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Mexico's civil war

Nov 27, 2008 by Michael Petrou



Silver or lead? It is an offer that is difficult, if not impossible, to refuse for thousands of Mexican police, judges, and politicians tasked with confronting Mexico's powerful drug cartels. The silver is bribe money. Lead is a bullet to the head—if the victim is lucky. The murders of uncooperative justice officials, and others who cross the cartels, have become increasingly gruesome of late. Beheadings are common.

For decades, during the 70 years that Mexico was effectively a one-party state run by the Institutional Revolutionary Party, a tacit understanding existed between drug cartels and members of all levels of government and state institutions that it was better to choose the silver. This does not mean that everyone from the president on down was on the take. But there was a pervasive lack of political will to confront the cartels, and when drug lords could count on politicians staying in office regardless of how many elections they might face, it made sense to seek mutually beneficial arrangements.

Mexico's transition to real democracy changed all this. Vicente Fox's election as president in 2000 broke the Institutional Revolutionary Party's grip on Mexico and shook up the status quo that allowed many cartels to prosper quietly. Their most serious challenge, however, came with the 2006 election of Felipe Calderón who, with the backing of the United States, has been more aggressive than any previous president about confronting the cartels and the police and politicians they have corrupted. He sent the army into cartel strongholds, and his government has purged thousands of compromised police and law enforcement officials.

But the more who are exposed, the deeper it becomes clear the rot has set in. Five members of an elite organized crime unit in Mexico's attorney general's office were arrested this fall on charges of taking large cash payments from the Beltrán Leyva cartel in exchange for secret information on anti-drug operations. Reports also emerged that the cartel had an informant inside the U.S. Embassy. Raids on cartels have netted high-profile drug lords, but these raids have had the same effect as throwing rocks at nests of hornets. The cartels are fighting back. And as cartel leaders are arrested or killed, their subordinates turn against

themselves and against other cartels in a battle for influence and turf.

The amount of money at stake is enormous. Mexico is now a producer as well as a transitway for cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, and marijuana. The restriction of narcotics traffic from Colombia through the Caribbean has increased the flow to Mexico. A bustling cross-border trade with the United States provides cover. Drugs in Mexico are now a US\$25-billion-a-year industry.

The result is what one of Mexico's most prominent daily newspapers, *El Universal*, calls a "war" and what John Bailey, a professor of government and foreign service at Georgetown University, describes as a "terrorist insurgency." More than 4,000 people have been killed in drug-related violence this year. Drug cartels have established training camps in the badlands near the United States border. Deserters from Mexican special forces units, trained by the Americans and originally used to target the cartels, have switched sides and now form a paramilitary group known as *Los Zetas* that can out-gun and out-manoeuvre many of the legitimate soldiers sent to apprehend them. They are led by an ex-soldier named Heriberto "the Executioner" Lazcano, who is rumoured to feed victims to lions he keeps on a ranch.

There are parts of Mexico, especially near the border with United States, where the cartels are so powerful that their members can hang recruiting banners in public spaces warning police to "join us or die." The mayor of one city near the border told a local reporter that a cartel was sponsoring cadets at the police academy to ensure the drug lords would have allies among the police after the cadets' graduation. Police who don't shift their allegiances face a grim future. Earlier this year, a handwritten warning placed at a monument to fallen police in the border city of Ciudad Juárez listed the names of 22 police commanders who, the note said, "still don't believe" the cartels' reach and power. Seven were subsequently murdered, and all but one of the survivors quit. Emilio Goicoechea, Mexico's ambassador to Canada, told Maclean's he is approached by parents of Mexican police asking for his help getting their sons to Canada. Their sons have refused to cut deals with the drug cartels and fear they will die unless they get out of Mexico.

Mexico's finance minister has blamed the crisis for damaging the economy—among the 15 largest in the world, and one that is tied to Canada's through the North American Free Trade Agreement. The greater threat, however, is to the fabric of Mexico's democracy. "The overall situation of governability, in the sense of the government convincing its own people that it can really govern and control territory, is in doubt," says Bailey, the Georgetown professor. "These gangs, in particular areas of the country, effectively challenge the government for control over roads and territory."

