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Guerrero Tragedy Reopens Debate on Legalizing Drug Production

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The high-profile disappearance of 43 students and the murder of six people in Iguala, Guerrero state, in September has opened up debate on two issues. The first is whether Mexico should relax laws governing the consumption and production of marijuana and poppy plants. The second question centers on the future of the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), particularly the faction known as Los Chuchos, which has led the party for the past several years. On Nov. 4, federal police arrested former Iguala mayor José Luis Abarca, a member of the PRD, and his wife María de los Ángeles Pineda in Mexico City. The pair, who went into hiding in the aftermath of the Iguala incident, was suspected of having orchestrated the attacks on students (SourceMex, Oct. 15, 2014, and Oct. 29, 2014). The mayor and his wife were arrested while hiding out in an apparently abandoned house in the working-class borough of Iztapalapa in Mexico City.

The Guerrero incident galvanized a broad range of citizen groups to hold demonstrations around the country to demand that President Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration hold an exhaustive investigation to determine the fate of the students. Some demonstrators were holding on to faint hopes that the 43 students from the teachers college (Escuela Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa Raúl Isidro Burgos) in Guerrero state were alive. There were broad suspicions, however, that the students were murdered and buried in clandestine graves.

Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam offered further information of the fate of the students in a press conference on Nov. 7. The attorney general revealed that authorities had detained three members of the Guerreros Unidos cartel directly responsible for the murders of the 43 students. In a confession, the three detainees said Iguala police arrested the students and then turned them over to the criminal organization, which executed them. Authorities have recovered what they believe are charred remains, which were sent to specialists in Austria for testing.

"The Peña Nieto government will not be able to explain what happened to the 43 students without clarifying the connections between the criminal organizations and politicians in the state," Jorge Carrasco Araizaga wrote in the weekly news magazine Proceso. "Never before has there been such an opportunity to reveal the political, law-enforcement, business, and social structure that supported Abarca inside and outside Guerrero."

Seeking to ease rules on marijuana consumption

While authorities deal with the problem at hand, some political commentators are suggesting that Mexico look at the big picture and some of the factors that promote violence, including the battle among criminal organizations to control drug production and sales. Mexico has already made some small efforts in this area, including an initiative approved by the Congress in 2009 that decriminalized possession of a small amount of marijuana and other narcotics (SourceMex, Aug. 26, 2009). However, efforts to further ease restrictions have not made much progress (SourceMex, Aug. 11, 2010, Sept. 4, 2013, and March 5, 2014).
There seems to be some momentum building on further efforts to ease penalties for consumption. Manuel Mondragón y Kalb, director of the Comisión Nacional contra las Adicciones (CONADIC), recently told participants at a conference on drug consumption that Mexico could not afford to distance itself from the discussions on legalizing marijuana. "We are witnessing a moment in time when the issue is being significantly addressed in international circles, and this issue is being treated in such a manner that Mexico cannot separate itself from this reality. We are going to have to [join this discussion]."

Mondragón y Kalb’s comments are important because they represent a change in stance from an important person involved in efforts to treat drug addictions in Mexico. As recently as March of this year, the CONADIC leader made statements opposing any significant easing of restrictions on possession and consumption of pot because it would imply a possible conflict with policies in other countries and an impact on agriculture in Mexico. Furthermore, legalization would not affect the structure of drug-trafficking organizations, he said at that time.

Cecilia Soto, a columnist for the daily newspaper Excélsior, said there is an urgency in Mexico to consider alternative efforts to combat organized crime, including legalization. She noted that recent high-profile incidents such as an Army massacre of drug traffickers in Tlatlaya, México state, on June 30 (SourceMex, Oct. 1, 2014) and the murders of the students in Guerrero are just some examples of what is happening around the country.

"We need drastic measures to eliminate what today has become a prize and the source of conflict for criminal organizations and create an alternative of social reinsertion for the thousands of Mexicans involved in criminal activity," Soto wrote in a column dated Nov. 3, 2014.

