

CONTEMPORARY MEXICO: WHAT NOW?

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This course intends to go beyond the headlines regarding Mexico, as much attention is being given to deportations and border enforcement, drug-fueled cartel violence and fentanyl, tariffs and the future of the North American Trade Agreement 2.0, water deliveries to the U.S. from the River Bravo (Rio Grande), and importantly, the stance of Claudia Sheinbaum, the recently elected president of Mexico, toward the Trump administration. In this light, the course begins with an examination of the political dominance of the so-called Morena Party* of Mexico. In the general election of 2024, the Party captured 7 or 9 gubernatorial contests (thus controlling in effect 28 of Mexico's 32 state houses), holding a powerful hold over the country's Congress as well as the Mexican Senate, and winning for the second consecutive time the presidential race—stirring concerns about a erosion of democracy in Mexico if not a return to an authoritarian one-party state. While political and economic issues will be discussed extensively in the course, social and cultural matters will be a thematic thread throughout, from public education and popular music to domestic violence and cinema, among other topics.

*The official Spanish name of the party is *Movimiento de Regeneracion Nacional* (National Regeneration Movement), founded in 2011 by Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. He won the presidency in 2018 for a six-year term. Reelection is not allowed by Mexican law. The Spanish term *morena* refers to a dark-complected woman and is associated with the apparition of the Virgin Mary in Mexico, the *Virgen de Guadalupe*; the term also implies an association of poor dark-skinned Mexicans who are purportedly the core of support of the Party—a racial remnant of “colorism” in Mexico which will be discussed in the class.

Schedule of Lectures

Week 1: The Revenge of the South: The base of the Morena Party

The discussion centers on the southern reaches of Mexico that anchor the support of the Morena Party. The states of this region are historically among the poorest of Mexico; and they contain a higher proportion of indigenous groups than most of the country. As will be discussed in the lecture, decades of rural-to-urban migration underscores the poverty found in Mexico's largest cities, especially Mexico City. The lecture briefly traces the decline of formerly strong political parties, where one party held sway in Mexico from 1929 until the elections of 2000. And another party won the presidency from 2000-2006 and 2006- 2012. So why and how did Morena sweep into power since 2012 and win the presidency for first time in 2018? This question frames this initial session, its meanings, and the domestic and foreign policy implications.

Week 2: *Prayers for the Stolen*** : Facing the past, present and possible futures

This lecture examines the inherited challenges faced by the Morena Party as it developed its political strength and weathered its relationship with its powerful northern neighbor. Attention is given to the entrenched transborder strength of the drug cartels, their violence, and their power in a country riddled with corruption. The lecture also delves into the tough social and cultural context that faced Morena's leadership, its corresponding policy initiatives, and the mixed results, as evidenced in school dropout rates, number of unwed mothers, income/wealth inequality, among the markers of social inequities. Moreover, the lecture will discuss the multiple issues generated by Mexican immigration to the U.S., their implications for U.S.-Mexico relations, and for Morena's base of support.

***Prayers for the Stolen* is a 2021 Mexican film originally entitled *Noche de Fuego*. The film portrays three very young girls in a rural village subjected to sex trafficking.

Week 3: “Distant Neighbors” or “Two Nations Indivisible”? The U.S.-Mexico Nexus

The Trump administration’s tariff rhetoric has clouded the relationship between the two countries at this writing. Regardless, the resilient connection will remain in one way or another, whether it is immigration (legal and undocumented), exports and imports, direct investments, financial linkages, and tourism (third largest source of foreign earnings for Mexico and the number one destination of U.S. tourists). Not to mention the commercial presence of the U.S. across the border: from American pizza and hamburger chains to Walmart stores and American-made movies and television programming. And there are of course Mexican companies operating in the U.S., ever hear of Cemex or Bimbo? This lecture will discuss the issues noted above and their obscured, implicated aspects, such as the H-2A visa program, remissions to Mexico, American ex-pats in Los Cabos, and the popularity of tequila and mescal.

Week 4: The Mexico Plan: The Morena Vision for 2024-2030

This lecture focuses on the ambitious 18-point program by President, Claudia Sheinbaum for her term in office. What is the likelihood of her successes, of her possible failures, in the midst of the shadow of relations with the U.S. and formidable domestic problems? Mexico’s public education system is among the lowest achieving by all accounts, and the Mexican economy is vulnerable to down swings in key commodities, such as oil prices. Meanwhile the scourge of drug-fueled violence and gangs appears nearly intractable. On the other hand, the electoral support of the Morena Party in 2024 suggests that much of Mexican public will continue to support the Party in spite of the possible shortcomings of her administration. And, yet, the question of Mexico becoming a one-party authoritarian state (again) lingers in the background.

For those who would like a deeper dive into a particular Mexico-related topic, please feel free to contact me via email for bibliographical sources.