

Opinion – What Comes Next for Mexico's First Elected 'Presidenta'?

Written by Daniela Philipson García

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DANIELA PHILIPSON GARCÍA, JUN 17 2024

On 2 June, Mexico elected its first female president or, in Spanish, *presidenta*. Claudia Sheinbaum, president-elect of Mexico, has been lauded globally for her shiny credentials. She has a Ph.D. in environmental engineering from the University of California Berkeley, co-authored the Nobel Prize-winning 2007 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Report, and was Mexico City's first female elected Mayor. She will also become the country's first president of Jewish descent. Moreover, Sheinbaum did not only win. She won approximately 60% of the popular vote in a three-way election and led her party's coalition to a historic victory, winning two-thirds of the seats in the lower chamber of Congress.

The electoral results, only two senator seats away from a supermajority, position Sheinbaum and her party, Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional (MORENA), to pass constitutional reforms with little pushback from the opposition. Thus, not only will Mexico have its first *presidenta* come next October, but it will also have its most powerful president in recent history. During her presidency, Sheinbaum will face the opportunity to reshape the country with long-lasting effects. However, there is mounting uncertainty on whether these changes will be for the better or worse.

Sheinbaum's mentor and predecessor, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (known as AMLO), a contentious figure in Mexican politics, has been accused of promoting populism, embodying authoritarian tendencies, and undermining the country's democratic institutions. Despite these accusations, AMLO will leave office with record-high approval ratings (66% as of April 2024). Sheinbaum, who has benefited politically from her long-standing loyalty to AMLO, has vowed to follow his vision of Mexico's "Fourth Transformation."

As part of Mexico's so-called "Fourth Transformation," AMLO pushed for harsh economic austerity measures, infrastructure developments with irreversible consequences for the environment, and the Military's economic and political empowerment. Moreover, AMLO repeatedly sought to dismantle Mexico's National Electoral Institute and National Transparency Institute – both are considered cornerstones of Mexican democracy. Since the election, MORENA legislators stated they will continue to seek constitutional reforms to disintegrate both institutes and overhaul Mexico's judicial branch by subjecting Supreme Court Justices to the popular vote.

Electing Mexico's first *presidenta* was not spontaneous or accidental, rather it was by design. Despite its poor track record on gender-based violence, Mexico is a notable example of a country that promotes affirmative action for women, especially in politics. Women in Mexico were not allowed to vote until 1953. Since then, the country has made significant strides in advancing women in politics. More than 60 years since Mexican women first cast a vote, Mexico adopted statutory gender quotas of at least 50%, also known as gender parity, for federal and state congresses. In 2019, Mexico pushed the goalpost further by adopting a constitutional reform, known as "parity in everything," that mandated compulsory parity "in the composition of all elected and appointed offices."

As a result, in 2018 Mexico became one of the first and only countries to achieve gender parity in both chambers of Congress. Women also preside both chambers of Congress and the Supreme Court of Justice. They hold important positions of power, leading the Ministry of Citizen Security and Protection, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the

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Ministry of Interior. After the recent elections, women will hold 13 out of 32 governorships. Among them is Clara Brugada, Mexico City's incoming Mayor (also from MORENA). Nonetheless, it's important to note that increasing women's representation and participation in positions of power is a necessary but insufficient step towards gender justice. Having a female president won't necessarily translate into more feminist policies or automatic improvements in women's lives. Moreover, applying a critical feminist lens means debunking essentialist explanations charged with the underlying assumption that women are inherently "good."

A sign that gender parity does not automatically translate into gender justice is the worsening gender-based violence crisis in Mexico. Despite having significant representation in Congress and government in general, 10 women are killed and 7 go missing every day. Yet these statistics only showcase the extreme violence against women and girls and hide the everyday forms of gender-based violence they experience. A survey by the National Statistics and Geography Institute found that 70% of Mexican women have experienced some type of gender-based violence throughout their lives, including psychological, economic, physical, and sexual violence.

During her administration as the Mayor of Mexico City, Sheinbaum repeatedly claimed that her policies helped reduce femicides by 30%. However, a closer look at the data shows that there was an increase in homicides of women under "undetermined" circumstances, creating speculation as to whether the real number of femicides was being obscured. One article by *El Financiero* found that the number of femicides had increased, not decreased, by 30%. Likewise, the number of men and women who have disappeared in Mexico City has increased. However, Sheinbaum has refused to acknowledge these facts and sought to minimize the number of disappearances during her term.

Another concerning security challenge is militarization. Despite his 2018 campaign promise to remove the military from traditionally civilian tasks, such as public safety, AMLO has significantly expanded the Military's economic and political power. Nonetheless, evidence shows that militarization has failed to curb crime and insecurity since 2006 when then-President Felipe Calderón declared the "war on drugs" and deployed thousands of soldiers across the country. On the contrary, studies show that homicides and human rights violations have increased as militarization grows.

Yet Sheinbaum has followed in the footsteps of AMLO and Calderón. In 2022, during the aftermath of the pandemic, Sheinbaum deployed 6,000 National Guard soldiers across Mexico City's subway when residents complained about structural problems. Sheinbaum also promoted and sanctioned police brutality to repress feminist protests. As a result, Sheinbaum has especially hostile and contentious relationships with feminist groups and collectives in the capital.

As Mexico's first *presidenta*, Sheinbaum has already made history. However, her legacy will be defined by five specific issues: climate change, immigration, economic policy, political reform, and security. If she decides to side with AMLO, who favored environmentally destructive policies, austerity measures, democratic-weakening reforms, and militarization, the results will likely be dire. However, there is still hope Sheinbaum will decide to take matters into her own hands and instead implement a progressive policy agenda that prioritizes environmental, fiscal, and gender justice.

About the author:

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