

Mexico's Lopez Obrador embraces military on eve of presidential inauguration

Don Knowland
1 December 2018

Today, with foreign dignitaries in attendance, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) will be sworn in as the new president of Mexico.

In the July elections, AMLO and his party, Morena, crushed the three dominant parties, the ruling Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI), and the coalition between the right-wing National Action Party (PAN) and the formerly center-"left" Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). Morena now has commanding majorities in both houses of the Mexican Congress.

The unprecedented number of votes for AMLO arose largely from his campaign promises to end the carnage of the war on the drug cartels unleashed a dozen years ago by PAN president Felipe Calderón, to end the endemic corruption of government officials and to reduce the pervasive poverty and joblessness plaguing the Mexican working class.

But Lopez Obrador's pronouncements over the last two weeks are already rapidly undermining these expectations.

The war against drug trafficking launched in 2006 has left more than 200,000 dead and more than 35,000 disappeared. Troops and sailors were massively removed from the barracks and put into the streets, ostensibly tasked with replacing corrupt or incapable police forces and reducing crime and violence.

Those efforts utterly failed. 2017 witnessed 31,000 murders, double that of the year 2010. That equaled a rate of 25 murders per 100,000 inhabitants, surpassing the rate of Colombia and approaching that of Brazil (29 per 100,00 inhabitants). 2018 is on track to register a record number of murders.

Abuses by the military of civilians also became widespread during this period. The national human rights ombudsman has documented dozens of instances of the Army and Navy engaging in murder, torture and forced disappearances, including its well-known involvement in the Tlatlaya massacre, and the disappearance and almost certain murder of the 43 Ayotzinapa teaching students that outraged the Mexican public.

During his campaign, and shortly after his victory in July, López Obrador announced his intention to gradually withdraw the Army from the streets. But the week before last he performed an about-face, proposing an even greater role for the military, through the creation of a National Guard composed of military and naval units, which would subsume the current functions of the federal police.

Far from any return to the barracks, this measure will result in a significant increase in military deployment. By 2021, AMLO said, the National Guard should have between 120,000 and 150,000

troops in action.

López Obrador in effect seeks a military "Special Command" over federal, state and police functions. This apparently would even extend to their role in investigating crimes, which under the current, longstanding, constitutional framework falls under the control of public prosecution ministries. When he ran this conception by the current Secretary of Defense, General Salvador Cienfuegos, the general told him it could not be done because it would violate the Constitution. AMLO responded, "let's change the Constitution."

Thus the "fight against crime" in Mexico will remain in the hands of the armed forces. Instead of ending what had been the security paradigm of the last two administrations, AMLO is consolidating and even extending it considerably further.

In line with his statement to Cienfuegos, López Obrador is doing so even though the Mexican Supreme Court ruled last week that deployment of the military in policing operations violates fundamental constitutional norms. The response of López Obrador and Morena to this ruling was to introduce, the very next day, a congressional proposal to amend 13 articles of the Constitution in order to allow a military body to lead "the prevention of crime and the preservation of public safety."

One hundred and thirty-six civilian and human rights organizations, as well as over 500 political and social figures who have supported López Obrador immediately issued an "urgent" statement calling on him to suspend this legislative process. Morena's proposal, their statement said, would generate more violence, more violations of human rights and would grant "almost absolute power" to the armed forces. It would amount to "de facto militarization of the country." On Wednesday former PRI leader Ernesto López Portillo chimed in: "The president-elect is imagining a structure for national security control, with the military in charge of the operation."

But López Obrador is undeterred. He gave an unprecedented speech to a mass audience of 30,000 military personnel, explaining his decision to leave the armed forces with operational control over police tasks. Ignoring the well-documented abuses of the civilian population by the military, he instead glorified it, characterizing its ranks as guardians of the people.

The Army, he said, was an institution "that has been respectful of civilian authority. The Mexican soldiers, [even] the generals [!] are from the people." Moreover, thanks to their "remarkable contributions" in security matters, the armed forces "have earned

the respect and affection of Mexicans, mainly in the most vulnerable areas of the country.” They also were “a force in favor of peace and tranquility among the population.”

