



# Militarization, Organized Crime, and Democratic Challenges in Mexico

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## Introduction

This paper examines the nexus between corruption, weak institutions, drug trafficking, and organized crime in Mexico. (Morris 2012; Zepeda, Rosen 2019). Historical legacy has determined the current events of contemporary Mexico, which is characterized by a transition from an authoritarian to a democratic regime (Velasco 2012). Despite its transition to democracy, Mexico has been plagued by high levels of corruption and impunity. This article utilizes data and qualitative analysis to examine the trends in corruption and insecurity as well as lack of trust in institutions. This chapter also analyzes organized crime in Mexico and how the country's *war on drugs* has resulted in increases in violence and insecurity. Our main argument is that the

*militarization* of public safety, especially since Calderón's administration (2006-2012), and tough on crime policies in general have failed to address the underlying institutional challenges that the country faces connecting corruption, organized crime and political institutions.

## Democratization and Corruption: Fragile Institutions

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), corruption is a complex social, political and economic phenomenon that affects all countries, as it undermines democratic institutions, hinders economic development, and contributes to government instability. Corruption, according to the UNODC, attacks the basis of democratic institutions by distorting electoral processes, perverting the rule of law, and creating bureaucratic obstacles whose only reason for existence is to ask for bribes. In this context, economic development is constrained because foreign direct investment is deterred and small businesses within the country often find it impossible to overcome the “start-up costs” required because of corruption (UNODC 2020).

Mexico experienced seven decades of single-party rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional* – PRI). While the PRI began to lose political control at the state level in the 1980s, this party controlled the federal government until 2000, when for the first time in history, the National Action Party (*Partido Acción Nacional* – PAN) assumed power with the election of Vicente Fox Quesada to the presidency (Shirk 2005; Edmonds-Poli, Shirk 2016; Olney 2018).

Despite the transition to democracy, Mexico remains plagued by high levels of corruption and impunity (Morris, Klesner 2010; Andreas 1998; Shelley 2001, Morris 2009; Rosen, Zepeda 2016). According to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), Mexico has become more corrupt over time. From 2000 to 2015, Mexico moved from the 57th to the 106th position on the corruption ranking, with one being the least corrupt country and 180 being the most corrupt country (Transparency International 2019). In 2018 Mexico ranked 135 out of 180 countries, with the higher the number the more corruption (Transparency International 2018). The levels of corruption

between 2015 and 2018 escalated notably, which is paradoxical the period considered to mark a first phase on the democratic transition in the country, after two PAN administrations, one PRI and the victory of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (MORENA – Movement for the National Renovation). In 2019, Mexico ranked 130 in this same ranking, improving its position with respect to 2018. This suggests that the new government has taken action against corruption, but also that it will take time to alleviate this phenomenon (Transparencia Mexicana 2020).

In this context, organized crime groups have increased their ability to infiltrate government structures, especially in local governments, by taking advantage of the political “new comers” and their urgency to find spaces to secure position as formal political authorities. High level officials, including governors, from various states like Michoacán, Nayarit, Tamaulipas, and Quintana Roo have been involved in cases of corruption and linkages to drug cartels (Grillo 2014; Maldonado Aranda 2012, Olney 2018). The complex relationship between states and organized crime groups presents major challenges when attempting to implement strategies to combat drug trafficking and organized crime. During the period 2007-2017, at least 17 Mexican governors have either been under investigation, captured, or are fugitives of an array of crimes and felonies (García 2017).

