POLICY BRIEF

The ills and cures of Mexico's democracy

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Time will tell whether Mexico's new president is shaking up Mexican politics in a way that helps or hurts the country's democracy.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After a long period of authoritarian rule in Latin America in the 20th century, Mexico over the past two decades has been described as a "flawed democracy." The country has managed to develop a pluralistic political system, conduct credible elections, and nonviolently effectuate changes of national leadership. But the country continues to suffer from poor governance in critical domains of public policy, high impunity and corruption rates, weak rule of law and protection of civil liberties and human rights, entrenched marginalization of large segments of the population and growing inequality, and low public confidence in political parties and public officials and institutions. These core deficiencies have converged in the perfect storm of intense and socially-debilitating criminal violence, as well as ineffective and often heavy-handed state response.

These drivers of alienation have not resulted in any widespread craving for the return of authoritarianism in Mexico. However, as in various parts of the world,

the dissatisfaction with governance outcomes did produce a rejection of the existing political establishment.

Enter Mexico's "tropical messiah,"[1] Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO). In 2018, he and his party resolutely won Mexico's presidential and parliamentary elections, crushing several traditional parties. During the campaign and upon assuming office, AMLO has portrayed himself as a radically different politician and promised not just to shake up the political system, but in fact usher in a fundamental restructuring of political power and governance in Mexico. He calls his objectives of empowering Mexico's struggling half of the population through socio-economic and political empowerment and eliminating corruption "Mexico's fourth revolution."

AMLO's objectives are worthy. But some of the means by which he seeks to pursue them can be dangerous for Mexico's democracy. Instead of being a savior for the country, he could turn out to be a populist who amasses power and weakens the

rule of law and accountability—the very opposite of what he proclaims. Perhaps the biggest danger of the AMLO presidency lies in his furthering the de-institutionalization of governance in Mexico, which is hardly what the country needs. For democracy to thrive, Mexico needs improved policy outcomes. But it equally needs rule of law that is institutionalized and not dependent on the whims of individuals.

INTRODUCTION: SEVEN DECADES OF AUTHORITARIANISM

For 71 years, from 1929 to 2000, one political party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, or PRI), ruled Mexico with a combination of authoritarian repression and systematic cooption and buyoffs across society. For many decades, the PRI was the only party to field candidates for all political offices, such as mayors, state congressmen, governors, national congressmen, and the president of the country.

Throughout the country there was fundamental underdevelopment and weakness of the rule of law. Other checks on the power of the PRI and the imperial presidency were similarly truncated or nonexistent, and official positions and administrative bureaucracies were distorted to coopt and intimidate opponents and serve political and vested interests rather than employed to implement effective policies.

The PRI's 70-year-rule did little to rectify the enormous bifurcation of the country, and particularly the persistent deep poverty and marginalization of the south and its indigenous populations. While institutions in the thriving urban centers and the north were stunted, institutions and public services of all kinds, including basic education and health, were critically underdeveloped in the south.

Although the PRI's power and absolute control of the presidency formally ended in 2000, they started weakening in the 1980s. The patronage buyoff system was shaken by a set of profound economic crises, including hyperinflation and severe devaluation of the Mexico peso.[2] The arrival in the 1980s of high-value cocaine trafficking from Colombia to the United States through Mexico further hollowed out Mexico's law enforcement: The cops no longer controlled the drug lords for the purposes of the state; the narco-traffickers now started dictating their terms to the politicians, cops, and state institutions, relying on coercion and bribery and acting with increasing impunity.

DEMOCRATIC REFORMS AND THEIR LIMITATIONS AND DISCONTENT

In the post-2000 democratic period, each of the three administrations aroused high expectations of radical social changes and improved policy performance, but failed to deliver.[3] While democratization in Mexico devolved power away from the imperial presidency to lower levels of government, particularly state governors, this devolution took place in the context of pervasive institutional weakness and distortion, impunity and weak rule of law, distorted and captured bureaucracies, social inequalities, and persistent crony capitalism.[4] The devolution of power also augmented opportunities for corruption. The era of electoral freedom has thus struggled to effectively address the core deficiencies of governance and to robustly reform institutions.

