

6-30-2010

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Murder Of Pri Gubernatorial Candidate Latest Twist In Electoral Season In Mexico

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2010-06-30

The assassination of the top candidate in the Tamaulipas gubernatorial election confirmed Mexico's worst fears, that organized crime was attempting to influence the election results. Rodolfo Torre Cantú of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), who was leading in the polls by a wide margin for the July 4 Tamaulipas gubernatorial race, was killed less than a week before the election after armed assailants ambushed his convoy on the way to the airport. The murder was the latest twist in a topsy-turvy campaign season in which the center-left parties and the conservative PAN have joined forces in several gubernatorial races, primarily to create a united opposition against the PRI.

The PRI, which was expected to do well in most states, views the elections as the next major step in its effort to recover the presidency. Torre Cantú the candidate for a coalition comprising the PRI, the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM), and the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL) was the second political candidate murdered in Tamaulipas this election year, with drug cartels the suspected perpetrators in both incidents. In May, José Mario Guajardo Varela, a PAN candidate for mayor in the community of Valle Hermoso, was gunned down along with his son and an employee (SourceMex, May 26, 2010).

The possible influence of drug cartels has also been alleged in the Quintana Roo and Sinaloa gubernatorial elections, where candidates were linked to drug cartels while serving in public office. The allegations are mostly circumstantial in Sinaloa, but federal authorities detained center-left candidate Gregorio Sánchez in Quintana Roo on charges of protecting drug traffickers while mayor of the Benito Juárez municipality, which includes Cancún (SourceMex, June 02, 2010). The arrest forced Sánchez to withdraw from the race. He was replaced by Gerardo Mora Vallejo. Candidate killed near end of campaign Torre Cantú, who served as health secretary for the state of Tamaulipas before gaining his party's nomination to succeed outgoing PRI Gov. Eugenio Hernández, was murdered just days before the deadline for candidates to stop campaign activities before the election. He was driving to the Ciudad Victoria airport on his way to a breakfast with journalists. His convoy was intercepted on a local highway by a group of armed assailants who killed the candidate, state legislator Enrique Blackmore Smer, and three bodyguards.

The candidate was traveling in a bulletproof car, but the assailants forced him and his companions to alight from the vehicle, after which they were killed execution style with high-caliber weapons. The assailants' tactics were similar to those in other incidents earlier this year, with trucks used to block the highway to allow the perpetrators to escape. In March, drug traffickers blocked Monterrey streets with hijacked trucks as a sign of defiance against government efforts to crack down on drug-trafficking activity (SourceMex, April 14, 2010). Rather than suspend the election, the Tamaulipas government and the PRI decided to proceed with the July 4 vote. The PRI moved quickly to name a replacement, selecting Torre Cantú's brother Egidio. The new candidate for the PRI-PVEM-PANAL

coalition has served as interim mayor of Ciudad Victoria and director of public works for the state of Tamaulipas. Torre Cantú's murder elicited outrage throughout the country and raised concerns that the drug cartels had gained a foothold in the electoral process.

In the aftermath of the assassination, President Felipe Calderón scheduled a nationwide broadcast to ask Mexicans to work together against the forces of organized crime that he said were to blame for the murder. "United, Mexicans can and will overcome a common enemy that today threatens to destroy not only our tranquility but our democratic institutions," Calderón said. "It's in the divisions among Mexicans where criminals find spaces and vulnerabilities to harm Mexico." The president also expressed willingness to listen and enter into dialogue on proposals to address the seemingly out-of-control surge in activity by drug traffickers and crime organizations. The PRI did not necessarily meet the administration's gesture with open arms. Speaking at a ceremony to pay homage to Torre Cantú, party president Beatriz Paredes Rangel suggested that the president and his party might be using the murder for political gain. "More than declarations, we demand a thorough and effective investigation that will find the culprits," she said.

No group or organization stepped up to take credit for the murder, and the specific motives for the assassination were not clear. Guajardo Varela was killed in May because he refused demands from cartels that he withdraw from the election. A report in the Mexico City daily newspaper *La Jornada* said the federal government has dispatched a group of anti-drug experts from the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR), the Policía Federal (PF), and the Army to conduct the investigation. The group is said to be looking for Heriberto Lazcano (known as El Verdugo or El Lazca), and Miguel Ángel Treviño Morales, two key leaders of the ruthless Zetas cartel, which has been known to operate in northeastern Mexico, including Tamaulipas (SourceMex, January 06, 2010). PRI governors accused of unfair tactics ahead of elections Torre Cantu's murder has overshadowed other issues related to the election, including charges and countercharges of illegal campaign tactics.

