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The Rise of the New Left: AMLO's Mexico in the 21st Century

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Introduction

Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, commonly known by his initials as AMLO, was voted to be the next *Presidente de Los Estados Unidos Mexicanos* in the country's general election on July, 1 2018. On July 1, 2018, AMLO won a landslide electoral victory and he assumed presidential office on December 1, 2018. This was AMLO's third time running for president and many like to think he should have won the first time he ran but Mexico's corruption problem is big and that 2000 presidential election is often believed to have been rigged. AMLO's win is significant because of how unexpected it was. The corruption is Mexico is at large and so it was expected that the PRI's candidate would win. Yet, AMLO had the support of the youth, they wanted to see change in their country. He wants to empower the underprivileged, alleviate poverty, and wants to rid the country of the exhaustive power and corruption produced by political and business elites. He also wants to reduce violence, as it only seems to be getting worse, in a country plagued by a decades long drug war. The goals of AMLO's term as president includes an end to political corruption, increasing access to education and job security for younger generations of Mexicans, and to decrease economic inequality in the country (Castañeda 2019). Through his campaigning he made many promises. AMLO promised this so-called "Forth Transformation." The previous transformations being, Mexico's Independence, the separation of church and state, and the 1910 Revolution. However during his campaign he was very vague as to how he would actually achieve this transformation, he was unclear on his policy positions.

He promised to reduce social inequality by ending privileges, to end corruption, and to end the country's deadly drug war. Citizens who seek change easily accepted these

promises and we're tired of a corrupt and dysfunctional government. To achieve this landslide win AMLO needed a diverse group of allies, many of whom had very contradictory political views according to Ahmed and Villegas. In their article, "López Obrador, an Atypical Leftist, Wins Mexico Presidency in Landslide" they interviewed Antonio Sola who in AMLO's previous campaigns was against him said, "Today AMLO is a much more moderate, centrist politician who will govern the business community with the right hand, and the social sectors and programs with the left." (Ahmed et al. 2018). In this way AMLO isn't your typical leftist.

AMLO is the head of the MORENA party, a relatively new political party in Mexico, which AMLO started in 2012 because he felt there was no established political party which represented his political ideologies. AMLO's political ideology is centered around ending inequality in Mexico. The *Movimiento Regeneración Nacional*, or more commonly known by its acronym MORENA, became a symbol of hope for Mexico— which is also their slogan, "La esperanza de Mexico." The word "*morena*" directly translates to "brown" or "tan" skin, and as result, is specifically chosen by this party because of the word's connection to Mexico's patron saint, *La Virgen of Guadalupe*, who is symbol of darker-skinned Mexicans in religious iconography and belief. AMLO wants to empower all the people of Mexico regardless of skin complexion or socioeconomic status.

With this election, Morena took over the chamber and the senate, giving power to the left in this new presidential term. It is also worth discussing AMLO's political past, he was originally in PRI, then joined the center-left PRD for several years. The PRD is an acronym for Partido de la Revolucion Democratica. When AMLO came to power, the

MORENA party did too, as it became the head of the chamber and senate of Mexico. The flaws of the PRI and PAN inspired Morena's political values.

MORENA is in coalition with two other parties: PT and PES. PT is Partido del Trabajo and PES is Partido Encuentro Social. The alliance with PT makes sense because that is another party on the left side of the political spectrum. However, the alliance with PES can be confusing as it is a rather conservative, evangelical party that is right-leaning. Hanrahan and Fugellie (2019) emphasize MORENA's need to end corruption, increase rights for indigenous people and women, as well as advancing other timely social issues that Mexico faces (3). The authors argue that although MORENA has recently gained political power with ALMO's presidency, which is not all that is needed to make the necessary changes the party desires in Mexico.

AMLO's win was not expected by the majority of constituents and political leaders in the country because of the long-established two-party political system that has controlled Mexican politics for centuries. The PRI, *the Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Institutional Revolutionary Party), and PAN, the *Partido Acción Nacional* (National Action Party), had been Mexico's two leading parties, The PRI held uninterrupted power for 71 years up until 2000 and then again in 2012 until 2017 (BBC 2018). In between, PAN held power for two presidential terms. Castañeda (2019) explains MORENA is a social democratic party with legislative strength. This means it is a unified structure of government that sets both the party and AMLO as its leader apart from previous administrations—as president, ALMO has control of both the executive office and the support in the legislative branch to change policy.

