

Mexico: growing crisis over failed drug war policy

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Mexico's "war on drugs" is an unmitigated social disaster. The drug war began at the end of 2006 with the militarization of wide swaths of the country. Many of these once relatively tranquil areas are now bloody war zones under de facto military control. For all this, there has been no significant reduction in drug trafficking or the power of the drug cartels. On the contrary, every year has seen a steady increase in violence culminating in a three-year death toll estimated as high as 17,000.

Anger over the drug war policy boiled over Saturday in Ciudad Juárez, a city of 1.3 million people across the border from Texas. Thousands marched to demand the resignation of President Felipe Calderón, state governor José Reyes Baeza and the city's mayor, José Reyes Ferriz. They also called for the holding of a referendum on the continued presence of some 10,000 soldiers.

Leading the march were relatives of 15 students who were massacred at a January 31 party. While government officials initially claimed that the killings were the result of a "turf war" between rival drug gangs, the families insisted that the youths had nothing to do with the drug trade and questioned how the heavily armed assassins were able to move freely through the militarily occupied city.

The predominantly young demonstrators chanted "Juárez isn't a barracks, get out!" and carried signs reading, "We are students, not gang members." Hundreds of protesters lay down in the street, simulating massacre victims, blocking the international bridge to El Paso, Texas.

An aunt of two of the massacre victims told the Mexican daily *La Jornada*: "We are going to fight together against injustice, whatever it costs. We already know that my nephews aren't coming back, but the useless and corrupt politician with their police and army must get out."

Juárez—a critical trading hub and cheap labor platform for multinational corporations—has been under de facto military control for nearly a year now. The military has distinguished itself by its generalized hostility to the entire working population and routine abuses. Saturday's march was the second such protest in little more than two months.

Juárez and other regions of the country, such as Nuevo Laredo and now the entire state of Michoacan, have been so destabilized by the war that they are virtually ungovernable. Tancitaro, a town in Michoacan state, is the most extreme example. As of December 4,

2009, the mayor and the rest of the town's leadership abdicated their authority saying: "The basic conditions for exercising political power do not exist." Since their departure, the state congress was forced to appoint a dummy administration until the next election, which will not be held until 2011.

In Michoacan alone, more than 1,506 people have been killed since 2006. Like the total casualties on the national level, the death toll has steadily increased every year. The state attorney general estimates that people are being killed at a rate of 1.4 every day, while CISEN, the national security agency, estimates the rate to be twice as high, making the state one of the most violent in the country.

Leonel Godoy—Governor of Michoacan state and PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution) member—has asked that federal police prosecuting the drug war leave the city centers and move to hotels along the highway to reduce the number of civilian casualties, while the state secretary, Fidel Calderón Torreblanca, publicly criticized the drug war policy saying: "the federal authorities need to revise their strategy to find a more efficient and effective way to counter drug traffickers that doesn't alarm the population so much."

Mass opposition to all levels of government is not uncommon in Mexico. Calderón began his presidency in the midst of militant protests—one in Mexico city against the alleged fraud that got him elected by the narrowest margin in Mexican history, the other a teachers strike in Oaxaca culminating in the teachers union's seizure of the capital city. To be sure, such manifestations of popular discontent have been chilled by the unprecedented and aggressive military presence throughout the country, but they have begun to reemerge in a more explosive form.

On October 15, an estimated 350,000 people took to the streets in Mexico City to protest Calderón's decision to shut down the state-owned electric company which resulted in the sacking of nearly 44,000 electrical workers and the virtual destruction of their union. This was one of the initial steps in Calderón's austerity plan for Mexico—a nation suffering widespread poverty and malnutrition before the recent global economic crisis—which he has dubbed: "doing more with less."