With their roots in the authoritarian era, the core drivers of political alienation and democratic underperformance include the following.

Corruption, impunity, and lack of accountability

Pervasive impunity and corruption still characterize Mexico's political, economic, and social life. Corruption costs Mexico as much as $53 billion per year, or some five percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP).[5] Mexico places last in Transparency International's corruption ranking of OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries, and at number 135 out of 180 countries overall.[6] In 2017, 84 percent of Mexicans believed that corrupt political leaders were a "very big problem."[7] Fifty-one percent reported

having to pay a bribe to access a government service.[8] Fiscal policy and state capacity continued to be inhibited by tax evasion and other challenges of revenue collection.

Over 90 percent of violent crimes in Mexico go unpunished. Tens of mass graves, sometimes containing more than one hundred bodies, have been found around Mexico. The most notorious and emblematic case of criminal impunity and likely government involvement has been the case of 43 missing students from a teachers' college in Ayotzinapa who may have been murdered by a combination of local police forces working with criminal groups at the order of local politicians. But the federal government has systematically covered up the crime and sabotaged credible international investigations.[9]

Elites continue to be able to buy their way out of prosecution or otherwise escape accountability. The administration of the previous president Enrique Peña Nieto was roiled by multiple corruption scandals involving shady real estate deals, massive electoral financial swindles,[10] and extensive spying on political opponents, civil society organizations, and journalists; but little if any effective prosecution followed.[11] The Odebrecht corruption scandal that has rocked Latin America was barely investigated in Mexico and hushed up.[12]

The 2002 and 2015 transparency laws began a set of important and valuable reforms, enabling citizens to hold government officials accountable. But their implementation has been uneven and sometimes reversed. In 2016, thanks to activism in Mexican civil society, the legislature passed a sweeping anti-corruption bill enhancing the independence of anti-corruption officials and bodies and empowering oversight by civil society.[13] But although signing it into law, the Peña Nieto administration essentially ignored implementing it.[14] When effective reforms do get passed, vested interests seek to overturn them or subvert them in implementation, including by employing coercion.

In 2014, the Mexican Congress passed a reform allowing the re-election of members of Congress, with members of the lower chamber now being allowed to serve for up to four consecutive terms and senators for up to two terms. This was an important way to improve accountability of political leaders. The president of Mexico, state governors, and mayor of Mexico City continue to be prohibited from seeking reelection. City mayors also remain restricted to one term, unless state legislatures approve re-elections reforms.

Bans on re-election, in place since the 1920s, severely distort incentives for lawmakers and prevent accountability, with voters able to vote only on promises and never on performance. The possibility of re-election now presents an opportunity for restructuring lawmakers' incentives away from short-term handouts. However, the power of party bosses to control lawmakers has not been eliminated. Politicians can only seek re-election if they run on the ticket of the same party as in their first candidacy.

The devolution of power from the imperial presidency to the state level did not increase accountability: instead, it devolved and normalized corruption. At least 14 former governors are under investigation, indicted, or convicted of corruption, often as a result of citizen activism. Along with many mayors, some have also been accused of major collusion with organized crime. In states such as Veracruz and Tamaulipas, criminal groups such as the Zetas came to control the state apparatus, using top government and law enforcement officials for vast-scale criminality.[15] In Veracruz alone, some $150 million meant for public health initiatives in 2014 disappeared.[16] Nonetheless, many politicians arrested for collusion with organized crime or corruption escape conviction.

Struggling judicial reforms, weak rule of law, and perverted bureaucracies

A key accomplishment of the Felipe Calderón administration was a wholesale overhaul of Mexico's justice system, replacing an old troubled inquisitorial system with a more transparent prosecutorial one. But the Mexican government failed to diligently support the reform. Although the new adversarial criminal justice system became officially operational in June 2016, its implementation has been highly uneven. In some states, instead of rectifying old problems, such as systematic violations of presumption of innocence and the use of torture-obtained evidence, the new system replicates these ills.