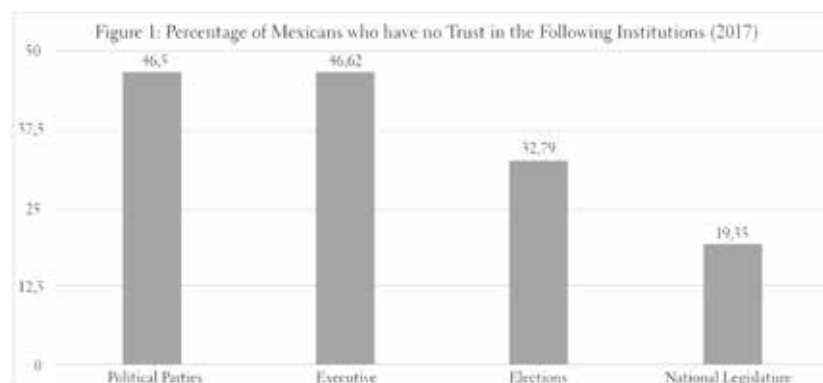
One of the institutions that has been plagued by corruption is the police. Prior to the implementation of the national guard, there were different police bodies at various levels (i.e., federal, subnational and local police). The police, especially the local police, are perceived as one of the most corrupt institutions in the country. At the national level, the municipal preventative police forces accounted for nearly 40 percent of the police force, while the federal ministerial police, accounted for only 1.6 percent of the total police forces. Working as a police officer is very dangerous and many individuals have died while in the line of duty. Police are not well paid, which also makes them vulnerable to accepting bribes from organized crime groups (Davis 2006; Zepeda Lecuona 2009).

Furthermore, Mexico faces major challenges with high levels of impunity generated by an inefficient judiciary system. The high levels of impunity in the country persist despite major reforms to the judicial

system that began in 2008. According to a Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) report, there remains much “to be done for Mexico to enjoy a system that holds perpetrators accountable for crimes while ensuring respect for human rights.” (Mayer, Suárez Enriquez 2016). There are various obstacles that must be addressed, such as the need to change entrenched practices, pass new laws, and train personnel. Ultimately, reforming a judicial system is tough work-in-progress that has been taking decades-long to process some positive outcomes.

### Trust in Institutions and Democracy

The high levels of corruption and impunity have contributed to Mexicans being very distrustful of institutions. For example, 46.5 percent of Mexicans responded “not at all” in the 2017 LAPOP survey when asked their level of trust in political parties. Similarly, 46.62 percent of respondents do not trust at all the executive. Only 5.01 percent of respondents answered that they have “a lot” of trust in the executive. On the other hand, only 2.20 percent of respondents contended that they had “a lot” of trust in political parties.



Source: Created by authors with data from LAPOP 2017.

Note: The respondents in this question answered “not at all” when asked their levels of trust in these institutions.

Mexicans also have very low levels of trust in politicians, likely because of the seemingly endless number of corruption scandals involving politicians in all branches of government. In fact, 41.16 percent of Mexicans

in 2017 believed that “all” politicians are corrupt, while 36.76 percent believed that “more than half of them” are corrupt. On the other hand, only 5.20 percent answered that “less than half of them” are corrupt.

Moreover, survey research demonstrates that Mexicans are very dissatisfied with democracy. According to the 2017 Mexico survey conducted by LAPOP only 3.46 percent of the population responded that they are “very satisfied” with democracy. On the other hand, 49.53 percent of the survey contended that they are “dissatisfied,” while 23.97 argued that they are “very dissatisfied.” These data indicate a severe damage regarding the Mexican citizenship trust in their political institutions, an element which is, simultaneously, an effect of decades of political practices and a reinforcement to the incentives to tolerate or to cooperate with organized crime groups or politician’s misconducts.

### **Felipe Calderón’s Drug War: Militarization as politics by other means**

President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), from the right-wing oriented party PAN, assumed the presidency after a contested election against Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the left-wing political party PRD (Rodrigues, Labate 2019). Thousands of protestors hit the streets to protest the massive levels of fraud that allegedly occurred during the elections. Given this context, Calderón, who assumed power as a relatively weak president, sought to increase his power and demonstrate his toughness by launching a *war on drugs* against the major drug cartels and organized crime groups operating in the country. It is true that Mexican administrations have been fully committed to the so-called U.S. war on drugs since the early 1970s.

