



Celebration of Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico City after being declared winner in Mexico's federal election of July 1, 2018. (Wikimedia/Salvador alc)

Great Expectations and Grim Realities in AMLO's Mexico

By Mary Speck

Andrés Manuel López Obrador—known simply as AMLO—assumed Mexico's presidency on Dec. 1, 2018, with a robust mandate. He won a clear majority in the July 1 national elections, trouncing rivals from both the conservative National Political Action Party (PAN) and the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). His National Regeneration Movement (MORENA) and its electoral allies will dominate both houses of Congress and took five of the nine state governorships in contention, along with their state legislatures.

Such margins could give López Obrador more federal power than any president since 2000, when Mexico ended seven decades of single-party rule.¹ He has promised to use his mandate to launch a “fourth transformation”—i.e. epoch-defining change on the order of Mexican independence in 1821, the liberal reforms of the mid-nineteenth century, and the popular revolution that convulsed the country from 1910 to about 1920. Though as President-elect López Obrador toned down his rhetoric—sounding more like the pragmatic politician he proved to be as mayor of Mexico City—he must still manage high expectations. He has promised voters that he will address poverty and inequality by launching universal pensions for the elderly and providing paid apprenticeships for 200 million youths; help the struggling middle class by freezing fuel prices; revive the energy sector through massive investments in the country's troubled state-owned oil company—all without increasing the deficit.²

AMLO must also fulfill hopes for peace in a country plagued by some of the world's most vicious drug gangs. Some 230,000 people were murdered between 2008 and 2017, more than double the number killed in the previous decade. Experts blame up to one-half of these homicides on criminal gangs.³ Tens of thousands more have reportedly disappeared.⁴ This tsunami of violence has continued to crest—in July 2018 police recorded the highest level of homicides for any month on-record.⁵

Fulfilling his promise to drastically reduce this violence is López Obrador's most complicated challenge. The president-elect has ignited controversy by seeming to contradict the pacifist promises and slogans—such as offering “*abrazos no balazos*” or “hugs not bullets”—that characterized his campaign.⁶ But his security policies are still evolving. As President-elect he struggled to define his position on such thorny issues as the

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militarization of law enforcement. Nor has he explained how he will finance the country's ongoing justice reforms and strengthen local police. Like his predecessors, López Obrador must grapple with the reality that federal power alone is unlikely to bring the country's highly localized violence under control. There is no populist playbook for building effective police and efficient courts.

As candidate, AMLO vowed to de-militarize the fight against organized crime, but as President-elect he has proposed creating a military-controlled National Guard. The new force—drawn largely from the ranks of army and navy—would start at 50,000, growing to 150,000 within three years.⁷ It would operate under command of the Secretary of Defense, an active-duty general. Human rights groups immediately condemned the proposal, urging López Obrador to instead strengthen civilian police forces.⁸

As candidate, López Obrador floated the idea of offering an amnesty to drug traffickers. As President-elect, after hearing from irate victims, he stressed justice, with forgiveness only for low-level, non-violent offenders, and promised that truth commissions would investigate the worst abuses and provide reparations to victims.⁹ During the campaign, AMLO also spoke of legalizing marijuana and permitting the cultivation of opium poppies, though his team may be reconsidering this stance. As President-elect AMLO stressed that Mexico will work within the United Nations to modify international drug control conventions.¹⁰

The United States has a huge stake in Mexico's success: The criminal organizations responsible for rising violence in Mexico have also fueled a U.S. drug epidemic resulting in 72,000 fatal overdoses during 2017 alone. U.S. agencies have worked closely with Mexican police and military forces to capture drug kingpins; Congress has also appropriated nearly \$3 billion in equipment, training, and capacity building assistance.¹¹ This is only a fraction of the approximately \$14 billion Mexico spends each year. But by

accepting shared responsibility for the illegal drug trade—long a Mexican demand—the United States has secured cooperation on security issues that would have been unthinkable less than a generation ago.

This article examines the evolution of security policy under AMLO's most recent predecessors: Presidents Felipe Calderón (PAN) and Enrique Peña Nieto (PRI). The first began his term with a frontal attack on drug cartels, though he came to understand that Mexico could not control organized crime without social programs and institutional reforms. The second preached demilitarization, embracing violence prevention. But he failed to sustain these efforts, opting instead to institutionalize military interventions. Both failed to enact reforms that would strengthen local police.

