Mexican president-elect's new plan to fight crime looks like the old plan

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The Guardian, Wed 21 Nov 2018

Andrés Manuel López Obrador stood on pacification platform but critics say new force repeats predecessors' short-term thinking

▲ Andrés Manuel López Obrador takes office on 1 December. Photograph: Edgard Garrido/Reuters

In opposition, Mexico's president-elect [Andrés Manuel López Obrador](#) promised to pacify the country by taking troops off the street and sending them back to their barracks.

This week, lawmakers from his party proposed to keep soldiers on the frontlines for the foreseeable future with the creation of a national guard.

The new force would combine military and civilian police under a single military command to "prevent and combat crime across Mexico and [would be] endowed with the discipline, hierarchy and ranking of military institutions", [according to proposed bill](#) published in the legislative gazette on Tuesday.

López Obrador – known as Amlo – takes office 1 December, after winning election on a populist promise to pull [Mexico](#) out of a worsening spiral of crime, corruption and inequality.

He arrives as the murder rate reaches a record high, and 12 years after the start of a militarised crackdown on organised crime which has left more than 200,000 dead and more than 37,000 missing.

The rule of law also remains as fragile as ever, while police forces are plagued by corruption and incompetence.

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"More than 90% of crimes end up going unpunished, and the country is still seriously suffering from not having a professional police force," said congresswoman María Alvarado of Amlo's National Regeneration Movement (Morena).

But critics of the plan accused the incoming president of pursuing the same short-term thinking as his two predecessors. Felipe Calderón first deployed soldiers against the cartels in December 2006, arguing it was temporary measure until police forces were prepared to take on the task.

They have remained in place ever since.

"Amlo's security plan is the same as Calderón and [outgoing President Enrique] Peña Nieto, but on steroids. More soldiers, fewer civilian controls; more soldiers, fewer police," tweeted political science professor Denise Dresser.

Surveys show that Mexico's armed forces are the country's most trusted institution, but the military has repeatedly been accused of human rights abuses and extrajudicial killings.

Amlo had pledged to pursue a new security strategy, promising to explore amnesties for low-level criminals, crack down on corruption, fight poverty and decriminalise marijuana.

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So many Mexicans were surprised when Amlo told reporters he planned to "forgive" rather than pursue politicians accused of corruption.

"Vengeance is not my strong point, and I don't think it's good for the country to get bogged down chasing those accused of corruption," he said on Tuesday.

His party's announcement of a new military force to fight crime has also prompted criticism.

"Soldiers have showed they're not prepared to coexist with people – much less treat them as the police should," said Jorge Medellín, a journalist covering Mexico's military.

Mario Delgado, Morena's leader in the lower house, said on Tuesday that the new body would exist "as long as this crisis of violence and insecurity persists".

"It's an institution, which on the inside has military discipline and organisation. On the outside, it's a national police," he said.

But civil society organisations said the move would enshrine the "militarisation" of Mexico.

"It's clear this radical redistribution of power will have profound political consequences," said a statement signed by 523 human rights defenders, academics and security experts. "Military leaders will inevitably become political actors, eventually overturning the federal pact and absorbing power, which until today, have corresponded with civilian authorities."

Tuesday's announcement came just days after the supreme court ruled that a controversial law enshrining the military's role in law-enforcement was unconstitutional. The legislation was passed last year over stiff opposition from Amlo's Morena party.