

Mexico's AMLO defends legacy in final state-of-the-nation speech

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Mexico City, September 2 (RHC)-- Mexico's outgoing President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has defended his legacy in the final state-of-the-nation address – an annual report on his government – a month before he is set to leave office and be replaced by his close ally Claudia Sheinbaum.

Speaking for two hours in Mexico City's sprawling Zocalo Square, Lopez Obrador bade farewell to enthusiastic followers on Sunday as he seeks to advance a major overhaul of the country's courts.

Despite the controversial push, which critics say would weaken the judiciary, the Mexican president continues to enjoy a 73 percent approval rating as his six-year term winds down. "We are living in a true democracy, building a new homeland" and "laying the foundations to begin a new stage", he said in the speech.

Thousands of supporters of Lopez Obrador, widely known by his initials AMLO, filled the square, which saw a party-like atmosphere.

"I came because it is the farewell of one of the most historic presidents in the country," Jose Luis Diaz, a 39-year-old entrepreneur, told the AFP news agency. "We won't see another president like him for 100 years."

The presidential report is an annual review of governmental progress in Mexico, akin to the president's State of the Union address in the United States.

On October 1, Lopez Obrador will hand power to a fellow member of his Morena party, Sheinbaum, who was elected in June to be the country's first woman president. Presidents in Mexico are limited to a single six-year term, so Lopez Obrador could not seek re-election.

Sheinbaum will also inherit a package of constitutional reforms initiated under Lopez Obrador, including the judicial overhaul plan that opponents see as a worryingly autocratic move by the governing party.

At the core of the proposal is a plan to elect federal judges – including Supreme Court appointees – by popular vote. Lopez Obrador has said the change is needed to root out corruption.

Earlier this month, U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Ken Salazar warned the proposed judicial changes – which include putting judges up for election – could threaten "the historic commercial relationship" between the two countries. The U.S. is Mexico's top trade partner.

"Democracies can't function without a strong, independent and non-corrupt judicial branch," Salazar told reporters, prompting a strong response from Lopez Obrador.

The Mexican president described the criticism as "disrespectful" to Mexico's "national sovereignty."

Currently, federal magistrates in Mexico are chosen through an evaluation process, including exams, overseen by a judicial council. Supreme Court justices are nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate.

On Sunday, Lopez Obrador defended the judicial overhaul plan, saying it would ensure that judges are "at the service of the people" and suggesting it would limit criminal influence in the courts.

Reporting from Mexico City, Al Jazeera's John Holman said Lopez Obrador listed his achievements during his speech, focusing on his efforts to combat poverty in Mexico.

"I think critics and supporters alike would support that idea – that he has reduced the number of poor through direct credit transfers, by a raft of social programmes, pensions for the old and grants for school and university for the young," Holman said. He added that Lopez Obrador also talked about rooting out corruption in Mexico, but "there's a lot less evidence for that".

Not that it mattered to Lopez Obrador's supporters – on Sunday, the most widely seen signs around Zocalo Square were those that simply said, "Gracias" – "Thank you!"

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