At the same time, criminals have escaped effective prosecution on technicalities and mishandled procedures, since police, prosecutors, and judges have not been trained adequately in the new protocols. Instead of supporting a better implementation of the reform, the Mexican political system reverted to its problematic tendencies, with bills introduced to weaken fair trial guarantees and expand the scope of mandatory pre-trial detention. In many states, courts remain under the thumb of governors while state and municipal police suffer from extremely low capacity.

Overall, Mexican bureaucracies often remain indecisive, inefficient, disrupted by frequent leadership and policy changes, and susceptible to corruption.

Intense violence and criminality

Since 2006, over 200,000 people died in Mexico as a result of violent homicides and de facto warfare among Mexico's criminal groups. In 2017, more than 30,000 people were killed, a record number expected to have been surpassed in 2018.[17] As a result of criminal violence as well as the state's militarized response to it, at least 37,000 people disappeared[18] and perhaps another 345,000 have been internally displaced in Mexico.[19] The intensity of the violence—in absolute numbers, in the operational tempo of aggressive actions by criminal groups, and in the visibility and brazenness of violence—has often surpassed violence rates and patterns of insurgencies or civil wars.

The intensified violence has spread geographically throughout Mexico, as well as to many functional domains, affecting not only illegal economies, such as drug trafficking.[20] Legal businesses—from oil extraction and fuel delivery, to avocado farmers, mining companies, retail stores, and food processing companies and services—have been negatively affected and sometimes altogether hampered by extortion, kidnapping, and violent intimidation. Impunity continues to protect over 90 percent of the crimes, and some 84 percent go unreported to the police,[21] as Mexicans do not expect redress and fear the police, including their collusion with criminals.[22]

Beyond bribing federal law enforcement, justice officials, and politicians, criminal groups have also sought to directly control political life at local levels. They have put forward their own candidates, intimidated rivals, inserted criminal proceeds into local campaigns, usurped public resources, infiltrated and intimidated local police forces, and assassinated political candidates and elected politicians. During the 2018 presidential and parliamentary campaign in Mexico, at least 145 politicians, candidates, and party workers were killed.[23] But violence against political rivals in Mexico goes back decades and many assassinated candidates and government officials have been killed by their business and political rivals.

State policies have failed to temper down and deter criminal violence.[24] In fact, they have often exacerbated it, such as through excessive reliance on so-called high-value targeting of criminal bosses and other poor policy design and implementation.[25]

State policies, particularly the use of unaccountable military and law enforcement forces, have also directly contributed to the violence. Since 2006, when President Calderón deployed the Mexican

military to fight criminal groups and take over policing responsibilities from the weak and corrupt police forces, over 10,000 complaints of abuse against the military have been lodged. Few have been meaningfully prosecuted.[26] Despite new laws raising penalties for human rights violations, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, and manufactured evidence remain widespread. Torture is routinely practiced to obtain confessions. Some 60 percent of prison population suffer from physical violence.[27] Prisons are overcrowded, with gangs and prisoners often engaging in criminal activity in and from prison and sometimes even physically leaving prisons to conduct crimes.[28]

Imperiled media and unprotected social activism

One of the most significant elements of democratization and democracy consolidation in Mexico has been the growth of civil society. Its high activism has translated into improvements in transparency, anti-corruption, and accountability efforts, as well as changes in anti-crime and drug policies. At the same time, activists and NGOs often face violent resistance from non-state actors, businesses, political elites, and even the state. Indigenous groups and environmental activists remain particularly vulnerable.

