



Freedom in the World - Mexico (2011)

Capital: Mexico City

Population:
109,610,000

Political Rights Score: 3 *

Civil Liberties Score: 3 *

Status: Partly Free

Status Change Explanation

Mexico's political rights rating declined from 2 to 3 and its status from Free to Partly Free due to the targeting of local officials by organized crime groups and the government's inability to protect citizens' rights in the face of criminal violence.

Overview

Violence between security forces and organized criminal groups, and among the criminal groups themselves, reached unprecedented levels in 2010. Over 15,000 people were killed as the syndicates fought over territory, continued an expansion into new criminal activities, and sought to coerce officials and corrode state institutions. The government maintained troop deployments in the regions most affected by violence even as allegations of rights abuses by the military increased. The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) won six of the year's nine state gubernatorial races, but alliances between the ruling center-right National Action Party and the left-leaning Party of the Democratic Revolution succeeded in defeating the PRI in three of its traditional strongholds.

Mexico achieved independence from Spain in 1810 and became a republic in 1822. Seven years after the Revolution of 1910, a new constitution established the United Mexican States as a federal republic. From its founding in 1929 until 2000, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) dominated the country through patronage, corruption, and repression. The formal business of government often took place in secret, and the rule of law was frequently compromised by arbitrary power.

In the landmark 2000 presidential election, Vicente Fox Quesada of the National Action Party (PAN) defeated the candidates of the PRI and the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), capturing 42.5 percent of the vote. By 2003, Fox's greatest achievements remained his defeat of the long-ruling PRI, providing for more open and accountable government, and arresting some leaders of the country's vicious drug-trafficking groups. However, solutions to the problems of poverty, corruption, crime, and unemployment proved elusive. Elections held in July 2003 confirmed the PRI as the most powerful party in Congress and in many state governments.

In the 2006 presidential election, PAN candidate Felipe Calderón defeated Mexico City mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the PRD by a mere 244,000 votes in the initial count. López Obrador rejected the result and for several months led protests that paralyzed parts of Mexico City, but many Mexicans—and most international observers—were not convinced by the PRD's evidence of fraud. In September, after a partial recount, the Federal Electoral Tribunal formally declared Calderón the winner. Though the PAN won the most seats in the congressional elections, the PRD's share of deputies exceeded the PRI's for the first time.

In 2007, Calderón managed to forge coalitions with opposition lawmakers to pass modest pension, tax, electoral, and judicial reforms, but political wrangling increased in 2008 due to an attempted reform of the petroleum sector and the approach of the 2009 congressional elections. The PRI emerged from the July 2009 balloting with control of the Chamber of Deputies, taking 237 seats and forming a majority with the 21 seats of the allied Green Party. The PAN's share fell to 143 seats, and the PRD declined to a distant third, with 71. For a third straight year, the PRI outperformed its rivals in state and local elections, which were held in six states in 2009. Balloting was held in nine states in 2010, with PRI candidates winning the gubernatorial contests in six.

Nonetheless, alliances between the PAN and the PRD led to the election of non-PRI governors in Oaxaca, Sinaloa, and Puebla for the first time in decades.

Intermittent talks among the three major parties in 2010 failed to yield progress on a major political reform proposed by Calderón in December 2009. The package would, among other changes, allow limited reelection for many elected officials, permit candidates to run as independents, provide for a second round of voting in presidential elections, reduce the size of Congress, and grant the president a line-item veto on budget bills.

Also in 2010, more than 15,000 people were killed in violence associated with major drug-trafficking syndicates, which has increased each year since 2006 and has become the dominant concern in Mexican politics. This precipitous rise occurred despite Calderón's decision to deploy the military to the worst-affected areas soon after taking office. While a majority of Mexicans continued to support the government's offensive against organized crime, opinion polls also registered skepticism about official claims that the campaign was making progress. In addition, mounting allegations of severe human rights violations have surrounded the security operations conducted by more than 45,000 soldiers in various parts of Mexico.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Mexico is an electoral democracy. The president is elected to a six-year term and cannot be reelected. The bicameral Congress consists of the 128-member Senate, elected for six years through a mix of direct voting and proportional representation, with at least two parties represented in each state's delegation, and the 500-member Chamber of Deputies, with 300 elected directly and 200 through proportional representation, all for three-year terms. Members of Congress are also currently barred from reelection. Each state has an elected governor and legislature.

