

## Memórias da corrupção no México: Uma reflexão pessoal

### Memories of corruption in Mexico: A personal reflection

NUBIA NIETO<sup>1</sup>

**Resumo:** Nas últimas décadas assistiu-se no México a um aumento do tráfico de droga e da violência, para não mencionar que os níveis de corrupção continuam elevados no país. O envolvimento dos políticos em escândalos de corrupção parece ser um elemento constante, independentemente do partido que está na presidência. Desde o ano 2000, o México passou por um processo de transição política, após o Partido Revolucionário Institucional (PRI) ter perdido a presidência, ao fim de 71 anos. O Partido de Ação Nacional (PAN), de direita, governou o país por 12 anos (2000-2012). Apesar de o PRI ter recuperado a presidência com Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018), esta está atualmente (2023) nas mãos do Movimento Regeneração Nacional (MORENA), da esquerda populista. Contudo, a corrupção e a violência parecem imparáveis. Neste contexto, apresentamos aqui uma pequena reflexão sobre o impacto da corrupção na minha história pessoal enquanto indivíduo a viver no México ao longo de diferentes estágios. Esta reflexão não pretende ser um contributo científico, mas antes um exercício de exploração de experiências e sentimentos pessoais baseados em acontecimentos nacionais e materiais factuais, que mostram de que maneira a corrupção está consubstanciada na socialização de governantes e cidadãos.

**Palavras-chaves:** Corrupção; México; Impunidade; Política.

**Abstract:** In the last decades, Mexico has experienced an increase in drug trafficking and violence. Not to mention that corruption levels continue being high in this country. The involvement of politicians in corruption scandals seems to be a constant element no matter what party holds the presidency. Since 2000, Mexico has experienced a political transition process after the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) lost the presidency after holding it for 71-years. The National Action Party (PAN), right wing, ruled the country for 12 years (from 2000 to 2012), although the PRI recovered the presidency with Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018), the presidency is currently (2023) held by the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA), left populist wing. However, corruption and violence seems to be unstoppable. In this context, it is presented as a little personal reflection about the impact of corruption in my personal history as an individual living in Mexico in different stages of my life. This reflection does not intend to be a scientific contribution, but rather an exercise to explore personal experiences and feelings, based on national events and factual materials, which show how corruption is embodied in the socialization of rulers and citizens.

**Keywords:** Corruption; Mexico; Impunity; Politics.

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<sup>1</sup> Independent researcher, United Kingdom. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9454-5922>.

## 1. The corruption in the past

When I was a child in Mexico I used to see to my father paying bribes – «mordidas» –, when he was driving, opening his business or selling his products. Any excuse was valid for the police officer; they used to approach my father asking him for the «refrescos» (soft drinks). My father was a small farmer, so many local inspectors used to pass to the house asking him «a co-operation» to avoid «a fine», many times they invented any excuse to extort him, or threatened him to close his business if he refused to pay. A few times, his truck was taken when he refused to pay, causing more problems as he needed to pay later on more and higher bribes to the employees of the council or «Delegación» (town hall), today named «Alcaldía» (municipality office). The employees of the «Delegación» (town hall) easily intimidated him using legal and bureaucratic terms.

The «mordidas» were part of my souvenirs of my childhood as my parents needed to save money each month to pay the bribes to inspectors, transit officials, police officers, and local authorities to get any construction permission, deputy teachers to accept us in the local school and employees of the council to get any administrative procedure done. All parents in my village used to talk about «the best bribe dealer in town», and the time and reliability of their services; they acted as a kind of «gestores» (managers) of bribes. Since many times, other «gestores» ran away with

their money or they just disappeared for a while without delivering any result promised and paid. This scenario was frequent in my childhood. Even I remember that my father used to flirt to «women officers» to avoid penalties and when I asked him why he was flirting to another woman different to my mum, he used to respond to me «to avoid paying more money».

