

Mexico: Calderon uses drug violence as pretext for militarizing society

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Much like George Bush in his fraudulent “war on terror,” Mexican President Felipe Calderon and his media supporters are deeply engaged in a fear campaign to bully Mexican public opinion into accepting a move toward authoritarian rule and increased US intervention.

Winning the presidency by the smallest margin in Mexican history—in an election marred by accusations of fraud—Calderon took office amid popular distrust and hostility. His opponent Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador challenged the election results by means of a mass anti-Calderon mobilization in which millions repeatedly converged on the Zocalo, Mexico’s city square, converting it into a semi-permanent encampment and shutting down key portions of the city over a period of months. However, Lopez Obrador was careful to keep the movement safely within the boundaries of bourgeois electoral politics, demanding no more than a full recount of the votes.

Fearful that the struggle would get out of control, Lopez Obrador and his PRD party quickly liquidated the mass mobilization after the Federal Electoral Tribunal officially declared Calderon the victor, based on a partial ballot recount.

Simultaneously, a teachers strike in the state of Oaxaca had grown into a full-scale insurrection drawing in large sections of student youth, workers and peasants. The protesters eventually formed into an umbrella group called the APPO, which took control of the city center and held it for months. As in Mexico City, Lopez Obrador’s PRD eventually sought to cooperate with the PAN (National Action Party) and PRI (Party of Institutional Revolution) to “disappear” all the political organizations that came out of the protests—most importantly, the APPO.

Mexico has the world’s fourth largest population of millionaires, while 30 million scrape by on 22 pesos (barely US\$2.00) or less a day. Millions of children suffer malnutrition and hunger on a daily basis. Last year’s outbreaks of mass civil disobedience were, in essence, a manifestation of anger over worsening living conditions and economic polarization. The upheavals sent a shock of fear through the upper echelons of Mexico’s ruling elite.

Politicians from all major political parties—eventually including Lopez Obrador’s PRD—and the Mexican media banded together in an attempt to neutralize the growing radicalization, by inundating the public with lies about the fairness of election procedures and the impossibility of a full recount. More recently this campaign has taken the form of vilifying Lopez Obrador as punishment for daring to involve the masses in politics.

With Calderon’s popularity sinking before he was even inaugurated, former president Vicente Fox was under pressure to resolve the situation in Oaxaca before handing over the reins of power. A combination of the Federal Preventive Police PFP and the military were sent to crush the uprising by means of state terrorism in late October.

After finishing Fox’s military operation against the people of Oaxaca—disappearing and/or killing dozens for their participation in a political protest—Calderon wasted no time in launching a full-scale military occupation of various Mexican states under the guise of a war on

drug traffickers.

The US-based Stratfor web site, which bills itself as a private intelligence agency and “shadow CIA,” noted its approval shortly after Calderon’s inauguration in December, writing, “The holing up of APPO members highlights the Federal Preventive Police’s success in countering the group.... Calderon has proven that he has the backbone to govern Mexico and settle internal conflicts, but Oaxaca is only a start.”

Calderon’s ‘war’ on the long-standing and complex socioeconomic problem of drug trafficking began on December 8, when he set into motion a series of operations against drug cartels. Far from a plan to curtail the drug trade or protect the people from violence, the operation consisted of nothing more than a mass deployment of military units across the country. According to the Mexican daily *La Jornada*, 23,000 soldiers have been deployed so far with an official mandate to “use all necessary force to resolve disturbances and return peace to society.”

Predictably, the operations have resulted in a large increase in violent deaths among drug gangs, the military and the civilian population. In Calderon’s first 100 days *La Jornada* reported that 291 people had been executed by drug cartels, most of them in the northern states such as Guerrero, Sinaloa, Baja California and Michoacán—states that have received the bulk of the troops. Moreover, the attorney general’s office reported an average of 225 crimes per day related to narcotics trafficking between December 1, 2006, and March 31, 2007 which represents a 40 percent increase over the 2006 average.

Instead of drawing attention to the ominous danger to human rights or the bloodbath that has resulted from the disastrous military operations, the Mexican and international press have dutifully lapped up sensational stories about shootouts and secret cartel armies like “the zetas” (a group of ex-special forces soldiers who have allegedly formed a mercenary army in the service of the cartels).

For months, the media has worked in tandem with the executive branch of the Mexican government to generate a virtual hysteria over drug-related killings, which Calderon has seized upon to push through a raft of reactionary legislation and executive decrees aimed at strengthening the executive and criminalizing any and all mass social movements opposed to growing economic inequality and political corruption.

On March 9, Bush met with Calderon as part of the latter’s trumpeted “Latin American tour.” A day later, Calderon announced that Mexico would launch a justice reform plan to strengthen police power and “speed up” court cases.

On April 27, a comprehensive reform bill—called the “antiterrorism packet”—was approved in the Mexican Senate. The bill vaguely defines terrorism declaring that “anyone who uses ... any type of violence to disrupt national security or pressure authorities to make a determination” can be charged with the crime of terrorism and sentenced to 40 years in prison. Moreover, anyone who fails to reveal the identity or activities of a “terrorist” can receive 9 years in prison, and anyone who threatens to commit “terrorism” can be sentenced to 15 years.