Mexico's media, critical watchdogs for exposing corruption and collusion, have been under multiple forms of attacks. Criminal groups have physically intimidated journalists and social media activists who reported their crimes, often torturing and murdering their victims. Between 2000 and 2017, 111 journalists were killed in Mexico and at least another 25 disappeared.[29] Murders of journalists and attacks on the media continued in 2018. Authorities have failed to properly investigate the murders, sometimes being complicit in them: Ninety percent of crimes against journalists have gone unpunished.[30] As a result, many journalists and media outlets have self-censored, staying away from reporting on crime and corruption.[31]

Even in the absence of intimidation, news coverage is affected by the media's dependence on government advertising money and subsidies. Broadcast media are dominated by a duopoly linked to powerful businessmen and politicians. The 2013 reform of the telecommunications law established a new regulator and reduced fees, but was limited in scope.[32]

Persistent poverty and social marginalization

Mexico remains a highly unequal and bifurcated country. Mexico is a middle-income country and a member of the OECD. It has reduced extreme poverty and managed to expand access to health and education. Still, its poverty rate has stubbornly persisted at over 40 percent of the population for decades, with over 50 million people living below the poverty line and about 21 million living on less than $2 per day.[33] Sixty-four percent of Mexico's wealth is concentrated in 10 percent of the population.[34] Mexico's crony capitalism, oligopolies dominating major industry and services such as telecommunications, and a regressive tax system all contribute to the persisting severe inequality.[35]

The country's thriving city centers look like those in Western Europe or the United States, while its slums—where millions of people live—lack highways, schools, and clinics. Disconnected from Mexico's prosperity, these neglected areas also lack effective police presence and rule of law, and are run by criminal groups. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) increased employment in cities close to the U.S. border and pulled in millions of migrants from other parts of Mexico, but public infrastructure and social service provision did not follow.

The lack of services in the southern part of Mexico, all the more so in areas of indigenous populations, is even more pronounced. Vast segments of rural areas in the south saw little to no development or state investment for decades. There, thriving tourist resorts and private haciendas dramatically contrast with villages with little primary education

and virtually no social services, where the nearest health clinic may be 20 miles or more away. Among indigenous populations whose poverty levels run over 70 percent of the population, childbirth mortality and maternal mortality are much higher than among non-indigenous Mexicans. Economies in these areas, such as the Tierra Caliente region of Michoacán and Guerrero, center on illegality, with men seeking to cross into the United States in search of economic opportunities and women cultivating opium poppy. Criminal organizations rule and fight over these areas.

Multiple government efforts at redressing inequality, particularly in the south, have had highly uneven outcomes. Some, such as conditional cash transfers, performed relatively well. Others, such as special economic zones, have fallen flat. Development and redistribution programs are deficient in a number of ways: Significant amounts of public resources are usurped for private gain, and public administration structures are ineffective and clientelistic. These have been systematic problems in Michoacán, Chiapas, Guerrero, Tabasco, and Oaxaca for decades.[36] The millions of dollars invested in those areas with little discernible impact are also pilfered by criminal groups.

The rise of militias

In the context of intense and escalating criminal violence, extortion, and intimidation—as well as the state's inability to protect residents—anti-crime militias have risen throughout Mexico, including in urban areas of the north. However, their visibility and extent has been most prominent in Michoacán and Guerrero.[37] The militia groups have taken on the policing and governing functions, such as arresting people whom they accuse of working for criminal groups, and holding their own court trials and meting out sentences. In some towns, they have expelled local police forces, dismissed local government officials, taken over police stations and mayors' offices, and prevented the access of federal authorities. At the same time, militia

members themselves began engaging in their own predation on local communities.[38] In turn, criminal gangs also revamped themselves under the cloak of militias.

In 2014, the response of the Peña Nieto government—enrolling some of the vetted militias into a specially created body, the so-called the Rural Defense Corps—was perhaps the least bad option at the time, because the state feared bloodshed if it confronted the militias forcefully. However, the government's response also proved woefully inadequate: The vetting and accountability mechanisms were insufficient,[39] and many militias persisted outside of the law and continued to engage in criminal activity.[40] Subsequently, the Mexican government exhibited a temporary willingness to act against the militias, including arresting and prosecuting some of their members. But that did not lead to their systematic dismantling, either. Many of the arrested leaders, even those accused of ordering homicides or extortion, got out of jail as prosecution faltered.

