Electoral Violence and Illicit Influence in Mexico's Hot Land

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Principal Findings

What's new? On 6 June, Mexico will stage its largest-ever election day, with 21,000 contests nationwide. Opposition forces accuse President Andrés Manuel López Obrador of planning to deepen authoritarian rule should his allies prevail in the polls. Meanwhile, criminal groups exploit electoral competition in their quest for impunity and power.

Why does it matter? The country's politics are highly polarised, and its parties are weak and opportunistic. Criminal groups can use favours and threats to gain influence over future elected officials. Entanglements between government and organised crime that have long undermined security policies help perpetuate Mexico's high levels of violence.

What should be done? Severing links between criminals and state officials will be challenging, especially given the government's apparent reticence to act. Still, outside actors should encourage investment in independent election oversight bodies and local institutions, and a shift toward tailored and less militarised policies to curb insecurity in Mexico's most conflict-ridden areas.

Executive Summary

As Mexico approaches the busiest election day in its history, the country's criminal groups are vying to turn the polls into a lever for profit and power. For President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, in office since December 2018, the battle for over 21,000 posts at various levels of the Mexican state is a test of his proclaimed mission to rid the country of corrupt, neoliberal elites. Opponents, on the other hand, denounce the government's careless stance toward the COVID-19 pandemic, its divisive rhetoric and its alleged plans to establish central, authoritarian control over the state apparatus. Yet while the contenders wrangle for voters' support, criminal groups have been busy seeking out potential allies among future elected officials, regardless of their affiliation. Competition among these groups for influence over the state underpins a wave of electoral violence, which has so far claimed 89 lives. Collusion between state authorities and illegal outfits is likely to continue, spurring yet more bloodshed, absent steps to curb corruption and impunity during and after elections.

Elections in Mexico have for several cycles been tarred by waves of killings, primarily of candidates and state officials: 371 officials and 152 politicians, including 48 candidates, were murdered in the run-up to the last major polls three years ago. Many of these victims had fallen out of favour with criminal outfits, whose pursuit of shady deals to assure themselves protection and access to public institutions and funds tends to be ruthless. With dismally low conviction rates for serious crimes such as murders – which total over 30,000 each year and go unsolved in almost 90 per cent of cases – and with police and judicial systems already compromised by illicit influence, particularly in regions marked by armed conflict, authorities often appear to lack either the will or the capacity to bring perpetrators to justice or to shield at-risk candidates.

This election cycle has brought more of the same — a polarised political environment, opportunistic parties and candidates, and criminal groups eager to build their influence. On the government side, López Obrador's ruling MORENA party (created in 2014 to further his presidential aspirations) lacks cohesion and has been exploited by hangers-on who see it as a convenient vehicle for attaining power. For their part, opposition parties find themselves in a rut, with few leaders of note and many internal fissures. On both sides, candidates wishing to bolster their campaign with funding and blocs of guaranteed votes may look for assistance from criminal groups.

These criminal outfits, in turn, are increasingly locked in acrimonious feuds with one another. Over recent years, the large groups that once dominated the country's organised crime scene have splintered into many smaller factions. As criminal sources confirm, transactional relations with elected politicians and state officials are one of the most significant competitive advantages an illicit group can enjoy. The interplay of electoral competition and apparent corruption are on clear display in Michoacán state's Tierra Caliente (the Hot Land), one of the regions of Mexico most blighted by conflict, where rival criminal groups look to gain advantage by forging pacts with prospective office holders. If their preferred candidates win, these groups can expect favours ranging from impunity to protective relationships with state-level and federal security forces, or even access to state largesse. Local conflicts worsen when compet-

ing groups strike deals with different state offices or institutions, preventing any single criminal network from becoming dominant and setting the stage for violent stalemates.

Flourishing relations between state actors and criminal groups, anchored in a quid pro quo between illegal electoral support and official corruption, are among the greatest impediments to reducing Mexico's sky-high rates of violence and impunity. Breaking these bonds will not be easy, especially given an absence of strong leadership on this issue at the highest level of government. Mexico's partners like the U.S. and the European Union should seek out allies in government and civil society who could take steps to stabilise regions ravaged by violence. One such step would be to strengthen the institutions in charge of safeguarding the elections' integrity. Those bodies' independence is crucial to any effort to shield elected officials from criminal influence. But patterns of corruption, co-option and impunity are deeply ingrained in the political and electoral systems. Countering these will require far stronger mechanisms of external oversight and accountability, backed by civil society, in institutions such as the police and prosecutors' offices.

The overarching project of curbing criminal power in Mexico will also require a comprehensive overhaul of security policy, which, notwithstanding López Obrador's pledge upon taking office to change course, continues to lean too heavily on the use of military force and thus to backfire. Tailored strategies for conflict-affected areas, entailing security forces protecting vulnerable civilian populations alongside efforts to clean up local institutions and the creation of programs that address underlying socio-economic causes of criminal recruitment, would represent a more effective way forward. Here again, the federal government's will to make such moves is presently lacking, but some state and local authorities as well as civil society groups are doing innovative work. Washington and other influential outside actors should support these sub-national efforts even as they press the federal government to reorient itself to a new security policy that can help Mexico break out of the deadly cycle in which it finds itself.

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I. Introduction

Mexico's 6 June elections are set to be the largest in the country's history. More than 21,000 posts are up for grabs at all levels of government, including fifteen state governorships, the entire federal lower house of parliament (500 seats), 30 state congresses and 1,923 mayoralties. For President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who is nearing the halfway mark of his six-year term and is constitutionally prohibited from re-election, the stakes could hardly be higher. His Together We Will Make History alliance, which includes the president's party, MORENA, is aiming to gain the posts and seats it needs to deliver on a promised "fourth transformation", including achieving a two-thirds majority in the federal lower house that would enable it to make constitutional changes. Under this slogan, López Obrador has pledged to lead the country toward a brighter future by ending what he characterises as the old political elite's shady bargains, providing non-violent solutions to its security crisis, ensuring the economy functions to the benefit of working people, and recasting the Mexican state to help reach these goals.

López Obrador's party looks set to do less well in the polls than three years ago but still not too badly. The administration's patchy record with respect to public security, the economy and the campaign against corruption, as well as its disastrous performance in pandemic management, means that MORENA is likely to suffer losses relative to its landslide in the 2018 elections. Still, López Obrador's approval ratings have remained above 55 per cent, and according to most polls above 60 per cent, since taking power. Part of his success can be attributed to the weakness of opposition forces, which are both fragmented and short on credibility after presiding over rising insecurity and corruption before López Obrador's ascent to power. They will have to content themselves with curbing MORENA's advances. The latest polls show approval ratings for López Obrador are still high, and intent to vote for MORENA stands above 40 per cent. A split political landscape seems the most likely outcome: MORENA could fail to hold its absolute majority in the federal legislature even as it wins more than eight of fifteen state governorships.[1]

But Mexican elections are more than a competition among candidates for the public's support. They are also a forum for criminal groups to gain, prolong and deepen access to state power. These groups exert the most intense and overt pressure on electoral processes in conflict-affected regions and at the municipal level, which remains the weakest layer of government and also the one faced with the most daunting challenge in policing crime. All but five of the 35 candidates killed in Mexico since

[1] See "Morena pierde la mayoría absoluta y necesita de aliados para controlar el Congreso", *El País*, 17 May 2021; "Evaluación de gobierno", Mitofsky, 3 May 2021; "#AMLOTrackingPoll Aprobación de AMLO, 25 de mayo", *El Economista*, 25 May 2021; and "Así van los estados en últimas semanas de campañas, según las encuestas", *Expansión*, 24 May 2021.

the campaign season officially began on 7 September 2020 were running for office on the municipal level.[2]

The violence that has come to plague Mexican elections has roots in the country's transition from 70 years of one-party rule to electoral democracy, which culminated in the 2000 presidential election. Prior to that, an authoritarian system led by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) relied on curbing public dissent and forging informal pacts with powerful groups, including criminal outfits, lending a semblance of cohesion to the different layers of the Mexican state; these proceeded to splinter after the transition to democracy. Regional and municipal institutions characterised by a dearth of transparency and lacking sufficient federal support and oversight became particularly vulnerable to more direct capture by private and criminal interests. Deals hatched between officials and criminals kicked off a cycle of corruption and violence.[3] These pacts' volatility, and their tendency to break down under pressure from criminal competitors or the state's military-style offensives, especially under the administration of former President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), helps explain why groups continue to jostle so aggressively for position in so many parts of Mexico.

