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Staying left, the Mexican way

While much of Latin America turns right, Mexico's ruling Morena is bucking the trend. Its success comes at the expense of ideological purity

With much of Latin America seduced by the radical right, Brazil and Mexico have emerged as the region's last major bastions of left-wing government. Yet there is a key difference between the two. Whereas Brazil's leftist President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva faced an uphill battle to win re-election last month, Mexico's ruling party, the left-wing Morena, is expected to win five times as many votes as any opposition party in next year's legislative elections.

How Mexico's left has managed to retain overwhelming electoral support is among the most fascinating questions of contemporary Latin American politics. The answer centres on Morena's pragmatic brand of left-wing politics, which blends a bold redistributive agenda with unflinching security policies and a willingness to cooperate with a variety of forces, including those that many on the left might view as foes.

Left on labour, tough on crime

When it comes to workers, Morena is unapologetically left-leaning. Successive Morena governments have pursued major labour-market reforms, including raising the minimum wage, mandating salary transparency, tightening subcontracting enforcement and strengthening workplace protections.

Since 2018, when Morena's Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) took power, average labour income has risen 30 per cent above inflation, lifting more than 13 million people out of poverty. Under López Obrador's successor, President Claudia Sheinbaum, social-security coverage has been extended to 1.3 million gig workers. Morena-led governments have also built an extensive network of social programmes that now reach 41 per cent of Mexican families.

While Morena embodies the leftist ethos on labour, it breaks the mould

on security. Sheinbaum, in particular, has cracked down on organised crime, nearly halving the daily homicide rate in just 18 months. Her security strategy includes an element of political theatre, with regular televised presidential briefings showcasing operations against criminal groups and touting the construction of new prisons to house the fast-growing population of convicted criminals.

Morena has also joined forces with allies that other left-leaning movements might shun, from evangelical conservatives to the Green Party, whose political agenda includes tax cuts and the promotion of the death penalty, both anathema to many left-wing voters. As a result, constituencies that have helped bring right-wing governments to power elsewhere in Latin America have ended up supporting the left in Mexico. Among Mexicans who identify as right-wing, 43 per cent reported favouring Morena during the last presidential election.

Nowhere is the Mexican left's pragmatism more evident than in its dealings with US President Donald Trump.

Even the military, which strongly backed the political right in Brazil, accepts Morena in Mexico. It is not hard to see why: its capacity and budget have grown considerably under Morena's rule. So has its prestige, as Morena-led governments have entrusted it with building airports, railways, hotels and other major infrastructure. (Soldiers are cheaper than private contractors, they argue.) Morena-led governments have also replaced the civilian Federal Police with a National Guard run by the Secretariat of Defence.

Mexico's left has formed similarly unlikely alliances in the corporate world. Both AMLO and Sheinbaum made it an early priority to establish a business advisory council that brings together some of Mexico's wealthiest corporate leaders. Since then, Sheinbaum has taken a hands-on role in courting private investment and working with business to develop economic-growth strategies.

Nowhere is the Mexican left's pragmatism more evident than in its dealings with US President Donald Trump. Whereas other progressive Latin American leaders, like Lula in Brazil and former Colombian President Gustavo Petro, opted for open confrontation with Trump, Sheinbaum demonstrated remarkable restraint, even in the face of mockery. Sheinbaum has made uncomfortable concessions to the United States, from blocking migrant caravans from Central America to transferring 36 hectares of maritime area for a private gas terminal in the US.

Another peculiar feature of Mexico's left is that it has mostly steered clear of identity politics. Despite being the country's first female president, Sheinbaum tends to invoke feminism mostly in ceremonial terms and has not made it a theme of her government. In fact, Mexico City has gone so far as to create a special social assistance program only for men, because women often get greater benefits from federal programs.

The pragmatism of Mexico's left carries enormous risks. The most obvious one is that if Morena compromises on too many fronts, it may end up governing like a conservative party.

Mexico has remained on the left because it is governed by a political movement that places greater value on pursuing its domestic priorities than on maintaining ideological purity.

In some areas, this is already happening. Morena governments have largely avoided raising revenues through higher taxes, despite chronic underinvestment in public infrastructure and health care. Mexico collects taxes equivalent to just 18 per cent of GDP, far below the OECD average of 34 per cent, and its public-health system is one of Latin America's most underfunded. Morena also lacks a properly funded green agenda, has failed to push antitrust action to dismantle private oligopolies, and has overseen a systematic increase in the number of people imprisoned without conviction.

Some emphasise that Morena's continued popularity reflects longstanding regional dynamics. Just as Mexico retained a conservative government while the 'pink tide' swept the rest of Latin America, it has remained a leftist stronghold at a time when many of its neighbours have swung rightward. Yet a different political clock is not enough to explain Mexico's position.

In reality, Mexico has remained on the left because it is governed by a political movement that places greater value on pursuing its domestic priorities than on maintaining ideological purity. Mexico's left is willing to compromise on security policies, political alliances, economic orthodoxy and foreign policy, provided it can continue delivering tangible improvements in the lives of working-class Mexicans.

The result is a political movement that might make many traditional leftists deeply uncomfortable, but has emerged as one of the world's most electorally successful left-wing movements.

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