

AMLO Governance Model (2018–2024) and Its Structural Similarities with Petroism

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In recent years, Latin America has witnessed the emergence of political leadership that, under the promise of total transformation, has shaken the institutional foundations of its countries. Beyond specific policy decisions, these projects have deployed a powerful symbolic language capable of redefining national, and to some extent regional, political narratives. This analysis focuses on two paradigmatic cases: Mexico and Colombia. Although distinct, both countries share a history marked by drug-related violence, armed conflict, and, more recently, an electoral upheaval that brought anti-establishment figures to power: Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018–2024) and Gustavo Petro (2022–2026).

Within this framework, the present analysis aims to identify and illustrate the structural and operational similarities between the governance models of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) in Mexico and Gustavo Petro in Colombia. This exercise goes beyond anecdotal comparison and instead aims to uncover a common pattern in leadership styles, communication strategies, institutional management, and public policy outcomes. By transcending national particularities, it examines a contemporary regional political phenomenon. To achieve this, the analysis draws primarily on the book *Year Seven. The Legacy: The Catastrophe* by López San Martín (2025) for the Mexican case, alongside various academic articles and press sources for the Colombian case.

The book *Year Seven. The Legacy: The Catastrophe* presents a comprehensive and well-documented critique of AMLO's six-year presidency. Its central thesis argues that the "Fourth Transformation" (4T), far from fulfilling its promises of democratic regeneration and social well-being, culminated in a legacy of institutional deterioration, security crises, social polarization, and mediocre economic performance. The author contends that behind a discourse of austerity and the fight against the "Mafia of power", a systematic concentration of authority, the dismantling of autonomous institutions, the establishment of a propagandistic communication apparatus, and permissiveness toward corruption within the president's inner circle occurred. Through a meticulous review of six years of governance, the book portrays a scenario in which transformative rhetoric clashed directly with governing practices that, according to the author, exacerbated the very problems they claimed to solve.

The book's structure does not follow an explicit division into sections, but is instead organized through a thematic and chronological sequence that reveals the evolution and contradictions of AMLO's government. Nevertheless, an implicit macrostructure can be identified. Initially, the foundations and discourse section examines the origins of the movement, the construction of the 4T narrative, and the campaign promises that led to electoral victory. This is followed by the instruments of power, which analyze the mechanisms of governance, including "Las Mañaneras", the security strategy "Abrazos, no balazos" (Hugs, not bullets), public spending management, and social programs. The third section, contradictions and outcomes, exposes the gap between discourse and practice, addressing issues such as corruption involving family members and close associates, systematic attacks on journalists and media outlets, the health crisis, the deterioration of public services, and nepotism in the presidential succession. Finally, legacy and projection assess the long-term impact of AMLO's administration, including foreign policy alignment with authoritarian regimes, the weakening of institutional democracy, and the burden his model places on Mexico's future.

Against this backdrop, the present text conducts a comparative analysis of the governments of Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico (2018–2024) and Gustavo Petro in Colombia (2022–2026), revealing patterns and structural similarities that transcend national particularities. Both presidents, emerging from self-proclaimed leftist and transformative political projects, have implemented governance strategies that, according to the cited sources, exhibit significant parallels in areas such as security and drug trafficking, traditional media relations, economic management, health policy, and foreign affairs. The following sections highlight the central arguments of López San Martín's work and their correspondence with the Petro administration.

Failed Programs in the Fight against Drug Trafficking and Security

The promise of pacifying countries torn apart by violence constituted a central pillar of both leaders' political platforms. Mexico and Colombia, through their emblematic strategies "Abrazos, no balazos" (Hugs, not bullets) and "Paz Total"

(*Total Peace*) appear to have followed similar trajectories, as these peace initiatives were implemented inconsistently and, rather than dismantling conflict, enabled the reconfiguration and expansion of criminal power.

In Mexico, AMLO prescribed addressing the social roots of violence, prioritizing “*Hugs*” over “*Bullets*”. However, as López San Martín (2025) demonstrates, practice contradicted rhetoric. On the one hand, militarization was maintained and even expanded through the National Guard, on the other, the lack of federal coordination and a comprehensive security policy created a vacuum rapidly occupied by drug cartels.

Flagship social programs such as Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro and Sembrando Vida, designed without precise territorial targeting, were in many regions co-opted by the very criminal structures they were meant to weaken (López San Martín, 2025). Rather than pacification, the outcome was an escalation of violence. Between 2018 and 2024, Mexico surpassed 180.000 intentional homicides and accumulated more than 100.000 missing persons. Episodes such as the 2019 “*Culiacanazo*”, in which the government released a cartel leader to avoid bloodshed, became emblematic of a weakened and negotiatory state (López San Martín, 2025). The author’s conclusion is unequivocal, the policy of “*Hugs*” did not stop bullets, instead, by allowing territorial expansion, it multiplied them.

Similarly, in Colombia, Gustavo Petro’s “*Paz Total*” strategy, centered on simultaneous negotiations with all armed groups, suffered from serious design flaws from the outset. It was launched without a clear legal framework for judicial submission and, crucially, without a deterrent security policy to support dialogue (Vélez, 2025). Rather than pacifying the country, this approach created a strategic vacuum that illegal armed groups exploited to strengthen and expand their territorial control. Reports indicate that between 2023 and 2025, groups such as the Gulf Clan, Segunda Marquetalia, and the Central General Staff grew between 32 % and 76 %, extending their presence to more than 230 municipalities (La Silla Vacía, 2025). The humanitarian consequences have been devastating: mass forced displacement rose from 0.16 % in 2022 to 0.50 % in 2025, and extortion kidnappings tripled, signaling a dramatic loss of the state’s monopoly over legitimate force (Tolosa, 2025).