In the run-up to the 6 June election, this report examines Mexico's political landscape, President López Obrador's place in it, and the local patterns of state-crime interaction that have emerged during the campaign. To illustrate what these illicit relations mean in practice, it focuses on one of the country's most embattled regions: Tierra Caliente (the Hot Land), in the western state of Michoacán. It draws on more than 60 interviews as well as long-time informal conversations Crisis Group has had with criminal operators working for Michoacán-based armed outfits and for the Jalisco Cartel New Generation, the country's fastest-expanding criminal network; political consultants who have brokered deals between candidates and criminal groups; residents, humanitarian workers and Catholic clergy in Tierra Caliente; civil society activists, past and present candidates for office, MORENA members, academics and a former commissioner of Mexico's National Electoral Institute (Instituto Nacional Electoral, INE). It builds on Crisis Group's extensive body of work examining the relationship between criminal groups and conflict-level violence in Mexico.[4]

[2] Tweet by Etellekt Consultores, @etellekt_, 3:55pm, 28 May 2021. A total of 152 political activists and candidates were killed in the run-up to elections in 2018. See "Séptimo Informe de Violencia Política en México 2018", *Etellekt Consultores*, 8 July 2018.

[3] For an overview, see Luis Astorga, *El siglo de las drogas: El narcotráfico, del Porfiriato al nuevo milenio* (Mexico City, 2005); Richard Snyder and Angelica Durán-Martínez, "Does Illegality Breed Violence? Drug Trafficking and State-sponsored Protection Rackets", *Crime, Law and Social Change*, vol. 52, no. 3 (2009); Viridiana Ríos, "Why Did Mexico Become So Violent? A Self-reinforcing Violent Equilibrium Caused by Competition and Enforcement", *Trends in Organized Crime*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2013); Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley, *Votes, Drugs and Violence: The Political Logic of Criminal Wars in Mexico* (Cambridge, 2020).

[4] See, in particular, Crisis Group Latin America Reports N°69, *Building Peace in Mexico: Dilemmas Facing the López Obrador Government*, 11 October 2018; N°80, *Mexico's Everyday War: Guerrero and the Trials of Peace*, 5 May 2020; and N°83, *Virus-proof Violence: Crime and COVID-19 in Mexico and the Northern Triangle*, 13 November 2020.

II. A Test for López Obrador

A. *The Fourth Transformation*

The 6 June elections represent a test for Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who has called on the population to support his professed break with what he characterises as the country's recent neoliberal and conservative past.[5] The president and his supporters assert that the old political guard is responsible for the country's social, economic and security predicament. Their narrative holds that this "power mafia" worked in collusion with international and domestic corporations, the media, civil society, foreign states and international organisations to loot Mexico, and that together they are now conspiring against López Obrador's expansive political vision – his "fourth transformation" – in order to continue doing so.[6] The president and his allies argue that López Obrador's leadership has blocked the old guard from achieving their designs, even as it has "swept" away their corruption.[7]

López Obrador's assertions that the old guard failed to deal effectively with Mexico's deeply rooted problems of insecurity, corruption and socio-economic injustice – and that democracy has failed to serve the interests of the majority – are not unfounded.[8] The president claims to have made decisive headway since assuming office on 1 December 2018. He has said that human rights abuses such as massacres, enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings perpetrated by security forces have become a thing of the past.[9] He has declared that his administration's safeguards for freedom of speech and of the press are unprecedented, and that "Mexican women have never been as protected as now".[10] When the government has struggled to point to concrete success in, for example, the area of public safety, the president has insisted that progress is being made, while his supporters rightly note the "wretched

[5] "López Obrador explica a quiénes considera conservadores", *El Financiero*, 8 January 2019.
[6] The first three historical transformations that López Obrador is referring to are Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821, the liberal state reforms of 1861 (La Reforma) and the 1910-1920 revolution. The president says he is following in the footsteps of those responsible for these achievements. See "Versión estenográfica: Diálogo con pueblos indígenas, en Coatetelco, Morelos", AMLO website, 22 November 2019.
[7] "'Limpiaremos el gobierno como se barren las escaleras': Obrador", *Excelsior*, 11 January 2019.
[8] See, eg, "Seis años después: miles de muertos y un Estado más vulnerable", *Aristegui Noticias*, 26 November 2012; and "Fue un mal año. No, menos, como seis: la evaluación de Fundar al gobierno de Peña", *Animal Político*, 28 November 2018.
[9] See "Ya no hay corrupción, aunque le dé coraje a 'los conservas', dice AMLO", *Milenio*, 11 March 2021; and "AMLO afirma que 'ya no hay masacres'; 'se le olvida la de mi hija', responde Adrián LeBarón", *LatinUs*, 1 September 2020.
[10] On freedom of speech, see "Nunca como antes se había respetado tanto la libertad de expresión: AMLO", *Regeneración*, 25 September 2020. López Obrador has stated that the uptick in femicides is the result of these "not being counted before" and that "the classification [of femicides] practically began with us", which is false. "La clasificación de feminicidios comenzó con nosotros: AMLO", *La Otra Opinión*, 30 March 2021; "Responde AMLO al #8M: amor, valores y combate a la pobreza para enfrentar la violencia contra las mujeres", *Animal Político*, 9 March 2021; and "Femicides rise in Mexico as president cuts budgets of women's shelters", *The Guardian*, 22 July 2020. Femicide became a separate criminal category in the Mexican penal code in 2012. See "Falso que feminicidios aumentaran porque antes del sexenio de AMLO no eran clasificados así", *Verificado*, 1 April 2021.

inheritance" left by predecessors.[11] López Obrador has also stated that, in spite of the devastating humanitarian and economic impact of COVID-19, "the economy is doing very well".[12]

These claims often clash with available data, however. There is little doubt, for instance, that Mexico faces pressing economic challenges. The country's GDP shrank by 8.2 per cent in 2020, and the total number of people living in poverty is estimated to have risen from 61 million to at least 69.9 million since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic – roughly 55 per cent of the population.[13] In comparison, Latin American GDP as a whole fell by 7.4 per cent in 2020.[14]

Insecurity also continues to be a major problem. Certain categories of crimes such as car theft and kidnappings have dropped significantly during the pandemic.[15] But during the first two and a half years of López Obrador's term, homicides have remained at a plateau of over 30,000 cases, a figure first reached in 2017. An all-time high of 36,685 killings was registered in 2018, with 2019 slightly down at 36,661. Preliminary data for 2020 suggest a 3.5 per cent reduction from 2019; the reasons for the fall remain a matter of speculation.[16] Meanwhile, the proportion of murders that remains unsolved reached a record high of 89.6 per cent in 2019.[17] A daily average of 10.17 women were murdered in 2020, slightly down from the previous year but up 72.4 per cent from 2015.[18]

There are other worrying trends. A Crisis Group study of criminal violence across the country found an estimated 198 armed groups operating in 2019, a number that has more than doubled since 2010.[19] Lethal violence rose in ten of Mexico's 32 federated entities over the first two months of 2021, including 128 and 45 per cent spikes from 2020 in the states of Zacatecas and San Luís Potosí, respectively.[20] Killings of

[11] "AMLO rinde primer informe trimestral de este año; aquí el minuto a minuto", *El Universal*, 30 March 2021; and "'La herencia maldita' limita a AMLO para lograr todos sus proyectos: Solalinde", *Radio Fórmula*, 2 December 2019.

[12] "No estamos exentos de una nueva crisis económica: AMLO", *Forbes*, 18 March 2021.

[13] La pobreza en México aumenta pese a los programas sociales del Gobierno", *El País*, 9 February 2021.

[14] "Latin America crosses a bleak milestone", *The Washington Post*, 25 May 2021.

[15] "Homicidio, extorsión, narcomenudeo … los delitos en semáforo rojo en México", *La Silla Rota*, 24 May 2021.

[16] Data from Mexico's National Institute of Statistics and Geography. Data for 2020 from the Mexican federal government's Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System. The true number of cases is assumed to be higher due to the longstanding problem of under-reporting. There has been some doubt as to the reliability of official crime statistics since before the current administration. According to a Mexican NGO, two thirds of federated states have been handing the Executive Secretariat patchy and inconsistent information. "Fallas de Origen, Índice de Confiabilidad de la Estadística Criminal", México Evalúa, 14 April 2021.

[17] "Impunidad en Homicidio Doloso y Feminicidio: Reporte 2020", Impunidad Cero, November 2020.

