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AMLO: a new hope for Latin America?

Svenja Blanke on the inauguration of the new Mexican president Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador

Read this interview in German.

Latin America has moved to the right in recent years. And yet in the early 2000s, it was the left that predominantly governed the countries between Central America and Tierra del Fuego in the South. In Mexico it's exactly the opposite. For decades, the country has been governed by neo-liberals and conservatives and it's just now that Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador, AMLO for short, has won a landslide.

On 1 December 2018, AMLO assumed the office of Mexican President. In this context, Claudia Detsch spoke to Svenja Blanke about the prospects for his presidency, for the left in Latin America and AMLO's relationship with US President Donald Trump.

Does AMLO have what it takes to be the left's beacon of hope far beyond Mexico's borders?

AMLO won the votes of those wanting a change in Mexican politics and the economy. With 53 per cent and an absolute majority in congress, his victory in July was not only remarkably convincing. He's a symbol of hope and change. At present, many Latin American countries elect far-right politicians as presidents. As we all know, it has happened recently in Brazil. Latin American democracies are showing considerable signs of decay. Given this situation, those on the progressive side, which is of course a very diverse and fragmented group, naturally hope that central elements of a progressive agenda will be implemented under the AMLO government.

So what would be core elements of such a progressive agenda in Mexico?

They would include fighting poverty and insecurity with innovative reforms, creating high-quality jobs, more and better education and improving human rights. Whether these hopes will be fulfilled is

purely speculative at the moment. López Obrador is known for implementing large infrastructure projects from his time as mayor of Mexico's megacity. He is now planning major public investment for Mexico's more underdeveloped south-west region with the 'tren maya', a large railway project. That should promote employment and development. Whether the project is socially and environmentally sustainable remains to be seen. Such projects are therefore only a starting point for new left-wing political ideas in the 21st century.

Will AMLO's foreign policy present a left-wing alternative to right-wing nationalism in the region?

So far AMLO is not really known as a politician who's particularly interested in regional or global issues beyond Mexico's own concerns. For him, Mexican domestic policy is the priority. It's not yet too clear how he and his government will act on the global stage and what kind of conciliatory momentum for peace and security they will get going.

But the governments of the two largest countries on the American continent are banking on confrontation and the escalation of violence. Insecurity and violence continue to run rampant in the region, authoritarian tendencies are increasing, political and humanitarian crises are mounting up, in the case of Venezuela developing into a mass exodus. In view of this political climate, the region urgently needs a foreign policy counterweight who will advocate human rights, democracy, humanity and multilateral solutions. Mexico could be such a voice against future ultra-right-wing alliances involving Bolsonaro and Trump. The line-up of the new foreign policy team inspires hope, at any rate.

AMLO is considered a left-wing populist. Is it only populists who currently have a chance of success in Latin America, like in other parts of the world?

Latin America has a long tradition of so-called populist presidents. That is true both on the conservative side with Fujimori and Uribe and on the left with Chávez, for example. This also includes the Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas, who nationalised the oil industry in 1938 and carried out agricultural reforms. However, AMLO's victory can be explained by the particular Mexican context.

Since 2000 violence has multiplied under the presidencies of Fox, Calderón and Peña Nieto. This applies both to petty and organised crime. The human rights situation has worsened considerably. Economic growth is not high enough to create jobs, despite the potential of Mexican industry, science and markets. There are also the low quality of many existing jobs, social inequality, the income gap

and poverty. A majority of Mexican society therefore decided to give another candidate a go who is not from the main PRI or PAN parties. AMLO has actually been in politics for many years. But since he has not held any official office since 2006 he was not perceived as an establishment candidate. His normal, non-luxurious lifestyle reinforces this image.

At the moment it seems as though only politicians who directly attack the establishment stand a chance in Latin American elections.

Corruption, cronyism or privileges for a closed circle of the political and economic elite undermine the democratic systems. That is the reality in Latin America as a whole. This helps us understand the Mexican people's hope in counting on a man who promises to oppose corruption and stand up for the concerns of the poor and marginalised. This demand also exists in other countries in the region. This is why recently political 'outsiders' such as comedians, businessmen, singers and journalists are being given a greater chance. It does not mean automatic success for populists. There are counterexamples such as the presidential elections in Costa Rica at the beginning of the year.

It's correct, however, that there is a growing sense in Latin America that the political representatives only govern for the few. The traditional political class is fervently rejected. In 2017, approval of democracy throughout Latin America had the worst indicator since 2001, standing at 48 per cent. In Mexico in 2017, only 37.7 per cent of the population thought that democracy was the preferred form of government. 38.4 per cent even thought that for 'normal' people it wouldn't matter whether they lived in a democratic or undemocratic society. Only 12 years prior, in 2006, the approval ratings for democracy were still at 54 per cent in Mexico.

The relationship between Mexico and the US is strained due to disputes over migration and trade. Should we expect a long-running feud between Trump and AMLO?

AMLO and Trump actually got off to an amazingly positive start. The relationship between the two countries since Trump's inauguration has been pretty bad due to his rhetorical attacks. And yet Mexico still deals with the US. AMLO seems to be avoiding provocations recently, even though he can score with anti-Trump rhetoric at home. But Mexico is dependent on its large neighbour, economically in particular. Hence the interest even before AMLO's inauguration in getting a trade deal signed and sealed. But the US is also reliant on Mexico: exports to Mexico are higher than those to

Brazil, Russia, India and China put together. The US-Mexico-Canada agreement (now USMCA instead of NAFTA) was signed on 30 November. So the signs are pointing cooperation, not a feud. From a Trumpian point of view, AMLO will certainly be boosted by having won so clearly. Trump likes winners.

Yet at the same time new disagreements over how to handle Central American migrants on the US-Mexican border are breaking out. Can we expect a constructive solution to this?

The Central American migrants, who are now stuck at Mexico's northern border, have sped up conversations between the two countries about their future joint action. They are probably currently negotiating a kind of Marshall Plan. This involves a sort of third-country agreement: Mexico takes in the Central American refugees while the asylum procedure is reviewed, but then in return receives resources and private investment from the US for economic development on Mexico's southern border. There have already been initial attempts at triangular cooperation in the recent past. The pressure to act has grown with increasing migration from northern Central America.

Since AMLO himself has little experience in US-Mexican relations, perhaps the element of surprise in politics between the two nations now comes from AMLO rather than Trump.



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