This abstract crisis manifests most starkly in regions such as Catatumbo. According to the UN (2026), violence there has intensified through the use of technologies such as drones, resulting in the displacement of thousands and the systematic assassination of social leaders. Although the government enacted a state of internal commotion to expedite resources, implementation proved ineffective. By July 2025, only a

minimal fraction of funds had been disbursed, revealing that exceptional powers failed to translate into real operational capacity (Morales, 2026). Bureaucratic paralysis thus deepened vulnerability at the heart of the conflict.

A particularly revealing parallel lies in the management of drug trafficking. Both AMLO and Petro highlight achievements against organized crime that are largely illusory. Petro, for instance, has praised increases in cocaine seizures, yet Colombia’s potential cocaine production has not declined. On the contrary, coca crops account for 67 % of global production, reaching historic highs (Osorio, 2025). This is compounded by a sharp decline in forced eradication, which fell from over 100.000 hectares in 2021 to fewer than 3.000 by 2025 (Campos, 2025). Emphasizing seizure figures while ignoring runaway production and state retreat from territory mirrors the Mexican case, official discourse frames tactical gains to conceal a historic strategic failure.

Thus, both “*Abrazos, no balazos*” and “*Paz Total*” became, in practice, synonyms for tactical permissiveness. Criminal organizations interpreted these strategies not as opportunities for reintegration, but as openings to reaffirm and expand their power. In attempting to distance themselves from the failed “*Iron fist*” policies of the past, both governments committed the opposite error, underestimating the predatory nature of criminal organizations and dismantling deterrence mechanisms before securing credible agreements. This miscalculation enabled criminal consolidation, eroded the state’s monopoly of force, and ultimately ceded territory, initiative, and sovereignty, while communities paid the price in lives and displacement.

Insults and Attacks on Journalists

In Mexico, AMLO institutionalized a “repertoire of insults and disparaging adjectives” through his morning program, known as *Las Mañaneras*. Writer Gabriel Zaid reportedly counted up to 80 denigrating adjectives used by López Obrador and described him as “an artist of contempt and disqualification”. Among the most frequently used labels were “*Coup plotters*”, “*Mercenaries*”, “*Conservatives*”, “*Looters*”, “*Hypocrites*”, “*Classist elites*”, and “*Traitors to the homeland*”. This logic of attack was constant, as the book notes that “over the course of six years, Andrés Manuel López Obrador behaved like an exasperated monarch, he sowed hatred against journalists and anyone who was even minimally critical of his administration”, while simultaneously attributing every complaint and form of opposition to the moral illegitimacy of the spokesperson.

The seriousness of this rhetoric is further intensified by direct contemptuous remarks against specific journalists. For

instance, in a statement on December 14, 2022, AMLO asserted, “just imagine if one only listens to Ciro, or to Loret de Mola, or to Sarmiento it’s actually harmful even to one’s health. If you listen to them too much, you might end up with a brain tumor”. The day after these remarks, Ciro Gómez Leyva survived an assassination attempt. According to the book, there was no rectification from the government, instead, the attack was indirectly justified. It even recounts that “on one occasion, the former president, perhaps in a lapse, confessed during his morning address that he felt pleasure when insulting his critics and opponents, because he considered them deeply hypocritical”.

Colombian President Gustavo Petro has also maintained a confrontational and stigmatizing discourse toward journalists. A clear episode occurred during the inauguration of the Ombudswoman, Iris Marín, on August 30, 2024, when he referred to them as “the journalists of power, the mafia’s dolls”. In a CNN interview, María Jimena Duzán stated in response to Petro’s rhetoric, “what happens with Gustavo Petro is that, since coming to power, he has maintained discriminatory and stigmatizing language toward women in general, and especially toward Colombian journalists. “Journalism in Colombia has confronted the mafia far more than Mr. Gustavo Petro has calling us mafia dolls is truly an insult” (CNN en Español, 2024).

Furthermore, according to Uribe (2024) from W Radio, “in his speech during the police promotion ceremony, President Gustavo Petro responded to allegations claiming that the government had ordered illegal wiretapping of high court justices and political opponents. “If we were the victims, how could we do the same to them?” Petro said, adding that “no intelligence agency will intercept any magistrate or member of the opposition”. Likewise, the president lashed out at the press outlets that reported on these allegations, even labeling them the “*Mossad press*”, in reference to Israeli intelligence services. This pattern of disqualification seeks to delegitimize critical journalistic work and centralize the official narrative around the presidential figure.

Beyond stylistic differences, the structural effect is similar in both cases, as it aims to erode journalism’s role as a democratic counterweight by portraying it as corrupt, hypocritical, and at the service of internal and external enemies, while simultaneously attempting to invalidate any inconvenient information. This strategy not only intimidates and polarizes, but also constitutes a mechanism of narrative control, if the official source is presented as the only legitimate one, truth becomes subordinate to the narrative of power. Thus, disqualification emerges not as a rhetorical outburst, but as a calculated political tool designed to weaken a fundamental pillar of democracy.

