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Over 110 candidates murdered in run-up to Mexican elections

Without a single ballot counted, it's already clear who's the real winner in the Mexican elections - it's organised crime

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Although voters in Mexico won't elect their new president, members of the two houses of Congress and local mayors until 1 July 2018, the outcome has been a foregone conclusion for several weeks. But it's not Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the candidate of the left-wing Morena movement who has been leading the polls for months in his third tilt at the presidency. It's a player whose name isn't even on the ballot paper: organised crime. With more than 110 candidates assassinated so far, this election campaign has been a bloody affair.

Most of the deaths are down to organised criminals eliminating their enemies, particularly at local level, and exerting pressure on mayoral candidates whom they regard as putting their interests at risk. Up to 9 June 2018, monitors of political violence in Mexico, such as Etellekt, had identified more than 400 acts of aggression against politicians and candidates, ranging from threats and intimidation to murder. As a result, many politically engaged people abandoned their quest for office at an early stage, stepping away from a career as a party candidate. Political involvement is just too dangerous.

Acts of violence have been reported at 263 mayoral offices in Mexico, well over 10 per cent of the total. At regional level, such incidents are concentrated in the federal states of Guerrero, Oaxaca, Puebla and Veracruz, which are *hot spots* of violent confrontation, as is the federal state of Mexico that encompasses the capital. In most cases, the targets are candidates of the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and its alliance partners, although opposition parties and independent candidates are also caught up in the political violence.

Criminals competing for oil

An example from the Mexican analyst Eduardo Guerrero sheds light on the interests of the criminal element. Violence has intensified significantly in the federal state of Guanajuato in recent years. This is due to a new area of organised criminal activity: oil theft. The oil pipelines of the Mexican state oil group PEMEX run through Guanajuato, and criminal elements drilled into them in 2017 to illicitly extract oil. In total, 1,852 such illegal extraction sites have been detected in Guanajuato alone (18 per cent of all registered cases in Mexico). They fuel the booming business for resale of this illegally tapped oil.

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The national oil group is incurring losses of an estimated USD 1.5 billion a year as a result. Various criminal cartels are competing for this source of income, while trying to gain control of the regions concerned and the main local authorities there. The criminals are using intimidation and corruption (financial support for the election campaign) in an attempt to secure the best environment for their lucrative business. Similar tactics are used in relation to the transit routes for the drugs business, with the gangs wanting governmental authorities to turn a blind eye and leave their activities unpunished.

This new wave of violence, which has seen the murder rate in Mexico soar, highlights the territorial dimension of political violence overshadowing shared democratic life. State institutions are unable to ensure adequate protection for candidates, especially in rural areas. It is again becoming apparent that the vast number of police entities in Mexico at local, state and national level are blocking a solution that would involve harmonising joint standards for recruitment and training of police staff. The essential conditions for a peaceful election do not exist in Mexico right now.

A shift in Mexican security policy is unlikely

On the other hand, the president of the National Electoral Institute, Lorenzo Córdova, has stated that the uncertainty is no real barrier to organising the elections. He assumes that polling stations can be set up all over the country and unhindered access of citizens can be ensured on

election day. This may be true, but the conditions for a freely contested election are limited if fear drives citizens to withdraw their candidacy and the right to stand for election is undermined by intimidation. Personal protection for high-risk mayoral candidates is a first step towards ensuring physical safety here. However, this protection must not end up restricting people's access to the candidates and prevent them from getting to know their positions.

Meeting this challenge would be one of the greatest things a new Mexican president could do for his country.

By contrast, it is harder for the political parties and the security authorities to coordinate with each other to prevent criminals or their stooges from gaining political office. The main factor here is the political neutrality of the state institutions, which many parties have their doubts about – and not without reason. Party-political appointments and patronage networks mean that these institutions are unlikely to be immune to influence or to exercise their role impartially.

The fact that organised criminals also know how to exploit the elections for their own ends is a clear sign of the agenda that the new Mexican president will be dealing with when taking office on 1 December 2018. So far, all candidates for the highest office have failed to provide convincing solutions for combating violence and uncertainty. There is significant path dependence in the field of security policy in Mexico in particular, which means that a change in policy is unlikely in the context of the current environment and past decisions.

Therefore, shielding governmental institutions from criminal influence is a key task at all levels – from the local mayoralty to the national security agencies – that takes more than political will and snappy slogans. It will be virtually impossible without an extensive rethinking of police work, preventive strategies and a review of military deployment. Meeting this challenge would be one of the greatest things a new Mexican president could do for his country.



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