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Carlos Navarro

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President Felipe Calderón Offers to Launch Debate on Legalizing Drugs in Mexico

by Carlos Navarro

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The president of Mexico and his immediate predecessor have a major difference of opinion on whether Mexico should proceed with the full legalization of drugs. President Felipe Calderón and former President Vicente Fox, both members of the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), made their views known as a proposal to legalize drugs in Mexico has surfaced. The issue emerged as Calderón continues his high-stakes battle against drug traffickers. The president claimed a small victory when troops killed Ignacio Coronel Villarreal, one of the top leaders of the Sinaloa cartel. At the same time, the administration released updated statistics indicating that at least 28,000 people have been killed in Mexico since Calderón took office in December 2006.

The violence that has rocked Mexico for the past three and a half years has created a ripe environment for Mexican society to begin conversations on whether legalizing drugs could make a difference. The Congress took a small step in the legalization direction in 2009, when it decriminalized possession of small amounts of drugs (([SourceMex, August 26, 2009](#)))

Calderón offered to open the debate on the full legalization of drugs while at the same time emphasizing that he was opposed to such a drastic move. Speaking at a three-day conference on public safety in Mexico City in early August, the president said, "It's a fundamental debate in which I think, first of all, you must allow a democratic plurality [of opinions]. You have to analyze carefully the pros and cons and the key arguments on both sides."

But many observers say the government's inability to curb drug-related violence has forced Calderón to put all options on the table. "He did not open the debate from his own will," Jorge Hernández Tinajero, the president of Cupihd, a civil group in Mexico that disseminates information about drug policies, told *The Christian Science Monitor*. "It is because he is against a wall."

Calderón, Fox on opposite sides of issue

Calderón made his true position clear a few days later in an interview aired on Radio Caracol in Bogotá, Colombia, openly expressing his opposition to full legalization of drugs. "Completely freeing the drug market and even reducing prices are two factors that could push millions and millions of youths to consume drugs," the Mexican president said.

Calderón also suggested that it could be counterproductive if Mexico took the action unilaterally. "If there isn't a generalized, universal legalization policy across the world, and mainly in the main drug consumer, the United States, there won't even be any economic benefits, because the price is determined by the American market," he said.

At a meeting with the leaders of most political parties in Mexico City on Aug. 9, the president reiterated his position that the decision on whether to consume drugs should not be left in the hands of children and youth. "I don't think that a child of 11 or 12 or 14 years of age is sufficiently informed to simply reject any drugs that are put at his disposal," said Calderón.

At the same time, the president said he was open to considering proposals from all parties to improve the strategy against organized crime. This would include openly debating legalization.

Some prominent voices support drug legalization, including ex-President Fox, who views the issue from a practical standpoint. He argues that bringing the sale of drugs into the formal economy would reduce drug-cartel profits. "We have to think about legalizing the production, distribution, and sale of drugs," Fox said on his personal blog.

The ex-president qualified this suggestion by pointing out that he does not endorse consumption of drugs. "We have to view this as a strategy to hammer and break the economic structure that allows the drug-trafficking organizations to earn enormous profits," he said.

And several experts agree with this position. "In my opinion, legalize everything and regulate everything...that could really affect the finances of the drug cartels, especially if the government were the supplier [of drugs]," said political analyst and drug-trafficking expert Jorge Chabat of the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económica CIDE).

Chabat suggested that the government could begin by gaining control of the marijuana market, since this is a significant source of revenue for the cartels.

Political parties would welcome debate

There was a generalized willingness to hold the debate among Mexico's various political parties, but there were also differences of opinion. The greatest reluctance to legalize drugs came from PAN leaders, who suggested that legalization would do little to curb the power of the cartels. PAN president César Nava said the cartels would step up their involvement in other criminal actions, such as extortion and kidnapping.

Sen. Gustavo Madero Muñoz, the PAN floor leader in the upper house, urged caution. "Legalizing drugs, starting with marijuana, should not be taken lightly as if it was a magical solution that would end the violence the following day," he said.

The Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which holds a plurality in the Chamber of Deputies, agreed that an open discussion would be beneficial. "Mexican society should be open to debates on all topics. We should not refuse to discuss delicate matters," said Deputy Francisco Rojas Cárdenas, who coordinates the PRI delegation in the lower house.

Nuevo León Gov. Rodrigo Medina, whose state has seen a major spike in kidnapping, murder, and other crimes such as street blockades by drug-trafficking organizations, said the federal executive branch should coordinate any forum on legalization. "There are many academics, journalists, editorialists who have touched on this theme for months and even years," said Medina. "And it is worthwhile to have the discussion at the highest level, to evaluate the pros and cons."

There was some disagreement within the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) on whether legalization was feasible, but there was general support for holding the debate. "There are those in favor and those against [legalization]. I think the presidential proposal is positive because we would be able to understand the implications and practical effects of the measure....Social organizations, specialists, academics, lawmakers, and citizens should all give their opinions," said Sen. Carlos Navarrete, who is the PRD floor leader in the upper house.

In Mexico City, PRD Mayor Marcelo Ebrard agreed with Calderón's concerns about protecting children and youth but agreed that the debate was necessary. "This is a discussion that we need," said Ebrard. "It is going to be interesting when all positions and suggestions are on the table."

There were some differences among the PRD delegation, which holds a plurality in the Mexico City legislature (Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal, ALDF). David Razú, who chairs the human rights committee (Comisión de Derechos Humanos) in the ALDF, endorsed the concept of a debate but said Calderón's proposal is a little tardy. "This is a discussion that should have been held a long time ago," said Razú.

