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Campaign to End Bullfighting in Mexico Draws Mixed Reactions

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A growing number of states and municipalities in Mexico have moved to ban bullfighting, in part because of a strong campaign launched by the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM) in 2011 (SourceMex, Nov. 9, 2011). The list of places that recently banned bullfighting includes five municipalities in Veracruz state, the state of Sonora, and the community of Tangancícuaro in Michoacán state. However, some states—Aguascalientes, Tlaxcala, Zacatecas, and Guanajuato—are taking the opposite position, with state legislators and governors taking actions to protect bullfighting, commonly known as the fiesta brava, via declarations declaring the practice "cultural patrimony."

The strong push to ban bullfighting in Mexico has flared passions on both sides of the issue. "The bullfighting debate at times resembles the abortion controversy, where the two sides cite studies and documents and use comments from celebrities to back their positions," columnist Juan Pablo Proal wrote in the weekly news magazine Proceso. "Dozens of studies offer proof that this involves mistreatment of animals and that the prevailing attitude behind bullfighting is a precursor to societal violence. Defenders of the fiesta brava have also produced studies and convincing arguments to defend their position."

The polarization created by bullfighting is a new phenomenon in Mexico. There was a time when the practice was accepted as part of the country's cultural tradition, and those who opposed the activity quietly looked the other way. However, thanks to the efforts of animal-rights activists and legislators from the PVEM and other parties, the issue has come to the forefront.

But Proal points out that promoting violent events contributes to the escalating climate of violence in Mexico. "I believe that the tolerance to violence is very high in our country, and we have become quickly accustomed to high levels of brutality," the columnist said. "This campaign points out that activities such as bullfights, cockfights, and dogfights are part of this culture of tolerance and celebration of violence."

States, municipalities pass laws prohibiting mistreatment of animals

In all cases, advocates of a ban have paired the effort with initiatives to prohibit the mistreatment of animals, whether domesticated or wild. In addition, the one common denominator in communities where the ban has been successfully implemented is the absence of a bullfighting tradition or large arenas to host bullfights. There is one notable exception: Mexico City. On Jan. 30, 2013, a new law went into effect in the Mexican capital that prohibits the mistreatment of animals. There are stiff punishments, including jail sentences as long as four years and heavy fines.

While the Spain-based newspaper Diario Público called the law "a de facto ban" on bullfighting, the animal-cruelty legislation does not explicitly ban the practice. And, when asked about this question, Mexico City Mayor Miguel Ángel Mancera, a member of the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), offered a vague answer, suggesting that the courts will have to decide whether
the law applies to bullfighting. "This discussion has not taken place, and it is my understanding that [this law] is intended to address a different kind of mistreatment," said Mancera. "Nevertheless, we have to examine the motives, and this is where the interpretation of the law comes into play."

Mancera’s noncommittal stance is understandable, since Mexico City has one of the largest venues for bullfighting in the country, the monumental Plaza de Toros, with a capacity of more than 41,000 spectators.

While Mexico City’s law leaves bullfighting in a gray area, recent legislation in other cities and states contained more specific language banning the practice. The northern state of Sonora set a precedent by becoming the first state to ban bullfighting in all communities within its borders. The initiative, presented by PVEM legislator Vernon Pérez Rubio Artee, received strong support from animal-rights organizations, including Pata de Perro and Comunidad Animalera Trabajando (COAT).

"The measure also stipulates a number of regulations regarding the possession of pets and sanctions for those who abuse a wide range of animal species," said the Mexico City daily newspaper Excélsior.

Even though there is no statewide ban in Veracruz state, five municipalities have taken action this year to ban bullfighting through animal-protection legislation. The list includes two major cities, the state capital of Xalapa and the city of Veracruz, the state’s largest city, and Boca del Río, another major metropolitan area. The two other communities to ban bullfighting are the mountain communities of Fortín de las Flores and Teocelo.

Animal-rights groups also contributed to the changes in Veracruz in mid-June. The law, which comprises 110 clauses, deals with a broad range of aspects dealing with humane treatment of animals, from a prohibition on cock- and dogfights to restrictions on circuses and a ban on the use of horses and mules to haul goods inside the city limits. "The new law is very complete, establishing clear regulations in a number of areas," said Mayor Carolina Gudiño Corro, a member of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

As was the case in Sonora, animal-rights groups provided significant input. "We want to thank and congratulate ... the members of the different animal-protection groups in the city of Veracruz who participated extensively in drafting the new city regulations on the care and protection of animals," said Gudiño Corro.

In late June, the community of Tangancícuaro became the first of the 113 entities in Michoacán state to ban bullfighting. The community of about 30,000 inhabitants is in the northern end of the state, near the city of Zamora. Similar to its role in other places that have banned bullfighting, the PVEM—led by Mayor Gustavo Tzintzun—was important in promoting the change, which prohibits organizing any form of bullfighting and circus events.

