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Scandal Forces Michoacán Gov. Fausto Vallejo to Resign

by Carlos Navarro
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The saga of corrupt governments in the Michoacán statehouse took another interesting twist when Gov. Fausto Vallejo was forced to resign after the release of several photographs of his son meeting with notorious drug trafficker Servando Gómez Martínez, also known as La Tuta. The compromising pictures, which showed Rodrigo Vallejo posing with the leader of the Caballeros Templarios (Knights Templar), did not implicate Vallejo directly but added to the governor's credibility problems. The release of the photos came just weeks after Vallejo's top aide, and former interim governor, Jesús Reyna García, was arrested on charges of collusion with the Caballeros Templarios.

Shortly after the photographs of Rodrigo Vallejo and La Tuta were released on social media, the governor traveled to Mexico City to submit his resignation directly to President Enrique Peña Nieto before presenting the decision formally to the Michoacán state legislature. The official explanation offered to the public was that Vallejo resigned because of health reasons. The excuse was plausible, as Vallejo—who won the gubernatorial election by a very narrow margin in November 2011 (SourceMex, Nov. 16, 2011)—took a leave of absence on four separate occasions because of health problems. The latest leave, in 2013, lasted for about six months. He resumed his post in October 2013 and remained in office until his resignation in June.

Although there was no indication that Vallejo colluded with drug cartels, evidence surfaced that one of his top aides, government secretary Reyna García, had direct dealings with the Caballeros Templarios. Reyna García, who was appointed interim governor during Vallejo's last leave of absence in April 2013, was subsequently arrested for his dealings with La Tuta and other leaders of the Caballeros Templarios (SourceMex, April 30, 2014).

Some analysts suggested that Vallejo, who once served as mayor of Morelia, bore major responsibility in the Reyna case. "If Fausto was unaware of Reyna's illicit activities, then he was an incompetent governor," columnist Martín Moreno wrote in the daily newspaper Excélsior. "if he knew about these activities, then he was an accomplice. Either way, Vallejo loses."

Picture shows governor's son posing with cartel leader

Others suggested that Vallejo must have known about the activities of Reyna and those of his son Rodrigo. "It is not possible that Vallejo was unaware that two people who were closest to him—his youngest son Rodrigo Vallejo and his right-hand man Jesús Reyna García—had a close relationship with the Caballeros Templarios," columnist Alejandro Cacho wrote in the daily business newspaper El Financiero.

Some observers said the involvement of Rodrigo, commonly known as El Gerber, with the Caballeros Templarios was especially troubling for the Peña Nieto government. Shortly after the photos began to circulate through social media, the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) announced a major investigation in the case.
"The word was that anyone who had problems with police—whether they belonged to highway patrols or were part of a state or municipal body—could call El Gerber, and the situation would be fixed," a Morelia police officer told Excélsior. "It didn’t matter whether you were transporting weapons or whether you were driving a stolen car, the officers were all working for 'The Company,' which was the Caballeros Templarios."

Some indications are that Vallejo was aware of the existence of the photographs of his son and La Tuta before they were released on social media. This prompted the governor to attempt damage control before the pictures went public. "In an effort to soften the blow, Vallejo said in an interview that there were no criminals in his family," said José Gil Olmos, a correspondent and columnist for the weekly news magazine Proceso. "In fact, he revealed in the interview that one of his sons had been kidnapped by members of organized crime."

"The governor’s intention was evident," said Moreno. "He wanted to make a statement before the compromising photo was circulated and at least try to explain why Rodrigo was posing with La Tuta."

Despite all the problems facing Vallejo, the governor insisted during his annual state-of-the-state address in February of this year that he would not resign his post and would seek the support and endorsement of the Peña Nieto government.

Peña Nieto had no choice but to accept Vallejo’s resignation, as the governor’s situation created problems for a federal administration seeking to gain credibility in a state that has been under the control of organized crime, particularly the Caballeros Templarios and La Familia Michoacana. Some residents have fought back, forming their own militias to fight the Caballeros Templarios, and this has put those residents in conflict with federal authorities, who believe it is their responsibility to fight the criminal organizations (SourceMex, May 29, 2013, and Jan. 22, 2014).

Furthermore, Gómez Martínez remains a top target for the federal government, which has already killed other top leaders of the Caballeros Templarios, Nazario Moreno González and Enrique Plancarte Solís, earlier this year (SourceMex, April 2, 2014).

**Legislature appoints academic as interim governor**

Shortly after Vallejo’s resignation, the Michoacán state legislature elected Salvador Jara Guerrero as interim governor through 2015. Jara, who has no political experience, left his post as rector of the Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo to accept the job.

Jara promised to strengthen the state finances and to restore the confidence of citizens in the state government and immediately clean house. One of his first actions was to fire most of Vallejo’s collaborators and appoint new cabinet secretaries.

The appointment of an outsider to the post was a clear effort by the state legislature to restore confidence in the governor’s office. This was evident in statements from opposition politicians. "I believe he is an honest individual, and we are certain that he is a person who has no connections to organized crime," Jesús Zambrano Grijalva, national president of the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), told Excélsior.

Some analysts point out, however, that the true center of power in Michoacán lies in the federal government, namely Alfredo Castillo Cervantes, the special commissioner that Peña Nieto named to
head the peace efforts in Michoacán in January of this year. "Vallejo was ousted last January, when the central government named Alfredo Castillo to his post," said Moreno. "At this point, we knew who would really run the state."

Castillo was responsible for launching the investigation that eventually led to Reyna’s arrest.

**Cartel has continued illegal sales of iron ore**

The Caballeros Templarios have continued with some of their major operations, including the sale of illegally mined iron ore to China *(SourceMex, Oct. 20, 2010)*, even with the death of top leaders Moreno González and Plancarte Solís. The iron-ore-smuggling operations have generally been thought to be the domain of Gómez Martínez.

Despite their best efforts, federal authorities have been unable to stop the sale of the illegally mined ore to buyers in China during the past several years. The government scored a rare victory in April, when authorities seized the Chinese flagship Jian Hua, which was carrying a huge cargo of illegally extracted iron ore. The shipment, originally loaded piecemeal at the port of Lázaro Cárdenas in Michoacán, was to be transferred to a ship further up the coast in the port of Manzanillo in Colima state.

Observers said the move by the federal government for control of the port of Lázaro Cárdenas last November *(SourceMex, Nov. 6, 2013)* has made it more difficult for the Caballeros Templarios to conduct their normal operations at the site, forcing them to shift more of their operations to Manzanillo.

Castillo said authorities were able to intercept the shipment because of an anonymous tip. "Through the verification process used for transport of goods designated for foreign trade, we were able to inspect the cargo on the Jian Hua, which was carrying more than 68,750 tons of iron ore worth tens of millions of pesos," said Castillo.

"The investigations by commissioner Castillo revealed that the Chinese buyers were paying Servando Gómez Martínez, La Tuta, about US$11 per ton for the minerals extracted from mines controlled by the cartel or stolen from other sites," journalist and columnist Joaquín López-Dóriga wrote in the daily newspaper Milenio. That price is far below the true price of iron ore, which recently fetched as much as US$100 per ton on international markets.

The ship’s crew presented authorities with a permit issued by the Secretaría de Economía (SE) for a mine in Michoacán, but officials confirmed that the mine mentioned in the document was not even active."

After the origin of the iron ore was determined, the Sistema de Administración Tributaria (SAT), a unit of the Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público (SHCP), issued a temporary seizure order for the iron ore in Manzanillo, and the Mexican Navy secured the vessel and crew.

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