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Post-New Year's Day Murder Illustrates Vulnerability of Mexico's Mayors

by Carlos Navarro

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The mayors of small and medium-sized cities remain among the public officials who are most vulnerable targets for drug-trafficking organizations in Mexico. Violence against the heads of municipal governments has existed for decades, but the problem became more acute during the six-year term of former President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012). Criminal organizations killed 31 mayors during the Calderón government ([SourceMex, Sept. 29, 2010](#)). The situation has worsened in recent years, with 41 mayors assassinated in the past three years, during the first half of President Enrique Peña Nieto's administration. The latest victim, Gisela Mota Ocampo, of Temixco in Morelos state, was killed at her home on Jan. 2, the day after she took the oath of office.

Mota Ocampo's murder brought renewed attention to the role of mayors in Mexico's drug trafficking as victims of, or collaborators with, criminal organizations. By all accounts, Mota Ocampo belonged to the former group. She apparently resisted efforts by the drug-trafficking organization Los Rojos—which operates in Morelos, Guerrero, and México states—to bring newly elected mayors under their control.

Mota Ocampo's murder also added another element to the debate on how security should be approached in Morelos. Gov. Graco Ramírez supports Peña Nieto's plan to bring local police forces under a single command in each state, while some mayors—namely Cuauhtémoc Blanco of Cuernavaca—have come out strongly against the plan. The concept, dubbed Mando Único, was developed during the Calderón government ([SourceMex, July 28, 2010](#)), but the program was not fully launched until 2014. Under the plan, the government would replace Mexico's 1,800 municipal police units with 32 centralized state departments.

"Mando Único is supposed to reduce the corruption seen within Mexico's municipal police forces, many of whom are in league with drugs organizations," said the online news site InsightCrime.org. "Doing away with the municipal police is also supposed to help make local politicians less vulnerable to threats and killings (although Mota's death clearly calls this into question)."

Los Rojos gang linked to Temixco mayor's murder

According to police sources, Los Rojos leader Santiago Mazari, alias El Carrete, had made contact with all the newly elected mayors in Morelos to pressure them to meet demands from his organization: to reject the Mando Único and to cede decision-making powers on public works projects to the cartel, which would then select one of its business allies to do the work. Additionally, Los Rojos was demanding a portion of the municipal budget, reported as much as 10%, as protection payment.

Mota Ocampo apparently refused the demands and was executed by seven members of a criminal organization who broke into her home and beat up her relatives. Authorities said Mota Ocampo's murder was intended to send a signal to other mayors who had not decided whether to accede to the demands of the criminal organization.

“As has been the case with mayors who have been elected or have taken office, the relatives had previously received death threats,” columnist Maite Azuela wrote in the daily newspaper *El Universal*.

“The events at the beginning of this year foreshadow difficult times for those who aspire to represent us at this level of government,” columnist Rubén Cárdenas wrote in the daily newspaper *El Siglo de Durango*. “The number of mayors killed during the first three years of the Peña Nieto administration has already surpassed the number of similar deaths during the administration of his predecessor, so there is no time to waste. We must develop an effective strategy to counter the influence of criminal organizations.”

Just days after the assassination, Morelos state authorities announced they had arrested three of the perpetrators, including a 32-year-old woman identified as Nora and two young men, ages 17 and 18. Four others remained at large as of mid-January.

“We will not be intimidated by organized crime,” Gov. Ramírez said in an interview with *Radio Fórmula*.

Ramírez said the threats against mayors who support *Mando Único* in his state were carried out by *Los Rojos* as well as by the rival gang *Guerreros Unidos*. Both organizations are fighting for control of Morelos. Members of *Guerreros Unidos* have been linked to the kidnapping and murder of 43 students from a teachers college (*Escuela Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa Raúl Isidro Burgos*) near Iguala, Guerrero state, in September 2014 ([SourceMex, Oct. 15, 2014](#)). Former Iguala mayor José Luis Abarca and his wife, María de los Ángeles Pineda, who collaborated closely with the criminal organization, were accused of having planned the killings ([SourceMex, Oct. 29, 2014](#)).