**Animal-rights advocates seek nationwide ban on bullfighting**

Proponents of a ban have made no secret of their desire to extend the ban to all of Mexico and are using language from a proposed UN Universal Declaration on Animal Welfare (UDAW) to make their case. "The adoption of the UDAW by the UN would establish the well-being of animals as an international issue, providing references to governments that want to improve laws dealing with
animal rights," Alfredo Alcalá Montaño wrote in the Voz Ciudadana column in the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio.

Alcalá said global sentiment to promote animal protection could be akin to the increasing awareness around the world to protect the environment. "Fortunately, one of the rights that has gained ground in public debate in recent years is the right to a healthy environment," said the opinion piece. "And this includes respect for all living beings that form part of our ecosystem."

Citizens in other states, including Colima, Durango, and Tabasco, have expressed interest in promoting animal-protection laws that would include a ban on bullfighting. "We are demonstrating our rejection of bullfights because they are an expression of cruelty and torture of defenseless animals," said Gabriel Martínez, who organized a protest through the capital city of Colima at the end of June, along with other members of the Movimiento Antitaurino.

Martínez said bullfights only serve to bring out feelings of aggression among the citizenry. "Specialists have demonstrated that children and youth who are exposed to bullfights at a young age tend to express this aggression against others as adults," he said.

In Tabasco, a group of citizens marched to the state legislature in Villahermosa carrying placards that read, "No to circus animals, No to cockfights, No to bullfights, and Yes to protection of animals." The demonstrators demanded that the state legislature resume debate on the Reglamento de Control Canino, an animal-protection initiative that has been frozen for almost 10 years.

**Bullfight proponents seek to protect "cultural patrimony"**

But proponents of bullfighting are also pushing for a national initiative that would declare the practice part of Mexico’s cultural patrimony. In Ciudad Valles in San Luis Potosí, citizen Rosa Lucía Cervantes Zúñiga has launched a campaign to urge the state legislature to reject proposals to prohibit bullfighting. "I believe that the fiesta brava represents tradition, culture, and art," Cervantes Zúñiga told Milenio. "Additionally, the legislature should be addressing more important issues such as punishing the mayors and officials who become wealthy at the expense of the public."

Others agree with the argument that a double standard exists in society if one considers the treatment of animals used to bring food to the table. "[Opponents] of bullfighting describe the bulls as 'living beings that do not deserve to suffer,'" the anonymous author of the Desde el Tendido Taurino column wrote in Milenio. "But have they ever taken time to consider the manner in which calves, hogs, goats, and chickens are killed? And have they ever examined the manner in which municipal pounds treat the street dogs that have been captured? Only when we have attained zero mistreatment of animals in these situations can we discuss bullfights."

Still, the strongest argument for those who support the continuation of bullfights is preserving what they consider Mexico’s cultural patrimony. And half a dozen states—Aguascalientes, Hidalgo, Querétaro, Puebla, Guanajuato, and Zacatecas—have passed resolutions declaring bullfighting an important part of their cultural patrimony. The common denominator for all of these states is that they all have large bullfighting arenas.

"I hope we can make this a national initiative," Aguascalientes Gov. Carlos Lozano, a member of the PRI, told reporters a day after neighboring Guanajuato announced its decision. "I am very pleased that Guanajuato is determined to protect the fiesta brava. And I am aware that many other state and local governments are on the same page. We have to protect this important national tradition."
Authorities in Guanajuato, which is led by Gov. Miguel Márquez, a member of the center-right Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), cited economic development and tourism as another reason to preserve the tradition. A communiqué from the state government said bullfighting has benefited the state for 500 years, providing employment for cattle breeders, artisans, retailers, and workers in the tourism and services industries.

"Bullfighting is not only an art but a source of income for thousands of citizens," said local bullfighter Domingo Sánchez, who participated in a rally to preserve the tradition and counter efforts from the PVEM to ban the practice. "Additionally, Guanajuato is the country’s second-largest state for bull-breeding facilities."

But the sentiment about bullfighting is mixed in Guanajuato. While the governor received support from Roman Catholic Bishop Benjamín Castillo Plascencia of Celaya and people involved in bullfighting, dozens of protestors made their opposition known at a demonstration in the streets surrounding the Plaza de la Luz bullfighting arena in León.

In Zacatecas, the state legislature approved a resolution by an overwhelming vote of 21-2 not only to protect bullfighting but also to require the state administration to promote and preserve the practice as a popular tradition.

"This activity represents a permanent link to our past and an important symbol for our citizens of Zacatecas, who recognize its historical value," said the initiative approved by the legislature.

However, the sentiment was not unanimous among Zacatecas citizens, who organized a protest attended by dozens of demonstrators on the day that the legislature approved its decision. "These types of declarations are a step backward," said Lupita Tapia, president of the civic association El Muro Zacatecas, one of five organizations that participated in the demonstration. "This is the opposite of the steps that the Federal District, Colima, and Veracruz have taken, which is to penalize the mistreatment of animals."

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