"We need to take firm steps toward the legalization of consumption of marijuana, including measures that regulate planting and sales of the drug," said Soto. "I don’t think legalization by itself, in whatever manner is implemented, will completely end the power of the criminal organizations because they have developed many other ways to make money. But I do believe that drying up one of their principal sources of income [will have an impact]."

**Guerrero leads country in illegal poppy plantations**

Some observers see a clear connection between production and the power of the cartels. In an opinion piece in the daily newspaper El Universal, political analyst Héctor de Mauleón wrote about the growing importance of poppy production in Guerrero state, particularly the region near Iguala.

De Mauleón said US President Barack Obama sent a memo to the US Congress dated Sept. 16, 2014, just 10 days before the infamous incident in Iguala, expressing strong concerns about the high rate of poppy cultivation in Mexico. In the note, Obama described Mexico as the main source of opium derivatives entering the US. The US president also pointed out that the number of heroin confiscations along the US border with Mexico had increased by 324%.

The most recent report from UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), released in 2013, confirmed that Mexico has become one of the world’s largest sources of drugs with a cultivated area of about 12,000 hectares of marijuana and poppy. The country has also become one of the major sources of synthetic drugs, including methamphetamines, said UNODC. The report says Mexico’s drug production is now 30 times higher than that of Colombia, which was once a major source of drugs.
De Mauleón cited statistics from the US State Department that support the increasing role of Mexico as a supplier of poppy-based narcotics to the US market. In 2012, half the heroin seizures in the US occurred along the border in Mexico, said the report.

"On this side of the border, the cultivation of poppies had exploded in a spectacular manner, and the production of Mexican black tar—a product that is cheaper and less refined but more potent than white heroin—was beginning to invade the US market," said the El Universal columnist.

Guerrero produces about 98% of the poppy plants grown in Mexico, and the city of Iguala has become an important center for trafficking opium-based drugs. "The Mexican government is well-aware that the derivates from opium cultivated in Teloloapan, Arcelia, Totolapan, Coyuca de Catalán, Pungarabato, Cuetzala, among other regions, are consolidated in Iguala and from there packaged for distribution north of the border," said de Mauleón.

**Supplying the pharmaceutical industry**

Soto suggested that Mexico consider taking the same approach as India, which is to legalize poppy cultivation for medical purposes. "I came to this position after a year of wrestling with the issue," wrote Soto. "I proposed that the Mexican government legalize the planting and cultivation of poppy with the explicit purpose of producing opiate-type medications, which are produced especially because of their analgesic properties."

A further advantage, says Soto, is that Mexico could become at least a small participant in the global pharmaceuticals market.

India is the only country authorized by the UN Convention on Narcotics to produce licit opium, also known as opium gum, which is extracted directly from the bulb and used in pharmaceutical products. Nearly a dozen other countries also grow opium legally, but any products processed from their crops have to use other parts of the poppy, which results in a less pure product.

"The most important producer is India, which competes by offering lower prices than the large labs in the west," said the Excélsior columnist.

Soto’s comments came with a note of caution. "Even though the cultivation of poppies is highly regulated, there is always the risk that this activity spills over to the illegal economy," acknowledged the columnist, who pointed out that organized crime already controls illegal production in Mexico.

Soto suggested that it might not be as viable for Mexico to become a source of poppy products for the international pharmaceutical industry because global supplies are currently larger than demand. This is not the case for the Mexican market, she said, where few companies supply poppy products to the pharmaceutical market.

**A fractured PRD**

While the debate on drug legalization in Mexico might not be resolved anytime soon, the fate of the PRD could become apparent by the 2015 midterm elections. Abarca and Gov. Ángel Aguirre, both members of the center-left party, have been the targets of angry protests along with President Peña Nieto, who is a member of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Aguirre, who is said to have looked the other way upon learning of the activities of Abarca and other allegedly corrupt mayors in Guerrero, submitted his resignation in October ([SourceMex, Oct. 29, 2014](http://www.sourcemex.org/mexico-news-magazine-2014-10-29.html)).
Factions of the PRD are accusing each other of having promoted and endorsed Abarca’s candidacy, with Nueva Izquierda taking the brunt of the criticism. This faction is also known as Los Chuchos, named after longtime leaders Jesús Zambrano and Jesús Ortega.

