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Mayors at the Forefront of Drug Wars

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Mayors have become a lightning rod in President Felipe Calderón's campaign against drug traffickers. Mayors, mostly from small municipalities, have been caught between a rock and a hard place; they must choose between cooperating with drug cartels or risk losing their lives. Eighteen mayors have been murdered since Calderón launched his intense anti-drug effort in 2006 ([SourceMex, January 24, 2007](#)). More than half of those deaths occurred in 2011. Mayors who cooperate with the drug cartels are also under scrutiny by the federal government. In 2008, authorities arrested several mayors and other public officials in Michoacán state on charges of cooperating with drug traffickers ([SourceMex, May 27, 2009](#)) and ([Aug. 19, 2009](#)). All but one of the suspects were released after a federal judge ruled that the government lacked sufficient evidence to hold them.

Eleven mayors murdered this year

The attacks on the mayors have been brutal, including in the 11 cases recorded this year. In many of the cases in 2010, the mayors were shot on a public street or in a public building, as was the case with José Santiago Agustín of the small community of Zapotitlán Tablas, in Guerrero state, as he exited a market on April 28. Manuel Estrada Escalante of El Mezquital in Durango state was killed at a restaurant on Feb. 22 of this year, while Alexander López García of El Naranjo in San Luis Potosí was murdered during a meeting at his office. Jesús Manuel Lara Rodríguez of Guadalupe in Chihuahua state was shot to death at home on June 19, and Prisciliano Rodríguez Salinas of Doctor González in Nuevo León was killed as he sat in his truck on Sept. 23.

Some murders were especially brutal. Edelmiro Cavazos Leal of the Monterrey suburb of Santiago in Nuevo León was kidnapped and tortured before being killed on Aug. 16 ([SourceMex, Sept. 8, 2010](#)). On Aug. 29, Marco Antonio Lea García of Hidalgo in Tamaulipas state was shot in front of his 10-year-old daughter, who suffered minor injuries.

In the most recent attack, Gustavo Sánchez, mayor of Tancitaro in Michoacán, was found dead along with an aide on Sept. 27. The attack stumped authorities because it was not typical of recent murders. Both men were beaten with rocks rather than shot to death. Their bodies were found in an abandoned pickup truck. "We've had executions of people, a town official, a councilman, but always shot to death...never anything like this," Michoacán state prosecutor Jesús Montejano said in a radio interview. "We are worried because this situation is very different from what organized crime usually does."

Investigators were working on the theory that robbery, and not retaliation by organized criminals, was the motive. But Tancitaro is smack in the middle of an area controlled by drug traffickers, who had in the past threatened city officials. Sánchez, a school teacher, agreed to take charge of the municipal government only after the elected mayor Gonzalo Paz, the city council, and the police department resigned en masse because of threats from members of the drug cartel La Familia, which controls the area.

For the most part, the drug cartels have targeted mayors of small and medium-sized municipalities, which lack the security apparatus of big cities. There have been some exceptions, such as Ciudad Juárez, where cartels threatened the life of Mayor José Reyes Ferriz in 2009, forcing him to establish residence across the border in El Paso, Texas ([SourceMex, Feb. 25, 2009](#)).

And even when big-city mayors are protected, they are still vulnerable. On Sept. 29, a group of assailants tossed a grenade at city hall in the border city of Matamoros. The grenade caused little damage to the government building, but two passers-by were injured in the attack.

Mayors from smaller municipalities more vulnerable

The violence and threats from drug traffickers has a special effect on communities along the border. In addition to Reyes Ferriz, the mayors of several communities in Tamaulipas have moved their residences across the border to the US. "We are looking for ways to ensure that those mayors conduct their duties with the utmost conditions of security," said Hugo Andrés Araujo de la Torre, interior secretary for the state government of Tamaulipas.

Alejandro Poiré Romero, a spokesperson for the Secretaría de Seguridad Pública (SSP), agrees that mayors of smaller communities are more vulnerable because they lack the security provided to municipal leaders in the cities. Although most of the 2,456 municipalities in Mexico are potential targets, Poiré said fewer than 200 of these are in what the government considers "hot spots." It is in these municipalities where the mayors are either corrupted or threatened or both.

"If the mayor cannot be corrupted...the drug traffickers cannot operate," Raúl Benítez Manaut, an expert on security issues at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), told The Christian Science Monitor.

Benítez said the mayors are stuck between a rock and a hard place, as the government is expanding its intelligence capabilities and beginning to crack down on drug-related corruption. Some mayors who would have otherwise cooperated with the drug traffickers are now deciding not to cooperate, which has made them targets for the killings. "If the mayor is an obstacle, that is when the problem starts," said Benítez.

Poiré said the increased pressure from both the federal government and the drug cartels is leaving many elected officials vulnerable. Because of this, the Calderón administration's security Cabinet—comprising the public safety secretary, the attorney general, and the interior secretary—has begun to look for ways to provide increased protection to mayors and other public officials who are vulnerable to the drug traffickers. "The security Cabinet is not only trying to identify with precision all those officials who are vulnerable but also ensure that all the necessary security mechanisms are available," said Poiré.

Setback in Michoacán

The government's efforts to prosecute officials who cooperate with drug traffickers received a setback in late September, when a federal judge ordered the release of five police officials and one law-enforcement officer who had been accused in May of conspiring with drug traffickers in Michoacán. The principal suspects in the sting were the mayors of 10 cities, most of whom were released in recent weeks because of a lack of proof. All but one of the 35 officials charged have now been released or exonerated. The only official who remains in custody is Armando Medina Torres, former mayor of the town of Mugica.

Among those who were cleared was Julio César Godoy Toscano, who had won a seat in the federal Chamber of Deputies in the July election but was not allowed to take the post because of the charges. Godoy Toscano, a member of the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), is the half brother of Michoacán Gov. Leonel Godoy Rangel. Julio Godoy has begun an appeals process to try to regain the seat he was denied.

Observers said the release of the officials puts the Calderón government in a bad light because of the failure of its campaign, which had been dubbed "el michoacanazo."

"The PGR looked foolish because the most important investigation in this administration's six-year term fell apart," said the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio Diario.

US border mayors support southbound inspections

Mayors on the US side of the border are also affected by the drug wars. The US municipal officials not only have to contend with some violence that occasionally spills over from the Mexican side but are also at the forefront of the smuggling activities. Many US border cities are gateways for the drugs that are transported into the US and also for the weapons that are smuggled into Mexico.

In the past, mayors in border towns in south Texas resisted efforts to increase inspections of vehicles entering Mexico because of the potential deterrent to commerce and tourism. "I have come to the conclusion that the United States has to live up to its responsibilities," John David Franz, mayor of Hidalgo, Texas, told the Rio Grande Guardian, an Internet-based news service. "The cash that is financing the drug war in Mexico and the cartels and the firearms that are causing all this havoc and mayhem is coming from the United States."

Franz chairs the Texas Border Coalition (TBC), which represents the interests of elected officials from El Paso to Brownsville.

Richard Cortez, mayor of McAllen, Texas, expressed similar sentiments about the need for border communities to help the US and Mexico try to slow the movement of weapons into Mexico. President Barack Obama's administration has taken steps such as increasing inspections and expanding the role of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) along the border([SourceMex, April 1, 2009](#)).

But critics in Mexico and the US say the US federal government's efforts have fallen short and could be expanded. "I now think it is critical and important for the United States of America, if we are going to help ourselves and help Mexico, that we introduce southbound checks," said Cortez, a former chair of the Border Trade Alliance, which promotes trade between communities in the southwest border region and Mexico. "They have to be a strategic part of what we are doing to combat border violence."

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