Leftism is generally defined as a political ideology that supports equality—gender, socioeconomic, racial, etc.—and the rights of all Mexicans. Advocating for economic equality is essential in Mexico because the gap between the rich and the poor is rapidly growing. According to the World Bank, Mexico is the "second largest economy in Latin America…the eleventh largest economy in the world" with a population of 130 million people (World Bank 2019). The World Bank also reports that 41.9% of the population is living below the national poverty line. "Over the last three decades Mexico has underperformed in terms of growth, inclusion, and poverty reduction compared to similar countries" (World Bank 2020. In Mexico, a person is either rich or poor; there is no middle class (Arroyo et al. 2018). Leftist politics in the country have adapted to growing socioeconomic inequality. "The New Left" differentiates from "the Old Left" because the "Old Left" was solely attuned to working towards a socialist state (Illades 2017). The New Left has moved beyond this utopic vision of Mexico by aligning with a political ideology more concerned with creating equality for all and rid society of unjust socioeconomic hierarchies (Hanrahan and Fugellie 2019, 4). AMLO's political ideology comes from his humble upbringing. He was born in the state of Tabasco and was the firstborn of seven children (Grayson 2007). This personal history is important to understanding how AMLO's association with leftist politics was not seamless. Oil extraction is very important to Tabasco. In 2019, a new oil deposit that could produce 69,000 barrels a day was discovered by Pemex that "could yield 500 million barrels of crude…the largest since 1987 when a 536-million-barrell deposit was found in Tabasco" (Mexico News Daily 2019). AMLO grew up believing in oil extraction as a viable sector of Mexico's economy.

AMLO's recent presidential win presented a concern for the United States because both countries are highly dependent on each other to sustain economic viability on both sides of their shared border. The Congressional Research Service released a report about U.S.-Mexico economic relations in 2019 that reads:

> The economic and trade relationship with Mexico is of interest to U.S. policymakers because of Mexico's proximity to the United States, the extensive trade and investment relationship under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the conclusion of the NAFTA renegotiations and the proposed U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), and the strong cultural and economic ties that connect the two countries. Also, it is of national interest for the United States to have a prosperous and democratic Mexico as a neighboring country. Mexico is the United States' third-largest trading partner, while the United States is, by far, Mexico's largest trading partner. Mexico ranks third as a source of U.S. imports, after China and Canada, and second, after Canada, as an export market for U.S. goods and services. The United States is the largest source of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Mexico.

It was also a concern as he wasn't willing to take the backlash from President Trump and his supporters. Since Trump has been running for president to his actual presidency he has been very critical of Mexico. Trump is very against Leftist values, and can be regarded as moderate to conservative with his views. That being said it was easy to understand why he wasn't AMLO's biggest fan. However, the increase in border patrol on the U.S.-Mexico border started to affect Mexico as migrants were now seeking refuge in Mexico.

This research project investigates how the New Left is reshaping Mexican politics for the first time in nearly thirty years. ALMO represents a turning point for the country by advocating for federal policy that advocates for basic human rights—including women, children, and indigenous groups-- and ending political and economic corruption. For the purposes of this research, "progress" refers to AMLO's ability to pass federal

policy that helps women, children, and indigenous groups attain equality, as well as his actions to end corruption.

Argument

I argue that AMLO's recent social policies are reshaping education, health, climate change, and ending corruption. He wants to provide more access to education, which means building more schools and providing scholarships to students. AMLO wants Mexican citizens to have access to health care and is working to raise pensions for the elderly. Climate change has become an increasingly dire issue around the world and AMLO wants to create policies to decrease the pollution in Mexico. Lastly, AMLO is working to ending corruption by being as transparent with the public as possible. For him this meant holding press conferences frequently. He believes the government was elected by the people, so it should stand for the people. These newly established social programs are benefiting Mexicans who have historically and systematically been denied civil and human rights by former federal policy.

