

8-19-2009

Michoacan Becomes Focus Of President Felipe Calderon's Anti-drug Efforts

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Michoacan Becomes Focus Of President Felipe Calderon's Anti-drug Efforts." (2009).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/5330>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in SourceMex by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Michoacan Becomes Focus Of President Felipe Calderon's Anti-drug Efforts

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2009-08-19

The state legislature in the central state of Michoacan has designated substitutes for eight mayors arrested in May for providing protection to the drug cartels. The appointees, who will serve out the remainder of the ousted mayors' three-year terms until 2011, face some of the same problems and challenges that dogged their predecessors, namely how to counter the overreaching influence of the regional drug-trafficking cartel known as La Familia. Other politicians have been caught in the cartel's web, including Julio Cesar Godoy Toscano, who was elected to serve in the 2009-2012 session of the Congress. Godoy's alleged involvement with the drug cartels has put his half-brother, Michoacan Gov. Leonel Godoy Rangel, in a very difficult position. Leonel Godoy has taken extraordinary steps to root out drug-related corruption, including replacing several members of the state's security forces.

Replacements named for arrested mayors

The arrest of the Michoacan mayors in May was part of an effort by President Felipe Calderon's administration to fight drug-related corruption. Also arrested at that time were several public officials, including the state's public safety secretary and several police chiefs (SourceMex, May 07, 2009). In mid-August, almost three months after the mayors were removed from their posts, the Michoacan state legislature recommended replacements in the cities and towns of Arteaga, Tumbiscatio, Zitacuaro, Tepalcatepec, Apatzingan, Ciudad Hidalgo, Lazaro Cardenas, and Uruapan.

The legislature made every effort to name a substitute mayor from the same party as the ousted official. The scandal touched all three major political parties, with four of the mayors affiliated with the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), and two each with the Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and the Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). The substitute mayors will be under intense scrutiny by federal and state authorities and, at the same time, will face pressures to protect La Familia and its operations, which at times have contributed to economic development in their communities.

In some instances, La Familia forces residents to pay fees for protection and services. In the community of Ciudad Hidalgo, for example, the drug cartel has set up a system of fees to extort local residents. "The business owners in this pine-covered mountainous community know by heart the monthly 'protection' fees that they have to pay to the cartel in order to continue operating their businesses," said the Associated Press (AP). "It's 100 pesos (US\$7.80) for a street vending site and 30,000 pesos (US\$2,330) for an automobile dealership or a construction materials distributor." The situation in Ciudad Hidalgo is similar to that in other small communities in Michoacan, where La Familia operatives have gained total control of the local economy. "They control everything, from the shoeshine operations to the taxi drivers," said a US drug enforcement agent. Those who do not

pay are beaten and sometimes even murdered, said the AP report. La Familia uses the carrot in addition to the stick.

In the community of Arteaga, local cartel leader Servando Gomez Martinez, also known as La Tuta, has won over most residents with gifts of food, clothing, and even medical attention. "He has gained a reputation as a person who helps people," said one local resident. "He is a campesino who wears sandals like the rest of us." Gomez Martinez, who is said to be partly responsible for recent attacks on law-enforcement personnel in Michoacan, called a local radio station offering to negotiate a truce with the Calderon administration. The government rejected the offer, saying it does not negotiate with criminals.

Newly elected deputy accused of ties to drug cartel

The influence of La Familia has complicated life for Michoacan Gov. Leonel Godoy. Godoy, a member of the PRD, is keen on demonstrating that he is tough on crime. In early August, shortly after the list of replacement mayors was released, Godoy also announced an overhaul of his public-safety department, replacing some of the officials who were arrested in May. Many of the replacement officials will be in charge of such areas as citizen protection, legal affairs, and the state police.

At the same time, Godoy has a "brother problem." A recent investigation by the federal Secretaria de Seguridad Publica (SSP) linked the governor's half-brother, Julio Cesar, to La Familia. At the time the results of the SSP probe were announced, Julio Cesar was running as a member of the PRD for one of the 12 directly elected seats in the federal Chamber of Deputies. The federal investigation also mentioned another candidate for Congress in Michoacan with links to La Familia. Saul Soliz, who was running as a representative of the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM) for another one of the directly elected seats in the lower house, was said to have coordinated operations for La Familia in the La Huacana region of Michoacan and also in Valley of Mexico, which includes Mexico City.

With the PRD fairly popular in Michoacan state, Godoy easily won election in the First District, which includes the port city of Lazaro Cardenas. Conversely, Soliz lost his race in the July 5 midterm election to a member of the PRD (SourceMex, July 08, 2009). The Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) attempted to keep Godoy Toscano, who went into hiding after the federal charges were announced, from taking his seat. In separate motions, the PGR and the PRI appealed to the federal electoral court (Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federacion, TEPJF) to withhold ratification of the Michoacan politician's election.