This commitment meant the acceptance of intelligence services offered by U.S. agencies or the actual presence of American agents in Mexican territory—especially, from the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the CIA—and the promise to engage military forces in counter-narcotics operations. In part, the U.S. administrations, notably since Reagan’s (1981-1989), assumed the optics that military forces would be more effective to fight well-armed and wealthy “drug cartels” and, also, they would be less corrupt than Federal, state and municipal

police forces (Rodrigues, Labate 2019). In this sense, the Calderón's "declaration of war" was not the beginning of the "militarization" of Mexican public safety, but a new and more intense phase in its history (Rodrigues, Kalil, Zepeda, Rosen 2017). Here, we take the definition of "militarization of public safety" in its basic definition as the engagement of military troops in tasks and missions traditionally conducted by police forces, such as urban patrolling, streets' and highway's check points, operations to arrest "drug lords", participation in anti-drugs criminal investigations, missions to destroy illicit laboratories and cultivation areas among others (Rosen, Zepeda 2016; Rodrigues, Kalil, Zepeda, Rosen 2017).

As stated by Rubén Aguilar and Jorge Castañeda (2012), the main reason that Calderón declared the war on drugs was political to gain the legitimation, supposedly lost in the 2006 presidential elections, in the middle of the protests in the streets of Mexico City. Other scholars also observe that the war on drugs (Chabat 2010) was launched immediately after Calderón was sworn in and sought to draw attention away from the highly controversial 2006 election (Watt, Zepeda 2012). President Calderón desired to weaken the increasing power of the cartels in the country and elevated the threat of drug trafficking and organized crime groups to the top national security threat. As a result, however, drug trafficking and violence increased during the Calderón government (Carpenter 2012; Grillo 2012). First, organized crime groups battled among each other for control of territory and drug routes (Watt, Zepeda 2012; Jones 2016). These activities resulted in increases in violence over time. Second, drug trafficking organizations fought with the government, who deployed the military to combat these criminal groups. Nevertheless, Calderón insisted in deploying the military instead of the police due to the former higher levels of citizenship confidence. The Mexican military is also believed to be better trained and more efficient than the police, besides the fact that their basic training is supposed to be linked to tasks related to national defense and warfare, and not policing activities (Moloeznik 2009; O'Neil 2009).

The militarization of the drug war led to high levels of violence in Mexico. Drug-related killings spiked from 2,120 in 2006 to 5,153 in 2008. In 2009, 6,587 drug-related killings occurred (Shirk 2010). Ac-

According to data from *Reforma*, Chihuahua accounted for 31 percent of the total drug-related killings in 2009. Other states also had high percentages of drug-related homicides: Sinaloa (12 percent); Guerrero (10 percent); and Durango (10 percent) (Shirk 2010).

According to various official sources, the number of narco-executions increased notably from 2007 to 2011, when violence reached its peak (López, Del Pozo 2012). In 2012, violence started to decline as the number of narco-executions related to organized crime reduced notably compared with the previous year. Furthermore, between 2006 and 2012 approximately 26,000 people disappeared. In addition, at least 10,000 individuals were murdered and buried in “narco-graves” over the same period (Macias 2014). In summary, estimates reveal that more than 100,000 murders occurred during the Calderón government as a result of the war on drugs (Aguilar, Castañeda 2012).

### **Violence during the Peña Nieto Government: PRI again, Militarization again**

Enrique Peña Nieto (PRI) assumed the presidency in 2012. The new president distinguished himself from the previous government by focusing less on the discourse of the drug war and more on various reforms. Peña Nieto passed educational and energy reforms, although they have been quite controversial in nature. In addition, the new president spent less effort marketing the victories of the war on drugs, which is a stark contrast from the Calderón government, which invested tremendous resources touting the successes of the drug war. For instance, Mexican television stations would routinely show the capture of major kingpins who were paraded in front of the public. Thus, while the discourse regarding drug strategies might be different, the drug policies have remained quite similar.

The Peña Nieto *sexenio* had more homicides than the one of his predecessor Felipe Calderón. According to data provided by The National System of Public Security (Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública – SNSP), 104,794 homicides occurred between 2006 and 2012. However, relying on the same source, during the Peña Nieto *sexenio*, there were 130,165 homicides. Mexico is confronting the

highest levels of violence in recent decades. In 2018, there were 33,743 intentional homicides and the homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants in that year was 23.1—the highest in the last 23 years. In the subnational level, the rates were even more drastic. Colima registered the highest rate in 2017 for this crime (81.1), followed by Baja California (77) and Guerrero (61.3). In sum, 24 out of the 32 subnational states registered an increase in the number of intentional homicides in 2018 with regard to the previous year, according to data provided by the SNSP.

