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Mexico's Ranking on Transparency International's Corruption Index Worsens in 2010

by Carlos Navarro

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It almost sounds like a broken record. The latest report from Transparency International (TI) again placed Mexico among the most corrupt countries in the world. The international organization, based in Berlin, said Mexico ranked 98th of the 178 countries on its Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), which measures perceived levels of public-sector corruption. Mexico's rating of 3.1 on the CPI, with 10 being the least corrupt, was its lowest in 10 years. In 2009, when Mexico's rating was 3.3, the country ranked 89th of 178 countries ([SourceMex, Dec. 9, 2009](#)).

The perception of corruption is frequently linked to public officials at the federal level, but problems are rampant at the state and municipal levels as well. TI officials acknowledge that at least some corruption can be traced to the drug trade, with public officials and law-enforcement personnel faced with the choice of cooperating with the cartels or losing their lives. Several mayors have already lost their lives this year because they refused to cooperate with the drug cartels ([SourceMex, Sept. 29, 2010](#)).

While Mexico's 3.1 rating was the lowest in the last decade, the figure was not far from previous years. According to TI data, Mexico has remained between 3 and 4 during the last 10-year period, with the highest level of 3.7 occurring in 2001.

TI develops its rankings on corruption using information from surveys conducted in the 178 countries. In Latin America, the number of surveys used varied between three and seven. In Mexico's case, the rating was based on seven surveys.

"The 2010 CPI draws on different assessments and business opinion surveys carried out by independent and reputable institutions. It captures information about the administrative and political aspects of corruption," said TI. "Broadly speaking, the surveys and assessments used to compile the index include questions relating to bribery of public officials, kickbacks in public procurement, embezzlement of public funds, and questions that probe the strength and effectiveness of public-sector anti-corruption efforts."

Mexico's rating was worse than 16 countries in the Americas and Puerto Rico and better than 10 nations in the region. Canada, Barbados, and Chile had the least corruption, with respective ratings of 8.9, 7.8, and 7.2. The most corruption was reported in Venezuela, Paraguay, and Haiti, each with ratings of about 2.0.

Administration insists that it is fighting corruption

President Felipe Calderón's administration acknowledged that the new TI rating did not look good for the country. "We have to take this seriously," said Salvador Vega Casillas, who heads the Secretaría de la Función Pública (SFP), which audits government practices.

But Vega Casillas also suggested that the TI survey does not reflect the Calderón government's efforts to combat corruption in powerful government entities such as the state-run oil company

PEMEX and in Fondo de Vivienda del ISSSTE (FOVISSSTE), the special agency that provides housing loans to government workers.

TI official Antonio Garrigues Walker, a Spanish jurist, described corruption in Mexico as a problem that is "as important and as negative" as drug trafficking. Garrigues said there are clear links between the two. "The situation with drug trafficking is worsening, and the same thing is happening with corruption," the TI official said in an interview with the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio Diario.

Garrigues said Mexicans should not assume that corruption is insurmountable, even though the problem has been around for a while. "By ensuring that [corruption] remains in the public consciousness, we create a type of sensibility among the citizenry," said the TI official. "If citizens start to realize that this is a national problem that affects the lower-income classes in particular, there will be a greater effort to address corruption."

The Spanish jurist said an effective, honest campaign to eliminate bribery and other corrupt practices could in the long run help economic growth. "If you eliminate corruption in Mexico by just 50%, the country's wealth would multiply by 10% or 15%," said Garrigues.

Garrigues cautioned that open government by itself would not eliminate corrupt practices. "Transparency does not eliminate corruption entirely but does make it more difficult," said the Spanish jurist. "The citizens and the news media have to fight so that transparency laws are not cosmetic and are strictly applied."

Some officials in the Calderón government disputed the notion that corruption has kept foreign investors out of Mexico. Finance Secretary Ernesto Cordero said corruption has not affected the flows of foreign capital because the Mexican economy has a good image overseas.

"Of course, we have to take steps [to address corruption]," said Cordero. "But investment continues to flow into our country at a steady rate. Mexico is an important destination for foreign capital among emerging economies, and that is a sign that we are performing our task well."

Opposition parties weigh in

The TI report provided plenty of political fodder for the opposition parties and for critics from semi-independent and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). María Marván, commissioner of the Instituto Federal de Acceso a la Información (IFAI), described the new TI rating as embarrassing. "Our standing is shameful, and much is because of the systemic suppression of transparency in our country," said Marván.

The IFAI commissioner said a lack of leadership at the highest level was part of the problem. "[President Calderón] must assume a more intentional stance toward transparency and support the agencies that promote open government," she said.

The political opposition also weighed in with criticism of the administration. The center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) called for the administration to create a special office to monitor corruption. Deputy Alejandro Encinas Rodríguez, PRD floor leader in the lower house, did not directly accuse the Calderón government of corruption but hinted that the administration was not doing its job. He said corruption was present across the spectrum of government activities and therefore it was "urgent that Mexico create an autonomous agency to combat corruption—an anti-corruption czar."