Besides, I remember when I went to visit my school mates in their homes, sometimes it coincided with the inspectors that they used to visit to my parents, their visits were always unpleasant and changed the mood of my parents, since after their visit my parents were arguing about money. The same situation happened with the parents of my school mates. All kids in the village, we knew that if we wanted to have a financial stability we needed to work or belong to the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) (Institutional Revolutionary Party).

During my childhood, the PRI was the most powerful party in the country, and when an official of the PRI visited my village and my school, mainly on November 20 – «día de la revolución Mexicana» (Mexican Revolution day) (1910-1917) –, we needed to attend the school dressed in the best clothes that we had and to sing the national anthem in front of them or dance folk dances, even the parish priest used to come to our school to go and meet with the politicians, waiting for good alms and some favours for his parish.

When the politicians visited the village, they used to come in beautiful and expensive cars, bodyguards, surrounded by rows of police officers, and the locals were required to bring flowers, some farmers were forbidden to pass across to the main road, while the event was taking place: no donkeys, no horses, no dogs, no pigs, no cows were allowed to be on the roads. In case locals refused to attend the politician event, the local authorities used to propose them a food pantry, chemical fertilisers, or some free allowances to sell in the market without paying the inspector. If the local people continued refusing to attend the event, then the local authorities threatened them to remove their permissions to sell on the local market or impose some unjustified fines.

All children knew how to pretend to pay respect to the PRI politicians, even if we were aware that our parents were not partisans of the PRI. San Gregorio Atlapulco – meaning in nahuatl «donde revolotea el agua» (where the water flows) – belongs to Xochimilco – municipality located in the south of Mexico City –, San Gregorio Atlapulco is a village with strong *Zapatista* revolutionary roots (Ruiz Sanchez & Ruiz Belman, 1995: 15). Many of our grandparents were illiterate people, as they grew up during the revolution. My grandmother, Juana Valentina Gonzalez, served as a *Zapatista* «Adelita» – revolutionary soldier –, an indigenous woman from nahuatl ethnic background, and she always used to remind me and the other kids of the village of the im-

portance of defending the lands: «Chinampas, ejidos y cerros» (floating gardens, communal lands and hills); and she advocated all her life for the right to education and dignity, and she reminded us how difficult it was for her and the people of the village to survive during the revolution, hiding themselves inside of the *Teuhtli*, meaning in nahuatl «Venerable sir». The Teuhtli is a hill formed from an extinct volcano located between the municipalities of Milpa Alta and Xochimilco – cooking during the night to avoid being seen by the «carrancistas» (constitutionalists), group of revolutionaries, followers of Venustiano Carranza (Espejel, 2018), and the enemies. They use ash and charcoal on their face to look ugly and dirty women in order to avoid being taken away by «carrancistas».

Most of the children of the village knew how to pretend to pay respect to the PRI to avoid further consequences for our parents, even if it was natural that we didn't believe in the PRI. My father was a «respected farmer», who was forced by local authorities to lead peasants to sell their lands at very low prices; since he refused, he was beaten several times, so my family was always known by the local authorities.

During my teenage years I always associated the PRI with corruption, impunity, intimidation, nepotism, cronyism, clientelism and influence peddling. Young people of my time fought from our trench against the PRI, thinking one day we would get rid of it, and then the

country could get free from authoritarian and despotic rulers. Many of my friends of college and university were part of social movements against the PRI, they joined the ranks of the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) (Democratic Revolution Party), formed in 1989. The PRD was identified with the left wing. Others decided to join the *guerrilla* in the south of Mexico, and others decided to finish the university, hoping to get a job out from the PRI, but the PRI was present in all aspects of our life. Some of my ex-colleagues joined the State bureaucracy, working as legislative advisers, lecturers or administrative staff in government offices. Others less fortunate or without political connections ended up as taxi-drivers or street traders. In my case, I didn't want to work in the Government, then I became a journalist for national newspapers.

