



Democracy as the expired vaccine for Mexico: the return to a militarist state

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Abstract: Mexico is increasingly moving away from democracy and proof of this is the return of militarism through institutionalised populism. Is there a medicine for such a disease or will the remaining institutions do the work?

Mexico is a country in which the concept of democracy has not fully matured, and possibly will not happen, except with structural changes in the government and in society. Democracy is like a vaccine against diseases like authoritarian and populist governments, but vaccines expire, and it is necessary to change the formula when tending to patients. Today around the world, democracy is used to consecrate populist causes with terrible results. An example of this is Mexico and the use of 'democratic mechanisms' to return to a militarist country

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Mexico's historical review, military sickness, and vaccines

The military has been [a part](#) of Mexico's political life since its independence in 1821 until the formation of the first political party in 1929 after the revolution. It was not until 1946 that military authority in Mexico was set aside and civil authority was established. However, this relationship remained and caused, in one way or another, the creation of repressive governments (from 1964 to 1976) backed by the military. This toxic relationship gave way to massive violations of human rights like the massacre of students in [Tlatelolco \(1968\)](#), and the implementation of [terrorist tactics](#) during the infamous 'dirty war' during the 70s. The name 'dirty war' refers to inhumane strategies used to target and kill people and dissident movements by the governing parties at the time.

During the 80s and early 90s, Mexico entered the neoliberalist wave, creating a plethora of institutions. This was a time for democratic development, state financial consolidation, critical public opinion, civil organisations, political plurality and civic culture, without denying the existence of poverty, inequality, insecurity, organised crime, etc. This period of neoliberal reforms gave way to a change that was not only governmental, but also gave power to society, giving it a voice and spaces to flourish.

In 2000, partisan alternation was accomplished after seven uninterrupted decades which brought a change of ideas, objectives, and priorities, although not all for the better. One example of this was the [war on drugs trafficking](#), which actively lasted six years (from 2006 to 2012) and left approximately 120,000 dead, including drug traffickers, soldiers, journalists, human rights defenders, and civilians. This war formally ended in 2019 with the current president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO).

AMLO's massive, expired vaccine

Andrés Manuel López Obrador, commonly known as AMLO, came to power in 2018 in his third attempt for the presidency with more than 50 percent of the total votes, an outcome never seen in Mexican elections before. His platform was an antimilitarist one, guaranteeing freedom of the press, zero tolerance for corruption, gender parity, among other promises, and all were expected to be achieved through democratic means.

However, the execution of the above was [the complete opposite](#), accompanied with a textbook populist ideology. The previous idea becomes more important when one considers that the 2018 elections were not only to elect the president, but also for legislators from both chambers, where the president's party and its' allies obtained 54 percent and 62 percent of the upper and lower chambers respectively. It was his platform, the weariness towards past governments, and

his 'relationship with the people' that gave him the [presidency](#) and the legislative power, coupled with the opportunity to choose and ratify the judiciary.

From 2018 until today, AMLO has used —effectively and ineffectively— the current institutional structure to undo and erode others: [educational reforms](#) that promotes stagnation, [energy reforms](#) that favour the existing state-owned monopoly, the [absorption](#) of regulatory bodies, the [proposal of re-election](#) and extension of members in the judiciary system, [severe government austerity](#) models, [electoral reforms](#) that put an end to political plurality and oversight, and a [military pact](#). All these reforms imply major setbacks in terms of human rights, not only in the positive obligations of the state to protect, but also in the negative obligations to do no harm.

Such a situation allows us to imagine democracy as an expired vaccine for Mexico. It not only does not prevent a human rights and economic development problem, but it creates circumstances in which, through a democratic setting, institutions can be destroyed or eroded. How? Through institutionalised populism: control over state powers based on referendums and decrees, and the use of media to discredit any opposition, partisan polarisation, among many others. AMLO and his platform have promoted a dangerous relationship between the state and the military on two fronts. On the first front, the President shields the army from criticism using rhetoric which claims that the army has been [cleansed](#) of corruption and that they respond to the needs of the people. While on the second front, he grants [control](#) of ports and customs, [construction](#) of macro-projects of infrastructure and [public security functions](#) until 2029 (still being debated and pushed for). This will be one of the key components of his legacy, the military pact.

How to change the formula? Is it possible? And more so, can it adapt through time?

As with other major global problems, there are no silver bullets, rather there are slow processes that require large investments by the state without necessarily having the guarantee of the expected results, such as the development of any vaccine. If we can picture populism as a disease for democracy, it is accurate to say that this disease is here to stay. In light of this, academia has proposed ways to change the formula and lay the foundations, not to eradicate the disease, but to prevent major complications that could threaten the life of the country and its citizens.

One suggestion found in the literature, relevant to the Mexican case, is the [reduction of political polarisation](#). Research shows that in polarised societies, a significant number of voters will be willing to sacrifice fair, democratic competition in favour of (re)electing a candidate who champions their interests.

Likewise, it is important to set aside the practice of 'educating the opponent' and focus on shaping people's perceptions of norms through familiarity or closeness to the norm —people start caring when they see other people taking action. Another suggestion is to [create unifying narratives](#). Whilst populism presents the fight between the people and the corrupt elites, political parties must create unifying discourses. The configuration of these may vary, but in the case at hand, it is possible to do so through common, unifying beliefs, historic memory, and the successful cases of institutions. An example of the latter was the march against the electoral reform, where people expressed their discontent in the attempt to take away the autonomy of the electoral institute. However, the same did not happen in the commemoration of the massacre of students (1968) in the lead up towards the military pact. For the next few years, Mexico will have to deal with the symptoms resulting from Obrador's populism. The intervention of the armed forces in civil matters has already been put into practice since 2018, resulting in [violations](#) of the human rights of migrants, lack of transparency in the exercise of their functions in the [civil sphere](#) and [corruption scandals](#), just like before. There is nothing left but to hope that the effects of the first vaccine —institutions— will help Mexico to cope with this disease, which apparently is here to stay even after AMLO's end of term.
