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Drug cartels in electoral politics and policy decisions in Mexico

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Drug cartels in electoral politics and policy decisions in Mexico

As President López Obrador (AMLO) received Joe Biden and Justin Trudeau, and the inhabitants of Culiacán processed the violence that followed the capture of Ovidio Guzmán - son of the infamous drug lord Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán - on the 6th of January 2023, drug violence is, once again, at the heart of Mexican politics. This short report explores the interactions between criminal organisations and electoral politics in the context of the War on Drugs, and how this has affected AMLO's ratings, public image and legitimacy. The first two sections look at the general context of drug cartels' involvement in electoral politics. In particular, they explain the dynamic interaction between violence, corruption and drug-trafficking; disentangle electoral violence; and reflect on criminal governance and narcos' quest for legitimacy. The third section dwells on AMLO's presidential campaign, and sheds light on his initial strong anti-militarisation rhetoric and ambitious Development Plan. Lastly, we analyse the failures of the current administration's strategy for the War on Drugs.

I.   General context

Violence, corruption and the trafficking of illegal drugs - most of which are sold in the United States[1] - have been constant forces shaping Mexico's recent history. However, as explained by the game-theory economist Stephen Morris, the patterns and relationships between these three variables have varied along with political and economic events. Under the seventy-year long rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) - which lasted from 1929 to 2000 - corruption mostly involved those at the top of the political ladder and leaders of drug-trafficking organisations (DTOs). In this context of informal but stable and predictable control networks, high-ranking officers both extorted from and protected DTOs by allowing them to carry on their operations.

Notable cases include Michoacán's *priista* Governor Fausto Vallejo, whose son allegedly belonged to the cartels *La Familia Michoacana* and *Los Caballeros Templarios* [2], and who was accused by his opponent from the PAN, Luisa María Calderón, of receiving support of these cartels to win the 2012 elections. This seemed supported by the facts that a mayor campaigning for her had been assassinated the week before the ballot and that "numerous candidates [had] quit local races out of fear".[3] Another example is that of former governor of Tamaulipas Tomás Jesús Yarington (1999-2004), who was accused by the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and pleaded guilty of laundering money for the criminal organisations *Cartel*

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[1] León, Mariana. "México, líder en venta de droga en América", *El Financiero*, June 23, 2017. Link

[2] Olmos, José. "Vallejo: Un Gobernador Por El Narco Y Para El Narco." *Proceso*, June 27, 2014. Link

[3] Wilkinson Tracy, and Cecilia Sanchez. "Mexico President's Sister Apparently Defeated in Michoacan Vote." *Los Angeles Times*, November 14, 2011. Link.

del Golfo and *Los Zetas*.[4] His ill-gotten gains are estimated in millions of dollars and include a luxurious mansion in Texas,[5] and he was nº 6 in *Forbes'* 2013 list of most corrupt Mexican figures.[6]

Two high-profile cases are currently in the news. One of them is the ongoing trial in New York of Genaro García Luna, who was the Secretary of Public Security under the Calderón administration (2006-12)[7] and one of the key figures working with the DEA in his war on drugs. According to the *BBC*, this trial is seen as the sequel to the much-publicised trial of "El Chapo", as García Luna is accused of colluding with the Sinaloa Cartel "by not interfering with their operations, warning them of control operations, eliminating members of rival cartels, and placing other corrupt officials in positions of power".[8] Further, former adherents of the Sinaloa Cartel assure he received suitcases from them with MXN $5-6 million (around $267,970 USD - $321,617 USD) in cash in at least 2 occasions between 2006 and 2008.[9] Apart from that, the former Tamaulipas Governor, Francisco Cabeza de Vaca (2016-22), is currently wanted by the FGR - General Prosecutor of the Republic - and has an immigration alert preventing him from legally exiting the country.[10] Cabeza de Vaca, who is rumoured to be the PAN's candidate for the 2024 Presidential elections[11], is accused of illicit enrichment (two of his luxurious flats were bought through shell companies that have worked with the Sinaloa Cartel on different occasions),[12] money-laundering, and collaboration with criminal organisations, namely the Gulf Cartel and *Los Zetas.*[13]

For most of the 20th century, the centralisation of political power in the hands of the PRI meant that even if the government was highly corrupt, it was able to enforce some rules and procedures within and between cartels, so drug-trafficking and corruption were relatively peaceful processes.[14] Nevertheless, three events disrupted these dynamics and created the security panorama and corruption risks that we see today.

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[4] "Gobernadores ligados al narco". *La Silla Rota.* (June 2015) Link

[5] "¿Quién es Tomás Yarrington, exgobernador que se declaró culpable por lavado de dinero?", *24 Horas,* March 25th 2021, Link

[6] "Los 10 Mexicanos más corruptos de 2013." *Forbes*, December 22, 2013. Link.

[7] Stevenson, Mark. "US drug trial opens for Mexico ex-security head Genaro García Luna", *The San Diego Union Tribune*, January 17, 2023, Link

[8] "Quién es y de qué se acusa a Genaro García Luna, el más alto exfuncionario de México juzgado en Estados Unidos", *BBC News Mundo*, January 17, 2023 Link

[9] Vargas, Carlos. "Genaro García Luna, el "superpolicía" que enfrentará en juicio a la Corte de EU", *Expansión Política*, January 17, 2023. Link

[10] "Francisco Cabeza de Vaca, quien es buscado por la FGR, reapareció en una reunión con Javier Lozano" *Infobae*, December 19, 2022 Link

[11] "Cabeza de Vaca, otro de los posibles contendientes del PAN en 2024", *Expansión Política*, Nov 2022 Link

[12] El Universal and EFE. "Desafuero de Francisco Javier García Cabeza de Vaca: Quién es y de qué se le acusa", El Imparcial, April 30, 2021, Link

[13] Rámirez, C. "Desde lavado de dinero hasta vínculos con el narcotráfico: los gobernadores de Tamaulipas bajo la sospecha" Infobae, February 24, 2021 Link

[14] Morris, Stephen D. "Drug trafficking, corruption, and violence in Mexico: mapping the linkages", *Trends in organised crime*. 2013, vol.16 nº 2. p. 195-220. DOI 10.1007/s12117-013-9191-7

Firstly, increased US involvement and operations by its Drug Enforcement Agency in Colombia from the 1980s led to changes in the business model of Mexican DTOs, and an inflow of drugs to Mexico. Significantly, while it is hard to evaluate the exact inflow of illegal drugs over a certain period, measures of drug consumption in Mexico and the US, and the volume of drugs seized at the borders, suggest that their global trade has continued to increase in recent decades.[15] Further, deaths by synthetic opioids and heroin have soared in the US since 2009;[16] the number of people who have tried illegal drugs (from mariguana to cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine) in Mexico nearly doubled between 2002 and 2016, and the median age of first contact fell by three years in the same period.[17] In Guanajuato, "narcomenudeo" - drug retail - is currently causing havoc and it is estimated that in the state alone, 600,000 people are addicted, so the trade generates MXN $60 million a day (around $3,216,178 USD). As explained in an investigative reportage by *PopLab* and *Animal Politico,* children and teenagers are getting hooked up at an increasingly young age, which pushes many of them to start selling drugs themselves to be able to afford their daily dose, thereby compromising their health and education prospects, and exposing them to arrests and violence if they try to stop or steal.[18] All of this suggests that the militarised approach to the war on drugs failed to reduce consumption and smuggling.