Education has been a big focus for AMLO and when he was campaigning he said he wanted young people to have access to it. To start this meant creating more schools and providing scholarships for students so they could buy their school supplies, and pay their tuition. However, he had bigger ambitious he wanted free education from primary to higher education. He proposed a new education reform as he felt the current one was turning education into a business. There are many important features including providing a guaranteed free education at all levels, to create a more diverse curriculum that would teach different gender perspectives, respect for nature, and to promote the preservation of Indigenous communities (teleSur, 2019). The reform wasn't just about the students but

also changing the way teachers are trained (teleSur, 2019). The reform easily passed through the Chamber and the Senate. Health has also been another important AMLO wants to tackle. He wants to provide healthcare for those who don't have it. Universal healthcare as we have seen in the U.S. can be hard to accomplish as not everyone agrees with it.

AMLO made a big promise of ending corruption, which to AMLO meant holding previous government officials accountable for their actions. Not only that but also locating the whereabouts of the 43 students that disappeared in 2014 in Iguala. Many citizens believed the government orchestrated their disappearance as the students were on their way to a protest.

Climate change is a pressing issue worldwide and AMLO wants to tackle it in Mexico. He has decided to start small, through a ban on plastic bags, utensils and containers. He is taking the first steps towards combating climate change in Mexico. However, he is still a big supporter of petroleum that is very bad for the environment.

AMLO has opened the presidential residence as a museum instead of having it as his home. This is for two reasons to promote education and to show he really is a people's man. AMLO doesn't want to be seen as superior rather someone with the power to help. Other examples of him trying to make himself more relatable are his refusal of the secret service and rejection of the presidential jet.

There is often questions about the money for a lot of his ideas and AMLO decided to make cuts on the federal wages, sell the presidential plane, and decrease secret service as to add to the budget for social spending.

Research Questions

1. What is the New Left and how does AMLO fit into this political ideology?

2. How has the MORENA party and AMLO changed Mexican politics?

3. What is the sociopolitical significance of AMLO's presidency?

Methodology

I use secondary data analysis[1] that addresses how the Mexican population feels towards AMLO and his presidency since his inauguration. I analyze data about how many people are getting education scholarships, who the recipients are, and how much are they are being given by the federal government to assess the access and affordability of quality education in the country. I also look at the total number of pensions dispersed to the elderly and healthcare plans before and after ALMO's presidential term to assess the quality and affordability of healthcare. Finally, I begin to interpret rates and types of violence to address how AMLO's policies have worked toward alleviating continued drug-related deaths in the country. Examining political beliefs and attitudes towards the president help answer how the New Left is achieving socioeconomic and political progress and equality in Mexico. I also use this data to assess whether Mexican people feel AMLO is making tangible societal differences, and if he is, what aspect he is changing. I hope to find data that demonstrates what issues Mexican civilians feel this government is addressing and changing for the better. This analysis also provides information about how AMLO is perceived and if things have changed since his inauguration.

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[1] Secondary data analysis is using data that has already been collected and analyzing it based on the questions a person is researching.

Another method I use is content analysis [2]of popular media. I analyze AMLO's social media accounts to access how his posts reflect his political beliefs and whether he is expressing signs of leftism, Marxism, capitalism, conservatism, etc. I also analyze AMLO's daily press conferences. "Falling somewhere between religious sermon and stump speech, the press conference has become a fixture in Mexico since the anti-establishment leftist known as AMLO took office" (France24 2019). AMLO has decided that being transparent with the press and the people is very important as he first begain this practice of daily press conferences as Mexico City mayor (2000-2006). By using content analysis of AMLO's social media posts and daily press conferences, I assess the effectiveness of these platforms to "announce policy, speak to his base, and attack opponents by real and perceived" (France24 2019).

