023). In this sense, AMLO has earned the trust of the poorest Mexicans, those who have seldom been at the

center of public policies that aimed at supporting them, as opposed to public policies that aimed at policing them, for instance. This granted him a popularity rating of approximately 60% among the Mexican population, a few months before the end of his mandate (BBC News Mundo, May 29, 2024).

Another relative success of AMLO's presidency, which also justifies his high popularity rating, as well as the fact that he is very likely to select his successor, is the relative good health of the Mexican economy. After the tragic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on economies throughout the world, and Mexico in particular, the Mexican economy seems to have recovered. In 2021, economic growth was 5.9%, which was vigorous, but which also reflected the growth of the rest of the world that year. In 2022, the Mexican economy grew by 3.9%, and in 2023, the level of growth was still vigorous (3.2%), although it did not match the forecasts of several organizations, including the International Monetary Fund, which expected growth rate of 3.4% in the Mexican economy (*El Economista*, Feb. 22, 2024).

This growth rate, which translated also into more job offerings and less unemployment, was due to several factors that I will not discuss in detail here. Suffice it to say that some of the reasons are related to the heavy investments made by AMLO's government in substantial infrastructure projects. One of these, the train line in the Yucatán Peninsula, aims to connect a traditionally isolated and poor region of the country, and has caused much criticism that I will also not explore here. However, despite the criticism, AMLO has insisted on the train line and is progressing towards its completion. Another cause of the relative good health of the economy is that tensions between the U.S. and China have resulted in significant changes to supply chains. These changes have allowed Mexico to surpass China for the first time in 21 years as the main exporter to the U.S. (*El Pais*, Feb. 8, 2024).

On fighting crime—one of his main electoral promises back in 2018—AMLO has clearly underperformed. Homicides increased under his presidency, going from 24 per 100,000 inhabitants under former President Felipe Calderón, to 29 per 100,000 inhabitants under AMLO. By the end of 2023, after five years of AMLO's presidency, 156,136 people had been murdered. During those same five years, 44,073 individuals went missing. As for political violence, in the campaign for the midterm elections in 2021, approximately 35 candidates were killed. As for the current electoral cycle, according to the New York Times, between June 2023 and March 2024 "*Laboratorio Electoral, an independent research institute focused on democracy and elections, has documented at least 67 attacks, threats, kidnappings and killings related to the elections. At least 39 people have been slain, 19 of them candidates for local positions. A significant portion of the violence is linked to cartels and other criminal groups seeking to influence who holds office*" (NYTimes, March 1, 2024).

Moreover, AMLO, who promised in 2018 to reduce the role of the military in fighting crime[6], failed to deliver on that promise. Although in December 2019, he created a National Guard to replace the Federal Police and allow it to be the leading player in fighting crime, only 25% of the new force was from the former police, while the remaining 75% came from different parts of the army. Furthermore, when the newly established National Guard failed in its mission, AMLO resorted once again to increasing the policing powers of the military, which was contrary to his electoral promises.

6. The promise of reducing the role of the military in fighting criminal activities arose because of the widespread accusations of violence and civil rights abuses by the military during that campaign.

Finally, fighting corruption, which was one of AMLO's most important electoral promises in 2018, is likely his main failure, despite his rhetoric to the contrary. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, for instance, Mexico's score changed very little between 2018, the year of the election of AMLO, when Mexico's score in that index was 28, to 29 the following year and then 31 in 2020. Mexico has stagnated at a score of 31 since then (for comparison, Denmark, the least-corrupt country, scored 90 in 2023). That score has ranked Mexico 128 out of 180 countries that are part of that index. Recent accusations of corruption involving some of his close associates and also members of his family, have contributed to this feeling that AMLO has failed in his fight against corruption. The lack of an independent judiciary represents one of the major handicaps in fighting corruption effectively, and AMLO has weakened, instead of strengthening, the judiciary and other agencies and institutions. Indeed, weakening the institutions, and the mechanisms of checks and balances in the country, was one of the main accusations against AMLO during the last few years of his mandate.

With the election of Claudia Sheinbaum, expectations are that AMLO's legacy will become entrenched. During the electoral campaign, she has committed to maintain his social programs and his focus on the poor. There will be changes, of course. Ms. Sheinbaum is a scientist, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, she showed her differences with AMLO—who was already her political mentor—by following scientific recommendations and enforcing them while the president treated the pandemic with disdain and did not give it much relevance. When she was Mayor of Mexico City, she also showed her differences with AMLO in the treatment of security reform: she improved the training of police officers, increased their salaries and invested in intelligence, which allowed her to reduce the levels of homicide, theft, and other crimes by approximately 60% during her tenure (NYTimes, March 1). Ms. Sheinbaum will also likely work for the decriminalization of abortion (NYTimes, September 6, 2023).

