

Insight Report: Mexico

Security implications of the 6 June mid-term elections

May 2021



Mexico Travel Security Risk Rating



MEDIUM: Mexico



HIGH: Baja California, Chihuahua, Colima, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Jalisco, Mexico, Michoacán, Morelos, Sinaloa, Tabasco, Tamaulipas, Veracruz, Tamaulipas states



Key judgements

- Mexico's mid-term elections, scheduled for **6 June**, will be the largest in the country's history and will determine the make-up of the Chamber of Deputies (lower house of the federal legislature), 15 governorships and 30 state legislatures, in addition to thousands of local government posts.
- The election is expected to have a negative impact on the security environment. Political violence has marred the campaign season, in the form of threats, kidnaps and assassinations of political candidates and local officials. This type of violence is primarily concentrated in HIGH risk states with high levels of drug cartel activity and is indicative of the significant influence and capabilities of criminal groups in those areas.
- We expect the aforementioned targeted killings to continue leading up to, and following, the 6 June elections, as organised criminal groups seek to retain and adapt their influence over incoming local officials. Such positioning may manifest itself in increased violence generally, particularly in the form of exacerbated inter-cartel violence and increased cartel activity in areas considered strategically valuable for drug production, trafficking or other illicit activities.
- There is a potential for unrest related to the election, though this will likely be localised and triggered by a closely contested result, allegations of fraud or irregularities, or another controversial scenario. These are unlikely to develop into widespread, nationwide protests.
- We recommend closely monitoring developments throughout the election cycle and maintaining up-to-date business continuity plans that factor in a potential deterioration in the security environment due to violence and/or unrest.

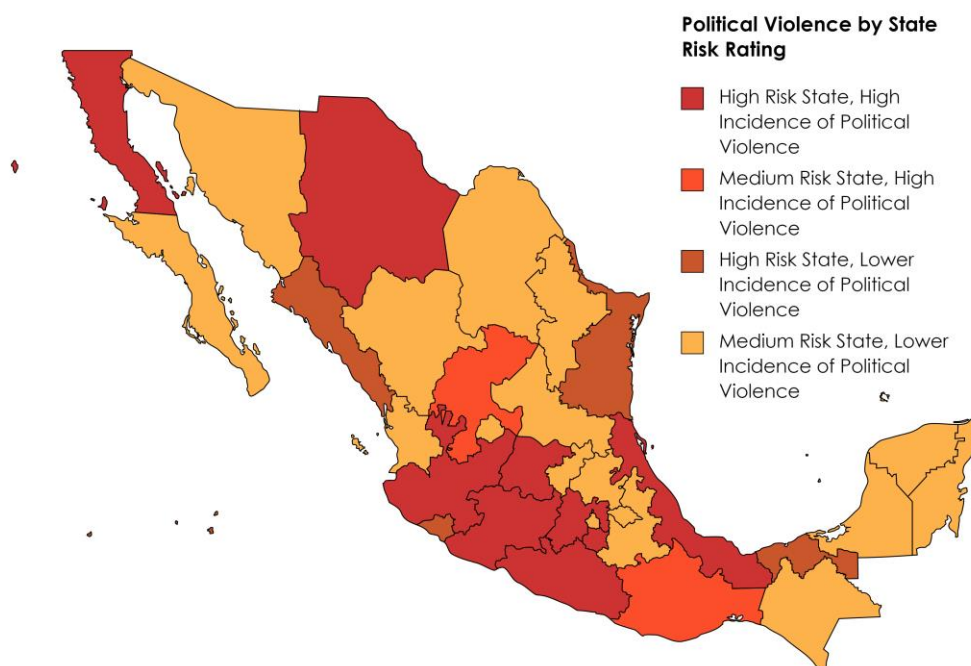
Overview

Over 94m people will be eligible to vote in the election, which will be the largest in the country's history following a streamlining of the country's electoral races into a single season, which were previously staggered over various years, as well as the continued growth of the electorate.

Most polls indicate that it is uncertain whether President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO)'s governing coalition will retain control of the Chamber of Deputies. The campaign season has been marked by open disagreements between AMLO and Mexico's electoral authority, the National Electoral Institute (INE), leading critics to accuse AMLO of threatening the independence of the agency. Governors' and state legislature races will likewise test the AMLO administration's performance thus far and prospects for support at regional levels, particularly in states where his National Regeneration Movement (Morena) party did not fare well in 2018 general elections.