Secondly, the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 raised the stakes of drug trafficking, encouraging DTOs to be more competitive. This translated into a fractionalisation of traditional cartels and a diversification of their activities, so they became transnational criminal groups engaged in extortion, kidnappings, illegal logging, fuel and water theft, prostitution, and human trafficking.[19] Some criminal organisations - ie. *Los Zetas, La Familia Michoacana* and *Los Caballeros Templarios* - have even overtaken a non-negligible share of the lucrative avocado trade, which generates MXN $2400 millions a year (around $120,863,664 USD) in revenues and whose national production is concentrated in their home state, Michoacán.[20] For local producers, this means paying an "extortion tax" on their exports and having to respect production quotas, so that in some regions of Latin America, people speak of "water and avocado cartels"[21]. Though it is hard to know for sure, authorities estimate that these activities bring in about USD $100 million to cartels every year.[22] Similarly, the *Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación* (hereafter CJNG) sought to decrease its reliance on drug trafficking for income by engaging in kidnapping and the trafficking of medical equipment.

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[15] "World Drug Report 2021" *United Nations,* 2021. Link

[16] Hedegaard, Holly, Miniño, Arialdi, and Warner, Margaret. "Drug Overdose Deaths in the United States, 1999–2019." *NCHS Data Brief No. 394,* Link.

[17] Comisión Nacional contra las Adicciones, Encuesta Nacional de Consumo de Drogas, Alcohol y Tabaco ENCODAT 2016-2017, pp. 47-65. https://encuestas.insp.mx

[18] Pizano, Carmen and Dominguez, Edith. "Adolescentes, el ejército de reserva para la venta de drogas en Guanajuato", *PopLab* y *Animal Político.* August 2022. Link

[19] Pérez Dávila, S. "Más allá del tráfico de drogas: la diversificación del crimen organizado" *Nexos*, November 2022. Link

[20] Pape, Eric. "Avocado Cartels: The Violent Reality Behind 'Green Gold'", *Inteligencia*, July 2022 Link

[21] Schlinger, Ted and Cechin-De la Rosa, Chris (Executive producers). "Season 2, Episode 1: Avocado Wars" from the *Rotten* documentary series (2019)

[22] "El lado oscuro del éxito comercial del aguacate: extorsiones, secuestros y sangrientas disputas entre los cárteles del narco", *Infobae*. September 30, 2019. Link

Thirdly, the top-down corruption model that marked the last decades of the PRI rule eroded with the political decentralisation of the 2000s. Indeed, the presidency of Vicente Fox - the first candidate from an opposition party to overtake the PRI in 2000 - was characterised by a devolution of political power to subnational governments, which gave state and even local agencies more responsibilities.[23] This trend was accompanied by a consolidation of state enforcement and "major administrative reforms including restructuring, mandated relocation of personnel, mass firings of corrupt officials, increased turnover and swifter assignment rotations".[24] As a result, corruption became a multiple-agent game, which now involved authorities from all levels of government rather than a handful of high-ranking officeholders. Thus, decentralisation aggravated both corruption (by forcing more points of contact between DTOs and state officials) and violence (because the returns or guarantees that DTOs could obtain from each bribe were fewer). Furthermore, the purge of corrupt policemen and paramilitary sometimes backfired because many sacked officers joined the ranks of the criminal organisations they colluded with, bringing with them their insider knowledge and military training. In fact, this is exactly how *Los Zetas* was formed.[25] Thus, the militarisation of the response to the war on drugs destabilised established cartels and permitted the creation of new ones. Today, the Mexican territory is disputed by 12 criminal groups, nearly half of which emerged after 2011, including the powerful CJNG and regional DTOs such as *Los Caballeros Templarios* or *Los Viagras*.[26] Competition and the increased safety risks therefore entailed that drug trafficking is much more violent and relies on broader and more sophisticated networks of corruption than at the beginning of the century.

Lastly, the major change in the interaction between corruption, violence and drug-trafficking organisations arose from the war on drugs and the deepening of US-Mexico security cooperation.[27] After winning the 2006 elections by a narrow margin, Mexican President Felipe Calderón attempted to invigorate his support base by expanding the plan Operativo México Seguro ordered by his predecessor. This implied deploying 45 000 soldiers in the streets of some of the most violent cities to overcome the inefficiency and widespread corruption of federal, state and local police forces. Less than a year later, it was supplemented by the Mérida Initiative: a bilateral security cooperation agreement envisaging an aid package of 1.4 billion USD to be delivered over the next three years, ¾ of which would go directly to the Mexican army and police forces.[28]

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[23] Dresser, Denise. Mexico's Dying Democracy: AMLO and the Toll of Authoritarian Populism. *Foreign Affairs,* Nov, 2022. 74, Link

[24] Morris, Stephen D. "Drug trafficking, corruption, and violence in Mexico: mapping the linkages", *Trends in organised crime*. 2013, vol.16 n° 2. p. 195-220. DOI 10.1007/s12117-013-9191-7

[25] Nájar, Alberto. "México: la historia secreta de cómo Los Zetas convirtieron a Coahuila en un infierno", *BBC News,* November 6, 2017. Link

[26] Arista, Lidia. "Mapa del crimen en México: 12 organizaciones se disputan el territorio", *Expansión Política*, June 18, 2022. Link

[27] Haugaard Lisa, Isacson Adam, and Johnson Jennifer. "Un relato aleccionador: Las lecciones del Plan Colombia para la política exterior estadounidense hacia México y otros países" (November 2011) https://es.scribd.com/document/72283057/Un-relato-aleccionador

[28] "The Merida Initiative", *U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Mexico*, September 7, 2021. Link

Under President Obama, the Merida Initiative was renewed with a slightly less militaristic approach, and the strategy became centred around four pillars:

- Disrupting the capacity of organised crime through the transfer of high-end equipment, shared intelligence, and joint law-enforcement operations
- Improving and sustaining the rule of law by encouraging reforms, adopting better practices to reduce impunity and establishing national training standards for Mexico's police, prosecutors and judges
- Creating a more efficient border structure by modernising Mexico's infrastructure
- 'Building strong and resilient communities' by "[funding] projects on crime prevention and human rights, while also providing technical assistance to NGOs".[29]

Since the inception of the Merida Initiative in 2006, Washington has spent nearly USD $3 billion in Mexico's war on drugs.[30] However, involving its northern neighbour in its security strategy had a number of implications and adverse institutional consequences for Mexico. This shouldn't have been a surprise given that historically, US interventions in Latin America have tended to increase violence in the region while serving US national interests.[31]

This is particularly well illustrated by the Plan Colombia, which was advertised in the US as a successful cooperation, but came at a huge human and institutional cost for Colombians. In particular, while it is true that the strategy significantly reduced violent crimes in the country over the 2000s, human rights advocates denounce numerous abuses by the military and emerging paramilitary groups, with the consequences of the drug war disproportionately falling on indigenous people and Afro-Colombian communities. Between 2000 and 2010, over 3 million people have been internally displaced by violence, an estimated 12,800 women have been raped (including at least 1,900 by military agents), and 32 Indigenous cultures are at risk of completely disappearing.[32] This is because, although there seems to be no selective targeting, many of the territories that have been fumigated with glyphosate to eliminate coca plantations - notably the Putumayo region in the Colombian Amazon, which concentrated 47% of the aerial fumigation in the early 2000s - are forests and conservation areas, which have traditionally been "inhabited by low-income, especially Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities".[33]

Another common criticism is that, while this sort of aid package imposes difficult political decisions on receiving governments and exacerbates violence for local populations, donor countries can disengage

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[29] Vorobviera Yulia and Berg, Ryan 'The Mérida Initiative may be dead, but restarting US-Mexico security cooperation will be crucial' LSE Latin America and Caribbean (January 2021)

[30] Ibid.

[31] There is a wide body of literature documenting US interventions and support for authoritarian regimes in Latin America throughout the 20th century, their geopolitical motivations and their effects. See for example
Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992 by W. LeoGrande (1998) or
Intimate Ties, Bitter Struggles: The United States and Latin America Since 1945 by A. McPherson (2006)

[32] Hauggaard et al., 2011

[33] Rincón-Ruiz, Alexander, and Giorgos Kallis. "Caught in the Middle, Colombia's War on Drugs and Its Effects on Forest and People." *Geoforum* 46 (2013): 60–78. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2012.12.009

themselves from any kind of political reform. In particular, the US has been fulminated against for failing to address the distribution and consumption of drugs by its citizens, money-laundering across its borders, and permissive gun laws supported by the lobbying of powerful corporations such as the NRA (National Rifle Association).

