Double-Fragmentation and Bleeding Democracy: The Drug Trade, Violence, and Democratic Health in Mexico

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This paper seeks to explain the drastic increases in violence related to the drug trade in Mexico since 2000, arguing that a 'double-fragmentation'—a decentralisation of both political and criminal power—has been the key factor driving the violence. For over seven decades, Mexico's one-party state protected cartel activities, while governing inter-cartel interactions and thus restricting violence. Democratisation (a decentralisation of political power) eliminated the state-cartel protection mechanisms that had persisted throughout the 20th century, leaving cartels free to compete more violently with one another. This competition led the Calderón administration to adopt an aggressive approach to cartel policing which militarised DTO (drug-trafficking organisation) activities and targeted organisation leaders. This fragmented the most prominent cartels in Mexico into smaller, subnational units with access to military equipment and expertise, such as Los Zetas. These subnational units have individually sought to expand their territory and control, corrupting judicial and electoral activities along the way while engaging in increasingly theatrical forms of violence. The paper emphasises the insecurity and instability produced by escalating violence as a concerning factor in the weakening of Mexico's democratic health, and questions whether the popularity of the incumbent Obrador administration—despite power-consolidating behaviour—is a result of those factors.

Introduction

After a single-party authoritarian state dominated the political sphere in Mexico for the majority of the 20th century, Mexico finally achieved electoral democratisation in the year 2000. Yet, since then, rates of violence have skyrocketed, and drug trafficking groups have plagued all arenas of Mexican life. How could democratisation lead to worsened social conditions? In Mexico, democratic transition has led to the collapse of state-cartel collusion and protection agreements. This produced increased competition between the cartels to re-establish state connections and consolidate territory. A key symptom of this competition was increases in violence, leading the Calderón administration to intervene and over-militarise the conflict. As a result, many cartels splintered into smaller local factions—increasing the prevalence of turf wars, violence, acts of terror, and corruption—predominantly at the subnational level. In this sense, a double-fragmentation occurred in Mexico—the fragmentation of political power, and the fragmentation of criminal power—both caused by leadership turnover. Broadly, Mexico has become caught in a self-perpetuating cycle of violence that has weakened democratic health and made the country susceptible to democratic backsliding. This paper will argue that Mexico's democratic transition has caused a double-fragmentation—one which led to an exacerbation of drug-related violence and political corruption, producing high levels of insecurity, and damaging public perceptions of democracy.

This paper is in no way meant to argue against democratisation. Rather, it draws on a long line of scholarship that recognises the difficulties of democratic transitions in states that have had their social fabrics partially defined by the activities of criminal organisations—sometimes referred to as 'perverse state formation' (Pearce 2010, p. 286). Instead, it seeks instead to understand the links between democratisation, violence, and democratic consolidation. While previous scholarship has examined Mexico's democratisation, violence, and subnational criminal governance, this paper seeks to propel an understanding of these issues toward a discussion of broader democratic health in the country. Further research should examine current democratic health and stability in Mexico, as a symptom of the aforementioned issues.