Calderón's Crusade

Calderón took the Mexican public by surprise when he decided to confront the cartels with military force at the start of his term, proclaiming a “national crusade” against crime.¹² As candidate, he had not placed security issues at the forefront of his campaign, much less argued for a military offensive against organized crime. In his memoir, Calderón would reject the phrase “war on drugs,”—which he dismissed as a slogan coined in the U.S—saying his intention was to end the “cynical impunity” enjoyed by powerful criminals who had infiltrated Mexican institutions.¹³ But those institutions were ill-equipped to handle the fallout as federal troops fought organized crime on multiple fronts. Instead of taking preventive measures, Calderón launched his offensive without considering “how the criminals would respond.”¹⁴

He was not the first president to deploy troops in counter-narcotics operations. The army had been eradicating marijuana and poppy crops for decades. His predecessor, Vicente Fox, sent troops to the northern border states under his “Secure Mexico” program beginning in 2005, when the military



In 2007 the towns of Nogales, Arizona (United States), left, and Nogales, Sonora (Mexico), stand separated by a concrete and steel fence. (U.S. Army/ Gordon Hyde)

removed hundreds of police in Nuevo Laredo for conspiring with drug traffickers.¹⁵ But Calderón's efforts were on a much larger scale: By the end of 2007, the federal government had launched joint military/police operations in nine of the country's 32 states; at the height of the offensive in 2011 it was deploying about 50,000 soldiers. Calderón also strengthened the federal police, dramatically increasing the force from 6,000 agents in 2006 to 36,000 by 2012.¹⁶

The mission quickly racked up impressive results, including the seizure of more than \$200 million in cash crammed into closets, cabinets, and suitcases at an upscale home in Mexico City and the confiscation and destruction of some 23 tons of cocaine (with an estimated street value of about \$2.7 billion) found in a container ship at the port of Manzanillo.¹⁷ Calderón also went after so-called

"high-value targets" or kingpins, capturing or killing dozens of major traffickers. Powerful organizations, such as the Beltran-Leyva, Tijuana, Juárez, and Gulf cartels, lost top leaders. The hyper-violent Zetas (formed by ex-Gulf hitmen with military experience) were especially hard hit, by both the government and former allies.¹⁸

It also quickly secured backing from the United States. In March 2007, Calderón and U.S. President George Bush met in the city of Merida, Yucatán, to begin a "new and intensified level of bilateral cooperation" against drug trafficking. From 2008 to 2010, Congress appropriated about \$1.5 billion for the initiative, including \$421 million in foreign military funding, which allowed Mexico to purchase aircraft and helicopters. The Obama administration would provide an additional \$425 million from 2011–12.¹⁹

As much or more important than U.S. funding—which represented only a small fraction of the \$14 billion the Mexican government itself spent each year on security toward the end of Calderón’s term—was U.S. cooperation. The Drug Enforcement Administration, along with other U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies, worked with vetted Mexican military or federal police units to capture or kill “high-value targets.”²⁰ Fusion centers allowed U.S. and Mexican agencies to exchange intelligence. Cooperation was especially close with the Mexican navy—a nimbler, less insular institution than the army—whose marine units often took the lead in high-profile counter-narcotics operations.²¹

The United States also helped ensure that captured kingpins would face trial, relieving Mexico’s overburdened justice system. Extraditions to the United States increased dramatically under Calderón, who sent nearly 600 suspects to face trial in the United States, twice as many as the total number extradited by the two previous presidents combined.²²

Less visible—though potentially more important—were efforts to fortify Mexican institutions. The Calderón government passed a series of constitutional reforms in 2008 to transform its judicial system during a period of eight years from a closed-door process based on written dossiers to an adversarial model where defendants can challenge the evidence against them in open court. Mexico has both a federal-court system and 32 state (including the federal district) systems, all of which needed to train judges, prosecutors, and defense attorneys in oral trial procedures for more serious crimes and alternative dispute resolution mechanisms for lesser offenses.²³

The Calderón government also tried to address deficiencies in law enforcement. It raised selection standards, enacted vetting, and improved training for the federal police while also expanding subsidies for state and municipal police to do the same. It created a national database designed to allow police at all levels to share information. However, it failed to pass its key

initiative: a constitutional reform establishing “unified commands” that would have placed municipal forces under the control of state governors.