Public Spending Management and Economic Policies

Beyond the rhetoric of austerity or social justice, the economic management of both governments reveals a shared pattern of expanding public spending focused on immediate consumption, to the detriment of productive investment and long-term fiscal sustainability. This approach, although justified through different discursive frames, has generated similar pressures, including market distrust, capital flight, and an increasing fiscal burden for the future.

In Mexico, despite the discourse of an “*Austere republic*”, AMLO’s administration presided over a disproportionate increase in public spending. As documented by López San Martín (2025), in the final year of his term, expenditure rose by 11 % year-on-year, far exceeding the macro-level growth in revenues (3.3 %). This expansion, not consistently directed toward investment, placed significant pressure on public finances. The most telling consequence, however, was the loss of investor confidence, throughout the six-year term, 335 billion pesos in foreign capital invested in government debt exited the country, signaling a clear vote of no confidence in the direction of economic policy (López San Martín, 2025). The promise of stability thus collided with the reality of an expansive and unorthodox fiscal management.

Additionally, a significant episode of “capital flight and disinvestment” was recorded. The book notes that “during López Obrador’s term, 335 billion pesos in foreign capital invested in government instruments left the country” (López San Martín, 2025). This outflow reflects a deterioration in international investors’ confidence in the government’s economic policy orientation, with potential long-term repercussions for economic growth and stability. A spending structure that prioritizes current expenditure over investment constrains productive transformation and raises serious concerns regarding long-term fiscal sustainability.

Similarly, Gustavo Petro’s government in Colombia has promoted a historic expansion of the General State Budget, which increased by 111 trillion pesos in real terms (Portafolio, 2025). However, this growth has not translated into greater state investment capacity. On the contrary, nearly 90 % of the increase has been absorbed by current expenditure on pensions, healthcare, public sector payroll, and judicial rulings. While productive investment stagnates, current spending rises from 254 to 353 trillion pesos between 2022 and 2026, a trend that analysts have described as unsustainable and that severely limits any prospects for structural economic transformation (Portafolio, 2025).

The situation is further aggravated by a management approach based on “overly optimistic accounting” and a surge

in operating expenditure from 209 to 328 trillion pesos without an emergency to justify it. Moreover, the failure to meet revenue targets and the irregular use of public funds (as in the UNGRD case) forced the Executive to breach the fiscal rule. The result was a downgrade of the country's credit rating, increasing the cost of debt and shifting the burden of adjustment onto future generations. Faced with this scenario, Petro's response has been both dual and contradictory, declaring a state of economic emergency to impose, by decree, a tax reform previously rejected by Congress, targeting "Ultra-wealthy" individuals and the financial sector, while simultaneously decreeing the largest minimum wage increase in decades (Hernández, 2025). This measure, combined with the inability to deduct royalties in the mining-energy sector, constitutes a model of aggressive state intervention.

Thus, the economic mirror presents a troubling reflection, two governments that, starting from different diagnoses, the fight against the "Power mafia" and against "Inequality", have designed a governing style that prioritizes immediate political and social spending over macroeconomic prudence. Both AMLO and Petro have opted to expand the role of the state in the economy, but through a pattern of resource consumption that mortgages the future and erodes the confidence of economic actors. What remains as a legacy is not the promised productive transformation, but a profound financial fragility that will constrain the room for maneuver of their successors.

Corruption Allegations Involving Family Members

If there is one area where the rhetoric of purity and moral regeneration promoted by both governments collides most sharply with reality, it is in the murky terrain of corruption allegations involving their inner circles and family members. For both AMLO and Petro, the family has not functioned as a private refuge, but rather as a vulnerable flank where public scrutiny has been concentrated, revealing what critics describe as the central hypocritical contradiction of political projects that came to power by denouncing a corrupt elite. These cases are not merely fleeting scandals; they operate as critical stress tests for the credibility of the entire political narrative, exposing the fragility of a legitimacy built upon claims of moral superiority.

In Mexico, López San Martín's (2025) work lays out a detailed and extensive map of a network of suspicions surrounding the presidential family, suggesting a pattern rather than isolated coincidences. The case of AMLO's brothers, Pío and Martín Jesús López Obrador, captured on video allegedly receiving funds for the 2018 campaign, represented the first and most significant crack in the façade of austerity. The narrative of

opacity deepens and becomes more sophisticated with the next generation, as José Ramón López Beltrán and his wife were linked to the luxurious "Gray House" in Texas, owned by an executive of a firm that later obtained lucrative contracts with Pemex.

Even more distant relatives, such as his cousin Felipa Obrador Olán, have been identified as owners of a company that received multimillion-peso contracts from the state oil company (López San Martín, 2025). Andrés Manuel López Beltrán himself has been associated with cocoa-related businesses that, according to the book, strategically benefited from the social program, called "Sembrando Vida" (Sowing Life). For the author, this set of cases constitutes evidence of an ecosystem of permissiveness and influence peddling that not only directly contradicts the promise of "putting the poor first," but also establishes a new privileged caste under the banner of the so-called transformative project. The conclusion is blunt, the leader who promised to embody change ultimately reproduced, and even institutionalized, the very vices of the "Oligarchy" he had denounced.

In Colombia, President Gustavo Petro faces a storm of scandals that, in an even more simultaneous and severe manner, touch both the family core and the legal foundations of his rise to power. The fronts multiply and reinforce one another. On the one hand, an autonomous body such as the National Electoral Council (CNE) is investigating the alleged violation of campaign financing limits during the 2022 election by more than 5.3 billion pesos, leading to formal charges against the president himself and calling into question the very legality of his electoral victory (Salazar, 2024). Additionally, concerns have been raised regarding the transparency of a 500 million pesos donation from the Colombian Federation of Educators (Fecode) to Colombia Humana, amid suspicions that these funds may have been diverted to the presidential campaign. In response to the charges, the head of state claimed that he was the target of a so-called "Soft coup."