Fragmentation of Political Power

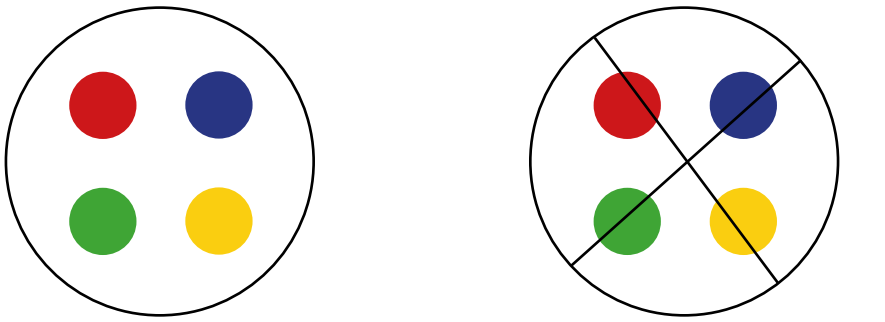
The PRI Period

For seventy-one years, Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) governed the country uninterrupted. Although elections were conducted throughout this period, they were not free and fair, and election fraud was widespread (Trejo & Ley 2020; Thompson 2004). Scholars generally recognise that the country's true political shift towards democracy occurred with the 2000 election and the victory of Vincente Fox's National Action Party (PAN) (Schedler 2022; Trejo & Ley 2020; International Crisis Group 2021). The PRI's political monopoly had been slowly eroding since the late 1980s, when the left-wing factions broke off to promote policies that differed from the PRI's. By 2000, popular support for other parties, such as the PAN and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) had increased, and the Mexican political system became a multiparty affair which enjoyed newfound political pluralism. As a result, the total dominance of the PRI party over the Mexican political sphere was diminished, and previously entrenched norms of political behaviour began to disappear.

Prior to this period, the drug trade in Mexico was characterised by centralisation of power—both in terms of drug trafficking organisations (DTOs)[1] and politics. Four major cartels[2] dominated the drug trade; these were the Sinaloa Cartel, the Juarez Cartel, the Gulf Cartel, and the Tijuana Cartel. The country was a major exporter of narcotics in this period, but these larger organisations remained surprisingly peaceful under what has been aptly referred to as the PRI's '*pax mafioso*' (Trejo & Ley 2020, p. 71; Rios 2013, p. 139).

[1] Use of the term 'drug trafficking organisation' (DTO) refers broadly to a spectrum of sizes of criminal drug-trafficking organisations in this paper.

[2] Use of the term 'cartel' refers to a large drug-trafficking criminal organisation in this paper.



A. one protector, many organisations

B. many protectors, many organisations

Figure 1 | Representation of state-criminal organisation structures in Mexico. Solid lines represent state protection; coloured shapes represent criminal organisations such as cartels. Adapted from Snyder & Duran-Martinez (2009, p. 258).

The sheer political hegemony of the PRI ensured that the drug trade could be organised around state activities, and a high degree of peacefulness was maintained, especially compared to other drug-trafficking countries (Snyder & Duran-Martinez 2009; Trejo & Ley 2020). The PRI established patronage networks with the cartels, ensuring protection of public officials and civilians, in return for judicial protection of cartel members—the PRI 'defined the rules of the game for traffickers' (O'Neil 2009, p. 65). There were high levels of collusion occurring between state officials and cartels; perhaps most notably, General Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo was in the pay of the Juarez cartel while in office as the regime's most 'senior drug official' (Morris 2012, pp. 30–31; Reuter 2009, p. 278).

Political scientists Angelica Duran-Martinez and Richard Snyder refer to this phenomenon as 'state-sponsored protection rackets' (Snyder & Duran-Martinez 2009, p. 253). They can be understood as informal agreements where 'public officials refrain from enforcing the law or, alternatively, enforce it selectively against the rivals of a criminal organization, in exchange for a share of the profits generated by the organization' (Snyder & Duran-Martinez 2009, p. 254). Mexico's PRI essentially institutionalised corruption as the norm for interactions between the state and drug cartels through state-sponsored protection. Cartels that enjoyed the protection of the state would provide information about other criminal groups which did not have agreements with the state. This allowed state forces to eliminate the cartels' competitors, generating promotions and praise for the police, and increasing market share for the cartels (Snyder & Duran-Martinez 2009). Under this structure, the state was able to control the market and reduce competition, thus reducing violence (Rios 2013).

Figure 1 is a visual reference for different structures of state-criminal organisation interactions. In the PRI's ruling era, Mexico's structure resembled that of example 'A'—where a single centralised protector commits to protection deals with all organisations inside of their jurisdiction. In a case where a single hegemonic political party such as the PRI has central control over state functioning and elections do not take place, it is less prone to violence compared to other structures. This effect occurs because the given government has the full latitude required to enforce, commit, and guarantee deals with organisations over a long-time horizon[3] (Snyder & Duran-Martinez 2009). Cartels could expect that their deals would be upheld because there were no threats to political hegemony of the ruling party; the drug trade remained stable and controlled under the PRI.

