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Even as the major candidates are offering solutions to address the seemingly out-of-control drug-related violence in Mexico, there is some concern that the major drug cartels are plotting to influence the upcoming elections in July. Because of tight monitoring of campaign donations and the very public scrutiny of all the activities of the major presidential candidates, it is less likely that the cartels will have much direct impact on the presidential race. Still, there is some concern that "dirty money" will somehow filter into the campaigns, not only for the presidency but especially for congressional, gubernatorial, and local elections. In addition to electing the president, Mexicans will elect 500 members of the Chamber of Deputies, 128 senators, six governors, and the mayor of Mexico City. Several municipal and state legislative races will also take place.

Another concern, said Interior Secretary Alejandro Poiré, is that the cartels might seek to "stick their noses" into the elections and disrupt the July 1 vote with violence. Even with this possibility, Poiré dismissed suggestions that the government postpone the vote. He said the Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB), the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE), and other agencies have developed a map identifying communities where the potential for violence is greatest. "We have discussed some problems that need to be addressed, and we are working closely with the IFE and local authorities to guarantee a peaceful process," he said.

## Government, political parties monitor campaign contributions

But the threat of violence is not the foremost concern ahead of the elections. Political analysts and the major parties are worried that the drug cartels might try to influence the national campaigns with donations to individual candidates. The IFE has previously taken steps to keep donations from drug cartels out of the elections (SourceMex, Feb. 18, 2009), but there is no evidence to indicate whether the institute's efforts were successful.

The major parties—the governing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) and the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the center-left coalition led by the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD)—-have all raised concerns that organized crime might infiltrate the elections. Corruption allegations have touched all three major parties (SourceMex, May, 30, 2001, April, 21, 2004, and May 27, 2009).

The PRI, which governed Mexico for seven decades, developed a strong reputation of cooperating with the drug cartels, particularly during the administration of ex-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (SourceMex, July 22, 1998, and May 20, 2009). Because of that perception, the PRI executive committee (Comité Ejecutivo Nacional, CEN) has taken decisive action to ensure that none of the party's candidates is linked to organized crime.

PRI president Pedro Joaquín Coldwell said the party would look closely at the personal finances of candidates seeking any office in the 2012 election, and anyone proven to have taken funds from organized crime would be asked to withdraw from the race. The PRI president emphasized,

however, that the party would use due process, acting only when presented with concrete proof and documentation.  "We will not act on mere rumors," said Coldwell.

Despite the best efforts of the government and the political parties to keep organized crime out of the elections, some experts believe that it is a nearly impossible task.  "The controls we have are not sufficient," said journalist Ricardo Ravelo, author of the book El Narco en Mexico," which takes a close look at the operations of the drug cartels in Mexico.

Ravelo said the cartels are not going to discriminate in their attempts to influence the elections.  "The dirty money is going to flow through all the parties.  Money is money," the author said.

## Lack of enforcement powers a big problem

Even the government acknowledges that it might be difficult to stop the flow of money from organized crime into the elections because of a lack of enforcement and investigative powers.  In an interview with the Mexico City daily business newspaper El Economista, sources from the electoral watchdog, the Fiscalía Especial para la Atención de Delitos Electorales (FEPADE), said the IFE has some mechanisms in place to try to prevent illicit funds from infiltrating the campaigns, but that is not sufficient.  "[The IFE] has no investigative powers to apply to the presidential elections, because there is no legislation that can be applied in this case," said the newspaper.

Critics agreed that the Congress is partly to blame for the lack of enforcement powers.  "Almost all the reforms regarding security and public safety are stuck in Congress, including some important proposals from the governors association (Comisión Nacional de Gobernadores, CONAGO)," columnist Jorge Fernández Menéndez wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior.

With closer scrutiny on donations to the major campaigns, the challenge is to track the activities of organized crime in local races.  Ravelo said a whopping 70% of Mexico's municipalities are controlled in one form or another by drug cartels.  The criminal organizations not only have a hold on the local government and the police but have also established extortion and protection operations targeting businesses and individuals.

More often than not, donations to candidates in small communities carry strings attached.  Often, the candidate either accepts a bribe or is threatened.  In recent comments about the influence of organized crime on elections, President Felipe Calderón said investigations found that threats from organized crime forced 50 candidates in Michoacán state to withdraw from recent elections because they feared for their lives.

