Mexico's New Scientist President May Not Be Able to Save the Country

By: Joy Langston

Mexico's new President, Claudia Sheinbaum, an energy engineer and climate scientist, faces huge challenges. Yet, she has so far largely stuck to her predecessor Lopez Obrador's politicised policies. How well will she balance her academic expertise with the exigencies of her political legacy?

Mexico's voters spoke loudly in the June 2024 election when they delivered a landslide victory to Claudia Sheinbaum of the National Regeneration Movement (commonly known by its syllabic abbreviation, Morena), who was president Andrés Manuel López Obrador's choice to be his successor. Sheinbaum had risen to power alongside the charismatic and popular Obrador, also known by his initials AMLO, who was the 65th president of Mexico from 2018 to 2024.

Obrador had prepared Sheinbaum by assigning her to several important posts. She was secretary of the environment in the government of the federal district in the early 2000s, and then mayor of the Tlalpan borough from 2015 to 2017. With Obrador's support, she also became the head of the government of Mexico City from 2018 to 2023.

However, Sheinbaum has her own credentials. For her master's and doctorate degrees at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), she studied energy engineering and conducted her doctoral research at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in Berkeley, California. She was part of a team of 600 academics that wrote to the Nobel Committee in support of Al Gore's nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007. While in university, she was also a student leader, along with her future husband, Carlos Imáz. They were part of a student group that was able to block an attempt to charge higher tuition fees at the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

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Sheinbaum began her six-year presidential term on 1 October 2024. As of now, it remains uncertain whether she will tackle government inefficiencies, combat corruption, promote economic equality, and advance clean energy while protecting the country's environment. What is clear, however, is that she is following in her predecessor's footsteps. The challenge lies in balancing her evidence-based academic background with Obrador's politicised approach to energy, climate, and environmental policies. How Sheinbaum navigates this situation will determine whether her leadership fosters meaningful progress while respecting the political legacy she has inherited.

Early in Sheinbaum's presidency, Obrador has maintained significant influence through his "Plan C". Plan C, which Sheinbaum has also publicly endorsed, includes 18 constitutional reforms aimed at centralising executive power and continuing some controversial, arguably anti-democratic, initiatives from Obrador's time. With Morena holding constitutional majorities in both congressional houses and two-thirds of state assemblies, all legislation, including key constitutional changes, has passed with little to no input from opposition lawmakers.

During her 2024 campaign, Sheinbaum made 100 promises, mostly broad and non-objectionable, which included constitutional changes to allow direct election of judges and magistrates, to develop sustainable energy, and to renew energy policy.[1] (For more on Sheinbaum's promises, see "Claudia Sheinbaum: These were the 100 Commitments She Made For Her Six-Year Term".)

Two major changes, now law, stand out as significant challenges to Mexican democracy—the direct election of thousands of local and federal judges and the integration of previously autonomous government agencies into the federal bureaucracy. This analysis will first examine these policies and their implications before addressing President Sheinbaum's energy and climate proposals.

During Obrador's presidency, several of his policies faced judicial opposition. In response, a key component of Plan C aims to weaken the judiciary by introducing direct elections for all judges. Starting in June 2025, half the judges will be selected through a yet unspecified paper ballot system. Eligibility criteria have shifted from judicial expertise to election outcomes. For example, Supreme

Court candidates need five years of judicial experience, a short essay on their judicial philosophy, five recommendations from acquaintances, and at least a B grade point average in their law degree. Morena's control over candidate selection could ensure the judiciary is filled with party loyalists, raising concerns about property rights and the impartiality of legal principles.

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Beyond controlling the elections of over 1,500 judges and magistrates, leaders in the Lower House and Senate aim to advance another controversial aspect of Plan C. This includes dismantling autonomous agencies responsible for transparency, evaluation, regulation, and electoral management. These agencies will be absorbed into federal ministries, effectively eliminating their independence. This move consolidates power within the executive branch, leaving the federal government unaccountable for any questionable actions.

