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Questions Remain on Tenth Anniversary of Colosio Assassination

by LADB Staff
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The government's inability to completely solve the assassination of presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio during the past 10 years has fostered the growth of several conspiracy theories. Colosio was gunned down on March 23, 1994, while campaigning in the impoverished neighborhood of Lomas Taurinas in Tijuana in the northern state of Baja California. Authorities charged factory worker Mario Aburto Martinez with Colosio's murder and sent him to La Palma federal prison to serve a 45-year sentence, the maximum allowed by law. In four separate investigations, special prosecutors have concluded that there was insufficient evidence to prove that anyone but Aburto was responsible for Colosio's murder (see SourceMex, 1994-06-08, 1997-07-30, 1999-04-07, and 2000-10-25).

The conclusions of the reports have not convinced critics, who insist that Aburto was part of a wider conspiracy to kill Colosio. One of those theories suggests the murder may have been carried out by drug traffickers, who felt threatened by Colosio's stump speeches to end political corruption in Mexico.

The most widely mentioned theory, however, is that Colosio was murdered on orders of high-level officials in his own Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Former President Salinas said to have planned murder Several versions of this theory suggest that the mastermind was former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, who became nervous about Colosio's increasingly populist rhetoric and his consistent campaign pledges to end corruption.

Some observers say the Salinas theory may have some credence because Colosio was replaced after his death by Ernesto Zedillo, whose pro-trade positions more closely mirrored the neoliberal stance held by Salinas and his predecessor Miguel de la Madrid (see SourceMex, 1994-03-30).

One of the most vocal proponents of the theory of Salinas' involvement in the assassination is Colosio's father, PRI Sen. Luis Colosio Fernandez. Colosio Fernandez says relations between his son and Salinas had been deteriorating, as evidenced in a letter sent by Colosio's campaign coordinator Ernesto Zedillo. "How can I forget that letter in which Zedillo mentioned that President Salinas was determined to raise questions about Colosio's ability," Colosio Fernandez said in early March. In the letter, Zedillo also was recommending that the Colosio camp enter into a political truce with Salinas.

In a recent interview, Salinas denied having philosophical or political differences with Colosio but acknowledged that the campaign began under difficult circumstances in January 1994 because of the uprising of the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN). "Our communications were fluid, and we remained close and in constant dialogue," Salinas told reporters. Salinas instead sought to deflect the blame to Zedillo, who he said was about to be replaced as Colosio's campaign
coordinator. "It would be good to know if the campaign coordinator knew he was going to be ousted," Salinas said, in reference to Zedillo's letter.

Zedillo had no immediate comments on Salinas' charges, but the two former presidents are not exactly close friends (see SourceMex, 2000-10-25). In statements regarding the death of his son, Colosio Fernandez called on the Fox administration to reopen the investigation of the assassination, focusing on Salinas, Zedillo, and Manuel Camacho Solis. Camacho, a former mayor of Mexico City and Chiapas peace commissioner, was angered when he was bypassed in favor of Colosio when the PRI appointed its presidential candidate. At that time, the nomination was still determined through the "dedazo," or fingering, by PRI officials.

Camacho was said to have plotted to discredit Colosio so he could then be named as a substitute candidate. "I do not have any proof or evidence," said Colosio Fernandez. "But I think it would be healthy for the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) to reopen this investigation in a direct manner, without appointing any special prosecutor."

Camacho, who has since left the PRI and is now a federal deputy for the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), declined to respond to Colosio Fernandez's charges, but agreed that the investigation should be reopened.

Ernesto Ruffo Appel, who was governor of Baja California state at the time of the assassination, reacted more cautiously to Colosio Fernandez's statements. He asked that Salinas not be accused of participating in a plot to kill Colosio without the accuser presenting concrete evidence. "We will get nowhere with mere fabrications," said Ruffo, a member of Fox's center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN).