The state of Guerrero, and its major city, Acapulco, are examples of the effect of the militarization of public safety in Mexico. In 2011, also according to SNSP data Acapulco registered 1,008 homicides for a population of 813,443 inhabitants, which makes a rate of 123.9 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants. The next year presented 1,170 homicides for a population estimated in 822,422 which implies in a rate of 142.3 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants. These numbers put Acapulco among the five more violent cities in the world (Rodrigues, Kalil, Zepeda, Rosen 2017). The southwestern state of Guerrero had become in previous years a major way in for synthetic raw material for methamphetamines from Asia, and an important via for the South American cocaine towards the U.S. The combination of these elements increased the interest of major Mexican drug-trafficking organizations (DTO) from center and north Mexico, such as the Michoacán Family and The Zetas, in the area. The arrival of big DTOs, seeking for association with local gangs, has stressed the competition among them and also has challenged the tradition influence of the Sinaloa Cartel and its associates in Guerrero. The competition embedded in an illegal environment trends to spark violence among illegal armed groups (Rodrigues, Kalil, Zepeda, Rosen 2017). That is a plausible hypothesis to make sense of the increment of homicides in Acapulco from 2010 to 2012.

President Felipe Calderón, while ending his administration, decided to face burst of violence in Guerrero by being faithful to his anti-drug policy. In doing so, his administration deployed 10,000 troops to Guerrero, among Army and Federal Police numbers (Rodrigues, Kalil, Zepeda, Rosen 2017). Calderón's decision was not defied by Peña Nieto. The numbers in terms of lethality that followed were:



Year	Number of Homicides	Population	Rate per 100,000
2013	883	830,309	106,3
2014	590	837,271	70,5
2015	902	843,413	107
2016	918	838,841	108,2

*Source: By the Authors based on SNSP/Homicide Monitor*

Despite the proportional reduction of the previous homicide rate, the ratio stabilized in a very high level, with we remember that the tolerable rate for the World Health Organization (WHO) is 10 homicides per 100,000. In sum, the militarized Acapulco remained violent, presenting a different geographical display of the most lethal areas, which could be attributed not by (or at least, not only) the military presence, but also by the stabilization of a renewed balance of power among local gangs/DTOs with the definition of territories and routes (Rodrigues, Kalil, Zepeda, Rosen 2017).

Despite the continuation of the failed militarized anti-narco policies, the Peña Nieto Administration has gathered some “successes” in the war on drugs. When the country’s most-wanted drug lord Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán was recaptured in January 2016, President Peña Nieto tweeted: “Mission accomplished.” Yet this victory in the *war on drugs* has not led to a reduction in crime, as Guzmán’s extradition to the United States in January 2017 has triggered more violence in Mexico. At the same time, other rival cartels such as the Jalisco New Generation cartel –a powerful new organization specialized in meth-amphetamines– has expanded along the Pacific coast, entering the highly disputed Guerrero shoreline.

The impacts of organized crime and illicit activities has also reached the business community. On May 3, 2018, Grupo Lala, one of the most important private companies in Mexico, closed operations in one of its distribution centers located in Southern Tamaulipas, due to insecurity and high levels of violence. The firm argued that security conditions were not adequate to continue operating. This company controls almost 50 percent of the milk market in Mexico, but the distribution center was shut down after one of the company’s trucks were torched in a nearby locality (Woody 2018). Tamaulipas is one of Mexico’s most

violent states, mainly due to the fighting between the Gulf Cartel and The Zetas for the control of the Northeast of Mexico.

