

IN DEPTH

## Pacification and peace building in Mexico

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More than a year has gone by since Mexico's last presidential elections. Those elections were preceded by historical levels of violence, with both 2017<sup>1</sup> and 2018<sup>2</sup> being years with the most homicides ever recorded in the country. They were also the elections with the highest number of candidate assassinations on record. Even in this context, people went to the polls massively, voting on the basis that they were sick and tired of the traditional parties that had been ruling until then at both federal and local levels. The election results were a sign of a desire for a change in the prevailing situation of inequality, violence and corruption in the country. The security strategy adopted 12 years ago in the fight against organised crime provided another indicator of the unsustainable nature of Mexico's current path<sup>3</sup>.

Thus Andrés Manuel López Obrador won the presidency of Mexico with the support of more than 50% of the electorate, on his third attempt at running for the position. With a relatively new party, he managed to build alliances with different groups belonging to the traditional political class, important members of other political parties and the evangelical leaders congregated in the also recently created Social Encounter Party. This coalition was constructed around López Obrador figure, his image and his leadership. He therefore began his term in office with extremely favourable political conditions and an absolute majority in both chambers of the Mexican federal Congress as well as in most of the local legislatures.

López Obrador brings to his presidency a political project that includes objectives and a discourse of struggle against corruption and social inequality, but also with proposals that have been put into question because of their insufficient differentiation from the

lines laid down by previous governments. In fact, he also begins his time in office with an confrontation, evident throughout his campaign, with a civil society whose organisations and representatives he identifies as political adversaries, locating and highlighting among them only entrepreneurs and opinion leaders who question his forms of political action.

In short, he arrives with the possibility of a broad control of the state apparatus and with social backing from a population that believes it is possible to take the country in a different direction and willing to give him majority support. However, the president's agenda and proposals are not directed towards the transformation of the structural conditions that generate the inequality and violence that currently plague Mexico, but rather towards changing political conditions around his highly concentrated prophet-like leadership and the naming of officials in whom he has personal confidence.

**“ The new presidency of Mexico has presented peace as a concept linked to security, as a negative peace, the opposite of violence and a state of war. ”**

The administration's policy on the issue of peace, like others, has suffered the fate of becoming “tougher,” and once again puts matters in the hands of political figures who enjoy the president's personal confidence. These tendencies are similar to measures generated by previous governments facing the deterioration of state institutions and the complexity of the Mexican context.

Peace has been presented as a concept constantly linked to physical security by the new administration<sup>4</sup>. This relationship, pairing peace and security, makes us think of a negative conception of peace; as the opposite of violence, but with a focus on physical violence. That is to say, a peace that contrasts with a state of war and which is conceived of as a negation of war, based on the imposition of order by the security forces.

Following this same logic, just after his election victory, the president launched an initiative from the Secretariat of Security and Civilian Protection called “Listening Forums for Peace and Reconciliation”. Here, the administration hoped to attract different voices to build a strategy to confront the situation of violence in the country, on the basis of forums open to public participation in different parts of the Republic. However, as these sessions were held, Mexican civil society expressed strong criticisms of the process, such as: the requirement that the Secretariat of Security be the coordinator of this initiative; the last-minute nature of the invitation made to the Mexican population; the lack of coordination with academic experts and specialised organisations; and the concentration on open assemblies held with little preparation and generalised opinions that would be difficult to systematise.

It was pointed out several times that the term “pacification” was inadequate as it expressed precisely an idea of a peace imposed by order and state forces, but this was never rectified. The results of the exercise did not offer solutions to the issue. The absence of a clear proposal to respond to the situation of violence in the country became increasingly evident and the degree of collusion within the police forces was shown to be much higher than had previously been imagined.