In an attack on the press, the reforms also prohibit “that anyone publish or distribute, or allow another to publish or distribute, photos or images without the express consent of those featured.” A person found guilty of this crime may be sentenced to eight years in prison. One day after its passage, Senators from both the PAN and PRI admitted the bill could serve to criminalize social protest and promised to amend it later, according to *La Jornada*.

Calderon is currently urging Mexico’s Congress to amend the Constitution to allow officials to tap phones without a judge’s approval in any case the government defines as “urgent.”

One of the first to be prosecuted under the new terror laws was Ignacio del Valle—leader of a peasant-based social movement called the Defense Front of Land Ownership in San Salvador Atenco, which fought authorities to prevent the illegal expropriation of their lands for the construction of a new multibillion-dollar international airport in 2002. De Valle was labeled a terrorist and sentenced to 67 years in prison for his role. Three other of the front’s leaders were detained and held incommunicado for over a year before receiving similar sentences.

That the first victim of the legal reforms was a political dissident did not deter Calderon and the media from repeating the lie that harsh measures were aimed at fighting drug cartels. Like the authoritarian movement in US politics, Calderon’s legal efforts have been aided by a right-wing Supreme Court. The Supreme Court of National Justice (SCJN) anticipated Calderon’s military operations in Oaxaca, declaring last year that the military can legally aid police forces in the area of public security.

Last January, after the events in Oaxaca, the Court also ruled that law enforcement officials could conduct search and seizure without a court order in “flagrant situations,” despite the fact that this practice is constitutionally prohibited and in violation of the American Convention of Human Rights, which has been adopted as the law of Mexico. The result is that nearly any military personnel can search houses, seize property and detain individuals without any oversight, based on nothing but a suspicion of “flagrancy.”

Last month, Calderon issued an executive decree to organize and train a new Mexico City-based army within 90 days. The new force bears the ungainly title of “The Special Core of Federal Support Forces of the Mexican Army and Air Force” and will be centralized under the direct command of the president and administered by the Secretary of National Defense (Sedena). The announcement was made in the official newspaper of the federal government, *El Diario Oficial*, which stated that the soldiers will be trained to manage “critical situations in which social peace and public security are altered.” The number of troops has yet to be announced, but it is estimated that it will be in the thousands.

Sedena’s training manual states the purpose of the new force: “Those that alter or disturb public order, tumultuously gather, intimidate or oblige authorities to make any determination and put life or property in danger can be charged with the crime of rioting and become the object of repressive state action by special forces equipped with shot-guns, chemical agents and precision rifles.”

Calderon’s “war on drug cartels” has been accompanied by his repeated calls for increased US support and intervention in the form of money and logistical support, similar to that received by Colombia in its long-standing “drug war” against the FARC guerrillas.

On January 22, Calderon oversaw the extradition of the suspected leader of Mexico’s Gulf drug cartel—Osiel Cardenas—to US authorities. In response to the handover of Cardenas—and 15 other prisoners—Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales enthusiastically hailed the collaboration as “unprecedented in ... scope and importance.”

On February 7, officials of the US Drug Enforcement Administration and the FBI met with police chiefs from Mexico, Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras for a three-day summit in Los Angeles to discuss strengthening multilateral efforts against what they call

“transnational gangs.” On April 23, Mexican authorities publicly called for US assistance in locating a suspected murderer in Durango state, despite the fact that local police lost the suspect nearly 500 miles from the border between the US and Mexico. Finally, in early May, Calderon announced that Mexico had begun to work with the US to detect gun purchasers of Mexican origin in the United States.

On April 27, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the US State Department has provided Calderon with a new \$3 million Communications Intercept System, which will enable him to begin his own domestic spying program. Susan Pittman, of the State Department’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, told the *Times*, “It is a government of Mexico operation funded by the US.” The contract states that the system is designed to allow both governments to “disseminate timely and accurate, actionable information to each country’s respective federal, state, local, private and international partners.”

These joint operations demonstrate a growing US involvement that is developing in tandem with the drive to impose new border security measures as part of the pending immigration legislation in the US. The proposed immigration bill requires a doubling of Border Patrol agents and the creation of a massive detention center on the border with capacity for up to 30,000 prisoners at any one time. Given Calderon’s desire to become Washington’s junior partner in the global war on terror, these measures could easily be adapted to form a new link in the international chain of US gulags into which Mexican and American political prisoners can be more efficiently disappeared.

Calderon is using the Bush administration’s erection of the framework for a police state in the US as a model for imposing similar measures aimed at controlling the explosive growth of social discontent in Mexico.

Unlike the Bush administration, however, Calderon’s move against democratic rights is being implemented contemporaneously with the eruption of mass popular movements around the country and is more nakedly directed against political dissent. The reckless attempts to utilize drug cartel violence as Mexico’s 9/11 reflect a profound desperation within Mexico’s economic elite. In the end, however, it may well create the opposite of the intended effect, fomenting more vigorous mass political opposition and unifying previously localized upheavals against the entire Mexican government.



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