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## **Electoral Institute Launches Campaign To Keep Drug Money Out Of July Elections; Skepticism Abounds**

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Drug cartels have infiltrated almost every aspect of life in Mexico, even becoming the direct and indirect source of employment and economic well-being for entire communities. It has also been common knowledge that the cartels have been involved in financing some local and state elections. This has led the federal elections agency (Instituto Federal Electoral, IFE) to launch a comprehensive program to keep money from organized crime out of the July elections, which feature six state legislatures, several mayoral and gubernatorial seats, and all seats in the Chamber of Deputies. But many skeptics say the government campaign, which is generally vague, will do little to shut the cartels out of the process.

Campaign to work with state governments, political parties The IFE unveiled its program to the Mexican Congress in mid-January. "This agreement establishes the measures and commitments by the political parties and the institute to create the conditions of security, legality, and transparency needed for the 2008-2009 electoral process," the IFE said in a document presented to the congressional standing committee (Comision Permanente), comprising members of all parties in the two legislative chambers. IFE officials later explained that the institute would work very closely with state governments to monitor the source of campaign donations and identify the funds that come from organized crime. Even though all states will vote for new members of the federal Chamber of Deputies, the IFE's efforts will focus primarily on the eleven states that have mayoral, state legislative, and gubernatorial elections on July 5: Campeche, Colima, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Morelos, Mexico, Nuevo Leon, Queretaro, San Luis Potosi, Sonora, and the Federal District.

Drug-related violence has increased significantly in many of those states, including Sonora and Nuevo Leon, states along the US-Mexico border that are electing new governors (SourceMex, August 27, 2008). Leonardo Valdez Zurita, president of the IFE council, said the institute has created a special unit, the Unidad Tecnica de Fiscalizacion, to track campaign funding in the 11 states. He said the unit has mechanisms in place that will make it "practically impossible" for drug traffickers to finance the upcoming elections. Still, he emphasized that the effort should be broad and far-reaching. "This should be a shared responsibility. "The political parties and authorities all have our responsibilities," said Valdez. "To the extent that local authorities become more involved, we will be able to implement protections into the elections," IFE counselor Virgilio Andrade said in an interview with the Cuernavaca newspaper La Jornada de Morelos. Andrade emphasized that the point of view of the state electoral institutes was a necessary component of the campaign.

State electoral institutes in most states have already forged accords with the federal government to cooperate on tracking funds. Mexico state Gov. Enrique Pena Nieto told reporters that he is fully confident in the capabilities of his state's electoral body (Instituto Electoral del Estado de Mexico, IEEM) to ensure that the funding sources in all state elections are transparent. Voters in

the state will be electing 125 mayors and 75 members of the state legislature on July 5. "I think the IEEM has developed measures, in cooperation with federal treasury authorities, to guarantee that none of the campaigns will be financed with illicit resources," said Pena Nieto, a member of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). The IFE campaign received support in the media. Political commentator Ricardo Revelo, in the radio program *Detras de la Noticia*, pointed to the need to expose and publicize any connections between drug organizations and political campaigns. As an example, he pointed to Jesus Vizcarra, mayor of the coastal city of Culiacan in Sinaloa state. Vizcarra, who has been mentioned as a possible candidate for Sinaloa governor, has publicly acknowledged ties with Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada, a leader of the Sinaloa cartel. Vizcarra is a member of the PRI, which has governed Sinaloa for decades. Revelo also cited the need for the institute to extend the campaign to the congressional elections nationwide. He raised concerns that organized crime could "gain representation" in the Chamber of Deputies.

Skeptics doubt program's effectiveness Many observers are skeptical that the government can keep the drug cartels out of the elections. "The suspicion that surrounds any candidate cannot disappear with this type of scrutiny," Tatiana Clouthier, a social activist in Nuevo Leon state, told the Mexico City daily newspaper *El Universal*. "The IFE is not capable of quickly tracking expenditures and, therefore, won't be able to properly monitor any funds originating with organized crime." *El Universal* also quoted Eduardo Buscaglia, an elections-transparency expert at Columbia University in New York, who suggested in a recent report that Mexico could go a long way toward solving the problem by ensuring that the candidate-selection process becomes more transparent. This, he said, could prevent the infiltration of illicit organizations in Mexican politics. But others pointed out that drug-trafficking organizations already have a strong hold on the Mexican political process, and this would be difficult to root out. "It is very difficult to present a candidacy without the risk of offending the drug trade," said Sen. Ramon Galindo Noriega, who represents Chihuahua state for the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). "Organized crime has clearly attempted to buy candidates in the big cities, but it is easier to do so in the small municipalities."

