Surge in Crime, Insecurity Major Themes in Calderon's State Address

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Discontent is bubbling among the Mexican population in part because of a growing sense of insecurity and a very sluggish economy. The growing unease among Mexicans has been demonstrated recently in protests around the country, including a massive march in Mexico City at the end of August, urging the government to do more to curb crime and violence.

The increased insecurity has also translated to a slight drop in the approval rating of President Felipe Calderon, who is blamed for a generally ineffective campaign against drug traffickers that not only has failed to stop the cartels but also has resulted in increased violence. There is strong concern that the violence is hampering the growth of the Mexican economy, already saddled by the sluggish performance of the US, Mexico's top export market.

Huge marches organized in Mexican capital, other cities
The most visible sign of discontent among the Mexican populace was a series of marches organized around the country on Aug. 30, just two days before Calderon was scheduled to present the second informe (State of the Union report) of his administration.

The largest of these marches took place in Mexico City, where tens of thousands of protestors paraded from the Angel de la Independencia monument to the central Zocalo square to voice their strong displeasure about the government's failure to control violent killings, kidnappings, and other crimes. Participants in the event, called "Iluminemos Mexico" (Shine a Light on Mexico), were clad in white and carrying candles.

Many demonstrators carried placards saying, "Enough." Similar protests were also reported in Guadalajara, Monterrey, and a dozen other cities around the country. The marches were reminiscent of similar protests in 2004, when citizens took to the streets to speak out against drug-related violence, kidnappings, and other crimes (see SourceMex, 2004-06-30). This year's demonstrations were organized by 15 citizen-based organizations. Although they came from a range of political orientations, concern about crime brought them together. "We want to offer an example to society," said Elias Kuri, director of Agenda Ciudadana Fundacion para el Desarrollo, one of the sponsoring organizations. "Regardless of a person's job or vocation or political orientation, we have to come together with a common objective."

While violence and crime have been creeping up gradually in the past two years, there has been an unprecedented surge during the summer months. A total of 987 homicides, which included 10 minors and 68 law-enforcement officers, were reported in July and August, a record for any two-month period in Mexican history. "The speed by which the violence occurred was unprecedented," said the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal. "In the last 60 days, there were an average of 16.6 victims of organized crime every 24 hours. This is the equivalent of one death every 85 minutes."
The newspaper said 3,400 homicides known to be linked to organized crime were reported between January and August, compared with 2,673 for all of 2007. A large number of the killings since the early part of July have occurred in Chihuahua and Sinaloa states, but other regions of the country have also experienced a surge in violence. The discovery of 12 headless bodies in Yucatan state in mid-August was one of the reasons behind the anti-crime march. But most of all, said organizers, there is strong outrage about official inaction and corruption, including evidence that police officers have participated in activities such as kidnapping. Several specific situations were mentioned at the rally in the Zocalo, including the kidnapping and murder of a 14-year-old boy, Fernando Marti.

The Mexican government has acknowledged that kidnapping has increased, with an average of 65 persons abducted each month. But several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) suggest that there could be as many as 500 kidnappings per month, including "express kidnappings," where victims are taken only for a couple of hours while they or their family withdraw funds from their automatic-teller machines.

Some kidnappings, such as that of young Francisco Marti, have turned fatal. At least 60 victims have been killed since December 2006, when Calderon took office, said Laura Elena Herrejon, director of the Mexico City anti-crime group Movimiento Pro Vecino. "We live in paranoia, chaos, and anarchy," a participant in the march told Bloomberg news service. "This is the only way to let these irresponsible authorities know that we're tired of this and we're not going to stand for living in a city that has been kidnapped."

**President suffers some loss of confidence**

The outrage against authorities has translated into the loss of confidence in government. A public-opinion poll by the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma in mid-August showed that Calderon had a credibility rating of only 44%, compared with 54% a year ago. Not surprisingly, the two areas where most respondents said the government had fallen short were security and the economy. Even with the low credibility rating, Calderon's personal approval remained at 62%, compared with 65% a year ago, the Reforma survey indicated.