Bailey's assessment is bleak but not unique. "There are areas where they are supplanting the government, really controlling the government," says Shannon O'Neil, a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. She says this occurs at a local rather than national level. The cartels' primary aspirations are about power and money, not politics, and co-operation from a city mayor or police chief is often all that is needed to ensure the safe passage of cocaine. But O'Neil fears the reach of the cartels could expand into higher levels of government. "This could get worse," she says. "Calderón has stepped up his attack at a time when Mexico was reaching a tipping point where you might go into a failed state. That's where the battle is now."

One of the many epicentres of Mexico's drug war is Rosarito Beach, a small city of 140,000 in the state of Baja California, just south of the U.S. border and San Diego. It was once a popular vacation destination for American college students, and there's still a large expat population in town. Fox Studios, where several scenes from *Titanic* were filmed, is nearby, and an adjacent museum displays sets from the movie.

Tourism is down these days, though. At least 35 people have been murdered in drug-related violence since September, including seven police. Heavily armed soldiers roll through the city.

The man charged with keeping the public safe in Rosarito is Hugo Torres, the 72-year-old mayor. Torres, who was previously mayor during the 1990s, says he got back into politics because he was frustrated by the

rampant crime in his city and the infiltration of the police force by drug cartels. “I own a hotel,” he says. “It’s hard to move it to Canada, so I decided to come in and change the town. I love this town. I cannot see the thing go down the drain and not do anything about it.”

Torres’s first days as mayor made clear the severity of the task he faced. “When I began my job, my chief of police did not want to do deals with the criminals and rejected their offers, so they tried to kill him. They killed his escort.” Torres told Maclean’s.

It got worse. Torres discovered that 12 police officers were involved in the plot to kill their chief. Most witnesses were afraid to testify, but two of the officers were nevertheless convicted. The rest resigned, or, Torres says, “We got rid of them.” Shortly after the shooting, Torres’s own life was threatened. The mayor realized his force needed to be cleaned out. He made every police officer in Rosarito take a lie detector test and, with help from the United States, vetted their bank records and backgrounds, looking for hidden stashes of money or other evidence that might indicate who was loyal to the cartels. He fired half the police force and brought in the army and federal police.

“It was necessary, because the force of these guys was too strong, and our policemen were not trustworthy,” he says. Torres raised the salaries of his remaining police, and of new recruits, and started training programs with American police. But resignations are still common, and in October police in Rosarito marched on City Hall to ask for bulletproof vests and more guns.

Despite all this, Torres is confident about the future. “It is the first time that the federal government decides to fight crime like this,” he says. “This is making a big difference. The organized crime was more organized than we were in the past. Now, we are organized better than the criminals. We are a much bigger force. How long it will take to win the fight, I don’t know. I’m optimistic.” Torres says things aren’t all that bad now. Tourists and normal citizens are never targeted, he says. The problem is gangsters killing gangsters. The same thing happens in American cities, he says, and nobody pays as much attention.

There are American cities with comparable levels of violence. But overall murder rates in Mexico are still among the highest in the world. Canadians vacationing in Mexico have been among recent victims. And while the violence is worrying, more serious is the corruption of the security services, state institutions, and elected politicians.

Victor Clark-Alfaro, a professor at San Diego State University and director of the Bi-National Center for Human Rights in Tijuana, Mexico, told Maclean’s that drug cartels have financed municipal political campaigns. When he made these accusations publicly, he says, the allegedly corrupt politicians threatened him at the human rights centre where he works. “It has reached the point that it is putting in threat the democracy in our country—the presence of democracy, and also the state itself,” says Clark-Alfaro. Shannon O’Neil, the Council on Foreign Relations fellow, has similar worries. Citizens don’t need to be directly affected by the violence, she says, to lose confidence in the state and thereby weaken its democratic foundations. “If you don’t have a functioning public security system, which means everything from a local policeman or woman, through federal investigators and judges that rule based on the merits of the case, you have no protection from the vagaries of bad state decisions or criminals,” she says. “And you can’t have a real democracy if you don’t have basic safety and human rights.”

Felipe Calderón has made confronting the drug lords the defining issue of his government. He ordered raids on the cartels immediately upon assuming office, and since then has spent billions of dollars continuing to chase them. He’s also successfully convinced the United States that the Mexican drug war threatens America, too. The U.S. Congress agreed to spend US\$400 million on Mexico this year as part of the “Mérida Initiative,” which provides training, equipment, and intelligence to combat drug trafficking. “It’s a transnational problem, and we both recognize that we can only solve it by working together,” a State Department official told Maclean’s.

