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Filling the vacuum

Claudia Sheinbaum is the frontrunner for the Mexican presidency. But the political legacy of her predecessor AMLO is both an opportunity and a burden

One outcome of Mexico's general elections of 2 June 2024 is guaranteed: for the next six years, a woman will lead the country. Barring surprises, all the polls are predicting that the new president will be Claudia Sheinbaum Pardo, the candidate for the governing coalition of the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA), the Labour Party (PT) and the Ecologist Green Party of Mexico (PVEM). In early September, Sheinbaum was selected after five surveys of MORENA members. She is expected to continue the policies of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador ('AMLO'), who won a landslide victory in 2018 and whose 'Fourth Transformation' has fundamentally changed the balance of power.

Another reason it's virtually certain that Mexico will have a woman for president is that *Frente Amplio por México* (Broad Front for Mexico) – the alliance of the three most important opposition parties, which had dominated Mexican politics for decades before MORENA was founded in 2014 – has *also* chosen a woman candidate. Largely unknown two months ago, Senator Xóchitl Gálvez Ruiz has managed to shake up the normally predictable politics by clashing publicly with AMLO, who repeatedly attacked her in his morning press conferences. Her bold campaign put her in the national spotlight, and in June, her surging popularity pushed opposition party leaders to abandon their candidate selection process (submitting 150,000 signatures of supporters, followed by a nationwide poll and a primary). The other candidates in the tripartite oppositional alliance of the authoritarian Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which ruled for some 70 years, the conservative National Action Party (PAN), which succeeded it for two presidential terms, and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) have to put a good face on the matter.

Who are the candidates?

Xóchitl Gálvez describes herself as an indigenous woman from a poor background, a computer engineer and an entrepreneur. At first glance, her origins, curriculum vitae, folksy demeanour and appeal seem better suited to MORENA. Under Vicente Fox's PAN government (2000-2006), she headed the National Commission for Indigenous Issues, then ran for her state government and later was a district mayor of Mexico City. In an interview, she described her position as centre-left and, above all, pragmatic. While Sheinbaum can benefit from the president's popularity and represent the continuity of the Fourth Transformation, neither Gálvez nor her coalition has presented anything substantive: they merely criticise AMLO and his government.

That said, Gálvez has replaced her coalition's desolate mood. Barely two months ago, it was musing about the size of the margin they'd lose by. Now, although all current polls suggest Gálvez will not be able to catch up with Sheinbaum, they are cautiously optimistic. Gálvez could at least ensure that the opposition parties increase their presence in Congress and dash MORENA's hopes to win the qualified majority needed to pass constitutional amendments. The long election campaign might still hold more surprises — if another opposition party fields a candidate.

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Claudia Sheinbaum Pardo, until recently Mexico City's Head of Government, remains tipped to win the elections. That position also served as AMLO's stepping stone to the presidency, and he was succeeded by Sheinbaum's party rival, former foreign minister Marcelo Ebrard. Since the 1990s, the modern left-wing politics of Mexico City's Social Democratic mayors have impacted the entire country. Sheinbaum was the city's Secretary of the Environment under AMLO, then a member of the team for his unsuccessful 2006 presidential campaign. After that, she returned to academia, and, when AMLO lost the 2012 elections, helped found MORENA. In 2018, during AMLO's presidency, Sheinbaum was the first woman elected as Head of Government of Mexico City.

Sheinbaum, a physicist, has a middle-class background and an impressive academic CV. After researching at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in California, USA, she earned her doctorate in energy

engineering and became a researcher at the National Autonomous University of Mexico's Institute of Engineering Sciences. From early on, she was involved in climate change issues, especially sustainable development. She sat on the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and advised the state-owned Federal Electricity Commission (CFE).

Although Sheinbaum has often been said to lack AMLO's charisma, that seems irrelevant. After supporting AMLO's politics for a quarter of a century, what she has to do now is follow in his footsteps. She has a secure position within MORENA, despite its sharp reverse in Mexico City in 2021, and has proved herself. All the polls predicted that she would be MORENA's candidate, with the best career path — according to the party organisation and members, and most of those who want to see AMLO's policies continue.

Challenges ahead

Nonetheless, President López Obrador, who has done more to shape Mexico's political agenda than anyone else this century, will create a vacuum when he leaves office. Sheinbaum will have to fill that but will have room to manoeuvre, despite inheriting several challenges from AMLO. She'll have to remain loyal to the charismatic president on whose popularity she depends, , embody the political continuity of AMLO's six-year government, especially regarding his social programmes. While tax revenue in Mexico has risen significantly due to more rigorous tax collection – especially from large companies – it remains less than 15 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP). State revenues can no longer finance universal health care or the basic pension, which is scheduled to rise by 25 per cent during AMLO's last year in office. Thus far, he has ruled out reforming taxes and increasing government debt, which will rise from 3.3 this year to 4.9 per cent of GDP in 2024. In view of the elections, however, there may be some flexibility.

In interviews, Sheinbaum has stressed the need to shift from Mexico's mostly petroleum-based energy policy to renewable energies, which used to be a taboo subject. The government is pursuing energy sovereignty by strengthening the state-owned oil company, PEMEX, which has not been profitable for decades, as well as the CFE, another state-owned company responsible for electricity generation and supply. That policy is a simmering dispute in the United States-Mexico-Canada Trade Agreement (USMCA). After unsuccessful dispute settlement talks, the US is set to invoke the USMCA dispute resolution mechanism, arguing that Mexico's nationalist renewable energy policy discriminates against foreign investment. Should Mexico lose the case, it could face billions in

claims.

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Sheinbaum would also inherit AMLO's strained relationship with Mexican universities due to his austerity policies that strongly affected research institutes and universities. In response to their regular criticism of government policies, the president lashed out at educational institutions and non-governmental organisations, including feminist groups — lumping them together with the conservatives, corrupt elites and neoliberals protesting the loss of their privileges. For her part, Sheinbaum stresses the importance of research and development.

Sheinbaum would not just inherit López Obrador's conflicts with those institutions, but would also follow his confrontational and polarising style. AMLO claims that his Fourth Transformation government genuinely represents the people's interests against the elites. Not only does that earn him accusations of populism by his critics, but he is also accused of seeking to curtail the autonomy of institutions that began to limit executive powers and to create transparency in the democratisation process in the 1990s.

Claudia Sheinbaum will have to both promise continuity and prepare for change — while her opponent will say the same thing. But AMLO's enduring popularity, his generally good record of economic and social achievements and her party's support make Sheinbaum the clear favourite. As for Gálvez, aside from the Social Democrats, who fear they may not be reelected to Congress, her coalition parties PAN and PRI – discredited former governing parties – drag her down. AMLO has made political capital from their elitist politics, repeatedly stating that he is the first president to stand up for the unprivileged majority. Despite justified criticism of his failure to reduce violence and crime and his efforts to subordinate autonomous institutions, most Mexicans continue to view AMLO as the purveyor of change. So far, this majority also seems willing to place their trust in his designated successor.



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