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Claudia Sheinbaum takes the oath as Mexico's new president at the Congress in Mexico City Oct. 1. Sheinbaum, 62, an environmental scientist and former mayor of Mexico City, became Mexico's first female president. (OSV News/Reuters/Henry Romero)



by David Agren

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Sr. Paola Clericó voted for a woman in Mexico's presidential election. But she did not opt for one of the two women running as candidates for the country's main political coalitions.

Clericó accompanies the families of Mexico's disappeared who often form search parties and scour the countryside for clues on the whereabouts of their missing loved ones. Her work informed her vote. She wrote the name of Betzabé Alvarado on the ballot — a 24-year-old woman in Puebla state, who disappeared in 2021 while making a bank deposit — rather than marking an "X" for one of the three registered candidates. Many families of the estimated more than 100,000 disappeared in Mexico did the same, protesting the ballot options, along with the crushing disinterest — and downright hostility — they say the country's president and political class have shown their movement.

"Just like any woman, she could have had the chance one day to be president, or a lawmaker, or a manager or whatever she wanted to be. But somebody decided another destiny for her and she is missing," Clericó,a member of the Congregation of the Religious of Jesus and Mary, told Global Sisters Report. Betzabé's mother was killed for searching for her, according to media accounts.



A woman holds a sign reading, "No To Violence," during a demonstration June 19 in Yajalon, in Mexico's Chiapas state. The demonstrators were demanding government authorities guarantee their safe return to communities people have fled due to armed gang violence. (OSV News/Reuters/Jacob Garcia)

Mexico elected its first female president and first Jewish head of state June 2. Claudia Sheinbaum, of the ruling left Morena party, claimed more than 60% of the popular vote — easily besting opposition coalition candidate Xóchitl Gálvez, a senator and Indigenous businesswoman. Her vote tally made her the most voted-for candidate since the days of one-party rule and surpassed the 53% won by her predecessor and political mentor, outgoing president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (known as AMLO).

A climate scientist and former Mexico City mayor, Sheinbaum took office Oct.1. Flanked by female cadets and cheered by lawmakers chanting "¡Presidenta!," she delivered her inaugural address from the lower house of Congress after receiving the presidential sash from her predecessor.

"After 200 years of the Republic and 300 years of the colony … for the first time we women have arrived to lead the destiny of our beautiful nation," she said. "We women have arrived. And I say we have arrived here because I am not the only one who has arrived, all women have arrived together."

> 'After 200 years of the Republic and 300 years of the colony … for the first time we women have arrived to lead the destiny of our beautiful nation.'
> —Claudia Sheinbaum
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The election of the first female president showcased the progress on gender parity in Mexican politics — a requirement for all public positions.

How much female participation has changed Mexican politics, however, remains a contested question. AMLO appointed a gender-balanced administration and appointed women to key positions. But observers say none had much influence — partly because of the president's tendency to govern alone.

"He puts women in certain positions, but they have to be obedient," said Maricruz Ocampo, a women's advocate in the city of Querétaro. "The women that are not subservient are attacked mercilessly by him."

AMLO's shadow also looms over the incoming administration. He promises to retire after leaving office, but analysts point to his purported attempts at controlling the ruling party and placing key allies in Congress as potential roadblocks for his successor.

"I think AMLO should give her a chance to be herself," Clericó said.

Sheinbaum's transition team declined to make a spokesperson available for comment.



Outgoing Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador delivered his final State of the Union address at Zocalo Square in downtown Mexico City. Sept. 1. (OSV News/Reuters/Raquel Cunha)

Women religious welcomed the election of a female president and are hopeful about the incoming Sheinbaum administration. But four nuns who spoke with Global Sisters Report also seemed wary of claims of vast changes in the role of women in Mexican politics and society. The nuns' work in rough parts of Mexico and with victims of violence informed their perspectives on the state of the country.

"I think there continues to be a lot of machismo. Femicides are the proof," Clericó said, referring to the killings of up to 10 women daily, which are seldom investigated or punished. "Too many women have been murdered or mistreated."

A feminist movement has surged in recent years — a movement AMLO branded "conservative" and "manipulated" — as women protest gender violence, including femicides and groping on public transportation, along with issues such as pay equity. Some in the movement pushed for the decriminalization of abortion, too.

(Mexico's supreme court decriminalized abortion in 2021, a decision Mexico's bishops decried as "murderous.")

"It has penetrated some parts of society, perhaps the more intellectual parts. I don't feel that in the society at large," Clericó said of changing attitudes on gender.

"It's changing, but societal consciousness on inequality is progressing slowly," said Comboni Sr. Clara Torres, who works to prevent human trafficking and ministers to its victims. "There's a lot to do," she added. "How many cases are not attended to?"

Sheinbaum, 62, campaigned on continuing AMLO's populist political project, which he christened the "Fourth Transformation." The phrasing suggests he views his role in history on par with the country's independence from Spain and the Revolution of 1910.

