

Can AMLO end Mexico's devastating drug wars?

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AMLO's campaign promises of amnesty fall short of the reality of the country he is about to take the helm of.

Left-wing populist Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's election victory came on the back of the deadliest 12 months in two decades in Mexico [Reuters]

On July 1, by electing [Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador](#) (AMLO) as their new president, the Mexican people did not only speak, they shouted: "No more copycat politicians, no more failed promises, no more violence and no more Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)".

PRI candidates had dominated Mexican presidential elections since its founding in 1929, with the exception of the twelve year period from 2000 to 2012 in which the National Action Party (PAN) candidates Vicente Fox and Felipe Calderon held office.

The shift from right of centre (PAN) and center-right (PRI) to the far-left presidency of AMLO was a massive change, albeit a risky one. But Mexico desperately needed change.

2017 was the deadliest year in Mexico in two decades, with [over 23,000 homicides](#). The country has been convulsing from a wave of violence linked to drug trafficking that has left almost 200,000 dead since December 2006, when former President Felipe Calderon's government launched a controversial military anti-drug operation. Clearly, the government is not winning the so-called "war on drugs".

Moreover, corruption is on the rise and the income gap is widening. Local politicians unapologetically flaunt their wealth in the faces of their struggling constituents. Historically, apathy combined with the need for the money politicians pay for votes was enough to keep corrupt individuals in office. But not this year - this year the people had enough.

The victory of AMLO, a far-left populist and a somewhat volatile and potentially autocratic political figure, has left many corrupt local politicians concerned for their political future.

And concerned they should be - two of AMLO's loftiest campaign promises have been to broker an amnesty deal with organised criminal organisations, in order to put an end to the violence, and to investigate and prosecute corrupt politicians, many of whom are in business with the cartels. The public is split on the plan for peace and reconciliation. Moreover, the details of the plan and how the president-elect

intends to pardon the narco-cartels without pardoning the politicians that are in cahoots with them is not yet clear.

The promise of amnesty

So, what would an amnesty in [Mexico](#) look like and could it work? One country that can possibly provide an example is Colombia - in November of 2016, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos headed up the country's famous Peace Agreement which granted amnesty to members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in exchange for their weapons, much to the horror of the Colombian right. While the civilian death toll has fallen since the amnesty, it hasn't yet done much to ameliorate the situation of the nearly eight million Colombians who have been internally displaced due to the five-decade long conflict. Moreover, cocaine production is at a record high in the country and violence is rising once again with dissident rebels and drug gangs seeking to take over in areas formerly under the control of FARC fighters.

But the albeit modest success of the amnesty in Colombia should not be seen as a clear sign that a similar deal with narco-cartels in Mexico could also succeed, as there are important differences between the Mexican drug cartels and the Colombian [FARC](#). For instance, the FARC had a Marxist-Leninist ideology behind it, and it joined with drug cartels in order to finance its resistance operations. But, at least originally, making money wasn't the fighters' main objective. With the Mexican narco-cartels, however, money is clearly the main objective and there is no redeeming ideology. Also in Mexico, there is no specific leader to negotiate with, as there was with the FARC. And perhaps most importantly, the amnesty negotiations between the Colombian State and the FARC were mutually agreed upon: many FARC members wanted to put down their weapons and lead relatively normal civilian lives, something that members of major organised criminal networks in Mexico have not shown an inclination for as of yet.

There is another major problem facing AMLO's proposed amnesty that Santos did not have to deal with in his own country: the logistics of it. Over 125 million people live in Mexico, and hundreds of thousands are believed to be participants in the drug trade to varying degrees. AMLO's proposal has been relatively ambiguous in terms of how or who would be given amnesty, under what terms and when. This ambiguity signals that the president elect does not fully comprehend just how convoluted the situation is in Mexico. An amnesty in a country as large, populous and corrupt as Mexico would involve potentially tens of thousands of people, sometimes entire families and even entire towns implicated in some way or another in the drug trade - a move that is logistically hard to conceptualise.

A reality check

Another obstacle in the way of AMLO's efforts is the fact that the drug war cannot be won in or by Mexico, alone. Any significant decrease in the drug violence in Mexico

is directly dependent on a parallel decrease in the demand for narcotics in the US, and to a lesser extent, in Europe.

So, if AMLO wants to end his country's devastating drug wars, he will either have to convince the US and European governments to find some way to get their populations to stop using illicit drugs, or he's going to have to convince those countries to decriminalise such narcotics and eventually legalise access to them - thereby substantially weakening the black-market demand for narcotics. This is a long shot for even the most persuasive of presidents.

Of course, diminishing or even eliminating the black market demand for narcotics in the US and Europe would not guarantee the end of organised criminal activity and the violence that accompanies it in Mexico.

The narco-cartels are, like most organised criminal groups around the world, able to adapt and expand into other markets. Take for example the mafia in Sicily, which found a way to make an illicit profit off of the most benign of markets - tomato production. With the wrong kind of motivation, the opportunities for finding creative ways to make illegal profits are endless.

In short, AMLO's campaign promises of amnesty fall short of the reality of the country he is about to take the helm of. While the president-elect's promises were good enough to convince people to vote for him, he will now need to put pen to paper and come up with a real plan to end narco-crime and violence in the country. Hopefully, he will be smart enough to surround himself with people who know more than he does about the violence in Mexico, and wise enough to listen to what they have to say. Otherwise, Mexicans can look forward to another six years of unprecedented violence and economic uncertainty.

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