Although homicides initially fell during 2007, they rose sharply in 2008, peaking at more than 27,000 in 2011, almost three times their level just four years before. The rise was especially steep in states along the border and the Pacific coast where Calderón had sent federal forces to confront the cartels. The government’s assault had left drug trafficking groups wounded, but still dangerous. Fragmented criminal organizations engaged in bloody battles for succession or territory, in some cases outsourcing enforcement to street gangs. Federal forces were stretched thin as they took over local law enforcement in multiple hot spots; patrolling urban and rural areas, manning checkpoints, sometimes even directing traffic.²⁴ Aggressive tactics led to abuse. Complaints against both the federal police and the military for human rights violations quintupled between 2007–12.²⁵

Juárez

Ciudad Juárez on the U.S. border became a virtual war zone. As federal forces took control of law enforcement, homicides accelerated from less than 200 in 2007 to 3,000 in 2010—a rate of more than 200 per 100,000 people, or about 12 percent of the country’s total homicides. Thousands fled across the border into Texas. Outrage over mounting casualties erupted into protests, especially in January 2010 after gunmen, apparently looking for rival gang members, burst into a birthday party in the working-class neighborhood of Villas de Salvácar, killing 15 people, mostly teenagers.²⁶

The massacre of high-school students in a city occupied by federal forces made national and international headlines. The Calderón government, which was already preparing to change tack, decided to make the northern border city its test case for a new approach. “Military action is not

enough,” Calderón told the citizens of Juárez when he announced a major initiative to address violence in February 2010. His government invested more than \$380 million in the city under a program dubbed *Todos Somos Juárez* (“We are all Juárez”), which financed social programs designed to make communities—especially those with large numbers of un- or underemployed youth—more resistant to violent crime. The idea was to create a multi-sectoral model to address risk-factors while strengthening institutions of justice and law enforcement. The crisis also spurred institutional reforms at the Chihuahua state-level. The state prosecutors’ office was purged, subjected to vetting, and offered better training and work conditions.²⁷

Although homicides remained historically high, violence was ebbing when Calderón left office in 2013. It subsided especially rapidly in Juárez, which the government cited as vindication of its approach. But the Calderón government remained identified with the militarized counter-narcotics operations blamed for tens of thousands of deaths. The incoming president would publicly repudiate his predecessor’s actions even as he adapted or continued many of the same policies.

Peña Nieto’s Pact

When Enrique Peña Nieto took office in December 2012, some feared the PRI’s return to power meant restoration of the “democratic authoritarianism”—i.e. periodic elections within a system of de-facto single-party rule—that had characterized PRI governments during most of the 20th century.²⁸ He assumed office with great political strength. The PRI controlled not only the presidency but also 21 of the 32 state governments in the country. Although his party failed to win a majority in either house of Congress, the president had already secured support from the country’s three major parties for an ambitious reform program dubbed the “Pact for Mexico” before he took office.

By the end of 2013, the Peña Nieto government had passed finance, telecommunications, and education reforms, plus a controversial energy bill that permitted foreign investment in the oil and gas sector for the first time since Mexico expropriated foreign oil companies in 1938.²⁹ The youthful president’s free-market agenda won him high international praise, including a cover photo on the international edition of *Time* with the headline, “Saving Mexico: How Enrique Peña Nieto’s Sweeping Reforms Have Changed the Narrative in his Narco-Stained Nation.”³⁰

Peña Nieto also moved quickly to put his stamp on security policy by dissolving the Secretariat of Public Security, created in 2000 under President Vicente Fox, and moving federal police and civilian intelligence back into the interior secretariat. He promised to take the military out of counter-narcotics operations by deploying a new civilian-controlled *gendarmería*, a paramilitary force recruited largely from former military officers, which would have 40,000 members.³¹ During his first year in office, Peña Nieto also appeared to put the Merida Initiative on hold, by requiring, for example, that all cooperation go through a “single window” in the interior secretariat, which delayed dispersal of millions in assistance.³²

The PRI government embraced violence prevention citing efforts in Ciudad Juárez as a model. It created the National Program for the Social Prevention of Violence and Delinquency (PRONAPRED) to channel federal subsidies to state governments for disbursal in more than 50 districts identified as violent hot spots in 2013 and to more than 80 two years later. Municipal governments and civil society groups were to use the funding to identify and address risk factors, reclaim public spaces and strengthen local capacity.³³

