

Mexico

Human rights: an unavoidable duty for candidates

The date for the elections has been set for 2 July, and candidates for the presidency of the Mexican Republic are setting out their programmes, engaging in debates and making commitments to address urgent and important issues of immediate concern to society. There is, however, one aspect which, in spite of its fundamental importance for the country's development and the democratic aspirations of everyone, is still virtually absent from the political debate. It is the protection and promotion of human rights.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes that men and women can only achieve freedom from fear and want, as well as freedom of speech and belief, if the conditions are created whereby all people can enjoy all human rights.

To respect, protect and fulfil all human rights is not a luxury, but an obligation that has to be met at all times under the terms of national, regional and international law. Governments have a clear obligation to prevent and punish any abuse by State agents, or to respond to any acts by private individuals that deny the full exercise of human rights. However, the obligations do not end there. Governments also have obligations to promote and fulfil all human rights. This means that they have to take immediate and progressive steps to ensure that everyone enjoys a life free from discrimination, with full access to justice, health, housing, education, food, water and work.

Amnesty International is making an appeal to candidates to remind them of the need to put human rights at the centre of the vision for the country. It urges them to translate this vision into tangible commitments in their election manifestos in order to put them into practice once in government.

Without doubt human rights violations continue to be a daily reality in Mexico. The flaws in the criminal justice system which allow its misuse facilitate torture, arbitrary detentions and impunity. Women and girls continue to suffer high levels of violence and discrimination. One example of this terrible reality is the inadequate response to the brutal pattern of killing and the disappearances of women in Ciudad Juárez and the town of Chihuahua over the past thirteen years. In addition, the marginalization and extreme poverty experienced by many communities, both urban and rural, is well known, and exists because basic human rights, such as health care, water and adequate food, are beyond their reach. At election time, as at present in Mexico, it is essential that the candidates offer a viable and credible programme of action to effectively overcome the persistent obstacles to the protection and promotion of human rights.

It is understandable that the high levels of crime and insecurity in Mexico should be given priority in the electoral campaign. However, candidates should bear in mind that the legitimate right to security is inextricably linked to respect for human rights. Public security policies that promote the use of military force as a preventive measure, or that sacrifice

human rights in the name of security, may contribute to increased security, and undermine human rights.

Various Mexican non-governmental human rights organizations have put forward proposals to the presidential candidates, urging them to make commitments in specific areas. Amnesty International joins in the demands of civil society by highlight six areas of concern which, although not exhaustive, ought – in the organization’s view – to be addressed as priorities with a clear political determination:

- **Ensure the implementation of a reform to the public security and criminal justice system to guarantee the absolute respect of human rights. Guarantee access to justice and accountability in order to end impunity.**
- **Ensure that the Constitution gives full recognition to the respect, protection, promotion and fulfilment of human rights as set out in international treaties.**
- **Guarantee effective mechanisms to prevent and combat violence against women and girls and secure their right to live a life free from violence and discrimination. Strengthen measures to put an end to the alarming number of deaths of women in Ciudad Juárez and the city of Chihuahua and eliminate impunity.**
- **Take immediate and progressive steps to respect, protect and fulfil economic, social and cultural rights, without discrimination, giving priority to the needs of the most vulnerable. In addition, ensure that indigenous peoples enjoy the rights set out in international treaties.**
- **Guarantee that human rights defenders, journalists and activists in marginalized communities all over the country can carry out their legitimate and essential work without intimidation or judicial persecution based on fabricated charges.**
- **Implement effective and credible mechanisms to put an end to impunity for human rights violations committed in the past. The failure of the *Fiscalía Especial para Movimientos Sociales y Políticos del Pasado* (Office of the Special Prosecutor for Past Social and Political Movements) to produce results demonstrates that impunity for systematic violations of human rights during the so-called ‘dirty war’ is still an unresolved issue.**

In recent years, in regional and international forums, Mexico has been seen as an important reference point in the promotion of human rights. Inside the country, too, there have been changes. Civil society has developed and there have been a growing number of commitments in the area of human rights. In spite of this, Amnesty International believes that these commitments have not led to sufficiently tangible progress. Furthermore, the human rights recommendations of the United Nations and the Inter-American Commission on Human

Rights have yet to be implemented. The present government produced a National Human Rights Programme which has achieved few results to date. It is crucial that the new government, the Congress of the Union and other State commit themselves to strengthen this mechanism in conjunction with civil society to make it the engine of real change.

Human rights commitments cannot simply be rhetorical. They must form the fundamental axis on which the relationship between society and the authorities is based. Last August, Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International, wrote to Mexican political parties urging them to translate their rhetoric into concrete action to take the country forward into a new era of human rights. In the midst of the electoral campaign, this is the moment for the candidates for the presidency to demonstrate the political will to exchange words for specific action that will directly benefit everyone in every corner of the country.