But Encinas' comments come at a time when the PRD is facing its own corruption scandal involving federal Deputy Julio César Godoy Toscano, who is accused of offering to use his position as a legislator-elect to help drug traffickers in his home state of Michoacán. Godoy Toscano was elected to serve in the 2009-2012 session of Congress ([SourceMex, Aug. 19, 2009](#)) and ([June 2, 2010](#)).

Godoy Toscano, half brother of Michoacán Gov. Leonel Godoy, went underground after the charges were levied against him. He managed to elude police checkpoints and show up for a special congressional swearing-in ceremony in September of this year, allowing him to gain immunity from prosecution.

The Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) said the arrest warrant against Godoy Toscano is still valid despite his new status. After his swearing-in ceremony, the legislator continued to proclaim his innocence. But those comments rang hollow after authorities leaked a tape recording of a conversation between Godoy and Servando Gómez Martínez, leader of the drug-trafficking organization La Familia Michoacana, in which the two men were discussing mutual favors.

A special committee in the Chamber of Deputies is considering a motion to strip Godoy of his post, but the PRD leaders in the lower house, including Encinas, have come to his defense. This prompted criticism from one Mexico City-based newspaper, *La Crónica de Hoy*, which pointed to Encinas' contradictory views. A headline in the newspaper read, "Encinas, Protector of Godoy Toscano, Demands Anti-corruption Czar."

Support for Godoy Toscano is not unanimous within the PRD. Hortensia Aragón, secretary-general of the center-left party, said the decision of the PRD delegation in the Chamber of Deputies was a mistake. "I do not respect or support the deputies' decision, which was made without consultations with the party," said Aragón.

In addition to Godoy Toscano, two other politicians were linked to the drug trade in recent elections, including gubernatorial candidates Gregorio Sánchez Martínez in Quintana Roo and Jesús Vizcarra Calderón in Sinaloa ([SourceMex, June 2, 2010](#)). Sánchez Martínez was unable to continue his candidacy after federal authorities took him into custody, while Vizcarra lost his election.

The PRI's reaction to the TI report was more low-key. There was no official statement from current officials, but Emilio Gamboa, who once served both in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, suggested that the presidential elections on July 5, 2012, would serve as a referendum on Calderón's performance, including his inability to root out corruption.

One reason the PRI comments were so low-key was because the party has frequently been associated with corruption during its nearly 80-year history. Martín Moreno, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper *Excelsior*, said corruption runs across the political spectrum. "There are decades of corruption within the PRI and its presidents, relatives, governors, and union leaders. Then we have the corrupt passivity and inefficiency of the PAN [Partido Acción Nacional] governments. And we have seen the PRD taking bribes on national television," said Moreno.

Corruption touches all political parties

In his column, Moreno cited a long list of politicians and relatives of politicians from all parties who have been linked with corruption. The list includes ex-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari and his brother Raúl Salinas de Gortari. "[Raúl] charged commissions of 10% to anyone who wanted to conduct business with the government while his brother was in office," said Moreno.

Leaders of unions affiliated with the PRI were also linked to corruption, including Joaquín Hernández Galicia, "La Quina," head of the power Sindicato de Trabajadores Petroleros de la República Mexicana (STPRM). Galicia is accused of embezzling large amounts of union funds.

Elba Esther Gordillo, head of the teachers union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación, SNTE), was also accused of misappropriating union funds. Although she was affiliated with the PRI for most of her political career, she helped Calderón win the presidency in 2006.

Moreno also pointed to examples of corruption in the two other major parties. René Bejarano and Carlos Ímaz, two powerful PRD personalities, were both connected to a bribery scandal involving businessman Carlos Ahumada Kurz in 2004 ([SourceMex, March 10, 2004](#)) and ([Nov. 10, 2004](#)).

The PAN has also been linked to acts of malfeasance during its time in office. Manuel and Jorge Bribiesca Sahagún, sons of former first lady Marta Sahagún de Fox, are accused of using their position as insiders within the administration of ex-President Vicente Fox for their personal gain ([SourceMex, Feb. 22, 2006](#)) and ([Sept. 23, 2009](#)).

The most corrupt personality within the PAN was ex-legislator and former presidential candidate Diego Fernández de Cevallos, who was known as Jefe Diego because he used his powerful positions to push through laws that would benefit business sectors in which he or his associates were involved ([SourceMex, Feb. 25, 2004](#)) and ([May 20, 2009](#)). "In the morning he was a legislator and in the afternoon he was a lawyer," said Moreno. "He combined the benefits of the two positions for his personal gain and that of his clients."

Unknown assailants kidnapped Fernández de Cevallos this year ([SourceMex, May 26, 2010](#)), but there are reports that his family has paid a huge ransom and that he will be released sometime in November.

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