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New Details Emerge of Political-Criminal Links in Guerrero

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The federal government and opposition parties are working to expunge the influence of criminal organizations from the electoral and political process, but the problems could be insurmountable. A proposed plan by legislators to create the national anti-corruption system (Sistema Nacional Anticorrupción) to eliminate the influence of drug-trafficking organizations has come at a time of political crisis in Guerrero state—exposing that very collaboration between criminal organizations and elected officials (SourceMex, Oct. 15, 2014).

The Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) recently confirmed reports that former Iguala mayor José Luis Abarca and his wife María de los Ángeles Pineda Villa were the intellectual authors of the disappearance and suspected murder of 43 students from a teachers college (Escuela Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa Raúl Isidro Burgos). Abarca ordered a police force infiltrated by the criminal organization Guerreros Unidos to intercept and attack the students to prevent them from disrupting a speech and party at the Plaza de las Tres Garantías that the mayor’s wife was hosting. The party was organized to celebrate Pineda’s achievements as the director of the Iguala office of the federal social-assistance program Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (DIF).

"The presence on that night of Sept. 26 of students from Normal Rural Raúl Isidro Burgos de Ayotzinapa created a perception among municipal police that these youth were going to disrupt the celebration. At this point, the order was given that the students be prevented from reaching the site of the event," said the daily newspaper Excélsior.

The attack killed six people, injured another 20, and resulted in the disappearance of the 43 students. Demonstrations around Mexico have demanded the safe return of the students, but the widespread belief is that the students were murdered and buried in mass graves. As of late October, authorities had detained 56 people in connection with the incident but were no closer to determining the whereabouts of the students or their remains.

First Lady called the shots

Sidronio Casarrubias Salgado, a leader of Guerreros Unidos in Iguala who is now in federal custody, told authorities that Pineda had coordinated the group’s illegal activities from the municipal headquarters along with her husband mayor Abarca and Felipe Flores Velázquez, who was the municipal secretary for public safety.

Pineda and her brother Salomón Pineda Villa were part of a family that was linked to some of Mexico’s most violent criminal organizations, including the Beltrán Leyva cartel and the Cartel del Pacífico or Sinaloa cartel, led by Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán Loera. The Sinaloa cartel remains one of the strongest criminal organizations in Mexico even though Chapo Guzmán was arrested earlier this year (SourceMex, Feb. 26, 2014).

When the Beltrán Leyva organization broke from the Cartel del Pacífico, the Pineda Villa family remained with the organization led by Arturo and Héctor Beltrán Leyva, whose stronghold was in Morelos, México, and Guerrero states.

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"[María de los Ángeles Pineda] was directly related to two of the top financial operators of the group led by Arturo Beltrán Leyva," Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam said in a press conference on Oct. 22.

Murillo offered details of how Abarca paid members of the criminal organization to perform a variety of services. "This shadowy group, according to statements by people who have been detained by them and comments of leaders of the organization, was receiving about 2 to 3 million pesos (US$148,000 to US$223,000) regularly," Murillo Karam told reporters.

The PGR said the relationship between Abarca and Guerreros Unidos is just the tip of the iceberg regarding the extreme corruption in Guerrero state. Murillo told reporters that criminal organizations "wove a network of complicity" with several municipal governments and police departments in Guerrero.

The trend has caused major concerns for political parties, which appear to have little control of these elected officials. "The incident with the students confirms a cruel reality in our country, that the weakest link in the chain of government is found at the municipal level," said Carlos Navarrete, president of the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD). "Criminal organizations often take over territories, infiltrate the police force and municipal departments, and promote violence in hundreds of communities all over the country, no matter which party is in charge."

**Guerrero governor Aguirre resigns under pressure**

The PGR questioned the leadership of Gov. Ángel Aguirre, who either failed to take action or looked the other way as the criminal organizations became integrated with local government structures. The criticisms against Aguirre grew so strong that the governor, a member of the PRD, submitted his resignation on Oct. 24.