Morelos plans to put into effect the *Mando Único* in 15 municipalities in the state: Cuernavaca, Temixco, Jojutla, Zacatepec, Emiliano Zapata, Ayala, Ocuituco, Xochitepec, Huitzilac, Jiutepec, Tlayacapan, Temoac, Jantetelco, Tepalcingo, and Tlaquiltenango. Temixco has been identified as a high-crime area, with kidnapping, robbery with violence, and murder being the top crimes. The municipality ranked among the highest in the number of murders in communities with populations exceeding 100,000.

Temixco is an important location for the state government. Even though Cuernavaca is the capital of Morelos, Temixco is the seat of several state institutions, including the Public Security Commission, which coordinates state and local police forces.

Critics noted the lack of action from the federal government in the aftermath of the murder of the Temixco mayor. “If the homicide had occurred in a French or US community, and not in Temixco, Morelos, surely President Enrique Peña Nieto would have reacted much faster,” columnist Jenaro Villamil wrote in the weekly news magazine *Proceso*.

While some mayors have been simply gunned down, in a few instances, public officials have been kidnapped, tortured and killed. Ygnacio López Mendoza, mayor of Santa Ana Maya, in Michoacán state, met this fate in November 2013.

According to *Proceso*, María Santos Gorrostieta Salazar, who had served as mayor of Tiquicheo, Michoacán, also showed signs of torture after her body was found in 2012. Other mayors who have been killed at or near their homes in the past three years include José René Garrido of San Salvador

El Verde, Puebla; Celestino Félix Vázquez of San Miguel Tilquiapan, Oaxaca; and Gustavo Garibay García of Tanhuato, Michoacán.

The list of mayors or mayors-elect killed in a public place during the past three years includes Marisol Mora Cuevas of Tlacojalpan, Veracruz; Wilfrido Flores Villa of Nahuatzen, Michoacán; Feliciano Martínez Bautista of San Juan Mixtepec, Oaxaca; Gerónimo Manuel García Rosas of Aquila, Veracruz; Manuel Gómez Torres of Ayutla, Jalisco; Rogelio Sánchez Galán of Jerécuaro, Guanajuato, and Ulises Fabián Quiroz, a candidate for the seat in Chilapa, Guerrero.

Most of the murders of mayors over the past 10 years have occurred in the states of Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, and Durango in the north, and in the southern and central states of Michoacán, Guerrero, Oaxaca, Morelos, and Veracruz, according to statistics from the Asociación de Autoridades Locales de México AC (AALMAC).

Criminal organizations have also assassinated public officials once they have left office. That includes the 2015 murders of former mayors Ambrosio Borbonio Ame of Cuitláhuac, Veracruz; Santos García Machorro of Cuapiaxtla, Puebla, and Lorenzo Hernández Guerrero of the city of San Luis Potosí. "The list of former mayors who have been targeted during the past several years is very long," Cárdenas wrote in *El Siglo de Durango*.

Drug traffickers have attempted to influence elections at all levels, pouring money into political campaigns and also threatening or killing candidates who will not promise their cooperation ([SourceMex, April 11, 2012](#), and [April 30, 2014](#)). In 2011, Mayor Ricardo Guzmán Romero of La Piedad in Michoacán was gunned down as he distributed campaign literature for gubernatorial candidate Maria Luisa Calderón ([SourceMex, Nov. 16, 2011](#)).

In addition to mayors, criminal organizations have targeted city councilors, police chiefs, department heads, and other municipal officials. "The AALMAC has documented cases in 100 municipalities where more than 1,000 employees have been threatened," Cárdenas noted.