[18] "Feminicidios en México | Arussi Unda, de Las Brujas del Mar: 'El machismo y la impunidad hacen la mezcla perfecta en donde se odia a las mujeres y no pasa nada'", BBC, 3 February 2021.

[19] Jane Esberg, "More than Cartels: Counting Mexico's Crime Rings", Crisis Group Commentary, 8 May 2020. This period includes the last two years of the Calderón administration as well as the tenure of President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018).

[20] "Violencia crece en diez estados, pese a mayor despliegue de la Guardia Nacional", *Animal Político*, 7 April 2021.

police officers have also risen from previous years, with 446 officers murdered in 2019, 524 in 2020 and 170 in 2021 as of 19 May.[21] Mexico surpassed Syria in 2020 as the world's deadliest country for media professionals, with nine killed and fifteen still missing.[22]

Anyone highlighting the gap between these grim statistics and the government's upbeat claims tends to be met with indignation from the president and his team. López Obrador has repeatedly rejected criticism by pointing to the existence of unspecified "other data", and by arguing that critical journalists are thinly veiled agents of a conspiracy to bring down his "fourth transformation".[23] Mexico's "corona czar" Hugo López-Gatell Ramírez criticised media reporting that Mexico had surpassed 200,000 deaths caused by COVID-19 (which was the officially recognised toll at the time of his statement) as driven by the desire to draw an audience and profits, and by an agenda to undermine "the changes that are happening [under this government]".[24]

B. *Opposition Weakness*

In spite of López Obrador's confrontational approach toward his critics, and his government's debatable record, his popularity has remained robust at around or above 60 per cent.[25]

An adversarial, defiant leadership style that is fine-tuned to dominate Mexico's news headlines helps account for these buoyant ratings. The president is "producing an epic", in which "he is attacked by powerful enemies of himself and Mexico, and he emerges as a heroic saviour who is sacrificing himself for the greater good", a scholar and long-time civil society activist explained.[26] Hostility to critics – frequently vented in his daily press briefings (called *mañaneras*) – enables him to command media attention. Outlets often reproduce his remarks as well as repudiation of his statements

[21] In 2018, 452 officers were killed, and in 2019, 446. See Causa en Común, "Registro de Policías Asesinados", n.d.

[22] So far, the Committee to Protect Journalists has confirmed five journalists' killings as caused by their work. At least 90 per cent of killings are never resolved by the state. See "Mexico world's deadliest country for journalists, new report finds", *The Guardian*, 22 December 2020. The freedom of expression NGO Article 19 documented 692 attacks, including threats, against journalists and media workers in 2020, up 13.6 per cent from 2019. Of these, 27.6 per cent were communicated digitally, and just under half by state officials. "Distorsión: el discurso contra la realidad, Informe anual 2020", Artículo 19, 23 March 2021.

[23] According to a Mexican fact-checking group, in his 589 daily press briefings through March 2021, López Obrador has emitted 46,000 factually incorrect statements, twice as many as U.S. President Donald Trump in his four years in office. See "The Value of Truth: A Third of the Way", Signos Vitales, March 2021.

[24] "Gobierno mexicano admite que muertes por COVID suman más de 300 mil", Radio Fórmula, 29 March 2021; and "López-Gatell carga contra la prensa y la acusa de 'apropiarse' del dolor de las víctimas y de actuar por interés económico", *El País*, 26 March 2021. Government data show excess deaths for 2020 and until 15 March 2021 of 417,002. World Health Organization experts said in April that better pandemic management could have avoided 190,000 deaths in Mexico to date. See "190 mil muertes pudieron evitarse en México durante la pandemia: expertos a la OMS", Yahoo! Finanzas, 12 April 2021.

[25] See "Morena pierde la mayoría absoluta y necesita de aliados para controlar el Congreso", op. cit.; and "Evaluación de gobierno", op. cit.

[26] Crisis Group online interview, Jacobo Dayan, Ibero-American University, 2 April 2021.

without much commentary, reinforcing his argument that he is locked in a battle with fervent adversaries.[27]

López Obrador also benefits from the relative weakness of the main opposition parties, PRI and National Action Party (PAN), which often fail to respond to his plans with concrete counter-proposals. According to one political scientist, "Mexico currently has no noteworthy opposition [parties] and they hardly present a challenge for MORENA, at least not in these elections". The same observer noted that the opposition parties would be better described as "opportunist compounds" in which opposing interest groups "fight for power without rules, [including with] physical and armed force".[28] In a 2020 survey by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography, 76.4 per cent of respondents said they had little or no trust in political parties, with MORENA's support largely dependent on López Obrador's own popularity.[29]

López Obrador's public support is also rooted in a gap between the opinions of policy experts, many of them in civil society organisations, and popular expectations. Experts have, for instance, relentlessly campaigned against the increasing militarisation of public security over the past fifteen years, documenting its adverse effects on human rights and democracy.[30] By contrast, the National Institute of Statistics and Geography survey cited above found that 40.1 per cent of respondents would accept a military government. Moreover, while civil society has been pushing for decentralised, democratic institutions responding to independent oversight, many in Mexico as in other Latin American nations have grown distrustful of democracy's claimed merits: 77.5 per cent of respondents stated their approval of a government headed by a "strong leader" .[31] "We have to take into account", said one political scientist, "that democratic alternation [at the presidential level from 2000] has not yielded palpable results and benefits for many, so it is not surprising that people are turning their hopes to something else".[32]

C. *Remaking the State*

Instead of seeking to appease his political foes, López Obrador has aimed to cement political power by delivering tangible benefits to the country's poorer citizens.

Social programs geared at senior citizens, rural residents and young people lacking educational and professional opportunities are at the core of this strategy. Although his strategy of "republican austerity" has seen the budgets of federal government secretariats cut by up to 75 per cent, funding for social programs, alongside those for

[27] Ibid. See also "Las mañaneras de López Obrador", *El País*, 21 September 2020; and "Distorsión: el discurso contra la realidad", op. cit.

[28] Crisis Group telephone interview, Alberto Olvera, University of Veracruz, 29 March 2021.

[29] "Encuesta Nacional de Cultura Cívica 2020", National Institute of Statistics and Geography, March 2021.

[30] See, for example, "Undeniable Atrocities: Confronting Crimes against Humanity in Mexico", Open Society Justice Initiative, June 2016; and "¿A dónde vamos? Militarización y la ruta del militarismo", *La Revista Anti-Militarista*, Colectivo Seguridad Sin Guerra, April 2021.

[31] "Encuesta Nacional de Cultura Cívica 2020", op. cit. Support for democracy in Mexico in 2018 stood at 38 per cent, a significant fall from the 2002 high of 63 per cent. See "Informe 2018", Corporación Latinobarómetro, 2018.

[32] Crisis Group telephone interview, Carlos Flores, Centre for Investigations and Superior Studies in Social Anthropology, 31 March 2021.

the army and infrastructure projects, has been comparatively robust. From fiscal year 2020 to 2021, the budget for López Obrador's eleven flagship social programs increased by 3.6 per cent to 303,983 billion pesos, roughly $15.15 billion and equal to 4.8 per cent of overall federal spending.[33] The government argues these initiatives will tackle insecurity, including young persons' vulnerability to recruitment by organised crime, by bringing down inequality and poverty. Rather than fight "fire with fire" by meeting violence with armed force, the goal is to prevent crime.[34]

While, to some extent, the approach tracks recommendations that Crisis Group and others have made to shift to a less militarised approach to fighting crime, it has fallen short in some respects.[35] As noted below, the administration has yet to establish comprehensive strategies that would combine its social programming with other policies so as to curb the worst criminal aggression. A study by the independent National Council of Social Development Policies, moreover, found that the social programs had limited impact due to a lack of methodological rigour: "The programs have tended to focus on direct [monetary] transfers rather than on prevention, mitigation and attention to risks" faced by vulnerable populations.[36] Funds also do not seem to have been sufficiently targeted at high-conflict regions, and Mexico's federal auditor has said that in 2019 alone, over 106 billion pesos (about $5.3 billion) remain unaccounted for.[37] Analysts have raised doubts as to whether money actually reaches the pockets of vulnerable people.[38] Critics condemn these programs as propaganda for the administration.[39]

The mix of welfare programs and strong presidential rule that has characterised López Obrador's administration was standard under the PRI, which was the president's first political home from 1976 to 1988. According to one political scientist, "the ambition to return to highly centralised power is undeniable".[40] In this vein, the government has also been forging a new executive state structure, which runs parallel to