Electoral Democratisation

When Mexico's transition to democracy occurred, the state's pre-existing patronage networks were shattered, sending the drug trade into an increasingly competitive free-for-all. Although the PRI did not lose a general election until the year 2000, its political monopoly began to erode in the late 1980s. In 1989, the PRI lost its first governorship, in the region of Baja California. In response, drug trafficking-related violence in that region increased sharply (O'Neil 2009, p. 65). This regional effect was the precursor to the eventual country-wide splintering of the PRI's patronage networks. This was compounded with reforms to the Attorney General's Office (PGR) which introduced regular relocation of personnel, fired large swaths of federal employees, and 'unleashed an ongoing process of creation and elimination of offices' (Snyder & Duran-Martinez 2009, p. 263). Each of these processes served to reduce the time horizons of government officials. A decade later, the PRI had far more broadly lost its control over the enforcement—and crucially, the non-enforcement—of the law across the country through the democratic transition (Snyder & Duran-Martinez 2009). Alongside actual leadership turnover and regime change, even more massive amounts of police were fired in an attempt to further dissolve ties between the state and the cartels (Reuter 2009). As a result, pre-existing informal arrangements between the state and the cartels broke down, resulting in cartels' inability to dominate their territory and prevent the power accumulation of rivals (Trejo & Ley 2020).

Without state protection, cartels simultaneously lost hegemonic control of their territories, and competing DTOs—and violence—emerged. Due to the illegality of the drug trade, there is an absence of 'formal mechanisms and systematic rules to deal with disputes and disagreements between organizations' (Rios 2013, p. 142). This makes competition highly unstable, as DTOs are left to resort to violence in the wake of territorial disputes. In response, territory-based violence increased, and it became a necessity for cartels to invest

[3] 'Time horizon' refers to the foreseeable, predictable future. In this context, it refers to the fact that cartels could rely on their contacts within the state to remain in office for very extended periods of time, given the non-democratic structure of the state. Leadership turnover initiated by political plurality would disrupt these time horizons.

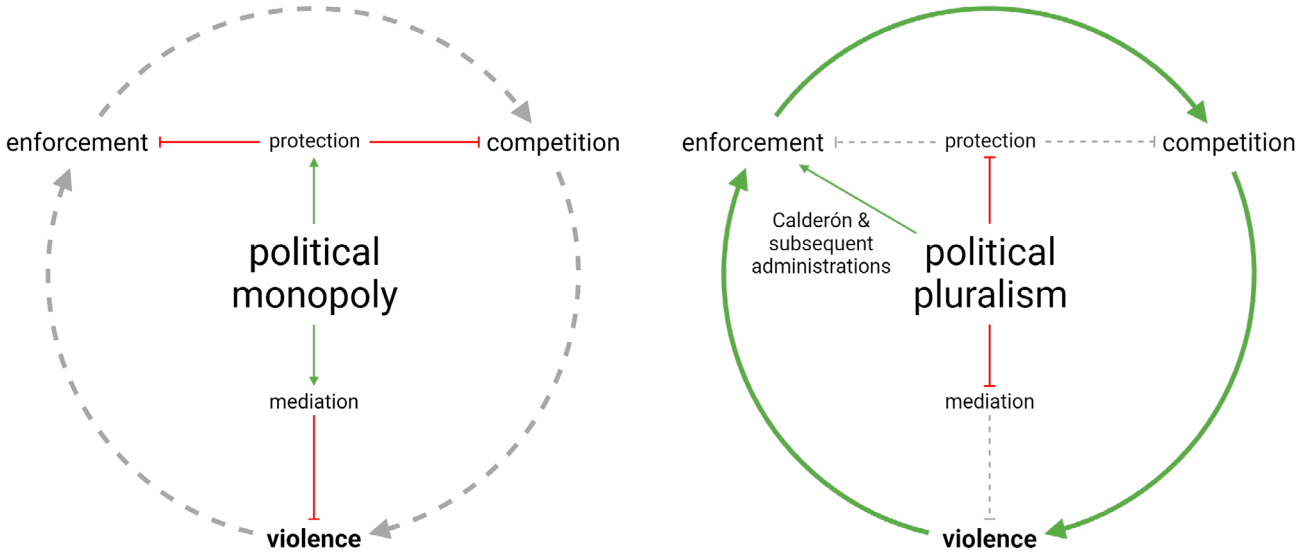


Figure 1 | Comparison between political monopoly and pluralism, and their resultant effects on the self-reinforcing equilibrium formed by relationships between enforcement operations, competition in drug markets and DTO violence.

in private militias and professionalisation of their own independent security forces. (Trejo & Ley 2020, pp. 82–83). This set the conditions for inter-gang clashes to emerge, making increasing drug-related violence a more salient issue in the nascent Mexican electoral sphere.