Analysis

The Americas Society Council of the Americas has been tracking data collected related to AMLO since his election. The data presented has been collected through different newspapers and each explains their method of gathering information. The first graph was data collected through *Parametría. Parametria* conducts all types
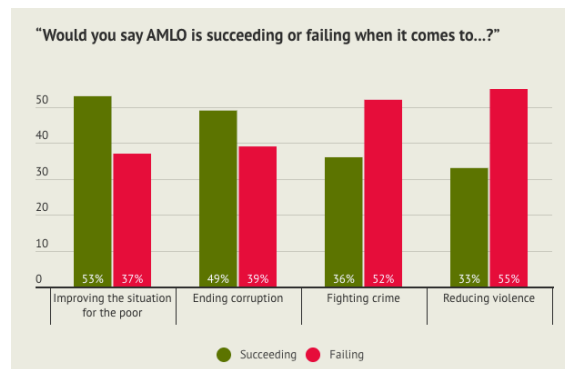

Figure 1: "Would you say AMLO is succeeding or failing when it comes to..?" from

Zasis, Caren. "AMLO Presidential Approval Tracker by ASCOA." Infogram, October 7, 2019. https://infogram.com/caa29d52-2615-49bb-b6d5-307da917fb40.

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[2] "Content analysis refers to the analysis of the content of both written and non-written documents. Within this technique, the contents of each document are quantified objectively in a systematic and replicable manner using predetermined categories, thereby allowing the data to be analyzed quantitatively. Krippendorff (2004) argues that the purpose of the technique is to make replicable and valid inferences regarding the relationship between the content of the document and its context. Context may include the purpose of the document as well as organizational, cultural and other aspects [discourse analysis]" (Thorpe and Holt 2008).

of studies and is located in Mexico City. For this data it was looking at what issues AMLO was tackling. The information on the graph was collected from December 1st 2018 to the end of 2019. For this data, Mexican citizens were asked a series of questions about AMLO's role as president. For this specific data they asked, "Would you say AMLO is succeeding or failing when it comes to...?" For improving the situation for the poor, 53% said he was succeeding; this was the only issue where more than half said he was succeeding. For the rest of the issues: ending corruption, fighting crime and reducing violence more than half thought he was failing. These four issues were part of AMLO's campaign and promise as President, so these aren't the ideal results. However the fact that some people are still seeing him work towards them is good.
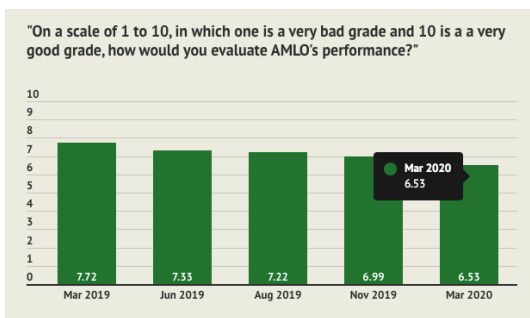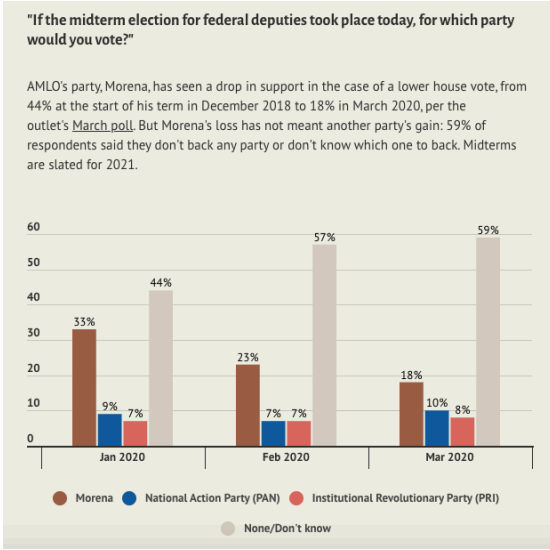

Figure 2: "On a scale 1 to 10, in which one is a very bad grade and 10 is a very good grade, how would you evaluate AMLO's performance?" from

Zasis, Caren. "AMLO Presidential Approval Tracker by ASCOA." Infogram, October 7, 2019. https://infogram.com/caa29d52-2615-49bb-b6d5-307da917fb40.

El Universal, which is a newspaper, produced the second graph, and they were collecting data on public opinion. This graph is similar but instead of looking at specific issues it asks, "On a scale of 1 to 10, in which one is a very bad grade and 10 is a very good grade, how would you evaluate AMLO's performance?" This data is more recent, but there seems to be a steady decline in his grading. In March 2019 he started at an average grade of 7.72 and by March 2020 he was at a 6.55. When looking at information like this and knowing how recent it is, it is also to take into account what outside factors could also be playing into the grades he is getting.

