

Mexico's new president to grant amnesty to those who profited from corruption

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The lopsided vote for Mexico's new president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) and his MORENA party in the July elections arose in no small part from his pledge to end governmental corruption. Outrage over corruption in the last government drew him many voters.

In his inaugural speech on Saturday, López Obrador stressed that “the main cause of economic and social inequality in Mexico, as well as of the insecurity and violence that have plagued it,” had been the dishonesty of government officials and the “small minority” that had profited from “peddling influence”. His administration's prime objective thus would be to end that corruption, as well as the absence of criminal sanctions—impunity—for it.

The Bank of Mexico said something along the same lines in its quarterly report last month—that Mexico's economy “could not advance” without an end to corruption and violence.

Most might conclude that prosecution for past corruption would be likely to help deter corruption in the future. And for much of the campaign AMLO had insisted that corrupt government officials would be prosecuted.

However, later in the campaign he began to backtrack, suggesting that, while he would not halt ongoing prosecutions, such as those of corrupt state governors, others might not be prosecuted for past activity.

Two weeks before his inauguration López Obrador clarified that he in fact would grant an amnesty to those who committed acts of corruption in the years prior to his government, including even past presidents. He insisted, “I do not think it's good for the country that we get bogged down in persecuting corrupt suspects.” That is, publicly airing the scale of corruption would

only trigger more outrage in the population and discredit the entire framework of bourgeois rule.

In his speech on Saturday López Obrador reiterated that position: “I propose to the people of Mexico that we draw a final line under this horrible history and make a new start: In other words, that there be no persecution of former officials and that the current authorities breathe easily about any pending issues.” When that statement was greeted with jeers, he said he would put the issue to a national “consultation.”

Many now assert that during the election campaign López Obrador, who lost two prior presidential runs due to electoral fraud, entered into a compact with Peña Nieto that he and the members of his government would not be investigated for corruption in exchange for a promise they would not interfere with his campaign.

López Obrador has repeatedly said that he will fund his social programs with money that would otherwise be diverted to graft. But his amnesty policy means that corrupt government officials will keep the hundreds of millions of dollars they pocketed, while businessman who had paid bribes will likewise hold on to the billions they garnered.

They will not be poured back into government coffers to fund the promises AMLO has made to fight poverty and increase pension and education funding.

In his speech on Saturday made no mention of pardoning those driven by poverty to commit low-level crimes who fill Mexico's prisons.

Lopez Obrador in his inaugural speech Saturday also tied the “insecurity and violence” that have plagued Mexico—the killing and disappearance of hundreds of thousands and skyrocketing murder rate since the federal government launched the war on Mexico's drug cartels a dozen years ago—to widespread government

corruption.

Funds from the drug gangs did stuff the pockets of government officials both petty and high. A desire to end the resulting violence also was a significant motivation behind the massive rejection of the old parties in the July election.

López Obrador's amnesty for past corruption is perhaps curious in light of the testimony that is being given in the criminal trial in a federal court in Brooklyn, New York of Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán Loera, who is charged with being the co-leader of Mexico's Sinaloa narcotics cartel.

In an extraordinary series that appeared two weeks ago in Mexico's Bloomberg-affiliated *El Financiero*, columnist Raymundo Riva Palacio, depicting Mexico as a "narco state," outlined the scale of payments made by the cartel to high-level officials that are alleged in El Chapo's case. Because of such massive payments, Mexico's government favored certain cartels over others in their internecine wars, including through military action, thereby fueling the waves of violence.

For example, according to the US government's main witness, who is the brother of the co-leader with Chapo Guzmán of the Sinaloa cartel, it paid millions of dollars to the secretary of public security under Peña Nieto's predecessor, president Felipe Calderón. The right-arm to Marcelo Ebrard, who was López Obrador's secretary of public security when he was mayor of Mexico City (2000-05) and is now is serving as his new foreign minister, also received millions for protection of the cartel.

The US government's prosecutor in the Chapo Guzmán case has also told the court that the government of former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari, who, along with his brother, had long been accused of having entered into arrangements with drug cartels, had the archbishop of Guadalajara killed in 1993 in Guadalajara's airport, and then pinned the crime on Guzmán and his cartel. Salinas was a trusted adviser to Peña Nieto during his ascent to political power.

Perhaps more significantly, the lawyers for Chapo Guzmán assert that the evidence in his trial will show that Peña Nieto received six million dollars in bribes for protection of the cartel when he was governor of the state of Mexico (2005-2011). If true, there would be little reason to conclude that similar arrangements

would not have continued into his presidency.

Instead of initiating investigations, and then prosecutions, based on whatever may be established in the Chapo Guzmán case in terms of high-level government corruption, López Obrador intends to grant an amnesty unless "the people demand" prosecution.

MORENA's deputies in Congress are initiating a constitutional reform to permit such a procedure. A "consultation" with the people of Mexico on his amnesty proposal is projected for March (as well as on his decisions to form a National Guard composed of military units, and a business advisory council to meet regularly with the country's wealthiest businessmen).



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