Mexico's Federal Electoral Institute, which supervises elections and enforces political party laws, has come to be viewed as a model for other countries. The 2006 elections were considered generally free and fair, but there were many complaints, especially by the opposition PRD, concerning negative advertising and the use of administrative resources on behalf of the presidential victor, Felipe Calderón of the ruling PAN. In response, an electoral reform was passed in 2007 to strictly regulate campaign financing and the content of political advertising. Opinion was mixed regarding the efficacy of the reform in its first major test, the 2009 Chamber of Deputies elections, but the contest overall was considered free and fair. At the state level, allegations of abuse of public resources to favor specific gubernatorial candidates have increased in recent years.

Perceptions of the vulnerability of politicians to pressure from organized crime increased in 2010 with the murders of 13 small-town mayors and the PRI candidate for governor of Tamaulipas, one of the most violent states. Estimates of the number of municipalities subject to drug traffickers' influence have grown substantially in recent years. In the most violence-plagued regions, provision of public services has become more difficult.

Official corruption remains a serious problem. Billions of dollars in illegal drug money is believed to enter the country each year from the United States, and there is a perception that drug money affects politics, particularly on the state and local levels. In May 2009, federal authorities arrested more than 30 public officials in Michoacán for ties to the locally dominant La Familia criminal organization, but by the end of 2010 nearly all of the cases had collapsed, feeding allegations that the charges were politically motivated. No senior politicians have been convicted of corruption in recent years, though many security officials have been dismissed or charged with links to drug traffickers. Mexico was ranked 98 out of 178 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Legal and constitutional guarantees of free speech have been gradually improving, but the security environment for journalists has deteriorated markedly. Some major media outlets are no longer dependent on the government for advertising and subsidies, and the competitive press has taken the lead in denouncing official corruption, though serious investigative reporting is scarce. Other outlets, particularly at the local level, remain vulnerable to relationships in which positive coverage of politicians is exchanged for financial benefits. Broadcast media are dominated by two corporations that control over 90 percent of the stations. Defamation was decriminalized at the federal level in 2007, and while it remains a crime in many states, a 2009 Supreme Court decision expanded the range of reporting protected from such state laws.

Since a sharp increase in violence in 2006, reporters probing police issues, drug trafficking, and official corruption have faced a high risk of physical harm. The National Human Rights Commission reported nine journalists killed in 2010, with another four disappeared, making Mexico one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists. Self-censorship has increased, and many newspapers in high-violence zones no longer publish bylines with stories involving organized crime; others avoid such stories altogether. A special prosecutor's office devoted to investigating crimes against journalists has made only slow progress since opening in 2006. The office was given increased powers in July 2010, and in October the government pledged to arrange protection for threatened journalists, but rights groups considered the initiative weak. Mexico's 2002 freedom of information law, despite some limitations, has been considered successful at strengthening transparency at the federal level, though many states lag behind. The government does not restrict internet access.

Religious freedom is constitutionally protected and generally respected in practice. However, it is limited in some areas, and political battles over issues such as abortion and homosexual rights have led to an increase in religious discourse in the public sphere in recent years. In August 2010, the Roman Catholic archbishop of Guadalajara accused the Supreme Court of corruption after it ruled that same-sex marriages conducted in Mexico City must be considered valid throughout Mexico. The government does not restrict academic freedom.

Constitutional guarantees regarding free assembly and association are generally respected, but political and civic expression is restricted in some regions. In June 2010, the Supreme Court ordered the release of 12 prisoners convicted of responsibility for the violence that erupted when police attempted to evict market vendors in Atenco in 2006. Nongovernmental organizations, though highly active, sometimes face violent resistance, including threats and occasional murders. The United Nations documented five murders of human rights defenders in 2010. The most highly publicized was the December killing in Chihuahua of Marisela Escobedo, who had become an anti-impunity activist following the murder of her daughter.

Although Mexican trade unions' role as a pillar of the PRI has diminished significantly, independent unions have long faced government and management interference. Informal, nontransparent negotiations between employers and politically connected union leaders often result in "protection contracts" that govern employee rights but are never seen by workers. Those attempting to form independent unions are frequently fired. The government's closure of a state-run electric company in October 2009 led to protests and political strife that continued in 2010. Several large unions, particularly the teachers' union, are considered by many observers and citizens to pose obstacles to necessary policy reforms.

The justice system remains plagued by delays and unpredictability. A 2008 constitutional reform replaced the civil-inquisitorial trial system with an oral-adversarial one. An explicit presumption of innocence and stricter rules regarding evidence were also included, and the reform was widely expected to strengthen due process and increase efficiency and fairness. Nonetheless, human rights groups raised concerns about the vague definition of organized crime and the substantially weaker protections, including extended detention without charge, afforded to organized crime suspects. Implementation of the new system was expected to take eight years, and by the end of 2010 legislation to apply the procedures had passed in just 10 of 31 states.