In short, the Mérida Initiative might have led to some spectacular arrests and seizing of cargos, but there is a broad consensus that Mexico's war on drugs has had adverse institutional consequences for the country *and* fallen short of its objective of reducing drug trafficking, corruption and violence, all of which have soared since 2006.

II. Recent Developments in the War on Drugs

A. DTOs enter electoral politics

The activities of DTOs in Mexico have evolved and resulted in a much more complicated security panorama. The violence that surrounds the drug trade has started to enter into civilian and political life lowering the probability of a near term resolution for this conflict. Since the beginning of the Mexican war on drugs in 2007, DTOs have incorporated violence against politicians and civil servants into their strategies. In this context, we understand "electoral violence" as the use of force or the threat thereof by DTOs with the goal of influencing local democratic processes, consolidating their authority in a given territory or punishing non-cooperative public officials.
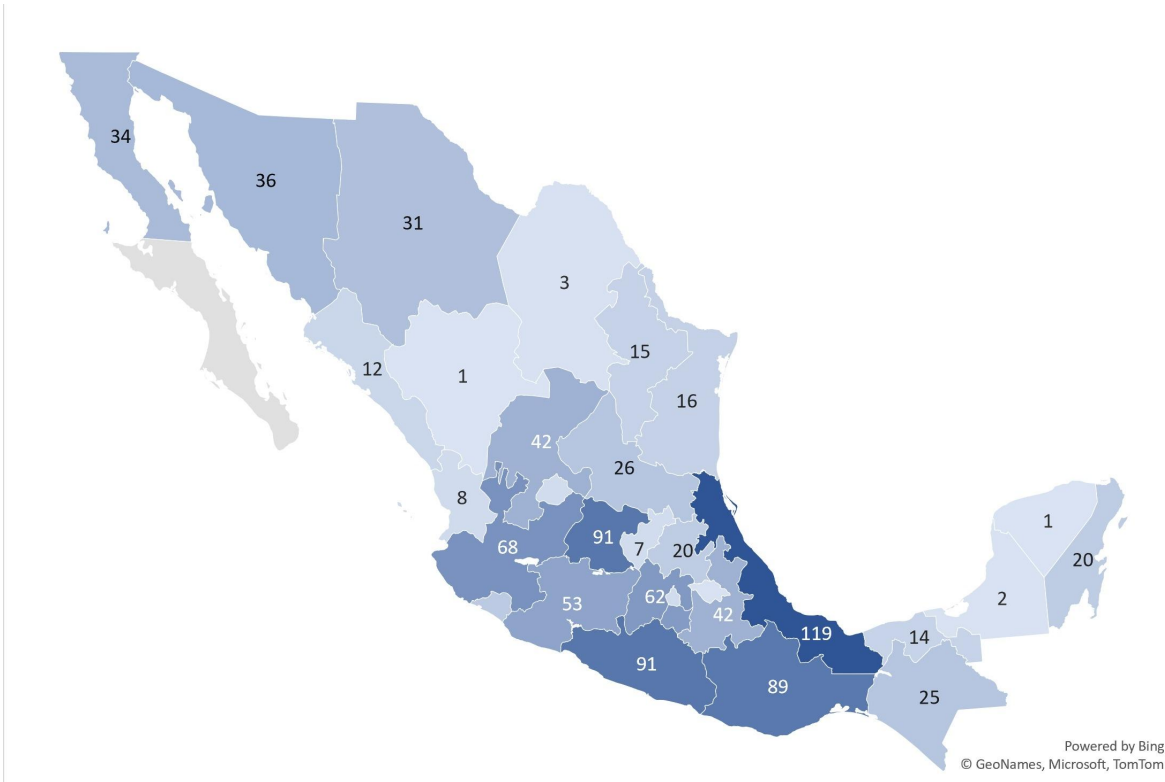
Graph 1[34]: Instances of DTO-related Electoral Violence by State (2017 - 2022)

We will now present the extent of this issue and the dynamics at play in its appearance. On the one hand, we have seen the increasing presence and use of force of DTOs in local and state level political affairs. Namely, the involvement of DTOs in electoral processes in Mexico has turned local politics into a deadly endeavour: political violence sponsored and carried out by many DTOs has characterised various electoral races at the local and state level. This includes the assassination of an aspiring governor for the state of Jalisco[35] by alleged members of CJNG in October 2022 in a restaurant in Guadalajara and an acting mayor for the state of Chiapas outside of his home.[36] While reasons behind these attacks remain unknown, the involvement of DTOs is clear. Furthermore, these developments are not new in the country: in 2018, for example, 101 politicians and civil servants were murdered.[37] Furthermore, in the last electoral cycle - the 2021 legislative elections - there were 102 instances of murder and more than 1000 accounts of violence against politicians and civil servants in the process.[38] It is not obvious if these

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[34] *Source:* Votar entre balas: https://votar-entre-balas.datacivica.org/#profiles

[35] "Los 36 minutos que el narco necesitó para asesinar a Salvador Llamas, aspirante de Morena al Gobierno de Jalisco", *El País*, October 24, 2022. Link

[36] "Rubén de Jesús Valdéz Díaz, presidente municipal de Teopisca, Chiapas, es asesinado", *El Economista,* June 6, 2022, Link

[37] Salgado, Agustín. "Violencia y elecciones: en 9 meses, 101 políticos y candidatos fueron asesinados en México", *Animal Político*, June 29, 2018, Link

[38] "Elecciones 2021: asesinaron a 102 políticos y se registraron 1,066 agresiones", *Animal Político*, June 2021 Link

attacks are a form of intimidation to other candidates and civil servants, reprisal for betrayal to a once complicit individual or an effort to punish an individual who did not want to collaborate with a DTO.

This phenomenon, however, has reached an all time high in 2022. According to DataCívica, a national non governmental organisation, between 2018 and 2022 there have been a total of 982 instances of attacks, assassination attempts and threats of violence against individuals associated with the government or politics in general or against buildings associated with political parties and the state[39]. As shown in Graph 1, the state of Veracruz is the most affected with 119 instances of DTO-related electoral violence followed by Guanajuato, Guerrero and Michoacán. It is noteworthy that almost half of all instances between 2017 and 2022 took place during 2022, and that, while some states (Yucatán, Durango, Campeche) have barely been affected, *all* states have had at least one instance of drug-related electoral violence in the past five years. Graph 2 shows that between 2017 and 2022, the most common form of DTO-related electoral violence was assassination representing over half of all instances.
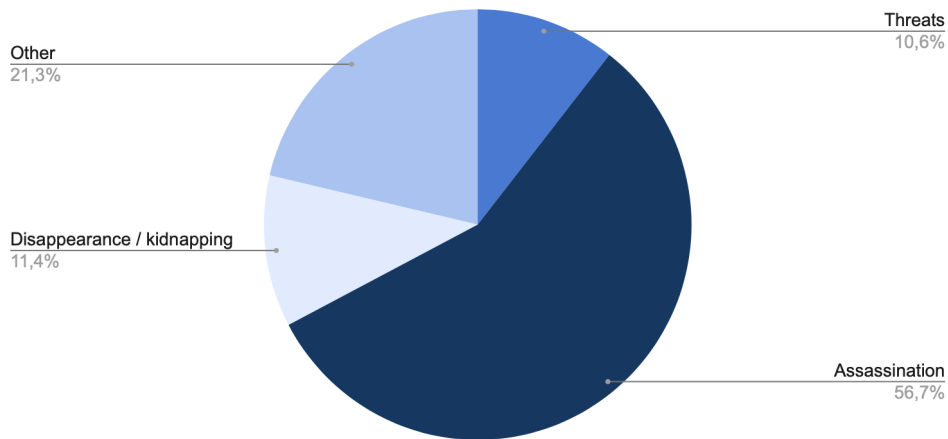
Graph 2[40]: Incidence of Each Type of Electoral Violence (2017 - 2022)

International observers - such as the Council on Foreign Relations[41] and the National Electoral Institute[42] - have expressed their concern for the integrity of Mexican democracy in light of these events. This violence has affected all branches of the Mexican government with the majority of the victims being civil servants, as illustrated by Graph 3. Other groups that have been notably targeted by DTOs with threats and armed attacks are political candidates and the family members of politically involved individuals. These instances of violence or threats thereof have taken place almost exclusively at the municipal level where DTOs can exert the most control on political processes as seen in graph 4.