## **2. The political transition: A new hope**

One decade later, finally the PRI lost the presidency, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2000 Vicente Fox from the Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN) (National Action Party) won the Mexican presidency (2000-2006) under the promise to end corruption in the country. Then, Mexico began a new chapter in its political life, putting an end to the 71-years rule of the PRI. There were parties on the street. The impossible became possible. Now, the country was free. The villagers of San Gregorio Atapulco took the image of the saint of the village, «Santo Patrón de San Gregorio Magno», to the streets:

fireworks, Aztec dances, burning incense and flowers were present in the market, in the church, even in the pantheon, to remember those who disappeared during selective repressions of the PRI against local leaders. The «caciques» – chiefs in charge – for the first time were a little bit lost «to who» follows now. To «who» demands protection from impunity, or «with who» creates alliances to keep their privileges. The caciques and corrupt local people didn't wait long to place their people in key Government positions. And soon they re-established their corrupt networking with the new party in office.

In the whole country, people had high expectations to improve their living standards, education, public health, and of course put in place «the rule of law». However, the PAN little by little learned the statecraft based in corruption, reproducing the same practices that the PRI used to do: nepotism, embezzlement, bribery, extortion, collusion, rip offs and all types of corruptions that the PRI practiced. The next national election was won by the PAN again, this time under the presence of Felipe Calderon Hinojosa (2006-2012), with promises to fight against corruption and drug trafficking – narco trafficking. He launched the war drugs in 2006. However, scandals of corruption flourished again in the name of Vicente Fox and Felipe Calderon, their families, friends and close collaborators. Even worse, the political corruption was at that stage irrelevant in comparison with the violence that

was flourishing in the whole country. Sexual assaults, robberies, assaults with high calibre weapons on the streets became part of ordinary conversations; almost all families in the country have experienced at least one crime. Reporting crimes, disappearances, rapes and so on seem to be part of the new normality.

From 2006 to 2012, president Calderón waged a U.S.-backed offensive against drug cartels. Fighting between rival gangs and the security forces led to between 47.000 and 70.000 deaths. More than 20.000 disappeared and a quarter million people were displaced. What's more, Calderón brought the military involvement to unprecedented levels. By 2011, there were 96.000 soldiers and 16.000 Mexican marines in the battle against cartels, which only exacerbated the violence (Grillo, 2013).

In the press rooms, the number of deaths passed soon from tens, hundreds to thousands, before being reported. Blood, pain, fear, orphans, widows, elderly on the streets, dismembered bodies, heads with messages, armed forces patrolling streets carrying high calibre weapons were part of the national scenery. Many reporters lost their lives under torture, cruelty, inhuman and degrading ways to kill and humiliate people.

Now everybody was the target, not only the rich, but also the poor. Criminality became democratic, since everybody was at risk. There were criminals for all social levels: the poor

and middle class were targeted on public transport, streets, markets, churches, school and university campus, while the rich people in their mansions or cars. Body guards couldn't do anything. Armoured cars were effective while passengers were inside, but once they disembarked they were killed. Even popular music such as *rancheras* (folk Mexican music) were replaced by *corridos* – epic narratives to glorify the life and adventures of narcotraffickers –, which were listened in public places and social events. Suddenly, the atmosphere was turned into a country that normalized to live with drug cartels, death and tragedy.

In San Gregorio Atlapulco, parts of bodies were found on the main streets. People were mistrustful of everybody. The culture of helping each other was almost finished. Kids disappeared from playing on the streets. Some were taken away from their parents, and later on sold for prostitution and human trafficking. Local people were afraid to be robbed or kidnapped, even if they were very poor. Nobody was safe. Many *narco*-messages appeared in the market, in churches, and the «chinampas». The priest of the village was threatened because of criticising brutal killers in his preaching. The drug dealers (narco-traffickers) were everywhere. Suddenly, some small traders and peasants could afford expensive cars, trucks, motorbikes, so the rest of locals knew that they were part of the criminal system.