A lack of protocol to protect mayors

Despite a long list of murders, Mexico lacks a strategy or protocol to protect mayors and other municipal officials who face constant threats. "We are living through a situation that underscores impunity and paves the way for others to embark on similar criminal activities," Azuela wrote in *El Universal*. "Do authorities have a prevention strategy in the face of the extraordinary number of municipal authorities who have been killed?" Cárdenas suggested that the government develop a strategy to protect current and former mayors similar to that used for journalists. "What is most regrettable is that there are no protocols of protection for mayors or city councilors," the columnist wrote.

The government has created a special unit within the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) to protect journalists ([SourceMex, Feb. 24, 2010](#), and [March 21, 2012](#)). But the Fiscalía Especial para la Atención a Delitos Cometidos contra la Libertad de Expresión is deemed as mostly ineffective, as the number of murders of reporters, editors, photographers and other communicators remains fairly high ([SourceMex, Aug. 27, 2014](#), and [Aug. 19, 2015](#)).

Even though there have been documented cases where mayors have willingly collaborated with criminal organizations—including the links between Abarca and Guerreros Unidos and between Mayors Enrique Alonso of Tlaquiltenango and Jorge Miranda of Amacuzac and Los Rojos—there

is some criticism of the way in which authorities at other levels of government treat public officials from municipal governments.

“Authorities often begin their investigations with the hypothesis that the victims had prior contact with the criminal organizations or had in one way or another supported the operations of criminal organizations,” Azuela wrote. “This policy of blaming the victims avoids the deficiencies in the investigations that are present in most of these cases.”

The debate over Mando Único

The Mando Único was proposed six years ago by former Public Safety Secretary Genaro García Luna as a means to reduce corruption in municipal police departments. In theory, centralizing police under a single command would reduce the influence of drug gangs on law enforcement. Critics have suggested, however, that the plan would not necessarily reduce corruption, as the state commands could also fall under the influence of drug cartels. “Critics of Mando Único argue that corruption is just as endemic across state institutions,” said InsightCrime.com

The proposal, put forth in 2010, was placed on the backburner during the final years of the Calderón administration. Peña Nieto revived the plan at the start of his administration, with mixed results. Critics say the plan has not yet been implemented in many states because of the inability of Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong to persuade governors to employ this anti-crime strategy.

At present, Mando Único operates in 16 states, but only Aguascalientes and Campeche have modified their laws to place local police forces under a single state-run command. Legislators in Nuevo León also approved an initiative to employ this strategy, but not all municipalities have bought into the plan. The plan has also been implemented partially in other states, even without enabling legislation. These states include Coahuila, Durango, Guanajuato, Hidalgo, Morelos, Quintana Roo, Sinaloa, Sonora, Tlaxcala, Veracruz, Yucatán, and Zacatecas.

The uneven implementation of Mando Único, however, means that fewer than 18% of Mexico’s municipalities operate under the scheme.

In Morelos, the plan has created friction between Gov. Ramírez and several municipal leaders, including Blanco of Cuernavaca and Alonso of Tlaquiltenango, among others, who argue that the proposal infringes on the sovereignty of their municipalities. Blanco, a popular soccer star, was elected to the office under the banner of the small Partido Socialdemócrata (PSD).

“Blanco’s first decision as mayor of Cuernavaca was to reject Mando Único,” columnist Jorge Carrasco Araizaga wrote in Proceso. “More than a challenge to Gov. Graco Ramírez, this was a message to the government of Enrique Peña Nieto.”

In Tlaquiltenango, Alonso has rejected the plan outright despite admitting that all 40 members of the municipal police force “are in collusion with criminal organizations.”

Some analysts believe that Blanco’s opposition to Mando Único is a reflection of his greater political ambitions. “The fight between Graco Ramírez and Cuauhtémoc Blanco is a narrative that helps the former soccer star position himself as a candidate for governor [in 2018],” columnist Pablo Hiriart wrote in the daily business newspaper El Financiero.

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