One vexing issue will also certainly continue to be the challenge of migration. As long as the combined pull factor of the wealthy North American—mainly U.S.—economies, and the push factor of the violence and poverty in Central America persist, migration will be a challenge for Mexico and for its relations with the U.S. Mexico, which is a transit country, has had consistent generous and humane policies towards migrants. Although López Obrador has tried to manage U.S. interests and pressures by displacing migrants away from the U.S.-Mexican borders, that policy is unsustainable in the long term, and is also widely unpopular in Mexico, and among government supporters (NYTimes, May 14, 2024). Ms. Sheinbaum will also have to manage those same challenges, although she might have to do so with an eventual Trump Administration in the U.S., which would likely bring its own and peculiar challenges. In any case, Ms. Sheinbaum has made it clear that she will cooperate with the U.S., but that she will never do so at the expense of the national interest of Mexico and Mexicans. As she put it, yes to coordination, no to subordination. A future Sheinbaum government will also inevitably have to coordinate with neighboring Central American states on this tricky and humanistic issue.

Mexico in the World

Mexico was for a long period of the twentieth century engaged in the struggles of its fellow Latin American countries. Besides being the country of refuge for many Latin American leftists who, at one moment or another, were forced to flee their own countries, Mexico, unlike other Latin American countries that followed the U.S.-led boycott against Cuba under Fidel Castro, kept its links with that island and remained open to it. Similarly, in the early 1980s, it did not boycott the Sandinista regime, and by playing a leading role in the establishment of the group of Contadora, vied to defend Latin solutions for Latin problems, making a stand against U.S. interference in Central America, and seeking the support of its fellow Latin American states in order to enable that.

This stance took a slight hit in the 1990s, after the signing of NAFTA and the adoption of neoliberal economic policies by the different governments that have ruled Mexico since then. But under AMLO, Mexico seems to have tried to get closer to its fellow Latin American states, while avoiding angering the U.S. Mexico has also been trying to establish closer relations with China, as a form of balancing its overwhelming neighbor to the North. But unlike several other Latin American states (including Brazil, Peru, and Ecuador), Mexico has not received extensive Chinese investments until recently, when some Chinese investors started investing in Mexico as a way to access the U.S. market (due to USMCA, to be discussed hereafter). Indeed, between 1999 and 2018, China invested only $1 billion in Mexico, whereas between 1999 and 2021, the U.S. invested $292.6 billion (Americas Quarterly, September 28, 2021). In this sense, it is relevant to wonder whether or not a government led by Ms. Sheinbaum will try to invest more heavily in its relationship with China.

Ms. Sheinbaum, who has committed to remain faithful to the policies implemented by Mr. López Obrador, including in foreign policy, is expected to keep Mexico's strong links to the governments of Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua, along with the tense relations Mexico has had with Peru, Ecuador since the election of President Daniel Noboa and, more recently, Argentina under President Javier Milei. Mexico recently (in April 2024) broke off its diplomatic relations with Ecuador after the invasion of its embassy in Quito by Ecuadoran forces to seize a political opponent who was seeking refuge in that diplomatic territory. In relation to Argentina, the extravagant egos of two macho men, Milei and AMLO, have led them to exchange various jabs, and it is to be seen whether Milei will proffer further male chauvinist and patronizing comments about Ms. Sheinbaum. If he does, the Mexican government will have to decide whether to ignore those jabs, or to reciprocate.

Relations With the U.S.

The signing of NAFTA in 1992 by President Salinas de Gortari signaled a clear warming in Mexican-U.S. relations. It is true that Mexicans and North Americans had a long relationship with many moments of cooperation, but also others of tension. During the Second World War, Mexicans moved to the U.S. to work on farms and in factories, and replace the U.S. soldiers who were engaged in that war. In the 1960s, American firms moved south and established factories—called maquiladoras—along the Mexican-U.S. border to take simultaneous advantage of Mexican cheap labor and the U.S. consumer market. The signing of NAFTA provided an official framework within which the exchanges between

both countries could take place[7].

President López Obrador remained faithful to keeping relations with the U.S. calm and smooth. Although USMCA, the treaty that replaced NAFTA at the insistence of U.S. President Trump, was negotiated and signed by his predecessor when the latter was a lame-duck president, AMLO accepted it and played by its rules. AMLO understood perfectly the transactional nature of President Trump and cooperated with him with that mindset. That resulted in a surprisingly warm and close relationship between both men (NYTimes, July 8, 2020). AMLO has also managed to develop good and positive relations with President Biden, which shows not only his pragmatism, but also his sense of opportunism (NYTimes, May 14).