In late September, in the aftermath of the Iguala incident, Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong requested that Aguirre monitor Abarca’s movements to make sure that the Iguala mayor did not go into hiding. "I asked him to keep an eye on [Abarca], to not let him go," Osorio Chong said in a radio interview. "It was important, given what had occurred just a day and a half earlier, that vigilance be doubled, that he not be allowed to escape."

There is some speculation that Aguirre might have looked the other way while Abarca went into hiding, which increased the pressure for him to resign. Even as he was leaving the post, Aguirre defended his handling of the recent violence in Guerrero. He pointed out that he had requested federal assistance early, launched searches for the students and the culprits, and shared key intelligence with federal officials. "I said publicly that if my removal from this position would help resolve this matter, I would not oppose the move," Aguirre said in brief prepared comments. The governor said he hoped his resignation would serve to foster a political climate that would allow authorities to solve the case of the missing students and address the violence in Guerrero. "I am convinced this is a responsible decision," said Aguirre.

Some critics considered Aguirre’s resignation a late response. "The departure of the state executive and the explanations offered by the attorney general are actions that are insufficient and came too late," the daily newspaper La Jornada said in an editorial published on Oct. 24. "The responses of the state and federal governments [since the day after the incident] are evidence of the huge divide..."
between the formal institutions of the country and the demands of a society that is under siege and is exasperated."

"The charges against a former mayor and removal of a governor from his post satisfy only part of the demands of the national protest movement," added La Jornada. "And these are partial responses, as the mayor remains at large, and authorities have not initiated a judicial investigation to determine the possible responsibility of the governor not only in this case but in other municipalities [in the state] where a public entity is serving a criminal organization."

Others agreed that Aguirre’s resignation does little to solve the case. "[The fall of the governor] does not resolve the obvious question: the whereabouts of the 43 students and the capture of those responsible for the murder of six people (three of them students)," columnist Carlos Marín wrote in the daily newspaper Milenio.

"Now that Aguirre is gone, who will be held accountable for the hours, days, and weeks that transpire without news of the 43 students?" columnist Yuriria Sierra wrote in Excélsior. "Now that Abarca and his wife María de los Ángeles have been identified as the intellectual authors of the attack against the students, who are we going to ask to determine their whereabouts? Who are we going to ask about the identities of the more than 200 bodies that have been found in mass graves? With the departure of Aguirre, the federal government is going to have to investigate and be held accountable."

The Guerrero state legislature appointed Rogelio Ortega Martínez as interim governor to serve until 2015, when voters will select a new governor. Ortega Martínez, a professor at the Universidad Autónoma de Guerrero, immediately offered to enter into a dialogue with students from the Normal Rural Raúl Isidro Burgos and pledged to allow social protests and to resolve the case of the 43 missing students. "No one can govern without the support the people," said Ortega, who was ratified by a vote of 39-6 in the Guerrero state legislature.

**How to stop influence of organized crime in elections, government**

In the midst of the crisis, some political observers are asking whether ongoing violence will affect voter turnout for elections, not only in Guerrero but also in Michoacán, Sonora, and Nuevo León, all of which will elect a new governor on June 7 as well as new members of the state legislature and new mayors. Five other states have gubernatorial elections scheduled next year, and eight others will hold state legislative and mayoral elections. In addition, the entire country will vote directly for 300 new members of the Chamber of Deputies, while another 200 seats will be allocated based on the proportion of the vote that each party receives.

Electoral officials said they are not worried that violence and the general climate of insecurity will affect the elections. José Alejandro Luna Ramos, president of the electoral court (Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federación, TEPJF), acknowledged that violence has been a concern for years, but he noted that insecurity has generally not disrupted the electoral process.

A more important question is whether anything can be done to diminish the influence of criminal organizations in government. In recent years, electoral authorities have embarked on several efforts to keep drug money out of the electoral campaigns (SourceMex, Feb. 18, 2009). The concern is that the money donated by criminal organizations during the campaign might buy them influence with elected officials. Some observers say the problem extends beyond individual candidates and affects regional and state party organizations.
"The problem is the penetration of the drug cartels in the parties and not so much the concerns about election-day violence," former electoral counselor María Marván said in an interview with Milenio. "The 2012 elections offered evidence that the drug cartels were not interested in disrupting the vote."