In parallel, the criminal proceedings against his son, Nicolás Petro, for money laundering and illicit enrichment uncovered the alleged inflow of funds from questionable sources. These include the purported receipt of 400 million pesos from Samuel Santander Lopesierra, known as "The Marlboro Man", as well as various cash contributions from Alfonso del Cristo "El Turco" Hilsaca Elajdue, politician Máximo José Noriega Rodríguez, and several business figures from Cúcuta and Villavicencio, allegedly destined for the campaign's finances. The severity of the situation reached a critical point when Nicolás, in a dramatic turn, briefly declared that his father was aware of these dealings, only to later retract his statement, citing pressure (Salazar, 2024). This was compounded by the controversial appointment of his then, partner, Verónica Alco-

cer, as an ambassador, an appointment that was overturned by the Administrative Tribunal of Cundinamarca in April 2024 for violating Article 126 of the Constitution on nepotism.

In the face of this investigative pressure, Petro's response has followed a predictable script within his rhetorical play-book, the systematic delegitimization of institutions. He has labeled administrative investigations as "*Arbitrary*", framed them as part of a "*Soft coup*", and appealed to the "will of the people" as an antidote, thereby polarizing the debate and shifting it from the legal realm to the political one (Salazar, 2024).

Taken together, this accumulation of scandals reveals a recurring structural dynamic in this type of personalist leadership. First, the construction of a political identity based on claims of uncontested ethical purity makes such leaders particularly vulnerable when corruption touches their immediate environment. Second, the response tends not to be transparency or accountability, but rather attacks on the messengers, journalists, autonomous institutions, and political opponents, viewed as extensions of the political battlefield. In Mexico, this has taken the form of contempt and ridicule, in Colombia, accusations of a "*Coup*". Ultimately, these cases demonstrate that power, especially when concentrated in hyper-presidential systems, tends to generate its own orbit of interests and privileges, a "*Familial shadow*" operating at the margins of legality and ethics. These scandals do not merely damage the personal images of AMLO and Petro, they fracture the foundational narratives of their projects, revealing that the promise of a radically new politics can founder on the old and predictable rocks of nepotism, opacity, and conflicts of interest.

Addressing Political Problems through Popular Vote

In contexts where institutions resist and scandals loom, both AMLO and Petro have resorted to a shared rhetorical and procedural strategy, direct appeals to the "will of the people" as a form of suprapower that legitimizes actions while bypassing established democratic channels. This strategy, ranging from popular consultations to threats of mass mobilization, reveals a plebiscitary conception of democracy in which the charismatic bond between the leader and the masses is elevated above institutional checks and balances, including Congress, the courts, and even the Constitution itself.

In Mexico, AMLO employed this mechanism as a tool for distraction and responsibility shifting. According to López San Martín (2025), when the first signs of corruption within his family circle emerged in 2020, the president revived the "ghost of prosecuting former presidents" and submitted the issue to a popular consultation. The maneuver was clear, by

transferring the decision to "*The people*", he insulated himself politically, arguing that it was not his personal will, but rather an imprecise yet powerful popular mandate, that demanded such action. This logic reached its most extreme expression in his proposal to reform the judiciary through popular elections, whereby all judges and magistrates would be chosen at the ballot box. Under this model, "merit and professional trajectory would matter less than popularity," subordinating judicial independence to electoral logic and partisan clientelism, even proposing a "*Lottery system*" to allocate judicial positions (López San Martín, 2025). This initiative symbolized a radical deinstitutionalization of the state and the replacement of the judicial career with permanent campaigning.

In Colombia, Gustavo Petro has taken this logic to an even more explicit and recurrent level of institutional confrontation. Following Congress's rejection of his labor reform, his response was not negotiation, but the announcement of a popular consultation comprising 16 questions. Analysts such as Buendía (2025) argue that this mechanism was not genuinely intended to legislate, but rather to "win over the working electorate" and, above all, to stage a power struggle between the president, Congress, and organized interest groups. After the Senate rejected the consultation, Petro escalated his rhetoric and adopted a distinctly "campaign-style tone," warning that "the people rise up and revoke them" and threatening opposition lawmakers with electoral defeat and non-reelection (Torrado, 2025). The appeal to popular sovereignty thus shifted from consultation to threat, transforming participation into a tool of political punishment.

The most consequential move within this plebiscitary strategy has been the formal call for a National Constituent Assembly during a pre-electoral period. Promoted through a signature-gathering initiative led by his own cabinet, this proposal is perceived by the opposition as a definitive attempt to consolidate his political base, circumvent all institutional constraints, and reconfigure the rules of the game from the ground up (Jaramillo, 2025). Although Petro denies any intention of seeking reelection, the message remains clear: when institutions refuse to comply, the invocation of the "original constituent power" becomes a political threat. As Petro stated during an open town hall meeting, "it is up to the people to make the decision. This is the moment of the people" (Presidencia de Colombia, 2025).