At AMLO’s side during his speech was General Luis Crescencio Sandoval, AMLO’s choice as the new Minister of Defense, who will oversee the National Guard. Sandoval had presided for the last two years over a bloody street war in the northern Mexican city of Reynoso. In line with AMLO he emphasized that “soldiers, sailors *are* the uniformed people.”

The assurances of AMLO and his new military chief in fact reflect authoritarian conceptions. And they fly in the face of the fundamental Marxist conception articulated by Lenin that the state in its essence is composed of armed men that protect the interests of the ruling sectors of society.

The organizations opposing the legislation to amend the Constitution stressed in their statement last week that if the changes proposed by Morena are implemented, the government could declare threats to internal security in the face of any situation, whether “common crime problems, organized crime or social protests.” Thus, for example, protests along the lines of last year’s “gasolinazo” over surging gas prices, which AMLO criticized at the time for alleged excesses and violence, could be met with military repression.

If the population rises up in response to AMLO and Morena’s failures to carry through their hollow promises of progressive reforms, that is what it inevitably will be met with. This, in the final analysis, is the real impulse motivating the increased role now proposed for Mexico’s military.

On Tuesday, Lopez Obrador again went out of his way to assure the ruling elite and foreign capital that he will be prudent with public spending, that is, that neoliberal budget austerity and fiscal balance will prevail. Although Mexico taxes at one of the lowest percentages of GDP in the hemisphere, approaching that of Panama, a tax haven, his administration will not raise taxes, and domestic and foreign investments in Mexico will be safe.

His designated finance secretary, Carlos Urzúa, has already prepared a budget that will see a 70 percent cut in public jobs and a 30 percent cut to higher education.

AMLO emphasized on Tuesday that “Mexico is going to be a safe country, which is going to give a lot of confidence to the investment that we also need, because we are not only going to use public investment, we also need national private investment and increased foreign investment and we are already doing agreements.”

In contrast to these concrete proclamations, the incoming administration has made only the vaguest of proposals to invest in jobs, poverty reduction and education, that lack specifics or seriousness.

All this is a prescription for the Mexican working class to quickly lose faith in AMLO’s economic program.

López Obrador and his political team have also made clear that they have prioritized good relations with American imperialism.

Despite the overwhelming antipathy to and derision of Trump in the Mexican population, they have gone out of their way to avoid challenging his call for Mexico to pay for a border wall, his depiction of desperate Central American migrants as infected with

gang members and criminals or his demands that Mexico turn away those migrants at its southern border, and if not, house them in Mexico during the lengthy time their applications for entry into the United States are processed.

On Sunday, AMLO’s incoming foreign minister, Marcelo Ebrard, proposed to the United States the implementation of what he called a “Marshall Plan” for the Central American “Triangle.” The “investment and reconstruction” plan would be directed at El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala.

Under the plan, Mexico would absorb a large part of Central American emigration, at least while the applications of any who still sought to emigrate to the US could be processed. At the same time, a large public works program would be undertaken in the poverty-stricken south of Mexico.

Ebrard has proposed an “initial” contribution from the United States of at least \$1 billion to fund these efforts. Canada will also be invited to participate in their funding.

To convince Trump to join the initiative, Ebrard has characterized the intended result as a brake on illegal immigration.

Mexico will present this proposal on December 10 and 11 at the Intergovernmental Conference for the Global Compact on Migration of the United Nations.

Stripping away the rhetoric, it is apparent that a major goal of the plan is to staff development in southern Mexico with cheap Central American labor, as an enticement to both the American and Mexican bourgeoisies. Trump, however, may oppose the creation of such jobs outside of the United States.

Many in the pseudo-left are characterizing the incoming López Obrador administration as the first “leftist” Mexican government since that of left populist president Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s, who expropriated the holdings of foreign oil companies, as well as that of large landed estates, which were distributed to the peasantry. They are either giving full-throated support to the incoming administration, or “critically” supporting it.

This can only give cover to what will prove, based on the policies articulated thus far, to be a right-wing administration that will be forced to continue and intensify the attacks on the Mexican working class.



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