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[39] See: https://votar-entre-balas.datacivica.org/#profiles

[40] Source*:* Votar entre balas: https://votar-entre-balas.datacivica.org/#profiles

[41] O'Neil, Shannon. "Mexico's Democracy Is Crumbling Under AMLO", *Council on Foreign Relations,* March 10, 2022, Link

[42] "Comunicado de prensa: Condena INE todo tipo de violencia en el proceso electoral", *Instituto Nacional Electoral,* May 26, 2021, Link
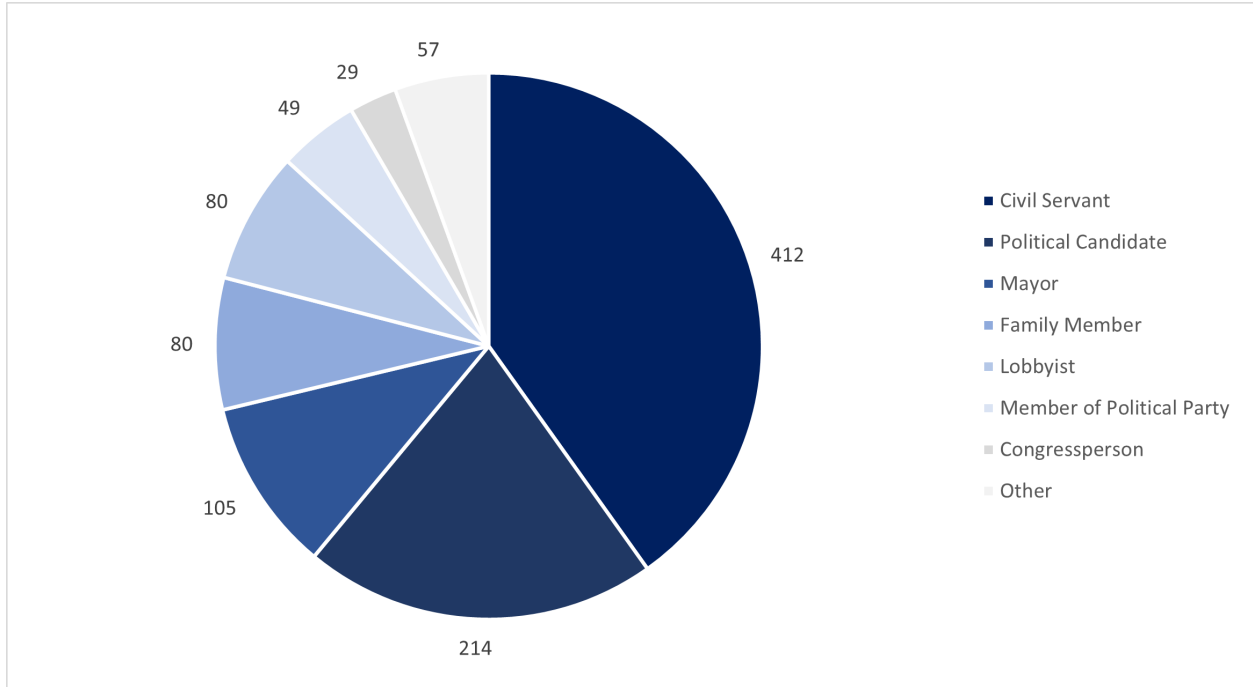
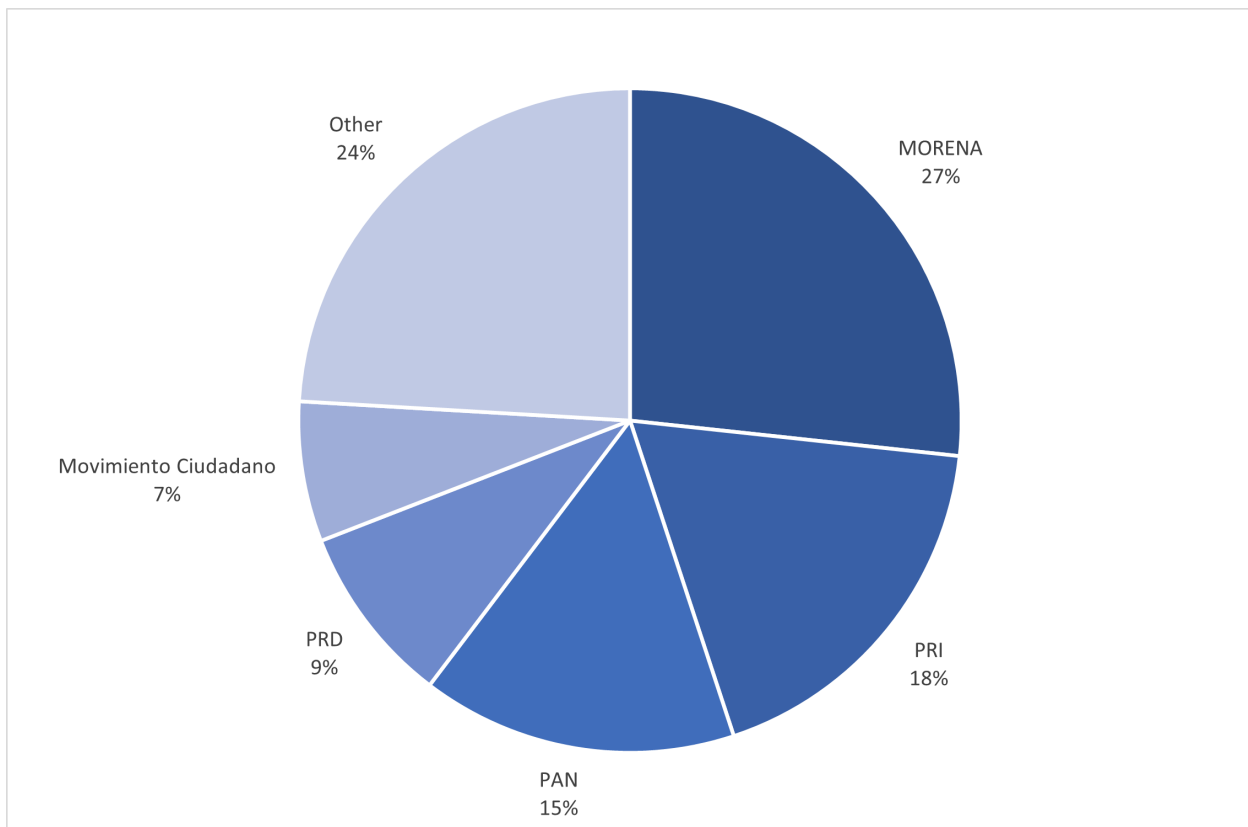**Graph 3[43]: Victims of DTO-related Electoral Violence (2017 - 2022)**

Graph 4[44]: Level of Governance of the Victims of DTO-related Electoral Violence (2017 - 2022)

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[43] Source: Votar entre balas: https://votar-entre-balas.datacivica.org/#profiles
[44] *Source:* Votar entre balas: https://votar-entre-balas.datacivica.org/#profiles

Nonetheless, instances of DTO-related electoral violence don't seem to have targeted a specific party or political movement. While more than a quarter of all applicable cases are affiliated with Morena, the incumbent party, this can be explained by the overwhelming presence this party has achieved after the 2018 presidential election. Graph 5 summarises the party affiliations of the victims. All major parties have experienced this violence: from the incumbent to the opposition coalition, which would seem to suggest that DTO-related violence is more motivated by the actions of specific politicians and their willingness or refusal to cooperate, than with their party-affiliation. We can also see that 24% of all victims belonged to smaller parties and local political organisations.

