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Will Mexico's judicial elections hurt democracy or make the courts accountable?

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MEXICO CITY Mexicans will vote in the country's first judicial elections Sunday. The fiercely debated question is whether electing judges will deepen democratic decay or purge courts of rampant corruption and impunity.

The vote comes as power in Mexico has been increasingly concentrated in the popular president's office, and as organized crime wields significant political influence in many parts of the country. Critics worry that electing judges will weaken checks and balances on government and stack the courts in favor of the ruling party.

Judges and court staff previously earned their positions through merit and experience. Now the election has more than 7,700 candidates vying for more than 2,600 judicial positions, including on Mexico's Supreme Court. Hundreds more positions will be elected in 2027.

"We've never seen something like this before. What Mexico is doing is like an experiment, and we don't know what the outcome of it will be," said Carin Zissis, director of the Council of the Americas' Washington office.

Mexico's judicial elections will pick judges across every level of government, an unprecedented situation globally.

Former President Andrés Manuel López Obrador led the push for the overhaul. The highly popular leader was long at odds with Mexican courts, which regularly struck down reform proposals and halted projects they called an overreach of executive power. López Obrador went as far as publicly criticizing judges in his press briefings.

Last September, after dominating presidential and legislative elections, his Morena party jammed the constitutional reform through congress. His ally and successor, President Claudia Sheinbaum, has continued to champion it.

The overhaul notably put limits on the Supreme Court's power to widely block presidential actions and laws, and set up a disciplinary tribunal for judges.

"The way I see it, the Supreme Court is going to once again become irrelevant, just like it was in the old days of authoritarian rule ... when its ability to monitor constitutionality was basically null," said Rafael Estada, a constitutional historian.

Sheinbaum and López Obrador have asserted that by popularly electing judges, they can root out corruption in the judiciary and bring the branch closer to the people.

"Who is going to choose the judges on the court now? The Mexican people. That's the big difference between what once was and what now is," Sheinbaum said Monday as she called on Mexicans to vote.

"And that," she added, "is democracy."

Many on the ballot won a lottery after being screened by committees made up of people from the three branches

of government two of which are controlled by the president's party. To qualify, candidates need a law degree, five years of professional experience, an essay and letters of recommendation from friends and colleagues.

The passage of the reform legislation sparked weeks of protests by judges and judicial staff, a sharp rebuke from the Biden administration and concerns by international investors, causing the Mexican peso to dip.

Opponents have called on Mexicans to boycott the vote, and the election is projected to have low turnout.

The opponents former judges, legal experts, politicians and foreign observers - say that battling corruption and impunity in the courts is not a bad idea. Most Mexicans agree that the judiciary is rife with corruption.

"The judiciary has a lot of scores to settle in this country," said Georgina De la Fuente, election specialist with the Mexican consulting firm Strategia Electoral.

But critics say the ruling party is simply politicizing the courts at an opportune moment, when Sheinbaum is highly popular.

Judicial candidates are not allowed to announce their party affiliation and are unable to accept party funds or hold major campaign events. A number of former Morena government officials and allies, however, have posted lists on social media of which ones to elect.

Mexico's electoral authority said Wednesday it also had investigated cases of physical guides handed out to potential voters in Mexico City and Nuevo Leon state, something it said could amount to "coercion."

"The way in which this reform was designed does not give people greater access to justice. It was designed to take control of the judiciary and blur the division of powers," De la Fuente said.

Others warn that the overhaul could open the judiciary to questionable judges and allow organized crime to further influence Mexico's justice system.

A number of candidates have raised eyebrows. Chief among them is Silvia Delgado García, a former lawyer for drug kingpin Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, who is running to be a criminal court judge in the northern border state of Chihuahua.

Critics "speak out of ignorance because whether or not I've represented some person doesn't transform you into that person," she told the AP as she handed out campaign flyers to people crossing the border from Ciudad Juarez to El Paso, Texas.

"What I can promise you is I'll be an impartial judge," she told some voters.

Watchdogs also say that last year's vote on the reform was rushed through, criteria for candidates wasn't always followed, the number of candidates was limited by a lottery and lower-court orders trying to keep the reforms from taking effect were ignored.

Zissis, of Council of the Americas, said the reforms could increase instability in the region at a time of rapid political change.

Mexico's government has been working furiously to talk U.S. President Donald Trump down from tariff threats and meet demands by his administration to crack down on organized crime. At the same time, Trump has been locked in political fights with courts trying to block various actions.

The turmoil could hurt international investment in Mexico if investors believe their money is less secure, Zissis said.

"It feels like Mexico is opening a Pandora's box," she said.

Associated Press journalists María Verza and Christian Chávez contributed to this report from Mexico City and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico.