

# The Dallas Morning News

*Violence, economy worry many  
Mexicans, but they try to keep the  
faith in their populist president*

President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's promised to turn back the tide of poverty, corruption and violence in Mexico. But AMLO's promises are facing deep obstacles as the violence instead grows and the economy gradually slows.

By **Alfredo Corchado**  
Published Oct. 5, 2019

[Click here to view the story on dallasnews.com.](#)

JUAN ALDAMA, Mexico - The human exodus here reached new heights over the summer as entire families hightailed it out of this once booming agricultural valley. They headed north in search of safety, away from violence, and far away from a nation grappling with the latest broken promises.

“There are some communities -- rancherías -- that simply cleared out,” and headed for the U.S., says Adan Flores, 22, a university student who traveled this region in the central state of Zacatecas as part of his field work as a psychology major. “We thought political change would automatically usher in a new country, but that hasn’t been the case so far. Many people are leaving.”

Flores was referring to President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador’s promise to turn back the tide of poverty, corruption and violence in Mexico. But AMLO’s promise of a grand Fourth Transformation -- fourth after the 1810 independence uprising, political reforms of the Benito Juarez era in the mid-1800s and the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1917 -- is facing deep obstacles as the violence instead grows and the economy gradually slows.

In nearby Cuencame, Durango, Jose Guadalupe Sanchez, 62, in a straw hat and leather sandals, sells beef-filled gorditas with potato and green chili to hungry passengers riding on a myriad of buses heading north and south on Mexican Highway 45, known as La Panamericana.

“I still believe AMLO will rescue us from poverty,” Sanchez said of the president. “We just need to be patient and don’t give up. He has good intentions.”

The bustling highway offers a picturesque journey that underscores Mexico’s beauty -- lush valleys and low-hanging clouds that seem to touch rain-soaked green hills. But it’s also a sobering reminder of the ills that still haunt the country: The Cartel Jalisco New Generation is fighting for control of the coveted freeway to transport illicit drugs and control the flow of migrants. It’s just another battleground for the endless bloodshed being carried out by rival cartels.

Sanchez makes the sign of the cross with a few pesos he’s collected so far on this day and explains: “I did think we would be better off by now, but the price of food is going up, the number of people killed is increasing. That’s worrisome.”

In interviews along Highway 45 from Mexico City to Durango, Mexican sentiments ranged from cautious optimism to dimming hope about the future.

Promised changes by Mexico’s first left-leaning president in decades have proven to be as elusive as those made by his predecessors.

They also reveal ominous signs of things to come, as support for the populist AMLO erodes and a slowdown in the economy leads to quiet anxiety.

“I’m worried that everything is going up, like corn,” said Josefina Martinez Perez, 78, who operates a corn-on-the-cob stand in Mexico City. “As someone who’s poor, I worry about every peso and I’m running out of pesos. He’s still my choice, but let’s get get going: Move the country forward.”

Lopez Obrador swept into office with a landslide victory of 53 percent of the vote, boasting of strong majorities in both houses of congress. His approval rating is still strong, but fell to 61 percent from 66 percent in the second quarter of the year, according to a national GEA-ISA poll released last month.

“I don’t think AMLO supporters have actual regrets,” said Carlos Bravo, a political commentator and

analyst. “But I’m sure a rising number of them are dealing with gradual disappointment.”

Crime is on the rise and the economy is teetering on recession, both issues looming as threats to Lopez Obrador’s ambitious plans for his much-touted “transformation” of the country’s society and politics.

## **A violent society**

Safety concerns run through swaths of the country. Homicides increased 3.3 percent during the first eight months of the year to 23,063 from 22,316 last year, according to recently released data from the federal government. The rate is on pace to set a new record, surpassing last year’s numbers when investigators opened more than 33,000 murder probes, up from an estimated 25,000 in 2017, according to the Interior Ministry.

The homicides include 13 journalists, triggering criticism from nonprofit organizations, including Periodistas de a Pie, which has documented more than 225 attacks against journalists in the first nine months of 2019. Mexico surpassed Syria this year to become the deadliest country for journalists, according to the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists -- a remarkable figure, since Mexico is not at war.

Critics say Lopez Obrador’s harsh rhetoric against journalists isn’t helping the situation. He calls reporters fifis, or snobs, who are promoting a right-wing agenda.

Those in the AMLO administration “love the media,” said Bravo, who’s also associate professor and coordinator of the journalism program at the Center for Economic Research and Teaching. But he added, “They hate journalism.”

