MAY 30, 2024 / Can Mexico’s first woman president fix Mexico?

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): On Sunday, Mexicans are gonna vote.

And it’s gonna be a historic vote.

It’s gonna be the biggest election in Mexican history.

*<CLIP> CNN: Around 100 million people are called to cast ballots millions of Mexicans abroad are also expected to take part in the process.*

SEAN: And after the dust settles, Mexico will have its first ever woman president.

*<CLIP> Claudia Sheinbaum: Vamos a ganar las gubernaturas. Y va a ver presidenta de la República y será. De la transformación. Que viva Morena!*

SEAN: The betting money is on Claudia Sheinbaum.

About a month ago, she was traveling through the southern Chiapas state when masked men stopped her vehicle to interrogate her:

*<CLIP> MASKED MAN: Queremos usted …*

SEAN: Was she going to do something to address the violence?

Was she going to do something about security?

We’re going to ask the same questions on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

*VOX MEDIA COLLEAGUE: Estan escuchando a Hoy Explicado – Today, Explained.*

SEAN: Megan Janetsky covers Central America and Mexico for the Associated Press. And speaking to her, it became very clear that you couldn’t really talk about Mexico’s likely future president, Claudia Sheinbaum, without talking about Mexico’s outgoing president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, or AMLO.

MEGAN JANETSKY (AP reporter): Yeah. So in a lot of ways, AMLO has kind of been larger than life in this election.

*<CLIP> CLAUDIA SHEINBAUM: Que viva el presidente Andrés Manuel López Obrador! Que viva México!*

MEGAN: And the thing you have to know is that he's highly popular. You know, when he got elected almost six years ago, it was a big deal because he had unseated the party that had been in power for 70 plus years. And that's because he spoke to a swath of the population that has long felt forgotten by the political establishment. You know, you have poor Mexicans, Mexicans in rural areas that simply by walking and talking like them,

*<CLIP> AMLO: Yaquis a los mayos. Él reprimió al pueblo. Esclavizó al pueblo. Pues ese modelo es el que querían de nuevo mantener eternamente en nuestro país. Nada más que el pueblo dijo Basta y se acabó ese pinche modelo.*

MEGAN: speaking in the same way they feel represented in a lot of ways. It's interesting because really, none of the other candidates have that same charisma that he has despite a lot of his policies, especially like the security policy being relatively controversial, he's still loved by a great portion of Mexico.

SEAN: Tell me about security policy. Tell me what promises he made to the Mexican people when he was running for office, when he was entering office regarding security.

MEGAN: So a big part of his government was basically on rewiring the way Mexico takes on crime, in part to distance himself from other former presidents like Felipe Calderón, who launched a drug war and saw violence shoot up.

*SCORING IN <Adrift\_APM>*

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA ENGLISH: Calderón can claim some success. In December 2009, Mexican Marines killed the so called boss of bosses, drug lord Arturo Beltrán Leyva, after a two hour shootout here in Cuernavaca.*

MEGAN: And basically AMLO his idea was instead of taking out these like, kingpins and, you know, pursuing these criminal groups like they have for a long time, pursue a policy that he referred to as “abrazos no balazos” …

*<CLIP>: AMLO: Abrazos no balazos*

MEGAN: … or like, hugs, not bullets, is kind of the rough translation. And the core of the strategy is basically addressing what he described as the root causes of violence …

*<CLIP >ALMO: Nosotros consideramos que los seres humanos no nacemos malos. Son las circunstancias las que llev an a algunos a tomar el camino de las conductas antisociales. Y si cambiamos esas circunstancias, podemos vivir en una sociedad mejor.*

*TRANSLATION: We believe that human beings are not born evil. It is the circumstances that lead some to take the path of antisocial behavior. And if we change those circumstances, we can live in a better society.*

MEGAN: … rooting out corruption in the police and expanding social welfare programs. So, you know, like for poor and marginalized communities.

*<CLIP>: CBS 60 MIN INTERVIEW WITH AMLO: López Obrador has spent unapologetically on social programs. Doubling the minimum wage, increasing pensions and scholarships.*

MEGAN: So the idea is essentially that if you provide them with opportunities, they fill the ranks less of, for instance, cartels and and other groups.

*<CLIP>: CBS 60 MIN INTERVIEW WITH AMLO: His approval rating has remained high, upwards of 60 percent for most of his presidency.*

MEGAN: That captured the attention of a lot of voters when he was elected.

*SCORING OUT <Adrift\_APM>*

SEAN: Hugs not bullets policy, not drug war.

