Mexico's Dying Democracy

AMLO and the Toll of Authoritarian Populism

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When Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador took office four years ago, he promised to deliver what he branded a "Fourth Transformation," the next in a series of defining junctures in Mexican history: the War of Independence in the early 1800s, the liberal movement of President Benito Juárez later that century, and the Revolution of 1910. To "make Mexico great again," he said he would fight deeply ingrained corruption and eradicate persistent poverty. But in the name of his agenda, López Obrador has removed checks and balances, weakened autonomous institutions, and seized discretionary control of the budget. Arguing that police forces cannot stop the country's mounting insecurity, he has supplanted them with the Mexican military and endowed it with unprecedented economic and political power. Today, the armed forces carry out his bidding on multiple fronts and have become a pillar of support for the government. López Obrador, or AMLO as he is known, seems intent on restoring something akin to the dominant-party rule that characterized Mexican politics from 1929 to 2000, but with a militarized twist.

Despite these questionable moves, the president and his party, Morena, remain popular. His supporters applaud the return of a strong and unencumbered leader, capable of enacting change in a country that is clamoring for more social justice for the many and less entitlement for the few. But his presidency, and the country's trajectory, worry scholars, activists, opposition parties, and members of civil society who fought to dismantle the hegemony of the former Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which was in power for 71 years, and now seek to defend Mexico's transition to multiparty democracy. These critics contend that López Obrador is polarizing the populace and jeopardizing the country's fledgling democracy with his routine attacks on civil society organizations, his stated desire to take apart key institutions, and his use of the bully pulpit to lambaste the media and members of the opposition.

His playbook is like those of strongmen in other countries, who argue that they have too many constraints on their power to effect foundational change, promote participatory politics, and rid the country of immoral and rapacious elites. Yet as Western scholars have lamented the rise of autocrats in Hungary, Nicaragua, Poland, Turkey, Venezuela, and even the United States, they have often overlooked Mexico's prominence in the growing list of countries where democracy is being subverted by elected leaders.

López Obrador's personalistic style of governing is a form of democratic backsliding. His rhetoric and policy decisions have put democratic norms and institutions at risk. He has reshaped the Mexican political ecosystem so quickly and fluidly that defending democracy has become extremely difficult, for civil society groups as well as opposition parties. López Obrador is eroding, in word and in deed, the democratic norms and rules that Mexico has developed since the PRI lost its grip on the political system. He denies the legitimacy of his

opponents by deeming them "traitors to the country." He tolerates criminality and violence to justify the militarization of the country. And he has displayed a willingness to curtail the civil liberties of critics, including those in the media. Reports of Mexican democracy's death may be exaggerated; it is not dead. But it is grievously ill. And López Obrador's leadership is affecting U.S.-Mexican relations in a way that could turn back the clock on three decades of economic integration, revive the previous mistrust between the two countries, and halt collaboration on issues of binational concern, including security, immigration, and climate change. The Biden administration does not seem to fully understand the dangers that loom ahead as Mexico becomes a more insecure, more militarized, and less democratic country.

EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN

According to a saying popular in Mexico in the 1970s, "Not a leaf moves without the president knowing about it." That is how the country worked until Mexico's transition to electoral democracy in the 1990s. Then, power became more dispersed, incipient checks and balances were put in place, and autonomous institutions, independent from the presidency, were created. A highly imperfect, and in many ways dysfunctional, political system emerged. Over the past four years, however, López Obrador has sought to re-create many of the political and institutional arrangements that characterized dominant-party rule. He is putting in place a strong presidency with ample discretionary powers, capable of dominating Congress, influencing the judiciary, determining economic policy, remaking the apparatus of the state according to the president's personal preferences, and exercising metaconstitutional powers, such as issuing decrees that enable the armed forces to be in charge of public security or allow them to carry out public works without fulfilling legal requirements.

López Obrador argues that he is cleaning house and combating corruption. He says he can do so only by being in full command of all levers of government. The fight against the model of economic liberalization and political competition that emerged in the 1990s—which the president derides as "neoliberal"—has led to bypassing Congress and the constitution, ignoring regulatory procedures, and channeling a growing number of government activities to his cronies and the military. Dismissing the state as a "rheumatic elephant," López Obrador has proceeded to undermine Mexico's civil service, regulatory bodies, and administrative institutions, either by breaking them up or by filling them with his own loyalists. The Human Rights Commission is led by Rosario Piedra, a militant member of Morena, who kowtows to the president while remaining silent on human rights violations committed by the military. The Energy Regulation Commission, an oversight body, has been staffed by men with personal and political ties to Rocío Nahle, the minister of energy. López Obrador has also let months go by without naming new members to the Competition Commission, a regulatory institution responsible for investigating and sanctioning monopolistic practices, which is currently understaffed and without a president. In decree after decree, López Obrador has eviscerated the Mexican state, often in the name of fiscal austerity, while giving many plutocrats free rein and refusing to carry out fiscal reform that would tax his rich allies. He may disparage neoliberalism, but Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan would approve of his behavior.

In recent years, political movements across the ideological spectrum in many liberal democracies have called for "bringing the state back in"—that is, shoring up the capacity of the state to address inequality, regulate markets, combat climate change, and respond to global health emergencies. The reverse is taking place in Mexico, with significant social

and political ramifications. The government's reluctance to design a fiscal rescue package or social welfare spending policies to soften the blow from the COVID-19 pandemic had devastating effects. As a result of what López Obrador described as "republican austerity," Mexico has suffered one of the world's highest excess mortality rates during the pandemic, with over 600,000 Mexicans dying of COVID-19. The ranks of the poor have swelled by almost four million people since 2019, according to the National Council for Evaluation of Social Development Policy. During the first year of the pandemic, vaccines were scarce, hospitals were beyond capacity, over one million businesses collapsed, and immigration to the United States rose sharply. Today, fewer Mexicans have public health-care coverage than at any point over the last 20 years, and the education system lies in shambles as a result of government disinvestment and mismanagement. A study carried out by the School of Governance at the Monterrey Institute of Technology reports that since the pandemic began in 2020, over one million children abandoned school, and there was a historic reduction of enrollment for all grades.

These consequences all flow from López Obrador's style of governing. He has formulated ineffective policies using questionable assumptions, such as his belief that the most indebted state oil company in the world—Pemex—can recover past levels of production and help the economy grow, instead of dragging it down. He has developed a personalistic method of carrying out policies, one that is prone to clientelism, including the distribution of cash to the poor, and based on an unreliable, politically motivated census developed by his party. And he has terminated initiatives in a haphazard and seemingly arbitrary way, for example, eliminating government-run trusts for science, technology, and educational evaluation. Arguing that a slew of government-run programs were corrupt, including childcare facilities, women's shelters, and environmental institutes, he proceeded to shut them down by decree and without evidence of malfeasance.

López Obrador's government claims to embody progressive values, but it contradicts them at every turn. It refuses to tax the rich, to prioritize the fight against climate change, and to support activists who decry the country's growing number of femicides. An average of 11 women are killed every day in Mexico, in what the UN calls a "femicide pandemic," but the government has cut funding for public shelters for the victims of gender-related violence. López Obrador promises to "put the poor first," but his government's budgetary allocations belie that assertion. He has done away with a broad swath of social safety nets, leaving the dispossessed in a more dire situation than when he assumed office. The 2021 National Poll on Health and Nutrition shows that as a result of cuts to the public health system—and the dismantling of prior national health coverage such as Seguro Popular, or Popular Insurance—the poorest segments of the population spend a greater percentage of their income on health care than they did under previous governments, and 66 percent of the uninsured have been forced to seek private care.

López Obrador champions direct cash transfers to the poor, but new social programs have been plagued by financial irregularities, charges of corruption, and wasted resources. The Federal Auditing Commission has documented these failings in two of the most touted government initiatives: "Planting Life," in which beneficiaries burned down trees in order to receive public funds to plant new ones, and "Young Building the Future," in which funds were disbursed to nonexistent companies that hired nonexistent workers.

Meanwhile, federal budget cuts are starving institutions that have been fundamental to the construction of level-playing-field capitalism, such as the Competition Commission and the Federal Telecommunications Institute. Funding has also been slashed for independent bodies that have been particularly important to Mexico's path to democracy, including the

National Electoral Institute, the Federal Transparency Institute, and the National Human Rights Commission. By flooding these institutions with partisan loyalists and delegitimizing their work by calling them instruments of "the conservative, hypocritical elite," López Obrador is harming their ability to carry out their roles as checks and balances on the government. Positioning himself as the sole representative of "the will of the people," López Obrador is rigorously adhering to the authoritarian populist playbook.

His actions have damaged not only Mexico's democracy but also its economy. Domestic and foreign investment have dwindled as the government botched its response to the pandemic; rolled back reforms that had helped boost growth, such as investment in renewable energy; and created regulatory uncertainty, thanks to the president's adversarial attitude toward the parts of the private sector that do not comply with his clientelistic system. Between 2019 and 2021, when bad economic conditions worsened with the COVID-19 crisis, Mexico's GDP shrank more than that of any other Latin American country. And the prospects for a recovery are dim, given global inflation and investor distrust in López Obrador's economic leadership.

For years, López Obrador decried what he called "the mafia in power" and railed against greedy oligarchs and their accomplices operating within the structure of the state. But instead of tackling social inequality at its source by strengthening the state's capacity to promote growth and more fairly redistribute its gains, López Obrador has simply reproduced the crony-capitalist model that defined the Mexican economy since the PRI seized control in 1929. His government has maintained and developed strategic alliances with some of the wealthiest members of Mexico's business community, earning the praise and support of influential figures such as the telecommunication magnates Carlos Slim and Ricardo Salinas Pliego. Both have been the beneficiaries of discretionary government contracts in the banking, telecommunications, and construction sectors. By revising the Mexican tradition of mixing state capitalism and oligarchy, López Obrador and his party are emulating the PRI's vision of governance as a system for distributing the spoils.

MILITARIZING MEXICO

First as an opposition leader and later in his 2018 presidential campaign, López Obrador decried the government's growing use of the Mexican military to combat drug trafficking and cartel-related violence, a practice that began in the 1990s and escalated under López Obrador's two immediate predecessors, Felipe Calderón and Enrique Peña Nieto. One of López Obrador's most popular campaign slogans was abrazos, no balazos (hugs, not bullets), and he promised to return the armed forces to the barracks. He garnered significant support among left-wing and progressive voters precisely because he vowed to redesign the failed security strategy that Calderón and Peña Nieto pursued. Both previous presidents had given the armed forces expansive powers, which led to an explosion in human rights violations but no significant reduction in homicides or other types of crime. López Obrador vowed to address the root causes of violence by channeling more public resources to the poor and keeping the military off the streets.

But in a surprising about-face, shortly after assuming office, López Obrador started to backtrack on his vow to demilitarize the country. Pressured by prominent generals who viewed his stance as unrealistic, López Obrador argued that because the police force was corrupt and inefficient, the army would have to maintain and even broaden its role. He pushed through a constitutional reform in 2019 that established a new militarized force

called the National Guard that was to take over public security for five years. But from the start, López Obrador undermined what was supposed to be civilian control and oversight by naming Luis Rodríguez Bucio, a recently retired general, as head of the new body and staffing it largely with active members of the armed forces.

Instead of reining in Mexico's army, López Obrador has unleashed it. Over the past three years, the armed forces have taken on unparalleled political and economic roles. The military is now operating outside civilian control, in open defiance of the Mexican constitution, which states that the military cannot be in charge of public security. As a result of presidential decrees, the military has become omnipresent: building airports, running the country's ports, controlling customs, distributing money to the poor, implementing social programs, and detaining immigrants. According to the National Militarization Index created by the Center for Research and Teaching in Economics, a research institute based in Mexico City, during the past decade, the military has gradually taken over 246 activities that used to be in the hands of civilians. The armed forces have been allocated larger and larger amounts of federal money, and many projects under their control have been reclassified as "matters of public security," thus removing them from public scrutiny under Mexico's National Transparency Law. Admittedly, López Obrador inherited armed forces that were increasingly given roles traditionally carried out by the police. But he has made things far worse by eliminating any semblance of civilian oversight or accountability. He has placed the National Guard under the direct control of the defense ministry, doing away with even the pretense of civilian control.

As he tries to win the loyalty of the military, López Obrador has ignored its history of acting with impunity and violating human rights. He parades with generals at his side and invites them to his morning press conference. At most public events, he surrounds himself with top brass, referring to them as el pueblo bueno (the good people) and claiming that they are incorruptible. But the history of the Mexican military is stained by its complicity with drug traffickers and criminals, beginning with the 1997 arrest of General Gutiérrez Rebollo, who was convicted of working with one of Mexico's top drug lords. The Zetas, one of the most savage criminal groups in Mexico, was originally made up of members of the military who moved into the drug trade and conducted lucrative criminal operations. And in 2020, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration in Los Angeles detained General Salvador Cienfuegos, Mexico's former minister of defense, and the U.S. government charged him with drug trafficking. In a reversal that remains unexplained, Washington later returned him to Mexico after negotiations between the Mexican government and the Trump administration's attorney general, William Barr. Upon his arrival, Cienfuegos was rapidly exonerated by Mexican authorities, and two of his top collaborators remain in key military positions, including Luis Crescencio Sandoval, head of the ministry of defense.

The armed forces were also involved in the disappearance of 43 students in the town of Ayotzinapa in 2014, when the young men were kidnapped by local police and their allies in the drug trafficking trade in the region. Criminal gangs who pursued and ultimately killed the students were aided by members of the army's 27th Battalion, including a general who was indicted in September 2022.

López Obrador is unwilling to limit the armed forces because he is governing with them, out of distrust for the civilian institutions of the state. He doesn't believe that the country's civil bureaucracy will be unconditionally loyal to him; the military, on the other hand, he says, is "fundamental and strategic" to his transformative project, and that may assure its longevity beyond his six years in office. He is also trying to carry out massive public works projects to cement his legacy, and the military provides an attractive option for getting things

done quickly. López Obrador frequently refers to a supposed coup d'état that right-wing conspirators are allegedly preparing against him. He has clearly decided that a way of preventing that outcome is to have some of his most powerful potential enemies—including those in the military—inside the tent pissing out, instead of outside the tent pissing in.

The militarization of Mexican politics will be López Obrador's most enduring and consequential policy decision. Future governments will be forced to either respect the enlarged power of the military or risk confronting it. Meanwhile, militarization is not producing the results López Obrador promised. According to the U.S. military, drug cartels have expanded their territory and now control a third of Mexico. Violence continues in many parts of the country, with over 100,000 people becoming the victims of forced disappearances since 2007, when the military was assigned to wage the "war on drugs." Organized crime has access to increasingly lethal weaponry such as rocket-propelled grenades, and attacks on civilians in cities are now everyday occurrences. López Obrador's term in office is on track to become the most violent in Mexico's recent history.

DISMANTLING DEMOCRACY

Since Mexico's democratic transition in 2000, the emphasis among reformers has been on building institutions that would assure accountability, transparency, and autonomy from the president and the ruling party. It was also important that opposition candidates have an equal chance in elections. López Obrador seems intent on undermining these objectives and erasing the country's hard-won (albeit incomplete) democratic gains.

Despite its many flaws, Mexico's electoral democracy had established basic rules for electoral competition that were largely respected. Fundamental to this system was the National Electoral Institute (INE), which is in charge of guaranteeing free and fair elections. For more than three decades, political scientists have viewed the INE, and its predecessor, the Federal Electoral Institute, as the jewel in the crown of Mexico's democratic transition. Yet since arriving in office, López Obrador has taken aim at it. He associates it with the contentious election of 2006, in which he believes fraud prevented what should have been a victory for him, and the electoral authorities carried out only a partial recount of the vote. His stated goal is to replace the INE with a new entity overseen by his party, thus propelling the political system back to the era of PRI rule, when the party in power controlled every aspect of the electoral process.

López Obrador's constant verbal attacks on the INE and substantial cuts to its budget have been accompanied by his frequent use of referendums and consultas populares (popular consultations) intended to establish what he calls a "true democracy." Whenever the president feels that his agenda is being stalled by constitutional limitations, he establishes a mechanism for obtaining popular support for decisions that would otherwise be stopped by the courts. In 2019 he promoted a "popular consultation" to see whether the people supported the construction of the new Maya train line, the Dos Bocas oil refinery, and other large-scale public works, but his party did not install enough voting booths countrywide to assure the level of participation required by constitutional rules for the consultation process. Nonetheless, López Obrador used the "yes" vote to validate the advancement of his projects, even though they failed to comply with legal requirements such as conducting environmental impact studies. In addition, states governed by Morena had more voting booths than others did, thus skewing the result in favor of the president.

The implications are worrisome: if a badly organized instrument of direct democracy

supports López Obrador's views, he embraces it, even if that entails bending the law to his bidding. He publicly pressures and threatens judges and ministers of the Supreme Court when they attempt to place legal obstacles in his path, including their refusal to support his punitive policy of automatic prison without bail for petty crimes. Alejandro Gertz Manero, the pliant attorney general, has also come to López Obrador's aid when the president wants his opponents jailed or indicted, as was the case with Jorge Luis Lavalle, a congressman who was put behind bars, without evidence, for allegedly taking bribes from Odebrecht, a Brazilian construction company.

This bullying and manipulation of the legal system makes it nearly impossible for opposition parties to sap support for López Obrador. Plus, they are burdened by a history of bad governance and corruption while in office and remain weak, divided, and leaderless. Although the opposition was able to wrest voter support away from Morena in Mexico City during elections in 2021, the party made significant electoral inroads at the state level and now controls 21 out of 32 governorships. According to the most recent public opinion polls, it is poised to win the presidency again in 2024. Because López Obrador is constitutionally limited to only one term in office, he will use the resources of the state to assure victory for a candidate he selects himself. Just like the PRI presidents of the past, López Obrador will choose a successor who will remain true to his vision, even if it means abandoning basic democratic principles.

The only true thorn in López Obrador's side are Mexico's feminists, a singular political movement that he does not seem to understand, cannot control, and has not been able to suppress. Women in Mexico are angry, and rightly so, given the tide of femicide sweeping the country. Women's long-standing frustration with the government's lack of response to the murders has been intensified by a president who seems impervious to and disdainful of their demands. Despite keeping his promise to establish gender parity in his cabinet, López Obrador has instituted policies and economic austerity that have been harmful to women. His government has closed publicly subsidized daycare centers, eliminated shelters for victims of domestic violence, defunded the National Women's Institute, and cut many national programs that protect women, especially those in indigenous communities. Today, Mexican feminists are more energized and more combative than ever, while they seek to reframe the public debate in favor of their rights and against increased militarization. Throughout his term, women's marches and public protests have been constant and have drawn enormous crowds. When they occur, López Obrador erects steel barriers around the presidential palace, a defensive measure no past president has ever resorted to. In the polls, support for the president among women has been falling because of his budget cuts, his repeated public attacks on feminism, and his tendency to tear-gas the protesters when they march.

PUSHING FOR MEXIT?

As part of his strategy to govern through fear and division, López Obrador has chosen to pursue an openly anti-American stance. In contrast with the conciliatory, even friendly posture that he assumed toward U.S. President Donald Trump, López Obrador has picked public fights with President Joe Biden on many issues, the most important being energy policy. López Obrador has pushed through a series of laws that discriminate against energy production by foreign companies and U.S.-generated energy in favor of state-owned oil and gas companies, such as Pemex and Mexico's Federal Electricity Commission (CFE). U.S. and Canadian enterprises have assumed increasingly critical public stances, arguing that Mexico

is violating commitments it made in the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), which replaced the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 2020.

To resolve the spat, the Biden administration pursued quiet diplomacy. John Kerry, the U.S. special envoy for climate change, has visited Mexico several times over the last two years, while other senior U.S. officials expressed concern, hoping that behind-the-scenes pressure might lead López Obrador to reconsider his position and strike down measures that give electricity produced by the CFE an unfair edge over energy from private companies and cleaner sources such as wind and solar. The usual tools of diplomacy, however, proved of little use, as López Obrador dug in and began to escalate his attacks on the United States, frequently asserting that Mexico is "not a colony," decrying American "interventionism" in his country's internal affairs, calling Mexican defenders of free trade "treasonous," and proclaiming that the USMCA violated Mexico's sovereignty. To fire up his base, López Obrador has turned a trade dispute into a political battle.

