

The Cartel Crackdown: Winning the Drug War and Rebuilding Mexico in the Process
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In July, Mexico will elect a new president to replace Felipe Calderón. Each of the three candidates in the race is campaigning on a distinct social and economic platform, presenting sharply different visions for Mexico's future. Yet whoever wins will need to address the foremost challenge confronting the country today: the battle against the drug cartels. And despite all the negative headlines, the next president will find that the government has made huge gains in the last five years toward defeating them.

When Calderón took office, in December 2006, the cartels were deeply rooted in Mexico, effectively controlling municipalities across the country and even entire states. In the previous two decades, they had amassed billions in illicit revenue and, operating with virtual impunity, used their illegal profits to penetrate and corrupt the Mexican government on a vast scale. These competing drug organizations fought over territory and supply routes, causing rampant violence. Calderón became the first Mexican president to take them on. By using force and launching large-scale reforms of Mexico's law enforcement institutions, he has already destroyed some of the cartels and weakened several others.

As a result of Calderón's determination and his success against the cartels, his approval rating now stands at 52 percent. Yet those organizations continue to plague the country. Since Calderón first took them on in late 2006, nearly 50,000 Mexicans have died in drug-related homicides. Although most of these murders are a result of cartel-on-cartel violence, the unremitting kidnapping, extortion, and bloodshed has hurt Mexico's image, damaged its tourism industry, and exhausted an increasingly weary Mexican public. According to an August 2011 Pew poll, less than half of Mexicans believe that the government is making progress in its battle against the cartels.

This fatigue is feeding an undercurrent in Mexican politics suggesting that Calderón's efforts to vanquish the drug cartels, however noble, have failed. In this view, Mexico cannot defeat these organizations; at best, it can achieve a Faustian bargain whereby the cartels are allowed to operate above the law in exchange for reducing their violence. Perhaps sensing the growing skepticism, Calderón's would-be successors have said little about the fight against the cartels, offering only vague platitudes about the need for a new strategy or calling for the withdrawal of the Mexican military from the provinces and an increased focus on the social causes of criminal behavior.

But this defeatism sells Mexico short; the country can still triumph in its struggle. It took 20 years for the cartels to become as dominant as they were when Calderón came to power, and even with the right strategy, it will take several more years of sustained effort to put them out of business. The question is whether Mexico's next president will hold firm and build on Calderón's advances or undermine them by negotiating with the drug lords. Accommodation may reduce some of the violence in the short run, but in the end, the only way for Mexico to restore order is to defeat the cartels once and for all.

Cartels In Control

When Calderón took office, there were roughly half a dozen cartels, each a large criminal outfit in its own right. These organizations—the Gulf, the Juárez, La Familia Michoacana, the Sinaloa, and the Tijuana cartels—dominated large swaths of Mexican territory and operated abroad, as well. Although they made money from extortion, kidnapping, and human trafficking, they derived most of their income from the drug trade. Their combined gross revenues from drugs alone had risen to approximately \$5-\$10 billion annually. To avoid a disruption of their operations, the cartels bought increasingly sophisticated weapons and bribed Mexican government officials at all levels. Those they could not bribe, they threatened or killed; in the past five years, the cartels have assassinated 32 mayors and 83 police chiefs, along with a number of journalists. *Plata o plomo?* (silver or lead?) was their motto.

The cartels began rising to their current stature in the mid-1980s, when several Mexican drug-smuggling organizations, which until then had been trafficking marijuana, established a connection with cocaine cartels in Colombia and, for a set fee per kilogram, started transporting drugs into the United States on their behalf. By the 1990s, the Colombians had begun paying the Mexicans with a share of the product itself, requiring the junior partners to establish their own distribution cells in the United States and elsewhere. By the end of the decade, the Mexican cartels had largely supplanted their Colombian counterparts, and they began to diversify their product line, selling drugs such as methamphetamines and heroin in addition to cocaine. They also expanded to other forms of organized crime, extorting legitimate businesses, kidnapping for ransom, and engaging in human smuggling. One of the cartels even stole and sold the Mexican government's own crude oil from pipelines that ran through the cartel's territory.