The political violence observed thus far is not uncommon during electoral cycles in Mexico, when cartels seek to assert their influence over local governments. The majority of such violence occurs in HIGH risk states with considerable cartel presence (see Figure 1 below) and in rural areas where local administration often maintains less of a presence than organised criminal groups.

Figure 1: States with the most political assassinations in this election cycle



Created with mapchart.net

Source: Integralia Consultores, a Mexico-based consultancy group.

Note: International SOS is in the process of raising the risk rating of Zacatecas state from MEDIUM to HIGH, due to a protracted deterioration of the security environment.

It is also noteworthy that most of the states with the most political assassinations are states with active gubernatorial races (see Figure 2). Thus far, the 2021 election cycle has been the second most violent for local officials and political candidates in the country's history, second only to the 2018 general elections.

Figure 2: States with gubernatorial races to be decided in the 6 June mid-term elections



Outlook

We expect election-related violence by organised criminal groups to continue in the lead-up to and beyond the mid-term elections, as such groups seek to improve or maintain their positions regarding their operations vis-à-vis the local authorities. While such killings on occasion take place in public areas such as transit hubs or rallies, these are typically targeted incidents and the risk to staff is incidental.

More significantly, we anticipate that the increase in political violence will entail a potential deterioration of the security environment in areas with high levels of cartel activity. This includes states such as Veracruz, Baja California, Michoacan and Jalisco, travel security risk for all of which are rated as HIGH. Interestingly, though Oaxaca generally posts lower rates of crime and is MEDIUM risk area, the fact that it experienced a number of political killings is consistent with a complex security environment in

Recent high-profile incidents

25 May: Mayoral candidate Alma Barragan was shot and killed in Morelion (Guanajuato state).

17 May: Zudikey Rodriguez, an Olympic athlete and popular candidate for mayor in Valle de Bravo (Mexico state), was kidnapped by members of the Familia Michoacana cartel and threatened to quit her campaign.

13 May: Abel Murrieta was killed as he distributed flyers for his municipal president campaign in Ciudad Obregon (Sonora state).

rural areas, where the presence of state authority is lacking or at times nearly entirely absent and most such violence takes place.

In the lead-up and aftermath of the elections, an increase in violent activity between organised criminal groups is expected. This includes both targeted assassinations of individuals involved in the political process as the relationship between organised crime and local officials is redefined, particularly in rural areas, as well as confrontations between rival groups. In municipalities that see challengers unseat incumbents, particularly in rural areas with significant organised crime presence, acts of intimidation against officials, as well as shows of force against rival groups, are likely following the elections. Winning candidates could also be targeted prior to taking office.

While we do not anticipate widespread unrest on a national level, localised disturbances related to the election remain possible. This is particularly the case in locations where elections are closely contested, or should allegations of irregularities or fraud surface. Preliminary results in most races are likely to be available on election night or soon after. However, official counts can take upwards of a week.

Demonstrations can be expected during this period of uncertainty in tightly contested races, particularly at the local level. Unruly demonstrations over violence against women in Mexico and Puebla states in recent months show the potential for unrest to result in acts of arson or other vandalism against state or private property. Unrest may be more likely and more disruptive in areas already prone to protest activity, such as Guerrero state and locations along Federal Highway 95, which is frequently subject to roadblocks.

Recommendations to security managers

- Monitor developments related to the upcoming election – including demonstrations and political violence – through a variety of sources, including International SOS, local media and trusted local contacts.
- Anticipate disruption in the lead-up to and following the election. Have a clear emergency plan in place in the event of unrest, and leave affected areas as quickly as possible.
- Exercise heightened precautions for essential overland travel, particularly in HIGH risk areas. Consider journey management plans, accounting for potential roadblocks, with pre-established check-in times alerting of safe departure and arrival.
- Avoid or minimise movement near politically-sensitive areas such as campaign rallies, poll locations and local government buildings, particularly in small towns and rural areas in HIGH risk states.
- There will be more than 140,000 polling locations throughout the country. Determine if these locations are in proximity of your office or other assets. Disruption can be expected around these locales on election day. They may also serve as flashpoints for demonstrations, confrontations or acts of intimidation.

- Maintain up-to-date business continuity plans that contemplate a deterioration in the security environment due to violence and/or unrest.
- In the event of an escalation, open up emergency communication channels and convey the organisation's posture to workforce.

This Insight Report has been prepared by our team in the Americas Regional Security Centre, which includes security experts with extensive on-the-ground experience in Mexico. For follow-up questions about the assessment or recommendations in this Report, please call nearest Regional Security Centre.

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