The militia phenomenon is not new in Mexico; in fact, it goes back decades. The Mexican state, military forces, and *caciques* (powerful local politicians and large landowners, often ruling like feudal lords) at various times appropriated or stood up militias for their counterinsurgency or territorial control purposes. But even when the militias actually deliver order, however perverted, they are a fundamental threat to democracy because of their lack of accountability.

MEXICO'S DEMOCRACY, FOREIGN POLICY, AND THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER

Challenges to democracy in Mexico are of Mexico's own doing—they are principally internally driven. Some Mexican scholars like to attribute a significant portion of Mexico's ills, particularly criminal violence and corruption, to international factors—such as the voracious U.S. appetite for illicit drugs, and the resulting cocaine flows from Colombia and

Mexico to the United States.[41] Indeed, the concept of shared responsibility was a key breakthrough concept of the Merida Initiative, the bilateral and security cooperation deal signed by Mexico and the United States in 2006. The United States accepted its responsibility for reducing demand for illegal drugs and combatting the flows of weapons and drug money from the United States to Mexico, and Mexico accepted its responsibility for mitigating the production and flows of illegal drugs in and from Mexico to the United States.

However, it is the preexisting weakness of Mexico's own institutions—including its law enforcement's lack of deterrence capacity, the lack accountability within and across society, and pervasive corruption—that makes the illegal drug trade in Mexico so toxic. The volume of illegal drug consumption and drug flows is also high in other parts of the world (including the United States and Western Europe) without being so corrosive. In East Asia, the amount of illegal drug production, traffic, and consumption is on par with or even surpasses Mexico, but the drug trafficking groups are essentially nonviolent,[42] even if governments in some of these countries can be egregiously and reprehensibly violent in their response to the illegal drug trade, such as in the Philippines,[43] or highly repressive, such as in China.[44]

The international effects of Mexico's regime, including the change from authoritarianism and democracy, have been limited. Mexico has long been a highly insular country, focused on its northern neighbor and rather disconnected from Latin America and the rest of the world. Mexico's economic ties with China, East Asia, and Western Europe have deepened, and Mexico eyes these regions as alternatives to any weakening of economic ties with North America under the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) that will replace NAFTA if the legislatures of the three countries approve the new trade deal. In other domains as well, Mexico's diplomatic footprint has increased. Nonetheless, Mexico is still predominantly focused on the United States, and to a lesser extent Canada, and internally.

The 1980s democratization wave in Latin America influenced the first period of major electoral mobilization in Mexico, in which opposition parties won mayoral offices of major cities. But Mexico's democratization after 2001 did not profoundly shape Latin American democracies or democracies around the world, or the regimes or foreign policies of other countries.

A reversal of democratization in Mexico would no doubt have an impact on North America's milieu, as an area of joint prosperity and shared values, if not yet of a joint security framework. Nonetheless, the Trump administration had already sought to walk away from the concept of joint economic integration, though ultimately did not throw it out the window. A return to authoritarianism may have an impact the quality of life that U.S. citizens residing in Mexico have, and would impact families of Mexican origin residing in the United States. If a return to authoritarianism meant a significant economic downturn in Mexico, that could potentially intensify the flows of undocumented migrants from Mexico to the United States. For a decade now, these flows have been down, with Central Americans seeking to escape intense criminal violence and crippling poverty surpassing the flows of Mexicans. But a democracy that does not deliver equitable growth and job creation in rural parts of Mexico could have similar effects.

