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FEATURED Q&A

What Is Fueling Violence Against Mexican Politicians?



Tomás Morales, a mayoral hopeful in Guerrero state, was among the Mexican candidates who have been killed in recent weeks. // File Photo: Facebook Page of Tomás Morales.

Q **Tomás Morales, a candidate for mayor of the violence-stricken Mexican city of Chilapa, in Guerrero state, was fatally shot outside his home on March 12, prosecutors said the following day. A half-dozen local candidates in Mexico's upcoming June elections have been assassinated just since the start of this year, and some analysts believe this may be Mexico's worst year ever in terms of political violence. Alfredo González, a mayoral contender from Atoyac, in Guerrero, and two mayoral candidates from the town of Maravatío were also killed in recent weeks. What factors are driving the rise in violence against local politicians in Mexico? What measures can Mexican authorities implement to deter political violence, and what responsibility does the government have for the current situation? How will assassinations and the threat of violence affect the upcoming election and its results?**

A **Vanda Felbab-Brown, senior fellow for foreign policy at the Brookings Institution:** "For decades, assassinations and intimidation have been a feature of Mexico's elections. But the intensity of electoral violence has increased dramatically. Post-election changes in governing structures also mean changes in the corruption networks that criminal groups exploit and hence a reorganization of state-crime relations. Criminal groups thus have strong incentives to shape electoral outcomes. Indeed, Mexican criminal groups are inserting themselves into ever-earlier stages of elections. At the national level, they may simply seek to develop corruption networks among all top contenders. But at lower levels, their intrusiveness into elections has grown

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TODAY'S NEWS

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Mexico Urges U.S. Court to Block Texas Immigration Law

Mexico is urging a U.S. federal court to block a controversial Texas law that makes it a state crime to illegally cross the border, with those convicted facing jail time and deportation.

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BUSINESS

PetroChina to Acquire Large Quantity of Venezuelan Crude

PetroChina is set to acquire a large quantity of crude from Venezuela following the easing of U.S. sanctions.

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POLITICAL

U.S. Sanctions Nicaragua's Attorney General

The U.S. Treasury announced that it had imposed sanctions on Nicaragua's attorney general, Wendy Carolina Morales Urbina, accusing her of helping to seize property from government opponents.

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Morales Urbina // File Photo: @UN_HRC via X.

POLITICAL NEWS

Mexico Urges U.S. Court to Block Texas Immigration Law

Mexico's government is urging a federal court in the United States to block a Texas law that makes it a state crime to illegally cross the U.S.-Mexico border into Texas, with those convicted facing jail time, deportation or both, UPI reported Thursday. Texas Governor Greg Abbott signed the measure, known as Senate Bill 4, in December, but it has been blocked in court. On Thursday, Mexico filed a friend-of-the-court brief arguing that the law could lead to harassment, arrest and deportation of Mexican citizens, as well as people who simply look like they are from Latin America, UPI reported. The measure also violates Mexico's rights to determine its own policies and conflicts with the precedent that enforcing immigration laws is in the purview of the U.S. federal government, not state governments, Mexico added in the brief. The law is causing "significant fear and concern among Mexican nationals living in Texas," it added. Also on Thursday, U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said during a visit to Guatemala that the Texas law is unconstitutional, the Voice of America reported. On Wednesday, a panel of the Fifth U.S. Circuit of Appeals heard arguments on the law but did not rule, leaving the measure on hold for now.

ECONOMIC NEWS

Report Sees Greater Speed in Remittances, But Challenges Persist

The "speed, simplicity and security" of sending remittances to Latin America and the Caribbean will increase this year as more of the money transfers are sent digitally, but "substantial challenges" remain, Mastercard said in a report

released Thursday. "After several years of accelerated digitalization, consumers in Latin America now have high mobile penetration, greater access to the Internet and fewer people that are unbanked and underbanked, sparking the growth of digital remittances in the region," the company said. In the report, the payment processor said the formal remittance volume in Latin America reached \$146 billion in 2022, more than twice the amount as compared to a decade before. The total in 2022 was 25 times the amount as compared to 30 years ago, the report added. Mastercard said greater digitization is expected to generate "an incremental \$20 billion in digital remittances" by 2026. The report added that the U.S.-Mexico corridor for remittances is "the single largest remittance pipeline in the world" and had a remittance volume of \$65 billion. However, Mastercard also said the remittance industry still faces major challenges "that limit full digitalization and adoption, including lack of transparency, trust and security in the system, poor digital user experiences and slow transaction speeds." It also called dealing with regulation "one of the most acute issues, given the lack of legal, regulatory, and operational consistency across global jurisdictions."

