News
Explainer



FILE - Presidential candidate Claudia Sheinbaum greets supporters as she arrives to her opening campaign rally at the Zocalo in Mexico City, March 1, 2024. Sheinbaum, a former mayor of Mexico City and the governing party's candidate, has kept a comfortable lead in all polls over her two opponents. (AP/Aurea Del Rosario, File)

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By mid-2024, Claudia Sheinbaum will most likely become Mexico's first female president. She would also be its first leader with a Jewish background in a country that's home to nearly 100 million Catholics.

On June 2, voters will choose a new president, 628 congressmen and thousands of local positions — Mexico's largest election ever, according to the National Electoral Institute.

Sheinbaum, a former mayor of Mexico City and the governing party's candidate, has kept a comfortable lead in all polls against opposition candidates Xóchitl Gálvez and Jorge Álvarez Máynez.

What role has religion played in the ongoing campaign that will elect the successor to President Andrés Manuel López Obrador? The answers are nuanced.

Does Sheinbaum identify herself as Jewish?

The 61-year-old candidate has approached the question with caution: While she is of Jewish ancestry, she is not religiously observant.

Her four grandparents were Jews who immigrated from Lithuania and Bulgaria. She was born in Mexico City and her parents did not raise her under any religion. According to her campaign team, Sheinbaum considers herself a woman of faith, but she is not religiously affiliated.

Being Jewish can be an identity, but not necessarily a religious one, said Tessy Schlosser, director of the Jewish Documentation and Research Center of Mexico.

And Jewish identity is multifaceted, Schlosser said. It can be aligned with history, society, spirituality, geography and ideology. Even within the same Jewish community, for example, there may be conflicting views on Zionism or genealogy.

"For some, if you are born to a Jewish mother, you are Jewish," Schlosser said. "For others, if you are born to a father. For others, if you have a grandfather. So, even in terms of lineage or racialization there are many debates."

How big is the Mexican Jewish community and what is its relationship with Sheinbaum?

The first Jews arrived in Mexico in 1519, along with the Spanish colonization. The community began to grow substantially by the early 20th century, as thousands of Jews fled from the Ottoman Empire to escape instability and antisemitism.

To date, the Mexican Jewish community is formed by Ashkenazi Jews, from Central and Eastern Europe, and Sephardic Jews, mainly from Turkey, Greece, Italy, Spain and Syria.

According to Renee Dayan — director of Tribuna Israelita, which serves as a link to the Central Committee of Mexico's Jewish community — there are now about 50,000 Jews in the country. The majority are settled in Mexico City and its surroundings, with small communities in the cities of Monterrey, Guadalajara, Tijuana, Cancún, San Miguel de Allende and Los Cabos.

As a general practice, the Jewish community maintains relationships with a broad range of local authorities and does not endorse any particular candidate or party, Dayan said. However, it is open to meeting with politicians who wish to discuss their proposals and recently met with Sheinbaum, Gálvez and Álvarez Máynez.

While welcoming the dialogue with Sheinbaum, members of the Jewish community do not consider her to be part of their ranks, in part because Sheinbaum herself has rejected any such connection.

"Claudia has actively tried to say: 'This is not me," Schlosser said. "It must be respected when a person does not want to be identified in one way or another."

More broadly, Schlosser said, Mexico's political world does not extend any special benefits to high-ranking politicians who represent social or religious diversity.

Has Sheinbaum's Jewish identity had any impact in the electoral process?

In mid-2023, former Mexican president Vicente Fox wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter, that Sheinbaum was "Jewish and foreigner at the same time."

That comment — denounced as "antisemitic, racist and xenophobic" — was not isolated. Fox was responding to criticism made by another user who said that Sheinbaum was "fake" for using a rosary when she was Jewish.

Similarly, Jewish publicist Carlos Alazraki said in an interview that Sheinbaum was a "phony" for wearing a skirt with the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe with the sole purpose of pleasing the Catholic electorate.

This is not the first time that Sheinbaum has faced criticism. Since the official campaigns kicked off in March, Sheinbaum and Gálvez have been questioned and second-guessed in a country where sexist prejudices still debate whether a woman is prepared to rule the second largest economy in Latin America.

So, what role does religion play ahead of June elections?

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Although Sheinbaum has repeatedly said that she does not practice any religion, she proudly publicized a meeting she held in February with Pope Francis and has indeed worn Catholic symbols at her rallies.

Mexico is a secular state with a robust legal framework that establishes the government's separation from the church, but the Catholic presence in the country is vast.

According to the latest official report (2020), 98 million of 126 million Mexicans are Catholics. They are followed by 14 million Protestants, mostly evangelicals, and then comes the Jewish community. More than 10 million people say they have no religion and 3 million identify as believers without religious affiliation.

The relationship between the Catholic Church and López Obrador has cooled since 2022, when several bishops raised alarms about the increasing levels of violence in the country. It is not clear whether the gap would be reduced with Sheinbaum as president, but during her campaign she has agreed to meet with Catholic leaders and reluctantly signed a national commitment to peace.

"We are in a moment in which we can see politicians seeking validation from religious authorities," said Pauline Capdevielle, academic from the National Autonomous University of Mexico. "We saw this before the official start of the campaigns, when the two candidates presented themselves before the pope."

Religion's role in the current elections was apparent when thousands of people supported the presidential aspirations of Eduardo Verástegui, a right-wing activist and film producer who — although his campaign faltered — echoed the voices of conservatives rejecting abortion and LGBTQ+ rights.

"When Verástegui's candidacy failed, I thought that the religious issue was not going to have so much relevance in the campaign, but little by little we have seen that it did, particularly when the Catholic Church began its program in favor of peace," Capdevielle said.

López Obrador and Sheinbaum have claimed that the number of homicides dropped during the current administration. But Catholic leaders, during nationwide forums that the church held in 2023, have echoed the fears spread among thousands of average citizens who shared how violence broke their lives.

Organized crime has long controlled swaths of Mexico through violence and corruption. It has diversified beyond drug trafficking in recent years, extorting businesses big and small for protection payments. Under López Obrador's "hugs, not bullets" policy, the government has avoided direct confrontation with the cartels, allowing them to essentially take control of a dozen or more mid-sized cities.

And though addressing violence is unavoidable, Capdevielle said, the Catholic Church's actions during the campaign could also be seen as an attempt to try to recover part of the public standing it lost during López Obrador's six-year term.

Whether the candidates are trying to capitalize on religion to seek votes may be debatable, but Sheinbaum, Gálvez and Álvarez Máynez have been careful not to lose votes by going against a largely conservative population.

None of them, for instance, has openly addressed abortion and the rights of the LGBTQ+ community.

"They are playing with ambiguities," Capdevielle said. "They leave aside the most ideological topics and are very careful with these issues because we have seen that, in Mexico, that can have an electoral cost."