MEGAN: Yeah.

SEAN: How does that go once he enters office?

MEGAN: Looking back now, many say Amlo’s strategy has been more based on pushing a PR campaign than actually solving Mexico's security problems, which is a lot harder. So in many cases, his government has declined to confront cartels and other criminal groups.

<CLIP>*CBS 60 MIN INTERVIEW WITH AMLO:*

*SHARYN ALFONSI: Can you reach the cartel and say, knock it off?   
AMLO: (English Voiceover from Spanish) No, no, no, no. What you have to do with the criminals is apply the law. But I'm not going to establish contact, communication with a criminal, the President of Mexico.*

MEGAN: They've expanded a lot, and it's basically allowed them to continue further carving out these fiefdoms in strategic parts of Mexico. Many say it also has allowed cartels to expand in power. So, you know, extortion has gone up, massively. You've seen cartels using higher caliber arms, using drones to drop effectively bombs on security forces, using armored vehicles, using, makeshift IEDs. He also did make significant changes in a way. You know, he he launched a major social welfare program. But what it really did was replace the former program, which provides funds to specific vulnerable populations with one that, you know, hands up payments to, like, across the board so effectively, like Mexico's poorest are suddenly receiving less money, while some of Mexico's wealthiest started getting money they didn't really need.

*<CLIP> CGTN AMERICA: in Mexico City, the wealth gap between the richest and the poorest is one of the widest anywhere in the world.*

MEGAN: He also proposed demilitarizing the public security and reforming the police. And he did disband the corrupt federal police and replace it with National Guard, but you also see his government using the military for things that you wouldn't normally think of the military doing, like building a train in the south of the country and, you know, not sharing information about a project that would normally be public and claiming it was a matter of national security. So in a lot of ways, the military has entered the civilian atmosphere in ways that previously you didn't really see.

SEAN: So he's reinvested in the Mexican military. But six or so years later. Is Mexico safer? Did he deliver on this promise?

MEGAN: So I would say it depends who you ask. You know, if you ask many Mexicans, your tortilla vendor, people in disputed areas of Mexico, it's pretty bad. Under Amlo, cartels and other criminal groups have expanded in power. Extortion has expanded. These groups have grown, you know, more complex to the point where oftentimes they're compared more to like giant illegal companies that are constantly ahead of authorities in this cat and mouse game, because they're warring with each other. They constantly have to, you know, one up each other. Think of more creative strategies trickling into other things that aren't just like drug trafficking, you know? So you have them entering like the lucrative avocado industry, real estate scams. I even a few months ago did a story about how one gang was effectively forcing locals to pay to access hijacked Wi-Fi.

*<CLIP>@ITVNEWS: The Los Viagras cartel, our behind the threats in multiple towns in Mexico's Misha. States, they allegedly forced over 5,000 locals to use that stolen antennas charging up to 500 pesos per month to use it. They were told if they didn't, they’d be killed …*

MEGAN: And this makes them more, flexible as well. You know, it's they have other profit margins that way when the, you know, authorities zig zag. And, they've also dipped their feet even more into the migrant smuggling industry, which obviously is very lucrative nowadays.

*<CLIP> PBS NEWSHOUR: The senior US official tells us amid a global migration surge that the trafficking industry is booming. It's now a multi-billion dollar business.*

MEGAN: That said, the government says that things have gotten better and they cite homicide rates, which are about the same as when Lopez Obrador took office. But, you know, you have other things, like many say, forced disappearances are on the rise.

*<CLIP>AL JAZEERA ENGLISH: Demonstrators outside a federal government building in Mexico city. They're the families of missing persons and they say they want answers over why dozens of case files have been erased from the official government census on forced disappearances.*

MEGAN: And I think overall, what few can dispute is that, you know, the criminal framework and all of these different moving parts are far more complex today than they were like 15 years ago.

SEAN: So I don't really get it. Homicide rates are basically the same. Disappearance rates are up. But you're saying AMLO is this super popular president and his chosen successor, Claudia Sheinbaum, is all but sure to win.

MEGAN: It's because, again, you know, he has tapped into a swath of the population that is, that has always felt forgotten. Poorer rural Mexicans have never felt like considered by, like, Mexico City elite, despite the fact that, for instance, a lot of poor populations haven't benefited as much from his welfare program. And that violence in swaths of the country continues to be really high and things continue to be really dangerous. They also see a man that talks like them, that speaks to them, you know, and sees them as a political asset. So, that's why Claudia Sheinbaum continues to be at the top of the polls.

