

# Against the Odds, AMLO Has Made Gains in His First Year

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On December 1, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) completed his first year as the president of Mexico where he started it: surrounded by a massive crowd in Mexico City's main square, the Zócalo. In a speech lasting an hour and a half, the president listed his domestic and international achievements before recognizing that the nation remains in a process of transition.

How long, then, would it take to consolidate his Fourth Transformation? "I believe another year; that is, in December 2020 the foundations will be established for the building of a new homeland," the president stated. "By then, under any circumstances, a return to the opprobrium of the neoliberal or neo-Porfirian period will be practically impossible," the latter term a reference to the gilded-age dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. He continued:

I am certain that once we have completed two years of government, the conservatives will no longer be able to reverse our changes. Or, to be less categorical, they will have to work very hard and shame themselves greatly to return to the dark days of corruption, abusive contracts, tax condonation, electoral frauds, the abandonment of our young people, racism, disdain for the poor, and "*Mátalos en caliente*" ["Kill them on the spot"]. But what I desire with all my soul is for us to be living by then in a better society: freer, more just, prosperous, democratic, peaceful, and fraternal.

AMLO's first-year domestic offering is hardly one to sniff at: scholarships for more than ten million students and apprenticeships for those entering the workforce; disability and old-age pensions; planting subsidies and price supports for small farms; interest-free microcredits to small businesses; a public bank to disburse benefits to the millions of poor who are shut out of the private banking sector; and a public telecommunications company to offer internet in a nation where private enterprise has left 80 percent of the territory out in the cold.

The starvation minimum wage has been raised 16 percent (although it remains one of the lowest in Latin America), and a new health care institute has been formed to phase in coverage to the twenty million Mexicans who lack it. His crackdown on gasoline theft has cut off a massive financing pipeline for organized crime, and his government has also signed into law a bill enabling the seizure of assets of those involved in it.

Other initiatives approved by the MORENA-majority Congress this year include recall and binding referenda, the classifying of fiscal evasion and electoral fraud as felonies, and a labor law guaranteeing the secret-ballot election of union officials in an attempt to end the legacy of leaders with lifetime appointments entrenching themselves in power for decades. He is also working to rehabilitate the state oil company, PEMEX, decimated by years of neglect, sabotage, and privatizations.

All of this, however, has come against a backdrop of a macroeconomic orthodoxy that has kept the economy stagnant. On one hand, it is understandable that his government, new to power and facing a hostile international financial system, would proceed with caution in its first year while getting a handle on the levers of the state. In this sense, it has succeeded: inflation is low, and the peso is up against the dollar. The president is also right in his criticism of GDP as the arbiter of all things, advocating instead for a model of development that includes wealth distribution as well as access to education, health, housing, and culture in its measurements.

It is fundamental, however, that his famed *austeridad republicana* — a strategy of savings designed to weed out the corruption fostered by decades of kleptocracy and the lavish lifestyles of top officials — not spill over into outright economic austerity that chokes off his program before it has a chance to show results. To fully unfurl that program without simply ransacking other line items to pay for it will require doing something AMLO has up to now categorically ruled out: raising taxes on the rich and large corporations which, not surprisingly, make out like utter bandits in Mexico's rigged financial system.

The 2020 budget, recently approved, does loosen the reins a bit in areas that saw cuts in 2019. And the coming year will also see the launch of the president's National Infrastructure Plan, with 147 projects including highways, rail, ports, and airports. These projects, however, are to be executed in the form of public-private partnerships with the nation's major construction firms.

In a strategy reminiscent of Lula's in Brazil, AMLO is shifting the weight of government tenders from international to national elites in an evident attempt to keep the latter on his side. In the president's set-piece addresses throughout the year, the nation's magnates have always enjoyed call-outs and front-row seats. It does not take much excavating into history, of course, to realize the danger of this class gobbling up all the contracts it can get, only to use its swollen bank accounts to turn on the president when he is no longer useful to it.

Another power bloc the president has been careful to cultivate is the military. The plum of the new international airport in Santa Lucia — to replace former president Enrique Peña Nieto's boondoggle project on the Texcoco lakebed — has been handed over to the Defense Department, with proceeds from its use to be transferred to the armed forces. The military also has its hand in the transport of gasoline, the national forestry project, and has received a chunk of Chapultepec Park for the installations of the newly minted militarized police, the National Guard.