THE AMLO ABSOLUTION

On July 1, 2018, 53 percent of Mexico's electorate voted for insurgent politician Andrés Manuel López Obrador, popularly known as AMLO, as Mexico's next president. It was the first time a leftist politician was elected in Mexico in three decades. In a resolute rejection of Mexico's dominant parties, the PRI and the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), Mexican voters also handed AMLO and his party, Morena, control of both chambers of the Mexican Congress as well as of Mexico City. After 24 years of divided government, President López Obrador enjoys a great capacity to pass laws and get budgets approved. AMLO's and

Morena's crushing victories were driven by the fundamental disappointment of Mexican electorate with the incomplete democratization of the past 18 years and the country's deeply entrenched social exclusion, inequity, corruption, lack of accountability, and escalating violence.

López Obrador has built his political career on campaigning for the rights of Mexico's poor and marginalized, particularly in the south, from where he comes. In many ways, his victory can make Mexico's democracy and governance far more equitable and inclusive than it has ever been. Redressing the systematic ills of Mexico's rule, including marginalization and corruption, are the key objectives of the AMLO presidency. They are worthy and important; indeed, along with bringing criminal violence down, to which AMLO has also committed himself, they are fundamental. Nonetheless, AMLO runs large risks in overstating the scope of the deliverables.

López Obrador promises to pay for his major redistribution policies and the development and empowerment of the marginalized half of the population (providing guaranteed education, jobs, and health care) by eliminating Mexico's corruption and thus saving $50 billion.

His goals are enormously ambitious, and he has been active in launching initiatives. For example, in November 2018, two weeks before assuming the presidency, AMLO announced his security strategy: The National Peace and Security Plan 2018-2024 (*Plan Nacional de Paz y Seguridad 2018-2024*). Along with a raft of anti-corruption measures that his administration has already launched, the new anti-crime strategy is "80 percent focused on the roots of insecurity," as compared with confronting existing criminal groups, as AMLO stated in announcing his plan.[45] The plan combines anti-corruption measures, economic policies, enhanced human rights protections, ethical reforms, public health and treatment for drug use and exploration of drug legalization, transitional justice and amnesty for

some criminals, and broader societal peacebuilding alongside more traditional anti-crime measures such as prison reform and security sector reform (including the creation of a new law enforcement force, the National Guard). It promises to ensure that "families in Mexico recover peace and confidence in institutions," and to "guarantee peace and improve the lives of each and every" Mexican citizen.[46]

Some of these core points are highly innovative, even if they are also fraught with challenges—such as an amnesty or leniency program for some criminals. Others come with many pitfalls, such as poppy licensing for medical purposes (considered within the rubric of public health). And still others, including the creation of a National Guard, replicate past policy instincts and failures. Critically lacking is an operationalized policing strategy, a robust police reform plan, support for Mexico's struggling judiciary reform, and a strategy for dealing with militias.[47]

However, how AMLO goes about delivering his promises is concerning. His populist style of governance, not his goals, may pose risks to Mexico's democracy. The problems go beyond his railing against the country's "mafia of power," as he calls the country's political and economic elite.

Equally, it is important to separate mistakes that an eager, rookie, self-styled-rebel politician makes from actions that reveal more deep-seated populist or authoritarian ways. For example, to demonstrate his anti-corruption seriousness and foster his image as man of the people, AMLO took a 60-percent cut in his presidential salary. Then, other government officials' salaries were pegged to the president's, setting his wage as the ceiling. These changes produced across-the-board reductions for many government employees, with dramatic cuts for at least 30,000 of them. The law immediately produced a predictable exodus of experienced managers and bureaucrats.[48] AMLO may claim "good riddance," but he will need to deal with a resulting loss of institutional memory and competent technocrats.

Similarly, alleging corruption and claiming support from citizens, AMLO cancelled the previous government's contract for Mexico City's already partially built new airport. The move sent the peso and Mexican markets tumbling and left investors dismayed, the airport dormant, and his government responsible for paying restitution to investors as they wrestle over the terms of the construction bonds buyback.[49] But the version of the airport that AMLO prefers is not technically feasible.[50]

The questions are whether AMLO will learn from correctable mistakes and correct them, and whether he will seek to amass power while undermining checks and balances. His campaign rhetoric was firebrand and full of attacks against those whom he perceived to have slighted him. During the campaign, he railed against the Mexican media, disparaged Mexican NGOs and civil society, and decried the Mexican Supreme Court and other institutions of transparency. After he became president, he refused to accept the recommendation of civil society groups to allow an independent process to appoint an attorney general, preferring instead to appoint the individual himself.

