



/blog/mexico-s-populist-president-threat-democracy

Freedom in the World

Assuming robust party competition is a necessary feature of a flourishing democracy, Mexico faces a complicated moment. The smashing victory of AMLO and his National Regeneration Movement (MORENA) last year left the other main parties on their heels, and since then the opposition has come across as weak and mostly directionless. Between Mexicans' low opinion of political parties and the youth of the country's democracy, it's not clear that the Mexican electorate would punish AMLO and MORENA simply to avoid the restoration of a dominant-party state. AMLO's polarizing style and statist-leftist ideology offers plenty of political space for a reconstituted opposition, but the speed with which the existing parties can adapt, or new ones can arise, is uncertain.

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AMLO is certainly a populist in the classic sense of portraying himself as the embodiment of the popular will and the scourge of rapacious elites. He also flirts with demagoguery, especially in his depictions of his (many) perceived political enemies. But it would be a mistake to put him in the same category as those populists in the region—Jair Bolsonaro and Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega currently, or Peru's Alberto Fujimori and Venezuela's Hugo Chávez in their primes—whose tools of power included the explicit rejection of liberalism, participation in or abetment of cronyism and graft, and the encouragement of violence against regime opponents or alleged criminals. AMLO's style is more reminiscent of the left wing of the PRI during its decades of dominance prior to 2000. He believes in imposing state authority over markets and the elimination of intermediaries between state and citizen, i.e., social benefits via direct transfers—which ensures that MORENA gets political credit. He also believes that centralized executive control is necessary to break the “power mafia” that has held Mexico back.

Because of his extended honeymoon period (over six months into his tenure, his approval is around 70 percent), the extent of AMLO's hegemonic aspirations has yet to be tested. Among his opponents, one valid worry is that the president will harness his current legitimacy to take a series of gradual steps to consolidate MORENA's power. However, given the depth of Mexico's governance challenges and the high probability that some of his economic and security plans won't be very effective, it seems more likely that AMLO will face an obstacle that reveals his willingness to accept or reject democratic constraints—an electoral setback, an adverse

Number one is his approach to security policy, especially the creation of a new hybrid police-military force, the National Guard, as the centerpiece of anticrime efforts. Mexico is experiencing severe criminal and human rights crises, which have worsened considerably during the 12 years of a military-led security strategy. The National Guard is at best an uncreative response to the problem, and at worst offers enhanced authority to institutions—the army in particular—that remain largely unaccountable and sometimes abusive. More importantly, even if the National Guard is effective in reclaiming some crime-dominated territories, it will not resolve the security crisis. Sustained progress depends on tackling Mexico's astronomical impunity rate, which requires far more attention to criminal justice institutions—especially investigative police and prosecutors—that have been deprioritized even as new National Guard deployments are announced on a weekly basis.

Second is AMLO's sheer dominance of the public sphere, along with an evident disdain for critics that calls in to qujct

general's office) of graft charges against a high-ranking Pemex official from the Peña Nieto administration is encouraging, but several high-profile corruption cases have failed in recent years due to prosecutorial incompetence, so stay tuned. Successful and transparent investigations of “untouchable” elite political actors—and political allies, in the inevitable event that MORENA affiliates are tied to corruption—would go a long way toward showing that the AMLO era represents a real break from the past.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that AMLO's popularity is based on the public's belief in the sincerity of his dedication to improving the condition of marginalized Mexicans. That dedication is indeed encouraging. The question again is whether AMLO will accept that sustained progress is nearly impossible without impartial and effective institutions—even when they constrain his specific vision and plans.

It's nearly all economic. The Mexican economy is nearly stagnant, and the export sector and business confidence in general are highly vulnerable to disruption caused by Trump's flailing, impulsive policy shifts. Conventional wisdom is largely correct here: given his ambitious domestic agenda, AMLO seems to have decided it's not the time to martyr the Mexican economy on behalf of nationalist or humanitarian impulses. (It helps that his nationalist credentials stand relatively unquestioned.) Harder tests could await if (or when) Trump creates some new pretext for an anti-Mexico move, or if conditions for migrants and locals along Mexico's northern and southern borders deteriorate significantly. AMLO has repeatedly exhibited sympathy for Central American migrants, who are likely to face even more inhumane treatment and deprivation under the new measures. It's an ugly situation, and the terrible options can't totally shield AMLO from the reality of complicity with Trump's policies. Perhaps the only redeeming feature of AMLO's diplomatic response to Trump's outbursts is the demonstration that his pugnacity can give way to tact when necessary. Hopefully that flexible streak will appear more often in domestic affairs as well.