The third graph is from data collected through *El Financiero,* which is another newspaper in Mexico. This data was collected from January 2020 to March 2020, so it is very recent. This graph asks, "If the midterm election for federal deputies took place today, for which party would you vote for?" Now this data is looking more at Morena's success, considering that Morena holds the majority in federal officials this information reveals a lot. As of March 2020, almost 0% wouldn't vote or don't know who they would vote. Only 18% were sure they would vote for Morena. This is very telling, that the people aren't fully supportive of Morena.

Los Angeles Times presented this table on March 14, 2019 and their source was Citizens' Council for Public Security and Criminal Justice. This table from LA Times depicts the 10 most violent cities in the world in 2018. Six of the ten cities listed are located in Mexico.

This demonstrates just how much of an issue violence is. The numbers on the right represent the number of homicides per 100,000 residents. This was the year that AMLO ran and won for president. Violence in Mexico has come under scrutiny, especially since the U.S. began sending all migrants seeking political asylum to Mexico. AMLO made reducing violence part of his promise as president, soon after being sworn in he declared, "There is officially no more war!" Although this is a nice sentiment, he made the decision to send soldiers and create a national guard to promote public safety. However, this may not have been the best course of action, as it seems to militarize those areas.

According to the blog, *Year One of AMLO's Mexico*, the writers argue, "… during the first year of AMLO's term the murder rate has actually increased. In the first ten months of 2019, there were nearly 30,000 murders—a record number. This is to a great extent a consequence of the failed policies of the Calderón and Peña Nieto administrations. But as time passes, AMLO will have to assume responsibility for the crisis. This will prove no easy task. One new policy in particular sets a worrying precedent: in July, AMLO established a National Guard." Although, there is an increase in violence, it isn't necessarily AMLO's fault, but with time he could be the reason it continues. The writers also feel his course of action with the National Guard may have been too hast and can actually further encourage violence.

As for his transparency, AMLO, since his inauguration holds a daily press conference at seven in the morning. This was something never before. Mexican presidents before him would rarely do this. On occasion he would also hold a second press conference in the evening. He didn't always do these sessions; sometimes one of

his secretaries would take over. In this way, he could keep the public as informed as possible (France24 2019).

Another blogger follows AMLO's presidency and documents policies and decisions he makes, the following are from November 2019,
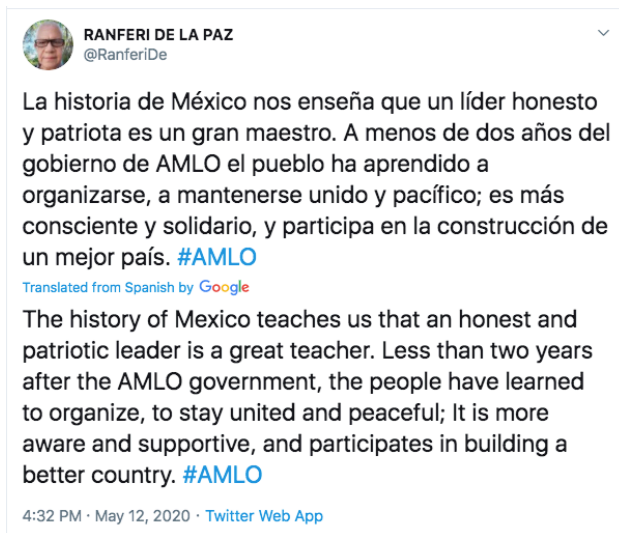
> "Recycling: Mexican beverage bottler and retail group Fomento Económico Mexicano (FEMSA) inaugurated a US$1 million recycling plant in the central state of Querétaro, local media reported. The facility will be used to break down obsolete refrigeration equipment to re-use components as well as dispose of materials in an environmentally responsible manner. *(El Mexicano, November 28, 2019)*
> Renewable energy: Mexican energy infrastructure developer Natco energy announced it will build three wind farms and one solar generation park over the next two years. Investment of approximately US$634 million will support construction of 508 MW of new generation capacity at sites in the states of Nuevo León and Guanajuato. *(Reforma, November 20, 2019)*"

Recycling and renewable energy are steps towards improving climate change. Climate change is not just an issue in Mexico but globally so it is important that AMLO addresses it. It is also clear tat this blogger is following AMLO's actions through reputable Mexican newspapers. On their blog they not only have constant updates but also share their opinion on the success of these actions.