Peña Nieto’s new approach soon fell apart. His government never managed to secure political support for the idea of a *gendarmería*, which



Memorial for the victims of the September 26, 2014 attack by local police on students from the rural college of Ayotzinapa in the city of Iguala, Guerrero, Mexico leaving six people dead and 43 missing. (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights)

fell prey to bureaucratic infighting over responsibilities and budgets. When the new force finally debuted in August 2014, it had been reduced to only 5,000 members. Peña Nieto's proposed constitutional reform mandating unified police commands at the state-level stalled in Congress. Major cities objected to putting their forces under state control and critics questioned whether state police were any more effective or honest than municipal forces. The idea limped along as some states negotiated unified

commands municipality by municipality, but results were mixed.³⁴

His national violence prevention plan also succumbed to confusion and controversy. The program never developed clear criteria for selecting projects or rigorous procedures for evaluating them. Civil society groups complained that it provided only short-term funding, which arrived months behind schedule, making planning impossible, and that municipal governments selected projects based on

political, not community, impact. After 2015, the federal government slashed and then eliminated the subsidies amid a series of budget cuts, though some funding returned in 2018. Peña Nieto never overcame the perception that his signature violence prevention program had degenerated into an exercise in political patronage.³⁵

Peña Nieto's security policies ended up looking much like his predecessor's. He continued to arrest high-value targets with the help of U.S. intelligence, capturing or killing 109 of the 122 traffickers that his government considered most dangerous. The government had less success in bringing these alleged kingpins to justice. By mid-2018 Mexican courts had convicted only four of them.³⁶ Like Calderón, Peña Nieto sent the most notorious to the United States for trial, including Joaquín Guzmán, the Sinaloa Cartel chief known as "El Chapo," who after escaping twice from Mexican prisons faced trial at a federal district court in Brooklyn, NY.³⁷

Peña Nieto's reliance on the military to capture "high-value targets" and to patrol high-crime areas sparked opposition both from human rights groups and within the military itself. "We did not train to pursue criminals," Defense Secretary Salvador Cienfuegos told journalists in December 2016, voicing an unusually public critique. "We are assuming duties that are not ours because there is no one else."³⁸ The president acceded to the military's demand that its role be "regularized," pushing a new Internal Security Law through Congress in December 2017. The law gives the president authority to order the armed forces to take on police functions in high-crime areas, while giving the military greater autonomy to identify threats, lead operations and collect intelligence. Critics argue, however, that it violates Mexico's constitution by expanding the armed forces' jurisdiction over civilians without subjecting them to civilian oversight. The Supreme Court started to review various

challenges to the law—including suits filed by eight municipal governments—in early 2018.³⁹

While he institutionalized use of the military for domestic security, Peña Nieto did little to strengthen police. The size of the federal police remained at about 37,000, increasing by only 400 during six years. The federal government also failed to increase the subsidies sent to the states for security, though according to its own diagnosis, the country should double the number of state police. Of those currently serving, only about 40 percent had passed basic competency exams and only 10 percent had completed training in criminal investigation. Thousands remain on state forces, despite failing background checks.⁴⁰

Peña Nieto's government faced problems beyond its control, such as weak oil prices that shrank government revenues and slowed economic growth. Anger over corruption and cronyism—especially his wife's purchase of a \$7 million home on favorable terms from a government contractor—also undermined his popularity. But the greatest scandal faced during the Peña Nieto government was its bungled response to one of the country's most horrific atrocities.

Ayotzinapa

On September 26, 2014, local police in the city of Iguala, Guerrero, attacked several busloads of students from the rural teaching college of Ayotzinapa leaving six people dead and 43 missing. Instead of immediately ordering a federal investigation, the Peña Nieto government spent eight days dithering with the state government over who should take responsibility. Then it launched a massive federal probe that arrested more than 100 people, including 70 municipal police who allegedly turned the students over to local gang members who then executed them, incinerating their remains. But it dismissed allegations that federal and state authorities—who reportedly knew about the disappearances in real time and failed to act—were at all complicit or negligent.

