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Presidential candidate Claudia Sheinbaum of Mexico's ruling party smiles as Archbishop Rogelio Cabrera López of Monterrey speaks March 11, 2024, during an event in Mexico City to sign a peace commitment organized by members of the Catholic Church. (OSV News/Raquel Cunha, Reuters)



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The Mexican bishops' conference, the Society of Jesus and the Conference of Major Superiors of Religious of Mexico convened the country's three presidential candidates March 11 to sign their National Agenda for Peace -- a roadmap for pacifying Mexico and the starting point for dialogue with the next government.

The document describes a dire situation in Mexico, where more than 30,000 people have been murdered in each of the past six years, and more than 90,000 have been disappeared during many years of violence and drug cartels' disputes over territory.

"We have been overwhelmed by the violence that has not stopped growing in the last 18 years," said Jesuit Father Jorge Atilano, director of the National Dialogue for Peace, a series of forums around the country, which formed the National Peace Agenda.

"The people that we are already losing day by day, the 90 (people) murdered, the 20 disappeared, the ones who pay protection money, those who are extorted and those who have had to migrate or move, they are the ones who have brought us here," he said.

Election front-runner Claudia Sheinbaum of the ruling Morena party, however, disagreed with parts of the plan, telling an audience of religious leaders, civil society, victims of violence, diplomats and experts: "I don't share the pessimistic evaluation of the present moment" outlined in the document.

She signed the document, but with the addendum, "Let's continue talking."

Responding to comments of Sheinbaum on the bishops' document, Xóchitl Gálvez, candidate for a three-party coalition, posted on X late March 11 that what Sheinbaum "did today" before the bishops' conference "is disrespectful, but above all, it is an act of arrogance when you do not recognize the insecurity in the country."

"You lie about the violence figures, you lie when you say you are an environmentalist, and you lie when you use Pope Francis' words of fraternity," she said, blasting her rival.

"Where do you live, Disneyland?" Gálvez concluded.

Mexico goes to the polls June 2 in an unprecedented election as women lead the two main political coalitions, meaning the country is likely to choose its first female president. But campaigns are unfolding amid deep political divisions, concerns over democratic backsliding and political violence -- with drug cartels killing candidates with impunity.

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The Mexican bishops' conference has urged voter participation, but expressed concern over democracy, the rule of law and criminal groups intervening in the electoral process.

"We believe that the worst-case scenario, the one that we must mostly avoid, is organized crime and other criminal groups intervening in the electoral process, anywhere and at any time," the bishops said in a March 3 statement. "Electoral democracy mixed with criminal groups is totally unacceptable. It's a sign of the most deplorable corruption that must be avoided at all costs."

The statement followed revelations that bishops in the southern state of Guerrero intervened as mediators in a dispute between warring drug cartels in an attempt to pacify an area rife with crimes such as extortion.

"The message that emerges from their initiatives for peace is that the state has lost control of the problem and that (the bishops) need to intervene with other social actors to negotiate a common agenda," Pablo Mijangos González, a historian of Mexican Catholicism at Southern Methodist University told OSV News.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who has never publicly criticized drug cartels, has disputed any suggestions the state has lost control of its territory. He also points to the murder rate falling 20% during his five years in office under a security policy known as "hugs, not bullets." But the president has repeatedly downplayed atrocities and refused to meet victims of violence -- while notoriously greeting the mother of convicted drug cartel boss Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán.

Sheinbaum, a former Mexico City mayor and López Obrador protégé, expressed differences with the National Agenda for Peace, including its sections on removing the military from public security tasks. She also disagreed with assertions that crime statistics were fudged, the social fabric was fraying, and the document's vision that "fear, powerlessness and distrust and uncertainty are prevalent" in Mexico.

On March 12, López Obrador mocked the bishops' plan at his morning press conference, accusing Sheinbaum's rivals -- without mentioning names -- of "hypocrisy" in signing it "if behind the scenes they are ordering a dirty war." He added, echoing Sheinbaum's disagreement, "Politically, I don’t agree with them wanting to create an environment that doesn't exist."

Gálvez blasted the idea of "militarized" public security, saying, "Give unto civilians that which is civilian and to the military that which is military."

She also walked back plans for building a mega-prison, saying she wanted prisons to be "true social rehabilitation centers, not crime schools."

Jorge Álvarez Máynez, candidate for the small Citizen Movement party, also signed the document. "The only difference between 2018 and 2024 is that the horror has increased," he said, referring to the last election year.

The Mexican bishops' conference has not traditionally spoken out loudly on issues of violence, preferring not to anger local politicians or put priests working in conflict areas in danger.

But the June 2022 murders of Jesuit Fathers Joaquín Mora and Javier Campos in their parish in Chihuahua state proved "a turning point," according to conference president Archbishop Rogelio Cabrera López of Monterrey.

The murders also prompted the National Dialogue for Peace, which provided space for dozens of Mexicans from all walks of life to discuss ideas for pacifying the

country.

"It's a more prophetic voice and much, much, much more committed," Jesuit Father Javier Avila, who famously called for the president to change security policy at Mora and Campos' funeral Mass, said of the bishops' recent statements. "There's no longer the terror of speaking."