[33] "El gobierno de AMLO proyecta invertir 303,982.9 mdp para 11 programas sociales", *Expansión*, 9 September 2020.
[34] "Los programas sociales no van a frenar la inseguridad en México", *The Washington Post*, 8 December 2019; and "'Todos cometemos errores', dice AMLO de Silvano: Quería Ejército en Aguililla, se tuvo una reunión", *Sin Embargo*, 14 April 2021.
[35] Falko Ernst, "Time to End the Lethal Limbo of the U.S.-Mexican Drug Wars", Crisis Group Commentary, 7 October 2020.
[36] "Análisis de los programas prioritarios al primer año de la administración 2018-2024", National Council of Social Development Policies (CONEVAL), 2020; and "La pobreza en México aumenta pese a los programas sociales del Gobierno", *El País*, 9 February 2021.
[37] "La Estrategia Nacional de Seguridad Pública (2018-2024). Un análisis desde la perspectiva de coherencia de políticas públicas", Observatorio Nacional Ciudadano, November 2020; "El primer año de AMLO y la ASF: 100 mil millones de pesos de irregularidades", Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad, 25 February 2021.
[38] Analysis by Viridiana Ríos based on National Council of Social Development Policies data, available in tweet by Viridiana Ríos, journalist, @Viri_Rios, 7:29pm, 6 March 2021.
[39] "Denuncian más uso de programas sociales en FEDE", *Reforma*, 14 April 2021. On the historical use of state social programs for patronage purposes in Mexico, see Felipe Hevia de la Jara, "Uso político de programas sociales y nuevos intermediarios institucionales: el Programa Progresa/Oportunidades en el sur de Veracruz", *Desacatos*, no. 34 (2010).
[40] Crisis Group telephone interview, Carlos Flores, 31 March 2021; "AMLO sí militó en el PRI durante los comicios de 1988: Verificado 2018", *El Financiero*, 26 April 2018.

and has partly supplanted the existing bureaucratic apparatus, and carries out the government's social programs. It reaches from the president at the top of the pyramid down to 32 "super-delegates" (one per state), 252 regional delegates and, finally, 18,894 "servants of the nation" (*servidores de la nación*). The latter are the foot soldiers of the "fourth transformation", going door to door to connect directly with citizens.[41] According to one regional delegate, this new structure's place within the Mexican state's institutional architecture has yet to be defined, but it aims to "replac[e] all other [social and political] leaderships at the local level". Critics accuse it of making public institutions agents of partisan politics.[42]

Autonomous institutions that were created as part of Mexico's transition to democracy have received short shrift. The government has cut budgets, installed loyalists in executive posts and expressed its desire to "clean up" or dismantle institutions such as the National Human Rights Commission, the National Institute of Transparency, Access to Information and Personal Data Protection, which handles freedom of information requests, and even the National Electoral Institute, organiser and watchdog of Mexico's elections.[43] López Obrador has recently labelled autonomous institutions tools for the old corrupt elite, saying they "serve as smokescreens to commit crimes and hide information", and announced that he would pursue reform to reintegrate them into federal secretariats, extinguishing their independence.[44] While certain institutions have been targets for embezzlement under previous administrations, it is questionable whether López Obrador's top-down attempt to root out these practices by seizing greater executive control over them will reduce graft or simply create new opportunities for it.[45]

D. *Intra-party Divisions*

López Obrador's party, MORENA, was created in 2014 to be a home for a wide array of political, social and economic interest groups. López Obrador has explicitly and repeatedly stated that "members of other parties are all welcome … as long as they embrace the fourth transformation".[46] As a practical matter this means, in the words of one analyst, the party is "an opportune instrument for political elites and power

[41] "Estos son los Servidores de la Nación que serán parte de las brigadas de vacunación", *Forbes*, 15 January 2021.
[42] Crisis Group interview, Mexico, 2019. "Servidores de la Nación: la maquinaria electoral", *Nexos*, 1 September 2019; "Los 'siervos' de AMLO acumulan cuestionamientos con miras a la elección de 2021", *Expansión*, 3 March 2021.
[43] "López Obrador carga contra los organismos autónomos y prepara una reforma para eliminarlos", *El País*, 8 January 2021.
[44] "#ConferenciaPresidente Viernes 5 de febrero de 2021", Mexican Federal Government, 5 February 2021; "Va AMLO por reforma para regresar funciones de organismos autónomos a las Secretarías de Estado", *Aristegui Noticias*, 29 April 2021.
[45] For instances of past corruption, see "La estafa maestra, graduados en desaparecer dinero público", *Animal Político*, 2017. A higher percentage of public contracts than ever registered before (more than 40 per cent) has been awarded by the López Obrador government without public tenders and under opaque conditions. "Corrupción: algunos protagonistas", *Nexos*, 1 February 2021; "El país de AMLO", *Reforma*, 22 February 2021.
[46] "#ConferenciaPresidente Lunes 10 de febrero de 2020", Mexican Federal Government, 10 February 2020.

groups of all sorts", particularly at a time when opposition parties are weak and in disarray .[47] Among those to join its ranks, and become candidates for office at all levels, are former members and office holders of the PRI, PAN and Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), notwithstanding that López Obrador has described all of these parties as emblems of the old, corrupt "power mafia".[48]

The costs of this approach are becoming apparent as internal strife within MORENA has intensified in the run-up to the June elections. Prominent tensions have emerged between those who consider themselves activists, many of them from the far left and members of the party since its creation, and others whom they deem to be opportunistic newcomers and refer to as *chapulines* (locusts). Early MORENA supporters from the state of Michoacán, for instance, spoke of a widespread "imposition" of candidates by powerful groups that have recently picked up the party flag; in protest, they have set up a months-long camp in front of MORENA headquarters in Mexico City.[49] Gibrán Ramírez Reyes, one of MORENA's most prominent national voices, has accused the party leadership, and López Obrador in particular, of "imposing" candidates including "a lot of people who lie, steal and betray", "racists", "land thieves", "election fraudsters" and embezzlers of public finances, as well as people tied to "mafias" and other shady political groups, including past governors jailed for criminal wrongdoing. He raised the spectre that the influx of these candidates could lead to the "the destruction of MORENA".[50]

The key concern among these party loyalists is that the cross-cutting appeal of MORENA, combined with its newfound electoral success, makes it susceptible to corrupt practices that the "fourth transformation" has vowed to smash. For criminal groups, particularly in high-conflict areas, developments within MORENA mean that new and old parties alike are coming under its auspices and presenting new, attractive vehicles for gaining access to the Mexican state.

[47] Crisis Group telephone interview, Alberto Olvera, 29 March 2021.

[48] "Priistas y panistas se han colado en Morena; son los que denuncian que no hay transparencia y democracia: Sánchez", *La Jornada de Oriente*, 15 March 2021. Fully 93.3 per cent of the fifteen MORENA candidates for governor are former members of PAN and PRI. See "Morena recicla candidatos: expriistas y experredistas, el 92% de sus aspirantes", *Expansión*, 6 January 2021; and "Conoce los candidatos para gobernadores por MORENA en las elecciones 2021", W Radio, 15 February 2021.

[49] Crisis Group text messages and informal conversations, MORENA founding members of Michoacán, 2020-2021.

[50] Gibrán Ramírez Reyes, "¿La destrucción de Morena?", *Milenio*, 5 April 2021.

III. Crime and Elections: The Case of Michoacán

A. *In the Heartland of the "War on Drugs"*

The Tierra Caliente region of Michoacán state illustrates the failings and unintended effects of Mexico's security policies. Beginning in late 2006, it became part of the heartland for the "war on drugs", as former President Felipe Calderón sent in federal forces with the promise that the state would be swiftly released from organised crime's grip.[51] But partly because of waves of militarised offensives against local armed outfits, lethal violence worsened and more than 15,500 homicides were officially recorded in Michoacán in the last decade.[52] Michoacán is one of six out of 32 federated entities in which roughly half the homicides in all Mexico occur.[53]

In 2013, under then-President Enrique Peña Nieto, federal security institutions reacted to public outcry over the degree of political, economic and social control achieved by the Knights Templar, then the dominant criminal group, by joining forces with so-called local self-defence groups – vigilantes who often harboured criminal elements.[54] The Knights Templar disintegrated, but many of the armed bands that had once acted under its umbrella proceeded to engage in incessant cycles of killings and clashes.[55] The human toll has mounted as civilians find themselves caught in the crossfire or deliberately targeted during incursions by armed groups intent on purging territories of alleged enemies. Thousands have been forcibly displaced.[56]