Lopez Obrador is trying to show that he takes the nation’s ongoing problems with violence seriously, meeting daily at 6 a.m. with his security team to assess the latest crime statistics from across the country. He’s also acknowledged that more needs to be done to restore security, even personally appealing to criminals “to think about themselves, their families, their mothers,” Lopez Obrador said. “They know how much their mothers suffer because of the sublime love they have for their children, and they need to think about that.”

But in some rural communities, visitors are encouraged through friends or relatives to have “permission” from members of organized crime syndicates to set foot in those areas.

In Durango, buses occasionally cancel services when the sun sets as weary drivers express concerns about violence, extortion and kidnappings. The same is true in the neighboring state of Zacatecas, where in the city of Fresnillo a headline from the Diario newspaper blares: “Buses halted because of insecurity.”

“Lopez Obrador inherited a sinking ship,” said Bernardo Saldivar, 48, a bus driver in Fresnillo. “We all need to do less complaining and more to help him rescue it because we’re all riding on it.”

For now, said Javier Garza, a noted freelance journalist in Torreon, Coahuila and expert on drug violence in the region known as La Laguna, the violence seems to be contained in the “Durango and Zacatecas, where the issue is hot,” he said. “Things so far are quiet in La Laguna.”

## The slowing economy

Lopez Obrador has blamed the slow economy partly on lingering problems resulting from the neoliberal policies carried out by previous administrations. The economy is poised to grow at less than one percent, down from the promised 4 percent he pledged to deliver when he took office last December.

Others in the government and some business leaders say the downward turn in the economy has more to do with the uncertainty over a new free trade agreement between Mexico and the U.S. than it does Mexican government policies. They believe the economy will rebound. The government is putting its faith in policies that focus on subsidies for youths, the poor and education programs to help the economic development of the country long term.

The economic situation is unsettling for domestic and foreign investors, particularly some in North Texas, where businesses are on “standby,” waiting to see what Lopez Obrador does and how President Donald J. Trump’s political future may affect the economy in Mexico.

Many blame Mexico’s historic ties to the U.S. and Trump’s mercurial mood swings for Mexico’s growing economic woes. Daily, Mexican government officials and business leaders check Trump’s tweets to assess their own situation.

Lopez Obrador has received much criticism for appearing weak and appeasing to Trump, especially by deploying an estimated 27,000 national guardsmen across the northern and southern borders to slow down the flow of migrants headed to the U.S. -- in essence building a human wall for Trump.

“Our concern is crime,” said Moises Morales, 38, an employee in the auto industry. He boarded the bus headed for Guanajuato. “But what has our National Guard been doing? Rescuing Central Americans. That’s not right.”

Supporters, however, see Lopez Obrador’s odd relationship with Trump as a reflection of the tall price for the economic integration between both countries.

“Mexico’s national sovereignty,” said Ramon Cantu Deandar, publisher of *El Mañana* in Nuevo Laredo, across from Laredo in Texas, “is a utopian thing,” explaining that the pressures from the U.S. limit Mexico’s options and challenge Mexico’s own sovereignty.

It’s a reality that many bus passengers understand, particularly in the prosperous region of El Bajío, with strong ties to North Texas. At dusk, the bus arrives in Leon, Guanajuato, where passengers transfer to buses headed for Mexico City, or the northwest to Monterrey and Nuevo Laredo.

The mood is jovial as the song *El Destino* blares and people prepare for the weekend, which includes a festival in San Miguel de Allende. Worries of an unusual crime wave in the state dissipate, for the moment.

Justino Balderas Morales, 48, a driver explained: “We can’t spend all our time worrying. We need to enjoy life. We’re pulling for him (Lopez Obrador), hoping that he does his part and we do our part as citizens.”

In the town of Saucedo, sandwiched between San Miguel de Allende and Guanajuato, Olivia Carranza, 32, prepares for the upcoming holidays, making reindeers from straw. She’s so busy, she explained, “That I don’t have time to think about Lopez Obrador. I focus on what I can do” and resist the tempta-

tion of “going north, like the rest of my family,” which lives throughout Texas.

In recent months, hundreds, if not thousands of Mexicans have flocked to multiple border crossings to seek asylum, a stark turnaround after years of a steep decline of immigration from Mexico. These Mexicans aren't escaping poverty, but violence.

But Carranza says she's staying.

“I love Mexico because somehow it gives me enough to feed my family,” she said. “Lopez Obrador may end up being just another leader with big promises. If he does a quarter of what he said, we'll all be happy. For now, I have a lot of work ahead of me.”