In a Nov. 7 press conference, PRD Sen. Luis Miguel Barbosa criticized PRD president Carlos Navarrete and other members of Nueva Izquierda for their refusal to clarify the party’s role in the developments in Guerrero. Barbosa said it was Nueva Izquierda members Sen. Iris Vianey Mendoza and Lázaro Mazón who pushed hard for the party to select Abarca as the candidate for the Iguala race, despite information indicating that the candidate’s wife was a member of the family that controlled drug operations in that region. Mazón eventually became Abarca’s public-safety secretary.

Other PRD members accused Barbosa of hypocrisy, since he was the head of the Nueva Izquierda faction when Abarca was selected. "Now, faced with their need to deny the paternity of the candidacy of José Luis Abarca to the mayoral seat in Iguala, the PRD factions are attempting to distance themselves from the role they played [in Abarca’s election] in July 2011," said Carrasco Araizaga.

These same PRD factions are also distancing themselves from the campaign that brought Aguirre to power in January 2011 (SourceMex, Feb. 9, 2011), said the Proceso correspondent.

There are unanswered questions on how Abarca and Pineda remained at large for several weeks after the incident and who helped hide them. "Abarca and his wife were renting a house in the most populated borough in Mexico City," columnist Jenaro Villamil wrote in Proceso. "This borough is governed by Jesús Valencia, who was once close to former mayor Marcelo Ebrard and in recent months has joined in support of [current Mayor] Miguel Ángel Mancera."

"Before he requested a leave of absence from his post and fled Iguala, Abarca met with former PRD president Jesús Zambrano, a member of Nueva Izquierda," noted Villamil. "Zambrano acknowledged the meeting but said the purpose was not to discuss protection for the mayor but to urge him to surrender to authorities."

Still, the party is clearly worried about the impact of the Guerrero tragedy on the PRD at both the state and national level. "For several years, the PRD embraced the concept that the most important thing was to attain more votes, increase the number of legislators and state governments," Navarrete said in mid-October. "We convinced ourselves that the most important goal was to attain electoral advances and neglected to vet the candidates and monitor the performance of the governments led by the PRD."

PRD legislators have proposed a set of measures that would restore public confidence in the center-left party. Sen. Armando Ríos Piter presented the party’s proposals at a press conference, including creating a truth commission to clarify the tragedy in Guerrero, a covenant with society to fight crime and promote transparency, greater support for victims of crime, and a scheme to provide direct assistance to municipal governments. The proposal also suggests creating a national police beyond the elite unit that the Peña Nieto government presented earlier this year (SourceMex, Aug. 27, 2014).

PRD founder Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas also expressed concern about the impact of the tragedy on the party, which no doubt has damaged its reputation. "It would be absurd to suggest that this case has not affected the party's image," the PRD leader said in a brief interview in mid-October.
Cárdenas said the actual extent of political damage would not be known until the elections take place. "It is regrettable that the 43 missing students were not found alive," Cárdenas later told reporters in Tabasco, where he was attending a state address by Gov. Arturo Nuñez in early November.

The PRD is also in danger of losing some of the coalition partners that helped the party succeed in recent elections in Guerrero. The Partido del Trabajo (PT) is exploring the possibility of fielding its own candidate for the upcoming election in Iguala rather than joining in a coalition with the PRD and Movimiento Ciudadano (MC).

It is not clear who would benefit from a poor performance in the polls by the PRD. The alternative on the left, the Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena), is also tainted by the Iguala tragedy. While Morena founder Andrés Manuel López Obrador did not play a role in the selection of Abarca, he did push for hiring the mayor’s public-safety director Mazón, who supposedly carried out the orders to police to detain the students and turn them over to Guerreros Unidos.

"I do not know the former mayor," López Obrador said at a rally in Mexico City to push for a citizen referendum on energy reforms. The problem for the Morena leader is that there are photographs circulating in social media in which he is posing with Abarca and his wife.

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