Mexico’s new president has a radical plan to end the drug war

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A helicopter of the police Condor group over Mexico City, on August 2, 2018. Mexican President-elect Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who will take office on December 1, inherits a messy war on drug cartels from his predecessor Enrique Peña Nieto.
Pedro Pardo/AFP/Getty Images

MEXICO CITY — Juan Carlos Trujillo last saw his brothers, Jesús Salvador, 24, and Raúl, 19, a decade ago.

The two men and five of their co-workers from the Trujillo family’s scrap metal business were abducted in August 2008, after they stopped to stay the night in a little town in the Mexican state of Guerrero.

The government’s investigation went nowhere, so the Trujillo family took it upon themselves to search for their sons. But that drew attention — and death threats — from one of the many drugcartels fighting over their home state of Michoacán. So the family dropped their makeshift investigation.

“You just never stop wondering what happened, if they are okay, if they are hungry or tired or hurting, if they’re even with us anymore,” Trujillo says.

But things got worse.

Two years later, Trujillo's other brothers, Gustavo, 28, and Luis Armando, 25, were last seen approaching a military checkpoint in the Mexican state of Veracruz — before they disappeared as well.

Trujillo is part of a massive community in Mexico: the families of the disappeared. Official statistics show that more than 37,000 people have gone missing in Mexico since 2007, though NGOs say the figure is likely much higher, as families are often too scared of retribution to report.

"Human beings aren't built to withstand so much pain," Trujillo, now a full-time activist for families of the disappeared,says. "Your dreams, your hopes, your plans, they all disappear."

Since the military took to the streets to fight the increasingly powerful and violent cartels producing and trafficking drugs north to consumers in the United States, tens of thousands of Mexicans have died. And a broken police and judicial system means perpetrators are almost never held accountable for a disappearance or murder.

But Mexico's next president, a leftist named Andrés Manuel López Obrador, has promised national reconciliation and peace and an end to more than a decade of the drug war.

López Obrador (who is usually referred to by his initials, AMLO) was elected on July 1 with the biggest margin of victory for a president in Mexico's modern democratic history. "The failed crime and violence strategy will change," he proclaimed during his victory speech on election night. "We will address the root causes of crime and violence."

AMLO and his advisers have proposed sending drug war-fighting soldiers back to their barracks, pardoning nonviolent drug offenders, and boosting social programs, repeating slogans like, "Hugs, not gunshots," on the campaign trail.

If the incoming president gets his way, this will be Mexico's first major split from the US on crime-fighting and drugs in decades. But the obstacles are many, and it remains to be seen if the new president has the lasting support and the resources to end the drug war.

Mexico's drug war has devastated communities for more than a decade

View of the body of a woman shot dead near her house in Culiacan, Sinaloa, on August 1, 2018.
Rashide Frias/AFP/Getty Images

It's not easy to pinpoint when Mexico's drug war started.Marijuana and poppy (used to produce heroin) plants have long flourished in Mexico's Sierra Madre mountain range, and in the 1960s, the government started incinerating them.

This did little to stem the drug trade, and in the 1980s, Mexico's first drug lords emerged, like the Guadalajara Cartel's Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo (soon to be dramatized in the new season of Netflix's *Narcos: Mexico*).

But the latest iteration of the drug war, which has coincided with Mexico's most violent era in modern history, began in 2006, when the newly elected President Felipe Calderón declared war on cartels and sent 6,500 soldiers to the unstable Michoacán state.

"This is a battle we have to wage," Calderón said at the time."Together as Mexicans, we will beat back crime."

Calderón's military deployment was later bolstered by the Mérida Initiative, an agreement with the United States to cooperate on the drug war. Since 2008, the US has given $2.7 billion to Mexicothrough the initiative "to help shape Mexico's security policy," while the Department of Defense gives millions more in its work with the Mexican military.

Mexico relies heavily on its military to pursue drug traffickers and bolster security in states mired in crime and corruption. In recent years, more than 130,000 military personnel have been involved in drug war-related activities on an annual basis.

And since Calderón deployed the military, the effects have been devastating. There have been 127,000 organized crime-related murders, according to Lantia Consultores,on top of the tens of thousands of people who have disappeared. Mexico recorded more murders in 2017 than in any other year in modern history, and the murder rate is already up another 14 percent in 2018.

Mexican soldiers stand guard at the entrance of the ranch where gunmen took cover during an intense gun battle with the police, along the Jalisco-Michoacan highway in Vista Hermosa, Michoacán state, on May 22, 2015.
Hector Guerrero/AFP/Getty Images

But organized crime groups are not the only perpetrators. The Mexican armed forces, as well as federal, state, and local police, have all been implicated in atrocities.

In the case of the Ayotzinapa disappearances, when buses full of college students were reportedly intercepted by the police on their way to a march in Mexico City and handed over to a drug cartel,an independent investigation showed that high-level authorities were aware of (or even participated in) the disappearance of 43 students.

