

# Mexico: AMLO Can't Do This Alone

Friday 31 May 2019, by [HACKBARTH Kurt](#), [MOOERS Colin](#) (Date first published: 26 May 2019).

**Both Mexican and international elites want to scuttle AMLO's progressive agenda. He'll only overcome their resistance with mass mobilization.**

On Friday, April 19, 2019, an armed commando group burst into a restaurant in the town of Minatitlán, Veracruz, where a birthday celebration was underway. Under the pretext of looking for a bar owner known as “La Becky” — a transsexual woman who, reputedly, had betrayed *Los Zetas* to offer her money-laundering services to the rival cartel *Jalisco Nueva Generación* — the commandos mowed down fourteen of the partygoers, including a one-year-old baby. Over the course of the following weekend, the gruesome massacre [made international news](#) while the hashtag #AMLOrenuncia (“AMLO Resign”) fluttered its way across social media feeds.

Then, on May 8, [gunfire erupted](#) in the central plaza of Cuernavaca, killing two members of the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) union, who had been accompanying a protest of street vendors. The attack was so brazen that it took place in broad daylight, in an area with heavy police presence only a few yards from the government palace where members of the state cabinet were meeting. A press cameraman was also wounded by the shots. In these circumstances, it would be hard to avoid the conclusion that the violence was a calculated media event.

## Violence as a Political Art

Far from the madding crowd of [bot-driven Twitter trends](#) and displaced pundits [deprived of the subsidies](#) (known in Mexico as *chayotes*) enjoyed under previous governments, AMLO continues to dominate the Mexican political landscape. Despite declines reported by certain polling companies, his [approval rating remains buoyant](#). MORENA candidates look set to romp to victory in upcoming gubernatorial elections in [Puebla](#) and [Baja California](#). At public event after public event, AMLO is cheered by crowds while [the officials accompanying him are booed](#) until the president steps in to bail them out.

The opposition, meanwhile, is prostrate. The PRI, the vampire sustained for decades by its parasitic symbiosis with the government, is [taking out loans to stay afloat](#) while admitting to having [inflated its voter rolls](#) by a factor of five. The conservative PAN is split between those who remain faithful to the original brand and supporters of former president Felipe Calderón who, with a hopeless hubris born of irrelevance, [has launched a spinoff party](#) entitled *México Libre*. The PRD is a stuffed relic of the post-1988 era. However improbable the assertion sounds, it is in fact a good time to be on the left in Mexico.

And yet the ongoing violence — which has [only increased](#) in AMLO's fledgling administration — is a daily reminder of how quickly things can turn. Over and above its significance as a public safety issue, violence is also a political *strategy* designed to discourage political participation, stoking “law and order” yearnings for strongmen to the detriment of those currently in charge. In this case, that means a progressive government attempting to get a handle on a country which — through a combination of savage capitalism and a twelve-year, state-sponsored “drug war” on its own

population — finds itself in a state of advanced decomposition. As columnist Julio Hernández López from the newspaper *La Jornada* [points out](#):

The complicated process of fully and effectively establishing a government with strong popular support generates reactions of all kinds, including criminal ones. Disrupting the scene, injecting fear and generating destabilization have been the classic formulas of displaced powers seeking to recover positions and topple adversaries. It is important to extend our gaze beyond the mere policing aspect [of violence].

## **No Democracy Allowed**

In addition to the uptick in violence, AMLO's opponents are also exploiting a first-trimester "downturn" in that most sacred of measures — GDP. "Downturn" is being used loosely here: Mexico grew at an annual rate of 1.3 percent over the period, but as this was less than the final trimester of 2018, mainstream media outlets [gleefully spun this as a "contraction,"](#) as if the economy had tipped into actual negative numbers. In the long tradition of social-democratic governments playing by someone else's rules, AMLO had played right into the trap by promising during his campaign to [boost growth rates to 4 percent a year](#) over the course of his administration.

Such a myopic focus on growth does not bode well for hopes to halt [mining exploitation](#) and development projects that stand to harm indigenous populations, such as the proposed [Maya Train](#) in the Yucatán Peninsula. But it is part of the bad hand Latin American governments are forced to play in the international financial system, where a single wave of capital outflows can wipe out, overnight, years of progressive planning.

Eyeing an opportunity, the international financial press swooped in to assess the situation with its typical poise and professionalism. On April 28, former Merrill Lynch analyst Mary Anastasia O'Grady of *The Wall Street Journal* [went personal](#). Not content to criticize AMLO on policy grounds, she used the president's signing of a "memorandum" — essentially an executive order — on education, before an education reform law working through Congress had been passed, to paint him as a *duce* in waiting. "This exposed the nature of the man," O'Grady fumed. "He sees himself as the Mexican savior, who from his perch of power administers righteousness. And he is justified, therefore, in his aim to transform the country radically. He will take his revenge on the haves, or, as he calls them the 'fifis.' Anyone who gets in his way is branded as corrupt...There's a pattern here and it has nothing to do with making Mexicans better off."

