



FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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Distributed via Email and Posted at www.fpri.org

June 2012

WILL BLOODSHED MAR THE JULY 1, 2012 MEXICAN ELECTION?

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Even savvy Mexico-watchers argue that cartel violence will escalate in the run-up to the July 1 national contests¹ in which voters will select a president, the 500-member Congress, the 128-seat Senate, Mexico City's mayor, five governors, and thousands of local officials.²

No one can be certain whether the Michoacan-based Knights Templars will engage in decapitations and other repulsive acts around and during Sunday's contests. After all, big shots in this quirky band believe they have been called to do the "Lord's Work."³

Equally unpredictable are Los Zetas, who have turned sadism from an art form into an exact science in the 21 states and several Central American countries in which they function.⁴

A harbinger of possible blood-letting are recent assaults on journalists in Veracruz state such as the June 14 slaying of *Milenio's* crime-beat newsman Víctor Manuel Báez Chino. Such incidents may be unrelated to the election and just a continuation of efforts by Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs) to intimidate and muzzle print- and electronic-media professionals. These DTOs have murdered some 40 members of the fourth estate since the beginning of 2008.⁵

¹ . Voters in Guanajuato, Jalisco, Morelos Tabasco, and Yucatán will choose governors on Sunday; the citizens of Chiapas will elect their governor on August 18.

² . Tracy Wilkinson, "Mexico Violence Escalates as Elections Approach," *Los Angeles Times*, June 14, 2012.

³ . For the background of this organization, see George W. Grayson, *La Familia Drug Cartel: Implications for U.S.-Mexican Security* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2010); Georgetown University cartel specialist John J. Bailey received a report that thugs blocked access to polling places in the 2011 election in Michoacán ; Bailey, E-mail to author, June 20, 2012.

⁴ . See George W. Grayson and Samuel Logan, *The Executioners' Men: Los Zetas, Rogue Soldiers, Criminal Entrepreneurs, and the Shadow State They Created* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press, 2012): 139-43.

⁵ . A list of journalists killed by criminal organizations appears in Grayson and Logan, *The Executioners' Men*: 139-43; the Committee for the Protection of Journalists reports that between 2000 and 2012 14 reporters have gone missing, 71 have been assassinated, and 500 have suffered acts of aggression; see Silvia Otero, "CPJ ve incesante violencia letal contra prensa en México," *El Universal*, June 14, 2012..

Apart from organized savagery, every balloting finds several candidates or campaign assistants in the cross-hairs of political adversaries, especially in Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero, and other southern, remote impoverished states.⁶

RHYTHM OF VIOLENCE

If officials, especially at the state and local level, threaten to interfere with criminality, their days may be numbered. In general, though, drug-connected torture, hanging, and decapitations appear to follow a tit-for-tat (or tit-tit-for-tat-tat) rhythm that is distinct from the electoral calendar.

Ildefonso Ortiz, an intrepid crime reporter who follows the drug war for *The Monitor* (McAllen, Texas), says that “absolutely, revenge drives the carnage that takes place along the border.” Such is the danger that he has renewed taking shooting lessons with his registered weapon that he carries when investigating cases.⁷

Sometimes the targets of revenge are opposing criminal organizations. Other times they involve banks, public buildings, police headquarters, and innocent people whose demise enables brigands like the beastly Los Zetas to maintain credibility—“cartel cred”—as vicious actors in the Mexican underworld. Such a reputation enhances their success in accomplishing extortion, kidnappings, human smuggling, contraband sales, loan-sharking, and a more than a dozen other felonies.

Below are examples of the dynamics of executions that have taken place in 2011 and 2012.

Event: August 25, 2011—Los Zetas fire-bombed the Casino Royale in Monterrey, Nuevo León, killing 52 patrons and staff of the facility.⁸

Retaliation: September 20, 2011—La Nueva Gente gang, a cat’s paw of the notorious Sinaloa Cartel, took credit for mutilating 35 Zetas and Zeta sympathizers—23 men and 12 women—in Boca del Río, Veracruz.⁹

Retaliation: November 23, 2011—Los Zetas left 26 bodies of alleged Sinaloa Cartel operatives in abandoned vehicles in Culiacán and other Sinaloan municipalities.¹⁰