And on top of that, all this bloodshed doesn't seem to have made a dent in drug trafficking.

According to the US Drug Enforcement Administration's 2017 report,Mexican cartels are fueling epidemic levels of heroin use and overdose (and, more recently, fentanyl). Mexican methamphetamine production is increasing and is "particularly pure and potent." Cocaine trafficked through Mexico is on the rebound.

AMLO's landslide election in July, however, could drastically change the government's response.

“You can’t fight fire with fire”

Andrés Manuel López Obrador delivers a speech during the final event of the 2018 presidential campaign at Azteca Stadium on June 27, 2018, in Mexico City.
Manuel Velasquez/Getty Images

On the campaign trail, the leftist candidate repeated catchy slogans and rhymes to show his opposition to the militarized drug war. These included phrases like “Abrazos no balazos” (hugs, not gunshots), “Becarios sí, sicarios no,” (scholars yes, killers no), and “No puedes apagar el fuego con el fuego” (you can’t fight fire with fire).

He kicked off the strategy in earnest on August 7 with a town hall in the border town of Ciudad Juárez, once considered the world’s most dangerous city. (The week before AMLO arrived, 11 bodies were found bound and strangled in a house.)

“We cannot solve these violence problems with an iron fist and with more prisons,” he told the town hall’s restless crowd in a speech filled with many slogans and few specifics. “I do not believe in ‘eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth.’ We cannot fight evil with more evil.”

Before his inauguration on December 1, AMLO and his future cabinet members will travel around the country to hear citizens’ concerns and ideas on the future of drugs and security. While the plan isn’t yet concrete, they say they are determined to end Mexico’s militarized drug war.

“The strategy up until now has been to use police and military force as the first tool,” says Alfonso Durazo Montaño, AMLO’s pick to head the Department of Public Security, which would oversee the police. “While those will still be a resource, they will be the last resort. Our goal is to attack the deep roots of our security problems: political, economic, social, and cultural problems.”

He summarizes their plan in four points:

- Take the military off the streets and replace them with better-trained, better-paid, more professional police
- Rewrite drug laws to regulate marijuana and, possibly, poppy(which is used to make heroin) while pardoning nonviolent drug offenders
- Offer reparations and support for victims of the drug war
- Ramp up social programs, education, and job alternatives in violent, poor regions

Mexico's transition away from a militarized drug war begins with better police, Durazo Montaño says. "We believe that within three years, we will have made enough progress to be able to take the military off the streets."

It's an ambitiousgoal, given how weak Mexico's police forces are. By the government's own analysis, Mexico has fewer than half the police officers it needs. Only 42 percent meet "basic competency" standards. Only 10 percent have been trained in criminal investigation. The average salary is barely $500 per month.

This is why calling in the military seems like an easy Band-Aid when crime overwhelms police. "The presence of the army created a perverse incentive," Durazo Montaño says. "It creates indifference of police chiefs and governors because they know that if they fail they can just call the army and keep delaying the improvement of police forces."

Since state governments must pay part of the salary of soldiers deployed in their jurisdiction, funds get sucked out of their own police forces. But Durazo Montaño says they will be "historic allies" of police officers. "We'll ensure police can live a dignified middle-class life … with medical care, retirement, a good salary," he continues.

However, like the US, Mexico has a federal government, and police forces are managed at federal, state, and municipal levels. Which means that this may be a much more complex task than it appears.

"If AMLO really wants to change things, it will be difficult, because states have to do their job too," says María Elena Morera, director of Causa en Común, a nonprofit focused on public security. "Police and attorneys general of each state largely fail to investigate and prosecute crimes, and if they can't solve citizens' daily crime problems like domestic disputes or extortion, everything else won't work."

Only 4 percent of reported crimes in Mexico result in official punishment because of a deficit in police, prosecutors, and judges. This is one reason so few Mexicans trust the authorities, and why many feel there's no reason to even call 911.

Beyond impunity, thismeans that 94 percent of crimes in Mexico go unreported. Morera says that's where the administration should focus. "The best thing this administration could hope for would be *more* reports of crime," she says. "We want citizens to feel like they can report crimes and that if they do, something will actually happen."

Marijuana legalization is inevitable. But what about poppy?

A police agent confiscates illegal poppy flowers during an operation at Los Pericos village, Mocorito municipality, in Sinaloa state, Mexico, on March 15, 2018.
Rashide Frias/AFP/Getty Images

AMLO's plans also fly in the face of the current drug prohibition stance shared by Mexican and US federal authorities. While the president-elect has been quiet on specifics, his advisers have not.