Authorities have dismissed the worsening conflict in Tierra Caliente as a "regrettable" reality boiling down to "confrontations among criminal groups" and claimed that "there is nothing to pacify since there is no war".[57] At the same time, officials often argue (with support from the domestic and international media) that the violence is attributable to well-armed criminal groups that have simply outgunned and overpowered state institutions.[58]

The battle lines in Michoacán – and, indeed, the rest of Mexico – do not, however, align neatly with state institutions on one side and criminal groups on the other. In

[51] Felipe Calderón, presidential inauguration speech, 1 December 2006.
[52] Data from the Mexican federal government's Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System. A total of 2,921 murders were recorded in 2020 alone, more than any other year on register, while the first two months of 2021 saw a further uptick of 15 per cent compared to the same period the year before.
[53] "El 50.6% de los homicidios se concentran en seis estados del país: Secretaría de Seguridad", *Animal Político*, 22 March 2021.
[54] "Meet the hitman and the vigilante who say they're trapped inside Mexico's drug wars", Vice News, 4 July 2016.
[55] See Falko Ernst, "The Life and Death of a Mexican Hit Man", Crisis Group Commentary, 17 October 2018; and "Mexico's Hydra-headed Crime War", Crisis Group Commentary, 3 June 2019.
[56] Crisis Group interviews, local criminal operators and combatants, civilians, humanitarian workers and Catholic clergy, 2015-2021. In March and April 2021 alone, well over a thousand people are estimated to have fled their homes amid these incursions. See "Violence erupts as Mexico's deadly gangs aim to cement power in largest ever elections", *The Guardian*, 20 April 2021.
[57] "Cinco grupos criminales se disputan control del territorio y la venta de drogas, dice Silvano", *La Voz de Michoacán*, 8 January 2021; "En Michoacán no hay nada que pacificar porque no hay guerra: Silvano Aureoles", *Milenio*, 24 August 2019.
[58] "In many parts of Mexico, government ceded battle to cartels", Associated Press, 19 October 2019.

conversations over the past decade, high-ranking members of armed groups and command-level state security officials, including of the armed forces, have spoken matter-of-factly about how boundaries between the two sides have become fluid or completely dissolved.[59]

For their part, lieutenants of criminal outfits in Michoacán say that they enjoy routine "*pláticas*" (conversations) with state police and military commanders, leading to arrangements that include intelligence sharing and acting jointly against other criminal groups. State security forces' involvement, they said, can tilt the balance of power in favour of one crime ring or another.[60] One such lieutenant said that his group's attempts to "hit [an enemy] with all we've got" have been undercut as his rivals "have the state government on their side. … And when we try, they send helicopters and operations".[61]

In the same vein, a high-ranking Mexican armed forces commander spoke of a general readiness to cut deals, saying these practices could be found at all levels of the security forces as well as among elected officials called on to approve these arrangements.

> There have been situations in which we arrested members of a [criminal] group, and they reacted by kidnapping [state officials]. I was put in charge of negotiating for their release. Speaking to the criminals, it turned out that they completely believed they were in their right. They didn't understand how we could arrest [their colleagues] when they had been assured by [other state officials] that they were on the same page, that an understanding had been reached. … I mean, when I'm told not to enter a certain area, that's fine by me. But here we simply didn't know.[62]

Opaque dealings between state officials and criminal groups have featured prominently in Mexico's political and social history for at least the past century.[63] But as both state institutions and organised crime in Mexico have grown more fragmented and prone to internecine violence, the effects of these transactions have become increasingly toxic.[64] With criminal factions jostling for sway over fragments of the Mexican state, the two sides have found themselves entangled in a web of relations

[59] Crisis Group interviews, 2012-2021.
[60] Crisis Group interviews, 2012-2021. See also "Violence erupts as Mexico's deadly gangs aim to cement power in largest ever elections", op. cit.
[61] Crisis Group interview, 2021.
[62] Crisis Group online interview, 2021.
[63] See Peter Lupsha, "Drug Lords and Narco-corruption: The Players Change but the Game Continues", *Crime, Law and Social Change*, vol. 16 (1991), pp. 41-56; Peter Andreas, "The Political Economy of Narco-corruption in Mexico", *Current History*, vol. 97 (April 1998), pp. 160-165; Stephen Morris, "Corruption and the Mexican Political System: Continuity and Change", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 3 (1999), pp. 623-643; and Luis Astorga, *Seguridad, traficantes y militares* (Mexico City, 2007).
[64] As discussed above, at the start of Mexico's post-2006 "war on drugs", six large criminal conglomerates exercised a high degree of territorial and market control. As of 2019, an estimated 198 illegal armed groups were active in Mexico. See Esberg, "More than Cartels", op. cit. Simultaneously, sub-national governments and institutions have grown increasingly autonomous as a result of democratisation that has proceeded without effective oversight and accountability, making them vulnerable to capture by criminal groups. See Crisis Group Latin America Report N°61, *Veracruz: Fixing Mexico's State of Terror*, 28 February 2017.

where violent ruptures are frequent. "There are a lot of pacts [between state and crime]", said a white-collar broker providing services such as connections to state officials to various groups in Michoacán and other states, including the Jalisco Cartel New Generation, "but only at the local and regional level. There is no one big pact".[65]

In the absence of a single criminal group able to impose itself to the exclusion of others, Michoacán – like other high-conflict parts of Mexico – finds itself in a state of perpetual deadly conflict. Armed bands fight each other for advantage. They also frequently attack security forces that are associated with competitors under arrangements that they see as unfavourable.[66]

B. *The Effects of López Obrador's Security Policies*

The complex entanglement of state officials with criminal enterprises in Michoacán as well as other conflict-affected areas makes it difficult for security institutions to foster trust and cooperation within their own ranks, let alone with one another. It also calls into question the state's ability to carry out security policies to protect the public.[67] These include the "war on drugs", which has been hobbled by unattainable goals as well as its distorted implementation caused by criminal groups' arrangements with law enforcement.[68]

Although he had pledged to demilitarise Mexico's approach to public security during his election campaign, López Obrador cast aside this commitment soon after taking office, instead relying on the armed forces to an even greater extent than his predecessors. Beyond its already broad security portfolio, the administration has put the military in charge of traditionally civilian tasks, including, for example, the construction and operation of (and collection of income from) infrastructure projects such as a tourist train in the country's south east. The president has also charged security forces with immigration enforcement on Mexico's borders.[69] The military is effec-

[65] Crisis Group interview, 2021.

[66] See the register of killed police officers prepared by Causa en Común, "Registro de Policías Asesinados", op. cit.

[67] Asked about his relationship with other branches of the armed forces, the military commander referred to above said that he considered them corrupt to a degree that "I wouldn't even entrust them my dog". A high-ranking intelligence officer of the state security secretariat of Veracruz state said even within the institution, "there are many sub-groups with different loyalties and interests, and they don't share intelligence with each other because you simply can't trust anyone". Crisis Group interview, Veracruz, 2020. In October 2020, the U.S. arrested General Salvador Cienfuegos, the secretary of defence under President Peña Nieto from 2012-2018, on organised crime charges. Following pressure by Mexico, he was released from custody and returned to Mexico, where following an unclear process he was cleared of all charges. "Mexico exonerates ex-defense chief who was freed by the U.S.", *The New York Times*, 14 January 2021. Genaro García Luna, head of the federal Public Security Secretariat and considered the chief anti-organised crime strategist under President Calderón from 2006-2012, is standing trial in the U.S. for allegedly having accepted millions in bribes from the Sinaloa Cartel. "Prosecution of top Mexican security official exposes the façade of the drug war", *The Intercept*, 26 January 2020.

[68] See Ernst, "Time to End the Lethal Limbo of the U.S.-Mexican Drug Wars", op. cit.