Graph 5[45]: Party Affiliation of Victims of DTO-related Electoral Violence (2017 - 2022)

This phenomenon shows the increasing and explicit involvement of DTOs in politics and the state. As competition between these organisations becomes increasingly fierce due to the aforementioned process of decentralisation, it becomes imperative for them to capture the State apparatus in the territory in which they operate (see table below for a brief overview of the fault lines of intercartel conflicts). Research carried out by Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley from the Center for Economic Research and Teaching (CIDE) suggests that municipal electoral cycles in Mexico are indeed connected to

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[45] *Source:* Votar entre balas: https://votar-entre-balas.datacivica.org/#profiles

an uptick in violence[46] because DTOs are likely seeking to influence the outcomes of the races.[47] The clearest example of this can be seen in the use of extortion by organised crime groups. In the state of Guerrero, for instance, a candidate for mayor stepped out of the 2021 race after receiving death threats[48]. Cases where the connection between the acts of violence and DTOs can be seen directly are rare due to impunity and the nature of the issue.

Another troubling dimension of these instances of violences is the fact that they tend to occur in States where CJNG has a strong presence: in 8 out of the top 10 states with the most instances of DTO-related electoral violence CJNG was either the dominant organisation or was involved in an intercartel conflict. For example around 11% of all reported instances of violence occurred in the state of Veracruz where the CJNG is competing with "Los Zetas".[49] Indeed, this research has also shown that the appearance of electorally motivated violence carried out by DTOs is geographically clustered.[50] That is to say, if electoral violence appears in a given municipality, adjacent territories are more likely to experience it in the future.

According to Trejo and Ley's research, there are three historic regions where DTO-related electoral violence is most prevalent: northwestern states such as Baja California, Chihuahua, Durango and Sinaloa; northeastern states such as Nuevo León and Tamaulipas; and the southwestern pacific coast in states such as Guerrero and Michoacán. This can be partially explained by the location of these regions as strategic where control is crucial for the drug trade and other adjacent activities: the states in northern Mexico, for example, are crucial territories for DTOs due to their proximity to the border with the United States. With data from government sources we aggregated all instances of homicide, kidnapping, extortion, human trafficking and drug dealing reported to the Mexican government and adjusted it to the population density of each state. Graph 6 shows how the states of Coahuila, Chihuahua, Baja California and Campeche lead in terms of DTO-related criminal violence.

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[46] Trejo, Guillermo, and Sandra Ley. "High-Profile Criminal Violence: Why Drug Cartels Murder Government Officials and Party Candidates in Mexico." *British Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 1 (2021): 203–29. doi:10.1017/S0007123418000637

[47] For more concrete examples, see: Ponce, A.F., López Velarde, R.V. & Santamaría, J.S. "Do local elections increase violence? Electoral cycles and organised crime in Mexico." *Trends Organised Crime* 25, 37–57 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-019-09373-8

[48] "Agresiones no cesan: balean el domicilio de candidato y amenazan a candidata", Expansión Política. May 29th 2021. Link

[49] *Source:* Votar entre balas: https://votar-entre-balas.datacivica.org/#profiles

[50] Trejo, Guillermo & Ley, Sandra, "High Profile Criminal Violence: Why Drug Cartels Murder Government Officials and Party Candidates in Mexico", British Journal of Political Science. 2019 Link
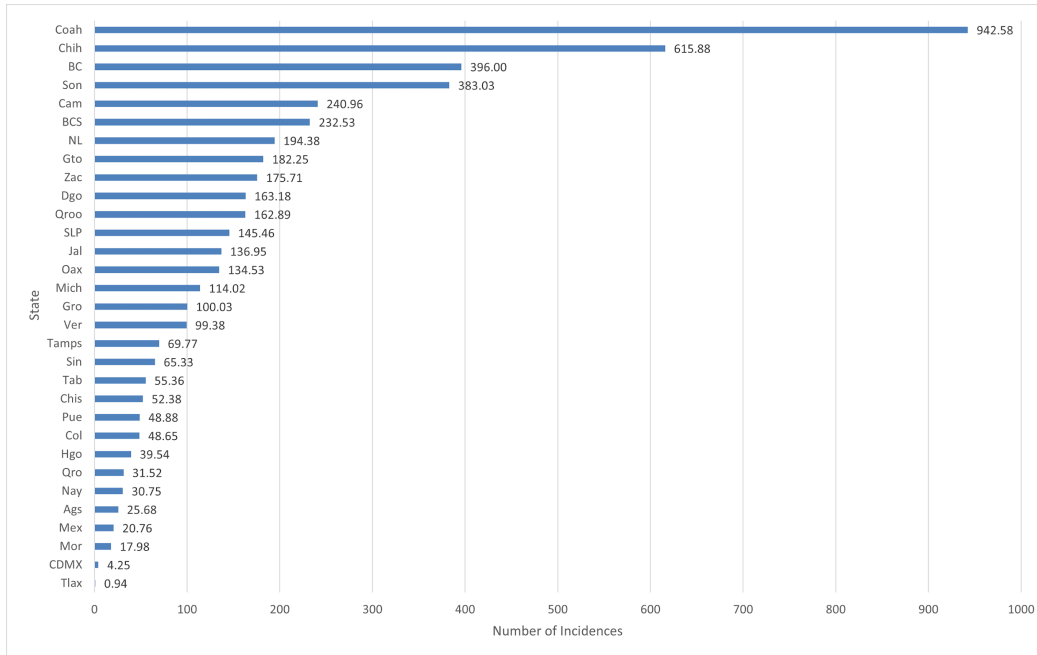
Graph 6: Incidence of DTO-related Criminal Violence* by State Adjusted for Population Density** (2022)

*DTO related violent crime includes homicide, kidnapping, extortion, human trafficking and drug dealing.

** Number of inhabitants of square kilometres.

Source: Fuente oficial. "Incidencia delictiva del Fuero Común", *Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública,* Gobierno de México, January 20, 2023. Link

Not only is this phenomenon compromising the integrity of government at the local level, it also puts the viability of Mexican democracy in jeopardy. This climate of terror is tipping the scales of elections and making it harder for citizens to exercise their right to vote and be voted in.

What can explain this development? It could be argued that this violent involvement of DTOs in politics is a result of the structure of the market they operate in. According to the Drug Policy Programme at the CIDE, due to the policies carried out by the Mexican government in coordination with the United States, the narcotics market has fragmented. Indeed, one of the government's main policies regarding DTOs was decapitation: a focus on high profile members of these organisations seeking newsworthy arrests.[51] The result: internal disputes linked to succession fights when leaders fell, and inter-organisational conflicts due to the fact that this strategy destabilised traditional cartels, but the state was unable to fill the newly-created power vacuum. Both types of conflict enabled the emergence or consolidation of new DTOs, who were now in a position to challenge older ones and claim previously occupied territory For example, the Tijuana Cartel led by Arellano Felix has fragmented into various organisations, including the

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[51] Atuesta, Laura and Ponce, Aldo. "Cómo las intervenciones de las fuerzas públicas de seguridad alteran la violencia. Evidencia del caso mexicano", *Programa de Política de Drogas del CIDE*, 2016. Link

Guadalajara and Sinaloa Cartels, and the now infamous CJNG. According to Fabián R. Gómez, a former Mexican intelligence officer: "the big Mexican cartels that we once knew have ceased to exist. Today they are organisations and criminal groups that are integrated temporarily around common but constantly shifting interests."[52] As seen previously, the increased competition and diversification of DTO's activities results from the combined effect of:

- the economic liberalisation of the 1990s (which raised the stakes of drug trafficking and other illicit activities by facilitating the access to the US market);
- the political decentralisation of the 2000s (which diffused corruption and intimidation by criminal organisations from the top, to all levels of the political ladder);
- and the militarisation of the war on drugs (which exacerbated inter- and intra-cartel violence).