López Obrador's reliance on referendums, mimicking the approach of the Evo Morales government in Bolivia, is worrying. Rather than a democratizing measure, referendums can easily become rubber stamps on questionable policies—overriding other checks and balances in the process, including the Mexican Congress.[51] Referendums also allow for outright majoritarian extremism, or—conversely—rule by the people, who are unelected and unaccountable. The referendums that have been approved so far were hardly representative of a broad segment of the population. The first, on the fate of Mexico City's airport, was organized by AMLO's Morena party and involved fewer than two percent of Mexico's eligible voters. A second, also organized by Morena, was on a railway project through Campeche, Chiapas, Quitana Roo, Tabasco, and the Yucatán that is economically questionable and threatens Mexico's rich biodiversity. It attracted a similarly low turnout, and approved the infrastructure project without any formal environmental assessment and despite objections by Mexico's leading scientists, environmentalists, human rights defenders, cultural figures, and NGOs.[52]

At the same time, AMLO goes to the Mexican Congress when it suits him, particularly when he fears that a referendum, however cooked up in design, may not produce the outcome he wants. If such shopping for policy approval persists, democracy in Mexico will be undermined.

While AMLO rails against corruption, he has a checkered record on obeying rules and supporting rule of law. Not paying for services such as electricity and water—a form of theft[53]—is a tactic that AMLO promoted as a rebel politician. In Tabasco, where he unsuccessfully ran for governor, for example, he encouraged residents not to pay for their electricity bills to protest poor access and high bills.[54] Yet the outcome has been two decades of widespread refusal to pay for electricity, with the resulting persistence of delivery, coverage, and price problems in the state. Nor has AMLO broken with labor unions associated with government graft.

Indeed, the biggest challenge for AMLO and the biggest danger for Mexico is the possibility that AMLO will oversee six years of deinstitutionalization via—once again—an imperial presidency. Beyond anti-corruption measures, AMLO has said little about strengthening and reforming institutions. He prefers to rule through individual power and referenda, not bureaucracies, procedures, and institutions. But this is the very opposite of what Mexico needs. Mexico's rule of law needs to be strengthened, not disparaged and weakened—and in order to achieve that, Mexico's institutions need to become more capacious.

THE AMLO FACTOR ABROAD

Perhaps more than other Mexican presidents in recent history, AMLO can influence the democracy zeitgeist abroad, but not necessarily for the better. His rise is consistent with, but does not precede the emergence of, other populist politicians in Latin America—from Evo Morales in Bolivia to Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua and Jimmy Morales in Guatemala. They all rose to power promising to empower the marginalized (and in the case of Evo Morales did so) and to combat corruption. But they increasingly turned to undemocratic ways, seeking to extend their rule by overturning term limits, silencing opposition, and preventing investigations of their own corruption. Will AMLO follow their lead or remain virtuous in scrupulous adherence to accountability processes? As most countries in the Americas have disavowed the authoritarian Venezuelan regime of Nicolás Maduro, AMLO has refused to follow suit, citing strict adherence to a non-interference principle in foreign policy.