At the start of 2000, the narco-traffickers used to pay for the silence of locals through financing the «fiestas patronales» (local festivities) in the village, but later on they started to apply more aggressive ways to pursue people to keep silent or to enter in the chain of production, manufacturing or distribution of the drug business.

Now, there was nobody to ask for protection, no matter if you were partisan or representative of the PRI, PAN or PRD, all people were a target. There was no strong corporate structure of the PRI available. No more control through the Confederación Nacional Campesina (CNC) (the National Peasant Confederation), Confederación de Trabajadores de México (CTM) (the Confederation of Mexican Workers) and Confederación Nacional de Organizaciones Populares (CNOP) (the National Confederation of the Popular Organisations). The politicians of the PRI were no longer respected by criminals, and they didn't require any more «credentials to kill» from the politicians, the criminals were free to operate without conditions or restrictions. The Pandora's box had been opened.

In the past, old people known as chief of the commune were respected, and even the leaders of the PRI needed to have their approval to put in place their policies in local communities, but now they were equally killed. Decent farmers were forced to accept the conditions of narco-traffickers. There was no option. Armed criminal commandos broke into local parties'

houses and took away young women, and killed just for the pleasure or intimidation.

In the middle of this national slaughter, Enrique Peña Nieto, as candidate of the PRI, was elected as a president of Mexico (2012-2018). This time, the PRI was representing a hope for social peace and stability. The blood that ran through the streets of the country brought Peña Nieto to the presidency. This time it was not a political party, but rather a white flag with criminals.

The number of deaths in Mexico related to drug trafficking reached and exceeded those of the civil war. For example, the number of deaths of civilians in Afghanistan reached 26.000 from 2001 to 2014; and in Iraq, 160.500 from 2003 to 2014, while in Mexico the number of homicides related to drug trafficking reached 164.000, between 2007 and 2014. Even in the same period (2007-2014) the number of deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan was approximately 10.000, while in Mexico was 164.000; 61.000 deaths more (Breslow, 2015). These numbers show that the human costs are higher in Mexico by the organised crime than in Iraq or Afghanistan under civil wars and declared foreign interventions.

The triumph of Peña Nieto represented a return to the old past. Finally, Mexican people knew that the PRI was full of criminals, but at least these criminals were able to negotiate with other criminals to bring peace on the

streets. Peña Nieto avoided talking about violence; instead he focused on economic growth, which was not a great achievement either, and yearned social peace never was re-established as all Mexican dreamt. Political corruption and criminality continued increasing along with impunity. Peña Nieto, his family, friends and close ones were involved in corruption, money laundering, and receiving favours of narco-traffickers (Aristegui, 2023).

Unemployment, poverty, farmland abandonment hit the families of San Gregorio. Young people were more attracted to belong to criminal gangs than working in the «chinampas» or «ejidos». The consumption of drugs in the village was more visible, and youngsters launched their own businesses based on «narcomenudeo» (retail drug trade) and kidnapping locals. The disputes of territories in the village were more aggressive among themselves: men were killed and found with their genitals in their mouths, bodies without the kidneys, hearts or eyes, bodies hanging from the Puente de Urrutia (bridge called «Urrutia») became part of the architectural landscape of an agricultural village.

### **3. More of the same**

In July 2018, the new president elected Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), commonly referred as AMLO, won the elections, through his Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (MORENA) (National Regeneration Movement) (2018-2024). This time there was no the PRI,

no PAN, or PRD, but a new political party of centre-left populist wing, whose ranks were formed from important figures of art, science and intellectuals. AMLO finally reached the presidency after two previous defeats as a presidential candidate of the PRD in 2006 and 2012. The magnitude of MORENA's victory in the Presidential election was replicated in the Congress with MORENA and its allies securing 308 deputies out of 500 and 69 senators out of 128 (Palma, 2019).

