

Mexico: Its democratic transition and narco-terrorism

RISING VIOLENCE AGAINST CIVILIANS

On September 15, 2008, at the Independence Day celebration in the central plaza of Morelia, Michoacán, Mexico, two grenades were thrown into a crowd listening to the governor's speech, resulting in several dead and injured. It was the first time something like this had happened in the country. Several years ago in Sinaloa, unknown gunmen opened fire for no apparent reason on a group of eight girls and boys under the age of 21—three between the ages of 13 and 15—who were riding in several vehicles and waiting for a traffic light to change. More than 300 shell casings from different weapons like G3s, AR-15s, and 9mm pistols were recovered at the scene. And in Culiacán, Sinaloa, a young pregnant nurse and her husband were murdered with rounds from AK-47s and 9mm and 38 Super pistols in full daylight outside a shopping centre (*La Crónica*, July 14, 2008; *Noroeste*, July 19, 2008; *El Universal*, September 16, 2008).

In the case of Morelia, the attackers were linked to drug traffickers, particularly the La Familia cartel. La Familia was previously associated with the Zetas, a paramilitary group created in the 1990s by former elite soldiers known as the GAFES (Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales), which was associated with drug trafficking organizations from the state of Tamaulipas. The victims at Morelia were classified as the targets of terrorist actions. La Familia's leader is a Bible reader who calls himself "The Craziest." In the Sinaloa cases, no specific organization has been pinpointed as responsible for the attacks. In all these cases, civilians were the object of what seems to be violence calculated to create alarm among the populace and to pressure authorities to change their strategies against the traffickers.

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Michoacán is President Felipe Calderón's home state and the place where he launched his administration's first anti-drug military operation. September 15, 2008, the date of the Morelia attack, has acquired enormous symbolic meaning because it marks the crossing of another line in the ongoing gangland-style competition among cartels to see which one can carry out the most daring, bloody actions. Sinaloa is the home state of most of the country's drug kingpins. There is no evidence to show that there has been an agreement among organizations in these states to attack the defenceless public. But these kinds of actions can and do escalate.

A FAILING STATE

The Mexican state has been unable to contain and neutralize violent groups, and its intelligence work to prevent and stop their actions has been ineffective. The numbers from government sources

and the print media put drug trafficking-related homicides at more than 5,000 in 2008, of which approximately 10 percent were soldiers, police, and security personnel. This represents an almost 100 percent increase compared to 2007, according to the attorney general (BBC World, December 9, 2008).

Drug trafficking-related violence has not been this widespread or this frequent for many decades, ever since the anti-marijuana and anti-poppy laws were passed in the 1920s. The same is true for the number of confrontations between traffickers and law enforcement. At the end of the 1960s, violence began to rise, but it did not yet challenge the state's ability to contain the perpetrators. Nor did the traffickers deliberately defy the state's monopoly on the use of force. The state's party system, created after the Mexican Revolution, built security institutions with extralegal attributes that allowed the state to do two things simultaneously: protect civilians and contain drug trafficking. The illegal drug business would flourish as a subordinate order as long as the authoritarian state lasted.

THE AUTHORITARIAN STATE UNRAVELS

The relationships among Mexico's police, the traffickers, the steady rise in violence, and the growth in the domestic market for illegal drugs began to change as the single-party state system began to unravel. The world market for illegal drugs was growing, as was the traffickers' economic capabilities for corruption. They were able to arm themselves with high-powered, high-calibre weapons, while at the same time, the authoritarian state and its mechanisms for control could no longer check the growth of drug monopolies. All of this was happening against the background of the country's transition toward democracy.

Mexico: Its democratic transition, page 64

The issue of security and the challenges that powerful drug trafficking organizations posed were not a priority for the political class in the first years of the transition. The political parties were more interested in the possibilities opening up for them to win more and better positions of power. In the midst of this competition, they failed to build the institutions needed for security and the administration of justice in a new era. There was little consideration that the country might be challenged by powerful drug trafficking cartels. The competition among parties and the end of the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) monopoly on the presidency happened without a wide-ranging review of Mexico's security needs. This oversight would later hobble future presidents.

The result of this failure contributed to the fragmentation and growing weakness in the state's security and intelligence services that left it unable to respond to the challenges posed by criminal groups, which went from accommodation with the powers that be to direct confrontation with Mexico's security institutions. Some criminal organizations, in addition to expanding their activities territorially, added another dimension—they set out to establish territorial control over their drug fiefdoms by physically eliminating their rivals and competitors. They also branched out and diversified their incomes by opening up new activities—for example, protection services for legal and illegal businesses, kidnapping, trafficking in persons, and media piracy.

CALDERON'S INHERITANCE OF A POISONED CHALICE

The security and justice institutions that President Calderon inherited from previous administrations made it impossible to be optimistic about his government's capacity not only to contain the drug cartels' onslaught, but also to effectively assert state authority against narco-terrorism. The lack of substantive political progress on Mexico's domestic security

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needs during the Vicente Fox administration, and the difficult, polemical circumstances under which Calderon took office, foreshadowed the continued wars of "positioning" among the drug cartels and their relentless capacity for political confrontation. These two factors more than any others have made it impossible in the short term to reach the agreements needed to reform and strengthen Mexico's security forces and the administration of justice.

In addition, since the Ernesto Zedillo administration, and through the twilight of the PRI state and the one-party system and the beginnings of the transition to democracy, the armed forces increasingly played an important role in the anti-drug strategy. Calderon decided to speed up this trend in the hope of containing the drug traffickers' organizations and armed belligerence; however, the enemy turned out to be more tenacious than expected. The traffickers intensified their internecine slaughter, their attacks against police, soldiers, and government security officials, and against civil society. The massive presence of soldiers and police in several states has not been enough to crush the illegal trade in arms and drugs or the drug traffickers' ability to corrupt Mexico's law enforcement officials. This failure has meant that the drug gang bosses

continue to leave a trail of death and bloody violence that, in turn, are the conditions of domestic ungovernability.

SITUATION CRITICAL

The president's supporters, opponents, and most of civil society have all expressed support for the presence of the military in the streets despite its poor results in curbing violence. No one dares set a date for their return to barracks. However, the army's continued presence increases the probability of further corruption and the growth in clandestine, vigilante, paramilitary groups linked to drug trafficking. If some of the army deserters join the drug traffickers, then Mexico will enter into a new spiral of violence. It is unanimously agreed that the high levels of corruption, poor training, and lack of confidence in the country's police forces are difficult problems to solve in the short run.

Further, nothing inside or outside Mexico compels us to think there will be a radical change in drug policies. For example, no one expects a progressive decriminalization of some substances. Under these conditions, it is not possible to foresee an alternative. The traffickers will continue to escalate the violence—whether of the "traditional" kind or what has been classified as terrorist violence. The tipping point could come when some group or coalition has the clout and support of Mexico's many publics to force the government to act with determination. This too will require a new consensus between Mexico's political class and the majority. Or, it could be something more dramatic, as the democratic state manages to regain the upper hand in the war against the drug gangs. 🍂

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