Calderón said the candidates, representing all the parties—the PRI, the PAN, and the PRD—were told that they either align themselves with a criminal organization or face the prospect of being eliminated.  They all opted to withdraw from the race.  "This is a serious problem," said the president.  "It is neither a personal nor a partisan issue."

## Threats against politicians also a concern

The 2010 elections, which included some gubernatorial and local races, were especially bloody for local politicians.  The list of those murdered for allegedly not cooperating with criminal organizations included Rodolfo Torre Cantú, the PRI gubernatorial candidate in Tamaulipas, who was killed in an ambush in June of that year (SourceMex, June 30, 2010).  José Mario Guajardo

Varela, a PAN candidate for mayor in the community of Valle Hermoso in Tamaulipas, and Joel Arteaga Vázquez, a candidate for a local post in Calera in Zacatecas state, were also murdered that year (SourceMex, May 26, 2010).

The 2010 murder of another politician was not confirmed until 2012. Authorities conducted DNA tests on 50 bodies found in a mass grave in Durango state in February and discovered that one victim was Alfonso Peña, the former mayor of the community of Tepehuanes, who had just been elected to the Durango state legislature. Peña disappeared shortly after the election, and his whereabouts were unknown until the gruesome discovery near the state capital of Durango city this year. Establishing Peña's identity was an exception to the rule. Authorities said only 13 of the more than 300 bodies found in mass graves in Durango since April 2011 had been identified as of mid-March.

Politicians have remained a target of organized crime in recent months, including during the gubernatorial election in Michoacán state, where Mayor Ricardo Guzmán Romero was gunned down as he distributed campaign literature for PAN candidate Maria Luisa Calderón (SourceMex, Nov. 16, 2011).

Another recent victim was Arturo García Solano, who was seeking the PRD nomination for the state legislature in the central state of San Luis Potosí. García Solano disappeared from his community of Ciudad Valles in mid-February, and his body was discovered almost a month later.

There is concern that, despite the government's efforts to prevent violence, voters might not come out for the election. "Because of this scenario of insecurity, voters in some populations might prefer to hide during the elections rather than expose their lives to gunfire, which is common in some communities," Tonatihu Avelino wrote in the daily newspaper Vanguardia.

## *Candidates offer solutions to violence*

The seemingly out-of-control drug-related violence has become a major theme of the presidential campaigns. Many citizens blame Calderón's campaign against drug traffickers, which launched shortly after he took office (SourceMex, Jan. 24, 2007), for the surge in the number of murders and kidnappings since 2006. The cartels have responded violently to the government's military and police crackdown, not only increasing attacks against each other and the government but also against civilians.

The reality is that the escalation in violence is due in large measure of the emergence of the Zetas, an organization founded by members of the Army special forces. The Zetas were originally enforcers for the Gulf cartel but later broke away to form their own cartel (SourceMex, Feb. 1, 2012).

Still, with a large portion of the electorate blaming Calderón for the violence, PAN candidate Josefina Vázquez Mota faces an uphill battle convincing would-be voters that she would employ a different strategy than the president. She attempted to distance herself from the president during a speech at a security conference in Mexico City. "I will put all the resources of the state to helping the victims and safeguarding the protection of human rights," said the PAN candidate.

All candidates, including Vázquez Mota, proposed removing the Army from the drug-interdiction campaign. She proposed creating a special federal ministry to coordinate 32 state police units that would take charge of the efforts to combat organized crime.

Enrique Peña Nieto, who is representing the PRI and the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM) in the election, proposed combating drug-related violence by increasing funding for security efforts significantly, which is the strategy that Colombia used to reduce drug-related violence.  "Colombia dedicates about 5% of its GDP to combat insecurity," said Peña Nieto.  "In Mexico, the total expenditures at all levels of government amount to about 1.5% of GDP."

The PRI candidate proposed replacing the Army with police divisions specialized in investigation and prosecution of specific crimes.

Andrés Manuel López Obrador—representing a center-left coalition comprising the PRD, the Partido del Trabajo (PT), and the Movimento Ciudadano—said his efforts would focus on efforts to end corruption at all three levels of government and to increase social spending.  Regarding corruption, he would crack down on officials who protect the criminal groups.  "We are going to eliminate that practice," he said.

López Obrador also proposed withdrawing the Army from the campaign against drug traffickers.  In contrast to Peña Nieto, however, López Obrador would increase expenditures on social programs rather than directly on security measures.  "Violence is not solved with more violence," said the center-left candidate.  "[The solution] is to better the living conditions for the population, especially by attending the needs of our youth."

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