**Books offer differing theories**

There is wide disagreement among prominent journalists who have written books on the subject. Jesus Blancornelas, who is also editor and publisher of the Tijuana-based weekly news magazine Zeta, said his three-year investigation into the case revealed no evidence that anyone but Aburto was involved in the case. Blancornelas, who collaborated with three colleagues on a book about the investigation, interviewed Aburto in prison. In the book, El Tiempo Pasa,

Blancornelas says Aburto admitted that he was the shooter and that he acted alone, but he says the fatal shot was accidental. Journalist Federico Arreola, who was a friend of Colosio, has taken the opposite stance in his book Asi Fue. The author claims enough evidence will surface to prove that the murder was the result of a conspiracy. "[Colosio] followed with respect and discipline all the rules that were required by an authoritarian system," said Arreola. "From this system emerged the principal elements of the plot that led my friend to the grave."

Former Mexican drug-enforcement agent Eduardo Valle also raises doubts about the lone-gunman theory in his book El Segundo Disparo. Valle, who spent hundreds of hours viewing different videotapes of the incident, says there is evidence that a second gunman may have been involved because of the angle of entry of Colosio's two bullet wounds. One bullet exploded in his head
from the left, and the other entered his stomach from the right. Valle said the tapes also show that Colosio's volunteer security patrol was clearing the way for Aburto to get close to Colosio. "There is a breakdown in security that is unexplainable," said Valle. "It seems as if a group of men who volunteered as security personnel for the PRI are clearing the path to allow Aburto to get close to the candidate."

**Legislators support reopening investigation**

The proposal to reopen the investigation has been endorsed by key legislators from the PRI, PRD, and PAN. "The government should exhaust all avenues of investigation to determine if there was an intellectual author behind Mario Aburto," said PRI Sen. Sadot Sanchez. Attorney General Rafael Macedo de la Concha said his office would comply with requests to review all the information compiled to date but said the investigation could not be officially reopened unless new evidence was presented. "We have acted responsibly...with much discretion," said Macedo, regarding the numerous requests to keep the case open. "There is no indifference on our part, we are still concerned about this case."

Legal scholar and former attorney general Diego Valades also confirmed that the case was not fully closed. "If any evidence appears, the case will have to be reopened." Fox's press secretary Alfonso Durazo Montano agreed that successive investigations have left questions unanswered about the Colosio murder. "We must recognize that this government began operating a full seven years after the crime was committed," Durazo told the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal. "We must recognize the complexities of continuing the investigation [this long afterward]."

The PRI, which recently celebrated its 54th anniversary, has much to lose from the negative publicity that surfaces every year on the anniversary of the assassination. This year was especially difficult for the former governing party because of the 10-year milestone and the continuing divisions within the party. In an interview with the Mexico City daily newspaper El Sol de Mexico, PRI president Roberto Madrazo suggested Colosio's murder only benefited the "ultraright" wing of his party, although he did not name any individuals.

"Colosio's project was to reform the PRI and promote a democratic regime," Madrazo told the newspaper. "He was seeking to eradicate the authoritarian practices that had been in place until then." Madrazo suggested that conservative elements in Mexican politics may have also been concerned about Colosio's pledge to end social inequality. But some detractors say Colosio's death has turned him into a larger-than-life figure. "It's very natural for some to want to turn him into a saint and revere his memory. But he was a PRI member to the core and beholden to Salinas," said Joy Langston, a political specialist at the Centro de Investigaciones y Docencia Economica (CIDE) in Mexico City. "It was not very clear that he was going to make any major changes." (Sources: Agencia de noticias Proceso, 02/10-12/04, 02/16/04; La Jornada, 02/12/04, 02/13/04, 02/17-19/04, 02/26/04; Univision, 03/10/04; The Arizona Daily Star, 02/12/04, 02/16/04, 03/18/04, 03/21/04, 03/22/04; La Cronica de Hoy, 02/11-13/04, 02/17/04, 03/23/04; Milenio Diario, 02/11/04, 02/13/04, 02/17/04, 02/18/04, 03/22/04, 03/23/04; Spanish news service EFE, 02/13/04, 02/16/04, 03/04, 03/18/04, 03/22/04, 03/23/04; The San Diego Union-Tribune, 03/23/04; Unomasuno, 02/11-13/04, 02/17/04, 02/18/04, 03/23/04, 03/24/04; The Herald-Mexico City, 02/11/04, 03/22/04, 03/23/04, 03/24/04; El
Universal, 02/13/04, 02/17-19/04, 03/22/04, 03/23/04, 03/24/04; El Independiente, 03/23/04, 03/24/04; El Financiero, 03/24/04)