Biden's patience finally wore out, and U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai announced in July that the administration would begin a process of dispute settlement consultations, a first step in what could lead to tariffs on a wide range of Mexican products. The Canadian government soon followed suit, challenging López Obrador's effort to establish government control over the country's oil and electricity sector and backtrack on the liberalization of the energy sector that the trade agreement established. If Mexico refuses to relent, and if the arbitration panel finds it to be in violation of the USMCA, the country could face severe financial penalties and compensatory tariffs. Even though Biden still depends on Mexico's assistance with immigration and security issues, he seems to have decided it is time to stop an emboldened López Obrador. Although López Obrador has not openly threatened to exit the USMCA, his confrontational rhetoric and his unwillingness to reverse his nationalistic energy policies has generated concern in Washington and Ottawa.

For Mexico, leaving the agreement would be economic and political suicide. Mexico's inclusion in a free-trade zone with its richer neighbors to the north has turned the country into a manufacturing powerhouse and has functioned as a guarantor of stability by reassuring international investors that the Mexican government would play by the rules. As a result of NAFTA and later the USMCA, investors came to see Mexico not as an unstable Latin American basket case but as a North American player that, in the event of a crisis, had a lender of last resort. When Mexico's economy collapsed in 1994, U.S. President Bill Clinton bypassed Congress to provide a $20 billion loan to help the country recover. Had Mexico not been a NAFTA partner, it would not have received that assistance. And if Mexico withdraws from the USMCA, Washington would be unlikely to rescue Mexico from a similar crisis.

By rejecting the political and economic tenets of the North American neighborhood, López Obrador is reviving views of Mexico as a country subject to pendular macroeconomic policy shifts and presidential whims, which produced crisis after crisis in the 1970s and 1980s. Even if he chooses not to withdraw from the USMCA, his erratic policymaking could lead to further disinvestment, capital flight, and a return to cyclical bouts of economic instability. In 2021, Mexico suffered record capital outflows of over $10 billion, caused by increased risk aversion among investors.

But López Obrador knows that playing the anti-Yankee card can yield political benefits, despite polls showing that a majority of the country supports free trade. With the 2024 presidential elections not far off, he believes that his popularity with an energized political base matters more than the maintenance of a trilateral trade accord. Scoring political points and amassing political capital matters more to him than avoiding a return to what the Mexican poet Octavio Paz once called the country's "labyrinth of solitude," where Mexico would

once again waste away, brought down by protectionism, nationalism, corruption, crime, and poverty.

PEDESTAL POLITICS

More than a government, López Obrador's administration is a daily act of political theater. His is a performative presidency that spins a tale of a heroic fight against privileged elites, perverted feminists, and corrupt experts, all conspiring against the public. He claims that he alone represents the will of the pure, true people. His rhetoric is simple: he seeks a seismic shift, not a mere course correction. He isn't interested in renovating; he wants to burn down the house. López Obrador believes that he embodies a moral revolution, unconstrained by the imperatives of democracy or the niceties of constitutional rule.

The core goal of López Obrador's presidency is the maintenance of personal popularity to assure that his party remains in power. His government is therefore uninterested in the material consequences of its policies and actions. It doesn't matter whether the critics think the performance is any good; all that matters is that the audience keeps applauding. As a political strategy, it has worked so far: recent polls show that over 60 percent of Mexicans approve of López Obrador personally, regardless of the well-documented and easily observable adverse effects his rule has had on the economy, on crime, and on democratic consolidation.

His continued popularity does not bode well for Mexico's future. Stepped-up military involvement in domestic affairs is a threat to democracy and human rights. López Obrador's assault on the state will destroy or degrade the democratic institutions that Mexican reformers had managed to build over the last 30 years. His inward-looking policies will inhibit economic recovery and Mexico's entrance into competitive post-pandemic global markets. Crony capitalism will perpetuate a system based on favors, concessions, and collusion that will favor the powerful and hurt consumers and citizens.

Democracy relies on rules, procedures, and institutions—not a leader endowed with mythical qualities. The cult of personality that the Mexican president has promoted and the polarizing ideas that he has injected into the public sphere have created an "us against them" environment. Mexican politics is increasingly fueled by fear and resentment instead of by debate, deliberation, and fact-based arguments, and public discourse has become unmoored from any sense of what is best for the country. Mexico has a long history of placing its destiny in the hands of an authoritarian president as it lurches from crisis to crisis. Now, López Obrador is taking the country down a familiar path, not to a strong, healthy democracy but to a lawless, corrupt kleptocracy, supported by people who should know better.