Not only has Grupo Lala suffered due to organized crime groups, but also companies such as Coca Cola – FEMSA and Grupo Mexico Transportes, which have either relocated their plants or suffered significant robberies. In May 19, 2018, organized crime groups caused the derailment of 39 train cars and four locomotives in Orizaba, Veracruz. According to Grupo México Transporte, this event generated losses valued at \$312 million pesos, considering the costs from sales, theft of goods and restoration of roads and equipment. Veracruz has been one of the most violent states in recent years as a result of the disputes of criminal groups for the control of drug trafficking routes to Texas by the U.S.-Mexico border and through the Mexican Gulf. These criminal groups have also diversified their illicit activities to include the theft of oil and gas from pipelines.

According to official sources, the theft of fuel, also known as “*huachicoleo*”, generated losses to PEMEX (the major oil company in Mexico) of around 30,000 million pesos (approximately US\$1.5 billion). This kind of theft has increased around 35 percent during the Peña Nieto’s *sexenio*. In 2006, the number of illegal taps detected in the company’s pipelines was 213, climbing to 691 in 2010 and to 6,249 in 2015. This figure reached 10,363 in 2017 (Woody 2018). The majority of Mexican drug cartels participate in fuel theft.

Table 1. Number of Intentional Homicides and Narco-executions in Mexico (2006-2019)		
	Narco-executions	Homicides
	Milenio	SNSP
2007	2,773	10,253
2008	5,661	13,155
2009	8,281	16,118
2010	12,658	20,680

2011	12,284	22,852
2012	11,412	21,736
2013	10,095	18,106
2014	7,993	15,520
2015	8,393	16,909
2016	10,961	20,547
2017	12,532	25,340
2018	15,887	33,743
2019	23,393	34,582
<b>Total</b>	<b>142,323</b>	<b>269,541</b>
<i>Source: prepared by the authors with data from Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública (SNSP), 2020, and Milenio newspaper.</i>		

## Militarization, Impunity, and Human Rights

In 2014, the Peña Nieto administration faced an international scandal with the killing of 43 students from a local teacher's college in Ayotzinapa, Guerrero, who were murdered in the city of Iguala. Hannah Stone (2014) argues, "A crime of this scale –the abduction and killing of 43 people– could not be carried out in secret. It required a culture of fear and complicity to prevent other authorities in Iguala from intervening and keep the residents silent". The police allegedly handed over the students to a local gang in Guerrero, Guerreros Unidos, who helped dispose the bodies. Investigations demonstrate that the government played an important role in the cover-up of such horrific events. Maureen Meyer (2016) of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) asserts that "[t]his is one of the worst cases of human rights violations seen in Mexico's recent history. Two years later, the Mexican government has done very little to help these wounds heal. It is shocking that, despite dedicating significant resources, the Mexican government has not found the students, and that its own officials have obstructed the investigation." The events that occurred in Guerrero have harmed Mexico's international reputation and called into question the ability of the Peña Nieto government to maintain law and order in the country.

Moreover, the police and the military have been involved in major human rights abuses, which are examples of state fragility. Upon assuming office, President Peña Nieto sought to make significant changes to the nature of internal security in the country. First, he launched the National Gendarmerie, which served as a special unit within the Mexican Federal Police. The government planned for the National Gendarmerie to initially have 50,000 members, but this unit ended up with 10,000 members. Second, the Peña Nieto government passed its Internal Security Act, which increased the power of the military, specifically their role in internal policing, and made it more difficult for civilian oversight of the institution (Mayer 2019). Despite the Mexican Congress approving the law in 2017, a year later the Supreme Court ruled that this act violated the Mexican constitution. Human rights experts viewed this as a victory. According to Maureen Meyer (2018) “this Supreme Court ruling is one of the most important of recent years: it’s an acknowledgement that civil institutions are responsible for providing security to a country’s citizens, and that the military is not a police force. Soldiers should not be used as a substitute for police and Mexico’s armed forces shouldn’t be in charge of the country’s domestic security. This law would have cemented the military’s role in patrolling the streets and would have granted them broad power over civil institutions.”