[69] "Ejército asume al menos 27 funciones civiles", *El Universal*, 21 March 2021; "Ejército recibirá todos los beneficios obtenidos del Tren Maya; 'megaobra' será patrimonio de Sedena", *El Financiero*, 16 March 2021.

tively running, training and manning the National Guard, which by law is supposed to be a civilian institution.[70] Overall, more military personnel have been deployed in Mexico under López Obrador than under the three previous administrations.[71]

López Obrador argues that reliance on the military is necessary as past reforms have failed to rid the police of corruption – a problem he deemed so profound that he jettisoned efforts at reform and disbanded the Federal Police in 2019.[72] In contrast, he has called the commanders of Mexico's armed forces – which remain highly popular – "incorruptible".[73] He also insists that reports of military involvement in egregious human rights violations such as enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings would end as he "would never, ever give [such] orders".[74] In the same vein, Secretary of Defence and army head General Luis Cresencio Sandoval González has said that "the path … of the military career is straight and does not tolerate deviations of any type".[75]

Even so, in Michoacán and elsewhere in Mexico there have been some changes in the way that the military pursues its security mission under López Obrador. Security experts, high-ranking military personnel and members of criminal groups interviewed for this report tend to agree that López Obrador's credo not to "fight fire with fire" has led the authorities to refrain from pursuing kingpins and from undertaking large-scale offensive operations to this end in conflict-affected regions.[76] Close observers say this change is driven in part by a desire to avoid headlines and images of violent conflict "that would be politically costly as they would signal that, after all, they're not doing things all that differently from before".[77] U.S. officials acknowledge that joint operations against high-level targets and criminal activities have "ground to a

[70] "Sedena hace que AMLO deje claro que el Ejército manda en la Guardia; Marina, a alinearse…", *Crónica*, 17 October 2020; "Mandos militares controlan a la Guardia Nacional, confirma amparo de Mayor del Ejército", *Animal Político*, 19 October 2020. In October 2020, López Obrador formally put the army in charge of the operational command of the National Guard, including the recruitment and training of its officers. See "La Guardia Nacional formaliza su incorporación a la Sedena", *Expansión*, 16 October 2020.

[71] As of late March 2021, a total of 186,613 officers, 26,296 from the navy and the rest from the army and National Guard, had been deployed, according to official information. See "Informe de Seguridad", Mexican Federal Government, 22 March 2021.

[72] "AMLO ya es presidente: Ofrece combatir desigualdad y corrupción aunque sin perseguir a funcionarios del pasado", *Animal Político*, 1 December 2018; "Por falta de moral y de disciplina, la Policía Federal desapareció: AMLO", *El Universal*, 12 October 2020.

[73] "Arresto de exsecretario Defensa sacude a ejército mexicano", AP, 16 October 2020.

[74] "'Nunca, jamás', daré la orden de reprimir al pueblo: AMLO, en guardia de honor en Tlatelolco", *Aristegui Noticias*, 2 October 2018. The armed forces remain, at 63.8 per cent, Mexico's most trusted institution, according to a 2020 survey by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography. "Encuesta Nacional de Cultura Cívica 2020", National Institute of Statistics and Geography, March 2021.

[75] "Combatir la corrupción en el Ejército", *El Universal*, 27 November 2020.

[76] It should be noted that already under previous administrations, strategic interventions in high-conflict regions such as Tierra Caliente happened sporadically.

[77] Crisis Group telephone interview, historian of Mexican crime, 31 March 2021. A specialist in Michoacán's security said the president "wants to avoid the high political costs past governments have suffered after they declared war against organised crime, so that he can achieve other priorities like structural reforms", including in the energy sector. Crisis Group text message exchange, 9 April 2021.

halt" under López Obrador, and that the Mexican government no longer carries out military operations in response to U.S. intelligence reports.[78]

At the same time, there is more continuity than meets the eye. The number of clashes between Mexico's army and alleged criminal groups, for instance, slightly increased during López Obrador's first two years in office compared to the previous five years under his predecessor Peña Nieto.[79] Overall, interlocutors discern less change in strategy under López Obrador than the government's rhetoric suggests, with one armed forces commander calling the government's assertions to the contrary "a farce".[80]

Many of the problems that have plagued the military's engagement with local communities also persist. Commanders in the field continue to operate with significant autonomy from higher-ups and remain entangled as ever with local criminal elements.[81] López Obrador, despite initial misgivings, has continued to allow a lack of transparency and oversight across the Mexican military – seemingly in exchange for political loyalty.[82] Operators for criminal groups highlighted how they continued to be able to engage with parts of security institutions present in their areas. "It's the same shit as before, but more stupid, more disorganised", said the above-referenced broker working with the Jalisco Cartel. He cited minor "misunderstandings" with new National Guard officers who "didn't understand yet what's up … though they are learning". He claimed that oil siphoning in central and northern Mexico, in which he said he was involved, remained protected through transactional arrangements with federal forces, including the National Guard.[83]

Likewise, a lieutenant for one of the armed outfits fighting over the Tierra Caliente spoke of "a good relationship" with the local National Guard commander. "They understand what we want to do, they are with us". Yet, he added, rival groups had attained the same understanding with commanders in other areas and with high-level officials from the state government.[84]

[78] "Exclusive: U.S. investigations into cartels paralyzed by standoff with Mexico", Reuters, 30 March 2021.

[79] Data from Mexico's Secretariat of Defence show an average of 241.2 armed confrontations per year from 2014 through 2018, and 251 per year for 2019 and 2020. "La SEDENA y su creciente abuso de la fuerza", *Animal Político*, 7 September 2020; "En 2020, murieron seis militares en 260 enfrentamientos con grupos armados", *La Jornada*, 3 February 2021.

[80] Crisis Group interviews, 2020 and 2021. "Para combatir el crimen, 'no se puede apagar fuego con fuego': AMLO", *El Financiero*, 4 January 2018. See also "'Todos cometemos errores'…", op. cit.

[81] The above-mentioned armed forces commander, for instance, stated that local military commanders frequently act according to their own judgment, and fail to coordinate with higher command levels or even report their actions. Crisis Group interview, 2021.

[82] Crisis Group interview, Raúl Benítez Manaut, National Autonomous University of Mexico, 25 February 2020. See also "Mexico army's expanding role protects military after ex-defense minister's arrest", *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 October 2020; and Maureen Meyer and Moses Ngong, "Mexico Faces a Test for its Anti-Corruption and Justice Reform Efforts", Washington Office on Latin America, 25 November 2020.

[83] Crisis Group interviews and telephone interviews, September and November 2020, February 2021.

[84] Crisis Group interview, 2021.

C. *Violent Competition Around Elections*

Access to the Mexican state is a crucial means for criminal survival and expansion. "If there is one rule all of the [illegal armed] groups know, it's that only those who have the protection of the state grow", said one Michoacán-based political consultant with long experience of how deals between candidates and criminal groups are brokered.[85] The need for state protection in turn means that criminal groups have a vested interest in sabotaging competitors' suspected arrangements with state officials that threaten to give them the upper hand, and are especially inclined to do so around election time, when new pacts are brokered. In the 2021 elections, the Michoacán governorship, its entire state congress and 112 mayoralties will be on the ballot. Over the course of the 2018 election campaign – one of the most violent in modern Mexican history – municipalities with a high number of criminal groups were also the most likely to experience violent attacks on political figures.

Criminal influence on elections is particularly prevalent locally, in part because municipal authorities are generally considered the weakest layer of government and the most susceptible to capture.[86] Criminal groups in Tierra Caliente have so much influence that candidates routinely approach them for support. "You can't govern without them. It [may] be done voluntarily or through force, but the truth is that the candidates approach the *maña* [generic term for organised crime] so they can win elections", explained the political consultant cited above. "In hot areas like Apatzingán [Tierra Caliente's main hub], it's perfectly normal that five, ten or fifteen candidates go ask for support, and they always promise that they'll work for the group". "This means", he added, "that at least in [rural] zones of high control, they [criminal groups] can dictate terms and many times also candidates".[87]

Sometimes, those candidates are very close to the groups, their members and others around them. In the current elections in Tierra Caliente, local observers, including political and criminal operatives, allege that several figures among candidates for different parties and levels of office may be connected to criminal entities.[88] The political careers of several individuals allegedly linked to organised crime have continued over many years, despite an attempted crackdown in 2009 when under former President Calderón, 28 Michoacán state and municipal officials were arrested on accusations of organised crime collusion and/or membership.[89]

Criminals invest in elections through the provision of illicit campaign funding. Campaign budgets have statutory caps; the average amount from public and private sources allowed in 2021 for candidates running for president of Michoacán municipalities is 333,921 pesos (about $16,650), with the precise amount varying accord-

[85] Crisis Group interview, March 2021.
[86] See "Léase si quiere gobernar en serio", México Evalúa and Centro de Investigación para el Desarrollo, April 2018.
[87] Crisis Group interview, March 2021.
[88] It is common for people tied to criminal groups in run for office in other high-conflict regions, too, such as the neighbouring state of Guerrero. See Crisis Group Report, *Mexico's Everyday War: Guerrero and the Trials of Peace*, op. cit.
[89] All suspects were later released due to procedural shortcomings on the prosecution's part. See "Liberan a último involucrado del michoacanazo", *El Economista*, 12 April 2011.