Education is another area that AMLO wanted to make changes. He promised to build more universities, eliminate university entrance exams, and allowing every student access to a higher education. Meaning providing scholarships to cover school supplies, tuition and anything else that was needed for their schooling. "According to UNESCO statistics, tertiary enrollments in Mexico have more than doubled, going from 1.9 million to 4.4 million between 2000 and 2017, placing tremendous stress on Mexico's education system."(UNESCO 2019). This stress stems from a change in education participation in 2012, where upper-secondary education was made compulsory. Upper-secondary refers to high school. However, during that time there wasn't enough funding or administration

to establish this. So AMLO and his administration vowed to provide financial assistance to upper-secondary students to reduce high school dropout rates. "Despite the still comparatively low enrollment ratios, Mexico is expected to be one of the world's top 20 countries in terms of the highest number of tertiary students by 2035. It will be a key challenge for the Mexican government to ensure quality of education amid this rapid massification."(UNESCO 2019). That means AMLO's promises are crucial to Mexico's educational development, there needs to be more schools for all the students to attend but there also needs to be financial resources.

Figure 5: Twitter post by Ranferi De La Paz commenting on AMLO's impact on agency

Figure 6: Twitter post by Yair Herrera on May 10th 2020

This twitter post was posted on May 12, 2020 in which Ranferi De La Paz comments that AMLO's leadership has led and encouraged Mexican citizens to organize and advocate for themselves. He has been in office for less than two years and De La Paz feels that AMLO has motivated this united front and recognizing Mexico needs to progress.

This post was made by Yair Herrera on May 10, 2020. He constantly posts about Mexico and U.S. politics. He is a Mexican-American and likes to be informed from what can be seen through his posts. He encourages Americans to

take a look at the way leftism is being practiced in Mexico. He is right when he says this is a good case study because AMLO is a leftist and he is facing resistance from the business elite. So although he has made many promises it isn't always tangible without support.

This last twitter post was made by a page titled "Un Continente Una Cultura" on May 8th, 2020. This account recognizes the difficult task AMLO has been assigned. Mexico was under a neoliberal regime for decades so change will not come easy. Yet, they also recognize that change is happening and will continue to happen.

Figure 7: Twitter post by Un Continente Una Cultura on May 8th 2020

Conclusions and Future Directions

Leftism has always been critiqued but the way it's been implemented by AMLO is different from how it has been in the past. This research contributes to possible governing methods if AMLO were indeed successful with developing Mexico. Often leftism is perceived in a negative light but studying Mexico, which just turned left due to AMLO would reveal a lot about how it works. I argue that AMLO's recent social policies are reshaping education, health, climate change, and ending corruption. The fact that this is happening currently makes it hard to find concrete evidence that my argument is true but with time we will se. It is still early in his presidential term and the current situation that the world is facing is also playing a big role. As of March there is a lot of research that was very focused on the coronavirus pandemic and although it is important to how

Mexico will progress I felt it was something that could be researched on its own and didn't want to completely shift the focus of this research. I think it is important to look into and will majorly impact Mexico's future but that was not the focus here.

The research I presented also reveals a lot about agency, AMLO's victory is a result from a need for change. The Mexican people were tired and angry with their previous leadership. AMLO's biggest support came from the young, they were very active during his campaigning. It is clear that AMLO's intentions are good but his execution hasn't always gotten the result needed. In the case with education, climate change and health, he is making progress but it can only get so far if there continues to be violence and corruption.

AMLO's presidency has the right ideals but a country that for so long conformed to unjust policies that didn't benefit the majority is going to take time to amend. AMLO still has a bit over four years to make the changes he promised and hopefully he is successful. If, he isn't, the Mexican citizens know what they want and will hopefully continue to take the elections seriously. AMLO won because the people wanted change and as long as that remains the case, where people want to better Mexico, there will be progress, even if it takes longer than what is desired. What AMLO is able to accomplish will not only be seen during his presidential term but a few years after as well, as sometimes it takes a while for things to play out. Mexico will have progress it is only a matter of time and good leadership.

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