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Murders, Intimidation Widespread in Mexico Ahead of June 7 Elections

by Carlos Navarro

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The Instituto Nacional Electoral (INE) is moving forward with the June 7 election despite the extraordinary level of violence that has marked the campaign, particularly in states that have experienced a great deal of turbulence in recent months. Official figures indicate that more than 83 million Mexicans are registered to vote in the election, in which voters will pick 996 officials, including 500 federal deputies, nine governors, and hundreds of mayors and state legislators. Voter distrust of the political establishment could become a factor in what some predict will be a lackluster election ([SourceMex, May 20, 2015](#)). "There is an abundance of questions and an asphyxiating mistrust of the political parties," columnist Arnaldo Kraus wrote in the daily newspaper *El Siglo de Torreón*. "Faced with this reality, voters wonder who to trust just days before the election."

If mistrust does not keep voter turnout low, then extreme violence could keep many voters from the polls. Hardly a day goes by without news that a person directly associated with the elections has been shot to death or received some threat.

Violence against candidates has also been common in past elections, including the high-profile murders of presidential hopeful Luis Donaldo Colosio in 1994 ([SourceMex, March 30, 1994](#)) and Tamaulipas gubernatorial candidate Rodolfo Torre Cantú in 2010 ([SourceMex, June 30, 2010](#)).

However, the murders and threats against candidates and others associated with the elections seem much greater than in the past. "This has become an electoral process filled with threats and dangers," columnist Francisco Guerrero Aguirre wrote in the daily newspaper *Excelsior*. "Would-be voters receive no break from the bad news, which is increasing daily and is extending to areas that had not experienced violence."

Six candidates killed since late February

The explosion of violence includes several murders. Here is a chronological list, based on media reports.

On Feb. 19, assassins ambushed and killed Carlos Martínez Villavicencio and two companions in Tlaxiaco, Oaxaca. Martínez Villavicencio, a member of the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), was seeking to represent the party in the Chamber of Deputies. The victim previously served in the Oaxaca state legislature and as mayor of the community of Santiago Juxtlahuaca.

On March 11, the body of Aidé Nava González, a PRD candidate in the mayoral election in the community Ahuacuotzingo, Guerrero, was found dead on the Tlapa-Chilpancingo highway. A narcomanta, a message from a local drug cartel, was found draped over her decapitated body. "This is what will happen to all the—politicians who don't want to sign up—traitors. Yours sincerely, Puro Rojo ZNS," said the message.

On May 1, Ulises Fabián Quiroz, running for mayor of Chilapa, Guerrero, was shot and killed during a campaign event. Fabián Quiroz was representing a coalition formed by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM).

On May 14, Enrique Hernández Saucedo, a candidate from the center-left Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena) for the mayor's seat in the town of Yurécuaro, Michoacán, was killed while giving a campaign speech. Investigators later determined that three police officers carried out the murder. Hernández Saucedo is a former leader of a self-defense group that battled the drug cartels in Michoacán state ([SourceMex, Jan. 22, 2014](#)).

On May 15, Héctor López Cruz, a PRI candidate for the city council of Huimanguillo in Tabasco state, was ambushed and shot on his doorstep. "The candidate was killed as he returned home from door-to-door campaigning in his neighborhood," said the daily newspaper Tabasco Hoy.

On June 2, a group of armed men murdered Miguel Ángel Luna Munguía, PRD candidate for the federal Chamber of Deputies in México state. "With the murder of Luna Munguía, a total of 20 politicians have been executed in 10 states, breaking a record for the number of killings in any recent electoral campaign," Jenaro Villamil wrote in the weekly news magazine Proceso. The totals cited by Villamil include former elected officials and party leaders.

The murders have not been limited to people running for office. In two instances, the victims were campaign staff. Within the course of two days in late May, assassins killed José Salvador Méndez Morales, campaign coordinator for federal congressional candidate Lorenzo Rivera Sosa in Puebla, and Israel Hernández Fabela, campaign manager for Aída Beltrán Sánchez, a candidate for the Mexico City legislative assembly (Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal, ALDF). Both Rivera Sosa and Beltrán Sánchez are members of the PRI.

Threats, intimidation prevalent

Some candidates have simply been the victims of intimidation. In April of this year, Guerrero gubernatorial candidate Luis Walton Aburto, a member of Movimiento Ciudadano (MC), reported that a group of about 20 assailants shot at his entourage in the vicinity of Chilapa, which has become one of the more violent areas of the state ([SourceMex, May 27, 2015](#)).

The attack on Walton occurred in the same area where Ulises Fabián Quiroz would be killed a few days later. No casualties were reported in the Walton incident, but the MC candidate decided to end his campaigning in that part of the state, which is about 55 km east of the Guerrero state capital of Chilpancingo.