In rural areas, respect for laws by official agencies remains tenuous, and coordination between federal authorities and the state and local police is problematic. In many of the most crime-plagued zones, federal police and troops have, upon arrival, simply relieved local police of duty, and the replacement of senior police officials with military personnel increased in 2010. A 2009 law requires all members of the police to be vetted; while in August 2010 over 10 percent of the Federal Police was dismissed for various offenses, the process moved slowly at the state and municipal levels. In October 2010 Calderón sent a bill to Congress that mandates the merger of state and municipal police, but the legislation had not passed by year's end.

Lower courts and law enforcement in general are undermined by widespread bribery, and a significant majority of crimes go unreported because the underpaid police are viewed as either inept or in league with criminals. Torture, arbitrary arrest, and abuse of prisoners persist in many areas. Prisons are violent and overcrowded, and pretrial detainees account for over 40 percent of inmates. Several prison riots in 2010 resulted in the deaths of scores of prisoners, while more than 400 inmates escaped during the year, including over 230 in two incidents in Tamaulipas in September and December. Reports of vigilante activity increased in 2009 and 2010, though

evidence regarding the scale is scant.

Presidential authority over the armed forces is extensive, but the military has historically operated beyond public scrutiny, and human rights advocates have warned that its strengthened counternarcotics role has not been accompanied by increased clarity regarding limitations on its conduct. Complaints of abuse increased dramatically in 2009 and 2010, including allegations of kidnapping, torture, rape, and murder. Several highly publicized incidents in which civilians were killed by soldiers created pressure to establish greater accountability for military abuses. Military personnel are generally tried in military courts. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights issued several decisions in 2010 reconfirming Mexico's obligation to try cases of human rights violations in civilian courts. In October 2010, the government submitted a bill to Congress that would give civilian courts jurisdiction over serious crimes involving the military, including torture and forced disappearance, but human rights groups complained that the legislation would continue to allow military justice to be applied in other cases of severe crimes against civilians. The legislation remained pending at year's end.

The number of deaths attributed to drugs and organized crime has risen sharply each year since 2007, with over 15,200 in 2010 alone. The carnage was concentrated in northern Mexico, particularly in Ciudad Juárez, where over 3,200 killings occurred, making it one of the world's deadliest cities. The murders often featured extreme brutality and torture designed to maximize the psychological impact on civilians, authorities, and rival groups. The number of massacres also rose, including several attacks on drug rehabilitation centers and an attack at a party in Juárez that left 17 teenagers dead.

In addition to homicides, organized criminals have increased kidnappings, extortion, and other offenses. The government took a number of steps in recent years to curb the violence and ease popular frustration, including consultations with civic leaders, the signing of a \$1.5 billion counternarcotics aid agreement with the United States, the continued deployment of over 45,000 troops, the reformation of the federal police, and the decriminalization of possession of small quantities of drugs. The government has pointed to the killing or arrest of several dozen criminal kingpins in 2009 and 2010 as evidence of increased pressure on the syndicates.

Mexican law bans all forms of discrimination, including those based on ethnic origin, gender, age, and religion. Nevertheless, social and economic discrimination has marginalized indigenous peoples, with many relegated to extreme poverty in rural villages that lack essential services. The government has attempted to improve indigenous-language services in the justice system, an area of major concern. Indigenous groups, particularly in Chihuahua and southern states, were harmed by the criminal violence in 2010. In addition, disputes over land issues within indigenous groups at times become violent. One such dispute, between factions of the Triqui indigenous group, resulted in over 30 deaths in 2010. Rights groups also frequently detail the persecution and criminal predation faced by migrants from Central America, many of whom are bound for the United States. In August 2010, the bodies of 72 migrants, presumably executed by criminal gangs, were found in Tamaulipas. In several states, criminals impeded free movement by blocking major roads.

Domestic violence and sexual abuse are common, and perpetrators are rarely punished. Implementation of a 2007 law designed to protect women from such crimes remains halting, particularly at the state level. Mexico is both a major source and a transit country for trafficked persons. Internal trafficking is also a problem. The murder of hundreds of women in the U.S. border zone over the last 15 years has remained a controversial subject. Abortion has been a contentious issue in recent years, with many states reacting to Mexico City's 2007 liberalization of abortion laws by strengthening their own criminal bans on the procedure.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom. Click [here](#) for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.*