ing to the size of the local population.[90] Candidates tend to see this sum as insufficient, spurring them to turn to illegal sources. As a local political campaign organiser told Crisis Group: "If you want to stand a chance, think 10 million [pesos, or about $500,000] and above … many candidates will spend 15 to 20 million [pesos, or about $750,000 to $1 million]".[91]

Secret slush funds "provided in cash by [criminal] groups", according to the consultant, have in previous Tierra Caliente elections reportedly financed vote buying, with small sums of cash of around 500 pesos and packages of basic food items being handed out to prospective voters.[92] Attempts by opposing candidates' teams to prevent each other from making these handouts can add another source of violence, particularly in the immediate run-up to election day.[93] Criminal groups also exploit their territorial and social control, particularly in rural areas, to channel blocks of votes to particular candidates, sometimes resorting to coercion to this end.[94]

D. *The Benefits and Limits of State Access*

Placing or co-opting candidates at the municipal level has in the past afforded criminal groups benefits such as direct influence over the actions of local and, in some cases, state police as well as access to state intelligence from various levels of government, for instance concerning pending arrests or other operations. Political influence has also allowed criminal groups to employ local security forces as appendages of their own organisations, using them to detain or kill targets as well as to protect the transport of illicit goods.[95] Criminal groups have also endeavoured – with apparent success – to tap into state finances. According to municipal officials in Tierra Caliente, criminals routinely do so through a system of kickbacks whereby successful

[90] A presidential election will take place in 112 of the state's 113 municipalities. "Acuerdo IEM-CG-36/2020", Michoacán Electoral Institute, 2020.

[91] Crisis Group interview, March 2021. During the 2015 mid-term elections, two Tierra Caliente candidates for office confirmed to Crisis Group having received 1 million pesos each from a local armed outfit. Crisis Group interviews, Apatzingán, Michoacán, May 2015.

[92] Crisis Group interviews, political candidates, consultants, and voters, 2011 and 2015.

[93] During the 2015 municipal elections in Tierra Caliente, Crisis Group accompanied a group of sympathisers of one party in their efforts to "protect the vote", ie, to prevent vote buying and similar practices. For instance, they observed the comings and goings in an urban polling station the local party leadership had deemed "hot". That night, a team working for the same party, and including members of a local criminal group, followed a vehicle suspected to be distributing illegal campaign gifts from a "cave" (safe house). The vehicle's occupants brandished a firearm in response.

[94] Mexican criminal groups, including in Michoacán, have long invested in gaining legitimacy vis-à-vis local populations, for instance by providing material benefits as well as purporting to provide protection against threats, such as other criminal groups. See "Mexican criminal groups see Covid-19 crisis as opportunity to gain more power", *The Guardian*, 20 April 2020. They also wield coercive influence. Voters in rural Tierra Caliente municipalities have said they were "advised" – some at gunpoint – to make "the right choice" during past electoral exercises. Crisis Group interviews, 2015 and 2017.

[95] Crisis Group interviews, Michoacán-based criminal groups, 2012-2020. See also "Averiguación Previa PGR/SIEDO/UEIDCS/205/2009", Procuraduría General de La República – Subprocuraduría de Investigación Especializada en Delincuencia Organizada, 2009; "Policías de Sinaloa entregan a ocho jóvenes detenidos a un grupo delincuencial", *El País*, 16 March 2017.

candidates hand administrative posts and their wages to designated individuals, who might not actually perform the job in question.[96]

One former official reported that he and his colleagues had been forced to provide a 20 per cent cut of their monthly salaries to a top municipal official alleged to belong to a criminal outfit. The former official said: "First, in an official meeting, he politely asked us for a discount [sic], and we declined. Then, he had us taken up on the hill [synonymous with a local criminal group's rural stronghold] … and they had us sit in a circle surrounded by *sicarios* [foot soldiers] who explained to us that they needed our support".[97]

Public funds end up in criminals' pockets in other ways too. Another coveted funding stream consists of embezzling funds from public-sector contracts, for instance in construction. "There are a number of heavyweights you have to satisfy [as a candidate], whether you like it or not", said the political consultant. "Otherwise, they will place their support elsewhere, and you lose. Right after la *maña* [organised crime] come the [private-sector] construction lords. Both expect something in return … that they are given contracts".[98] Expenditures on government social programs also make up 263 billion (about $13.15 billion) of the 492 billion pesos (about $24.6 billion) that were "unaccounted for" at all levels of government from 2000 through November 2019, providing another potential pool of public funds for criminal groups and their political allies.[99]

At the same time, the benefits to criminal groups of co-opting municipal power holders have diminished somewhat as local security forces have lost importance. Between the threats posed by organised crime and the failure of state and federal government to provide sufficient financial, operational and institutional backing, municipalities have watched their constitutional role as providers of public security erode over time. Successive federal administrations have preferred to rely on centralised security policies, often hinging on the armed forces, rather than local police.[100]

An ever more pressing imperative for criminal groups has been to find ways to steer higher-level state security forces in their desired direction. The upper echelons of the state have proven that they can inflict grave damage on criminal groups and individuals when they are determined to do so.[101] The arrest of one of the Knights Templar's top leaders and the killing of another – followed by the group's rapid disintegration – illustrate that capacity.[102] Likewise, numerous criminal leaders across the country have been killed or arrested during the nearly fifteen years of the "war on drugs". Leaders or other members of criminal groups active in Michoacán have as

[96] Crisis Group interviews, January and March 2021. The placement of so-called *aviadores*, or aviators, ie, staff who receive wages but do not work, is a common technique for embezzling public funds in Mexico. "La corrupción del gobierno", *El Financiero*, 23 February 2021.
[97] Crisis Group interview, April 2021.
[98] Crisis Group interview, March 2021.
[99] Viridiana Ríos, "La otra mafia del poder, corrupción y desigualdad en México", Oxfam México, September 2020.
[100] "Léase si quiere gobernar en serio…", op. cit.
[101] "Impunidad en homicidio doloso y feminicidio…", op. cit.
[102] "Que ahora sí: abaten al 'Chayo' y muestran cadáver", *Aristeguí Noticias*, 10 March 2014; "Detienen a 'la Tuta' en Morelia, aunque autoridades decían que se escondía en la montaña", *Animal Político*, 27 February 2015.

a result consistently expressed their aversion to attacking the armed forces since the Knights Templar fell apart.[103]

Indeed, some of these outfits appear to have developed a finely calibrated understanding of how far they can go in meddling with political life. An adviser to one group, for instance, said he did not consider it "wise to run with our own candidate [for a high-level office] … since you'll end up receiving more operations"; instead, he deemed it preferable to back the official party candidate most likely to win.[104] A lieutenant from the same organisation told Crisis Group that, on the basis of this logic, he had struck a deal with the candidate who looked best placed to win the state governorship. Providing votes to that gubernatorial campaign while simultaneously guaranteeing the victory of the candidate from the same party on the municipal level, he hoped, would benefit his group in its fight with opponents allegedly backed by certain state and federal security forces. "The idea is", he said, "that all [levels of government] will be of the same colour … that they let us do our job".[105]

Criminal groups' hopes that investments in electoral campaigns will bestow advantages over competitors or more clearly demarcate lines of territorial control come with few guarantees. According to the military commander, "there are what we call paradise municipalities, where you have pacts that work and almost no violence … but these are the exceptions". He added that state governors, for instance, prefer to "double-sell the *plaza* [turf]" to several competing criminal groups, perpetuating highly volatile state-crime arrangements.[106] "Everybody knows", said the adviser to one criminal group, "that only half of what is being promised is later delivered. But that is still better than having them [elected officials] as enemies".[107]

Failure to provide a return on criminal groups' investments can spark new cycles of violence. Members of three armed groups active in Michoacán, as well as the military commander, said techniques used to pressure office holders who have reneged on their promises have included attacks on state personnel such as police officers, blocking roads with burning vehicles to attract inconvenient press coverage, and public messages and videos looking to inflict reputational harm.[108]

[103] Crisis Group interviews, Michoacán, 2015, 2016, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021.
[104] Crisis Group interview, February 2021.
[105] Crisis Group interview, March 2021.
[106] Crisis Group interview, March 2021.
[107] Crisis Group interview, March 2021.
[108] Crisis Group interviews, 2019 and 2021. A leader of an illegal armed group in the neighbouring state of Guerrero also told Crisis Group that he had used car bombs with the same intent. See Crisis Group Report, *Mexico's Everyday War: Guerrero and the Trials of Peace*, op. cit. See also Benjamin Lessing, "Logics of Violence in Criminal War", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 59, no. 8 (2015), pp. 1486-1516.