Prosecutors rushed to close the case with the attorney general himself presenting their findings in January 2015 as “the historic truth,” though investigators had been unable to find or identify most of the students’ remains. To quell the outcry, the government invited international experts to review its investigation. That too backfired when the commission issued a scathing 500-page report detailing inconsistencies and irregularities, including the possible torture of suspects.⁴¹ Meanwhile the search for the missing students spurred the relatives of other missing persons to demand justice. Around the city of Iguala, relatives—who called their loved ones “the other disappeared”—discovered dozens of unmarked graves, often acting on anonymous tips. Human and victims’ rights groups also intensified efforts to find such

clandestine cemeteries in other states with unsolved disappearances, which according to a government registry have reached about 37,000 nationwide.⁴²

Peña Nieto invoked the Ayotzinapa tragedy when he launched a ten-point security strategy in November 2014. It repackaged some previous proposals, such as Calderón’s state-led unified police commands, and added a reform that would establish procedures for the federal government to take over corrupt municipal governments. He even echoed his predecessor’s slogan about the still-popular initiative in Ciudad Juárez, declaring “We are all Ayotzinapa” as he proposed additional social and economic investment in the region.⁴³ The constitutional amendments affecting local governance—which would have transferred considerable authority away



A woman votes in Mexico City during the country’s general election on July 1, 2018. (Wikimedia/ProPlasmaKid)

from municipalities—died in congress, though the government did push through legislation to strengthen laws on torture and enforced disappearance. A year later Peña Nieto, whose approval ratings had fallen sharply, appeared to have abandoned much of his November strategy.⁴⁴

With local police reform impossible, the federal government's main tool remained the deployment of military force. In the wake of the Ayotzinapa disappearances, the government sent troops to take over law enforcement in a dozen Guerrero municipalities. Nonetheless homicides continued to rise in the state, including in the municipalities where federal police or military troops provided public security. Locals complained that while federal forces set up checkpoints and patrolled highways in heavily armed convoys, they did little to protect ordinary people from violence or predatory crimes, such as extortion. Criminal gangs could simply retreat to outlying areas, temporarily lowering their profile until federal forces withdrew.⁴⁵

The Ayotzinapa disappearances were not the only atrocities involving security forces during Peña Nieto's government, nor were local police the only perpetrators. In July 2014, the army shot 15 alleged kidnappers in Tlatlaya, Guerrero; in January 2015, federal police shot at least six demonstrators in Apatzingán, Michoacán; and in May 2015 federal police killed 42 alleged members of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel in Tanhuato, Michoacán. In the Tlatlaya and Tanhuato cases, the National Human Rights Commission found evidence that federal forces shot the victims after they had surrendered and then tried to make it appear they had died in a fire fight. In Apatzingán it found that federal police used excessive force against unarmed civilians, executing at least one of the victims.⁴⁶

Ayotzinapa struck an especially deep chord, however, because it involved young students with no apparent link to organized crime. The *Escuela Normal Rural Raúl Isidro Burgos* in Ayotzinapa,

moreover, has a long history of leftist activism, giving its supporters the determination and means to keep the issue alive. Peña Nieto's government would never recover from its mishandling of the tragedy, especially as homicides, which had declined during the first two years of his term, started trending upward.

Diffusion and Diversification

On July 2, while many Mexicans were celebrating López Obrador's historic victory, gunmen intercepted a red pickup truck in Tecalitlán, Jalisco, killing Victor Díaz, the municipality's 28-year-old mayor, in a barrage of AK-47 fire.⁴⁷ The assassination was far from unique; criminals murdered some 152 politicians and activists during the 2018 campaign, plus more than 350 non-elected officials. Most of these political cadres (125) were involved in municipal politics; a much smaller number were competing at the state level (26); only one was campaigning for federal office.⁴⁸ Many bore the hallmarks of organized crime hits; interception by a vehicle filled with heavily armed men who quickly dispatch their victims with automatic weapons fire.

