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Former Michoacán Interim Governor Arrested on Charges of Colluding with Drug Cartel

by Carlos Navarro

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In April 2013, Jesús Reyna assumed the post of interim governor of the state of Michoacán while Gov. Fausto Vallejo recovered from an extended illness. Reyna, who had been serving as Vallejo’s government secretary, took the reins of government as violent clashes between the Caballeros Templarios (Knights Templar) drug cartel and self-defense groups were escalating (SourceMex, May 29, 2013). While Reyna, a member of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), publicly spoke of the need to mediate a truce between the two sides, widespread reports surfaced that the interim governor was actually in collusion with the drug cartel.

According to the allegations, which came from the self-defense groups and members of opposition parties, Reyna had taken direct actions to protect the Caballeros Templarios. The interim governor is said to have met at least three times with leaders of the group, including Nazario Moreno González, who was killed by Mexican armed forces earlier this year (SourceMex, April 2, 2014), and Servando "La Tuta" Gómez Martínez, the only top cartel leader who remains at large.

Sen. Luisa María Calderón, a member of the opposition Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), first brought attention to a meeting between the cartel leaders and several prominent Michoacán politicians, including Reyna, former federal deputy José Trinidad Martínez Pasalagua, and former Tepalcatepec mayor Guillermo Valencia, during the gubernatorial campaign in 2011.

A video surfaced subsequently showing a man who looked like Reyna at a meeting with Gómez Martínez in 2011. Even though the video was not clear enough to conclusively identify the interim governor as one of the participants in the meeting with the cartel leader, the image of Martínez Pasalagua was quite clear. Martínez Pasalagua—who was detained and summoned to testify before the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR)—confirmed that Reyna was in the video.

The evidence was sufficient for the PGR to order Reyna’s arrest in April 2014. The PRI politician remains under house arrest pending the filing of full charges. This legal procedure is known in Mexico as arraigo.

Martínez Pasalagua, who is also a leader for la Coordinación de Trabajadores Transportistas de Michoacán, said on a radio interview that he was forced against his will to attend the meeting with the Caballeros Templarios. The meeting, he said, was intended for the cartel leaders to negotiate the cartel’s support for PRI candidates in the region known as Tierra Caliente in Michoacán during the 2011 election. "[The cartel leaders] wanted to pass on the political positions that they wanted expressed during the elections for deputies and mayors," Martínez Pasalagua said in an interview on Radio Fórmula.

The PRI was the victor in the 2011 elections, narrowly winning the gubernatorial race but scoring decisive victories in state legislative and mayoral races. The election was marred by allegations that drug cartels influenced the results (SourceMex, Nov. 16, 2011).
"In the state of Michoacán, the rule of law does not exist," José Manuel Mireles, a leader of one of the self-defense groups, said in a radio interview. "The interim governor is one of the Templars, [and] many of the municipal presidents and municipal police forces in the state, the state police force, and the public prosecutors are part of organized crime."

Observers point out, however, that the Caballeros Templarios and La Familia cartels have corrupted politicians of all the major parties, including former governors Lázaro Cárdenas Batel and Leonel Godoy of the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD). "Servando Gómez has been the principal operator of organized crime in Michoacán, always with the support of Godoy Rangel, Jesús Reyna García, and PRI Sen. José Ascensión Orihuela Bárcenas, who has frequently had aspirations of becoming the state’s governor," columnist Matías Pascal wrote in the daily newspaper Unomásuno.

**Apatzingán mayor also arrested**

In addition to Reyna, authorities recently detained other prominent politicians from the Tierra Caliente region, including Apatzingán Mayor Uriel Chávez Mendoza. The mayor was accused of pressuring local city councilors and other officials to turn over 20,000 pesos (US$1,100) in extortion fees each month to the Caballeros Templarios. Federal authorities intervened following complaints from Apatzingán councilors Ramón Santoyo Gallegos, José Martín Gómez Ramírez, and Ricardo Reyna Martínez. In testimony to federal prosecutors on March 6, the councilors said Chávez Mendoza forced all the council members to attend a meeting in the village of Las Bateas, where cartel members threatened them unless they agreed to pay the monthly fees.

A coalition of self-defense groups in Michoacán has also made multiple complaints against Chávez Mendoza, alleging that the mayor developed links to the Caballeros Templarios and allowed the criminal organization to take control of the municipal police force to carry out some of its illegal activities.

The administration hopes that the arrests of Reyna and Chávez Mendoza will convince the self-defense groups to disarm and allow police to take over law-enforcement duties in the state. In early April, Alfredo Castillo—appointed by the administration to oversee federal security efforts in Michoacán—said he expected the self-defense groups to give up their arms in the next several weeks.

Castillo’s comments came on the same day that Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong urged the self-defense militias to give up their arms. "What I would tell them is to let authorities do their jobs," said Osorio.

The interior secretary left open the possibility that the self-defense groups could assist authorities. "The groups that want to help will be allowed to do so, and those that do not want to assist can return to their daily activities," he said.