The intimidation appears to have worked for the perpetrators. "The threats in this municipality in Guerrero have been so severe that the Morena candidate dropped out of the race on the day that a commando attacked Walton," said Proceso.

In May, Silvia Romero Suárez, a PRD candidate for the federal Chamber of Deputies, and three aides were kidnapped in the municipality of Teloloapan in Guerrero. Romero Suárez and her companions were en route to Ciudad Altamirano for meetings with grassroots organizations backing the campaign of PRD gubernatorial candidate Beatriz Mojica. State prosecutors confirmed that the victims were found after an "intense search," but did not offer any other details. "PRD candidate Silvia Romero has been liberated and will be escorted to her home in Iguala," an official source told reporters. "The prosecutor's office will continue to investigate this case."

In the community of Soledad in San Luis Potosí, a truck belonging to mayoral candidate Juan Carlos Velázquez was set on fire. Velázquez is a member of the center-right Partido Acción Nacional (PAN). "[The assailants] broke a window, sprayed gasoline in the cab, and set it on fire," Velázquez told reporters.

In Sinaloa, congressional candidate Gerardo Brambila Rojo of the MC suspended his campaign after receiving threats from an armed group. MC officials said Brambila's decision to quit the race came after two armed men went to the candidate's home to persuade him to halt his campaign.

And in Jalisco state, Enrique Alfaro, MC candidate for mayor in Guadalajara, received several threats at his home. "Take care of your husband and your daughters to make sure nothing happens to them," said a message addressed to Alfaro's wife, Lorena Martínez.

"The intimidation and violence also has an objective beyond the annulment of the vote: to foster a climate of fear to prevent citizens from participating in the election," said Villamil.

The violent climate during the elections is exacerbated by clashes among members and sympathizers of the various parties in volatile states like Guerrero. For example, in the community of Ixcaputzalco in Guerrero state, four supporters of the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL) were killed during clashes on April 30. And on May 31, two supporters of the PAN died and another six were injured in Peto, Yucatán state, during clashes with sympathizers of the PRI.

Political parties urge authorities to ensure peaceful elections

The acts of violence and threats have prompted legislators from all parties to demand greater protections from the federal and state government for anyone running for office at any level and in any geographic location. The PRD, through representatives in the ALDF and the Chamber of Deputies, issued a statement urging authorities to investigate reports that several groups aligned with rival parties intend to disrupt the elections in Mexico City.

Tensions in Mexico City have also surfaced between sympathizers of the PRD and Morena in 13 of the 16 boroughs in the city, according to Proceso.

Deputy Ricardo Anaya Cortés, floor leader for the PAN in the lower house, demanded that authorities take steps to guarantee the conditions that would allow voters to cast their ballots in peace on election day. "There is no room for violence in Mexico," said the PAN legislator. "Authorities must guarantee the conditions of governability with the framework of the law, so that the electoral process is allowed to proceed in peace."

As of mid-May, 15 candidates had filed a formal request with the Instituto Nacional Electoral (INE) for federal protection for the rest of their campaigns. The requests were turned over to the Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB). INE commissioner Marco Antonio Baños said most of the requests were from candidates for local races or for the federal Chamber of Deputies. "None of the requests came from gubernatorial candidates," said Baños, even though one candidate for state executive—Walton Aburto of the MC—was targeted directly in Guerrero.

And despite the violence, state and federal authorities continue to offer assurances that the vote is going to proceed in a peaceful and orderly fashion.

In an interview with the daily newspaper El Universal, Baños acknowledged that there have been a number of "regrettable" incidents in some states like Guerrero but that there is no generalized

sense of insecurity in Mexico. "Our institution does not see this [climate of fear]," said the INE commissioner, who is also president of the Comisión de Vinculación con los Organismos Públicos Electorales Locales (OPLE).

"There is no situation that would lead the INE to take extraordinary measures or emergency actions with the Army, Marines, or the Secretaría de Gobernación," explained Baños.

There are also concerns that authorities are minimizing the problem at the state level. "On the same day that México state Gov. Eruviel Ávila and the local electoral institute issued a statement insisting that the elections in our country's most populous state would proceed in an atmosphere of peace, violence presented itself, just as it has in recent days in Guerrero, Michoacán, Oaxaca, Puebla, and Yucatán" said Villamil, in reference to the June 2 murder of Luna Munguía.

In San Luis Potosí, authorities downplayed the vandalism against Velázquez's truck as an isolated incident. The local INE office and the Consejo Estatal Electoral y de Participación Ciudadana (CEEPAC) offered assurances that a calm atmosphere would prevail in Soledad and elsewhere in the state on June 7. "We have had meetings involving authorities from all three levels of government to ensure the best climate possible [for the elections]," said state INE representative Sergio Aispuro Cárdenas, "All the political parties have also participated in this task, and the good level of cooperation is a sign that we are going to have a good election day."

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