Despite human rights advocates celebrating the Supreme Court ruling, Mexico militarization apparatus was not demobilized, and Mexican political authorities have still been facing many challenges regarding human rights abuses. According to Mexico’s National Human Rights Commission (*Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos – CNDH*), this organization has been flooded with 10,000 complaints of human rights violations of the armed forces, from 2010 to 2016 (Meyer 2017). Yet the number of investigations by Mexican authorities have been significantly less than 10,000, demonstrating that impunity remains rampant. For instance, between 2012 and 2016, 268 investigations existed regarding cases of torture and crime committed by soldiers. During the same period, official figures show that there were 121 investigations into abuse of authority by soldiers as well as 37 investigations of forced disappearances. The number of investigations of other crimes committed by soldiers during the same period is significantly less: 31 investigations of crimes related to sexual violence, 17 investi-

gations into homicides, three cases of extortion, three investigations of false imprisonment, and two cases of robbery (Suárez-Enriquez, Meyer 2017).

Despite the plethora of complaints, the number of convictions against Mexican soldiers for human rights violations and other crimes remains astonishingly low. It also is important to note that the Mexican government is not transparent about such information. This is a strategic move on the government to hide information from civilians by decreasing the levels of transparency and accountability. According to Ximena Suárez-Enriquez, “there is little available information about convictions of soldiers in the civilian justice system for crimes and human rights violations. Such information is not public, and it is fragmented among the hundreds of thousands of cases that the Federal Judiciary tries each year. Obtaining information about convictions of soldiers is a complicated endeavor, demanding great monitoring efforts” (Suárez-Enriquez, Meyer 2017). Based on official data, only seven convictions have occurred for covering up crimes and destroying corpses between 2012 and 2016. Moreover, there were only three convictions on forced disappearances and three for homicides. There have also been two convictions for “injuries and trespassing” and one conviction for rape. In sum, there have only been 16 convictions between 2012 and 2016 despite the rampant number of reported human rights abuses by soldiers (Suárez-Enriquez, Meyer 2017).

In 2017, the Peña Nieto Administration also tried to pass a new National Security Act in an attempt to officially modify the Mexico’s Armed Forces constitutional mission in order to include the tasks on public security. Despite its approval at the National Congress, in 2018, the Mexico’s Supreme Court found the act unconstitutional, cancelling its effects. It happened when right after Andrés Manuel López Obrador (aka AMLO) victory on the presidential election. During his campaign, AMLO was vehemently against the militarization of public safety. Among his promises if elected, AMLO included a new approach to public security centered in the social-economic promotion of the low-income families, in the support to poor young people and in a deep reform in the national security sector in order to allow the ‘demilitarization’ of the Mexican *war on drugs*.

## AMLO: The False Promise of a Progressive Administration?

Andrés Manuel López Obrador won the presidential elections in July 2018 in a landslide victory. López Obrador displayed during his years on the opposition a different perspective on how to combat drug trafficking and organized crime. For example, he has stressed that reducing poverty and fighting corruption will be two major actions of his government to counter violence and crime. He has highlighted the problem of the youth who neither work nor study (the “ninis”: “ni trabajan, ni estudian”). AMLO stated during his presidential campaign that providing more employment and education opportunities would reduce the recruitment of the youth who is convened by organized crime groups. Similarly, for AMLO, creating economic prosperity and more opportunities for the poorest would reduce the levels of violence in Mexico.

Yet the AMLO government has continued to face major challenges with violence and insecurity. The NGO *Causa En Común* (2019) released a report in 2019 contesting the official governmental statistics in order to demonstrate that many indicators of violence have increased in 2019 when compared to 2018. Mexico has had more than 820 intentional homicides in the first seven months of 2019 compared to the same seven-month period in 2018, revealing that violence has continued unabated (*Causa en Común* 2019). There also have been increases in the number of reported victims for certain crimes. For instance, there have been 133 more reported kidnapping victims in the first seven months of this year when compared to the same time period in 2018 during the AMLO administration, demonstrating the high levels of insecurity that exist in Mexico.

Researchers also note that Mexico has witnessed 5,593 more robberies with the use of violence during the first seven months of 2019 compared to the available data from the previous year (*Causa en Común* 2019). Decreasing violence in Mexico will not happen overnight, but the current data reveals that the AMLO government has not witnessed reductions in insecurity levels in 2019. President López Obrador will continue to face pressure to increase levels of citizen security and reduce the levels of violence plaguing the country.