Calderón Administration

After his victory in the 2006 general election, Calderón embarked on a bold hard-line approach towards the drug trade. His tenure marked a militarisation of the newly multipolar drug trafficking landscape, which led to a further exacerbation of violence (Reuter 2009). A massive state military force of 6,500 was deployed into the state of Michoacán, and 45,000 would be involved there by 2011 (Calderón et al. 2015, p. 1456). The deployment of the military rather than police forces was particularly detrimental in that it forced cartels to acquire more advanced weaponry and professionalised militias—producing cartel-owned non-state armies (Trejo & Ley 2020). The result was a staggering increase in drug-related homicides, increasing each year onwards from 2006: surging 142% from 2007–2008, another 40% from 2008–2009, and another 59% from 2009–2010 (Rios 2013, p. 140). Since democratisation, the ongoing drug war has resulted in 180,000 homicides and 70,000 disappearances (Schedler 2022, p. 483).

A crucial effect of this period is that it produced record numbers of arrests, interdictions, and extraditions to the United States (O'Neil 2009, p. 67). The focus of Calderón's approach was the specific targeting of high-profile leaders in cartels and DTOs, otherwise referred to as the 'kingpin strategy' (Trejo & Ley 2020, p. 144). A list of the thirty-seven most-wanted drug lords was released by the government in 2009, and by 2011, the state had 'had captured or killed twenty of the thirty-seven, twice the number of kingpins captured during the two previous administrations' (Calderón et al. 2015, p. 1456).

Cycles of Violence at the Subnational Level

In essence, the increase in Mexico's drug violence is rooted in its democratisation (see **Figure 2**). Political plurality resulted in a fragmentation of political power, causing the breakdown of long-upheld state-sponsored rackets which had effectively governed the dominant drug cartels. This created a more competitive drug market, leading to increased violence between the cartels. In response, state enforcement operations intensified under Calderón's administration. This hard-line approach produced a high degree of leadership neutralisation, which in turn fragmented the cartels into smaller, local DTOs—further increasing competition between traffickers, and restarting the cycle.

Criminal Fragmentation

The classic adage 'cut the head off the snake, and the body will die' could not be less true in the case of Mexico. Quantitative analysis has found that leadership neutralisation (capturing or killing) led to increases of 31.2% in drug-related homicides and 33.9% in non-drug-related homicides within a given municipality (Calderón et al. 2015, pp. 1471–1472). Thus, leadership neutralisation also leads to increased inter-gang violence, which has an even stronger spill over effect onto the rest of the population.

Decapitation of the Mexican cartels has led to increased violence in a few ways. First, it created internal succession struggles within DTOs where potential heirs engaged their loyal forces to eliminate potential competition for total leadership (Rios 2013). Second, it obstructed command chains from leaders to local 'cells' (Calderón et al. 2015). Local cells are responsible for smaller-scale criminal activities within their respective municipalities, and a lack of enforcement or connection to a larger cartel network can lead cells to pursue revenue instead through activities like extortion or robbery, explaining the spill over effect. Third, and

most importantly, it led to an outright fracturing of cartels (Calderón et al. 2015; Trejo & Ley 2020). The elimination of a leader can reduce ties between disparate factions within a cartel, which may not be so supportive of a new leader or may back their own leader against another entirely. Additionally, leaders of smaller factions may work independently to 'gain control of fragmented markets' (O'Neil 2009, p. 68). This occurs when existing fragments of a larger DTO may vie for particularly valuable territories and trafficking routes, as a means of further increasing market share and security against the other fragments.

