Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Governing Mexico is no easy feat - Claudia Sheinbaum's first year

On October 1, Mexico's first woman president, Claudia Sheinbaum, will begin her second year in office.

While not necessarily coming through with flying colors, Sheinbaum has persevered in the face of complex domestic and foreign challenges – a victory in itself.

And her accomplishments are nothing to sneer at: she has maintained a high approval rating, received glowing praise from the global press, overseen an apparent drop in homicides, and remained on relatively good terms with the ever-capricious US President Donald Trump.

But like her predecessor and mentor, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (widely known as AMLO), Sheinbaum has so far proved unable to make headway on the most important challenges facing Mexico – even though her party, Morena, has been in power for seven years.

For starters, there is the problem of Mexico's chronically anemic economic growth.

From the early 1990s, when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was signed, until 2018, when AMLO became president, average annual GDP growth was around 2.5%.

But the outlook has deteriorated sharply: most forecasts put the growth rate for 2025 at barely above zero, and 2026 does not look much better.

Low public and private investment, and only somewhat higher levels of foreign direct investment, augur that Sheinbaum's six-year term will resemble AMLO's, implying negative GDP growth from 2018 to 2030.

Despite reductions in poverty and inequality, this economic trajectory does not bode well for Mexico, which cannot fix any of its major problems without growth.

Many factors – including a poorly conceived judicial reform, Trump's tariffs, and a possible renegotiation of the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement, the successor to NAFTA – suggest that pessimism is in order.

To forge a different growth path, Sheinbaum would need to change course radically – an impossible task given AMLO's continuing influence.

Homicides have decreased

On law and order, Sheinbaum's record seems better at first glance. Compared to AMLO's "hugs, not bullets" approach to Mexico's criminal cartels, she has been much more proactive.

Homicides have decreased, arrests have increased, and, crucially, US officials are happier.

Hardly a day goes by without a well-publicized seizure of fentanyl or other drugs at the border with the United States.

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But the data tell a different story. Despite homicides being down, disappearances are up: nearly 12,000 people were declared missing between October 2024, and July 2025, compared to 9,500-10,000 in year-earlier period. This has cast doubt on the government's claims of a falling murder rate.

Similarly, more than 30,000 people accused of "high-impact crimes" have been arrested under Sheinbaum, but the number of prisoners has risen by only 10,000, because many of the detained are quickly freed.

US military action against the cartels

Moreover, Sheinbaum inherited what amounts to a civil war in the state of Sinaloa, caused by the abduction of the eponymous cartel's longtime leader, Ismael Zambada García, to the

US in July 2024.

Despite sending thousands of troops to Culiacán, Sinaloa's capital, she has been unable to quell the infighting.

From September 2024 to August 2025, more than 1,800 people were killed, and more went missing.

> A growing share of Mexico's population – up to one-third – is in favor of US military action against the cartels

The conflict recently prompted Governor Rubén Rocha Moya, widely suspected of having cartel ties, to cancel Independence Day celebrations for the second consecutive year.

To be sure, organized crime is a complex problem that requires a multifaceted approach, and allowing US boots on the ground – a Trump administration demand that, so far, Sheinbaum has rejected – would probably not help, as demonstrated by the failure of the US's "Plan Colombia" to curb drug production in that country.

Even so, a growing share of Mexico's population – up to one-third, according to some polls – is in favor of US military action against the cartels.

Governing Mexico is no easy feat

One of the main factors fueling the drug trade is corruption. Despite promising an anti-graft push, AMLO's administration is increasingly being viewed as one of Mexico's most corrupt, owing to the growing array of scandals within the armed forces, which took over some 70 civilian functions during AMLO's presidency.

In addition to overseeing drug enforcement, the military was tasked with building huge infrastructure projects, distributing medicine, and, most importantly, managing customs operations.

Sheinbaum must begin to address these problems, which will require her to complete her most perilous challenge: moving out of AMLO's shadow

Corruption is deeply ingrained in Mexico's armed forces. Following the Mexican Revolution, they maintained a tacit agreement with the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which ruled unchallenged for seven decades, to stay out of politics and receive minimal support in exchange for being able to manage their own affairs with minimal transparency.

Partly as a result of this agreement, Mexico has not suffered a coup or a coup attempt since 1938.

But the military's new responsibilities under AMLO's government created significantly more opportunities for enrichment.

It was recently revealed that the Navy was involved in a fuel-smuggling scheme, whereby tankers full of diesel were marked as carrying additives and thus entered Mexico duty-free.

A vice-admiral has been indicted, and a rear-admiral was murdered, allegedly for reporting the deception to then-Secretary of the Navy Rafael Ojeda Durán, who has also come under scrutiny. Given the huge amount of unpaid taxes, this ruse dwarfs previous corruption scandals.

Sheinbaum has made some progress against this age-old scourge by attempting to go after mid-level officers in the armed forces. But ultimately, her close ties with AMLO prevent

her from prosecuting the upper echelons.

Governing Mexico is no easy feat; few have done it successfully over the last century. In her first year, Sheinbaum confronted a fraught geopolitical environment and complicated challenges inherited from the previous administration, making the lack of progress on larger issues somewhat understandable.

But Sheinbaum must begin to address these problems, which will require her to complete her most perilous challenge: moving out of AMLO's shadow.

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