Both leaders thus instrumentalize mechanisms of direct democracy to bypass the restraints of representative democracy. For AMLO, "*The people*" functioned as both a shield against criticism and a hammer to dismantle judicial autonomy. For Petro, it has served as a battering ram against legislative opposition and as a permanent constituent force aimed at redefining the republic. In both cases, "*The people*" cease

to be an abstract sovereign and instead become a mobilized actor, activated by and for the leader. While this strategy seeks to project popular legitimacy, it often erodes institutional consensus and deepens political polarization.

Crisis in the Public Health System

One of the most painful and tangible failures shared by both governments lies in the systematic deterioration of their public health systems. Far from fulfilling the promise of universalizing and improving healthcare, the administrations of AMLO and Petro presided over an operational and financial collapse that deprived millions of citizens of essential medicines and treatments. The similarity lies not only in the scale of the disaster, but in its common origin, policy decisions that, under the pretext of combating entrenched practices and pursuing radical transformation, dismantled functioning technical mechanisms and replaced them with structures based on political loyalty and ideological affinity. The result has been catastrophic consequences for public welfare and national stability.

In Mexico, the crisis was triggered by an administrative decision with enormous human costs. As documented by López San Martín (2025), AMLO's government dismantled the previously successful model of consolidated pharmaceutical procurement that, since 2013, had centralized and optimized drug purchasing for all public health institutions (IMSS, ISSSTE, national hospitals, and the armed forces). The official justification was suspicion of corruption, but the execution proved disastrous. By transferring this critical function to the Ministry of Finance's Administrative Office, technical expertise was lost and, as the book notes, political loyalty (99% loyal) was prioritized over professional competence (López San Martín, 2025). The outcome was a historic shortage of medicines, six million children were left without vaccines, preventable diseases resurged, and in a particularly tragic episode, more than 4,000 children with cancer died due to the lack of chemotherapy. Meanwhile, thousands of patients were forced to file legal injunctions to obtain the medicines they were entitled to receive (López San Martín, 2025). The promise of "*Republican austerity*" thus translated into a public health catastrophe.

In Colombia, Gustavo Petro's government is facing a systemic collapse driven by parallel dynamics. His promise of a more equitable and publicly oriented healthcare system has collided with a reality of financial suffocation and institutional discoordination. According to recent analyzes, a system with near-universal coverage is now on the brink of collapse, medicines are scarce, specialist appointments are delayed for months, and emergency rooms are shutting down (Niño, 2025). The root of the crisis is both financial and political, as

Health Promoting Entities (EPS) spend 110 pesos for every 100 they receive, denouncing budgetary strangulation by the government. While the public sector bleeds, the private prepaid healthcare sector is expanding at a rate of 17%, deepening the very inequality the reform agenda sought to correct (Niño, 2025). Data from the Office of the Ombudsman (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2025) show that health-related complaints increased by 75.7% over two years, with dramatic spikes in the lack of specialist appointments, delays in medication delivery, and noncompliance with judicial rulings and tutela orders. The paradox is stark, efforts to de-privatize and democratize healthcare have, so far, resulted in an unprecedented weakening of the public network and a strengthening of the market it aimed to regulate.

Thus, the health policy mirror reveals a tragic irony. In both cases, an accurate diagnosis of the flaws of the previous system, whether opacity in procurement or the influence of intermediaries, led to a catastrophic prescription. The response was not to reform and strengthen existing structures through improved oversight, but to dismantle them and replace them with politically compliant yet operationally incompetent arrangements. Both AMLO and Petro underestimated the technical complexity of managing a national healthcare system and overestimated the administrative capacity of their loyalists. The cost was not borne by corrupt structures, but by the most vulnerable patients, children left without vaccines, cancer patients without chemotherapy, and citizens waiting months for life-saving medical appointments.

Misallocation of Public Appointments

The manner in which a government manages the appointment of its officials reveals its underlying power's conception. In this regard, AMLO and Petro offer a distorted yet complementary mirror, the former exercised such tight control over succession that his shadow continued to govern after his term ended, while the latter has institutionalized a system of political quotas and personal loyalties that prioritizes favors over suitability. Although opposite in form, both models converge in the same outcome: the weakening of an autonomous, cohesive, and merit-based government.

In Mexico, AMLO orchestrated what could be described as a slow, motion administrative coup. Rather than allowing for a clean transition, he engineered a succession designed to ensure the continuity of his political project and inner circle beyond his six, year term. As documented by López San Martín (2025), the former president succeeded in ensuring that "virtually half of the cabinet" of his successor, Claudia Sheinbaum, was composed of his own loyalists, strategically placed in key ministries and agencies. The author captures the essence of this phenomenon with a blunt phrase, "he

left without leaving” (López San Martín, 2025). Although Sheinbaum was democratically elected, she was effectively “surrounded by his people,” with her governing autonomy hollowed out from within. This was not mere nepotism, but rather the construction of a parallel or shadow government, in which real decision-making authority continued to emanate from the former president’s closest collaborators, ensuring ideological and political continuity at all costs.

In Colombia, the picture under Gustavo Petro is the opposite in form, yet equally dysfunctional in substance. Whereas AMLO suffered from pathological hyper-control, Petro faces a systemic crisis of clientelism and lack of suitability. Despite his promise to break with “politics as usual,” his administration has filled numerous strategic positions with appointments based on political loyalty or personal proximity rather than on professional or technical competence. This pattern is particularly evident in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where political affinity has been prioritized over the diplomatic career service.