On one side are the incumbent PRI governors, who want to ensure that PRI candidates win the July 4 gubernatorial races. This is especially true for the states of Veracruz, Puebla, and Oaxaca, where strong personalities have governed the state for six years. On the other side are the conservative PAN and the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) and its allies, which have formed an uneasy coalition in a handful of states to ensure that the PRI does not retain power. The PAN and the center-left parties are running joint candidates in elections in Oaxaca, Puebla, Sinaloa, Durango, and Hidalgo states. Ironically, most candidates representing the coalition are ex-PRI members. The strongest accusations against the PRI have come in states where the party has held a tight grip on the statehouse for generations. The PAN produced some evidence that the PRI is resorting to the illegal activities that kept the party in power for seven decades, including bribing voters.

In Veracruz, PAN officials released a tape recording of outgoing Gov. Fidel Herrera that alleged that the governor was conducting illegal campaign activities on behalf of the party's candidates, including gubernatorial candidate Javier Duarte de Ochoa. In one conversation, released by PAN president César Nava, Herrera says he will push for a "temporary jobs program" and will distribute supplies ahead of the election to help one mayoral candidate. Nava said the national PAN leadership was planning to file five separate complaints against the governor for illegal involvement

in the elections. The outgoing Veracruz governor responded by announcing his intention to file charges against Nava, candidate Miguel Ángel Yunes Linares, and PAN state coordinator Enrique Carambis Torres for illegally recording and distributing his private conversations. Additionally, he said the recording contained a "manipulation of voices," probably done by an expert impersonator.

The center-left parties, represented by Dante Delgado of the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD), distanced themselves from the PAN accusations but continued to criticize Herrera for illegal interference in the elections. The federal-elections watchdog Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE) said it would look into the PAN's allegations, but some IFE members said they might not be able to bring any sanctions against the governor even if there is proof that he conducted illegal activities on behalf of his party. Herrera's alleged intervention in the campaign was probably unnecessary, as many public-opinion surveys, including a poll by the respected Consulta Mitofsky, show the PRI leading by a comfortable margin in the gubernatorial race and many mayoral elections. A poll released by Mitofsky in early June showed 45% support for Duarte de Ochoa compared with barely 23% for Yunes Linares, a former PRI member who is representing the PAN and the PANAL. Delgado received only slightly more than 9% in voter preferences in the Mitofsky poll.

Nava is also pressing for authorities to investigate alleged illegal participation of the PRI governors in Oaxaca and Puebla. "We hope that federal and local authorities conduct investigations in states where we have presented complaints," said the PAN president. "We have denounced Gov. Mario Marín in Puebla and Gov. Ulises Ruiz in Oaxaca." PRI governors and/or party officials were also accused of illegal campaign tactics in Tamaulipas, Sinaloa, Puebla, and Chihuahua. "The PRI is continuing its practices of buying votes," said PAN Deputy Roberto Lara. While Veracruz might seem out of reach for the opposition parties, there are greater possibilities in some states where the PAN and the center-left parties have joined forces. In Oaxaca, the PAN, PRD, PCD, and Partido del Trabajo (PT) have come together behind Gabino Cué Monteagudo, who is running in the second consecutive election against PRI candidate Eviel Pérez Magaña. A handful of polls have Pérez Magaña leading Cué by single digits, although one poll gave Cué a narrow lead. The same coalition backed Cué in the 2004 election, which he lost by a very narrow margin to Ruiz (SourceMex, August 04, 2004). Cué received a boost late in the campaign when the PANAL threw its support behind the opposition coalition.

PANAL candidate Irma Piñeiro Arias had been polling in the single digits in various public-opinion surveys. As is the case in Veracruz, the PRD and the PAN say they have recordings of four telephone conversations that prove that Ruiz illegally intervened in the campaign on behalf of Pérez Magaña. In the recordings, the Oaxaca governor tries to convince the media to block any coverage of Gabino Cué. The PAN also presented complaints about the election in Chihuahua, where they alleged that PRI candidate César Duarte accepted the free use of an airplane belonging to businessman Jaime Galván for campaign purposes.

Galván has been accused of money laundering. "César Duarte owes many explanations to the people of Chihuahua and to the public in general," said Nava. "First he has to explain the extent of his relationship with Jaime Galván. Secondly, he has to come clean on whether he used this airplane." Duarte who is representing a coalition that also includes the PCD, the PT, and the PVEM

is leading in most polls, but one survey shows PAN candidate Carlos Borrueal Baquera ahead by a very narrow margin. PAN, PRD also accused of corrupt practices The PRI has pushed back by accusing the PAN of using federal public-assistance programs to gain voters' sympathy in key states like Puebla. Federal Deputy Óscar Aguilar González of the PRI said he would file a complaint with Puebla electoral authorities against the PAN for using federal programs like Programa 70 and Oportunidades to support the campaign of Rafael Moreno Valle who is representing the PAN-PRD-PCD coalition in Puebla. Most polls show Moreno Valle trailing PRI-PVEM candidate Javier López Zavala by a slight margin. Ignacio Muñoz Orozco, a spokesperson for the Secretaría de Desarrollo Social (SEDESOL), said it would be very difficult to use Oportunidades for electoral and campaign purposes because many safeguards have been created to prevent misuse, including strict timetables on when the assistance can be disbursed. "If one were to look closely at the state-sponsored social programs

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