AMLO campaigned in Mexico's 2018 presidential election for a clear departure from the previous political order, fighting corruption and restoring social peace: «achieve peace and end the war». AMLO presented himself as an anti-establishment candidate, although he was formed in the ranks of the PRI in the Seventies, he worked in the PRI bureaucracy at different levels, and in 1983 he was the president of the State Executive Committee of the PRI, he was president of the PRD (1996-1999), Head of Government in Mexico City (2000-2005), and in 2011 he formed MORENA's party, and since 2005 he started his political campaign to reach the Mexican presidency. His political stand was characterized since the beginning to criticize his counterpart in power, who accused of being a «power Mafia». AMLO had huge popular support, some people compared him with a saint, others with a communist similar to Hugo Chávez or Fidel Castro (BBC, 2018). The true is that many elderly people respected him a lot due to the

introduction of social welfare programmes, scholarships for young Mexicans and financial support for single moms, that previous Government had forgotten.

AMLO, during his campaign to the presidency in 2018, visited several times the municipality of Xochimilco, and San Gregorio during his presidency campaign in 2014. He was received with open arms by locals: flowers, incense, candles, fireworks, Aztecs dances... families turn apart due to political differences, friends and acquaintances avoided to speak about AMLO as it was a kind of bigotry around him. Even my mum, she and her friends of 80 years old went to his political rally in the middle of the rain excited as teenagers, like watching a rock concert. The whole village went to his final event as a presidential candidate in the Aztec Stadium, located in the south of Mexico City: trucks full of people, private owners who voluntary offered their trucks or private cars to carry people or donations of food. In the centre of the town, tent camps and public toilets were located to host people, who came from other parts of Mexico to the final rally. It was a community party spirit.

After five years of government all the high expectations, little by little, started to crumble. The violence continued with more furious intensity. Many journalists lost their lives. According to Reporters Without Borders, and the World Press Freedom index 2022, Mexico is classified as one of the most dangerous places

to exercise journalism and a country of a «difficult situation». Mexico is ranked in the place 127 out of 180 countries, where the first place is for the country of great press freedom and in «good situation» for journalists, and 180 is for the worse country to exercise the journalism. Mexico gets a score of 47,57 as a dangerous country to exercise journalism (RWB, 2022).

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) places Mexico as the second most dangerous country to practice journalism, after Ukraine, which takes the first place due to the war that it is facing with Russia since February 2022. Only in the year 2022, in Mexico, 11 journalists were murdered, while in Ukraine were recorded 12 during the same period (La Razón, 2022). Not including the fact that in Mexico several journalists do not report frontal attacks or threats due to fear of reprisals. Just in one month and a half (from January to mid-February 2022) 5 journalist were killed and on average 100 people lose their lives daily (Morán Breña, 2022).

Robbery and kidnapping continue hitting the country, and San Gregorio Atlapulco was forgotten by the promises of AMLO, who didn't come back again. The AMLO's administration recycled some policies of its predecessor and his Government soon would use the same authoritarian and repressive strategies used by PRI. For example, in December 2<sup>nd</sup> 2022 the military and policemen beat peasants, children and the elderly people, groped women, pulled



many women by the hair, and broke cell phones to prevent them from transmitting images, after villagers of San Gregorio Atlapulco were protesting for a water conflict (Soriano, 2022).

AMLO and close relatives have been also involved supposedly in corruption issues. One of the most notorious is the case of José Ramón López Beltrán and his wife Carolyn Adams, son of the president of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who lived for two years (2019-2020) in a luxurious house in Houston, whose value is nearly \$1 million USD, with a 23-meter pool and a private cinema. The house was owned by Keith Schilligs, senior executive of the Baker Hughes company, American company specialized in oilfield, liquefied natural gas, energy and industrial services (Garcia Soto, 2022).