As a result, many smaller DTOs emerged as independent trafficking groups while the larger organisations splintered into pieces. Thus, elimination of leadership has not dismantled the cartel system, 'but broken it into smaller fragments that fight each other for turf' (Esberg 2020). The number of active DTOs in Mexico is estimated to have more than doubled since 2009, and a large proportion of these are smaller cells that have broken off from their larger organisation in the wake of leadership neutralisation (Esberg 2020). Further, their recession into smaller, more local organisations has made their tracking much harder, making it likely that there are far more than can be documented.

Without a strong centralised state apparatus to provide protection to DTOs, collusion has been transposed to the subnational level. In an increasingly competitive environment, state protection is one of the most valuable advantages that a DTO can have against those who impede on its turf, making it a necessity to compete and survive (International Crisis Group 2021). The DTOs recognise this: 'If there's one rule all of them know, it's that only those who have the protection of the state can grow' (Ernst 2021). The smaller, newly emerged DTOs operate primarily in specific local territories, and do not have the capacity to pay the high cost that comes with bribing high-level officials. The focus has then shifted from the national level to the local level—'the weakest layer of government' (Trejo & Ley 2020, p. 252). Out of 357 Mexican officials arrested in 2009 for aiding DTOs, 90% were from municipal police forces (Morris 2012, p. 31). In discussing attempts to gain territory from other DTOs, a high-ranking lieutenant in a criminal organisation remarked that '[t]hey have the state government on their side … and when we try to attack, they send helicopters and launch operations' (Ernst 2021). Other benefits include regular exchanges of intelligence about the activities of rival groups and acting against enemy groups together—protection deals with local authorities 'can tilt the balance of power in favour of one crime ring or another' (International Crisis Group 2021, p. 11). The current distribution of protection therefore more closely resembles structure 'B' found in **Figure 1** (p. 100)—more (smaller) organisations, more protection sources, more competition: more prone to violence (Snyder & Duran-Martinez 2009).

Public Terrorism and Trauma

Alongside pure rates of violence, the form of the violence has also changed. The transition to the local level has brought with it the incentive for DTOs to weaponise terror. Generating a reputation as a feared and violent group is a form of credible commitment of retaliation in the case of local security forces defecting from protection agreements. As well, pure extortion and funnelling of tax dollars has also become an important source of revenue, making the narrative of a threatening presence more important. It can also make protection cheaper, as state officials can be forced to cooperate with DTOs through fear rather than bribes (Chalk 2011). In some cases, multiple DTOs compete for control of the same local officials—those with a reputation for higher levels of violence, and especially 'theatrical violence',[4] are more likely to game deals with local authorities, through this fear factor. In one case, a newly elected mayor received offers from two different rival DTOs within days of entering office—the safest option is to side with the group that has a greater capacity for violence (Felbab-Brown 2021a).

As a result, DTOs are competing for both territory as well as image. Theatrical violence is a key tool for DTOs to curate the image of a barbaric and ruthless organisation (Felbab-Brown 2021a). For example, it has become commonplace for DTO victims to be skinned, dismembered, or boiled in lye, and put on display (Chalk 2011). Many groups that were produced out of the fragmentation of the cartels, like Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) and Los Zetas, have resorted specifically to acts of public terrorism and theatrical violence. The CJNG emerged from the fracturing of a section of the Sinaloa cartel, notably ignited by the killing of drug lord Ignacio Coronel by Mexican security forces (InSight Crime 2020). The Zetas, meanwhile, were originally the armed wing of the Gulf Cartel—gaining their autonomy with the arrest of the Gulf Cartel's leader, Osiel Cárdenas Guillén (Corcoran 2017). The CJNG has used rocket launchers to shoot down state helicopters and launched military-style sieges on towns controlled by rivals, while sending audio messages of death threats to local citizens (Felbab-Brown 2021a; Arrieta 2021). They have begun using drone-mounted IEDs to bomb and terrorise civilians from above, in one case dropping a barrage of explosives directly on a police station (Janowitz 2022). CJNG recruits are coerced into engaging in cannibalism in order to desensitise recruits to violence (Meza 2019). In 2008, the Zetas tossed fragmentation grenades into a packed plaza celebrating Mexican Independence Day, killing eight civilians and injuring over a hundred (Chalk 2011, pp. 42–43). In the summer of 2011, they set fire to a casino, killing fifty-two civilians (Dudley 2017). Later in the year, they massacred seventy-two bound civilians and poured their bodies into a mass grave (Moore 2011). In another case, the Zetas abducted several buses of travellers and forced them to fight each other to the death for their survival (Corcoran 2017). These are only specific examples from two groups—more broadly, DTO members are increasingly rewarded on the basis of engaging in the most creative, sadistic, and theatrical acts of violence possible (Chalk 2011). Brutal violent activities like these produce generational trauma and insecurity, which induces further instability.