The self-defense groups, however, are reluctant to give up their arms. "They will try to take our weapons away, but when they see that the people are united in support of their community defenders, they are not going to disarm us," Mireles said in early April.

Other community groups have, however, agreed to work with the government under a structure that will allow them to remain in place but under the supervision of federal authorities. "The
government has given us 15 days to surrender our assault weapons," said Estanislao Beltrán. "[In turn], we will be allowed to form a group of community police that will be institutionalized."

Mireles had his own demand for the government: the nearly 100 militia members that have been detained during recent operations to dismantle the self-defense groups.

Recent complaints about complicity between elected officials and Michoacán-based criminal organizations have spilled over to neighboring Guerrero state. Authorities recently detained Feliciano Álvarez Mesino, mayor of Cuetzala del Progreso in Guerrero state, for colluding with a faction of La Familia Michoacana that has operated in Guerrero. Tomás Cerón, director of the Agencia de Investigación Criminal (AIC), said Álvarez Mesino, a member of the PRD, has had close connections with La Familia leader Froylán Barrera Guzmán since 2013. Barrera Guzmán and his associates have carried out at least 15 kidnappings in Cuetzala and nearby communities.

**Fighting corruption**

The Peña Nieto government’s recent crackdown is just the latest effort to combat the drug-trafficking organizations by prosecuting the politicians who enable organized crime. Interim Governor Reyna is just the latest in the list of chief executives who have been implicated or accused of complicity with criminal organizations. Others include Flavio Romero de Velasco of Jalisco ([SourceMex, Feb. 4, 1998]), Sergio Estrada Cajigal of Morelos ([SourceMex, April 21, 2004]), Mario Villanueva Madrid of Quintana Roo ([SourceMex, July 11, 2007]), and Tomás Yarrington Ruvalcaba of Tamaulipas ([SourceMex, May 30, 2012]).

Mayors have also been connected directly or indirectly to organized crime. The most prominent case involved 10 mayors of Michoacán, who were taken into custody as part of a crackdown ordered by then President Felipe Calderón ([SourceMex, May 27, 2009, Aug. 19, 2009, and Sept. 29, 2010]). In other instances, an individual mayor has been accused of complicity with drug traffickers, including Rubén Gil Campos of Izucar de Matamoros in Puebla state ([SourceMex, April 9, 2008]).

Sometimes, the allegations have centered on a relative of a mayor, who would presumably have access or privileges not available to others. This was the case with Jonás Larrazabal, brother of former Monterrey mayor Fernando Larrazabal ([SourceMex, Aug. 31, 2011]). And there have been times when a mayor has been threatened for not cooperating with the criminal organizations, which was the case with José Reyes Ferriz in Ciudad Juárez ([SourceMex, Feb. 25, 2009]).

While addressing corruption was part of ex-President Calderón’s campaign against drug trafficking, some analysts believe this effort will be even stronger during the Peña Nieto government. "The expectations are that a single arrest should not be viewed in isolation but as an example to other politicians who become involved in these types of abuse of power," said Javier Oliva Posada, an expert in political science at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM).

"What this strategy intends to demonstrate is that organized crime cannot exist without the support of local authorities," Oliva Posada said in an interview with BBC Mundo.

Oliva suggested, however, that simple vigilance is not sufficient to address the problem. "What this government lacks is a strategy to promote in-depth measures to restructure local governments," said the UNAM expert. "There must be some actions to act decisively in the areas where there is more violence."
Oliva pointed out that the cartels have also recently changed in the way they attempt to influence governments. In Michoacán, for example, the Caballeros Templarios tried to dictate who could run for office in the area under their control. A federal investigation, he said, indicated that the cartel was behind the murders of mayors in the area.

Oliva said the same type of tactics have been used by the Zetas and the Gulf cartel in elections in Tamaulipas and the Sinaloa cartel in Durango.

The administration and Congress are concerned that recent electoral reforms might give the drug cartels an opportunity to influence the election outside the traditional political structure. In mid-April, legislators from the three major parties drafted a new set of rules allowing the electoral watchdog (Instituto Nacional Electoral, INE) to vet anyone seeking office as an independent. Under electoral reforms approved by Congress in 2011, candidates for most offices no longer have to be affiliated with a political party (SourceMex, Nov. 2, 2011, and July 17, 2013). The new rules, which will examine the origin of campaign donations, were drafted by Sens. Emilio Gamboa of the PRI, Miguel Barbosa of the PRD, Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB) official Felipe Solís Acero, and presidential counsel Humberto Castillejos.

Along with the attempt to limit the influence of drug cartels in the election, the administration is also seeking to get a better handle on the finances of the criminal organizations. At a meeting in Washington in mid-April, Finance Secretary Luis Videgaray said the Peña Nieto government would begin to rely more directly on information from the UN and from the US Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). "This means that from now on ... any persons or companies that appear on the OFAC or UN lists will be prevented from conducting transactions with a bank, securities exchange, or any institution in the financial system regulated by the Secretaria de Hacienda," Videgaray told reporters. [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on May 1, 2014, reported at 13.06 pesos per US$1.00.]

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