Given Sheinbaum's academic and political background, one might expect her to prioritise addressing global warming and environmental degradation. However, the federal government's budget proposals for 2025 suggest otherwise. It reduces funding for public universities and research centres, signalling a diminished focus on education. Although Sheinbaum recently established the Ministry of Science, Humanities, Technology, and Innovation, its allocated resources, adjusted for inflation, fall short of its predecessor's funding. Additionally, the budget cuts funding for Semarnat, the agency responsible for environmental policies, regulation, and monitoring. These decisions indicate that neither education nor environmental protection is a top priority for the new administration.

Sheinbaum's administration continues to prioritise carbon-based energy, including petroleum and gas. Recently, she supported a constitutional amendment returning Pemex, the national oil company, and CFE, the electricity commission, to full state ownership, designating them as "social enterprises". This encourages both energy producers to renounce competition and efficiency. For instance, the CFE is now mandated to prioritise the use of costly, polluting state-owned energy sources over cheaper, cleaner private renewables when producing electricity. Mexico is Latin America's second-largest greenhouse gas emitter, with the energy sector accounting for 70% of emissions, according to a recent USAID-MEXICO report.

Pemex has been one of the world's most indebted oil companies, burdened by nearly US$100 billion in financial debt and US$20 billion owed to service providers. The government aims to rescue Pemex by reducing its tax obligations and reducing its debt load by injecting it with government resources, but this strategy risks harming Mexico's credit rating. Both Pemex and the CFE need foreign investment for modernisation. However, prioritising social needs over efficiency, deciding that investment in the energy sector will be 54% public and 46% private, and weakening the judiciary makes Mexico less attractive to international investors.

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Although Sheinbaum supports continuing Obrador's focus on carbon-based energy, she has pledged to honour the Paris Accords by increasing Mexico's renewable energy share from 24% to 45% by 2030. Achieving this ambitious target will require an estimated US$50 billion investment to improve the country's transmission and distribution infrastructure. However, if her government continues to pour resources into saving Pemex and allows energy outages due to CFE's inability to produce enough electricity, it remains uncertain whether Mexico can attract the private investment necessary to fund the energy transition she envisions.

During her appearance at the G20 Summit in November 2024, Sheinbaum sparked a debate on the priorities of global spending by challenging world leaders to allocate 1% of their combined military budgets to reforestation efforts. This proposal was partly inspired by Sembrando Vida (Sowing Life), an environmental programme initiated by Obrador. Sembrando Vida pays rural workers to plant government-supplied trees on their land, aiming to reforest large areas of woodlands, which have been damaged by fires, agriculture, and illegal logging. However, the programme has faced criticism because rural workers have been cutting down existing trees to be paid by the government to plant new ones. This has led to increased deforestation rather than mitigating it.

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Mexico is at a critical crossroads under President Sheinbaum. She must continue investing in petroleum production to meet domestic demand and honour historical priorities. At the same time, Sheinbaum is aware of the long-term risks of environmental degradation and climate change, which have already caused devastating hurricanes and droughts in the country. She inherited a high government deficit and has carried out a judicial reform that increases risks for both foreign and domestic investors at a time that she needs greater investments from them.

During her campaign, Sheinbaum pledged not to introduce fiscal reform, leaving the treasury hard pressed to find additional resources for urgent needs. These include expanding social programmes, improving education and healthcare, and increasing spending on public security. How she plans to address these challenges—many stemming from her predecessor's policies—remains uncertain. But one thing is clear: Mexico must be prepared for what might be a terrifying combination of economic and political hurricanes that even a doctor in climate science might not be able to resolve.

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Footnotes:

1 For more on Sheinbaum's promises, see "Claudia Sheinbaum: These were the 100 Commitments She Made For Her Six-Year Term" at https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/tendencias/claudia-sheinbaum-estos-fueron-los-100-compromisos-que-hizo-para-su-sexenio/