

6-2-2010

Arrest Of Quintana Roo Gubernatorial Candidate Could Reflect Drug-cartel Involvement In 2010 Elections

Carlos Navarro

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

Recommended Citation

Navarro, Carlos. "Arrest Of Quintana Roo Gubernatorial Candidate Could Reflect Drug-cartel Involvement In 2010 Elections." (2010). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/5400>

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.

Arrest Of Quintana Roo Gubernatorial Candidate Could Reflect Drug-cartel Involvement In 2010 Elections

by *Carlos Navarro*

Category/Department: Politics, Elections

Published: Wednesday, June 2, 2010

The drug trade has become the elephant in the room in the July 4 gubernatorial, municipal, and state legislative elections. Despite the federal government's insistence that it is doing everything it can to keep the drug cartels from influencing the 14 elections on July 4, allegations of organized-crime involvement are surfacing nevertheless. In Sinaloa, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) candidate Jesús Vizcarra Calderón has been accused of links to Sinaloa cartel leader Ismael Zambada, although there is no proof of any illegal activity. This is not the case in Quintana Roo state, where center-left candidate Gregorio Sánchez Martínez was arrested just weeks before the election on charges of taking bribes to protect the Zetas and Beltrán Leyva cartels.

During the past decade, elected officials from all three major political parties have been the subject of federal investigations for connections with the drug trade. Some of those former leaders, like ex-Jalisco Gov. Flavio Romero de Velasco (1987-1993) and former Quintana Roo Gov. Mario Villanueva Madrid (1993-1999), were arrested ([SourceMex, Feb. 4, 1998](#)) and ([May 30, 2001](#)). Villanueva was extradited to the US this year ([SourceMex, May 12, 2010](#)).

And in 2009, authorities arrested 10 mayors in Michoacán state on charges of protecting La Familia drug cartel ([SourceMex, May 27, 2009](#)). The mayors represented all three major political parties in Mexico. In March of this year, a court ordered the release of nine of the 10 mayors because of a lack of evidence. The mayors' release was a blow to President Felipe Calderón's administration, which had hoped to make an example of the officials.

Another prominent official accused of connections to La Familia is Julio César Godoy, brother of Michoacán Gov. Leonel Godoy. Julio César Godoy was elected to the Chamber of Deputies in 2009 as a member of the PRD but never showed up for a swearing-in ceremony after charges were levied against him. He remains in hiding.

Other elected officials have been the subject of accusations that they conspired with drug traffickers, but they were not charged. They include ex-Morelos Gov. Jorge Carrillo Olea (2000-03-01) of the PRI, Sergio Estrada Cajigal (2004-04-21) of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), and David Monreal, outgoing mayor of Fresnillo in Zacatecas state ([SourceMex, May 27, 2009](#)). Monreal, who in late 2009 had declared his candidacy in the Zacatecas gubernatorial race as a representative of the Partido del Trabajo (PT), withdrew from the race in February 2010.

Allegations against gubernatorial candidate in Sinaloa

The July 4 election also features at least two candidates accused of having developed connections with the drug trade. Allegations surfaced that Vizcarra Calderón had connections with the Sinaloa cartel after the daily newspaper Reforma published a photograph of the PRI gubernatorial candidate posing with Zambada, commonly known as El Mayo, and other members of the drug-trafficking organization. Vizcarra, who took a leave as mayor of Culiacán to run for the governor's seat,

contends that the photo is 20 years old and that all the people in the photograph were attending a celebration dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe. No charges have been levied against Vizcarra, but the allegations have become a major campaign issue for his rival, Mario López Valdéz, an ex-PRI member representing a coalition comprising the PAN, the PRD, and the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD). Some analysts expect a very close race between Vizcarra and López Valdéz, also known in the campaign by his nickname Malova.

Political observers suggest the focus on a candidate's drug connections has diverted attention from other issues. "It's hurting the democratic process," said Alberto Islas, a security analyst in Mexico City. "Instead of being a contest about what people really want...you have to choose between who is the bad guy and who is not the bad guy."

And yet the drug cartels' influence in the political campaigns is very real. Drug-trafficking organizations are suspected in the murder of José Mario Guajardo Varela, a PAN candidate for mayor in the community of Valle Hermoso in Tamaulipas state. Guajardo reportedly was murdered because he ignored warnings from the drug cartels to drop out of the race.

Quintana Roo candidate accused of protecting two major cartels

While authorities might be hard-pressed to prove any connections between Vizcarra and organized crime, the case is not the same for Gregorio Sánchez in Quintana Roo. Sánchez, often referred to by his nickname Greg, took a leave as mayor of the Benito Juárez municipality, which includes Cancún, to run for Quintana Roo governor for a coalition comprising the PRD, the PCD, and the PT. He is alleged to have used his position as mayor to protect major drug-trafficking organizations like the Zetas and the Beltrán Leyva cartel. Both groups are known to handle large volumes of cocaine and other drugs through the Yucatán Peninsula. Authorities also charged the center-left candidate with money laundering and conducting transactions with illegal proceeds.