These results generated a new impetus for the creation of the National Guard (GN) and furthered the conceptualization of this new body as a collaboration with military forces under military command, despite the fact that the Secretary of Public Security himself, appointed by the government elect, spoke in favour of halting this campaign proposal only a few weeks after the election. This was due to the outdated nature of the constitutional framework within which the National Guard was conceived, which followed a nineteenth-century model of civil society collaboration with the Armed Forces to face up to a possible foreign invasion. Faced with the complexity of the situation and the lack of alternative proposals, the government opted, as its predecessors had done, to modify the constitutional framework in order to give legal backing to the Armed Forces in carrying out public security activities, ignoring the declarations issued against these measures by numerous national and international human rights bodies and organisations.

**“ The vision of peace must take into account the conditions of access to truth and justice, of democratic participation, of respect for human rights, of dignified living conditions ”**

With the president's large majorities in local and federal congresses, this constitutional reform was approved, but not without provoking opposition from human rights organisations, mainly grouped in the “Security Without War” collective. And when these thought that they had achieved at least one major breakthrough by modifying the terms of the top command of the National Guard, obtaining the support of the opposition in the Senate for this to be civil and not military, the president proposed a different interpretation of what had been approved in the reform and announced the appointment of an active military officer, in the process of retirement, as the head of the GN.

Therefore, it was that the GN began to operate and deploy in various parts of the country, even before the approval of the secondary laws and protocols of action that govern it. After the resolution of tensions with Trump administration over the issue of migration and its threat to impose tariffs on Mexico, the GN was then deployed massively to enforce the detention of migrants on the southern border of the United States.

The tendencies towards increasing violence across the country have not changed either. The first three months of this year have been the most violent on record<sup>5</sup> and 2019 could break the record again to become the most violent year ever. A more comprehensive and integrated analysis of the subject of peace building must necessarily go beyond its relationship with security issues and must concentrate on building conditions for access to truth and justice, democratic participation in a broad sense, and respect for human rights, as well as underlining the importance of guarantees of access to decent living conditions that allow all people to live freely and develop to their full potential. With the National Guard as the focus in regards to peace

building, this has not happened.

It is nevertheless important to underline that within López Obrador team we find very diverse and even contradictory positions and political trajectories. Some of them have much greater empathy and relationship with the demands raised by civil society in support of the struggle for human rights. In this sense, we can see important advances. For example, in the paradigmatic case of Ayotzinapa, where progress was made in the design and creation of the Presidential Commission for the Investigation of the Truth in this case with the participation of the relatives of the victims, the representative organisations and international experts. Likewise, the discourse on this topic has changed substantially, now recognising the emergency and the dimension of enforced disappearances in Mexico. Since the transition period there has also been constant dialogue with different groups of victims, many of them grouped in the Movement for Our Disappeared in Mexico (Movimiento por Nuestros Desaparecidos en México). This movement, since its creation, has managed to design proposals for the creation of the General Law on the Forced Disappearance of Persons. Now it works to ensure that the law is implemented adequately, prioritising the work of searching for and identifying disappeared people.

**“ The tendencies towards a deepening of violence have not changed and 2019 could break the record again to become the most violent year ever ”**

The discourse against neoliberal economic policies has been an important part of the political orientation of this government. However, the promotion of the economy continues to be based on investment in massive infrastructure projects with grave environmental impact in territories with a significant presence of indigenous and rural communities, particularly in the southeast of the country. It is in this region where the construction of the so-called Mayan Train has been announced, a project with a significant impact on the environment and on the living conditions of the communities

in that territory. The administration also plans to build the Trans-Isthmic train in a geopolitically strategic zone, and the Dos Bocas Tabasco refinery, which is part of a commitment to an economy that will continue to be oil-dependent without clear projects for alternative energy.

The processes for the advancement and definition of such projects have been shown to be extremely limited in terms of public participation and consultation, particularly with respect to consultations with indigenous people which are not carried out systematically for all projects, regardless of the government's interest in their being executed. Nor have the referendums held complied in any way with international standards, and towns and cities have been included in them that are not directly affected by the project in question. This has generated confrontation and social polarisation within indigenous communities, sometimes with fatal effects such as in the case of the Morelos Integral Project, where, after the President had publicly criticised the population resisting the project and after the imposition of a consultation with less than two weeks notice, one of the opposition leaders was assassinated in front of his house, just four days before the referendum.