By around the turn of the century, the cartels had become so powerful that the Mexican government felt that it could do little to oppose them. Calderón's immediate predecessor, Vicente Fox, preferred not to hear about the problem, whereas Ernesto Zedillo, who preceded Fox, tried to fight back but found that any operations he ordered quickly became compromised because law enforcement officials had been paid off. As much as Zedillo and Fox wanted to challenge the impunity of the cartels, they learned that Mexico's weak and corrupt law enforcement institutions were not up to the task.

By 2006, the power of the cartels had reached an apex. Calderón set to work soon after his election, and the battle was joined almost immediately. Shortly before Calderón had taken office, La Familia Michoacana had slaughtered members of a rival cartel and tossed their severed heads onto the dance floor of a nightclub. Calderón, once he assumed the presidency, realized that he could not rely on the federal police, the *Agencia Federal de Investigación* (AFI), to restore order or to track down the perpetrators. After investigating, Calderón discovered that the AFI was riddled with corruption. Over the years, the cartels had bribed not only regional AFI comandantes but also top-level employees at the agency's Mexico City headquarters. Indeed, in early 2008, the AFI's second-highest official was arrested for taking hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes from the Sinaloa cartel. Internal investigations revealed that when the AFI was directed to arrest drug lords, members of the agency would often tip them off beforehand.

The state police were even more unreliable. Often on the payroll of the cartels in their respective regions, the state police not only failed to cooperate with the federal police but also regularly protected the cartels and their leaders. The municipal police were even worse: chronically undertrained, poorly paid, and often thoroughly corrupt.

With limited options, Calderón turned to the military, which, because it had never been involved in investigating or acting against the cartels, remained relatively immune from their influence. Calderón used the military as a show of force in areas wracked by cartel violence, such as Ciudad Juárez, Michoacán, and Veracruz, and to surgically target, capture, and, if necessary, kill cartel leaders. Yet Calderón understood that the military alone could not crush the cartels. To do that, he would need forces capable of patrolling urban areas, collecting intelligence, and gathering the evidence necessary to prosecute drug traffickers--functions that only professionalized law enforcement agencies could carry out. To win this war, Calderón needed cops he could rely on.

Clog the Trafficking

Calderón set about reforming Mexico's law enforcement institutions using a three-part strategy: creating a new, professional federal police force; rebuilding each of the 32 state forces and giving them the responsibilities of the discredited municipal police; and overhauling the judicial and penal systems.

Calderón began his efforts with the federal police. Fed up with the corruption of the AFI, he abolished the agency in May 2009 and created an entirely new force. The new federal police began from scratch, hiring well-vetted college graduates, training them at a new police academy, and offering higher pay. They also established world-class anticorruption standards and a rigorous internal affairs department.

Calderón's plan worked. The new force now boasts 35,000 officers and has built Mexico's first national crime information system, which, among other things, stores the fingerprints of everyone who is arrested in the country. The federal police have also assumed command from the army in several regions and demonstrated their ability to confront the cartels by apprehending several of their central figures. And the force has also avoided any serious incidents of corruption. Although largely unheralded, the building of this professional law enforcement agency in just a few years is one of Calderón's greatest accomplishments.

But the federal police need help from Mexico's 350,000 state police. Calderón has thus begun restructuring these forces as well, along the lines of the reforms he made to the federal police. Given the sheer number of new officers that must be vetted, hired, and trained, it will take at least several more years to complete the job. And to guarantee that the federal and state police work together, the Mexican government must find a way to work around the provincial governors, who ostensibly control the state forces and have too often been in bed with the cartels. A recent affidavit filed in U.S. federal court in Texas, for example, revealed that the former governor of Tamaulipas, a state that abuts the U.S.-Mexican border, had accepted millions of dollars from the Gulf cartel. Such corrupt governors have ensured that the state police take no action against, and even in some cases actively protect, cartel leaders in their territory. In the

future, the Mexican Congress should permit the president, at least in times of emergency, to federalize the state police in a given state, similar to the authority of the U.S. president to federalize National Guard units.

