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Left Neoliberalism and State Of Emergency in Mexico

The first great theoretician of military strategy, Carl von Clausewitz, said that war is a matter of violence and chance, but above all the continuation of politics by other means. French philosopher Michel Foucault affirmed that, on the contrary, politics was the continuation of war by other means, and consequently the law was a fundamental tool used to give politics a veneer of peace, understood since then as the friend-enemy relationship. Foucault's understanding of politics as a legal means of continuing war and setting rules for friend-enemy engagement sheds doubt on the very existence of peace, which can be nothing more than the nonviolent manifestation of war, a democratic at the service of neoliberalism.

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben affirms that in neoliberalism there is a permanent state of emergen-

cy in which the law ensures the suspension of guarantees without it meaning the interruption of democracy. Such a suspension in democracy is achieved through legal reforms and the presence of the armed forces. The permanent state of emergency is common in both right-wing and left-wing neoliberalism.

Thus, neoliberalism is not optional. Both left and right subscribe to it, the only difference being that the former does so in the name of national sovereignty, the economic interests of the nation, and the people, and the latter in the name of freedom, private property, and markets. In both cases, the fundamental aim is to expedite criminal, extractive capitalism and press legislative action and the armed forces into service to guarantee its activities. Together, the law and the armed forces—the permanent state of emergency—guarantee that the free market's productive and financial mechanisms operate with minimal opposition, regardless of whether the government identifies as left-wing or right-wing.

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The Leftist State of Emergency

The establishment of a permanent state of emergency in Mexico began decades ago but has reached its most absolute and far-reaching expression under the left government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018-2024). The militarization of civilian spaces started with the Zapatista armed uprising in the year 1994, on orders from President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000). Despite Mexico's political parties alternating in office, the army's position was reinforced under the right-wing government of Vicente Fox (2000-2006), of the National Action Party (PAN), who appointed a general as federal attorney general. The militarization of police activities was further extended under the administration of fellow right-wing president Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), who declared a "war on drug trafficking" and to that end deployed 50,000 troops in the states of Michoacán, Chihuahua, and Tamaulipas, with confirmed casualties of 102,000 dead and 17,000 disappeared. His successor, Enrique Peña Nieto of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) (2012-2018), continued his strategy of a militarized fight against drug trafficking and boosted the number of soldiers in Mexico's streets to 150,000. War casualties rose to 130,000 dead and 35,000 disappeared.

However, the leftist president Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the National Regeneration Movement (Morena), still in office, has vastly exceeded the numbers of deaths attributed to his predecessors; to date, the total count of the missing has reached 105,000 (74 percent men and 24 percent women), with the dead surpassing 150,000, including feminicides and homicides, despite López Obrador's stated refusal to follow the militarized national security antidrug policy favored by his predecessors, even as the number of troops in the streets has risen to 150,000. Also, he has stationed them in civilian areas where neither centrist nor right-wing officials had dared to go: police forces, customs, communications and transport, science and technology, tourism, aviation control, and migration.

The permanent state of emergency in Mexico is more extensive and far-reaching than ever in the hands of the left, and it all started with the creation of the National Guard in March 2019 as part of the national security strategy, despite the government's defining it as a civilian force that would be supervised by the National Defense Ministry until it was professionalized enough to operate without the help of the army and the navy. In June 2019, Mexico's

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president agreed with his U.S. counterpart, Donald Trump, to send 6,000 members of the National Guard to Mexico's southern border to block the advance of migrants hoping to reach the United States, in a *de facto* criminalization of such migration, which by law constitutes an administrative offense. As reported by the Mexican government, in late 2020 the National Guard numbered 100,000 members, of whom 76 percent belonged to the army and navy, stationed primarily in air, sea, and land ports to detain migrants, staff customs offices, and operate security checkpoints.

In 2020, the government published a decree authorizing not only the National Guard but the armed forces broadly defined to take part in tasks of law enforcement on an extraordinary basis until 2024. In the year 2021, Mexico's Congress approved the inclusion of the armed forces in the National Council on Science and Technology (Conacyt) and in early 2022 the president announced that a military company called Olmeca Maya Mexica would operate airports at Santa Lucía, Tulum, Chetumal, and Palenque, as well as the Mayan Train. No centrist or right-wing government had given so much power to the military in Mexico, which had distinguished itself from its Latin American counterparts by having a different social and legal system, which gave the armed forces the sinecures necessary to keep soldiers in their barracks and subject to civilian authority. This power was consolidated in September 2022 when congress enacted a reform extending the time the armed forces will command the National Guard and participate in law enforcement activities from 2024 to 2028.

In 2020, the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) had criticized the use of the armed forces in law enforcement on the grounds that the order violated the principle of legal certainty due to a lack of clarity regarding the armed forces' scope of action. In 2022, when the presidency of the CNDH passed to a person named by the Congress, controlled by the president's party, María Rosario Piedra Ibarra—daughter of renowned activist Rosario Ibarra de Piedra,

a member of *¡Eureka!*, a collective formed by mothers with missing children and whose son was a victim of forced disappearance—, it gave its unqualified support for extending the militarization of law enforcement and other civilian areas through 2024. Its argument was that the state of emergency and exceptional circumstances that produced the reforms justified extending the period and that the CNDH supported them because there was no doubt that they were for the benefit of the people, without acknowledging that militarization of civilian institutions represented an inherent danger to human rights, as the UN and various Mexican civil society organizations had affirmed. The CNDH limited itself to stating that it would monitor the armed forces to ensure that they respected human rights.