Insecurity and Political Stability

DTOs are destroying the prospects of a functioning Mexican state, and democratic consolidation. On the most basic level, a democratic state is conceived as being one that holds regular free and fair elections. However, more holistic views of democracy recognise that there is a necessity for more than just elections—it requires economic, social, and personal security. When political freedom is not combined with amelioration

[4] The term 'theatrical violence' refers to violent acts that serve a purpose aside from the violence itself. In the case of Mexican DTOs, it often manifests as excessively violent acts that seek to produce a terror-inducing image of the group which can be used as leverage against local officials, or to intimidate rivals.

of social conditions or proper protections of civilians, democracy itself is undermined (Gills & Rocamora 1992, p. 502). Therefore, democratic consolidation represents entrenchment of these rights and freedoms. If a more holistic criterion of democracy is not adopted or executed, backsliding can occur. In the case of Mexico, violence threatens consolidation through the 'delegitimization of state institutions; the public's growing willingness to turn to heavy-handed or antidemocratic "solutions"; and the degenerative effects on civil society' (Prillaman 2003, p. 8).

Political Functioning

DTOs engage in high levels of electoral violence and corruption, undermining the functioning of basic democratic institutions. Having control over a local mayor or governor is a key advantage for DTOs in competition with other criminal groups. Specifically, DTOs have sought to produce 'subnational criminal governance regimes in regions experiencing fierce turf wars' (Trejo & Ley 2020, p. 253) as a means of attaining total control over their territory. Under this system, 'local politics, economics, and much of people's everyday life is arbitrated by the narcos ... all life really, is totally managed by the narcos' (Felbab-Brown 2022). When a DTO's favoured candidate wins an election, they can take advantage of impunity, extort rent, embezzle taxes, and control regional businesses (Felbab-Brown 2021a). Candidates understand the inevitability of pressure from criminal organisations and will often proactively approach them for their support (International Crisis Group 2021). Local populations are coerced into voting for the preferred candidates of DTOs, while illicit campaign funding is delivered to candidates, and rival candidates are killed, or intimidated not to run for election (Felbab-Brown 2021a; International Crisis Group 2021). Over 80% of murders, attempted murders, death threats, kidnappings, and disappearances against state officials or candidates are perpetrated at the municipal level (Trejo and Ley 2020, p. 217). In the 2018 campaign period, '371 officials and 152 politicians, including 48 candidates, were murdered' (International Crisis Group 2021, p. i). Meanwhile, the first 6 months of campaigning in the most recent election period saw '69 politicians, including 22 candidates', (Ernst 2021) murdered across the country.

The Mexican judicial system is also heavily distorted by the presence of DTOs. This is caused both by corruption, intimidation, and outright violence. The prosecution rate for homicides in Mexico is around 2%, largely because of impunity drawn from cooperation between state authorities and criminal groups (Felbab-Brown 2022). In other cases, witnesses or others involved in legal cases are intimidated or killed. For example, in 2010, a DTO attacked a party predominantly populated by teenagers, killing fourteen—one of the attendees was set to testify as a witness in a trafficking-related homicide (Chalk 2011 p. 43). The most blatant case has perhaps been the justice system's dismissal of corruption and criminal collusion allegations against Mexico's former Defense Minister, Salvador Cienfuegos (Felbab-Brown 2021a, pp. 3–4).

