



Freedom in the World - Mexico (2010)

Capital:
Mexico City

Population:
107,800,000

Political Rights Score: 2 *

Civil Liberties Score: 3 *

Status: Free

[Overview](#)

Violence associated with organized crime, particularly drug trafficking, again rose dramatically in 2009, resulting in the deaths of at least 7,700 people. The government continued to deploy troops to the areas most affected by violence even as allegations of rights abuses by the military increased. The opposition Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and its allies captured a majority of seats in July elections for the lower house of Congress, and in December President Felipe Calderon proposed a package of major political reforms.

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. The new president assembled a cabinet that included businessmen and intellectuals, announced plans to overhaul the notoriously corrupt and inefficient law enforcement agencies, and pledged to make Mexico an international leader in human rights.

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 cartels. 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.

The 2006 presidential election was extremely close, with PAN candidate Felipe Calderon defeating Mexico City mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the PRD by

a mere 244,000 votes in the initial count. Lopez Obrador claimed that the result was fraudulent and declared himself the winner. For several months he sought the annulment of the election and a full recount, 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 Calderon the winner. Though the PAN won the most seats in the congressional elections, with 206 in the Chamber of Deputies and 52 in the Senate, the PRD's share of deputies exceeded the PRI's for the first time.

Several outbreaks of social unrest occurred in 2006. In April, a large demonstration in the town of San Salvador Atenco led to clashes between police and protesters that left two people dead, more than 200 arrested, and legal controversies over police conduct and protesters' harsh prison sentences. An even more serious crisis erupted in Oaxaca, where an attempt by Governor Ulises Ruiz of the PRI to forcefully disperse protesters led to months of violence that caused over a dozen deaths before Fox sent in federal police in late October.

In 2007, Calderon managed to forge legislative coalitions with opposition lawmakers to pass 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, and for a third straight year the party outperformed its rivals in state and local elections, which were held in six states in 2009.

Violence associated with organized crime, particularly drug trafficking, continued to worsen in 2009, despite Calderon's decision to deploy the military to the worst-affected areas after taking office in 2006. An expanded troop deployment in Juarez in early 2009 temporarily diminished the volume of killings there, but a subsequent upsurge dented local confidence in the authorities, as did mounting allegations of severe human rights violations by the military. December 2009 was the deadliest month of Calderon's term to date, causing increased criticism of the government's anticrime policies.

Mexico's economy also suffered during the year, with gross domestic product declining by an estimated 6.5 percent. The global economic downturn helped to reduce remittances from the United States and significantly slowed migration, even as U.S. authorities continued to step up deportations. The economy, particularly the tourism industry, was also buffeted by Mexico's status as the epicenter of an H1N1 influenza outbreak that began in March.

As the country prepared to enter its bicentennial year in 2010, a generalized sense of political dysfunction spurred Calderon to propose major political reforms in December. Among other changes, the package would 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.

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 (IFE), 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 Calderon of the ruling PAN. In response, an electoral reform was passed in 2007 to strictly regulate campaign financing and the content of political advertising. Supporters argued that the reform would sever the links between politics and Mexico's often oligarchic business interests, while critics claimed that the new rules would weaken free speech and further increase the power of the main three parties—the PAN, the PRI, and the PRD. 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. The PRI garnered 237 seats, with its allied Green Party (PVEM) taking 21, thereby assuring PRI control of the chamber. The PAN's share fell to 143 seats, and the PRD declined to a distant third, with 71 seats.

Official corruption remains a serious problem. According to the 2009 Latinobarometro poll, 17 percent of Mexicans stated that they or a relative had been party to a corrupt act in the previous 12 months, though this represented a sharp decline from the 2002–05 average of 54 percent. 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 officials arrested more than a dozen political functionaries in Michoacan for ties to the locally dominant La Familia criminal organization. Given the arrests' proximity to the July elections, the PRD state governor, Leonel Godoy, accused the government of politicizing justice. An arrest warrant was issued in July for Godoy's half-brother, a newly elected PRD congressman. Other scandals uncovered in 2009 involved the misappropriation of agricultural subsidies, the siphoning of oil from state-owned pipelines, and the opaque licensing of daycare facilities; the last came to light following a June fire that killed 48 children in Sonora. 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 89 out of 180 countries

surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Legal and constitutional guarantees of free speech have been gradually improving, but the security environment for journalists has deteriorated markedly. No longer dependent on the government for advertising and subsidies, the competitive press has taken the lead in denouncing official corruption, though serious investigative reporting is scarce. 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. According to the National Human Rights Commission, 13 journalists were killed in 2009, 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 on stories involving organized crime. Press freedom groups have repeatedly noted that the special prosecutor's office devoted to investigating these acts has made only slow progress since opening in 2006. 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. 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 February 2009, the Supreme Court cleared top state officials of responsibility for the violence between police and protesters in Atenco in 2006. Nongovernmental organizations, though increasingly active, sometimes face violent resistance, including threats and occasional murders. The United Nations documented 128 acts of aggression against human rights defenders between 2006 and August 2009, with an impunity rate of over 98 percent.

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. In addition, workers attempting to form independent unions are frequently fired by management. The government's closure of a state-run electric company in October 2009 angered the

powerful electrical workers' union, which argued that the move was politically motivated. The government and many analysts maintained that the closure was necessary to improve the efficiency of state services.

The justice system remains plagued by delays and unpredictability. In June 2008, Congress passed a major constitutional reform that 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, expected to take eight years, proceeded slowly in 2009.

In rural areas, respect for laws by official agencies remains tenuous, and coordination between federal authorities and the state and local police is problematic, with purges of local police forces adding to the tension in 2008 and 2009. In many of the most crime-plagued zones, federal police and troops have, upon arrival, simply relieved local police of duty. 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. Although the federal prosecutor's office announced in late 2009 that over 225,000 drug-related arrests had been made during Calderon's term, it acknowledged that nearly 75 percent of those arrested were subsequently freed. Prisons are violent and overcrowded, and pretrial detainees account for over 40 percent of inmates. Several prison riots in 2009 resulted in the deaths of scores of prisoners, while 53 prisoners fled a facility in Zacatecas in May without interference by guards. In the face of the government's seeming ineffectiveness, reports of vigilante activity increased in 2009.

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, including allegations of kidnapping, torture, rape, and murder. Although three soldiers were convicted of rape in a civil court in 2007, military personnel are generally tried in military courts, and most observers agree that the government's affirmations of these courts' effectiveness are not backed by credible evidence. In addition, an estimated 150,000 soldiers have deserted since 2000, providing a large pool of trained recruits for organized crime.

Although overall homicide rates have declined since the mid-1990s, the number of deaths attributed to drugs and organized crime has risen sharply in recent years, with over 7,700 in 2009 alone. The carnage was concentrated in northern Mexico, particularly in Ciudad Juarez, where over 2,600 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. On several occasions in 2009, apparent noncombatants were specifically targeted.

In addition to homicides, organized criminals have increased kidnappings, extortion, and other offenses. The government took a number of steps in 2008 and 2009 to curb the violence and ease popular frustration, including consultations with civic leaders, the signing of a \$1.4 billion counternarcotics aid agreement with the United States, the continued deployment of over 45,000 troops, the reformation of the federal police, the decriminalization of possession of small quantities of drugs, and numerous arrests.

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. Their ability to participate in decisions affecting their land and cultural traditions is usually negligible, and many are 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. In August and November 2009, the Supreme Court ordered the release of 29 indigenous prisoners who had been convicted in connection with a notorious 1997 massacre in Chiapas, citing severe procedural irregularities in their cases. Indigenous groups, particularly in Chihuahua and southern states, were harmed by the criminal violence in 2009. Rights groups also frequently detail the persecution and criminal predation faced by migrants from Central America, who are often bound for the United States.

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; in Ciudad Juarez, the number of women killed has risen substantially in recent years along with the overall murder rate. Abortion became an increasingly contentious issue in 2009, as many states reacted to Mexico City's 2007 liberalization of abortion laws by strengthening their own criminal bans on the procedure in most circumstances.

** 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.*