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Concerns about Violence Blemish Mexico's Independence Day, Bicentennial Celebrations

by Carlos Navarro

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Mexican authorities had planned some very special events for the 2010 commemoration of Independence Day because this Sept. 16 marked 200 years since Mexico declared its independence from Spain. And some commemorations in Mexico City and in the country's birthplace in Dolores Hidalgo, Guanajuato state, were expected to go off without a hitch. This year's bicentennial celebration, however, was full of ugly blemishes, in large measure the result of the drug-related violence that has scarred Mexico for years, and which intensified in the past four years. At least 16 communities, mostly in northern Mexico, cancelled their Independence Day ceremonies, and others had to implement extreme security measures or tone down their celebrations significantly. Amid the Sept. 16 ceremonies, other efforts to observe the bicentennial were taking place, including a proposal in the Senate to change Mexico's official name.

Some communities cancel celebrations

For generations, Mexican communities have celebrated Independence Day through the traditional "El Grito," led by the president, governors, and mayors across the country at midnight every Sept. 15. The ceremony commemorates Father Miguel Hidalgo y Castillo's original call for independence from Spain in the community of Dolores (now Dolores Hidalgo) in Guanajuato on Sept. 16, 1810. This year, the ceremony in Dolores Hidalgo was to be led by President Felipe Calderón, who in prior years has led the Grito ceremony from the national palace in Mexico City. Mayor Marcelo Ebrard led the Mexico City celebration this year.

Guanajuato Gov. Juan Manuel Oliva said that, during the days leading up to El Grito, the state government put a special effort into sprucing up Dolores Hidalgo to prepare for the big bicentennial celebration. But some analysts pointed out that the preparations included extremely tight security arrangements, beyond those normally reserved for activities involving the president. "The bicentennial celebration creates a risk. It's unbelievable, but this is the truth," columnist Pablo César Carrillo wrote in Milenio.com.

Carrillo said the possibility of a serious incident was very plausible, especially because some groups might be banking on the premise that something major happens in Mexico every 100 years, with the Independence occurring in 1810 and the Mexican Revolution, when Dictator Porfirio Díaz was toppled, taking place in 1910.

"Authorities have to be on alert because there will be no lack of groups that want to gain attention under the guise that something big happens in our country every 100 years," said the Milenio.com columnist.

Authorities were forced to make special security arrangements for the Independence Day celebrations last year and this year because of the grenade attack on the commemoration in the city of Morelia in Michoacán state in 2008, which killed eight people and injured more than

100([SourceMex, Sept. 24, 2008](#)). The perpetrators were thought to be members of the Michoacán-based drug cartel La Familia.

The possibility of follow-up attacks prompted the federal government to help with security arrangements in Michoacán, amid rumors that the annual Independence Day ceremony would be canceled in the city of Morelia, the state's largest city. In an effort to reassure the people of Michoacán that the celebration would proceed this year, Calderón made a special visit to the state just days before the Independence Day celebration. "Amid rumors that suggested a possible cancellation of the Grito de Independencia ceremony, President Calderón visited the military zone to review the security measures that have been taken ahead of the patriotic celebrations," said the Mexico City daily newspaper *El Universal*.

While the ceremonies were scheduled to proceed in Morelia and other cities in Mexico, this was not the case for many municipalities in Tamaulipas and Chihuahua states, which were forced to cancel their Independence Day events because of concerns about possible violence. Tamaulipas has seen a surge in drug-related violence in recent months, including the murder of several mayors and a gubernatorial candidate ([SourceMex, June 30, 2010](#)) and ([Sept. 8, 2010](#)).

Ciudad Juarez is the largest municipality in Mexico to cancel the traditional celebration, with many residents opting to cross the border to El Paso, Texas, to participate in a ceremony sponsored by the Mexican consulate in that US city. Juarez has also experienced an explosion of violence and other drug-related crimes ([SourceMex, April 14, 2010](#)).

Some major cities in Tamaulipas had planned to proceed with their Independence Day ceremonies on Sept. 15 amid extreme security measures, with Ciudad Madero and Matamoros cancelling the military parade on Sept. 16. Tampico moved up its Sept. 15 ceremony to 7:00 p.m. from the traditional time of midnight.