But this favoritism has not stopped high-ranking voices from taking advantage of the safety of retirement to voice their displeasure with AMLO's security strategy, especially following the failed raid against the son of El Chapo Guzmán in the city of Culiacán (and the killing of nine members of the Mexican-American LeBarón family shortly after). Such was the furor that the president even took to Twitter at the beginning of November to insist that, thanks to the popular support he enjoys, a coup d'état like the one that toppled Francisco Madero in 1913 could never occur in modern-day Mexico.

This may well be the case: AMLO's popularity remains resilient, the product of two prior presidential campaigns, fifteen years of non-stop touring of every corner of the country, and a plain-speaking, common touch his opponents could only hope to rival. But this support is diffuse and unchanneled. His fledgling party, MORENA, is still green, swollen with opportunistic candidates parachuted in from other parties, riven by infighting over the election of its national party leadership, and overly dependent on the figure of the president.

With notable exceptions, unions are feeble, hampered by a history of cooption and corporatism. And AMLO has only contributed to the problem by labeling members of the Left and local activists who oppose questionable mega-projects such as the Maya train in the Yucatan, the trans-isthmian free-zone corridor in Oaxaca, and a thermoelectric plant in Morelos as "conservatives."

And then there is the evangelical issue. In the 2018 campaign, AMLO made an alliance with Social Encounter (PES), a small party that grew out of the neo-Pentecostal Casa sobre la roca movement. When the party polled so badly in the election that it lost its public funding, the move appeared to be a masterstroke. So far, the PES has indeed been well controlled by the MORENA majority in Congress. But the president himself has proposed offering television and radio concessions to religious movements in order to "strengthen values." Just days ago, in a meeting in the presidential office, members of the National

Confraternity of Evangelical Churches announced that the seven thousand young people they have enrolled in the federal scholarship program will also be tutored in biblical precepts.

Big business, the military, and the evangelical movement: in light of the recent coup in Bolivia, this potential troika of interests should be worrying. If not for AMLO personally, perhaps, then for any successor of his that might find themselves getting stuck with a very nasty tab.

On foreign policy, AMLO has returned Mexico to its leadership role in Latin America, one frittered away by thirty years of submissive, right-wing governments. Barely two months into his term, he refused to recognize Juan Guaidó's self-declaration as president of Venezuela, thus putting an effective brake on the rush to depose Nicolás Maduro. Mexico has also been crucial in standing up to the US organ in Latin America, the Organization of American States (OAS), which has not only recognized Guaidó but accepted its envoy.

In November, the president once again bucked the United States and OAS — whose evidence-free insinuation of fraud gave crucial cover to the coup in Bolivia — by giving asylum to President Evo Morales and very possibly saving his life. In doing so, AMLO, a keen student of history, revived Mexico's grand tradition of opening its doors to refugees of the Spanish Civil War and the Latin American dictatorships of the 1960s and '70s.

A tradition, however, that does not appear to have a place for Central American migrants. When, at the end of May, Donald Trump threatened to slap escalating tariffs on a series of Mexican goods if it did not crack down on migration, AMLO won an apparent diplomatic victory both by convincing his counterpart to drop the idea and by refusing to sign up to becoming a "safe third country," which would have required migrants to request asylum in Mexico before being able to do so in the United States. But in exchange, Mexico agreed to send six thousand National Guard members to patrol the southern border with Guatemala while, at the northern border, receiving thousands of asylum-seekers back from the US while they await a resolution of their cases, a process that could keep them stuck in limbo for years.

Since then, the AMLO administration has been assiduous in hounding immigrants and immigration activists across the country, a process that has taken time and resources away from the security threats posed by organized crime.

To be sure, the threat of an erratic superpower hanging over you is no small one and, in the main, AMLO's strategy of containing Trumpian psychosis by avoiding a lose-lose war of words has its logic. Recently, Mexican diplomacy has again been at play in convincing Trump to postpone his threat to designate Mexican cartels as terrorist organizations, which would raise the specter of some sort of US intervention in Mexico (something endorsed, bizarrely, by Democratic presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg). But for a candidate who campaigned on defending the rights of Mexican immigrants in the United States, AMLO's ratcheting up of already inhumane, degrading treatment of Central American migrants in Mexico is disquieting.

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In his first year, AMLO has maneuvered carefully among a series of ills not of his making: the economy, violence, US meddling, the pressure of international capital, and the infiltration of organized crime in a state debilitated by decades of neoliberalism and corruption acting in symbiosis.

The Mexican public, well aware of the immensity of the task, has proven patient. The president's opponents, however, will not be. 2020 will be an even harder year.