Mexico has been particularly hard hit by the global economic crisis for a number of reasons, particularly its close ties to the US—epicenter of the crisis—and its heavy reliance on oil revenues.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

estimates that Mexico's economic growth contracted 5.9 percent in the first quarter of 2009. Oil revenues from the Mexican state energy company Pemex declined by 22 percent, and the country's relationship with the US, once a great asset, is now its greatest liability. Mexico's membership in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) expanded and deepened economic links between the two countries, firmly establishing Mexico as the region's cheap labor platform. Mexico's exports to the United States, representing 20 percent of the country's GDP, fell 36 percent between July 2008 and April 2009.

The steep drop in economic activity will result in further job losses. The official unemployment rate rose to 5.3 percent in May 2009, up from 3.2 percent a year earlier. These figures grossly obscure how severe the situation is, because 27 percent of the workforce works in the "informal sector" and is not taken into account.

The combination of the economic downturn and the disastrous drug war, have exacerbated the concerns of the US ruling elite as to the stability of the Mexican government. Stratfor, a private intelligence service with close ties in the US military-intelligence apparatus, warned: "if Calderón is making a policy of shutting state-run companies and taking on the unions — no holds barred — Mexico can expect to see a great deal of unrest in the future... large-scale protests could very well continue. And should Calderón try to utilize his two-front strategy in a broader fashion, he must be prepared to handle significant unrest. Should that come to pass, Mexico may find itself strained to the limit."

Ruling party buckles under strain

This state of affairs has put tremendous pressure on Calderón and his Party of National Action or PAN. In July the PAN suffered a humiliating defeat in Mexico's legislative elections at the hands of the PRI—Institutional Revolution Party. Since then there has been a reluctant acknowledgement within the PAN that the drug war in its current form is untenable. With an eye to the presidential elections in 2012, many in the party are demanding a change in course.

According to the *Guardian*, "the Mexican government now accepts that the military offensive launched by President Felipe Calderón is what prompted an explosion of inter-cartel violence." However, this assessment has pitted a growing section of Calderón's own party against Calderón himself.

Former president of the PAN party, Manuel Espino, submitted an open letter to Calderón demanding that he "take responsibility for the tragedy in Ciudad Juarez...because we now confront a failed war and a pointless bloodbath." In an interview with *Proceso*, Espino elaborated: "It's (the drug war) a failed strategy on the national level but to continue it would be suicidal...It's a strategy that has no intellectual underpinnings, no prior evaluation of the causes of the problem."

Calderón responded to the open letter saying he'd refuse to listen to "voices that naively claim the state should just retire from the field and the problems will magically disappear." To this Espino warned: "I don't want him (Calderón) to end up repudiated...If the President doesn't change course the ship will sink...the storm didn't come to us,

we went to it, and that is the responsibility of the person behind the wheel."

Espino's comments are significant. Over three years of chaos and bloodshed, not one of the nominally left parties in Mexico responded to the growing public opposition to the declaration of a domestic war, replete with sweeping legal changes so broad as to outlaw even the simplest forms of political expression.

The PRD, which was a significant political force in 2005, has slowly disintegrated into two camps, one promoting a more polished electoral image and increased focus on identity issues, while the other is still loyal to the former mayor of Mexico City and PRD presidential candidate, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO), and his brand of phony populism. For his part, AMLO has ostensibly broken with the PRD launching a nationalist campaign to "save Mexican oil" from privatization supported by his self-styled "brigadistas" and allied with a front of former radicals, Stalinists and PRI members.

In the absence of any credible bourgeois left party, the main opposition to Calderón's suicidal policies has come from within the right-wing PAN party itself. Besides being a measure of the impotence of what passes for the Mexican left, Espino's campaign against Calderón gauges just how desperate the situation has become for the Mexican government.

Espino describes Calderón's policy as a misuse of the military that will severely exhaust the institution. He goes on to warn: "Looking ahead to 2010, many are warning of the threat of subversive uprisings, it's imperative to count on the armed forces supported by the confidence of the people...If we just review this strategy and a permanent military presence is suggested, fine, but let's define its functions."

Essentially, Espino is attempting to save the project of militarization by scapegoating Calderón. He is also warning that care must be taken to preserve the armed forces for use against the principal enemy of the Mexican ruling elite and its imperialist patron—the Mexican working class.



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