Other politicians were openly doubtful about the IFE plan. PAN Sen. Felipe Gonzalez, who chairs the public safety committee (Comision de Seguridad Publica) in the upper house, said it would be hard not to corrupt even those who are monitoring the campaign-financing process. "They are only human," he said. Gonzalez said the problem runs deeper than the elections and is a symptom of the lack of coordination among the various institutions in charge of fighting the drug trade. Members of the opposition were even more critical of the IFE. Jorge Diaz Cuervo, president of the Partido Social Democrata (PSD), accused the institute of "tricking citizens" into believing that the IFE and the parties had come up with some sort of magic solution. "With this plan, they are not going to protect anything," said Diaz Cuervo. "On the contrary, they might provoke organized crime into pouring funds into the July election." But others like political observer Maria Amparo Casar defended the IFE, saying the problem lies with the political parties. "The parties have been pressuring the IFE to take on this gigantic task of creating this new level of protection for the elections," said Casar, who writes a column for the Mexico City daily newspaper *Reforma*. "The IFE's role has been only to assist." Casar pointed out that IFE statutes require the institute simply to ensure that spending on elections does not surpass a designated limit and to examine a sampling of the campaign donations to make certain that they comply with the law. Poll shows cartels mostly identified with PRI A January public-opinion poll showed that the public is divided on whether the drug cartels are involved in the electoral process.

In a survey commissioned by the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior and conducted by BGC, Ulises Beltran y Asociados, 42% of respondents said it was likely that drug cartels were helping finance political candidates, while 39% said it was not likely. Even more important, 65% of respondents said they were not confident that the political parties would cooperate fully with the IFE and report all funding sources. "The population is frankly skeptical of the pledge of the parties to guarantee that their candidates exhibit full transparency, particularly when it comes to connections to illicit activities," said Excelsior. When asked which party was more likely to cave in to the drug cartels, a majority of respondents, about 41%, pointed to the PRI, compared with smaller percentages for the PAN and the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). Although the PRI has not held the presidency for nine years, a majority of municipalities and state governments in Mexico have been led by members of the party for generations. There is an ironic twist in the perception that the PRI is the party that has most links to the drug trade.

A separate poll by Mitofsky y Asociados early this year suggested that the PRI is likely to rebound in the July 5 elections. The survey, which polled more than 1,000 respondents, showed the PRI with support of almost 40% of likely voters, compared with 25% for the PAN and 15% for the PRD. Mitofsky said a larger percentage of Mexican voters are identifying themselves with the PRI than at any time during the past six years. "The PRI not only increased its identification levels in the past year but also surpassed the PAN as the party that is least rejected," said the polling organization. The PRD appears to be in the most trouble, with a declining percentage of likely voters identifying with the party. The center-left party's problems appear to have a lot to do with the lack of transparency in its internal leadership elections (SourceMex, June 04, 2008 and January 28, 2009).

Cartels strong in many communities The biggest problem in attempting to root out organized crime in the elections is that many drug-trafficking organizations provide a source of support for many communities. In a recent report, the Secretaria de Defensa Nacional (SEDENA) estimated that that more than 500,000 Mexicans are involved directly in some operation of the drug trade, from planting and cultivating marijuana and poppies to transporting and distributing the final product. But the cartels' economic impact goes beyond the direct jobs created as part of their operations. In many cases, the drug cartels reinvest profits and spend on goods and services in the community, both of which promote economic development at the local level. Some drug-trafficking organizations have taken other steps to gain the sympathy of local citizens.

In Tamaulipas, for example, the Gulf cartel created a foundation to organize special events for children (SourceMex, January 09, 2008). The cartels have also been involved in financing and organizing citizen protests against the Mexican military. At least 20 demonstrations have taken place in communities where the federal government has dispatched troops to fight the drug cartels (SourceMex, January 24, 2007) "At least a dozen of these protests against the Mexican Army...were financed by organized crime," said the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio Diario. "Three were in Coahuila, three in Tamaulipas, and six in Nuevo Leon). Milenio Diario said the involvement of the drug trade is suspected because the protestors come from a certain demographic. "Participants usually come from marginalized and poor neighborhoods," said the newspaper. "They are offered money and transportation. Usually, women, children, and youth are at the front of the line."

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