For instance, León Fredy Muñoz was appointed ambassador to Nicaragua, Camilo Romero to Argentina, and Petro confidant Eduardo Ávila Navarrete to Spain, despite lacking the training and credentials required for such posts. Moisés Ninco Daza, appointed ambassador to Mexico, had neither a professional degree nor relevant experience and was ultimately removed from office (Osorio, 2022). Ligia Quessep, a childhood friend of the First Lady, was appointed ambassador to Italy, while Elizabeth Carrillo, an activist close to Vice President Francia Márquez, assumed the ambassadorship in Bolivia. Similar plans included appointing Jorge Rojas, Petro’s former Secretary of Government in Bogotá, to the European Union, Guillermo Rivera, former Minister of the Interior, to Brazil, and Germán Navas Talero, a former congressman, to Denmark (Semana, 2022). None of these appointments emerged from the diplomatic career service.

In the domestic sphere, Adith Rafael Romero, an industrial engineer who had worked for 12 years as a bodyguard, was appointed Director of the Unit for Victims despite having no prior experience in human rights, transitional justice, or assistance to victims of the armed conflict (Vacía, 2025). The lack of suitability reached scandalous levels with cases involving fraudulent credentials, including that of Juliana Guerrero, who was nearly appointed Vice Minister of Youth after presenting false accounting degrees (Coronell, 2026). Similarly, the Minister of Education, Daniel Rojas Medellín, failed to approve his master’s thesis project (Semana, 2025). This network of irregular appointments was facilitated by institutions such as Fundación Universitaria San José, accused of operating as a diploma mill that enabled the irregular hiring of at least 24 individuals across 16 state entities between 2023 and 2025 (Pérez, 2026).

This noticeable political system patronage coexists with severe managerial paralysis. While ambassadorships and directorships are distributed among allies, strategic offices such as the Presidential Chief of Staff, the National Planning Department (DNP), the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Tourism, and the National Tax Authority (DIAN) have remained vacant or led by interim officials, partly due to the inability to reach political consensus and partly, as Guevara (2025) suggests, because “the head of state does not know whom to appoint.” The paralysis is compounded by internal cabinet conflicts, including scandals involving Foreign Minister Laura Sarabia and former minister Armando Benedetti, which have further eroded executive authority (Guevara, 2025). The result is not a shadow government, but a dysfunctional one, on the one hand, key positions remain vacant, on the other, offices are filled by individuals lacking the necessary qualifications.

Thereby, the contrast illuminates a deeper truth about this type of personalist leadership. On one end, AMLO’s successful personalism proved so powerful that it became institutionalized, transcending the leader himself through a dense network of ideological and political loyalties. On the other hand, Petro’s clientelist personalism reveals an inability to build state capacity, replacing it with a web of favours and loyalties that erodes competence and public ethics. At both extremes, suffocating control and chaotic discoordination, the construction of a professional, meritocratic, and effective administrative state is ultimately sacrificed.

Framing through “*Las Mañaneras*” vs. Framing through X

López Obrador clearly understood the strategic value of direct and daily communication, establishing *Las Mañaneras* as the cornerstone of his governing strategy. From this platform, according to López San Martín (2025), he “sought not only to dominate the public discussion, to a large extent, he succeeded”. The book characterizes this model as “a communication strategy seasoned with a heavy dose of propaganda, extended episodes of manipulation, the spread of hatred, and the repetition of falsehoods with the aim of turning them into truths”. Ethics and civility gradually eroded, while “insults, vulgarities, and abuses multiplied, all carried out through the apparatus of the state”.

Among the multiple consequences of *Las Mañaneras*, the author identifies two as fundamental. First, public attention was monopolized around the president’s discourse and actions, centralizing virtually all governmental activity in a single figure, from the most trivial matters to the most consequential. If an issue was not addressed by López Obrador, it effectively did not exist. Second, and no less important, this media dominance and the politicization of the public agenda fostered deep social

polarization through the simplification of political discourse: “us, the good ones, versus you, the bad ones”, “the people against the corrupt elites”, “liberals versus conservatives”. This form of narrative engineering produced a Manichean division within Mexican society.

Gustavo Petro, by contrast, has found in the social media platform X the contemporary equivalent of Las Mañaneras. Rubio (2024) describes this phenomenon as one of “deinstitutionalization and personalization”, whereby the president “bypasses official communication channels and centralizes the voice of the state in his personal profile, creating a self-generated content sphere”. This extreme personalization, as Barrios argues, “undermines institutional seriousness, transforming public administration into an individual and volatile ‘opinion tribune’ incompatible with the restraint required of the head of state”.

Petro’s framing on X is characterized by belligerence and a crisis of credibility. His “posting compulsion” and the absence of “filters and contextualization” shape a framing strategy rooted in permanent confrontation. Petro uses the platform as a “stage of intolerance” to issue “corrections, rebuttals, and reproaches” with overt hostility toward opponents and the media. The direct consequence of this “irresponsibility and frivolity” is the constant production of fake news and scandals that incite hostility and place public officials at risk. Crucially, the president is “failing in his communications” because his messages are not perceived as personal opinions, and his lack of restraint “leads to a loss of credibility” (Rubio, 2024). The strategic objective of this framing is narrative engineering aimed at reducing scepticism through a dual moral classification of values, privileging emotional mobilization over technical debate in order to foster ideological alignment with his policies.