Local legislator Alejandra Barrales also agreed that a debate would be useful but said she adamantly opposed any legalization. "What has happened in countries where marijuana has been legalized?" asked Barrales, who chairs the government committee (Comisión de Gobierno). "They have not solved their problems with drug trafficking and addictions, and there are advocates in those countries pushing to reverse the legalization."

Catholic bishops also endorse discussion, oppose legalization

Others supported Barrales' position, including Emilio Carlos Berlie Belaunzarán, Roman Catholic archbishop of Yucatán, who noted that legalization "has not solved anything" in countries that have either legalized or decriminalized the use of marijuana, including the Netherlands, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, Spain, and Portugal.

Berlie Belaunzarán's comments are consistent with those of other key members of the Mexican Bishops Conference (Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano, CEM). "The issue is not whether drugs should or should not be legalized. That is a very simplistic notion," said Cardinal Norberto Rivera, archbishop of Mexico. "The main focus should be on the health of Mexicans and on the experience that other countries have had with legalization."

"The liberalization of drugs is not going to solve the problem of drug trafficking and much less criminality," said Rogelio Cabrera, archbishop of Tuxtla Gutiérrez in Chiapas.

Carmen Fernández Cázares, director of the Centros de Integración Juvenil (CIJ), urged debate organizers to exercise caution when putting together a discussion format so that Mexico's youth do not become confused. "Our hope is that no inaccurate or misleading comments are made about drugs, so that our youth do not become misinformed," said Fernández Cázares.

The proposal to hold the debate coincided with the latest report from the Centro de Investigación y Seguridad Nacional (CISEN), which put the number of drug-related deaths at 28,000 since Calderón launched a campaign against organized crime and drug traffickers at the beginning of his administration.

"It's inevitable that we must accept that violence keeps growing," said CISEN director Guillermo Valdés, while presenting the statistics at a dialogue on national security.

Some observers suggested that the government should go beyond the numbers in discussing the data. "Having lost the capacity for surprise and horror, CISEN issued a report, with President Calderón present, that there have been 28,000 murders linked to organized crime," wrote Félix Fuentes in a column for the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal. "With the coffins of so many

dead people, you could fill the surface of the Zócalo [Mexico's City's vast central square] twice over and still need space for another 2,000."

Administration claims recent victories in drug war

Even as the discussion moved forward on a possible debate on legalization, the Calderón government claimed some small victories in its campaign against drug traffickers. The administration managed to take down a top leader of the Sinaloa cartel in late July, when Army special forces stormed a safe house in the Guadalajara suburb of Zapopan and killed Coronel Villarreal. The cartel leader, commonly known as , headed the Sinaloa cartel's operations in the western states of Jalisco, Colima, and Nayarit and specialized in smuggling methamphetamines to the US.

Unlike other prominent drug traffickers, Coronel kept a low profile and conducted his business very quietly. But the US government was keeping close tabs on his operations, filing indictments against him in Texas and New York. And the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) had offered a US\$5 million reward for his capture. "Coronel was a major poly-drug trafficker involved in transporting multi-ton quantities of cocaine and producing tons of methamphetamine," the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) said in a statement shortly after his death.

Analysts said the operation was a victory for the Calderón administration, not necessarily because of Coronel's removal from the drug-trafficking scene but because the case showed that the government has improved its police- and military-intelligence gathering in western Mexico.

But Coronel's death will probably not make a huge difference in the long run because the Sinaloa cartel is expected to regroup quickly, or the void could easily be filled by the Zetas, which have recently made inroads into Guadalajara.

"These types of actions represent one of the favorite tactics in Calderón's anti-crime strategy, cutting off the leadership of the drug cartels," Jose Luis Piñeiro, a security expert at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM) in Mexico City, told The New York Times. "But in Mexico, it doesn't work that way, because the cartels reorganize quickly and name new leaders."

In another small victory for the Calderón administration, federal police rescued the two remaining journalists who had been kidnapped by drug traffickers in Durango state in late July. Two other journalists were released earlier. The four journalists were abducted immediately after a press conference at a scandal-plagued state prison in the city of Gómez Palacio. Prison officials were accused of conspiring with drug traffickers by allowing inmates to leave the premises to commit a murder in neighboring Torreón (([SourceMex, July 28, 2010](#))).

The kidnapped journalists included camera operators Javier Canales of Multimedios Laguna and Alejandro Hernández of the Televisa television network, and reporters Héctor Gordo of Televisa and Óscar Solís of El Vespertino newspaper in Gómez Palacio.

The kidnapers, presumably members of the Sinaloa cartel, said corruption was not exclusive to one organization. They demanded that broadcasters air three videos in which police officers and go-betweens describe ties between the Zetas and corrupt authorities. Milenio Televisión, which is affiliated with Multimedios Laguna, agreed to show a 15-minute segment, but Televisa refused to give in to the kidnapers' demands. The network instead broadcast a black screen in place of the scheduled magazine-style program that employs its captured staffers.

Gordoa and Solís were released shortly after the abduction, but Televisa's refusal to air the videos prompted the kidnappers to hold on to Canales and Hernández. Intelligence work led to a predawn operation that freed the captives from a house in Gómez Palacio.

The case underscored the plight of journalists in Mexico, where the drug cartels either seek to mute coverage of their activities or slant it in their favor. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reports that at least 30 journalists have been killed or disappeared in Mexico since Calderón launched his campaign against drug traffickers in December 2006([SourceMex, July 14, 2010](#)).

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