"The transformation in 2024 has a woman's face and reaching the presidency is a symbol for our daughters, our granddaughters," Sheinbaum said while campaigning.



Demonstrators and students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Normal School, a teachers college for young men, protest in Mexico City Sept. 25, ahead of the 10th

anniversary of an attack when 43 students from the school disappeared south of the city of Iguala. (OSV News/Reuters/Quetzalli Nicte-Ha)

"That sounds good," said Oblate Sr. Carmen Ugarte Garcia.

But "I have no expectations," she continued. "We've had great disappointments. At the end of her mandate we will see the results. I only repeat her words: that it be a six-year term to build equality, never again a 'keep quiet and you look prettier' [attitude toward women], that there be attention to the causes of violence, zero impunity and zero regime of oppression and privileges only for some, because there can be no peace in Mexico if there is no justice."

Garcia's wish "is that in this six-year term we all be protagonists of the greatest transformations."

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AMLO left office Sept. 30 as a popular and populist president. He hiked the minimum wage, didn't raise taxes and started cash-stipend programs for seniors, students and single mothers. Poverty dropped nearly 6% from 2018 to 2022, according to the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy, or Coneval. AMLO also scrapped its public health insurance program, which had covered 50 million Mexicans; in 2022, nearly 40% of the population lacked access to medical care.

Sr. Juana Ángeles Zárate, a Carmelite of the Sacred Heart, credited the previous president's communications for boosting his image, including a three-hour morning press conference and phrases such as: "The poor first." He focused on social spending, too.

"Social programs were delivered to people that never received them before," said Zárate, who served as president of the Conference of Religious Superiors of Mexico (CIRM) until recently. "They were a strong factor in boosting his popularity."

Torres said the stipends "really influenced how [people] voted," speculating that many opted for the ruling party so "they don't take away these 3,000 pesos" — roughly $155 monthly — "because I depend on them."

She added, "If Claudia really goes ahead with her projects, which she promised, including health for all, to promote education programs for all … it would be great, and I hope she does it."



Protesters hold a flag outside the Senate building in Mexico City Sept. 5 against the controversial overhaul of the country's judiciary, which ushers in a new era of elections for all judges. The reform, which passed, was pushed by the outgoing president. (OSV News/Reuters/Henry Romero)

Sheinbaum's inauguration comes amid rising violence: more than 30 candidates were killed in the 2024 election cycle. Parts of the country such as Sinaloa, Guerrero and Chiapas states, are rife with drug cartel violence.

Torres, Mexican director of Red Rahamim, the Mexican branch of Talitha Kum (the international network of women religious working against human trafficking), sees organized crime impacting the lives of ordinary people. That's contrary to AMLO's

claims that criminal groups "respect the citizenry."

Red Rahamim provides microcredit for women wanting to establish an income after leaving vulnerable situations like sex work.

"They start a business, then they charge extortion. This is ruinous," Torres said. "If there's insecurity and violence, how can people get ahead?"

Women religious work on the frontlines in some of Mexico's most violent regions. Mexico ranks as the world's most murderous country for priests. At least nine priests have been murdered in Mexico since AMLO took office in December 2018.

Zárate said no sisters have been murdered in Mexico. But "some sisters have had to leave the most conflictive regions," she added, while "others have decided to stay as an institution, despite everything."



Then-presidential candidate Claudia Sheinbaum of Mexico's ruling party smiles alongside Archbishop Rogelio Cabrera López of Monterrey March 11 during an event in Mexico City to sign a peace commitment organized by members of the Catholic Church. (OSV News/Reuters/Raquel Cunha)

CIRM partnered with the Mexican bishops' conference and the Jesuits in organizing a series of forums known as the National Dialogue for Peace. The forums were organized after the 2022 slayings of two Jesuit priests as they sheltered a man chased into their parish in the rugged Sierra Tarahumara of northern Chihuahua state.

Mexico's bishops and many priests called on AMLO to change his security policy of "hugs, not bullets." The president instead blasted the bishops. The three Catholic organizations presented their final report from the listening sessions at a March event, in which the three presidential candidates were invited to sign their peace plan.

Sheinbaum signed the document, but described its diagnosis as "pessimistic."

Zárate, who was on stage with the then-candidate, took the comments in stride, saying that Sheinbaum's appearance with her team "signifies how important it was to hear this initiative."

"The main issue was to avoid polarization," she added. "What helps is this generative dialogue... It was healthy to say that there were issues where there was disagreement."

Clericó also saw the president-elect's attendance as important. "We are at a time when it is better to add than to subtract," she said.

But she's disappointed with the outgoing AMLO administration, for which she said that she and the families of the missing "had high expectations." AMLO met with the families prior to taking office and promised justice. But he later claimed the list of missing persons was inflated and being used against him politically.

"We really had hopes that there would have been a change in security," Clericó said. She said she's also concerned about AMLO's excessive reliance on the military for security and public projects.

Clericó is keeping an open mind with Sheinbaum and hoping for the best.

"I don't have any ill will toward her," she said. "As a woman, I would love for her to be a good president."