Several Mexican cartels already operate in American cities, and sometimes casualties from battles in Mexico literally spill over the border. Dozens of gunshot victims, wounded in Mexico, have been treated at the county hospital in El Paso, Texas, which then needs to be guarded lest the assailants pursue their victims across the frontier and into the hospital to finish them off. The United States is also entangled in Mexico's drug war because it is largely Americans who buy the drugs, and sell the guns to the Mexicans who produce, traffic, and fight over them.

"We have a fundamental responsibility to control the demand on our side," the State Department official says. "And we also recognize that we have a responsibility to interdict more effectively the illegal smuggling of weapons that are purchased in the United States and are smuggled into Mexico."

According to David Shirk, director of the Trans-Border Institute at the University of San Diego, the United States has not done enough to decrease demand for the drugs in America. He likens the situation to the Prohibition era in the U.S., with the Mexican drug lords taking on the role of Al Capone and George "Bugs" Moran. But while alcohol was legalized in the United States after a ban of little more than a decade, there is little evidence that Washington will similarly relax its stand on illegal narcotics. This means it's unlikely that Mexico's fight will get any easier.

It also won't get any more affordable. The vast majority of Mexico's exports go to the United States, which is in the midst of a financial meltdown, and dropping oil prices will further strain Mexico's economy. The fear among some analysts is that Mexico's political leaders will resort to increasingly authoritarian tactics to impose order, and that sections of the population would accept this. "Every time you have increased insecurity, there are strongmen who gain support by promising to bring security," says Leonardo Martinez-Diaz, a Mexico scholar at the Brookings Institution. "Politicians who peddle this brand of politics tend to gain in popularity when citizens lose faith in public institutions and their capacity to protect them."

This hasn't happened in Mexico, Martinez-Diaz says. Calderón has strong democratic instincts, and it's unlikely his middle-class supporters would tolerate any serious authoritarianism from their government. Shannon O'Neil notes that the Mexican Congress has passed legislation stipulating that human rights and the rule of law be protected even as cartel leaders are hunted down. "In that sense I think that Mexico's democracy, given the severity of the crisis, given the severity of the security threat, is still functioning fairly well," she says. But it's hardly flawless. Amnesty International claims that arbitrary detention, torture, and violations of due process rights of criminal suspects are common.

Calderón's defenders might convincingly argue that the situation in Mexico could be much, much worse. Drug wars in Colombia destabilized that country for decades, fuelled the growth of murderous paramilitary groups, and funded an insurgent guerrilla organization, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, that still controls thousands of square kilometres of Colombian jungle. Compared to Colombia during the 1980s and '90s, Mexico is a lawful and placid place.

Compared with most First World democracies, however, Mexico is in a precarious position, and progress is unlikely to come quickly or easily. It faces an enemy that is financed by addicts in the United States, where Mexico's ability to affect demand for drugs is negligible. The resources Mexico has to deploy against the cartels are also limited, and will likely shrink as its economy is buffeted.

Calderón, in deciding to confront the cartels, took on a massive challenge. But he also understood that while turning a blind eye to their spreading influence and the corruption of state institutions might have avoided, or at least delayed, some of the bloodshed now affecting Mexico, it would also have crippled Mexico's growth into a mature democracy. In the short term, however, Mexico will likely face further turmoil. "Now that the wars among the cartels, and between the cartels and the government, have erupted, they have to be fought to a closure," says David Mares, a professor of political science at the University of California at San Diego, who expects the violence to get worse.

There are reasons to be cautiously hopeful, however. Rosarito Beach, for example, is still a dangerous town, but it no longer has the same reputation for corruption that it did only a few years ago. Hugo Torres, the new mayor, credits the federal government and state governments for taking a stand against both the cartels and corruption, so he feels supported doing the same. “In Rosarito Beach, we’re higher than half done,” he says, when asked about the progress he’s made since assuming office last year. He says the police are now under his control, and most citizens support him. Rosarito is still far from tranquil, though. The mayor has a waterfront house. He likes to surf in the ocean behind it. Armed guards protect the front.

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<http://blog.macleans.ca/2008/11/27/mexicos-civil-war/> printed on Jan 21, 2009

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