

There's a Better Way for Mexico to Fight Corruption

Editorial Board

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The new president promised “zero tolerance.” He’s off to a poor start.



The second-hand Jetta won't make it better.

Photographer: Cesar Rodriguez/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Public outrage over corruption helped put Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador into office, but his campaign to clean up the country's government hasn't started well. If he means to keep his promise to voters, he needs to change his approach.

To be sure, López Obrador inherited a rotten system. His predecessor Enrique Peña Nieto was an energetic economic reformer, but did little to combat official corruption. Peña Nieto's wife and top officials were implicated in [dodgy real estate deals](#), and the outgoing president [stood aside](#) as other Latin American governments went after participants in the notorious Odebrecht bribery scandal. During his term, the country's ranking in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index dropped some 30 places, to [135th](#). The World Bank now ranks Mexico as [one of the world's most corrupt countries](#).

López Obrador ran for office pledging “zero tolerance.” To prove he’s serious, he took a 60 percent pay cut, put the presidential jet up for sale, turned the presidential residence into a museum, and asked to be driven to work in a Volkswagen Jetta.

That’s all very well, but setting a frugal example gets you only so far. Other measures have been less well-judged. For instance, he announced across-the-board pay cuts for government employees, causing [an exodus of skilled managers](#) — and doing little, one imagines, to reduce bribe-taking. Complaining of corruption, he also canceled Mexico City’s new and already partially built \$13 billion airport, leaving investors dismayed and the government on the hook for restitution.

The new president hasn’t been above [wooing](#) politicians of dubious reputation over to his party, recruiting controversial figures to his newly created business advisory board, and pledging not to pursue investigations for past misdeeds.

The best way to fight corruption would be to [fully implement](#) the [National Anti-Corruption System](#), a package of reforms passed in 2016 creating a committee to coordinate all federal and state anti-corruption efforts while providing greater citizen oversight. It still lacks an independent special anti-corruption prosecutor, and other senior appointments stand vacant.

López Obrador’s party wants to control who gets nominated, angering the civil-society groups that pushed for the system’s establishment. Those groups also demand a more independent attorney general. And López Obrador needs to flesh out plans to centralize review of government contracts, especially since he favors higher public spending and more state intervention in the economy, which offer new opportunities for abuse.

López Obrador has made no secret of his disdain for civil society, Mexico’s most potent anti-corruption force in recent years. He should embrace them as allies. Failing that, the recently signed [trade agreement](#) replacing Nafta might help. It has strong anti-corruption [provisions](#) (copied from the Trans-Pacific Partnership that the U.S. unwisely abandoned), which could give civil-society organizations legal standing to pursue complaints that the government might prefer to ignore.

The new president was right to declare war on corruption. All that remains is to start fighting.

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