Police are also dying in record numbers. 2017 was the deadliest year yet for police; nearly 400, mostly municipal officers, were killed on duty. 2018 may match that record—240 had suffered violent deaths by late August.⁴⁹

Tecalitlán (once best known for its mariachis) had already made national news twice before in 2018. In January, the president and secretary of defense visited the town to inaugurate a new army base, one of three new facilities planned to provide security in the region.⁵⁰ A month later, three Italian businessmen went missing while visiting the area. Investigators say they were kidnapped by local police and then turned over to the Jalisco New Generation Cartel or CJNG, a relatively new group now believed to be one of the country's most powerful cartels.⁵¹

The municipality, which has a population of about 16,000, is in a dangerous neighborhood; it sits

within the western Sierra Madre mountain system, which extends along Mexico's Pacific Coast and produces most of the heroin consumed in the U.S. Its mountainsides not only offer an ideal climate for growing opium poppies and marijuana, but also provide cover for labs that fabricate synthetic drugs, using chemicals often made in China and then smuggled via cargo ship to Pacific coast ports.⁵² The five states on the U.S. State Department's "do not travel" list for August 2018 are located either within this corridor (Sinaloa, Michoacán, Colima, and Guerrero) or along the United States border (Tamaulipas).⁵³

But while violence remains high along these drug production and trafficking routes, it has also spread to central Mexico. Guanajuato—a major automobile manufacturing center that has opened four new plants since 2014—suffered more homicides in the first six months of 2018 than in all of 2017, when it had an already historically high annual rate of 38 per 100,000 people.⁵⁴ Homicide rates also rose during 2017 in neighboring Zacatecas, a mining and manufacturing center (up more than 500 percent since 2013), Hidalgo (up 260 percent), and Puebla (up 180 percent).

The uptick of violence in central Mexico seems related to increased competition over two lucrative rackets that have taken off in recent years; fuel theft and train robbery. Fuel thieves or *huachicoleros* (from a slang term for adulterated gas or diesel fuel) are costing PEMEX, the state-run oil company, more than \$1.6 billion a year. They tap pipelines, board ships or oil platforms and siphon fuel from tanker trucks, sometimes aided by corrupt employees.⁵⁵ Train robbers use rocks or vehicles to obstruct tracks or sometimes loosen rail fasteners to cause derailments. Then they break into the freight cars, rapidly loading waiting vehicles with auto parts or appliances or even bulk goods, like grain and cement.⁵⁶

To carry out such crimes, gangs rely on local support and official complicity or, at least, negligence.

As criminal organizations fracture and diversify into new rackets, the control of local territory becomes increasingly important. This puts mayors and other local officials in the cross fire. Many local leaders are victims of extortion themselves; they pay local gangs off out of municipal coffers to guarantee their own and their community's protection.⁵⁷

Basic Lessons

There is no single strategy that can quickly overcome the violence consuming many Mexican communities. AMLO can no more save Mexico through massive social programs than Peña Nieto could by enacting sweeping economic reforms or Calderón by deploying tens of thousands of federal forces. Mexico's criminal groups have proven to be as complex as the country itself, with an uncanny ability to mutate and migrate. Change will come community by community, municipality by municipality, and state by state by initiating effective violence prevention programs, ensuring genuine transparency, strengthening civilian law enforcement, and building a justice system that is both efficient and fair.

López Obrador—who repeatedly stated during his campaign that "only I can fix corruption"—must modulate his own insurgent instincts. Institution building is a painstaking process that will require collaboration not only across regions and political parties, but across Mexico's vibrant and vociferous civil society groups, from business and professional associations to universities and think tanks to social activists and human rights defenders. To avoid the mistakes that undermined previous governments, the new president must undertake reforms guided by certain goals or principles:

1. **Violence prevention** programs should be based on evidence, not political expediency, and adapted to achieve outcomes, not political expediency. This means the next government

needs to define a clear methodology for selecting the municipalities or districts eligible for funding and then help local authorities or non-profit groups develop projects designed to produce measurable results.

2. **Transparency** is essential to avoid the clientelism and corruption that has undermined both anti-poverty and anti-violence efforts in the past. The selection, monitoring and evaluation of all publicly funded social programs should be subject to public scrutiny and outside evaluation by recognized experts from Mexican universities and think tanks.
3. **Demilitarization and police reform** should go hand-in-hand. The next president should work with state governors to establish benchmarks for the military to gradually withdraw from its police duties while empowering specially trained and vetted federal police units to take on criminal organizations. States and municipalities must also obtain the funding necessary to recruit more and better police officers by offering them higher salaries, better training and equipment, and merit-based promotions. Police cannot purge themselves of corrupt and abusive officers. External oversight—through independent auditors or civilian review boards—is essential at the federal, state, and municipal level.
4. **Justice reform** must continue. Truth commissions and special tribunals are necessary but insufficient to address widespread impunity. The new government must find the resources and will to strengthen the capacity of independent prosecutors and the courts, both at the state and federal levels. Although some changes are controversial—especially limits on pre-trial detention—the new system remains Mexico's best opportunity to create a justice system that is both efficient and fair.