Graph 7 and Table 1 summarise the current conflicts and territorial strongholds that DTOs were engaged in during 2021.
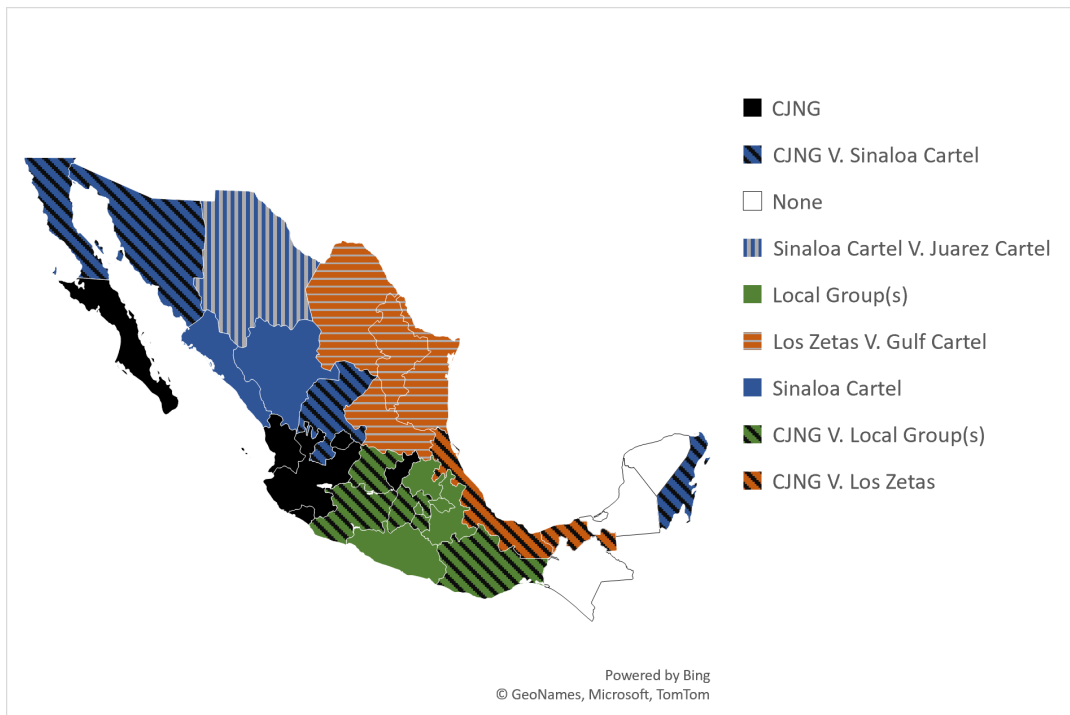
Graph 7: DTO Territories and Conflicts (2021)

Source: Congressional Research Service, "Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations" pp.10

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[52] Gómez, Fabián. "Alianzas y evolución: grupos delictivos en México en 2020", *Nexos*, July 13, 2020. Link

Table 1: Intercartel conflicts by state in Mexico (2021).

Conflict	Territories
CJNG V. Sinaloa Cartel	Zacatecas, Sonora, Baja California
CJNG V. "Los Zetas"	Tabasco, Veracruz
Sinaloa Cartel V. Juarez Cartel	Chihuahua
"Los Zetas" V. Gulf Cartel	Coahuila, Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, San Luis Potosí
CJNG V. Local groups	Oaxaca, Morelos, Michoacán, State of Mexico
Source: *Congressional Research Service,* "Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organisations". PP.10	

These developments are responsible for electoral violence because they have opened up new territories for illicit activity. Municipalities once irrelevant to the drug trade are now contested territories because they are attractive due to the other sources of income for DTOs (such as Michoacán, which has the ideal climate for avocado production). In sum, the entrance of DTOs into the electoral process does not represent solely an intention to capture the state apparatus. These organisations seem to be engaging in a form of territorial consolidation via the influence of electoral processes. That is to say, by carrying out these attacks and eventually determining who gets into power through intimidation, DTOs consolidate their authority in the municipalities they operate in and thus more stable sources of income.

B. **Criminal governance: DTOs and "social responsibility"**

Another troubling development resulting from the fragmentation of the drug trade in Mexico due to the so-called war on drugs is an uptick in violence between DTOs and the government, between the organisations themselves and, increasingly, between these organisations and the civilian population. The violence exercised by DTOs is not random in frequency nor timing. Perhaps the most recent and spectacular instance of this was the clash between the Mexican armed forces and members of the DTO known as "The Chapitos" in the capital city of the State of Sinaloa. After the authorities seized Ovidio Guzmán, the son of Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, members of his organisation took to the streets to wreak havoc with the aim of coercing the government into releasing him.[53] This event echoes a previous

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[53] Dávila, Patricia. "El gobierno recapturó a Ovidio… y el narco volvió a tomar Culiacán", *Proceso*, January 7, 2023. Link

attempt to capture him, dating from October 2019.[54] On that occasion, the cartel's backlash against civilians was so violent, that federal authorities released Ovidio Guzmán, thereby marking a defeat that was humiliating for the AMLO administration[55] and deadly for the local population. This time, the operation succeeded in the capture, but once again, at a high human and economic cost for the inhabitants of Sinaloa.[56] Both of these events in Culiacán - popularly referred to as "Culiacanazos" - illustrate how these organisations are strategic in their employment of force and terror. Having this in mind: what dynamics fuel the proliferation of violence in Mexico in recent years?

From a political economy standpoint, violence can be interpreted as a cost that DTOs must incur. Thus, it is in the interest of these organisations to minimise their use of force and the terror it generates. In other words, the violence we do see is the minimum given an equilibrium in the interaction between DTOs and the state. Here, context is key. According to a study by political scientist Dr. Angélica Durán-Martinez, the determinants of the use of violence by criminal organisations are the structure of the market they operate in and the actions of the state. What we see in Mexico is a context of highly frequent and highly visible violence. According to the data on the UN Office on Drugs and Crime's International Homicide Statistics database, Mexico has a homicide rate of 28 victims per 100 000 people. Furthermore, this violence is highly visible to the population.[57] A poll by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography found that 64% of the adult population considered that living in their city was dangerous.[58]

This scenario can be due to the interplay of two factors. First, high competition among DTOs. Because of the illegal nature of their revenue, violence is the only resource to settle disputes and navigate the drug trade (and other adjacent illegal activities). Perhaps the most notorious example of competition through violence is the *Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación*. This organisation has aggressively expanded into many states since its appearance notably worsening significantly the security situation in Guanajuato.[59] However this does not explain the visibility of the violence. Here we can see the second factor: the absence of the State. Indeed, if the authorities are unable to impose the rule of law, violence becomes more visible. This is because in a high competition scenario with the absence of the State, the visibility of violence becomes a viable intimidation tactic. That is to say, it sends a message to rival DTOs and the population.