The AMLO era may complicate relations with the Trump administration. Many of the drug policies that AMLO is contemplating—from breaking with high-value targeting of Mexican drug lords to poppy licensing and marijuana legalization—may sit badly with a White House that has embraced doctrinaire and backward war-on-drug tendencies. Other democratic Mexican administrations have not simply swallowed Washington's dictates. And during Mexico's authoritarian era, the country's counternarcotics policies frequently contradicted Washington's desires. Similarly, the AMLO and Trump administrations may clash over how to deal with Central American migrants: On the U.S.-Mexican border, local administration and police officials have sometimes blocked migrants from crossing bridges to the United States, and Mexico's federal government has acquiesced to the Trump administration's insistence that Central American migrants stay in Mexico while their asylum cases are processed.[55] But the AMLO administration has already significantly reduced efforts to control Mexico's southern border. All of these policy tangles and disagreements, however, are a function of particular administrations rather than structural outcomes of a democratic, authoritarian, or populist regime in Mexico.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

It remains to be seen whether López Obrador will live up to his promises of empowering the downtrodden or whether he will yet turn out to be another Mexican politician who raises hopes, only for the electorate to see its hopes crushed. If that happens, under the best of circumstances it could inoculate Mexico against embracing risky populism. Conversely, however, disappointment and resentment could produce repercussions greater than the country experienced at any time since the 1990s. Mexicans could come to believe that the entire post-authoritarian political spectrum of parties, politicians, and ideas has run its course without significant improvements in their lives. They may become susceptible to ideas far more radical and authoritarian than AMLO.

Overall, there is no structural reason for the relationship between an AMLO administration and the United States to become conflictual. Washington should support many of AMLO's goals even while disagreeing with many of AMLO's methods. Rather than adopting an anti-AMLO policy, Washington should adopt a principled policy of fostering accountability, rule of law, transparency, and institution building in Mexico.

Many of these principles were anchored in the Merida Initiative and Washington should persist with them, though adjusting them toward better outcomes and learning from what has worked and what not. They include U.S. assistance in training Mexico's police forces, judges, and prosecutors. The United States should also expand rule-of-law and law enforcement improvements at the sub-federal level in Mexico, working directly with committed state and city administrations.

The United States should equally support efforts to professionalize the Mexican bureaucracy overall and assist with training and rollout of programs that encourage merit-based appointments and build standards and protocols. The United States cannot unilaterally pursue such measures in and for Mexico—instead, the AMLO administration will need to request continued U.S. assistance.

But AMLO's anti-corruption thrust provides important openings for U.S. institutional development assistance, as does his public insistence on upholding and protecting human rights in Mexico. The United States should take advantage of such declarations and scrupulously promote such policies. It should also insist that its counterparts—whether the Mexican police, military forces, and eventually the National Guard—are held diligently and transparently accountable for any human rights abuses. And Washington can do its part in advocating civil liberties protections for Mexicans, including safety for journalists, the empowerment of a vigilant and vibrant civil society, and respect for Mexico's Supreme Court.

In some cases, advancing those long-term institution-building measures may require that Washington tolerate divergence in counternarcotics policies between Mexico and the United States. In particular, Mexico's leadership may decide that the country's poppy fields won't be eradicated, and that Mexico may no longer chase after some of the country's kingpins on Washington's say-so. This should not be a debilitating problem: Some of these policies have been not just ineffective but outright counterproductive. Reinforcing Mexico's rule of law and the competence, functionality, and integrity of its institutions will far more effectively help to combat criminality in Mexico and dangerous flows to the United States than bringing down a particular kingpin.

For that very same reason, as well as basic equity and hence the legitimacy of democracy, the United States should also support development efforts for Mexico's marginalized populations and regions. Indeed, in collaboration with the previous administrations, Washington has led in implementing anti-crime, socio-economic measures in Mexico; and advocating such policies got the Calderón and Peña Nieto administrations to focus on them as well. The López Obrador team has much to learn from those efforts as it builds its own policies, and can cooperate with Washington in that area.

Such efforts to strengthen Mexico's social fabric are not only fundamental for the quality of democracy in Mexico, they have positive repercussions for the United States. But once again, all such projects should be subjected to a scrupulous public debate and systematic evaluation of their pros and cons across many different policy domains. Often, there will be difficult tradeoffs, but they should be made on the basis of comprehensive analyses and transparency, requirements the United States can stipulate in its cooperation with Mexico.

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