A week later, on May 5, the *Financial Times* of London published a [subtly menacing companion piece](#). Under the innocuous-sounding title "Mexico's President Risks Undermining Himself," the editorial board echoed in earnest tones O'Grady's warnings against the inherent messianism of attempting to change anything. "In a redemptive quest to end 'neoliberalism' and Mexico's corrupt 'mafias of power,' he has used 'popular consultations' to justify controversial measures, such as cancelling a half-built airport," it lamented. "With supreme self-confidence, he has ended the opening to private capital by Pemex, preferring the government to pump billions into the troubled state oil company instead...Over the medium term, Mr. López-Obrador's autocratic pursuit of regeneration risks institutional and economic decay."

Then — wait for it — comes the veiled threat: "There are really only two real checks on his power. The first is international laws embodied in the North American Free Trade Agreement...The second is financial markets. The Mexican peso, Mr López Obrador's preferred bellwether, is for now trading much where it was last year. Unless he reins in his more value-destroying traits, markets will soon bake in a higher premium...It is not too late for him to change before financial markets, and disappointed citizens, force change on him."

And there you have it. Democracy cannot be allowed in Mexico if the result is a government that bucks international economic nostrums, however mildly. And if it persists in attempting to do so, mechanisms such as free-trade agreements and financial markets must be activated to slap down any of that “supreme self-confidence” it dares to have. Nice currency you’ve got there, Mexico — shame if something were to happen to it. The problem is, AMLO himself [welcomed the new version of NAFTA](#) — the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) — negotiated by the outgoing Peña Neto administration. In Spanish, the phrase is called *poner la soga al cuello*. To put a noose around your own neck.

## **A One-Man Show**

Fighting back against such a formidable array of forces requires two things: a careful strategy and mass mobilization. If the first six months are any indication, however, AMLO is looking much like a one-man show. The government’s media strategy has centered around the president’s daily morning press briefings — an unprecedented exercise in media openness that has been a powerful tool for setting the agenda. But the strategy, which has descended at times into [tit-for-tat exchanges with journalists](#), is starting to show its limitations. And while the president spends ample time criss-crossing the country — traveling by commercial flights or car — the trips have mainly been used to extol his new social programs rather than to prepare his base for the fights to come. Tellingly, the man who is a consummate master of mass organizing has not called for a single mobilization since taking office.

At the national level, meanwhile, MORENA is [enmeshed in a dispute](#) between its president Yeidckol Polevnsky and Senate Majority Leader Ricardo Monreal. On one hand, the conflict is a reflection of the eternal tug-of-war parties in power face between their machinery and their governing bloc. Beneath that, however, is a problem that has been festering ever since the party’s founding five years ago.

Polevnsky’s grievance, reportedly, is that the party is being [infiltrated by opportunists](#) seeking to latch onto patronage jobs and nominations for office. But in this case, the party has no one to blame but itself: since its inception, MORENA has been all too quick to offer plum candidacies to recycled politicians from parties from across the ideological spectrum — [including the much-reviled PRI](#). This has diluted its message and confused an electorate already filled to the gills with a “they’re all the same” cynicism.

And while the party, to its credit, has set up an [Institute for Political Instruction](#) to nurture and train candidates from below, the same party dispute is [preventing the institute](#) from receiving the funding needed to carry out its functions. Without this vital check from its political base, there is nothing preventing MORENA from following the path of the PRI and the PRD, both of which, in their own ways, succumbed to the conservatizing pressures of institutionalization and adaptation to the status quo.

## **The State is Not Neutral**

This speaks to a larger problem. In Mexico, where the state has been central to nearly every progressive political project since the Revolution — from the land reforms and oil expropriation of the 1930s to the founding of the welfare state in the 1940s and 1950s to the “stabilizing development” economic model of the 1960s and early 1970s — there are enormous pressures for parties to conform to its imperatives.

But the state is not a neutral entity: the space for reform it offers has always been determined by its relationship to domestic and foreign capital. Coded into its DNA is the securing of legal and political

rights for property owners (euphemized as “the rule of law”) and the creation of favorable conditions for capital accumulation. This does not mean that it cannot be forced to do things which run against the interests of capital. But to do so demands a sober assessment of the structural forces ranged against any such project both from within the state itself (bureaucratic inertia, administrative incompetence, veiled sabotage) and from without.

AMLO, for all of his energy, charisma, and frenetic activity, cannot storm that castle alone. The Mexican left’s project will only prosper if it succeeds in converting MORENA from a vehicle for campaigning and career advancement into a genuine tool for political education and popular democracy. In the world system of today, there are no second chances.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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