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## **Elected Officials In Zacatecas, Michoacan States Linked To Drug-related Scandals Ahead Of July 5 Elections**

by LADB Staff

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It seems that everywhere one turns, more Mexican politicians are getting caught in drug scandals or have at least some alleged connection to the drug trade. In one of the latest scandals, the family of powerful Sen. Ricardo Monreal of the Partido del Trabajo (PT) was linked to the seizure of a large load of marijuana in Zacatecas state. Also busted in recent weeks were 10 mayors and a dozen other officials in Michoacan state who are accused of protecting the regional drug-trafficking organization La Familia.

The mayors represent the three major parties, the Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), and the Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). Allegations of connections between politicians and the drug trade have been common through the years, but the charges appear to have gained greater importance since President Felipe Calderon launched his high-profile war against drug cartels in 2007 (SourceMex, January 24, 2007). The links between politicians and drug cartels have received even greater attention in recent weeks, as the July 5 election for the 500 seats in the federal Chamber of Deputies is expected to be fairly competitive. Most allegations have involved the PRI and the PAN (SourceMex, February 18, 2009 and May 20, 2009), but other parties are also becoming targets.

### *Family of Zacatecas senator linked to marijuana seizure*

In the scandal involving Monreal and his relatives, federal authorities seized 15 tons of marijuana at the Bodegas San Felipe in the city of Fresnillo. The warehouse, which is connected to a chile-pepper dehydrating plant, is the property of the Monreal family. PGR officials said their initial investigations found no evidence to link Sen. Monreal to the seized drugs, but authorities are closely investigating two brothers, Candido and David Monreal. The latter is the mayor of Fresnillo. The incident prompted Sen. Monreal to request a two-week leave of absence from the Senate, although the request was just a formality because the upper house is in recess.

In making the request, Monreal wanted to demonstrate that he has nothing to hide. By taking a leave, the senator relinquished the immunity from prosecution given to active public officials. But critics questioned Monreal's motives. "I find this move inexplicable because no one has said that the senator is under investigation," said PRD president Jesus Ortega. This is not the first time that the Monreal family has been accused of connections to the drug trade. Similar rumors circulated in 1998 when Monreal was pondering whether to seek the PRI nomination for governor. At that time, he left the PRI in favor of the PRD and eventually won election to the state's highest office. Monreal abandoned the PRD for the PT in late 2008, partly as a result of an internal split in the Mexican leftist coalition (SourceMex, January 28, 2009). Senator accuses Zacatecas governor of complicity in prison escape The senator's recent return to Zacatecas was also tied to a growing feud with Gov. Amalia Garcia, a member of the PRD who succeeded him as the state's top executive. The senator

has accused Garcia of persecuting his family and even implied that the governor might have planted the marijuana in his family's warehouse. Garcia has denied the charges.

Furthermore, Monreal has fanned the flames by charging Garcia with complicity in the recent escape of 53 suspected drug-cartel members from the Cieneguillas prison in Zacatecas. Video footage from a security camera shows the inmates, who somehow obtained a cache of guns, walking out of the facility without much resistance from the guards. Interpol described eleven of the 53 escaped prisoners as "a risk to the safety and security of citizens around the world." The ease with which the escape occurred has prompted many theories that the guards and the prison administration were complicit in the escape. PRD officials called Monreal's allegations against Garcia frivolous and instead placed the blame on a culture of corruption in law-enforcement agencies and on the federal government's failure to implement proper security measures in places where drug traffickers and other dangerous criminals are being held. "The responsibility of federal authorities and officials at the prison is very clear," said Ortega. "I do not see that the governor had any responsibility in these cases, which fall under federal jurisdiction."

Ortega urged the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) to investigate whether the prison guards had connections with the Zetas, a group of army deserters who serve as the enforcement arm of the Gulf cartel. The Zetas are among those responsible for the surge in drug-related violence in Mexico in recent years (SourceMex, July 06, 2006, May 21, 2008, and January 07, 2009). But the PRD president accused Monreal of making political hay out of the situation. "Instead of showing concern [about the prison escape], he has chosen to use it to his political advantage," said Ortega.

The senator's charges against Garcia and the earlier allegations that the governor planted drugs in the Monreal-owned warehouse worsened animosity between the PRD and the PT in Zacatecas ahead of the July 5 election, in which several seats in the federal Congress are up for grabs. David Monreal has accused Garcia and her daughter, PRD Sen. Claudia Corichi, of launching a "dirty war" against his family ahead of the election. He said Garcia is responsible for pamphlets that have circulated in Fresnillo linking the Monreal family with organized crime. Federal authorities arrest Michoacan mayors for protecting drug cartel While the dispute in Zacatecas attracted national and international attention, the feud was overshadowed by another development in late May: the arrest of 10 mayors, a judge, a former state police chief, and several regional public-security officers in the south-central state of Michoacan.

The public officials who are accused of protecting La Familia were taken into custody during a sweep involving hundreds of soldiers, police, and law-enforcement agents. La Familia which is said to specialize in cocaine, marijuana, and methamphetamine trafficking has waged a violent battle with the Gulf cartel for control of the drug trade in Michoacan (SourceMex, July 26, 2006 and September 24, 2008). Most of the arrested mayors govern small mountain communities near areas where marijuana is grown and where several amphetamine laboratories have been located. But prominent on the list is Mayor Antonio Gonzalez Rodriguez of Uruapan, the second-largest city in Michoacan. PGR spokesman Ricardo Najera said that neither Gov. Leonel Godoy Rangel nor ex-Gov. Lazaro Cardenas Batel, both members of the PRD, is under investigation. The governor's brother, Julio Cesar Godoy, was brought in briefly for interrogation but was promptly released.

Information supplied by the PGR indicates that the sweep affected all major political parties in Mexico. Gonzalez is one of two PAN mayors who were detained. Also arrested were five members of the PRI, two from the PRD, and one who represented a coalition comprising the PAN, the PRI, and the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM). Some experts said the sweep only touched the tip of the iceberg. A Mexican intelligence source told The New York Times that at least 83 of the 113 municipalities in Michoacan are involved at some level with drug traffickers. The Zetas, working on behalf of the Gulf cartel, have been known to corrupt entire police departments in Michoacan, either through bribery or threats (SourceMex, July 26, 2006).

### *But the problem extends beyond Michoacan, Calderon's home state*

In a recent report, Sen. Ramon Galindo Norieta, who heads the municipal development committee (Comision de Desarrollo Municipal) in the upper house, said drug traffickers have some control of as many as 60% of the municipal governments in Mexico. Some analysts praised the government's sweep as an important milestone in Calderon's war against drug traffickers. "What is significant about this is that it sends a very clear message that not even elected officials are above the law," says Armand Peschard-Sverdrup, a Mexico expert at the Washington-based consulting firm Peschard-Sverdrup & Associates. But some opposition politicians viewed the operation as another political ploy by Calderon to help his party's chances in the July 5 election.

In the process, the federal government might have violated the elected officials' constitutional rights. "No one, especially not the federal government, should use the need to fight crime to obtain advantages in an election," said a PRD statement. Godoy expressed indignation that the federal government did not inform him of the operation in advance but said he would cooperate fully with the Calderon administration. "This operation did not damage our relationship with the federal government," said the governor. "All we want is more information so we can make our own follow-up decisions [in this case]. Godoy asked for fair treatment from federal authorities. "We request an investigation that is timely, transparent, and that closely follows the rule of law," said the governor. Godoy said he would ask anyone in his administration who is under investigation including state attorney general Miguel Garcia Hurtado and deputy attorney general Ignacio Mendoza Jimenez to resign.

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