IV. A Blueprint for the Future

Elections continue to equip Mexico's criminal groups with a means of acquiring access to the state, providing impunity as well as other crucial advantages in violent feuds. Polls are not the only access point, however, and addressing the nexus between the authorities and criminal actors presents a huge structural challenge.

Strengthening electoral institutions would still be a good place to start. In the National Electoral Institute and state-level electoral institutes, Mexico already has in place an oversight structure that has been widely lauded for its size, overall design and operational capacity, and which has played a crucial part in Mexico's democratic transition.[109] Moreover, following a series of reforms, the INE has increased its powers to detect illicit campaign financing stemming from criminal groups, as well as illegally funnelled public funds.[110] Political operators who have worked closely with criminal outfits in Michoacán conceded that "the rules are very good", even if they noted that there are ways to circumvent electoral oversight and to "bend the rules … as is always the case in Mexico".[111]

There are limits to what the electoral authority alone can do. A former INE counsellor said the body's financial oversight powers had grown and that, in theory, it could now audit campaign financing throughout the lead-up to elections.[112] It remained, however, "materially impossible … [as] there are too many processes to watch and [the INE] depends on informants giving a heads-up about illegal financial flows … as well as the cooperation of other bodies such as prosecution offices, which remain highly opaque". She described how the parties obstruct oversight, for example by providing legally mandated spending reports in the shape of data dumps in the last few days before elections, in effect running down the clock and blunting the INE's ability to audit. She also acknowledged that the issue of state-criminal collaboration and collusion is not something that reforming the institution can by itself fix: "The corruption and impunity shown during elections are structural … and cannot be solved during them, let alone by the INE on its own".[113]

Even so, efforts to bolster the body would help. Curbing its independence, as López Obrador says he intends to do, would certainly represent a worrying leap

[109] Joy Langston, *Democratization and Authoritarian Party Survival: Mexico's PRI* (Oxford, 2017).
[110] One example was then Veracruz Governor Javier Duarte's alleged channelling of at least 15 million pesos (about $750,000) of embezzled public funds into Peña Nieto's victorious presidential campaign. "Javier Duarte dio millones de pesos a los mismos empresarios que financiaron ilegalmente la campaña de Peña: MCCI", *Aristegui Noticias*, 31 May 2018.
[111] Crisis Group online interview, political adviser, April 2021.
[112] Crisis Group telephone interview, Pamela San Martín, INE counsellor from 2014-2020, 1 May 2021. In 2014, following a constitutional reform, the original Federal Electoral Institute was transformed into the INE, putting it in charge of watching over elections at all levels, not solely the federal level. For an overview, see "Reforma Constitucional 2014", National Electoral Institute, 2014. Until the reform, political parties were not obliged to account for all campaign spending until after elections, with the victorious PRI not sanctioned for illegal campaign financing used for vote buying until after its candidate had assumed the presidency. "Multan PRI-PVEM por aportaciones ilegales", *El Universal*, 23 January 2013.
[113] Crisis Group telephone interview, Pamela San Martín, INE counsellor from 2014-2020, 1 May 2021.

backwards, bringing into question the integrity of democratic elections as well as their financial oversight. Instead, the president and his party, the judicial system, and international partners should leave the INE's constitutionally anchored independence untouched. They should also increase the Institute's financial and human resources to ensure it can operate more successfully.

Addressing the bigger issues requires reform beyond elections. Criminal sway over politics surfaces most overtly during campaigns, but it is a general condition that helps sustain high levels of lethal conflict. Broadly speaking, the federal and state governments, as well as international partners such as the U.S., should strive to replace ineffective security policies with concentrated initiatives in the regions with the highest levels of conflict, such as Michoacán. As Crisis Group has argued before, the focus should be on developing tailored regional action plans paired with the bolstering of offices and cadres in state institutions and security forces that are transparent and accountable, and which offer better training and working conditions, all of which are key to fending off criminal influence. These enclaves, potentially including specialised units in the prosecution service and federal security forces, could lend protection during the implementation of regional action plans, as well as gradually tackle corruption and collusion in other institutions. Independent oversight involving civil society should play a key role in ensuring that professional standards are maintained when existing judicial and internal oversight mechanisms have proven too weak.

The use of force, while likely to remain a necessity for the foreseeable future, should be seen not as a panacea but as a way to protect civilians at risk of being displaced or otherwise gravely victimised, as well as to end impunity for the most violent criminal groups. While the kingpin strategy backfired due to a lack of follow-up, enabling leaderless criminal groups to reassemble, often in more harmful incarnations, high-level perpetrators of serious crimes should still be captured and brought to justice. Prosecutors should prioritise cases featuring ties between state officials and criminals, since the failure to do so has given crime rings fertile ground in which to grow.

At the same time, tailored regional plans should include options for demobilisation and reintegration aimed at providing young criminal group members with ways back to law-abiding society and licit economic alternatives. In the first instance, mediation with criminal groups through the good offices of local citizens and the Church, possibly backed by international partners, should aim to guarantee access to humanitarian relief for people affected by armed conflict. Regional truth commissions consisting of civil society representatives, clergy and local business figures could help delineate the conditions for the eventual reintegration of criminal group members.

Meanwhile, the connection between conflict and criminal control of transnational commodity chains involving illicit drugs and also a number of agricultural goods and natural resources should also be a focus of these regional action plans. This would require governments and private businesses in the U.S., European Union and Canada, among others, to collaborate in sharing relevant information and, where necessary, take steps to ensure that transnational corporations face legal consequences if they aggravate conflict in Mexico.

Prospects for such changes appear slim in the last years of López Obrador's term, but donors could do things today that would help establish a blueprint for future action. The apparent lack of federal government interest in cleaning up state-crime ties mean the chances of a radical shake-up of security policy for now appear low.

But promising initiatives exist at the local and regional levels, often with support from some part or other of the state.[114] In the hope that high-level political interest could eventually be aroused, national and international donors should endeavour to support innovative sub-national projects. They should then use these programs' results to help shape future security policy.

Washington and other international partners should also communicate their concern over the likelihood of continued and potentially worsening instability if the Mexican administration seeks to hollow out democratic institutions, particularly those involved in electoral oversight. The U.S., which for years has both financially and politically supported unsuccessful force-dependent strategies for managing narcotrafficking and rural disorder, should make clear that it believes in a tailored approach that can attack the deep roots of criminal conflict.

[114] In Mexico City, Ciudad Juárez and rural Michoacán, for instance, projects carried out by Catholic clergy and civil society are working to reintegrate former young crime group members. While promising, these projects lack publicity and financial support.

V. Conclusion

Inside and outside Mexico, the struggle to lower the country's chronically high levels of violence is too often cast as a struggle between state authorities and stereotypical "bad guys" belonging to criminal groups. Yet what enables these groups to fight on and prosper is their ability to strike deals with state officials, affording impunity as well as the possibility of harnessing state power for illicit ends. Feuds between criminal groups linger as on the order of 200 armed outfits vie for power across the country. In high-conflict areas such as Michoacán's Tierra Caliente, institutional bulwarks are too feeble to impede links between elected officials and criminal operatives or halt persistent corruption and high levels of conflict.

López Obrador's promise of exemplary moral leadership as well as his efforts to concentrate power in his hands so as to govern more effectively have proved broadly popular but often contrast with the results of his policies. Thus far, he has largely failed to shore up a permissive and fragmented state apparatus. Weak political parties, including the president's own vehicle MORENA, are open to all comers, including opportunists of all stripes and members of criminal groups. The administration's hostility toward independent oversight and accountability, and the threat this poses to bodies such as the National Electoral Institute, bode ill for the projects of curbing graft or cleaning up Mexican democracy.

No quick fix is possible in these circumstances. Rather, it is vital to start building the bases for security policies that are adapted to the specific challenges of each region, and which aim squarely to thwart criminal capture of the state. Part of the answer is to rethink the force-based policies that the U.S. government, among others, has championed. Support for promising local and regional projects carried out by non-governmental and state bodies could help craft a blueprint for action farther down the line.

Mexico City/Bogotá/Brussels, 2 June 2021

Appendix A: The Tierra Caliente – Heartland of the "War on Drugs"

Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

After President & CEO Robert Malley stood down in January 2021 to become the U.S. Iran envoy, two long-serving Crisis Group staff members assumed interim leadership until the recruitment of his replacement. Richard Atwood, Crisis Group's Chief of Policy, is serving as interim President and Comfort Ero, Africa Program Director, as interim Vice President.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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