The likely next interior minister, former Supreme Court Justice Olga Sánchez Cordero, has a firm stance on legalizing marijuana. "Canada has legalized it. Half of the United States have legalized it. What are we thinking, killing ourselves when the rest of North America and much of Europe has legalized it?" she said in a radio interview in July.

Her frustration is particularly potent since Mexico's Supreme Court has ruled repeatedly in favor of marijuana legalization, but the current government has dragged its feet on writing legislation.

"Whether the Supreme Court forces it or the new Congress takes the initiative, it's just a matter of time for cannabis to be regulated," says Zara Snapp, a drug policy expert and plaintiff in the Mexican Supreme Court's latest affirmative decision on cannabis.

The thornier question is whether Mexico will legalize poppy production. Sánchez Cordero suggested that poppy production could be legalized to supply the national pharmaceutical industry. Today, Mexico imports all opioids for medical use from abroad, despite having a flourishing illegal poppy trade.

Mexico would need approval from the International Narcotics Control Board (a United Nations agency) to begin producing its own opiates. And then it would have to deal with the US.

“On cannabis, Mexico isn’t likely to feel much pushback because so many US states are pushing similar reforms,” says Maureen Meyer, the Mexico director at the Washington Office on Latin America. “If it goes to other drugs like opioids, it will become a larger challenge.”

The White House has been vague on its stance on legalization abroad, but President Trump may be opposed to sweeping drug war changes given an offer he floated to “knock out” the cartels with US troops. And a rift with the US would particularly hurt Mexico when it’s in the process of trying to reform its security forces.

“We need to improve cooperation with the United States, particularly on issues like arms trafficking, which has made it so much easier for organized crime to kill,” Morera from Causa en Común says.

If Mexico does push legalization, legislation design will be key to success. “If we are going to regulate drugs, we must do it in a way that benefits the people and communities most harmed by the war on drugs,” Snapp says.

She looks to legislation from California and particularly Massachusetts, which have written “social equity programs” into marijuana legalization. She envisions a scheme where farmers in Guerrero state currently growing poppy illegally would get priority access to grow and sell in the legal market. A young man in prison for selling marijuana would get training and preferential employment in a legal marijuana dispensary.

But Snapp says legalization’s boons would go further. “A regulated drug market provides a great opportunity to lift the curtain on all the corruption we know already exists around drugs,” she says. “It can force transparency.”

A black hole of justice

Inmates at Topo Chico prison in Monterrey, Mexico, on May 26, 2016.
Julio Cesar Aguilar Fuentes/AFP/Getty Images

The third part of AMLO's plan to take on the drug war has to do with the black hole of justice it has left behind.

This means reducing sentences or releasing convicts serving sentences for nonviolent drug crimes. Despite the notoriety of cartel kingpins, a disproportionate share of drug offenders in Mexico are charged for crimes involving tiny amounts of drugs. They also tend to be young and from marginalized backgrounds.

"If you legalize marijuana and/or poppy, how can you possibly keep people in prison for crimes related to those plants?" asks Froylán Enciso, a drug policy historian at Mexico's Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas University.

One of AMLO's most controversial messages in his presidential campaign was suggesting amnesty on some drug crimes as a necessary step to end the drug war. Public security adviser Durazo Montaño says an amnesty plan would likely be offered to people who produced or planted drugs for cartels or served as drug mules or lookouts.

Enciso says that justice in an amnesty plan would mean creating truth commissions for the country's most notorious recent crimes, like the disappearances of the Ayotzinapa students. He suggests some form of reparations could be offered to families of victims, including education and work opportunities.

But AMLO and his team have their work cut out for them. If they truly plan to address the root causes of the drug war, it will require buy-in from across the country: governors, mayors, ministers, bureaucrats, NGOs, activists, victims, and convicts. And AMLO's plan is likely to take much longer than the single six-year term Mexican presidents serve.

“Many Mexicans work in the drug trade and in organized crime. To dismantle this, the government has to offer something better. Can they actually offer something better?” Morera asks.

And smoothly transforming large parts of society is a gargantuan bureaucratic task.

“It implies coordination among many different agencies across every state,” Enciso says. “For example, if some kind of amnesty happens and you take kids out of prison, you have to have other agencies smoothly incorporating them back into society, into education, work, and so forth. Without that, organized crime is still the best option for many.”

Juan CarlosTrujillo, the man whose brothers were abducted, has met thousands of families all across Mexico who have also lost loved ones to drug war violence. But the collective grief hasn’t broken him.

Instead, he has become an organizer for the Brigada Nacional de Búsqueda (National Search Brigade),a nonprofit organizationthat helps families who are looking for missing loved ones when the authorities don’t.

Yet a decade on from his brothers’ disappearances, Trujillo has found nothing: no remains, no trace, and no culprits. There have also been no arrests.

But he hasn’t given up.

“Mexico has suffered enormous wounds that we need to heal,” Trujillo says. “The new government provides some hope that things can change.”

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