Monterrey—which also has seen a surge in drug-related killings, kidnappings, and other crimes—has implemented tight security measures, including the use of 1,500 federal police and soldiers to provide protection for participants in the celebration. Drug-trafficking cartels, especially the Zetas, have exchanged gunfire with police in Mexico's third-largest city. The Zetas have gone as far as to blockade city streets in a show of power ([SourceMex, April 14, 2010](#)).

Economy, poverty, other factors dampen bicentennial spirit

In addition to the violence, many analysts and commentators point to other factors that are putting a damper on Mexico's bicentennial and Independence Day celebrations. "On Sept. 15 and 16, as authorities around the country attempt to raise the festive spirit and patriotic sentiments that we have lacked in recent months, [we are aware] that half of our country lives in poverty, 7 million youth are neither in school nor employed, and eight of every 10 Mexicans fear becoming the victim of crime," said Roy Campos, president of Consulta Mitofsky.

"A bicentennial should inspire and generate hope, and this one hasn't," environmental and consumer advocate Alejandro Calvillo, former director of Greenpeace Mexico, said in an interview with the Associated Press. "It comes at a time of deep crisis."

A survey conducted in Mexico by the Pew Research Center in April and May of this year provides a good barometer of attitudes in Mexico. Of respondents, 79% said they were dissatisfied with the direction in which their country was headed. But the question was posed as part of an overall survey

of the anti-drug efforts during the Calderón administration. "Mexicans overwhelmingly continue to endorse Calderón's campaign against the drug cartels. Most also believe the Mexican military is making progress in the drug war, although they are less likely to hold this view now than was the case one year ago," said Richard Wike, associate director of Pew's Global Attitudes Project.

Campos said Mexico is at a crossroads, which means that citizens must reflect on the existing institutions and structures, including education and government systems, and their concept of nationalism, sovereignty, and worldview. "In other words, this celebration should provide an opportunity to reflect on the vocation of our country," the Mitofsky official said in a column published in the Mexico City daily business newspaper *El Economista*.

In a column published by *Agencia de noticias Reforma*, Karla Garduño said Mexico's misfortune is symbolized by two commodities that in the past were a source of pride for the country: corn and petroleum. "Our country has lost our autonomy in food and energy, as we're having to import more and more grain and gasoline," said Garduño.

Regarding oil, Garduño said, "Our public revenues have remained dependent on the petroleum sector for 30 years, and soon we will have to import oil because production is falling and we have failed to increase our refining capabilities."

"For more than 20 years, Mexico has imported corn—the foodstuff for which our country is more commonly identified—because our domestic production has been insufficient," Garduño said. "In 2009, according to the government's annual State of the Nation report ([SourceMex, Sept. 8, 2010](#)), our imports represented about 27.4% of our total consumption."

Plan floated to eliminate "States" from Mexico's name

In addition to the bicentennial celebrations, there are other efforts in Mexico to commemorate 200 years of the country's existence. A group of senators, led by Guillermo Tamborrel of the governing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), Luis Maldonado of the Partido del Trabajo (PT), and Arturo Escobar and Jorge Legorreta of the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM), has launched an effort to change the country's official name. Under the proposal, which has been endorsed by 49 senators, the country would simply be known as "México," instead of its full name of the United States of Mexico (Estados Unidos de México). The change would require a modification of Mexico's Constitution.

"It is an irrefutable fact that a country called Mexico exists, and people overseas know us as Mexicans," said Tamborrel. "Nevertheless, Mexico as a nation-state does not exist, according to our Constitution."

"The citizens that created a nation in 1824 under the model of a federal republic simply followed the model of our northern neighbor, copying even the name of the United States," added Tamborrel and other sponsors of the legislation.

There was no immediate response from legislators from the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), considered the power broker in the Congress. But outgoing PRI Gov. Fidel Herrera Beltrán of Veracruz said there is an important reason why the name has not changed, namely the commitment to federalism via the Pacto Federal, which was enacted as part of the Constitution. "Mexico is a federal democratic republic, comprising sovereign states, and this is spelled out in the Constitution through the Pacto Federal," said Herrera Beltrán. "That is why we are called the United States of Mexico."

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