Cornering Autonomous Institutions

A fundamental pillar of liberal democracy is the existence of autonomous institutions that operate as checks on executive power. Both AMLO and Petro have come to view these bodies not as guarantees of institutional balance, but as political obstacles to their transformative projects. However, their methods of neutralization differ: while AMLO pursued an overt campaign of delegitimization and abolition, Petro has adopted a strategy of financial strangulation and technical obstruction. The ultimate objective in both cases is to weaken any institution capable of limiting or questioning presidential authority, thereby concentrating decision-making at the center of power.

In Mexico, AMLO’s attack on autonomous institutions was explicit, sustained, and grounded in a Manichean rhetorical

framework. As documented by López San Martín (2025), the president consistently labeled these bodies as “factional, costly, and anti-popular,” even declaring that they were “good for nothing.” Within his narrative, institutions created to safeguard rights or regulate markets were not autonomous from political power, but rather “autonomous from the people” a phrase that encapsulates his logic: anything that does not respond directly to his popular mandate is, by definition, illegitimate and part of a neoliberal “golden bureaucracy” (López San Martín, 2025). Beyond fiscal savings, this offensive sought to eliminate spaces of technical and independent decision-making, subordinating all public policy to the direct and exclusive judgment of the executive.

In Colombia, Gustavo Petro has confronted institutional checks through a more subtle yet equally effective tactic, the weaponization of technocracy. A paradigmatic case is the management of royalties, a crucial source of funding for regional development. According to reports, the government, through the National Planning Department (DNP), has blocked the use of more than 28 trillion pesos (approximately USD 7 billion) in royalties, citing technical restrictions related to legal and tax expenditures within development projects (Hernández, 2025). For regional governors, this measure represents not a neutral administrative decision, but a political blockade disguised as technical compliance. By financially suffocating the regions through a technical agency, the central government exercises indirect yet stringent control over territorial autonomy. Rather than formally dismantling decentralized entities, it renders them dysfunctional by depriving them of resources, thereby centralizing investment decisions and political authority in Bogotá. This form of fiscal centralism undermines constitutionally enshrined regional autonomy and transforms technical institutions into instruments of political contestation.

Thus, the mirror of institutional autonomy reveals two faces of the same authoritarian coin. AMLO embraced demolition by decree and by contempt, convinced that his direct popular legitimacy invalidated any alternative source of authority. Petro, by contrast, practices suffocation through regulation and financial control, deploying the cold language of technical manuals to subordinate other levels of government and autonomous institutions. In both cases, the outcome is the erosion of the system of checks and balances.

Diplomatic Service as Political Currency

Foreign policy, traditionally the domain of technical expertise, continuity, and long-term state interests, was transformed under the governments of AMLO and Petro into an extensive political spoils system. In both countries, embassies ceased to function as institutions representing the nation abroad and instead became bargaining chips used to reward loyalty, silence

scandals, or accommodate political allies. This pattern of clientelizing the foreign service not only deprofessionalizes a critical state function, but also sends a devastating message, under these administrations, personal loyalty and domestic political convenience outweigh competence and international credibility.

In Mexico, the use of embassies as political rewards was strikingly blatant and closely linked to crisis management. López San Martín (2025) documents the paradigmatic case of Josefa González Blanco Ortiz Mena, Secretary of the Environment, who was forced to resign after delaying a commercial flight to wait for her arrival. Rather than being sanctioned, her loyalty was rewarded with an appointment as ambassador to the United Kingdom. This was not an isolated incident. The book notes that key embassies, such as those in Brazil, Colombia, and Russia, were assigned to Araudda Esquivel, Santa Patricia Ruiz, and Eduardo Villegas, respectively, individuals with “no diplomatic experience whatsoever” but with a “pleasant friendship” with the presidential inner circle, including the president’s own spouse (López San Martín, 2025). Mexican diplomacy was thus reduced to a system of prebends, in which the ability to represent the country abroad became irrelevant when weighed against personal proximity and political favor.

In Colombia, under Gustavo Petro’s administration, this phenomenon has taken on an even more revealing level of statistical regularity and strategic coldness. According to data from Blu Radio (2025), of the 53 ambassadors appointed by Petro during his first two and a half years in office, 44 (83%) were political allies or discretionary appointments, while only 11 (17%) belonged to the professional diplomatic career. Career diplomats were relegated to destinations such as Canada, Hungary, or Uruguay, whereas strategically significant or high-profile embassies, such as those in the United Kingdom, France, and the United States, were reserved for key political figures including Roy Barreras, Alfonso Prada, and Daniel García Peña (Blu Radio, 2025). This segmentation confirms that embassies are valued primarily for their political weight rather than their technical complexity. The situation is further aggravated by the unexplained vacancy of 14 embassies, including Saudi Arabia and Israel, suggesting both disinterest and potential administrative paralysis, where even the distribution of political favors encounters logistical or political constraints.

Consequently, the diplomatic mirror reflects a shared degradation of international public service. AMLO operated with a nearly feudal form of nepotism, using embassies as golden lifeboats for disgraced allies or as gifts for close friends. Petro, by contrast, has implemented an institutionalized system of political quota distribution, in which the overwhelming proportion of politicians over professional diplomats and the

strategic allocation of postings reveal a calculated effort to control the external narrative while repaying internal political debts. In both cases, the message sent to the professional diplomatic corps and to the international community is the same, experience, merit, and the continuity of state policy are expendable in the face of domestic political expediency. The legacy is not a strengthened foreign service, but a weakened network of international representation, subordinated to the fluctuations of internal politics and managed by individuals whose primary credential is not knowledge of the world, but loyalty to the individual in power.