The state of emergency in Mexico is greater than ever thanks to the left, which has been criticized for taking measures that, by definition, are typical of right-wing governments, but this criticism is misguided: the left is not opposed to legal militarization as part of a politics that is the extension of war. The majority of military coups d'état in Latin America have come from the right (Chile, Argentina, Brazil), but leftist guerrillas and revolutionaries have always used military strategies to achieve their ends, as we have seen in the case of the Cuban revolution and guerrilla movements in Colombia, Peru, and Mexico.

In his book *La utopía desarmada* (Utopia Disarmed), right-wing political scholar Jorge G. Castañeda, who served as foreign minister for part of the Fox administration, warned as far back as the early 1990s that the left lacks a natural democratic vocation, and its embrace of a discourse centered on human rights and democratic elections was a rhetorical tool employed to underscore its dedication to ensuring the common good, which, in Castañeda's telling, is a slogan used to justify any authoritarian act with the purported aim of lifting the downtrodden masses out of poverty.

The presence of the armed forces in Chiapas to detain migrants and the events of 2019 in Culiacán are not unrelated to economic and repressive actions involving their personnel, in particular, in the case of the Mayan Train.

The Mexican left in government offers a clear example of the phenomenon described by Castañeda, who made a list of pending issues that the left would need to focus on to overcome its limitations vis-à-vis the democratic system, which included combating the impunity and social deterioration produced by the imposition of a neoliberal political and economic model. In government, the left is not combating authoritarianism, as shown by the unprecedented militarization it has presided over, nor is it opposed to neoliberalism.

Leftist Militarization and Neoliberalism

The government headed by Andrés Manuel López Obrador is as deadly as the right-wing and centrist administrations that preceded it. The policy of subsidies for the elderly, young people, and single mothers is a means of locking in popular support while pauperizing and exploiting mid-level civil servants by eliminating their employment benefits and cutting their salaries. Instead of creating new positions in the civil service, people are hired as independent contractors or as “support” personnel, forcing them to use their own resources (cell phones and transportation). Such measures, contrary to the welfare of the people they claim to represent, are no different from the lean state policies implemented by right-wing and center-left governments. At the same time, the armed forces are put in charge of economic projects that harm the environment and communities, repress African and Central American migrants, and take control of bodies that report abuses and scientists who denounce them. At the same time, the government maintains a permissive approach to organized crime.

These measures are hard to distinguish from those implemented by right-wing and center-left policymakers in prior administrations, when militarization and the alleged pursuit of criminals were a charade designed to provide cover as other niches of organized crime and extractive industry were allowed to grow.

An exemplary case of the leftist state of emergency and neoliberalism is the presence of the armed forces in Chiapas, the birthplace of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), an icon of the Mexican left. As mentioned above, by agreement with then-U.S. President Trump, in June 2019 President López Obrador sent 6,000

members of the National Guard to detain migrants on the border with Guatemala.¹ Four months later, on October 13, the National Migration Institute (INM) headed up a deployment of National Guard members and federal police officers to block the advance of a migrant caravan that had started from Tapachula. Only four days later, on October 17, the National Guard located Ovidio Guzmán López, son of Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, at a house in Culiacán, Sinaloa, but released him following a series of armed attacks that put local residents at serious risk. The National Guard was not employed against a known criminal, but was used to detain migrants.

By 2022, the guard had twenty-four installations in Chiapas; however, it has not prevented clashes between criminal gangs like those that took place in the municipalities of Jiquipilas, Cintalapa, and Arriaga in early October 2022, for which the government deployed 300 Mexican Army and National Guard troops.

The presence of the armed forces in Chiapas to detain migrants and the events of 2019 in Culiacán are not unrelated to economic and repressive actions involving their personnel, in particular, in the case of the Mayan Train. On April 13, 2021, the Conacyt released a report on the project’s potential harmful impact on the environment and indigenous communities, “Territorios mayas en el paso del tren: situación actual y riesgos previsibles” (Mayan Territories along the Train’s Route: Present Situation and Foreseeable Risks), authored by thirty scientists, which warned that the project would violate the rights of 146,000 local indigenous residents, harm 10 protected natural areas, destroy 1,288 archeological sites, and contribute to trafficking of persons and narcotics. In April 2021, the Congress approved the inclusion of the armed forces in the Conacyt and in September of the same year the Federal Attorney General’s Office (FGR) announced plans to prosecute thirty-one Conacyt-affiliated scientists for alleged misappropriation of funds and organized crime.

The violence —both criminal and hybrid— typical of the state of emergency during the so-called “war on drugs” in Northern Mexico from 2006 to 2018 arrived in the south-east, in Chiapas, complete with the neoliberal practices espoused by both left and right of exploitation of natural resources and use of force to suppress opposition to the Mayan Train and the tourist project headed by the armed forces, employing the same tactics of murder and displacement seen in Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, and Guerrero

under previous administrations. Leftist neoliberalism is every bit as corrosive and deadly as that of right-wing and centrist governments. ■■■

Further Reading

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Notes

¹ This coerced agreement was reached following a threat by Trump, on June 7, 2019, to impose tariffs on imports from Mexico, which was hardly negligible given the United States’ status as the destination for almost 80 percent of Mexican exports and the origin of nearly 60 percent of its imports. [Editor’s Note.]