*<CLIP> CLAUDIA SHEINBAUM AD “TODOS CON CLAUDIA”: (song) Claudia Sheinbaum….*

MEGAN: One thing she cites a lot is, that she's the former mayor of Mexico City, which is significant because Mexico City basically hasn't been as hard hit by cartel violence like you've seen in a lot of rural areas. She's basically pitched herself to the Mexican public as a continuation of, of AMLO and his policies.

*Claudia Sheinbaum Ad Song out*

SEAN: Does that mean that she's not going to be much different on this significant question of security in Mexico?

MEGAN: I think the big question looking forward in security and everything else is, like, is Claudia Sheinbaum going to be AMLO 2.0 or is she going to chart her own path?

*SCORING IN <Great Expanse\_C\_APM>*

MEGAN: What is notable is that, you know, no matter what path she chooses to take, she is inheriting a puzzle that is more complicated than pretty much any other Mexican president has inherited before. You know, you have all of these different warring factions, you have more flexible groups diving into different industries and stuff like that. It's just way harder to unravel than it was before. And that's not just because of AMLO’s government, but because over the course of years and years and years, these criminal groups have been adapting.

*SCORING BUMP*

SEAN: Megan Janetsky. AP. When we’re back on *T,E*, what to do when you can’t just get rid of all the criminals.

[BREAK]

*<CLIP> ONCE UPON A TIME IN MEXICO:   
JOHNNY DEPP: Are you a Mexi-CAN or a Mexi-CAN’T*

*DANNY TREJO: I’m a Mexi-CAN.*

FALKO ERNST (International Crisis Group): I'm Falko Ernst, I'm the senior Mexico analyst at the International Crisis Group.

SEAN: When did the cartels and the gangs and the violence become such a predominant issue for Mexican politicians at the national level?

FALKO: Corruption has always been a factor in Mexican politics, and it's never been a clear dividing line between state and crime in Mexico.

*SCORING IN <Running Towards You\_APM>*

FALKO: Organized crime became powerful in the 20th century under the wings of authoritarian rule, at the time led by the PRI party.

*<CLIP> DEMOCRACY NOW!: AMY GOODMAN: The party that ruled Mexico from 1929 to 2000 for more than 70 years*

FALKO: And essentially they provided and sold protection to the drug cartels, and they could grow as an effect. Then at the same time, you had one president, Felipe Calderón, start what he called an all out war against the cartels with U.S. help and a lot of U.S. money being pumped into the process.

*<CLIP>: FELIPE CALDERÓN: It’s a common problem. It's an international problem. And the beginning of this sad story is that, uh, we have a neighbor which is the largest consumer of drugs in the world. So United States needs to reduce the consumption of drugs, one way or another.*

FALKO: And essentially, that led to a lot of kingpins being taken out of the picture, being killed, being arrested, being extradited to the US. But instead of the hopes that their organizations would falter as an automatic effect of these arrests, they splintered. And now you had many parts fighting over the throne and fighting over the inheritance of once large organizations.

*<CLIP> ASSOCIATED PRESS: Calderón himself went on national television Tuesday night to appeal to his countrymen to support the battle against organized crime. I say this is a fight of all Mexicans, because criminals don't discriminate. They hurt all of society.*

FALKO: And so you end up with a situation where you have about 200 illegal armed groups out there today on Mexican streets, and they're fighting each other, but no one is sufficiently powerful to actually get the job done and achieve dominance.

*SCORING OUT*

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA ENGLISH: Criminal groups appear to have used this land in the state of Vera Cruz to dump at least 250 victims in a series of pits. They've been found, not by the authorities, but a group of more than 100 mothers.*

FALKO: Most of these cases have happened without any type of judicial action or clarification for the victims. We have a number of search collectives, mostly mothers looking for the disappeared family members, for the disappeared children on the streets, fighting this inertia without really results for the most part. And I personally witnessed a number of cases where people lose their lives, the disappeared are being killed by the criminal groups and afterwards the family members, they don't even, go to the authorities and let them know what happened because they have no expectation for justice being. And that includes innocent bystanders. And a lot of them have been displaced, for instance, over the past years as criminal groups have gotten more paramilitary and they fight each other off a micro territories…

*<CLIP> SHANNON K O'NEIL. SENIOR FELLOW FOR LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS: There's a popular saying in Mexico that it's better to live five years as a king, as a ‘rey’, than 50 years as an ox, as a ‘buey’. And the idea here is that the opportunities for the long term, for particularly poorer youth, is so limited that it's better to go with the narcos now and be a narco king than just be a laborer who would live a long time.*

FALKO: I think the public in general has also come to accept and come to normalize that people are killed by the thousands and that there is a suspicion that a lot of people who suffer this kind of violence deserve it, because they must have been involved somehow.