The Cancún mayor was also linked with other bizarre incidents, including political espionage. In April of this year, the Mexican Army raided three sites in Cancún that Sánchez's chief of security José Manuel Vera Salinas was allegedly using to spy on the mayor's political opponents. All three locations were equipped with state-of-the-art espionage and wiretap devices. Sánchez has insisted that this was entirely Vera Salinas' doing and that his administration had nothing to do with the spying.

But it's not just allegations of espionage that are a political liability for Sánchez. Even if he had nothing to do with the actions of his security chief, he exercised poor judgment in hiring Vera Salinas. Before coming to work for Sánchez, Vera Salinas was employed in a similar capacity by Gov. Ulises Ruiz in Oaxaca state, where he coordinated the violent crackdown on the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (APPO) in 2006 and 2007 ([SourceMex, Aug. 2, 2006](#)) and ([Oct. 28, 2009](#)).

Sánchez's security structure has been rife with controversy. In 2009, three associates of the mayor, including the Cancún police chief, were arrested in connection with the assassination of a retired Army general, Mauro Enrique Tello Quiñones, who had begun work as Sánchez's security advisor. In an interview, Sánchez said he had hired Tello to root out corruption in the police department. Even though Sánchez's associates remain in custody, the investigation into the Tello assassination remains open.

Center-left coalition left without candidate in Quintana Roo

On June 1, a week after Sánchez's arrest, federal Judge Carlos Elorza indicted the former Cancún mayor on charges of involvement in organized crime and money laundering, effectively ending his candidacy. Article 20 of the Mexican Constitution prohibits anyone from running for office once formal charges are filed. Elorza said prosecutors submitted sufficient proof to support the charges that Sánchez was using illegally obtained funds and had developed ties to the Beltrán Leyva and Zetas organizations. The irony of the charges is that Sánchez had worked hard to cultivate a populist, anti-corruption image.

Even with the controversy surrounding the Cancún mayor, his arrest came as a surprise. Even many critics who believe that he might be guilty of all or most of the charges said the timing of the arrest makes it appear to be politically motivated. "This is a political persecution. There is no other word for it," Sánchez's wife Niurka Saliva told reporters.

Judge Elorza's decision left the PRD and its center-left allies to scramble to find a last-minute substitute. The logical choice, Sánchez's wife Niurka Saliva, is unable to step into the race because the Quintana Roo Constitution prohibits anyone who has been a naturalized Mexican citizen less than 10 years from running for office. Saliva is originally from Cuba. So the coalition was considering Sánchez's daughter, Karina Sánchez. But many coalition members are uneasy with this option because Karina is under 30 and has never held any political post.

Sánchez's departure from the campaign would seem to benefit the PRI, whose candidate, Roberto Borge Angulo, a federal deputy, was already widely favored to win the gubernatorial race. The PAN candidate, Isla Mujeres Mayor Alicia Concepción Ricalde Magaña, was not expected to be a major factor in the election.

With Calderón's PAN government benefiting little from Sánchez's departure, critics directed their anger at Interior Secretary Fernando Gómez Mont. The interior secretary was a convenient target for the PRD because he staunchly opposed the coalitions formed by the PAN and the center-left parties. This concern prompted Gómez Mont to resign from the PAN in early 2010 ([SourceMex, Feb. 17, 2010](#)).

"[The Sánchez arrest] was orchestrated by Fernando Gómez Mont and is a direct attack from those elements in government who oppose alliances," said PRD Deputy Guadalupe Acosta Naranjo, who is also the party's national secretary-general.

Acosta and other critics pointed out that Gómez Mont was also behind the arrest of the 10 mayors in Michoacán last year.

The PRD had pushed hard for the PAN to form a coalition in Quintana Roo, just as it had in Oaxaca, Sinaloa, Hidalgo, Puebla, and Veracruz states. "There was strong pressure for Greg to become the unity candidate for the PRD-PAN," wrote columnist Jorge Fernández Menéndez in the Mexico City daily newspaper *Excélsior*. "Something must have happened, because after long negotiations, the PAN discarded this possibility."

Fernández pointed out that during the negotiations the PAN hinted to PRD president Jesús Ortega that an investigation was under way and that authorities could move against Sánchez at any time.

But Ortega was a "fierce defender" of Sánchez and insisted that he remain as the candidate for the center-left coalition, said the Excelsior columnist.

Several PRD members criticized Ortega and the party leadership for sticking with the Cancún mayor despite clear evidence of wrongdoing. "There is definitely evidence that, in my opinion, justifies a prison sentence for Greg Sánchez," said Deputy Agustín Guerrero. "His bank accounts do not correspond with his earnings as mayor over a two-year period."

The financial irregularities extended to the municipal government, with key aides hatching a scheme to illegally raise funds for Sánchez's campaign. "Former municipal treasurer Carlos Trigos Perdomo developed an illegal-collection system in several offices that provided public service," said the daily newspaper Milenio. "The fund, which amounted to several million pesos, was presumably used to fund the campaign of Greg Sánchez."

-- End --