BUSINESS NEWS

PetroChina to Acquire Large Cargo of Venezuelan Crude

Chinese state-owned oil firm PetroChina is set to acquire a large cargo of Venezuelan Merey crude oil following the easing of U.S. sanctions on Venezuela's oil industry last year, Bloomberg News reported today. China officially resumed importing Venezuelan oil in February after purportedly ceasing them since 2019; however, traders and third-party data providers say China has actually been importing Venezuelan oil frequently over the years but disguising the cargo, often as bitumen mix, Bloomberg News reported. The U.S. Treasury Department originally lifted sanctions on Venezuela's state-owned

NEWS BRIEFS

U.S. Slaps Sanctions on Nicaragua's Attorney General

The U.S. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control announced Thursday that it had imposed sanctions on Nicaragua's attorney general, Wendy Carolina Morales Urbina, accusing her of helping the Nicaraguan government to suppress dissent by helping to seize property from political opponents of the government. The property seizures had "no legal basis," said Treasury Undersecretary Brian Nelson. The sanctions block any property and interests in property that Morales Urbina has under U.S. jurisdiction.

Brazil Eyes Gas Imports From Argentina's Vaca Muerta Formation

Brazil is exploring potential means of importing natural gas from the Vaca Muerta formation in Argentina in order to meet growing domestic demand, Mines and Energy Minister Alexandre Silveira told Reuters on Thursday. While Brazil is the region's largest oil producer, it has relied on imports of Bolivian natural gas, where supply is shrinking. Brazil is suggesting an existing pipeline connecting Argentina and Bolivia could be reversed in order to import gas north.

Niagara Energy Seeking to Buy All Shares of Enel Generación Perú

Niagara Energy is seeking to buy all of the shares in Enel Generación Perú, the largest electric company in Peru, according to a statement from the Lima stock exchange on Thursday, Reuters reported. Last November, Enel had announced a deal to sell the firm for \$1.4 billion. The current deal values Enel shares at a discount, with a price of \$0.47 a share, notably lower than the closing price of a share on Wednesday (\$0.57) or Thursday (\$0.53).

oil company, PDVSA, last October, allowing the firm six months of new investments and partnerships, prompting foreign firms to flock to Caracas and pursue deals. However, the United States promised in January to snap back sanctions on the country's oil sector on April 18 if President Nicolás Maduro failed to adhere to agreements on free and fair elections this year. The reimposition of sanctions now seems imminent, following a recent court ruling that upheld a ban on the candidacy of María Corina Machado, behind whom the nation's opposition had rallied, *The Wall Street Journal* reported. Sources with knowledge of the matter also told Bloomberg News that if U.S. sanctions are reimposed on Venezuela, China is unlikely to continue purchasing Venezuelan crude. The current cargo will be transported to the Guangdong mega refinery in Southern China, which had been a joint venture with PDVSA prior to 2019.

DAC Beachcroft Adds to Litigation Team in Mexico

Insurance-focused international law firm DAC Beachcroft announced Thursday that it has made three new hires for its litigation team in Mexico. Elisa Márquez, Beatriz Castelazo and Alberto García Cárdenas, all partners at Márquez & Castelazo are joining DAC Beachcroft's office in Mexico in order to enhance its services in civil, commercial and international arbitration, including matters related to complex litigation and bankruptcy, the London-based firm said. Márquez, Castelazo and García Cárdenas have all worked together at other top global law firms and companies and have experience providing services to international clients, such as insurance companies and financial institutions, DAC Beachcroft said. With the new hires, the firm "will be even better placed to help its clients navigate the complexities of Mexican legal proceedings, ensuring they benefit from the firm's enhanced capabilities and knowledge of the Mexican market," the firm added.

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significantly. A decade ago, criminal groups would often seek to intimidate and bribe those elected at the state and municipal level after they were elected. Only then would the criminal groups seek to dictate terms to elected officials regarding the protection of the criminal groups' rackets and resource diversions from public coffers. Now, criminal groups increasingly shape who can run in the first place and who will be a successful candidate. They do so by delivering money to the political parties and candidates they prefer, and intimidating and assassinating political candidates they oppose or those supported by rival criminal groups. They also intimidate local elections officials. Criminal groups also instruct local populations to vote for specific candidates and deny location populations physical access to vote for rivals. The takeover of legal economies by Mexican criminal groups further enlarges the resources they have available for bribery and electoral donations as well as their political influence."