SEAN: That doesn't sound like hugs, not bullets at all.

FALKO: <chortles> There's a lot of contradictions to that policy. I mean, from our fieldwork, again, talking to military commanders, I'm talking to criminal bosses and other members of these groups. There has been an offer for a more peaceful coexistence between state security forces and criminal groups in order to get public violence down, at least. So essentially, the offer has been I mean, ‘You don't murder as publicly anymore, and we'll leave you alone.’

SEAN: You're talking about corruption, colluding with criminals.

FALKO: Well, I mean, there's a thin line between corruption and pragmatic pacification, to put it this way. You've had these understandings in place between both sides for as long as the Mexican state and a crime has existed.

*SCORING IN <Evolutions\_\_a\_\_APM>*

FALKO: And, that doesn't have to be necessarily a bad thing if you think strictly in terms of stabilization, because there is a reckoning in Mexico and especially in these high conflict areas, that you will never get rid of drugs trafficking. That is an illusion which is, deeply rooted in northern thinking and U.S. foreign policy. But on the ground, I mean, we've been fighting the war on drugs for 50 years, and drugs keep on flowing across the border, and people keep on dying in Central America and Mexico and Colombia and so on and so forth. So people are looking to other means, other solutions to get the violence down. So either way, in order to implement any policy to bring about more peaceful times in Mexico is to first start cleaning your own institutions. But essentially that has also failed because the ambitions were too great. They tried to fix everything at the same time. And you're up against hundreds of thousands of police and military and justice officers, prosecutors that all come into shady ties, essentially with the criminal world. And so, those processes have succumbed to their own ambitions, essentially, and really haven't worked when we look at the continuously high impunity rate in Mexico that really hasn't moved, or if it has moved, it's moved in the wrong direction.

*SCORING OUT*

SEAN: So if you want to have any chance of stemming the violence, you have to first clean up your own institutions. Is Claudia Sheinbaum colluding? Do we know?

FALKO: I wouldn't stick my head out that much on that question, to be honest. Basically, because there's no proof for that. What I can say is that from, you know, judging from our investigations we've done on the ground and other organizations investigations, that there is a lot of a criminal element in all political parties because ultimately, especially at the regional level, you cannot separate politics from criminality. And so elections are won through illicit campaign financing. They are won because criminal groups that control chunks of the population will use those channels to negotiate deals with candidates, with political parties, and they will ask for something in return once they’ve invested. But I think, ultimately, this incoming administration also has to ask itself the, the question until when Mexico is going to remain stable if criminal groups, um, you know, feel more empowered, feel they show a greater self esteem in dealing with the state, you know, more frankly, confronting on a military front, um, even the armed forces, um, setting up ambushes and so on and so forth. Because ultimately the conundrum we're facing right now in Mexico is that, you know, security for the poor has been going really bad. And they provide the greatest toll, um, for what's going on on the ground. But at the same time, economic growth has been quite stable. There is this nearshoring moment right now that benefits Mexico and places it in a more central position, um, in global trade as, uh, for instance, the U.S. is moving further away from China. And so these two, uh, processes have been opposed to really not allow an urgency for doing the right thing on the ground when it comes to security. But that equation might not pan out, um, in the medium and long term. And I think this is something that, um, this, um, incoming administration, um, is thinking about.

SEAN: So, at best, this historic first woman president in Mexico may bring about some incremental change.

FALKO: Exactly. Yeah.

*SCORING IN <Triumphant Guitar\_BMC>*

FALKO: So, I mean, this is not going to go away quick and easy. The weight of the criminal economy has become so great that they have a lot of leeway to have a lot of resilience, among other things, because a lot of illicit funds have already been invested into legal economies. You take that money out, the economy is going down pretty dramatically in some regions. So there's a structural dependance, essentially, that also hinders decisive action against those that pump those funds into the legal economy.

*SCORING BUMP*

SEAN: Falko Ernst. International Crisis Group.

Our program today was produced by Denise Guerra. We were edited by Matthew Collette and Amina Al-Sadi. And fact checked by Laura Bullard. David Herman and Andrea Kristinsdottir mixed the show.

We didn’t really get into immigration on this one but we’ll make up for it next week on *Today, Explained* with TWO episodes about what Americans now say is the biggest problem facing the country.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]