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A clear majority

Newly elected President Claudia Sheinbaum wants to continue the left-wing policies of her predecessor. But the challenges facing Mexico are enormous

It came as no surprise that Claudia Sheinbaum Pardo was elected Mexico's new president on Sunday. For a year now, the candidate of the ruling coalition has had a lead of between 50 and 60 per cent in most polls. The surprise was the margin by which she won.

Sheinbaum scored 59 per cent, six percentage points more than the charismatic Andrés Manuel López Obrador, or 'AMLO', who won the presidential election in a landslide in 2018.

Her opponent Xóchitl Gálvez Ruiz, candidate of the opposition coalition consisting of the PRI, which had ruled omnipotently for 70 years, and the conservative PAN, which followed it for 12 years, as well as the now small social democratic PRD, only achieved 28 per cent despite a brilliant start — significantly less than expected.

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The first female president in the country's republican history will take office at the beginning of October for her six-year term. Politically, she has followed López Obrador for more than two decades. First as Environment Secretary when AMLO took over the government of Mexico City in 2000, then in his campaign team in the 2006 presidential elections, on both occasions for the PRD. From 2011 onwards, she was involved in setting up the current governing party Morena, and in 2018, she became head of the government of Mexico City.

Sheinbaum also has an extensive academic curriculum: She is a physicist with a doctorate in energy technology, specialised in environmental issues and was part of the United Nations' expert group on climate change (IPCC). She may not be nearly as charismatic as her predecessor, but that

was not relevant for these elections. Her electoral success is primarily due to the credibility with which she promised to continue AMLO's legacy. Sheinbaum was also able to rely on the support of her party Morena and build on her overall successful time as head of government in Mexico City.

An attempt at an authoritarian revival?

The opposition's poor result, meanwhile, is less to be attributed to Gálvez, but rather confirms that the parties in her coalition, PRI and PAN, have failed to make a fresh start. Discrediting them created AMLO's political capital. As a politician who, for the first time, is concerned about the non-privileged majority of the population, he has become the alternative for a majority of the people.

Indeed, the election results show that the social divide has become even more relevant. It is not only the president's discourse, criticised by his opponents as populist, which he uses to declare his programme to authentically represent the interests of the people. His criticism of the conservative elites coincides with the concrete experiences of large sections of the population in terms of existing injustice, discrimination and exploitation, as well as the indifference of past policies in this regard.

At the same time, his policies have led to concrete results: the reduction of poverty due to the doubling of minimum wages and the extensive abolition of temporary work, the strengthening of trade unions through a reform of labour law, and the introduction of a universal basic pension and other social programmes that reach seven out of 10 households.

At the same time, there have been numerous gaps, criticisable decisions and political intentions — in particular the failure to reduce violence and crime, the health policy debacle, the poor state of the education system and the attempts to pacify the judiciary and electoral authorities. But from the voters' point of view, unlike his predecessors, he has at least tried.

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The president has a lot of power in the Mexican system, but for fundamental changes, Sheinbaum cannot bypass Congress. Several of AMLO's initiatives that required constitutional reform were thwarted by Congress and the judiciary. The final results are not yet available, but it appears that the governing coalition has achieved a two-thirds majority in the Chamber of Deputies and only narrowly missed out on a

majority in the Senate. This means that the polemically debated constitutional reforms, introduced by the outgoing president before the election, are only subject to a few votes from the opposition, which can certainly be mobilised. Several of these reforms are questionable and, for AMLO's critics, exemplary for the president's populism and his attempts, in view of Mexico's history, to pursue an authoritarian re-establishment and ultimately undermine democracy.

This includes, in particular, changes to the electoral system — the abolition of so-called autonomous institutions. These were created in the course of the transition to democracy in order to put an unrestrained executive in its place, for example in the area of transparency or the prevention of the formation of monopolies. Most critical, however, is the intention to appoint judges of the supreme court, the district courts and the federal electoral court as well as the so-called eleven councillors of the national electoral authority through a general election. According to the accusation, this would restrict the independence of the judiciary and the electoral authority or subject them to political influence. The new Congress will convene on 1 September and AMLO will not hand over his office to Sheinbaum until 1 October. With a qualified majority in the new Congress, the outgoing president could therefore implement these constitutional reforms without extensive discussion before he leaves office.

Big shoes to fill

New governors were elected in nine federal states, including Mexico City. The governing coalition was confirmed in six states and won another in Yucatán. Particularly important was the election in Mexico City, which Morena's candidate, Clara Brugada, clearly won with around 52 per cent of the vote. It is expected that Morena will also win back some of the districts that were lost to the opposition in the elections three years ago.

At the state level, Morena now governs 23 of the 32 states (including Mexico City), while their coalition partner, the Green Party, governs one more.

Founded by AMLO in 2011 as a civil society movement and registered as a party in 2014, the 'Movement for National Renewal', Morena, is still a personalist movement with a party statute. Its appeal is great; after just four years – unrivalled in history – it had won the presidency, the

majority in Congress and, since then, the governments and state parliaments of the federal states.

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Its success cannot be understood without López Obrador, his values, the messianism attributed to him by many and his ability to express the collective expectations of the majority of the population, especially the poor. As the Spanish newspaper *El País* summarises: His 'powerful slogan "For the good of all, the poor first" has been etched in the collective consciousness.' The charismatic president had disciplined and bound the diversity of interests of the internal factions, which are officially not allowed to exist. Last but not least, he was the filter for the candidacies.

López Obrador has already passed on the leadership of Morena to his successor. After the election, he announced his intention to retire from political life. It remains to be seen whether Sheinbaum can hold the movement together with her own authority. This year's successful election could also mark the beginning of conflicts, fragmentation and fractures that could lead to a weakening of the country's strongest party at the next elections at the latest.

Many people will also be looking to see how the new president will approach all those who supported the political change in 2018 but then turned away, mainly due to the president's confrontational and polarising style. For example, the family organisations of the more than 100 000 disappeared, non-governmental organisations, the feminist movement as well as journalists and intellectuals who – often rightly – criticised the government's decisions. From AMLO's point of view, all of them are compliant supporters of his political opponents, the 'neoliberal, conservative and corrupt elites'.

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Financing current social spending and promised reforms, such as the establishment of a universal healthcare system and a maternal pension, will soon pose a major challenge. The biggest and most complex task, however, is to establish peace and security in a country where over 180 000 people have been murdered in the last six years. During the election campaign, 34 candidates were killed, 82 people if you include family members, supporters or officials. In some

federal states, the question arises as to whether it is still possible to speak of free elections due to the influence of organised crime.

A clear majority of voters were prepared to place their trust in Sheinbaum. She now faces the challenge of honouring her promise of continuity with López Obrador's long-term political project, while at the same time creating space for changes in a direction that will undoubtedly be necessary to keep Mexico on a stable democratic, social and economic course. Other countries in the region have not yet succeeded in doing this.



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