As he battled the cartels, Calderón also came to realize that he would need to reform the judicial system. Mexican prosecutors manage to obtain convictions in less than five percent of cases involving persons arrested for drug trafficking. By comparison, the conviction rate in the United States for similar crimes is over 90 percent. To fix this abysmal record, Calderón has proposed moving to a more transparent criminal justice system, with trials taking place in public so as to hold judges and prosecutors accountable.

Even when Mexico has managed to jail cartel members, it has had trouble keeping them there. Mexican prisons have suffered a series of embarrassing breakouts, including the infamous escape of the Sinaloa cartel's kingpin, Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, in 2001. Cartel bosses unable to escape still manage to live in luxury and conduct their illegal enterprises from behind bars. Many drug traffickers arrested by federal forces are held in poorly funded and understaffed state prisons. To hold key cartel figures securely, Calderón has begun building a maximum-security prison and modeling the Mexican penal system after that in the United States. But until these judicial and penal reforms are implemented, Mexico should continue to extradite as many of the cartel kingpins and their key lieutenants as it can to the United States, which has a much better chance of keeping them behind bars.

Choosing Victory

Calderón has fully achieved only one plank of his proposed reforms so far: the creation of a new federal police force. But in the meantime, by using the military and the reformed federal police, he has managed to wage an increasingly effective campaign against the cartels.

In his pursuit of the cartels, Calderón has employed what is known as the kingpin strategy, which Colombia used to defeat its drug cartels in the 1990s. This strategy calls for exploiting all the cartels' vulnerabilities: intercepting their communications, disrupting the supply and distribution of drugs and the chemicals needed to make them, and seizing the assets of cartel bosses. Once authorities have weakened a particular group, they can find and arrest the kingpin and the other essential members of the organization, including the leader's potential successors.

In the last three years alone, using this strategy, the Mexican government has captured or killed over 40 major cartel members. One of the greatest successes came in December 2009, when Mexican marines essentially destroyed the Beltrán Leyva cartel, a spinoff of the Sinaloa, after killing its leader, Arturo Beltrán Leyva, and capturing nearly all his top deputies. Meanwhile, Mexican forces have also dismantled the Tijuana cartel and severely weakened the Gulf, the Juárez, and La Familia Michoacana cartels. Even the Zetas (a spinoff of the Gulf cartel) and the Sinaloa, although they remain strong, have been disrupted; in early 2012, the Mexican government apprehended a founder of the Zetas and a high-level member of the Sinaloa cartel, among others.

To dismantle the remaining cartels, Calderón's successor will need to use an essential element of the kingpin strategy that has so far been missing: an aggressive asset-seizure program. This would involve identifying and confiscating not only the funds that the cartels use to conduct their criminal activity but also the assets that cartel members have purchased with illicit profits: houses, ranches, airplanes, boats, vehicles, and otherwise legitimate businesses. Such efforts against the Colombian cartels in the 1990s allowed Bogotá to arrest their leaders. The Colombian government found the cartel kingpins Pablo Escobar and José Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha after freezing their assets, which exposed them by making it harder for them to pay friends and bribe public officials for protection. If Mexico follows this example, it will find it easier to apprehend the heads of the Sinaloa and Zetas cartels.

When Mexico removes the kingpins, their successors, and their key operators, the cartels will splinter and collapse, unable to threaten the state any longer. That is when Mexico will have won its war against the drug organizations. Such a victory is now within the country's grasp, but Calderón does not have time to finish the job before he leaves office in December. Fortunately for Mexico, he will bequeath to his successor major successes against the cartels, newly invigorated institutions, and a sound strategy.

The next president of Mexico will have to decide whether to continue the battle begun by Calderón or revert to appeasing the cartels. The choice will determine the course of Mexican history. A deal of some kind with the cartels could temporarily stem the violence, but it would consign Mexico to the corruption and impunity of organized crime for generations to come, dashing the country's hopes of establishing the rule of law and entering the first tier of developed nations. Calderón's successor must recognize that the only long-term solution to the country's drug cartels is not to bargain with them but to defeat them.

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