Violence, however, is not the only tool in the DTOs' arsenal. International news sources have reported that DTOs engage in "public outreach" activities such as handing out boxes of food, hygiene products and

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[54] Mendez, Ollinka. "Así fue el "Culiacanazo", el primer intento de capturar a Ovidio Guzmán en 2019", *El Universal*, January 5, 2023. Link

[55] Ordáz Díaz, Arturo. "'Culiacanazo', la batalla que ganó el crimen organizado a las fuerzas federales de AMLO", *Forbes Mexico*, October 17, 2020. Link

[56] "Jueves negro en Sinaloa: día de bloqueos, balaceras, robos y muertes de militares y policías", *Animal Político*, January 13, 2023. Link

[57] See "Intentional homicides (per 100,000 people)" from the World Bank database. Link

[58] "Encuesta Nacional de Seguridad pública urbana, tercer trimestre de 2022", *INEGI*, October 18, 2022. Link

[59] Lopez, Oscar, and Abi-Habib, Maria. "'Absolute Warfare': Cartels Terrorise Mexico as Security Forces Fall Short", *New York Times.* August 31, 2022. Link

other goods[60]. The reality is that in the most marginalised communities in Mexico, DTOs are part of the immediate community of many citizens. One clear example of this is the aforementioned participation of various DTOs in the avocado trade. According to the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL): In 2018, 85.7% of the inhabitants of the state of Michoacán found itself experiencing some form of poverty[61]. In recent incidents, these handouts included branding by the involved DTO and a substantial media campaign.

Graph 6 presents which territories were contested or monopolised by the various DTOs in Mexico in 2021. As discussed earlier, it appears that CJNG is the most aggressive and notable organisation in the country. Furthermore, a lion's share of Mexico's most violent regions are currently involved in an intercartel conflict. The proposed map does not encapsulate the totality of conflicts in the country: it notably omits the activities of smaller local organisations that are also engaging in turf wars. These divisions, however, could help us understand where and why DTOs engage in these "public outreach" stunts. While highly contested areas of the country such as Michoacán and Guerrero are caught in the crossfire of the internal and external conflicts of DTOs, in territories where these organisations enjoy a monopoly, their strategy changes.

When all of their local resources are not invested in combating the government or a rival DTO, they are instead spent in cultivating an image of social responsibility[62]. This is because DTOs depend to a certain extent on the acquiescence of the population around them. The objective is twofold. On the one hand, DTOs seek to provide short-term incentives for the population in their stronghold territories to acquiesce to their activities without using force or intimidation. They achieve this by filling in for the incapacity of the Mexican state, for example, by distributing aid to marginalised communities during the Covid19 pandemic.[63] AMLO has even asked citizens through a morning conference that they reject these handouts after alleged members of the *Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación* handed out toys in the outskirts of Guadalajara.[64] On the other hand, these organisations want to project an image of social responsibility through these handouts, and a capacity for governance that undermines the credibility of the State. Ultimately, they want to appear as the legitimate authority in the territory they control.

As competition becomes fiercer and violence escalates on a national level one can expect DTOs in Mexico to intensify and visibilise these outreach stunts as a public relations strategy although only in those communities where they have monopoly control. The array of methods employed by criminal organisations to keep the population under control - which ranges from extreme forms of violence to

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[60] For example, during the Covid19 pandemic: Ferri, Pablo. "Coronavirus en México: El narco mexicano aprovecha el virus para exhibir su poder ante las cámaras", *El País*, April 17, 2020. Link
[61] National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy, "Informe de Pobreza y Evaluación 2020. Michoacán" CONEVAL 2022.
[62] Magaloni, Beatriz *et al*, "Living in fear. The Dynamics of Extortion in Mexico's Drug War", Comparative Political Studies. 2019.
[63] Jorgic, Drazen. "El Chapo's daughter, Mexican cartels hand out coronavirus aid", *Reuters*, April 17, 2020. Link
[64] "Mexico's president asks residents to reject drug gang gifts", *AP News,* December 28, 2022. Link

protection and delivery of public services - is brilliantly displayed in the award-winning movie *Noche de Fuego* (2021) by Tatiana Huezo.

III.   AMLO's presidential campaign: a strong anti-militarisation rhetoric and an ambitious Development Plan

With 53% of votes, AMLO's electoral victory in July 2018 was recognised around the world as an advancement for democracy in Mexico, due to the impressive turnout, the momentous victory of the left,[65] and the fact that elections were largely free and fair. The *BBC* for example, called it "an historical election", pointing at the progressiveness of the incumbent's program while also highlighting the challenges he would be confronted with, and the inconsistencies of his pro-poor discourse with some of the actions he took when he was Mayor of Mexico City.[66] Similarly, the week before the election, *Vox* wrote that "Mexican voters believe that if anyone can bring about [much needed] changes, López Obrador is the best bet. [...] In other words, the results of Mexico's election on Sunday could mean massive changes for the country."[67] On the whole, international newspapers emphasised the discontent of Mexican voters with the traditional ruling class and their hope that AMLO's left-wing coalition would address rampant inequalities, widespread corruption and drug violence. Following the results, a number of world leaders congratulated López Obrador and reiterated their willingness to work with him: Trump (US), Trudeau (Canada), Macron (France), Putin (Russia), and other leftist Latin American leaders such as Bolivia's Morales and Venezuela's Maduro. In particular, his National Development Plan was a cause for optimism,[68] as it foresaw the adoption of inclusive social and economic policies which, among other things, should have reduced the appeal of drug-trafficking. Indeed, a number of academics[69] have pointed out that one of the major limits of the drug war strategy is that it focuses so much weight on the military that it neglects other important aspects, notably health-related strategies such as prevention campaigns and rehabilitation programs. International organisations and political analysts have also stressed out the need for a multidimensional approach that incorporates other development issues, from poverty, to generalised violence, faulty judicial systems and a deficient provision of social services that drug cartels are happy to provide to assert their legitimacy. AMLO's campaign rhetoric echoed these arguments, while also opposing the militarisation of social phenomena like drug consumption or migration, and vouching to maintain a critical distance to the US so as to avoid a loss of national sovereignty.

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[65] "Mexique : large victoire du candidat de gauche « AMLO » à la présidentielle", *Le Monde*, July 2, 2018. Link
[66] Rojas, Ana Gabriela. "Elecciones presidenciales de México 2018: AMLO y el giro a la izquierda sometido a votación en una elección histórica", *BBC News.* July 2, 2018 Link
[67] Ngo, Madeleine. "The 2018 Mexican election, explained", *Vox*. July 1, 2018. Link
[68] Del Castillo, Graciana. "AMLO's National Plan for Mexico is a cause for optimism", *LSE Latin America and Caribbean* blog. July 5, 2018. Link
[69] See for example the aforementioned Hauggaard et al., 2011; Dresser, 2022; or Ortíz Millán, Gustavo. 'Una guerra inútil y contraproducente: Las consecuencias de la guerra contra las drogas'. *Instituto de Investigaciones Filosóficas*, UNAM (2010) Link

In short, AMLO's shift of emphasis from security concerns towards development, social inclusion, more transparent and participative democratic processes, and demilitarisation, appeared as a rational and promising strategy to tackle the violence and corruption of Mexico's drug war. Despite these encouraging developments, AMLO's presidency has not gone in the direction that many of his supporters expected.

