

“Corruption and Impunity as key contributing elements hindering the socioeconomic development and security panorama of Mexico”

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Introduction

The security panorama during the last 15 years in Mexico has been characterized by an increase in violence, a direct consequence of the “temporary” security strategy implemented by the government in order to confront the threat of drug-trafficking cartels during the “War against Drugs” (2006-present). The government’s strategy has consisted of a fully confrontational approach between the military and cartels, culminating in at least 220,000 deaths (SESNSP, 2019). As of 2020, since the start of the conflict, national homicides have increased at least 250% (INEGI, 2020). Now, the government’s “temporary” strategy seems to be permanent. The action plan has required a higher involvement of the army, increasing the deployment of military elements between 2001 and 2019 by at least 789% (Atuesta & Vela Barba, 2020). Hence, this conflict is the main security challenge Mexico is facing today. The militarization strategy and the lack of coordination between different levels of the government hamper the operationalization of security towards pacification and, ultimately, undermines development.

Although chronic violence from the “War against Drugs” plays a key role in hindering development, the state’s governance inefficiencies may be also contributing to the overall insecurity of the country even more comprehensively. Poor policy implementation is one of the reasons for the proliferation of impunity and corruption, which in turn are key factors causing the reproduction of poverty and inequality, impeding the socioeconomic and security development of Mexico and accounting for the prevalence of crime and violence.

Background of the Issues in Mexico

Corruption in Mexico is a historical legacy. Its roots lie in the colonialist past of the country. But corruption as we know it today, rose to prominence after the Mexican Revolution, and was further refined with the creation of the new political system during the post-revolutionary era (Bautista, 2017). During this era, politicians in power realized that due to a lack of regulations they

had the opportunity to enrich themselves and their allies by taking advantage of the newly created system.

Among the characteristics of the system that proliferated corruption were the lack of properly institutionalized checks and balances, the majority of the power being focused in the office of the President, partial rule of law, and repression (Bautista, 2017). This environment enabled a single party to rule the country for over 70 years, seemingly a paradigmatic case of Michels' "iron law of oligarchy" wherein the tendency in a flawed democratic system is to degenerate into rule by elites (Hyland, 1995, 247). With the same political party ruling the country, and the majority of the power being held by the President, a system based in loyalties and nepotism was created, resulting in the birth of a power elite that prioritized the preservation of the Presidency within their group. Partial rule of law and repression lead to impunity, and nepotism gave room to the rise of the business class, who, over the following decades, would promote and establish neoliberalism and amass fortunes.

Today, at least two thirds of Mexicans have very low trust in government institutions and police forces, considering them highly corrupt (GAN Integrity, 2020). Hence, citizens tend to underreport crimes, leading to impunity. The 2016 National Survey on Victimization and Perception of Public Security showed that only 10.5% of crimes were reported in 2015, and of those crimes, only 59.6% had preliminary inquiries, therefore, 93.7% of all the crimes in 2015 were either not reported or were under-investigated (INEGI, 2016). At least 33% of the surveyed citizens claimed reporting was a waste of time, 17% lacked trust in the authorities, and 50% considered they received bad treatment when reporting (Luengo-Cabrera & Butler, 2017). Of all the reported crimes in that year, in at least 45.9% of the cases nothing happened, or the issue was never solved, facilitating impunity (INEGI, 2016).

Systemic corruption has permeated the entire power pyramid. Today, nine out of ten Mexicans consider corruption a crime as serious a threat as drug-trafficking, and although insecurity remains their primary concern, citizens believe that corruption perpetrated by the private sector and politicians affects their safety directly (Ramírez Aguilar, 2020).

The Effects of Corruption and Impunity, as well as the Chronic Violence to the Mexican Society

The generalization of corruption is a multi-causal phenomenon; it is hard, therefore, to counteract (González Ramírez, 2020, p.7). The problem of corruption not only lies in the hands of the government, but also with the civilians. On many occasions civilians take advantage of the system, are coerced to fall in line with acts of corruption, or are afraid of resisting to it due to retaliations. Corruption, then, becomes a rational response from the civilian sector in their daily lives (González Ramírez, 2020).

In the case of governmental corruption, this involves a heavy network of complicity with the endorsement of individuals or groups with political or economic power, taking advantage of inefficiencies in the political system and thriving in impunity (Ramírez Aguilar et al., 2020). As a recent example, we have the Presidential term of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) characterized by many corruption scandals in which the ex-president himself took place. Even in these high-profile scandals, due to the common belief that reporting a crime or an act of corruption will lead to nothing, there has been little outcry, and citizens have grown tolerant of corruption cases, regarding this as part of their everyday life.