The private consulting company Consulta Mitofsky showed Calderon with an approval rating of 59%, compared with 66% a year ago. Roughly 76% of respondents said the economy was worsening. Although there have not been any recent polls for other branches of government, officials acknowledge that the increasing crime rate is also affecting them. "The Mexican president, the governors, and mayors throughout our country have received a failing grade regarding security," said Sinaloa Gov. Jesus Aguilar Padilla, whose state has experienced one of the largest increases in drug-related crime this summer.

Calderon, aware of the growing discontent in the country, has pledged to adopt some of the proposals presented by citizens who led the Aug. 30 demonstrations, including creating a panel of citizens to monitor government progress in fighting crime, improving the recruiting of police and oversight of officers, and supplying police departments with more modern and effective weapons to fight crime.
The Mexican president's pledge reinforces a commitment that he and Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard made to a 75-point document listing several additional steps that the federal and local governments would take to address crime. They include a promise to dismiss corrupt police officers, improve police-recruitment methods, create an anti-crime unit, combat money laundering, construct more prisons, and enhance coordination among federal, state, and local law-enforcement authorities. Along those lines, Calderon has floated a proposal to create a national police force to deal specifically with organized crime. The Mexican government could use funds provided by the US through Plan Merida for this purpose (see SourceMex, 2007-07-11 and 2008-08-27).

New format allows Calderon to avoid public report to Congress

The perception that Mexico's crime rate is spiraling out of control led to rumors on the eve of Calderon's State of the Union report that the Mexican president would not complete his six-year term, which ends in 2012. The president moved quickly to refute these rumors in an interview on the national network Televisa with television news personality Joaquin Lopez Doriga. "We have problems, but we are going to overcome them," said the president. "We will come out ahead if we work together."

Sen. Manlio Fabio Beltrones, leader of the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), also dismissed any speculation that Calderon would resign or that the Congress would attempt to remove the president because of the failure of his anti-crime initiatives. "The revocation [of the president's] mandate would create instability and chaos and could lead to ungovernability," said the PRI leader.

The Mexican Congress, which began its new session in September, has taken steps to address the crime issue. The PRI delegation in the Chamber of Deputies has introduced three initiatives to reform the federal penal code and other laws. Among other things, the initiatives would toughen sanctions against public officials who engage in corrupt practices. The surge in crime has worried some within the business community, including the banking and tourism sectors.

At a recent forum on banking security, Enrique Sanchez Mejordada of the Asociacion de Banqueros de Mexico (ABM), raised concerns that crime was hampering Mexico's economic growth. This concern was confirmed by Finance Secretary Agustin Carstens, who told reporters in Michoacan that dangerous conditions in Mexico were discouraging many would-be foreign investors from bringing their capital to Mexico. "We estimate that this feeling of insecurity in the country takes away approximately one percentage point of growth," Carstens said. Another industry hammered by insecurity is tourism, particularly along the US-Mexico border.

Miguel Torruco Marques, president of the Confederacion Nacional Turistica (CNT), said the spike in drug-related violence, along with increased red tape at border crossings, could reduce the total number of visitors to communities along the US-Mexico border by about 1 million this year. As expected, Calderon made crime one of the major topics of his annual State of the Union report.

For the second consecutive year, the report was delivered in written form to the Congress rather than through a public address, as had been the tradition until 2007. Calderon negotiated the written format with the Congress in 2007 to avoid a direct confrontation with the center-left coalition Frente
Amplio Progresista (FAP), which was still questioning the 2006 presidential election (see SourceMex, 2007-09-05).

In May 2008, the Congress approved changes to the Mexican Constitution removing a requirement that the president present the report in person to Congress (see SourceMex, 2008-05-07). Under the revised format, the written report was presented by Interior Secretary Juan Camilo Mourino to congressional leaders. Critics said Calderon has discarded face-to-face conversations with Congress in favor of television and radio interviews.

In the days before and after the report was presented to Congress, the president appeared on at least eight national media news shows, offering his views on the television networks Televisa and TV Azteca and on the radio networks Radio Formula and W Radio. In addition to presenting his plans to combat crime, the Mexican president urged the Congress to move quickly during the new legislative session to approve an overhaul of the state-run oil company PEMEX. Legislators are divided on how much private participation to allow in the company without violating the Mexican Constitution (see SourceMex, 2008-07-09 and 2008-08-06). "The issue has been discussed enough in Congress," Calderon said in an interview with Radio Formula. "Let's resolve it."

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