A Ruben Olmos, president of Global Nexus: "Illicit activities including extortions, kidnappings and violent crime have been on the rise across Mexico in the last five years. The government denies that murder rates are up and that its security strategy of tackling the root causes of drug consumption and avoiding direct confrontations is working, but the brutality of crime is shaking the entire country. Today, two main organizations—the Jalisco New Generation Cartel and the Sinaloa Cartel—have a presence in every state and control hundreds of local criminal groups. Election-related violence will continue as groups are positioning their interests and therefore will bribe current local officials and finance politicians running for office to guarantee protection once they arrive in power. It should not be surprising to see organized crime help mobilize voters to the polls on election day. As we look to the future, we should keep an eye on two states

that have done a relatively good job coordinating efforts between local, state and federal forces. Coahuila state was overwhelmed by drug cartels just a few years ago; today, all the main cities are safe, and there is great coordination between forces. The second case is Yucatán, by far the safest state in Mexico with murder rates as low as many European cities. Security should be a top priority for Mexico's next president and the nine new governors that will be elected June 2."

A Arantza Alonso, senior analyst for the Americas at Verisk Maplecroft: "Criminal groups seeking to influence who holds office drive a significant share of violence against political actors in Mexico, including candidates. However, although these groups are responsible for most political violence, not all violence is perpetrated by them. During the 2020-21 electoral cycle, social conflicts—as well as ethnic, territorial, internal and intra-party disputes—turned violent in locations where institutional weakness, high impunity and a weak democratic culture prevail. Political violence, particularly the direct targeting of candidates, reduces the number and quality of available hopefuls, diminishing viable political options and projects. Limiting political options to those who are willing or able to negotiate with criminal groups or other violent stakeholders such as militant groups affects the efficacy of mechanisms to channel discontent, as political representatives do not necessarily reflect the electorates' preferences—nor do they have incentives to prioritize their constituents' interests. Rather, they will seek to protect the interests of the violent groups that they have negotiated with. The growing influence of criminal groups in elections and administrations, particularly at the municipal level, will continue to degrade public security and undermine the rule of law. It will also affect democratic governance by reducing the extent to which Mexico's system of government is determined by the will of

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the populace. Measures to deter political violence could include the expansion of the government's protection program for candidates by improving its coordination with local security forces and its intelligence capabilities to prosecute offenders. This includes effectively dismantling criminal groups' financing sources and counter-intelligence capabilities."

A **Omar García-Ponce, assistant professor of political science at The George Washington University:** "Over the past decade, more than 1,000 politicians have been murdered in Mexico. Most of these victims are local politicians in areas of the country heavily affected by organized crime. This tragic phenomenon is escalating as the country approaches its next presidential election. It is important to understand that this alarming trend has deep and complex roots, including an ineffective criminal justice system, pervasive corruption and a profound infiltration of organized crime into the political system, among other factors. In a context of weak rule of law and high impunity, like in Mexico, organized criminal groups exert political influence through intimidation, coercion and outright violence, seeking control over territories and resources. This violence endangers the consolidation of Mexico's young democracy, as it is likely to erode trust in institutions and elections, depress voter turnout, or impede fair competition. But paradoxically, the escalation of criminal violence in Mexico has also been, at least to some extent, an unfortunate consequence of Mexico's growing electoral competition. Several scholars have shown that the transition to democracy disrupted the social and political order at the local level, redefining the organization of illicit markets and networks of protection and collusion between criminals and politicians. The fragmentation and diversification of criminal organizations have compounded this violence. Thus, the Mexican government is confronted with a

monumental challenge that is crucial not only for the stability and prosperity of the country but also for the preservation of its democracy."

A **Rodrigo Abud, managing director at Panorama:** "Continuing a longstanding trend, political violence in Mexico is once again escalating, presenting a grave challenge to the legitimacy of the forthcoming elections and prompting scrutiny of the government's obligation to tackle this crisis. With more than 10 political candidates assassinated within the first two months of 2024 (36 when including public officials and political relatives), according to Data Civica, the situation demands urgent attention. These figures compare with 102 casualties in 2021 and 152 in 2018, as reported by Etelekt, underlining the severity of the current crisis. Integralia has reported that 15 Mexican states are highly or very highly exposed to the influence of organized crime in local elections. Criminal groups aim to manipulate politics by imposing or eliminating candidates and influencing voter behavior, instilling fear and eroding trust in the electoral process. So far, political violence has been color blind in terms of political affiliation and has extended its reach to affect broader audiences. Despite efforts by Mexico's National Electoral Institute and the federal security ministry to enhance candidate and voter safety, concerns persist. The government must scale its efforts to protect all stakeholders, including journalists, public officials and society in general. The impact of this violence extends beyond individual tragedies, threatening the legitimacy of the elections and Mexico's democratic stability. With little over two months remaining until the country's elections, urgent action is imperative to prevent further bloodshed and restore confidence. Failing to address these challenges risks undermining the democratic principles upon which Mexico's governance is founded."

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