Current President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has proclaimed the eradication of corruption and violence as the main priorities of his presidency. Regarding corruption, he claimed he was going to clean the system from the top, but now, almost at the half the point of his term, we have yet to see results. On violence, the President's strategy of increasing the budget of the military and establishing the National Guard as a pacification response to the threat of organized crime is creating even more confusion inside the different institutions that compose the security framework of the country, creating inefficiencies and hampering the operationalization of security (Riva Palacio, 2020).

The threat of chronic violence, and the impact it has on everyday life, is the immediate cause of human insecurity and underdevelopment. The government must, therefore, establish security measures to guard the safety of individuals. The current policies of militarization of national security and confrontation with the cartels must be operationalized differently to guarantee security for citizens. Further down the line, once safety is achieved, a process of pacification and demilitarization of security will have to take place. To guarantee safety, however, the government must address other issues that further impact human security.

Despite the focus on freedom from fear of drug-trafficking cartels, insecurity in the country is also a result of underlying factors related more to a freedom from want approach to human

security: the prevalence of inequality and poverty. These factors contribute to the insecurity of individuals by not only strengthening social segmentation and disparities between citizens, but also by obstructing their access to opportunities that can grant them socioeconomic development. Even though the Mexican government has been working actively in addressing both inequality and poverty, poor handling of corruption and impunity has undermined these efforts.

Although Mexico has improved its legal corruption framework, as of 2020, it was still ranked 124 out of 180 countries in the Perception of Corruption Index (Transparency International, 2020) and, in cases of corruption, the impunity rate is about 99% (MCCI, 2019). The 2020 Global Impunity Index places the country 60 out of 69 countries measured (Le Clercq Ortega & Rodríguez Sánchez Lara, 2020). These high levels of impunity and corruption within the state's institutions have culminated in a lack of trust in the police forces and the military, to the point where local communities have established their own measures to pursue safety, such as the creation of armed civilian groups called *auto-defensas* (self-defense groups). The creation of these groups displays a fragmented security model where the state is not only losing control over the threat of organized crime but is also failing in its responsibility to protect citizens by ignoring the problems of impunity and corruption.

Both corruption and impunity are structural problems of the political system in Mexico; they hinder development and undermine security by decreasing the confidence of the public in the national institutions and indebting the country by taking resources from areas that need them. Ultimately, the state's institutions are weakened, creating a porous system through which corruption and impunity can flow. Mexico has refined a vicious cycle of insecurity from which it becomes ever harder to escape. Cartels create human insecurity, while governance failure undermines not only efficient security strategies to combat the cartels, but also perpetuates inequality and poverty, and reduces confidence in the agencies of government.

The main issue lies in the lack of fully enforced instruments guaranteeing the rule of law and provision of justice. As a result, corruption and impunity have weakened national security institutions and perpetuated distributive injustice. The huge disparity in incomes and its impact on poverty have led to an increase in the social polarization of society. This polarization creates unequal conditions in all aspects of the life of individuals, affecting their access to health services, education, and economic opportunities, fragmenting society, and creating patterns of insecurity wherein organized crime is seen as the only avenue for escape. Finally, in an environment where

organized crime is present, often violence and its reproduction obstruct development, making individuals vulnerable, pushing them towards unsafe conditions that can jeopardize their opportunities to obtain freedom from fear and want.

Solutions and Recommendations

To address the elements that hinder the socioeconomic and security development of Mexico, the government must establish a comprehensive approach whereby the aspects of freedom from want and freedom from fear are both addressed. To protect individuals from the immediate threat of chronic violence, the government must establish a homogeneous security system through better coordination and operationalization. This requires consistent enforcement of existing regulations. By guaranteeing proper rule of law and good governance, the state will address its flaws dealing with corruption and impunity, reducing the threat of organized crime and the complexities of insecurity.

By promoting freedom from want, the government would safeguard the human security of citizens, not only directly through providing better living conditions, but also indirectly as a disincentive to engage in criminal activity. Through the pursuit of freedom from fear, it would provide them a safe context in which to enjoy law-abiding and situation-improving opportunities. Both processes need to go hand in hand in order to guarantee sustainable development in the long-term.

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