A first contested action was his creation of the National Guard, a body that was supposed to be a civilian reinforcement to the army in the war on drugs, but integrated military members from the beginning and went under control of the SEDENA (National Defense Secretariat) in 2022. In recent years, the deployment of the National Guard in various regions has been interpreted as signalling Mexico's militarisation,[70] and a reinforcement of surveillance resulting from the propagation of states of exception.[71] Furthermore, the organism has been heavily criticised for human right abuses and for getting involved in an ever-increasing number of domains[72]. In the words of Dresser: "the armed forces have taken on unparalleled political and economic roles. The military is now operating outside civilian control, in open defiance of the Mexican constitution, which states that the military cannot be in charge of public security. As a result of presidential decrees, the military has become omnipresent: building airports, running the country's ports, controlling customs, distributing money to the poor, implementing social programs, and detaining immigrants. [...] The armed forces have been allocated larger and larger amounts of federal money, and many projects under their control have been reclassified as "matters of public security"."[73]

Nevertheless, the current administration has also failed to reduce the general climate of violence. Between 2006 and 2021, official sources estimate that over 350 000 people were killed, and another 72 000 disappeared due to Mexico's war on drugs.[74] Further, AMLO's presidency has become the most violent in the country's history,[75] with violent crime rates (including homicides and various forms of gender-based violence, including femicides [76]) doubling in the first 30 months compared to those of the Calderón and the Peña Nieto administrations.[77] Drug violence has therefore extended to every corner of

[70] Aguilar, Rubén. "El Ejército y la creación de la Guardia Nacional". *Animal Político*. January 13, 2023. Link

[71] Arteaga Botello, Nelson. "The Merida Initiative: Security-Surveillance Harmonization in Latin America." *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies / Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y Del Caribe*, no. 87 (2009): 103–10. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25676378

[72] "Existen 250 investigaciones contra elementos de la Guardia Nacional por abusos", *La Verdad*. July 2022. Link

[73] Dresser, Denise. Mexico's Dying Democracy: AMLO and the Toll of Authoritarian Populism. *Foreign Affairs,* Nov, 2022. 74, Link

[74] Arredondo, Iñigo and Pardo Veiras, José Luis. "México: una guerra inventada y 350,000 muertos", *The Washington Post.* June 14, 2021. Link

[75] Leyva, Thalía. "AMLO vs Calderón: los datos que retratan la violencia en sus sexenios", *Político MX.* June 23, 2022. Link

[76] Arista, Lidia. "En el gobierno de AMLO, los tres años más violentos para las mujeres", *Expansión Política*. January 26, 2022. Link

[77] Vela, David Saúl. "En sexenio de AMLO se han cometido el doble de homicidios que con Calderón", *El Financiero*. July 2, 2022. Link

political life, and shatters the lives of civilians, either covertly (ie. through disappearances or hidden threats) and in plain daylight, through dramatic events like the *Culiacanazos.*

Nowadays, it seems like the current administration has repeated the mistakes of previous ones, namely, to focus on arresting kingpins and high-profile figures while neglecting the middle operational layers of the drug trade.[78] This strategy is problematic because it doesn't necessarily weaken cartels (despite the arrest of Ovidio Guzmán, the Sinaloa Cartel is still up and running) and creates significant externalities. Indeed, this tactic was initially deployed under the Calderón administration, and on that occasion, it led to an intensification of intra-cartel violence, as power struggles emerged to decide who will replace arrested leaders. It also weakened the most powerful organisations of the time, but since the state was unable to fill the power vacuums it had created, this just allowed smaller criminal organisations to challenge older ones to get control of the disputed zones, fueling inter-cartel conflicts. In the end, the escalation of violence within and between criminal organisations affected the lives of all the civilians caught in the crossfire. Regarding the aforementioned argument that ending the war on drugs requires going beyond militarised responses and adopting multidimensional policies, AMLO's presidency has also fallen short of his campaign pledges. Indeed, for all his left-wing rhetoric, the current administration has not only failed to demilitarise the conflict (quite the contrary), it has also been inefficient at addressing underlying issues. For example, a 2022 study by the think-tank *Ethos* shows that many of the current government's "pro-poor" social programs are not properly targeted, so they don't actually reach the most vulnerable segments of the population.[79] Furthermore, AMLO dismantled the *Progresa/Oportunidades* conditional cash transfer program that lifted millions of people out of extreme poverty[80] and was one of the few, if not the only, Mexican program to have been evaluated as effective by international observers.[81] His administration has also gone under fire for reducing funding for education,[82] shelters for domestic abuse survivors,[83] transparency institutions[84] overseeing the independence of electoral processes, etc… All this to say that the strategy of departing from a militarised take on the war on drugs has actually still not been tried. Notwithstanding, AMLO's approval rating remains favourable: as of December 2022, 61% of Mexicans still had a positive view of his administration.[85]

[78] Vorobviera and Berg, 2021

[79] Gutierrez, Julieta and Genis, Nestor. "¿Primero los pobres? Análisis de la distribución geográfica de los programas sociales federales en los municipios más y menos pobres de México", *Ethos*. November 22, 2022. Link

[80] Michael P. Todaro & Stephen C. Smith (2015), *Economic Development, Twelfth Edition*, Addison-Wesley

[81] Stokes, Susan, et al. 2013. "Ch. 1 - Between clients and citizens: puzzles and concepts in the study of distributive politics" in B*rokers, Voters and Clientelism. The Puzzle of Distributive Politics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[82] Cruz Vargas, Juan Carlos. "Presupuesto 2023: Las políticas de AMLO le restan dinero a salud y educación", *Proceso.* September 13, 2022. Link

[83] Aquino, Eréndira. "En 2022, refugios para mujeres atendieron 25% más víctimas con menos recursos; denuncian simulación en aumento de fondos", *Animal Político*. January 4, 2023. Link

[84] de la Rosa, Yared. "En 3 años, gobierno redujo presupuesto de Inai, IFT, Cofece, CNH y CRE hasta 77%", *Forbes México*, January 11, 2021. Link

[85] Márquez, Javier. "Aprobación Presidencial", *Oraculus*. January 3, 2023. Link

What can we expect in the future of the war on drugs?

As we look to Mexico's future, the scenario is not favourable for a viable near term solution to this issue:

- As long as the government does not change course we can expect more violence to come. The policy of capturing high profile kingpins may be politically effective but in the long term this only exacerbates the conflict. The fragmentation of DTOs through decapitation increases competition among these organisations. This, in turn, makes the appearance of violence more frequent. Looking at the middle operational layers might be a more effective strategy.
- We can also expect equal or even greater levels of electoral violence carried out by DTOs in coming political processes. As DTOs consolidate their engagement in activities adjacent to trafficking narcotics, more communities will become attractive territories. Thus, one can expect violence against civil servants and political candidates to continue or even accelerate. It will therefore be important for Mexican authorities and private actors to keep track of the changes in the security panorama to try to minimise casualties, for example by identifying contested areas where inter-cartel violence is more frequent, changes in the power and control zones of existing DTOs, or markets that are increasingly attracting them.
- The increasing militarisation of public security and other civilian activities is not a solution to the problem, and it has a number of concerning implications for democratic governance that might extend far beyond the end of AMLO's term. Military presence in these operations will unambiguously undermine the rule of law in Mexico - in particular when it comes to the regulation of the army's power and its submission to civilian authorities, which is inscribed in the Constitution - and open the door for more human rights abuses by military and paramilitary agents. Human rights and anti-corruption advocates would therefore do well in keeping an eye on this situation.
- The security situation in Mexico and the current administration's response through militarisation will undoubtedly be a crucial talking point leading up to the 2024 presidential election. Moving forward, it seems that both the president and his allies in other levels of government will double down on this strategy despite criticism. In the global context of mounting polarisation, some also speculate that, if a general discontent propulsed Mexico's first "left-wing" administration to power, AMLO's disastrous management of the Covid-19 pandemic and the worsening of violence under his presidency could provoke an upsurge of far-right populism in the next elections.[86]

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[86] Aguilar, Rodrigo. "How Mexico's far right is slowly awakening", *LSE Latin America and Caribbean blog*. October 14, 2020. Link

Appendix

State abbreviations:

Aguascalientes	AGS
Baja California	BC
Baja California Sur	BCS
Campeche	CAM
Chiapas	CHIS
Chihuahua	CHIH
Mexico City	CDMX
Coahuila	COAH
Colima	COL
Durango	DGO
Guanajuato	GTO
Guerrero	GRO
Hidalgo	HGO
Jalisco	JAL
State of Mexico	MEX
Michoacán	MICH
Morelos	MOR
Nayarit	NAY
Nuevo León	NL
Oaxaca	OAX
Puebla	PUE
Querétaro	QRO
Quintana Roo	QROO

San Luis Potosí	SLP
Sinaloa	SIN
Sonora	SON
Tabasco	TAB
Tamaulipas	TAMPS
Tlaxcala	TLAX
Veracruz	VER
Yucatán	YUC
Zacatecas	ZAC

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