

Extradition requests for top politicians deepen US-Mexico crisis

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Late last week, the Mexican government of President Claudia Sheinbaum was slapped with an extradition request from Washington D.C. for ten prominent politicians from the central Pacific Coast state of Sinaloa, including the state's governor, Rubén Rocha, and its sole federal senator, Enrique Inzunza Cázares.

This came a week on the heels of revelations that CIA agents, without the federal government's knowledge, were operating in the northern border state of Chihuahua, in direct violation of Mexico's constitution and sovereignty.

Rocha is a senior member of Sheinbaum's ruling "left-wing" Morena (Movimiento Regeneración Nacional) party, as are the other nine serving and former politicians and security chiefs who are also subject of the extradition requests.

If Sheinbaum complies, she risks opening the floodgates to more US extradition requests, and fissures in her party. If she doesn't, she risks aggression from an increasingly unhinged Trump administration.

As Arturo Sarukhán, a former Mexican ambassador to the US, says, "she's caught between a rock and a hard place because she obviously understands what's at stake for her government and the US and the critically important USMCA (US-Mexico-Canada trade agreement) review."

Latin America commentator Nick Corbishly spun it differently: "Sheinbaum is between a rock and a hard place. The rock is the rising threat of US military intervention in Mexico, and the hard place being Sheinbaum's party's narco-politicians."

Veteran Mexican journalist Denise Marker described the development as "extremely worrying" and "without precedent." Indeed, it is: The Sinaloa cartel has operated in Sinaloa with nigh on total impunity and government protection for over 70 years. While Mexico has either delivered to the US (Mayo Zambada) or not impeded US capture of (Chapo Guzman) Sinaloa cartel chiefs, no major party state governor (PRI, PAN or Morena) has ever been extradited.

Speaking to *Al Jazeera*, Vanda Felbab-Brown, an expert on non-state armed groups at the Brookings Institution think tank in Washington DC, said that indicting elected politicians in Mexico had "long been considered a very big step, almost a 'nuclear option'."

Rumors of a second wave of extradition requests—including for three more governors, two legislators, and most likely the son of Mexico's last president and Morena's founder, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO).

Mexico's Attorney General's Office (FGR) quickly provisionally ruled out detaining the suspects indicated. The head of the Specialized Prosecutor's Office for Competition Control of the FGR, Raúl Jiménez Vázquez, said there was not enough evidence to justify taking such an action.

Asked about the extradition attempt, on Monday, Sheinbaum said "we are not a protectorate of the United States. We are not a colony of the United States."

However, despite her usual reaffirmations of Mexican sovereignty and independence, Sheinbaum in the main has capitulated to the Washington's will and Trump's demands.

Last year she halted the flow of undocumented migrants though Mexico to the US border. She refused entry to Mexico by emigrants from Venezuela and other countries. She sent National Guard troops to the border to stop US-bound drug smuggling, reducing fentanyl trafficking by over 70 percent since she took office in October 2024.

Sheinbaum was forced to castigate the governor of Chihuahua state Maru Campos Galván when it came to light she was working with the CIA, the DEA and the FBI in going after traffickers in her northern border state, in violation of the Mexican constitution. This came to light only because two of the CIA agents participating in the operation died in an alleged car accident.

In apparent response, the US Ambassador to Mexico, Ron Johnson, a former CIA agent and Green Beret with decades of experience of destabilizing foreign countries and training death squads, unsealed the indictment of Rocha, making its 34 pages of allegations public.

Governor Rocha responded, "this attack is not just aimed at my person but the whole Fourth Transformation [4T] movement, its emblematic leaders and the Mexicans who represent the cause."

The 4T is the overarching political project launched by AMLO, who has also been the target of charges of receiving campaign funding, collaborating with or looking the other way as to narcos.

This is likely an implicit threat from Rocha that if he is extradited, he will make disclosures regarding AMLO, his presidency, and tactical alliances by Morena with cartels.

Rocha, like any high-level Sinaloa government figure, likely has had dealings with Sinaloa cartel figures, and almost certainly received campaign funding from prominent cartel members. Moreover, he has likely been fingered by Guzman's sons, the "Chapitos" (who have turned witnesses in return for lighter sentences in their New York trials).

Despite a military operation in February that killed Nemesio Rubén Oseguera Cervantes, the head of the powerful Jalisco New Generation Cartel, the Sinaloa cartel's principal rival, if Sheinbaum declines the US extradition request of Rocha, she likely will be depicted by the US government, Mexican opposition parties, including past presidents (some of whom themselves had prior dealings with major narco figures), and right-wing media outlets in Mexico and abroad as a "narco president," who is protecting the country's drug lords rather than helping the US Department of Justice jail them.

Threat of US military intervention in Mexico

Refusal to cooperate also increases the risk of US military intervention

in Mexico. A la the seizure of Maduro in Venezuela, US special operations forces could attempt to snatch Rocha, Senator Inzunza, and other indicted politicians. According to some reliable sources, this option has been on the table for months.

