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Mexico's recentralisation of power

Even under the leftist government, violence is soaring. President López Obrador relies on the military and centralised power

Read this article in German.

'Hugs, not bullets' (Abrazos, no balazos) was Mexico's President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's promise to his country in the election campaign. He wanted to end the drug war. This would tackle the root cause of violence – in the social environment – by creating social programmes, jobs, traineeships and study opportunities.

In his view, the neoliberal economic model is to blame for a society drifting into crime, as it excludes the participation of large segments of the population. López Obrador has officially declared neoliberalism over – and replaced it with a paternalistic strategy of embracement. In his sermon-like morning press conferences he makes it clear that mothers should even pull their sons by the ears if necessary.

One year after his taking office, however, the spiral of violence is spinning faster than ever. With 25,890 murders by the end of October, 2019 is set to become a new record year. Each day, 95 people are killed. Kidnapping, protection racketeering and human trafficking have also risen to a new record level.

In some regions, cartels have de facto seized power and co-opted part of the state apparatus, collecting protection money from companies and citizens alike. In October, the Sinaloa cartel suddenly launched a campaign at the city of Culiacán to release the son of drug lord 'El Chapo' Guzmán, who had been arrested for extradition to the United States – and they succeeded.

The government instructed the security forces to let Ovidio Guzmán López loose in order to avoid a 'bloodbath,' setting a questionable precedent. This could lead to an explosion of violence as in Colombia in the 90s, wrote journalist Raymundo Riva Palacio. At that time, the drug

lords used a campaign of terror to try to bring the government to its knees and prevent an extradition law. For this reason Mexico's conservative opposition is already calling for the authorities to take a heavy hand, with US President Donald Trump offering military support to crush the cartels.

A military response

But is it really the 'soft line' that has failed? Any expert will admit that prevention makes sense in the long term. At present, however, the strategy of embracement seems to just amount to a discourse by which López Obrador wants to differentiate himself from his predecessors and legitimise his political transformation project. In reality, the head of state has militarised security even further.

The newly created National Guard, a military corps under the command of General Luís Rodríguez Bucio, began operations in the middle of the year with 71,000 members. By mid-2020, its ranks are expected to double. This gendarmerie was created in spite of protest by the UN and the human rights movement, which two years ago had managed to stop a similar project by predecessor Enrique Peña Nieto.

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In this way, the country's armed forces, which initially had reservations against López Obrador, were placated. The President appointed generals of dubious prestige to key posts. Moreover, he's guaranteeing the de facto impunity of the military. He has also put infrastructure projects into their hands – for example, the construction of a new airport in the capital and a reforestation scheme, which is also a job creation programme.

Thus the armed forces are assuming societal control functions and administering a multi-million dollar parallel budget – both without transparency and outside the supervision of Parliament. From a democratic point of view, this amounts to a questionable increase in power that opens the door to corruption.

But greater power and money do not go hand in hand with efficiency against organised crime. So far, chaos and improvisation rule – which perturbs both the lower ranks fighting at the front line against the Mafia and the generals in the reserve. The strategic decisions made by the government failed to convince and amounted to an insult to the soldiers,

said General Carlos Gaytán Ochoa at a breakfast with the current Secretary of Defence. Plain speaking like this is rare in Mexico's military – and this time it filtered into the press as well.

The sledgehammer method

There are several reasons why they're disgruntled. For one thing, the National Guard was hastily cobbled together from soldiers and members of the former federal police – who were less than enthusiastic because they lost privileges guaranteed by labour law. Currently, beyond its core mission, the National Guard is mainly being used to hunt for migrants to satisfy Trump, who otherwise may impose punitive tariffs.

In the course of a state austerity policy, tried and tested structures were dismantled. For example, the specialists trained in Israel, the only ones able to fly special espionage drones in the anti-drug unit, were dismissed.

Experts doubt that this sort of return to the former status quo will work.

But there's a system behind this sledgehammer method. López Obrador aims at a recentralisation of the state like in the 20th century. All roads are to lead to the presidential palace once again. Drugs crossed Mexico then as now, but back then the bribes landed in the designated coffers of the security forces and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). In most cases, this amounted to a discreet shadow business that had little effect on the ordinary population.

In López Obrador's view, the fact that, since democratisation in 2000, this central control has collapsed and every mayor and governor has his own police force, which has been demonstrably involved in organised crime, is the main problem behind violence in Mexico. He has therefore cut back budget transfers to the regions by one third. When local politicians demonstrated, he drove them out of his office with tear gas. 'Super-delegates', comparable to the French prefects, were appointed by him and imposed on the governors.

Recentralisation won't work

Experts doubt that this sort of return to the former status quo will work. 'The recentralisation makes it even easier for governors and mayors to avoid their responsibilities,' criticised journalist Ricardo Ravelo in an interview. 'They're making deals with the Mafia, and if there are

problems, they can claim that they have neither the means nor the authority to act against organised crime.'

In Mexico, offences associated with organised crime fall under federal jurisdiction. You do not need to be an expert to realise that 140,000 National Guardsmen are a joke in a country of 130 million that is the size of the European Union.

This is why Falko Ernst of the International Crisis Group speaks of a strategy on shaky ground, having negative effects in the short and medium term: 'The government underestimates the complexity of the problem, is afraid of legitimate use of force dismantled institutions, and does not prioritise the really promising reforms like a police or justice reform.'

In his view, a fight against the impunity in 95 per cent of cases would be promising; the previous government tried by establishing an independent prosecutor and an anti-money laundering authority. However, López Obrador quickly assigned trusted men to these institutions who are currently busy elsewhere. 'The government prosecutes political opponents more than the cartels,' was the succinct conclusion of the Latin America Risk Report.

Security adviser Edgardo Buscaglia demands that, in coping with the Mafia, it is necessary to copy what has been successfully practiced by more than 50 countries around the world: namely, networked inter-institutional task forces that will disrupt the cartel's financial structures. In addition, black money and Mafia-associated candidates must be banished from politics by electoral reform and citizens should be given control over budgets and government contracts.

That poses a challenge to the privileges of the corrupt political elite. The obstacles are therefore enormous. 'But the President has a duty to put his foot down,' says Buscaglia. However, according to Falko Ernst, López Obrador does not listen to external consultants. Of course, there is still time for a change of direction. Where the experts fail, the polls may succeed: in recent months the President's popularity has fallen from 68 to 58 per cent. And in matters of security policy, he has the support of only one third of the population.



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