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Country Report

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Mexico Before the Elections – Forecasts and Problems

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On June 2, 2024, presidential and parliamentary elections will take place in Mexico. Additionally, thousands of political offices at state and municipal levels will be newly assigned. Overall, these are the most extensive elections in the history of the largest Spanish-speaking country in the world – and accordingly, much is at stake. Claudia Sheinbaum (MORENA), the candidate chosen by sitting President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) from the left-populist government camp, currently leads by a significant margin in most published polls, while her competitor Xóchitl Gálvez (PAN), who represents a coalition of three opposition parties and civil society organizations, has been able to gain some ground in recent weeks but has not yet closed the gap. However, one thing is clear: Mexico will be governed by a woman as head of state for the first time starting in October. However, there are hardly any other certainties; rather, the domestic security situation is under considerable pressure. Since the beginning of the election campaign, elected officials as well as candidates have been murdered on the streets or attacked during campaign appearances. Local and national security forces are barely able to halt the insidious attacks of organized cartel crime. While the nationwide election of nearly 21,000 offices and the prospect of a female president symbolizes Mexico's significant progress as a democratic society, the country continues to struggle against significant structural problems.

Background

The United Mexican States are a federally organized presidential republic with 32 states. The President is directly elected as the head of state and government for a six-year term without the possibility of re-election. The Congress consists of two chambers: the Senate (128 seats) and the Chamber of Deputies (500 seats), which are both renewed every six and three years, respectively. Until the year 2000, the country was governed for over 70 years continuously by a single party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), whose legacy still influences the general understanding of democracy, elections, separation of powers, influence, and transfer of power to this day. The current incumbent and numerous leaders of the current ruling party, MORENA, were socialized within PRI and thus have a limited understanding of independent judicial processes and oversight mechanisms by the opposition, which are meant to prevent abuse of power and control government work. In the Freedom House Index 2024, Mexico receives 60 out of 100 possible points and is merely classified as "partly free."

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² Consisting of MORENA (National Regeneration Movement), the Labor Party (PT), and the Ecological Green Party of Mexico (PVEM).

³ Consisting of the parties PAN (National Action Party), PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), and PRD (Democratic Revolution Party)

Mexico's **political landscape** has been quite volatile since the year 2000. When the decades-long rule of the PRI was broken at the turn of the millennium by the conservative PAN with Vicente Fox, and Mexico rose to a full-fledged democracy through peaceful transition of power, efforts were made to reform the structural nepotism - with modest but significant achievements such as the establishment of the independent electoral institute, Instituto Nacional Electoral (INE). In 2018, AMLO came to power with the MORENA-movement he founded. Since then, it has consistently expanded its political presence in the country and now governs in 23 out of 32 states.⁴

The distribution of wealth and industrial capacity in Mexico is extraordinarily unequal. Additionally, despite all economic progress, over 40 percent of the population continues to live in poverty. In the north and in the industrialized center (Bajío) of the country, states benefit from free trade with the neighboring USA and billions of investments as part of the nearshoring dynamics, the relocation of company value chains to nearby foreign countries, while people in the south and southeast of the country have fewer economic prospects and social mobility opportunities. Nevertheless, Mexico is an **industrialized emerging market**, a G20 and OECD member, and currently the twelfth-largest economy in the world.⁵

The country is aware of its special role and **relationship with the USA** within the framework of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the "T-MEC" (Tratado entre México, Estados Unidos y Canadá), formerly NAFTA: Mexico is the most important trading partner of the USA and is closely intertwined with the "big brother" to the north economically and socially. This creates a special attractiveness for investors from Europe and Asia.

The internal challenges, however, are significant and continuous. Homicide rates in the context of the out-of-control **drug war** or conflicts among the now highly diversified cartels are at a historical record high. Parts of the country are no longer fully under the control of the state authorities.⁶ The pervasive **corruption** at all levels of government and society is another extremely problematic phenomenon that threatens the stability of democratic institutions. The weaknesses of the rule of law, with a 95 percent impunity rate, and an increasingly questioned independence and effectiveness of the judiciary, currently make Mexican democracy appear at least fragile, if not dysfunctional. Many of these problems are not directly attributable to the current administration of AMLO but are of long-standing and structural nature.

A comprehensive **assessment** of the current "sexenio," meaning the six-year term of government, is not intended here. However, it is worth noting that many of the high expectations with which AMLO took office in 2018 after his decisive election victory (53.2 percent) have not only remained unfulfilled but have been undermined by his very policies.

⁴ While MORENA governs in coalitions in 23 states, opposition parties are limited to governing in 9 states: 5 for PAN, 2 for PRI, and 2 for Movimiento Ciudadano (MC).

⁵ IMF-Forecast, 2024

⁶ During AMLO's term in office, according to official government statistics, there have been over 180,000 recorded murders.

