

Advocacy/ Posición pública de defensa y promoción

Transforming Barriers into Bridges in Mexico

The Transnational Center for Sustainable Peace

After a few years in decline, Mexico is experiencing a rise in armed violence, which now spreads beyond northern cities such as Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana to previously unaffected States in the central-south (Colima, Guerrero, Mexico City, Morelos), southeastern (Veracruz), and south (Chiapas, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo). Armed violence includes disappearances, internally displaced persons, extortion rackets, migrant kidnapping, and cartel and militia fighting.

Some missteps have been made in the last few years. The deployment of non-locals in some regions and the nomination of “Commissioners” (i.e. Michoacán) have opened the door to blind or twisted “law-enforcement.” The appointment of military to the top of police bodies (i.e. Nuevo León) might have cut corruption but it has neither helped build trust with the population, nor enhanced Human Rights. The “kingpin strategy”—President Peña Nieto claims to have neutralized 100 of his top 122 capos—has created power vacuums that have destabilized cartels and incited conflicts among and within them. And the initial impetus to help the youth in violent areas has vanished. Arguably, some municipalities needed more skills to administer efficiently funds for crime prevention, project monitoring indicators were absent, and short-term thinking did not acknowledge that results come after years of consistent implementation.

Good governance and inclusive politics practices have made progress possible. The inclusion of municipal and civil society leaders in policymaking, along with Federal and State authorities (i.e. Ciudad Juárez), as well as the coordinating role played by the Mexican Army

and the Navy in Tamaulipas and Guerrero, has reinforced accountability by identifying those in charge of security. Some municipalities have effectively implemented community policy models, which is a first step in the solution of two of the most critical issues in Mexico: the distrust between citizens and authorities, and impunity. Putting money into public bodies that have close ties to citizens has been shown to work. The Peña Nieto administration should continue working on these fronts in 2017. Due to retaliation fears, heavy bureaucratic procedures, and a lack of trust in public authorities, only 7% of crimes are reported. A low percentage of these go to trial, and barely 5% result in convictions. Overall, less than 1% of crimes are punished in Mexico.

Improving security indicators requires institutional capacity and inter-party compromise. The merging of 1,800 municipal bodies into 32 State forces (the “Unified Commands” initiative), which is currently being discussed, may help coordination, but power concentration is risky when checks and balances are deficient. Transforming Federal and State courts into an adversarial system—most public entities are not ready to implement the new structure—might be positive in the long term, but changes are fragile if Mexico does not improve the rate of 3.5 magistrates for every 100,000 inhabitants (the Latin American average, which is in itself low, is 8.8/100,000). For years, reports have underscored the need for police professionalization. Equipment is better today but, in 2014, 13.2% of the forces continued to fail proficiency tests. Well-trained officers, resilient to organized crime, need dignified wages. In Mexico, 78% of police officers earn less than

USD 520 a month, and there is no guarantee that salaries will be maintained at this level after local elections. Institutional capacity is sustainable only when there the civil service is operative. The next government can work in this track, starting with the improvement of the functioning of internal security bodies.

Inter-party compromise is also crucial. Today, the main federal political parties do not have a platform for internal security, which makes it virtually impossible to distinguish the differences between them. Although this is not necessarily an obstacle, it does provide an opportunity for political leaders to get mobilized. The next President can shape political pacts to convert short-term government military reactions into long-term State policies for peace. Success here requires thinking about prevention, management, and resolution. Armed violence is not inevitable; it is a human-instigated disaster. It is time to transform barriers into bridges for more transparency and accountability. Mexican authorities cannot afford to continue to ignore reports calling for comprehensive, long-term, strategic thinking in the security sector.



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