The PRI stood to gain from Godoy Toscano's removal, since its candidate came in second in the Michoacan congressional election. The TEPJF declined the PGR request, saying that the tribunal's exclusive mandate is to resolve electoral disputes and irregularities. Furthermore, the sources said no proof was presented that Godoy Toscano was directly involved in drug trafficking. Following the TEPJF ruling, the PGR appealed to the Chamber of Deputies not to swear in Godoy Toscano, which agreed to look into the request but was noncommittal on what action it would take. Deputy-elect Julio Cesar Duarte Jaquez, a member of the PRI who will preside as leader of the lower house for

the coming legislative session, said any decision would be made strictly according to Mexican law. The reaction was also decidedly mixed in the PRD, with Deputy Alejandro Encinas, who will head the party's delegation in the lower house, taking a wait-and-see stance regarding Julio Cesar Godoy. "I have not communicated with him, nor am I planning to establish contact. This matter has to be resolved through the judicial system," said Encinas. Encinas said that he expected Godoy Toscano would be absolved. "Once this happens, he would have every right to become a part not only of our party's delegation but of the full Chamber of Deputies," said the PRD deputy-elect.

State PRD officials in Michoacan were more adamant about Godoy's innocence, with party leader Fabiola Alanis Samano criticizing the PGR for blocking Godoy Toscano's efforts to take his rightful place in the state legislature. Alanis said the actions against Godoy were part of a larger campaign by the Calderon administration to "discredit and disqualify" the PRD. The whole saga has come to haunt Gov. Godoy Rangel, who said any media coverage of his half-brother frequently linked him to the alleged crime. "It is not fair that they keep linking me to matters for which I have no responsibility," said the governor. "The coverage is also based on the assumption that Julio Cesar actually committed a crime." Still, Godoy acknowledged the possibility that his half-brother might be guilty. "He has to present his evidence if he is innocent," Godoy said in a radio interview in mid-July. "If he is guilty, let them punish him with the full weight of the law."

Drug-related corruption widespread La Familia's influence in Michoacan is symptomatic of situations in other states, where drug traffickers have co-opted law-enforcement officers and elected officials to work on their behalf. One of the clearest examples is in Nuevo Leon, where the state legislature passed a law in mid-June prohibiting all city and state police officers from carrying personal cell phones while on duty. This directive presumably would prevent corrupt officers from communicating with drug traffickers.

Authorities in Nuevo Leon have already arrested 78 officers from 18 communities on charges of collaborating with drug traffickers. Among those detained are the public-safety coordinators in the communities of Guadalupe and Escobedo, part of the Monterrey metropolitan area. In late June, federal authorities detained 93 police officers and investigators in the central state of Hidalgo on drug-related charges. The officers were accused of providing security and information to the Zetas, a group of elite army deserters that acts as the law-enforcement arm of the Gulf cartel. A majority of those arrested were members of the city police force of Pachuca, the largest city in Hidalgo.

Government sends more troops to fight La Familia cartel

The federal government's campaign against the drug cartels has greatly increased conflict between the trafficking organizations and law-enforcement officials in states like Michoacan, one of the states with the highest levels of violence (SourceMex, January 24, 2007). "Michoacan has once again become a battlefield," syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento said in his July 15 column. "Just this weekend, there was a series of attacks against federal police. And on Monday, the bodies of 12 federal police officers who were tortured and executed were found in the community of Nuevo Centro. And yesterday, there were nine attacks against police, and authorities found three other bodies of officers who had been executed." Government sources said La Familia, which is said to have close ties to the powerful Sinaloa cartel, launched the attacks in revenge for the arrest of one of

its leaders, Arnolando Rueda Medina, also known as La Minsa. Rueda Medina is said to be one of the largest traffickers of methamphetamines to the US.

The Michoacan-based news agency Quadratin said Rueda was among 23 La Familia leaders detained during July. The increased attacks in Michoacan prompted the SSP to assign another 1,000 soldiers to drug-interdiction efforts in the state, more than tripling the number of Army personnel assigned to that task. Along with the increased Army presence, the government assigned three more helicopters and three armored vehicles to the anti-drug efforts in Michoacan. Human rights advocates have complained frequently that using soldiers in the war against drugs in Michoacan, Sinaloa, and other states has resulted in numerous human rights violations (SourceMex, February 20, 2008, July 16, 2008 and August 12, 2009). But there are also plenty of violations by the cartels. Public officials and law-enforcement officers who do not cooperate with the drug cartels are threatened with death.

A recent casualty was the mayor of the town of Ocampo in Durango state, who was shot in his own home in early June. "He was in the back of his house, when three trucks arrived at his front door with the sole purpose of depriving him of his life," said a spokesperson for the Procuraduria General de Justicia de Durango (PGJD). Drug cartels are also suspected in the death of another Durango mayor and the disappearance of still another during the past two years. Other recent incidents include the murder of Jesus Antonio Romero, director of public safety in the state of Veracruz. Suspected drug traffickers killed Romero, his wife, and four children in a pre-dawn attack by spraying the house with bullets and using grenades to set the house on fire. There has also been extensive violence in Ciudad Juarez, where drug traffickers have been targeting law-enforcement personnel and elected officials. Juarez Mayor Jose Reyes Ferriz has been among those whose lives have been threatened (SourceMex, February 25, 2009).

The latest victim in Juarez was Jose Ibarra, a federal agent who was investigating the 2008 murder of Armando Rodriguez, a respected crime reporter for the local daily newspaper El Diario. Ibarra was killed in front of his home in late July as he arrived from work. The drug cartels have frequently targeted newspaper and television reporters and editors who cover the drug trade. Because of drug-related violence, Mexico is considered one of the most dangerous countries for journalists, with at least 27 reporters and editors murdered since 2000 (SourceMex, December 06, 2006, January 09, 2008, February 25, and 2009). [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Aug. 19, 2009, reported at 12.87 pesos per US\$1.00]

-- End --