The mentioned escalation of violence, the significantly increased militarization of the state, dubious large-scale infrastructure projects (such as the *Tren Maya*, *Dos Bocas* refinery, AIFA airport), a return to fossil fuels in energy policy, markedly deteriorated healthcare services, and Mexico's partial withdrawal from the international stage are particularly worrying in this context.

However, there have also been significant achievements in social policy, such as the increase in the minimum wage and improvements in the pension system, whose economic sustainability is at least questionable. Additionally, there are constant clashes between the government and the Mexican judiciary, especially the Supreme Court, public disputes with critical journalists, and the weakening of autonomous oversight bodies of the political system, such as the electoral institute INE or the information authority INAI (*Instituto Nacional de Transparencia, Acceso a la Información y Protección de Datos Personales*).

Electoral Campaign and Polls

The **electoral campaign** in Mexico has been officially underway since March 1, 2024. On June 2, over 99 million citizens will be called upon to cast their votes, and political offices will be renewed at all levels of the state, from city halls to the presidential palace – totalling 20,263 positions according to the National Electoral Institute (INE).⁷ The most crucial decision is undoubtedly the election of the next head of state, in which Claudia Sheinbaum (MORENA) represents the government camp and Xóchitl Gálvez (former Senator of the PAN) stands as the opposition candidate.⁸ Jorge Álvarez Máynez is running for the *Movimiento Ciudadano* (MC), but he is not given any real chances.

The 61-year-old **Claudia Sheinbaum** served as the mayor of Mexico City, but, above all, she is a close confidante if not a loyal supporter of AMLO, whom she sometimes awkwardly attempts to imitate. The Ph.D. physicist briefly distanced herself from her mentor during the pandemic and relied on scientific knowledge regarding the handling of the coronavirus - a mistake, at least politically, that she will not commit again. Since then, she has consistently presented herself as the seamless continuation of the government's policies, embracing the historical task of advancing AMLO's "Fourth Transformation" (4T).⁹ The essence of this transformation was supposed to be the fight against corruption and poverty. Ironically, since AMLO took office in 2018, the problem of corruption has not improved but worsened instead. Sheinbaum can be credited with political acumen and administrative competence; at the very least, she has relevant government experience. However, there are doubts as to whether she can truly develop her own political style and break away from her "supreme father" AMLO.

The uniqueness of this election campaign lies in the fact that Claudia Sheinbaum rhetorically only needs to adhere to the policies of her predecessor, who still enjoys very high approval ratings (averaging 65 percent since taking office) and has intensified the expansion of state social programs in the last two years of his term,

⁷ [Calendario Electoral - Instituto Nacional Electoral \(ine.mx\)](#)

⁸ [Historisches Duell um die Präsidentschaft in Mexiko – DW – 09.04.2024](#)

⁹ The historical context of this catchphrase encompasses Mexico's three most significant transformation processes to date: (1) Independence from Spain from 1810 to 1821, (2) the reform processes with the Constitution of 1857, and (3) the Revolution of 1910 with the Constitution of 1917. AMLO and Morena now see themselves in the fourth transformation process, where the state reasserts control, bringing an end to the "neoliberalism" of recent decades, etc.

benefiting pensioners, single mothers, students, and other disadvantaged groups directly and in cash. The increase in the minimum wage is also a factor that millions of people directly feel, rising from 88 pesos per day (about 3.80 euros) in 2018 to 249 pesos (about 13.50 euros) on average nationwide, thus becoming a significant element in the current election campaign.¹⁰

On the side of the opposition, the also 61-year-old **Xóchitl Gálvez** is attempting to become the first female president in Mexico's history. The former senator of the conservative PAN, although she was never a formal member, is the candidate of the coalition alliance *Fuerza y Corazón por México* (Strength and Heart for Mexico). The engineer and successful self-made entrepreneur of indigenous descent impresses with her personal story of rising from humble beginnings. This resonates particularly with socially disadvantaged population segments and lends her a high level of personal credibility. However, her practical government experience is limited: during Vicente Fox's presidency (2000-2006), she was tasked with establishing the Institute for Indigenous Affairs, and later she served as mayor of the Miguel Hidalgo district in the capital. In contrast to Claudia Sheinbaum, she is considered charismatic, approachable, a woman of the people who until recently rode her bicycle through Mexico City.