One of the factors that has contributed to the increase in violence in Mexico is the transition to a new political regime, in particular, the rise of AMLO to the presidency as he has implemented a series of major reforms labeled “The Fourth Transformation”. According to diverse authors such as Luis Astorga (2005) among others, the escalation of violence related to organized crime takes place when a change of government occurs: this would be the case with AMLO. Astorga (2015) argues that during the PRI regime (1929-2000 and 2012-2018) organized crime operated in conspiracy, with the support or tolerance of the government. Therefore, a change of in the pinnacle of political power in Mexico implies that organized crime groups must fight violently among them and against the security related agencies in order to preserve their previous privileges.

On the other hand, President López Obrador began his administration with a struggle against oil theft. According to data from his government, during 2018 the economic losses for this criminal activity amounted to 65 billion pesos. Before taking office in December 2018, around 80,000 barrels per day were stolen, but by April 2019, this figure had been reduced to 5,000 barrels per day. In other words, the efforts of the AMLO government contributed to the reduction of this type of crime, but, as mentioned above, overall levels of violence in the country have increased (Semple 2019).

Regarding public security, the AMLO administration has been trying to implement a strategy that have been criticized for keeping many elements of the previous militarization of public safety. Previously, the insecurity problem generated by organized crime was considered to be the result of political-institutional factors, but the relevance of factors related to the economy, the labor market, poverty, as well as inequality and social marginalization were overlooked. These have become factors that encourage the illicit activities of organized crime groups.

At the rhetorical level, AMLO’s security strategy program has a different perspective from that of his predecessors Peña Nieto and Calderón. The fight against corruption and the reduction of poverty are two of the main actions of his government have announced to counteract violence and organized crime. There has been a serious commitment to tackle corruption in all levels of the public administration as various union leaders, lawyers and high-level officials of previous governments

have been prosecuted for a diverse array of crimes. AMLO considers that the government should promote economic prosperity and greater job opportunities to reduce levels of violence in Mexico.

For the first time in Mexico's recent history, there is a strong formal commitment from the highest position of political power to fight corruption. AMLO's government has prosecuted some notorious figures for allegedly being involved in major corruption cases. Among them, AMLO's government has apprehended Juan Collado, the lawyer for the ex-president Enrique Peña Nieto, as well as the former Pemex director, Emilio Lozoya. The latter was arrested in Spain in February 2020 by Interpol and the Spanish National Police. His case is connected to the massive corruption scandal involving the Brazilian construction company Odebrecht. Similarly, the previous secretary of public security, the main official in charge of the fight against drug trafficking in Mexico, Genaro García Luna, was apprehended in Dallas, Texas accused of collaborating with the Sinaloa cartel and receiving millions in bribes from this criminal group when he served as a security officer during Calderón's six-year term.

The objective is to tackle corruption and, from there, generate resources to finance social programs. According to the OECD, corruption costs Mexico around 10 percent of its GDP, which is about \$150 billion per year. Peña Nieto's government was plagued by several corruption cases, especially a scandal in which his former wife Angelica Rivera, a TV actress, bought a house from a construction company that had received contracts from the Peña Nieto government, according to a newspaper investigation (Espallargas 2019).

According to Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer 2019, around 60 percent of Mexicans consider that the fight against corruption being undertaken by the AMLO government is right and on track. Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer is one of the most important international studies on the phenomenon. The document was released by the Ministry of the Civil Service, and it shows a historical improvement, considering that the previous year only 23 percent of Mexicans trusted the federal government's anti-corruption policies. This means a significant improvement in the first year of Andrés Manuel López Obrador's presidency almost tripled. of corruption.



## Final Remarks

Violence and bloodshed have marked Mexico during the Calderón and Peña Nieto administrations. While violence initially decreased during the Peña Nieto government, the figures related to homicides rates and the “war on drugs” has increased over time. Peña Nieto was inundated with various scandals, while keeping the same general militarized anti-narco strategy conducted by Calderón. In addition, human rights abuses remained omnipresent within the state apparatus and as a regular practice connecting politicians, political parties, public security agents, businessmen, organized crime groups and the Mexican major DTOs.