Others agreed that drug cartels are more interested in ensuring that they can influence policy through a proxy politician. "The narco-state is one of the most recent developments, where criminal organizations and politicians are the same," columnist José Gil Olmos wrote in the weekly news magazine Proceso. "We are not talking about a case of infiltration and corruption. Rather this is symbiosis where the criminal and the politician are one and the same."

"The formation of the narco-state is very clear in Michoacán and Guerrero, where former governors Ángel Aguirre Rivero and Fausto Vallejo were accused of receiving campaign contributions from these organizations," said Olmos. "They later allowed these bands of criminals to govern and gain control of certain territories." Vallejo, like Aguirre, was forced to resign under a dark cloud earlier this year (SourceMex, July 2, 2014). Vallejo's aide Jesús Reyna, who served as interim governor, was arrested in April on charges of colluding with the Caballeros Templarios criminal organization (SourceMex, April 30, 2014)

Olmos said the fusion between politicians and drug cartels has been building for some time, involving politicians of all political affiliations. This includes the recent cases of ex-governors Mario Villanueva Madrid of Quintana Roo (SourceMex, July 11, 2007), Tomás Yarrington of Tamaulipas (SourceMex, May 30, 2012), Sergio Estrada Cajigal of Morelos (SourceMex, April 21, 2004), Enrique Álvarez del Castillo of Jalisco, and Víctor Manuel Tinoco of Michoacán.

Military leaders such as Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo, Ricardo Escorcia, Cuauhtémoc Antúnez Pérez, and Juan Manuel Rico Gámez have also been corrupted by criminal organizations, as have some members of Congress like PRD Deputy César Godoy Toscano, who remains at large.

Olmos said corruption has affected mayors from several medium-sized cities in Mexico, primarily in Guerrero and Michoacán. These mayors are affiliated with all the major parties: the PRD, the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM), and the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN).

The problem of corrupt municipal leaders was on the agenda of ex-President Felipe Calderón, who attempted to prosecute 10 mayors and dozens of public officials in Michoacán state accused of collaborating with La Familia drug cartel (SourceMex, May 27, 2009, and Aug. 19, 2009), but most of those arrested were released on a technicality (SourceMex, Oct. 31, 2012).

The scandals have prompted the administration of President Enrique Peña Nieto and leaders of opposition parties to offer new proposals to try to curb the influence of criminal organizations ahead of the 2015 elections. In early October, Interior Secretary Osorio Chong and interim PAN president Ricardo Anaya met to discuss a proposal to create an anti-corruption system that would obligate all political parties to closely vet every candidate running for office

"Our commitment is to protect the electoral process against any intervention of organized crime," said Anaya. "The parties are going to have to take charge of examining every single candidate who runs under their banner. This is the time for prevention, so that we don’t have to regret situations like those that occurred in Iguala in Guerrero state."
Eduardo Bohórquez, director of Transparencia Mexicana, endorsed the PAN proposal because it goes further than an original plan presented by the Peña Nieto administration and incorporates many of the recommendations made by his organization.

Bohórquez said the advantage of the PAN proposal is that several institutions, including each political party, would work together to combat corruption. This is preferable to leaving the task to a single entity or individual. "This creates a more complete system," said the leader of Transparencia Mexicana, the Mexican affiliate of the international organization Transparency International (TI).

Other experts also endorsed the plan. "A major epidemic cannot be addressed with a single government agency or with an aspirin," journalist Ricardo Alemán wrote in his online news site La Otra Opinión.

Bohórquez cautioned, however, that it would take a long time to construct a solid anti-corruption system and that results might not be evident after the 2015 election. [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Oct. 29, 2014, reported at 13.47 pesos per US$1.00.]

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