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Presidential candidate of the ruling MORENA party Claudia Sheinbaum gestures during her closing campaign rally at Zocalo Square, in Mexico City, Mexico, May 29, 2024. (OSV News/Raquel Cunha, Reuters)



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Barely eight days before Mexico was scheduled to head to the polls on June 2, the president of the Mexican bishops' conference issued an urgent exhortation — for priests and bishops.

"I respectfully invite all of our country's priests and bishops to respect the electoral laws and citizens' free vote," conference president Archbishop Rogelio López Cabrera of Monterrey said in a post on social media site X, formerly Twitter.

The conference followed the president's appeal with a May 28 statement, reading, "We are convinced that respect for freedom of conscience and electoral laws is essential to build a more just, peaceful and supportive society."

Mexicans vote in what promises to be historic elections: the country is likely to elect its first female president, Claudia Sheinbaum, who would also be its first Jewish head of state. Her main rival, Xóchitl Gálvez, is Catholic. The elections will be the largest in the country's history as the Mexicans will elect more than 20,000 congressional and public office holders on the federal, state and local levels.

But campaigns have unfolded amid bloodshed with over 30 candidates killed, according to Animal Politico media outlet, as drug cartels move into elected politics — facilitating further criminal control over swaths of national territory.

The latest victim of unprecedented electoral violence is Alfredo Cabrera, a mayoral candidate for an opposition coalition, who was gunned down in the southern state of Guerrero May 29, causing chaos and panic among people attending the rally.

The country votes amid political polarization, too. President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has promoted his protegé, Sheinbaum, through a three-hour morning press conference full of insults toward political opponents, questionable claims and veiled campaigning.

"There's enormous polarization," said Father Raúl Martínez, a priest in the Diocese of Valle de Chalco on the southeastern outskirts of Mexico City. "We as a church are working so that people get out and vote, so they participate," he said.

The bishops' stance on avoiding political statements underscores the thin line that the Mexican church has to navigate as it urges Mexicans to vote in the federal and local elections, while also raising its voice on politically sensitive topics such as violence and drug cartels meddling in the election.

It also comes as López Obrador nears the end of his six-year administration, ending his term with 60% approval, according to some polls.

The president pumped money into social programs — principally a scheme of cash stipends for seniors — while promoting a security strategy of "hug, not bullets," which critics contend has coincided with rising violence. López Obrador insists violence has decreased since he took office in 2018, pointing to a nearly 20% drop in the homicide rate.

Mexico's bishops raised their voice against Mexico's rising violence, especially after the murders of two elderly Jesuits in their parish, causing conflict with the authorities.

The bishops' conference and Jesuits organized peace forums in the aftermath and presented its plan for pacifying Mexico on March 15. Mexico's three presidential candidates signed the plan, but Sheinbaum voiced objections, saying, "I don't share the pessimistic evaluation of the present moment."

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Sheinbaum has promised a continuation of López Obrador's political project — saying little about her own plans for the country if she wins the June 2 election and takes office in the fall.

She has promised better policing — as she boasts of doing in Mexico City, where she was mayor from 2018 to 2023 and says the homicide rate dropped more than 50% — but confronts the increasing influence of Mexico's military, which AMLO tasked with public security duties and a series of responsibilities ranging from building and operating airports and railways to managing national parks.

The peace forums have continued as local candidates are invited to sign the plan. Sheinbaum promised to continue the dialog at the peace forum ceremony — something Jesuit Father Jorge Atilano says has occurred.

"The candidates assigned liaisons," who helped with the local level forums, Atilano told OSV News. "There's open communication. That's something we see as very positive. Now with the election happening, the process of dialogue will continue with the government-elect to continue advancing with these commitments and building bridges. That's the work to come," he said.

Scheinbaum later met with the bishops in April, though no details of their discussions were disclosed. A bishops' conference spokesman was unavailable for comment, but a source told OSV News that the encounter was productive.

Sheinbaum is Jewish, but identifies as non-religious.

Sheinbaum has courted the Catholic vote from the start — in a country with 77% of the population identifying as Catholic, according to the 2020 census. She traveled to see Pope Francis in February — as did her campaign rival, Gálvez – and quoted extensively from Fratelli Tutti afterward.

Her religiosity didn't emerge as a campaign issue until Gálvez raised it at the May 19 debate, when she criticized Sheinbaum for wearing a skirt with an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

"You have the right to not believe in God, it's a personal matter. What you don't have the right to do is use Mexicans' faith as political opportunism. That's called hypocrisy," Gálvez's team posted on X during the debate. "Of course, you want to close churches? That's something people are asking on the street."

Sheinbaum said her team would respond at a later date, but never did. Supporters stated on social media that Our Lady of Guadalupe was as much a symbol of national identity as a Catholic figure. The accusation was quickly forgotten after briefly trending on X.

"Sheinbaum has been careful enough not to present herself as anti-Catholic, anti-clerical, or a radical liberal in the culture wars," Pablo Mijangos y González, a Mexican historian at Southern Methodist University, told OSV News. "It lacked the necessary conditions to have any impact in the campaign."