The United States, for its part, should continue to accept its shared responsibility for the rise of transnational drug trafficking organizations. Both governments must work together to stop the northward flow of illegal drugs that kill U.S. consumers and the southward flow of firearms that slaughter Mexican civilians. U.S. policymakers must also stop repeating past mistakes—whose costs in blood and treasure are born largely by the Mexican public—by focusing not only on stopping drug trafficking but also, and most importantly, on preventing violence and strengthening law enforcement. In the absence of strong police and a capable justice system, capturing high-value targets has fractured criminal groups, igniting more violence, with little impact on the drug trafficking business itself. The United States should instead concentrate on the long-term task of helping Mexico strengthen law enforcement by sharing expertise to create a new generation of professional police, prosecutors, and judges. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ María Amparo Casar, "Morena toma todo," *Nexos*, August 1, 2018.

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³ This article uses the annual homicide statistics collected by Mexico's National Institute of Statistics and Geography, available at <They can be downloaded at: www.inegi.org.mx/sistemas/olap/proyectos/bd/continuas/mortalidad/defuncioneshom.asp?s=est>.

⁴ See the federal government registry of missing persons at www.gob.mx/sesnspp/acciones-y-programas/registro-nacional-de-datos-de-personas-extraviadas-o-desaparecidas-rnped.

⁵ Laura Calderón, Octavio Rodríguez Ferreira, and David A. Shirk, "Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis through 2017," *Justice in Mexico*, University of San Diego, April 2018, 7; Kate Linthicum, "Mexico opened 2,599 homicide investigations in July—the most ever recorded in a month," *Los Angeles Times*, August 22, 2018.

⁶ Critics accuse AMLO of renegeing on long-standing promises. See Josué Eduardo Gómez López, "AMLO

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⁷ Jude Webber, “Mexico to create new national guard to fight spiraling crime,” *Financial Times*, November 1, 2018.

⁸ Human Rights Watch, “Mexico: Military Policing Threatens Rights,” November 16, 2018, available at <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/11/16/mexico-military-policing-threatens-rights-0>>.

⁹ David Agren, “Fury as Mexico presidential candidate pitches amnesty for drug cartel kingpins,” *Guardian*, Dec. 4, 2017; “Mexico’s president-elect pledges justice at security forum,” Associated Press, Aug. 7, 2018, www.apnews.com/c10d601c5f9740359c254cb35039f212.

¹⁰ “Despenalizar marihuana y amapola: equipo de AMLO dice que acudirá a la ONU para cambiar tratado antidrogas,” *Animal Político*, August 22, 2018.

¹¹ Claire Ribando Seelke, “Mexico: Evolution of the Mérida Initiative, 2007-2019,” *Congressional Research Service*, July 23, 2018.

¹² Claudia Herrera, Alfredo Méndez, “Ofrece Calderón ganar la guerra al crimen organizado,” *La Jornada*, January 23, 2007.

¹³ Calderón, *Retos*, 26.

¹⁴ For analysis of Calderón’s precipitous decision and his strategic errors, see Eduardo Guerrero Gutiérrez, “La estrategia fallida,” *Nexos*, December 1, 2012.

¹⁵ See Raúl Benítez Manaut, “La seguridad nacional en la indefinida transición: mitos y realidades del sexenio de Vicente Fox” in *Paradigmas y paradojas de la política exterior de México: 2000-2006*, ed. Humberto Garza, (Mexico City: El Colegio de México-Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas, 2010), 184-208.

¹⁶ Benito Jiménez, “Militarizan más; suben muertes,” *Reforma*, July 18, 2018, “Mexico’s Drug Cartels,” Congressional Research Service, Oct. 16, 2007.

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¹⁸ See “Peña Nieto’s Challenge: Criminal Cartels and Rule of Law in Mexico,” International Crisis Group, March 19, 2013. For a defense of Calderón’s counter-narcotics policies by a former head of the Drug Enforcement Administration, see Robert C. Bonner, “The Cartel Crackdown: Winning the Drug War and Rebuilding Mexico in the Process,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 1, 2012.

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