What are the prospects under the presidency of Ms. Sheinbaum? Probably more of the same. As noted earlier, Ms. Sheinbaum has declared her intention to cooperate with the U.S. on migration issues, while preserving Mexico's interests and its relations with Central American states. In this sense, in Mexico, there is a feeling that the country has proven its relevance and reliability, and that can become an asset for the future of U.S.-Mexican relations. At the same time, Mr. Trump has announced that if elected, he will modify the terms of trade and access to the U.S. market by leveling a universal 10% import tax. That would significantly modify Mexican-U.S. trade relations and create an unprecedented challenge to the next Mexican president. But in Mexico, the feeling is that if Trump is elected again, Mexico will be better prepared to deal with his administration and will not be taken by surprise (NYTimes, May 9, 2024).

Relations With Morocco

In 2024, Mexico and Morocco celebrate the sixty-second anniversary of their diplomatic relations. This means that diplomatic relations between both countries have existed since the early years of Morocco's independence. It also means that these relations are solid and independent of particular circumstances. For instance, although Mexico was one of the first countries to recognize the Sahrawi Republic, Morocco did not break relations with Mexico, as it did with others. Instead, Morocco has maintained its diplomatic relations with Mexico and reinforced them, despite the refusal of Mexico to review its position on the issue of the Sahara. Mexico was even one of the countries visited by King Mohammed VI in his tour of Latin American states in 2004, while Morocco received Mexican President Fox that same year. In terms of trade, exchanges between both countries grew by approximately 20% between 2012 and 2022, and in 2023, commercial exchanges between the countries reached $353 million.

In terms of trade, one of the venues both countries are trying to explore is cooperation in the agricultural sector, in the sense that Mexico could benefit from one of Morocco's main exports: phosphates.

Morocco and Mexico share a glorious reading of their own respective histories. Both claim to descend from powerful regional empires with deep historic roots, and both see their pasts as entangled with their presents, and their presents as a continuation of their—more often than not—glorious pasts. Cuauhtémoc and Abdelkrim Khattabi (the leader of the

7. It is relevant to note that NAFTA did not include free circulation of individuals. NAFTA referred only to goods and services.

Rif rebellion against Spanish occupation, who defeated the Spanish army at the battle of Anoual in 1921) are both symbols of that resistance to invaders (which was in both cases Spain, though not the same Spain, since Spain of the sixteenth century was powerful and conquering, as opposed to Spain of the 1920s). Both countries also nurture wide ambitions for their nations and their people. Those ambitions partly rely on their glorious pasts, but they also aim at building solid foundations for their futures, with ambitious infrastructure investments.

One of the striking similarities between the countries is that they are both transit countries for migrants, who pass through their territories to reach wealthier lands, the U.S. in the case of Mexico, the European Union (EU) in the case of Morocco. This has led them to share similar views on the issue, as they have both signed the Marrakech Pact that calls for safe, organized, and legal migration. Added to this is the insistence of the leaders of both countries on the importance of reinforcing South-South cooperation, with the objective of allowing countries from the South to be respected and to defend more efficiently their interests. This, jointly with similar positions regarding neutrality in the war in Ukraine, shows similarities that provide grounds for deeper cooperation between the two countries.

In the current electoral cycle, none of the leading candidates should represent a major shift in Mexican views of Morocco. Ms. Sheinbaum is part of a government that has steadily, although moderately, reinforced relations with Morocco, whereas Ms. Gálvez was part of the government of the only President who has ever visited Morocco, or who has received a Moroccan King. This is to say that she is likely to maintain steady and positive relations with Morocco, in the remote possibility of her election. In this sense, it is up to Morocco to step up its game if, for instance, it aims at changing Mexico's position on the Sahara issue.

Conclusion

Mexico has consistently held its presidential elections every six years, no matter how dire the situation. That included in 1940 during the Second World War, in 1982 during the major foreign debt crisis, and in 1994 during the Neo-Zapatista challenge, to cite only a few. No president ever thought about remaining longer in power. And no president has ever thought about benefiting from wide popularity to change the other main rule of the presidential game in Mexico: one term and then out. This reveals an attachment to rules, forms, and traditions that has to be noted here.

That said, the current president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, has shaken Mexican politics. The PRI used to be the dominant party, ruling the country for 71 straight years. The PAN used to be the main conservative opposition party, to the right of PRI, while PRD used to be the main progressive opposition, to the left of the PRI. When they came together in a pact under President Peña Nieto, AMLO left the PRD, created a new party, MORENA, and swept to electoral victory in 2018.

With the elections of June 2, Mr. López Obrador's party seems to dominate Mexican politics: exit polls and early results indicate that Claudia Sheinbaum, his candidate for the presidency, won in a landslide, and candidates he supported and other political allies seem to have also won. This ensures the continuity of his legacy and announces the rise of a new hegemony in Mexican politics, that of a populist, left-leaning party.