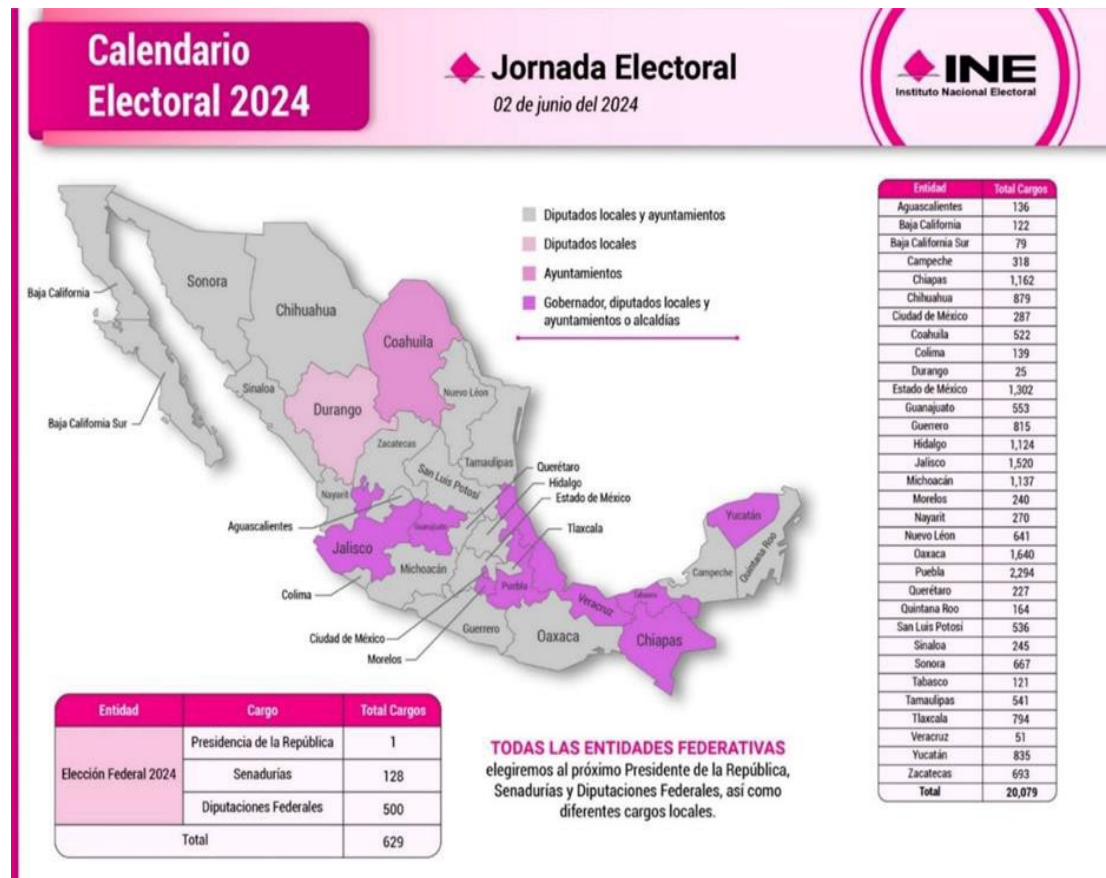
The third contender in the race for the presidency, **Jorge Álvarez Máynez** (MC), makes the best of his distant position, deliberately trying to reach a young audience and strengthen his party's role in possible coalition negotiations after the election through targeted voting.

In the first round of the **two televised candidate debates**, Claudia Sheinbaum was able to score points with her composed demeanor. Xóchitl Gálvez remained surprisingly subdued here. In the second duel, she was able to turn the tables and play a much more offensive role, since then there has been at least a more optimistic atmosphere in the opposition camp. The known or **published polls** should be taken with caution. The significant differences (ranging from 30 percent between Sheinbaum and Gálvez to a narrow single-digit margin or technical tie) illustrate that not all of these surveys are conducted reliably, and some of them may serve as propaganda material.

To what extent the ongoing **election campaign**, TV debates, and the massive election advertising will still cause significant shifts in voter favor is questionable. Predictions about the future composition of the Congress, which will be crucial for the effectiveness of the future president, are even more complex. Overall, the election campaign is clearly characterized by personal attacks and accusations. However, substantive ideas on how to tackle the various structural challenges are conspicuously absent. On Sheinbaum's side, the president himself remains – despite all legal prohibitions and admonitions from the INE – the most important campaigner, combined with the territorial presence of the 23 MORENA governors and the significant financial resources distributed with high opacity by the government during the campaign. An "unequal" election campaign in every respect where Gálvez, in addition to these challenges, also has to deal with a not always professional campaign strategy and internal power struggles among the three coalition partners.