It is an open question whether Mexican forces, many trained by the US, would attempt to block the US operation.

Some commentators have suggested that Sheinbaum and AMLO have decided that a diplomatic rupture with the US would be worth it to avoid Rocha spilling his guts in a New York courtroom.

The assumption may be that Washington lacks the will for forceful extraction. Given Trump's routine dismissal of international law, such an assumption is dubious.

Mike Vigil, a former US Drug Enforcement Administration chief of International Operations who lives in Mexico, warned in an interview with the Chilean outlet *Entrevistas Meganoticias* that an extraction is unlikely because any attempt to abduct Rocha "would be a disaster, not only for Mexico but also Latin America as a whole," causing instability throughout Latin America. Mexico is not Venezuela, he says.

Reports are that Sheinbaum traveled with Rocha himself Friday of last week to meet over the weekend with AMLO at his ranch in Palenque, Tabasco. Immediately afterwards, Rocha took temporary leave from his post, which removes all the legal protections against prosecution he enjoyed as a sitting governor.

So far Sheinbaum seems to have prioritized loyalty to Morena. On Friday of last week, she declared that the ten Mexican officials charged with drug trafficking and weapons offenses will be tried in Mexico, not the US—"if credible evidence emerges against them."

Again, this is happening at a delicate time for US-Mexico relations, with the USMCA trade deal up for mandatory joint review in June. With the global economy teetering from the US war on Iran, would Trump jeopardize its biggest trade partnership? There is no telling.

And it can't be ruled out that that Trump will use the extradition requests as leverage in the trade negotiations.

The threat of US military intervention against Mexican cartels has been in the US cards since at least early 2023, when neo-con Republicans like Lindsey Graham, Marco Rubio and former Attorney General William Barr began talking of the need to designate its cartels as "terrorist organizations."

That being said, US imperialism is playing a much larger game that extends to the entire American continent. The ultimate goal is to remove all obstacles to US dominion over the strategic resources of the region, including, crucially, its oil and gas, and rare minerals, as part of its strategic competition with China and Russia.

To achieve that goal, Washington seeks removal of all governments in the region that are not subordinated to its interests and that may wish to maintain some degree of national sovereignty. Its main pretext for doing that thus far, as shown with Venezuela, is the so-called war on the drug cartels.

Since the recent rash of elections that have brought far-right governments to power in Chile, Bolivia and Honduras (with pressure from Trump), and the US coup in Venezuela, the number of non-US aligned countries is in rapid decline. Chief among them are Mexico, Brazil and Colombia, which together account for over 60 percent of the region's population and GDP, as well as Nicaragua and Cuba, with the latter's shattered economy subject to blanket US sanctions.

Argentina's President Milei is now apparently conspiring with the recently pardoned Honduran narco-president Juan Orlando Hernández, whom the US and Israel apparently want to return to power, to "eliminate the left" in Latin America.

For now, it is perhaps difficult to imagine that the US will seek to remove Sheinbaum, as she has attempted to pacify Trump, is democratically elected, is not accused of personal ties to cartels, and still

enjoys high levels of public support. According to the latest *El Financiero* poll, her approval rating is 68 percent.

A minimum US goal is presumably to erode Morena's support base with a view to Mexico's mid-term elections in 2027.

In order to destroy Morena, Washington likely will first attempt to destroy the reputation of its co-founder López Obrador, who ended his six-year term presidential term with an approval rating of close to 80 percent.

The US Drug Enforcement Agency launched a series of accusations against AMLO in his final months in office. The widely published allegations did not present conclusive proof of AMLO's complicity; nor did they dent Morena's electoral prospects in the 2024 presidential elections, which Sheinbaum ended up winning by a historic landslide.

However, the US government likely will ramp up its efforts to tar AMLO with alleged ties to Mexico's drug cartels. Just under a month ago, the journalist Salvador García Soto published an article in *El Universal* titled "They Are Building a Case Against AMLO in Washington." He warned that this case will rely on statements that have already been made to the Department of Justice by "El Mayo" Zambada and the two sons of Chapo Guzmán, along with those of a former PAN party governor, a former foreign minister of the Republic, and a former Mexican ambassador to the United States.

It is the case that drug cartels have compromised, or even taken over, large sections of Mexico's political structures at the local and state level in key strategic regions, supplanting local authorities in some parts of the country. All major Mexican political parties are implicated in this to one extent or another, not just Morena.

That does not mean that criminal groups govern the entire country, or that Mexico is a "narco state," as many US politicians and pundits claim.

The US itself is more aptly described as a criminal state, trampling on international law, as it simultaneously conducts extrajudicial killings in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific, wages a war of flagrant and deadly aggression against Iran, and backs genocides in Gaza and Lebanon.

In the final analysis, the drug cartel scourge arises from the vast inequality existing under capitalism in Mexico, imposed by the Mexican ruling class, its billionaires and American imperialism.

It will only end with the Mexican working class taking power, along with the working classes of the entirety of Latin American and the US.



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