Bibliography

- Americas Quarterly, Martha Marcena Coqui, "Why Mexico's Relationship with China Is So Complicated", https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/why-mexicos-relationship-with-china-is-so-complicated/ , (September 28, 2021).
- BBC News Mundo, Cecilia Barría, "Los 4 pilares que explican la alta popularidad de AMLO tras 6 años gobernando México (y cómo lo ven sus críticos)", https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/cv22e6g3x59o , (May 29, 2024).
- Beverley, John and Oviedo, José, (1995) "Introduction", In *The Postmodernism Debate in Latin America*, John Beverley, José Oviedo and Michael Aronna (Eds.), (Durham: Duke University Press)
- Castañeda, Jorge G., (1993) *Utopia Unarmed – The Latin American Left after the Cold War*, (New York: Vintage Books)
- El Economista, Yolanda Morales, " El PIB de México creció 3.2% durante el 2023: Inegi", https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/economia/El-PIB-de-Mexico-crecio-3.2-durante-el-2023-Inegi-20240222-0025.html , (Feb. 22, 2024).
- El Pais, Beatriz Guillén, "Casi nueve millones de mexicanos salen de la pobreza en dos años", https://elpais.com/mexico/2023-08-10/casi-nueve-millones-de-mexicanos-salen-de-la-pobreza-en-dos-anos.html , (August 10, 2023).
- El Pais, Isabella Cota and Macarena Vidal Liy, "Mexico surpasses China as main exporter to the US for first time since 2002" https://english.elpais.com/economy-and-business/2024-02-08/mexico-surpasses-china-as-main-exporter-to-the-us-for-first-time-since-2002.html (Feb. 8, 2024).
- NYTimes, Michael Crowley, "Trump Welcomes Mexico's President in Surprisingly Warm Terms." https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/us/politics/trump-mexico-president-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador.html , (July 8, 2020).
- The New York Times, (Emiliano Rodriguez Mega and Simon Romero), "A Historic First for Mexico as Two Women Vie for the Presidency" https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/06/world/americas/mexico-women-president-candidates.html , (September 6, 2023).
- The New York Times, (Simon Romero and Emiliano Rodriguez Mega), "Why Mexico's Ruling Party Candidate Is Already Dominating the Presidential Race", https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/01/world/americas/mexico-election-amlo-sheinbaum-galvez.html (March 1st, 2024).
- The New York Times, (Natalie Kitroeff) "'Time, Patience, Cold Blood': Mexico Prepares for a Potential Trump Win" https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/09/world/americas/trump-mexico-2024-election.html , (May 9, 2024).
- The New York Times, (Simon Romero and Paulina Villegas), "The Other Busing Program: Mexico Is Pushing Migrants Back South" https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/14/world/americas/mexico-migrants-busing-border.html , (May 14, 2024).

About the Author, Nizar Messari

Nizar Messari is Associate Professor at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane (AUI), Morocco. He served as Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, and then as Vice President for Academic Affairs at the same university. He was Rice Scholar at Yale University's MacMillan Center during the academic year 2021-22. Before returning to Morocco in January 2010, he was Assistant Professor at PUC-Rio, Brazil. He has published in journals such as Security Dialogue, International Studies Perspective, Refugee Survey Quarterly, The Journal of North African Studies, Cultures & Conflits (in French), Contexto Internacional and Politica Externa (both in Portuguese) as well as in edited volumes in English, Portuguese and French. He is the co-author with João Pontes Nogueira of Teoria das Relações Internacionais – Correntes e Debates (Rio de Janeiro: Elsevier/Campus, 2005). He is finalizing a book on security studies from a southern and critical perspective, with a focus on the so-called Arab world.

About the Policy Center for the New South

The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS) is a Moroccan think tank aiming to contribute to the improvement of economic and social public policies that challenge Morocco and the rest of Africa as integral parts of the global South.

The PCNS pleads for an open, accountable and enterprising "new South" that defines its own narratives and mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, as part of a forward-looking relationship with the rest of the world. Through its analytical endeavours, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give the floor to experts from the South. This stance is focused on dialogue and partnership, and aims to cultivate African expertise and excellence needed for the accurate analysis of African and global challenges and the suggestion of appropriate solutions.

Read more

Policy Center for the New South

Mohammed VI Polytechnic University, Rocade Rabat-Salé, 11103
Email : contact@policycenter.ma
Phone : +212 (0) 537 54 04 04 / Fax : +212 (0) 537 71 31 54
Website : www.policycenter.ma

10 YEARS POLICY CENTER FOR THE NEW SOUTH