The “democratization” process has affected attempts to combat drug trafficking and organized crime, as a result of differences between state governments and the federal government; which is an interesting side-effect of a process that is commonly seen as a positive move for every single country under authoritarian rule. The problem is that the “golden rule” of democratization does not work the same way no matter where. In a country like Mexico, with a complex economy (both on the legal and illegal sides), a complicated political system, a historically vibrating and combative society, and an intricate framework in which legal and illegal agents cooperate and compete, the implementation of liberal democracy can produce an imbalance in power distribution among political, economic and armed actors.

In this context, local state administrations do not always cooperate with the federal government, particularly when governors are from a different political party than the party in power at the federal level. Thus, there has not been effective collaboration between the different levels of government because of political interests and rivalry. In such a landscape, it is difficult to create a robust institutional framework of coordination for security-related issues between the different levels of government. This framework must go beyond political interest and should prioritize national and public security, two complicate goals to achieve.

The transformation in the security strategy of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador represented during his campaign a new hope for reversing the high levels of violence and insecurity that afflict the country. Nevertheless, in March 2019, one of the first decisions of the new admin-

istration was the creation of a National Guard to substitute the military on public security activities. Despite AMLO's campaign claims and his initial declarations as president-elected, the actual National Guard was summoned in 2019 as a hybrid corporation formed by military police officers and Navy troops and its direction was attached to the Secretary of National Defense (SEDENA), controlled by the Army. Their training will take place in military facilities, under military supervision.

Civil society organizations, such as the Mexican Center for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (CMDPDH), have been vocalizing tough critics toward AMLO's public security policies, highlighting the potential persistence of massive human rights violations. For the CMDPDH (2019), a militarized National Guard is a distortion and a paradox vis-à-vis the expectations the Mexican leftists and the progressive social movements project for the AMLO's administration. AMLO's strange approach to public security and human rights has risen suspicions on two other items also discussed in this paper: corruption and impunity. The new administration has not yet proved itself when the actual polices are compared to AMLO's electoral promises. The militarization of public security has been a failure in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America, as analyze and demonstrated by experts both on the progressive and conservative sides of the political spectrum. Nevertheless, AMLO's current position toward the 'security issue' in Mexico has been revealing itself "more of the same". If it is true, the twelve-year bloodshed of Calderón's and Peña Nieto's administrations could be initiating a new and violent extension.

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ABSTRACT

**Militarization, Organized Crime, and  
Democratic Challenges in Mexico**

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Mexico has been facing two intrinsically and turbulent phenomena: the so-called ‘democratization process’ and the risen of massive organized crime organizations. This article tackles some of the multiple connections between these two branches of contemporary Mexican history, highlighting the combined effects of the persistence militarization of public security and the complex process of political renovation on corruption practices, human rights violation and the quality of democracy itself.

RESUMEN

**Militarización, crimen organizado y  
desafíos democráticos en México**

Desde comienzos del siglo veintiuno, México ha enfrentado dos intrincados y tormentosos fenómenos: el llamado ‘proceso de democratización’ y la emergencia de grandes grupos del crimen organizado. El presente artículo analiza algunas de las múltiples conexiones entre esos dos rasgos de la historia contemporánea de México, subrayando los efectos combinados que la persistencia de las estrategias de militarización de la seguridad pública y el complejo proceso de renovación política ejercen sobre las prácticas de corrupción, las violaciones a los derechos humanos y a la calidad misma de la democracia.

SUMMARY

**Militarização, Crime Organizado e  
Desafios Democráticos no México**

Desde o começo do século vinte-e-um, o México tem enfrentado dois intrincados e tumultuosos processo: o chamado ‘processo de democratização’ e a emergência de grandes grupos do crime organizado. O presente artigo analisa algumas das múltiplas conexões esses dois vetores da histórica mexicana contemporânea, destacando os efeitos

combinados que a persistente estratégia de militarização da segurança pública e o complexo processo de renovação política exercem sobre as práticas de corrupção, as violações dos direitos humanos e a própria qualidade da democracia.