

Is Mexico's Populist President a Threat to Democracy?

 freedomhouse.org/blog/mexico-s-populist-president-threat-democracy

No, or at least not yet, according to *Freedom in the World* Mexico analyst Jake Dizard.

Andrés Manuel López Obrador, better known as AMLO, won the Mexican presidency in 2018 by a decisive margin, and he enjoys strong support in the country's Congress. He also faces serious challenges, including widespread crime and corruption, a stagnant economy, and difficult relations with US president Donald Trump.

Some observers have paired AMLO, a left-wing populist, with Jair Bolsonaro, the new right-wing populist president of Brazil, arguing that the two leaders could shape future political trends across Latin America.

*In the interview below, Freedom House's Arch Puddington discusses AMLO's performance to date and his potential impact on Mexican democracy in an interview with **Jake Dizard**, an analyst for Freedom in the World and a postdoctoral fellow with the Robert S. Strauss Center for International Security and Law at the University of Texas in Austin.*

Recently, the *Economist* described "clear signs of disenchantment with democracy" in Latin America. Is AMLO's presidency a product of this disenchantment in Mexico?

To the extent that disenchantment with democracy is driving voting choices in the region, Mexico doesn't really fit the mold of, say, Brazil. The 2018 election was much more a rejection of the incumbent political class than of democracy as a system. Two pillars of Mexico's multiparty system had recent turns in power (the conservative National Action Party from 2000 to 2012 and the centrist Institutional Revolutionary Party from 2012 to 2018), and the electorate deemed them unworthy of another opportunity, for wholly understandable reasons. AMLO was well positioned to capitalize in 2018: his image of personal integrity and dedication to the poor stood in direct contrast to the corrupt and inequitable governance that characterized the prior administration, led by Enrique Peña Nieto. Many AMLO supporters felt they were voting to reclaim democracy, not give up on it, and it wouldn't be surprising if Mexico's recent downward trend in support for democracy as a system (as measured by AmericasBarometer) reverses this year.

However, there are reasons for at least moderate concern. Given that the country was ruled by a single party from the 1920s until 2000, Mexico's democratic culture is indeed relatively new, and many of its institutions are fragile or outright dysfunctional.

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.

The *Economist* article also says that Latin American voters are “turning to populists with little commitment to restraints on power.” Is AMLO a populist demagogue?

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 Supreme Court ruling, a recession, or a major corruption scandal, for instance. In short, it's definitely too soon to reduce AMLO to demagogue status or label him undemocratic, but the juxtaposition of his political dominance and vast ambition with Mexico's weak checks and balances has understandably caused some misgivings.

AMLO has taken a number of controversial steps in his first six months as president. What actions or policies do you find especially worrying?

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 into question his respect for basic pluralism. Those who challenge him are routinely labeled “cretins” or linked to the “power mafia,” and dissenting voices are often lumped together as avatars of the old, corrupt, neoliberal regime—even those with long public records of opposition to previous presidents. It is notable that due to the feebleness of opposition parties, many of AMLO’s frequent rhetorical battles are with media figures and civil society organizations rather than opposition politicians. This is producing the sort of spike in polarization that has, in many Latin American countries, presaged democracy-weakening cycles of political conflict.

A broader problem so far is that the solutions being offered don’t seem to address the depth of institutional weakness in Mexico and the incentives it creates for poor governance. AMLO believes that by setting an example of personal rectitude, he will inspire a rejection of corruption and the embrace of human rights, underestimating the incentives that perpetuate governance pathologies. Within the security realm, for example, networks of corruption and complicity often determine the career trajectories and roles of police officers, with new recruits inducted into these deeply rooted systems. (Most departments are not under the federal government’s control, but there is a role for it to encourage reform.) Similarly, AMLO has blamed military human rights abuses on soldiers “just following orders” issued by the old, bad civilian leaders. But as numerous studies of militarized public security have pointed out, the problem lies in putting soldiers trained to apply overwhelming lethal force into frequent contact with civilians (and not punishing abuses when they occur).

In general, AMLO seems allergic to detailed policy planning, preferring to make decisions via instinctive judgments or improvised forms of consultation with the public. This may sometimes allow him to cut through bureaucratized resistance to change, but it’s not a promising recipe for institutional reform in a complex modern state.

AMLO has named “coordinators” to oversee the actions of governors, taken measures to tighten control of civil servants and the judiciary, appointed political allies to regulatory bodies, cut state funding of NGOs, created a paramilitary

security force, proposed legislation to pack the Supreme Court, and made menacing gestures toward critical media voices. Taken together, this sounds like a strategy from the playbook of Vladimir Putin or Viktor Orbán. Or is that an exaggeration of current conditions in Mexico?

Quite exaggerated. I would dispute the characterization of nearly all those actions—to take one example, as wary as one might be of the National Guard in policy terms, the legislative debate preceding it was more open than most previous policies involving the military, and it certainly isn't a paramilitary force in the "political shock troops" sense. Similarly, AMLO's budgetary austerity program has been carried out in a crude, counterproductive, and even insulting manner, but it doesn't equate to a systematic purge of disloyal opponents. Finally, there are few signs—as yet—that AMLO will emulate populist peers by trying to break one of Mexico's most sacrosanct political norms: the ban on presidential reelection. And the number of factions within MORENA will cloud its post-AMLO future. In short, AMLO is stubborn, combative, and eager to maximize the power afforded by his current dominance, but he is far from exerting Putin- or Orbán-type control.

Nonetheless, aside from concerns already mentioned, there is another factor: it is far from obvious where AMLO's policy wins will come from. He has already (and appropriately) foresworn overly expansionary fiscal policy; combined with a fragile global economic outlook (including the Trump factor) and internal distortions, either stagnation or recession seem at least as likely as an economic boom. Progress against insecurity and corruption will also be slow at best. Should AMLO's popularity slip—especially as 2021 midterm elections approach—the temptation to more boldly tilt the playing field in MORENA's favor could rise.

Are there parts of AMLO's program that you find encouraging?

There are many initiatives that could be encouraging, if—and it's a massive if—they are implemented effectively. For instance, the administration's social programs and labor reforms could help stabilize the precarious lives of millions of Mexicans. The offensive against fuel theft could assist in shoring up the finances of Pemex [the state oil company] and stem illicit revenues that facilitate criminal control over semiurban and rural areas. The appointment of a truth commission to investigate the notorious 2016 disappearance of 43 students could give a huge lift to human rights accountability if it receives the political backing to explore all avenues of investigation. Respected officials are supervising the expansion of efforts to determine the fate of the 40,000 Mexicans registered as disappeared; if adequate resources are provided, the state has a real opportunity to support and forge solidarity with victims of rights abuses. There is little guarantee, however, that state commitment to any of these initiatives will be sufficient to achieve real progress.

A key area to watch is corruption, which undermines effective governance and citizen-state relations throughout Mexico and has been perhaps the defining theme of AMLO's discourse. The recent announcement (by the now theoretically autonomous attorney

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.

AMLO seems to have gone out of his way to avoid clashes with President Trump, most recently on the question of stemming the flow of Central American migrants to the United States. Is this accommodating attitude driven by sheer economic calculations? Or are there other considerations here?

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.