The Mexican population endures high degrees of insecurity, and harbours high levels of distrust for state institutions. This is the result of drug-related violence, theatrical violence, electoral violence, lack of state protection for citizens, and corruption. Civil society is strangled by DTOs—when the state itself is run by the traffickers, organising is near-suicidal. Over 35% of the population reported that they limit the spaces they visit, including shopping and recreation, because of drug-related violence—meanwhile, 46% of the population reported that they have been the victim of either assault or robbery, while only 40% reported feeling safe in their neighbourhood at all (Muggah & Tobón 2018, pp. 9–11). Consequently, nearly 72% of the population does not trust the police (Baek, Han & Gordon 2021, p. 408). In fact, over half of people 'say they do not even bother reporting crimes to police because such efforts would be "pointless" or a "waste of time"' (Prillaman 2003, p. 9). On top of this, there is a strong correlation between experiences of violence in children, 'and later adolescent roles as victims or perpetrators of violence' (Pearce 2010, p. 288). Constant terror, fear of engaging in normal life, exposure to violence—all these things create a lasting imprint of collective trauma on a country that is struggling to consolidate. Mexico continues to bleed, and breaking cycles of violence are essential to its long-term healing.

Democratic Stability

Finally, experiences of violence have a high degree of power in shaping political attitudes and perceptions of political activities. Support for democratic institutions reduces sharply for those that have been subject to violence, and victims of crimes are much more likely to support non-legal or non-democratic institutions or candidates that claim to represent 'law and order' (Muggah 2019). Widespread violence and impunity cause citizens to 'feel unprotected or even further victimized by the system that is meant to protect them' (Pérez 2003, p. 628). As a family member of a victim of the war on drugs states, 'I don't know where the state ends and organized crime begins' (Morris 2012, p. 29). In Mexico, a National Institute of Statistics and Geography survey found that 76.4% of Mexicans had minimal or non-existent trust in political parties, 77.5% desired a government with a 'strong leader'—and even more telling—40.1% said they would favour a military government (International Crisis Group 2021, p. 6). Unfortunately, as predicted by political scientist Jenny Pearce, high levels of violence will lead democracy to become securitised—and as a result, democracy itself is sacrificed (2010, p. 286; p. 301).

Currently, the incumbent president and 'firebrand populist' Andrés Manuel López Obrador has been taking steps to continuously consolidate power (Muggah 2019). Obrador has both challenged democratic conventions and norms, while working to weaken electoral checks and balances, strengthening his party (Sánchez-Talanquer & Greene 2021). Obrador has also engaged in a 'systematic weakening of Mexico's institutions' by gutting budgets, and reducing regulatory power, also weakening the capacities of local security forces (Felbab-Brown 2022). At the same time, he has sought to reduce judicial independence, and reversed judicial reforms (Felbab-Brown 2021b, pp. 3–4). In 2020, Mexico became the most dangerous country for journalists in the world, with the highest rate of homicides against journalists in the world—topping war zones (Lakhani 2020). Obrador has 'weakened protection for journalists under threat and cut funds for investigations'—two of the journalists

killed in 2020 were under federal 'protection' due to receiving death threats (Lakhani 2020). Obrador makes use of polarising rhetoric and antagonises the press and the media in his speeches—in a similar fashion to other recent populist presidents (Flannery 2021) . Despite all these issues, Obrador's approval rating is between 60 and 80 percent (International Crisis Group 2021, p. i; Sheridan 2019).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Mexico's transition to a democracy began a chain of events that resulted in a double-fragmentation—of political power, and of criminal power. The advent of political pluralism in the country fragmented political power, disrupting long-standing agreements between the original major cartels and the PRI. These state-sponsored protection rackets broke down, leading to increased inter-cartel competition and violence. As a result, Felipe Calderón embarked on a hard-line, militarised approach to dealing with the cartels, focusing primarily on targeting high-profile leaders. As many cartel leaders were arrested and killed, their criminal organisations fragmented into many smaller, more localised DTOs with newfound autonomy. At the same time, the hard-line approach had forced many cartels to militarise themselves for protection. Increasingly localised and militarised DTOs created even further competition, forcing high degrees of pressure onto local subnational political systems. This has led to further increases in violence and corruption—producing high levels of insecurity and eventually distrust of democratic institutions across the country. Now, the incumbent president has been accused of centralising power, yet his approval ratings remain high—will Mexico be able to avoid democratic backsliding?

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