Close to Dictatorships, Far from Western Democracies

The foreign policy of AMLO and Petro represented a deliberate rupture with the traditional alignment of their respective countries, Mexico’s cautious equilibrium and Colombia’s historical alliance with Washington, in order to embrace a new ideological axis. This axis was defined by rhetorical anti-imperialism, declarative solidarity with left-wing authoritarian regimes in the region, and a calculated distancing, if not outright confrontation, with Western powers and their multilateral forums. This reorientation was not a mere tactical adjustment, but a core identity pillar of both political projects, aimed at repositioning their nations as leaders of an alternative bloc and projecting onto the global stage the same struggle against “Elites” that they promoted domestically.

In Mexico, AMLO transformed the doctrine of “*Non-intervention*” into a diplomatic asset for rapprochement with pariah regimes. As documented by López San Martín (2025), the most powerful symbolic gesture was his boycott of the 2022 Summit of the Americas in Los Angeles, in solidarity with the excluded regimes of Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. This act, an explicit snub to the United States, was justified as a matter of sovereignty and inclusion, but in practice functioned as a political calling card to regional authoritarianism. His admiration for Cuba was particularly explicit, he went so far as to claim that the island “is a place to go live,” and referred to its president, Miguel Díaz-Canel, as a “distinguished, admired, and fraternal guest” (López San Martín, 2025). For AMLO, these governments were not dictatorships, but victims of an unjust “blockade” and bastions of popular sovereignty as he defined it. His call for an alternative migration summit in Palenque, attended by these same regimes, confirmed his intention to construct parallel forums that deliberately excluded the northern power.

In Colombia, Gustavo Petro carried out an even more radical historical shift, given the country’s longstanding strategic alliance with the United States. His stance has been a constant and militant defense of the Cuban and Venezuelan regimes,

centered on the denunciation of economic sanctions. As Angel and Mariottiz (2023) argue, Petro has used international forums, such as the G-77 Summit in Havana, to attack the “economic blockade that should never have existed” and to challenge Cuba’s inclusion on the list of state sponsors of terrorism, even confronting his predecessor, Iván Duque. This position goes beyond criticism of a specific foreign policy instrument; it constitutes a legitimization of the Castro regime itself and, by extension, of Chavismo. In doing so, Petro not only distances Colombia from Washington, but reverses decades of Colombian foreign policy by aligning with governments that previous administrations had identified as sponsors of insecurity and terrorism within Colombia’s own territory.

In consequence, foreign policy became the arena in which the domestic discourse of struggle against “*The regime*” or “*The oligarchy*” acquired a global dimension. For both AMLO and Petro, the United States and its democratic allies embodied, at the international level, the same hegemonic and exclusionary power they claimed to fight at home. Solidarity with Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua was therefore coherent within their broader narrative: these were sister nations allegedly victimized by the same global system. This positioning, however, came at a high cost. It weakened traditional strategic alliances, generated friction with key trading partners, and entangled both countries in a precarious diplomacy of balance, or imbalance, where ideological reaffirmation frequently prevailed over concrete national interests. The legacy is a bifurcated geopolitics, a rhetoric of a sovereign, anti-imperialist Global South, coupled with a practice that dangerously draws these countries closer to the orbit of authoritarian regimes and farther from the centers where critical decisions on global economic and security governance are made.

By way of synthesis, the comparison between the governments of AMLO and Petro reveals a recurring political “*Script*” that transcends ideology and national context. This pattern revolves around a plebiscitary hyper-presidentialism that, despite its transformative rhetoric, reproduces and intensifies the very crises it promised to resolve. In the realm of security, the strategies of “*Abrazos, no balazos*” and “*Paz Total*” devolved into tactical permissiveness that strengthened organized crime and weakened the state’s monopoly on the legitimate use of force. In communication, the demonization of the press branding independent journalists and opponents as “*Mercenaries*” or “*Mafia dolls*”, sought to centralize the narrative and neutralize dissent. Economic management prioritized current spending over investment, generating fiscal fragility and capital flight. Family centered corruption scandals fractured the discourse of moral purity, exposing how concentrated power inevitably creates its own orbit of privilege.

This model culminated in a systemic erosion of checks and balances, as autonomous institutions were undermined through overt hostility or technical asphyxiation. Foreign policy was reoriented toward an anti-imperialist ideological axis sympathetic to authoritarian regimes and increasingly distant from traditional alliances. Mexico’s *mañaneras* and Colombia’s reliance on social media functioned as fundamental tools of this social engineering, constructing parallel realities and weakening democratic deliberation. Consequently, the outcomes of this shared model materialized in humanitarian crises in health systems, rising criminal violence, capital flight, the deterioration of public services, and deep social polarization. Promises of radical change collided with a reality defined by improvisation, ideological rigidity, and contempt for meritocratic governance.

The final paradox is unmistakable. These projects came to power denouncing elites and promising to democratize authority, yet ultimately concentrated power even further, polarized their societies, and weakened democratic institutions. Their legacy is not one of profound transformation, but rather a cautionary tale: personalist messianism, however well-intentioned it may appear, often culminates in an exercise of power that reproduces, and at times intensifies, the very vices it vowed to eradicate. Mexico’s “*Fourth Transformation*” and Colombia’s “*Government of Change*”, far from constituting genuine breaks with their countries’ structural problems, ultimately deepened domestic fractures and undermined national development. True political renewal, this analysis suggests, requires strengthening institutions rather than individuals, and demands accountability for all especially for those who claim to govern in the name of the people.

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