Apparently, Baker Hughes obtained multi-million contracts thanks to his relation to López Beltrán. Baker Hughes is a contractor of the Petroleos Mexicanos (PEMEX) – Mexican State-owned petroleum company. The American company received 8,9 billion Mexican pesos (MXN) (about \$434 USD million) from PEMEX for its oil services in 2021, up from 6,5 billion MXN pesos (about \$3,17 USD million) (X-Rates, 2022) more from previous year (2020) (Stillman & Averbuch, 2022). The contract was awarded a month before López Beltrán moved into this house. Besides, Baker Hughes obtained an extension of its contract (Loret de Mola, 2022). Baker Hughes shareholders demanded an investigation for pos-

sible conflicts of interest, legal irregularities, and influence peddling, while in Mexico AMLO reacted furious against Carlos Loret de Mola (Garcia Soto, 2022), the journalist who made the revelation, and using the State apparatus against a journalist, who lives in a country with high levels of insecurity and violence, exposing an authoritarian stand.

The case of José Ramón López Beltrán, son of the president of Mexico, is added to the scandals of corruption, involving the president's cousin, Felipa Obrador, and brothers, Pío and Ramiro López Obrador, who have obtained contracts, credits and money, using their position in Government. In August 2020 some videos were released in which Pío Lopez Obrador is seen receiving money from David León, then a public servant of the Government of Chiapas. Approximately 2 million MXN (about \$96,6 USD thousand) (X-Rates, 2022). The resources were used in 2018 for Morena campaign (Arista, 2021).

On the other hand, once the government of President López Obrador had begun, the company Litoral Laboratorios Industriales, owned by the president's cousin, Felipa Obrador, obtained contracts with Pemex for 365 million Mexican pesos (about \$17,8 USD millions) (Arista, 2021).

Another of López Obrador's brothers, José Ramiro Obrador, benefited from the López Obrador Government's rural development bank, receiving

a loan for one million 771,000 Mexican pesos (about \$86,4 UDS thousand) (X-Rates, 2022) granted by the Financiera Nacional de Desarrollo Agropecuario, Rural, Forestal y Pesquero (FND) (National Financial for Agricultural, Rural, Forestry and Fisheries Development).

Concepción Falcón Montejo, another relative of AMLO, was involved in an alleged embezzlement of 223 million Mexican pesos (about \$10,8 USD million) from the municipality of Macuspana, Tabasco, the municipality from which the federal president is from (Arista, 2021).

The cornerstone of the AMLO triumph was his commitment against corruption, violence and abolishing privileges, although the outcome of his government is quite questionable and doubtful. The country has seen more than 360.000 homicides since 2006, when the Government declared war on the cartels (CFR, 2022). AMLO approach to the exercise of power is equally questionable, since he reproduces the same schemes of his predecessors: authoritarian behaviour, despotism, nepotism, clientelism, cronyism and influence peddling. The credibility of AMLO Government was once more lapidated in the history of Mexico.

Meanwhile, many of my university ex-colleagues and friends who have been journalists have been killed or threatened and live in risk for exercising their profession, which is not only poorly paid, but also life threatening. Those friends who chose to work as public servants

in the Government offices, they must accept authoritarian and despotic orders from their superiors who embody a vision of public function as a source of private wealth and personal privilege. Others have abandoned their professional careers due to the age and set up their own business, which means irregular income, and accept corruptive conditions of «local inspector» to be able to operate. For pretty young women, the conditions are worse to keep their jobs or keep their small business running, they are often forced to accept «sextortion» – a form of coercion to extort sexual favours –, causing them mental and physical pain as their dignity is taken away at expenses of getting some *pesos*. Corruption and secrecy continue putting lives and human dignity at risk.

The peasants of San Gregorio Atlapulco continue working and producing flowers and vegetables that end up in local markets. Disappointed with the AMLO dream, they don't see an immediate better future, but rather deception and feelings of being mistrusted and cheated once more by politicians and corruptive criminals.

San Gregorio Atlapulco, that once has represented a point of resistance of the Spanish Conquest in 1519 and an important anchor of the revolution of the peasant forces of Emilio Zapata, and whose «Chinampas», and mountains symbolize the survival of their habitants, is still waiting, many centuries later, for a better future for their generations.

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