On the other hand, in the matter of indigenous and Afro-Mexican peoples a Constitutional Reform has been promoted that seeks to change the conception of their relationship with the Mexican state. This reform would be based on the recognition of key elements of these cultures, such as legal systems and the concept of collective territory, among many other pending issues that are part of the historical debt that is owed to these populations. The largest sum ever will be dedicated to the promotion of social support programs, with direct resources for broad sectors of the population. To achieve this, a set of measures has been proposed with significant cuts in the bureaucracy, including salary reductions for top officials, but also dismissing workers, in a program of cuts that is paradoxically typical of neoliberal states. In addition, these social programs seem to be directed at strengthening a clientelist relationship with the population, while leaving in place the challenge of reducing the gap of inequality and marginalisation; this could have the effect of generating divisions within community bodies of self-organisation and social resistance, as well as the risks involved in the widespread distribution of resources in the context of extreme violence that a large part of the country is living through.

**“ We must move towards a notion of peace construction that focuses on the recovery of social relations, the transformation of structures and the reach of all those conditions that allow a healthy and plural coexistence with equity and justice ”**

In terms of law enforcement, it is easy to coincide with the catastrophic vision presented by the Attorney General of the Republic in his report on the first 100 days of the institution's activity; however, it is similar many aspects to what his predecessors –then named General Prosecutors– had pointed out and the orientation of his work seems to be more focused on carrying forward the investigation of big cases than on a transition and deep transformation of the federal justice prosecution system and institutions.

The issue of migration is going through one of its gravest crises ever with the current promotion of a policy of arresting and criminalising both the migrant population and those who defend their human rights. The situation for human rights advocates and journalists across the country has continued to worsen with at least 20 murders so far during the current government's period in office and a government protection mechanism that has serious deficiencies. Clearly, this administration's policies regarding this issue are insufficient, failing to promote an integral protection program to give coherence to all the efforts required in this matter.

Meanwhile, civil society's relationship with the president is not improving. Not only because of the continuous insults he has directed at them, but because of his general contempt for the technical arguments that put into question any of the decisions he has made which reflect a voluntarist desire to insist on achieving his goals. The attitude of the multiple and varied left social movements has been diverse, from those who have decided to join or collaborate in an optimistic vision of the possibilities of

change, to those –like the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, the National Indigenous Congress and the Indigenous Council of Government– that have already presented a clear position of resistance and of distancing themselves from the new government. There is also a wide range of intermediate positions among civil organisations that, in their work, combine at the same time a critical relationship and coming closer over different issues.

From the perspective of peace-building and conflict transformation, I am convinced that the change of government, with the transcendence of objectives such as those that have been outlined, opens up important opportunities for historic demands that are essential to achieving real peace. However, it will be necessary to promote a project with a comprehensive vision of this concept, which unifies in a consistent and achievable manner all its components towards a notion of peace-building that focuses on recovering social relations, transforming structures and including all those conditions that permit a healthy and plural coexistence with equity and justice, beyond the impetus of isolated initiatives which aim to re-establish a peacemaking order around a concentrated charismatic leadership and the good will of its collaborators. Having the ability to influence things, to take advantage of the possibilities opened by this context, is an important challenge that is open to those of us who, from different realms and fronts of struggle, continue to believe in and commit ourselves to building that attainable, just and lasting peace.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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1. Bellal, A. (2017). *The War Report* (No. BOOK). Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights (Geneva Academy).
2. Government of Mexico: information regarding incidence of crime; statistics, open data files, as well as relevant information in this regard.



3. See the Drug Policy website, [Política de Drogas](#).

4. [Plan Nacional de Paz y Seguridad 2018-2024](#) (National Peace and Security Plan 2018-2024).

5. Government of Mexico: information regarding [incidence of crime](#); statistics, open data files, as well as relevant information in this regard.

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[Photography](#) Andrés Manuel López Obrador rally

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