

# As Mexican economy stagnates, ruling Morena party imposes state law to suppress social protests

By Don Knowland  
6 August 2019

On August 1 the so-called Law of the Garrotte, which effectively criminalizes opposition demonstrations, marches and protests, went into effect in oil-rich Tabasco, the home state of Mexico's President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO). The majority of the state Congress made up of deputies from AMLO's party, the Movement for National Regeneration (Morena), rammed through the legislation.

The law imposes a six- to 13-year sentence for interfering with "the execution of public private works and works or roads or communication channels," and for "the extortion, coercion, attempt to impose or impose fees or totally or partially prevent free movement of people and vehicles, machinery, specialized equipment or the like." The sentence increases to 10 to 20 years if violence accompanies an attempt to impose fees, or minors are used in blockades.

Morena depicted the legislation as an attempt to end shakedowns related to public and private works. But it has unleashed a firestorm of opposition from Mexico's other major parties, the former ruling party, the PRI (Institutional Revolution), as well as the Party of National Action (PAN) and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD).

While the handwringing by these right-wing bourgeois parties, all of which are responsible for bloody acts of repression, amounts to a hypocritical political gesture, the charges they level are nonetheless true.

The PRI charged that the Morena deputies were "acting as accomplices of a regime that wants to replace politics and dialogue with brute force." The Tabasco PRI deputy who had proposed the higher

sentence for extortion claimed he had not intended to "criminalize social protests," or impede the right to free expression.

Another Tabasco PRI deputy, Ingrid Pantoja, said that the law is a "betrayal of the people," intended as a pretext "to inhibit the right of citizens to exercise any type of demonstration against the federal, state government, municipality or any other public entity, even if they are peaceful." Pantoja gave as an example that any citizen could go to prison for protesting the privatization of water promoted by the Morena mayor of the Tabasco city of Villahermosa.

The national president of the right-wing PAN, Marko Cortés Mendoza, called the law an attempt by the Morena government "to build a totalitarian and controlling system, which has gradually limited the checks and balances of all Mexicans." He said PAN did not oppose "regulating" marches, but ruled out "repressing and criminalizing those who exercise their constitutional right to march in protest."

Cortés Mendoza said "it is paradoxical" to see how AMLO—who 26 years ago seized oil wells for more than 10 days, generating losses according to Pemex, the national oil company, of more than 40 million pesos—now seeks to stifle such actions. PAN Senator Kenia López Rabadán said López Obrador would have faced more than 50 years in jail under the new law, since he led seizures of oil wells on four occasions.

The Extraordinary National Directorate (DNE) of the PRD said the law was intended to "protect the interests and businesses of Morena, and not to protect Tabasco citizens ... they just want to defend juicy businesses that will give them a lot of money."

The DNE emphasized that "it is obvious that said law

seeks to avoid protests before the imminent construction of the [\$8 billion] Dos Bocas refinery by Pemex, to begin in August ... money is what moved them to make those constitutional changes, and now it turns out that blocking a street is more painful than a homicide, or someone accused of rape in the state of Tabasco.”

In contrast, business organizations, including Mexico’s largest employer confederation, Coparmex, strongly endorsed the new law. The president of Coparmex in Tabasco, Ricardo Castellanos Martínez de Castro, said, “We expect the law to apply and that now with the intervention of the National Guard and the Army, extortions will end.”

The commander of the 30th Military Zone, Pedro Escalera Cobián, said the military would enforce these recent amendments to the Tabasco Criminal Code, in addition to strengthening surveillance in oil areas, particularly where the Dos Bocas refinery will be built.

Blocking roads during social protests is a Mexican tradition with a long history. For example, peasants protesting environmental degradation of their lands by companies often protest to demand compensation for damages. Under the previous president, dissident teachers routinely blocked roads, objecting to attacks on education and their salaries; such actions have continued this year during the AMLO presidency.

The logic of the Tabasco legislation in fact is to ban all such opposition protests. It comes at a time of mounting dissatisfaction with the AMLO government.

Mexico’s gross domestic product is hovering around recession level. It declined .2 percent from the prior quarter in the first quarter of 2019; it grew only .1 percent in the second quarter. Over the last five quarters growth has been a meager 0.04 percent.

Economists now project only 0.4 percent growth this year, far below the 2.0 percent forecast by the government when AMLO took office in December. Whether or not the economy is technically entering recession, it is stagnating.

Austerity measures imposed by AMLO—a drop in current public spending, a huge number of federal government jobs cut and the budget cuts this year—are playing no small part in this downtrend. But there are more fundamental causes at work, including the escalating trade war internationally, the effect of economic uncertainty on investment and the rising cost

of living for the Mexican masses.

These economic trends, and AMLO’s service as Trump’s immigration gendarme, are eating away at the Mexican president’s previously high approval ratings. A recent poll by México Elige shows them plummeting from 73 percent in February to 47 percent in July.

Increasing working class resistance to the policies of AMLO’s government is inevitable. Ultimately measures such as those imposed by Morena in Tabasco are aimed at squelching such opposition.

AMLO’s lionizing of the Mexican military, his creation of a National Guard based on the military for domestic police enforcement, along with brutal attacks on Central American immigrants and the threats and violence directed earlier this year at the Matamoros strike wave further illustrate the distinctly authoritarian drift of his government.

The fake “left-wing” and “socialist” groups that have enthusiastically supported his administration are serving as nothing more than a cover for what will prove to be a right-wing regime operating in the service of the Mexican bourgeoisie and international capital.

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