¹⁰ [Así aumentó el salario mínimo durante el sexenio de AMLO \(expansion.mx\)](https://expansion.mx)

Moreover, in a total of **nine states**, a new state governor will be elected and in 31 out of 32 states a new state parliament will be elected. In some of these states, the situation seems relatively clear; the support in the population is too strong, for example, for MORENA in Chiapas or Tabasco, AMLO's home state. In some of the strongholds of the PAN, such as Guanajuato or Yucatán, the respective PAN candidates are ahead, albeit with relatively narrow leads in the single-digit percentage range. Much more exciting than expected two months ago is the contest in the populous states of Mexico City, Puebla, and Veracruz. Here, the MORENA candidates were clearly ahead, but now a neck-and-neck race is expected in all three states, which should be of particular importance for the overall result and for the composition of the national congress.



Election calendar for June 2, 2024.
Source: National Electoral Institute (INE).

Campaign and Violence

The central theme of the election campaign is the rampant (electoral) **violence** across the country. As feared by all sides of the political spectrum since the last major regional elections in 2021, the influence of organized crime on the entire electoral process has increased. Almost daily, the media report attacks on campaigners, the withdrawal or murder of candidates.

Gisela Gaytán, a 37-year-old MORENA candidate for the mayoralty of Celaya, a city with nearly 500,000 inhabitants in Guanajuato, was shot dead on the first day of her campaign in broad daylight by assailants on a motorcycle. Citing figures from the consulting firm *Integralia*, the newspaper *El Universal* reported on April 24th a total of **501 cases of targeted electoral violence** between September 2023 and mid-April 2024. This averages to 2.2 attacks per day on politicians, journalists, and campaigners, ranging from threats to kidnapping and murder.¹¹

Today, this electoral period is already the bloodiest in Mexico's history by a significant margin. It's worth noting that both sides are relatively equally affected, so no particular party (at the local level) could be accused of having a special connection. Candidates from the government coalition and its partners are attacked and killed (18 to date) just as representatives of the opposition (11 in the same period).

In some regions, cartels are now pushing their own candidates onto the electoral lists; they decide before the election who can run and who should stay away. Even candidates who want nothing to do with the major cartels or local gangs rely, implicitly or explicitly, on their support, or are sometimes informed of their support without being asked. Although the AMLO government cannot be solely blamed for the situation – the complex reasons for today's situation date back decades and can be found elsewhere as well – the trivialization and tolerance of the problem of organized crime and cartels have nevertheless allowed for an unprecedented "sexenio of power expansion".¹²

Outlook

What makes the election campaign and political debates in Mexico so elusive is the fact that the central problem of **violence** and the **loss of state control** is obvious, but no one has a clear concept of how to deal with it, let alone what a medium-term solution might look like.

Even though Xóchitl Gálvez prioritizes the issue of **security** in her campaign – "Mexico without fear" is one of her slogans – it is not clear what she specifically intends to do if elected. The citizens of the country seem resigned and do not harbor serious hopes for the problem-solving competence of politics, even though they identify "security" as the greatest challenge for the upcoming government in the polls. Claudia Sheinbaum follows her mentor entirely in this matter and has no intention of even acknowledging that Mexico has a serious violence and security problem, which is unparalleled in comparably developed countries.

Clearly, the next president will inherit a monumental pile of problems: in addition to the annual murder rate, which is three times higher than in the United States (23 murders per 100,000 inhabitants), the **migration issue** also plays a significant role, not only in bilateral relations with the US. Constantly, new "record numbers" of refugees are reported, some from Latin America, some from Africa or Asia, trying to make their way north through Mexico. On this route, they are exposed to the extortions, rapes, and murders perpetrated by the equally omnipresent drug cartels.

¹¹ [Mexiko: Die Mafia bestimmt die Politik \(fr.de\)](#)

¹² The repeatedly emphasized mantra "abrazos, no balazos" (hugs, not bullets) illustrates this failed strategy.

The issue is likely to have a significant impact on the outcome of the elections in the USA on November 5th.¹³

The social benefits provided by the AMLO government are not based on structural changes, but on debt-financed cash transfers to the poor. In the midst of the election campaign, neither side wants to publicly admit that this form of social redistribution is simply not sustainable; even hinting at cuts would be political suicide.

One can only hope that regardless of the specific election outcome, Mexico will chart new and forward-thinking paths, such as in **energy supply**. It is no secret that Mexico needs to drastically increase its efforts in **climate protection** to produce more clean energy and establish a solid infrastructure for foreign investment. Only then can the current nearshoring hype be meaningfully utilized and translated into investments, jobs, and greater prosperity.

In terms of democracy, one may hope that voters will not only provide a clear mandate for the new government but also ensure meaningful **democratic counterbalances** in Congress. This would prevent the democratic and rule of law setbacks of the current administration from being surpassed by the subsequent one with a constitutional majority. Overall, the situation in Mexico remains dynamic and complex, but the impending political and personnel shifts across the country offer the opportunity for a fresh start and new ideas. It is essential to hold onto this prospect.

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¹³ The Economist, 30.04.2023 – Andrés Manuel López Obrador will haunt his successor.