Retaliation: November 24, 2011—Desperados deposited 26 cadavers in three vehicles in the busy Arcos de Milenio traffic circle in Guadalajara, Jalisco. The first three suspects arrested claimed that they were paid by the Milenio Cartel, collaborators of Los Zetas. Allegedly, another Zeta comrade-in-arms, the New Generation Jalisco Cartel (CJNG), owned the trucks in which the bodies were discovered.¹¹

Retaliation: May 4, 2012—Supposedly Los Zetas hanged nine cadres of the Gulf Cartel, aligned with the Sinaloa Cartel, near Nuevo Laredo. The same day, 14 Zetas were decapitated and wrapped in plastic garbage bags in the same border city, which is the major portal for Mexican-U.S. commerce—legal and illegal. In a narco-banner signed by Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzmán Loera, the Sinaloa Cartel capo called the massacre a message to Los Zetas’ chiefs, Heriberto “The Executioner” Lazcano and Miguel Ángel “El 40” Treviño Morales. It is unclear whether the Sinaloans or the CJNG performed the executions.¹²

Retaliation: May 9, 2012—Los Zetas and the Milenio Cartel were believed to have dismembered and beheaded 20 people near Lake Chapala, south of Guadalajara, where many Americans and Canadians retire.¹³

Retaliation: May 13, 2012—Los Zetas butchered 49 to 60 individuals, most of whom were migrants or other

⁶ . For instance, an unknown assailant killed Margarito Genchi, a PRD candidate for the state legislature in violence-prone Chiapas state; see Wilkinson, “Mexico Violence Escalates as Elections Approach.”

⁷ . Ildefonso Ortiz, Telephone Interview with author, June 22, 2012.

⁸ . William Booth, “Mexico Blames U.S. Drug Culture, Guns for Casino Massacre,” *Washington Post*, August 26, 2011.

⁹ . “Por la plaza de Veracruz: ‘Cartel del Golfo,’ ‘El Chapo’ y ‘Los Zetas,’” *Zeta* (a prize-winning Tijuana weekly that courageously investigates narco-crimes), September 24, 2011.

¹⁰ . Stratfor, “Mexican Security Memo: Los Zetas Strike in Sinaloa Territory,” March 11, 2012.

¹¹ . Henry Saldaña, “Implicados en la masacre Guadalajara aceptan siete homicidios,” *Milenio*, December 8, 2011.

¹² . Confidential government source.

¹³ . “Suspect Arrested in Mexico Massacre Case,” *EFE*, February 29, 2012.

innocents, near Cadereyta, Nuevo León.¹⁴

RATIONAL BEHAVIOR?

Enrique Peña Nieto, candidate of the once-dominant Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) holds a commanding lead in the presidential contest. A mid-June poll conducted by the respected Buendía & Laredo firm and published on June 19 in the respected *El Universal* newspaper found Peña Nieto (43.6 percent) well ahead of three other competitors—Andrés Manuel López Obrador who heads a leftist coalition (27.7 percent); Josefina Vázquez Mota (25.1 percent) of the center-right National Action Party (PAN); and Gabriel Quadri de la Torre (3.6 percent), nominee of National Alliance Party (PANAL), a creature of the corrupt SNTE teachers' union.¹⁵

There is absolutely no evidence that Peña Nieto has ties to Mexico's Mafiosi; however, he has emphasized that reducing bloodshed is a higher goal than capturing capos.¹⁶ If the cartels act rationally—and that is a big “IF”—it would be counter-productive to disrupt elections in which the likely winner's priorities would change the military-led, capture-the-capos strategy pursued by outgoing President Felipe Calderón.

In some ways it would be disadvantageous to disrupt the upcoming contests at any level—unless, of course, the criminals take down politicians who refuse to accept bribes because they have cast their lots with rival DTOs.

University of Miami security expert Bruce M. Bagley has argued: “The Mexican traffickers need a degree of predictability to conduct their business too. They seek a permeable and permissive business environment for their illegal activities in their areas of operations.”¹⁷

There is concern in Michoacán, which is plagued by the Knights Templars that violence could erupt. PRD President Jesús Zambrano has warned that Los Zetas, the Knights Templars, and, possibly other criminal organizations will commit atrocities in the days before the election to demonstrate their muscular presence and intimidate candidates. He has emphasized that: “Political parties, candidates, society, and all of us together with the government, must take advantage of the campaigns to recover public spaces in the hands of these groups.”¹⁸ After all, Los Zetas killed the PRI's gubernatorial candidate in Tamaulipas two years ago and approximately 30 mayors, many along drug-trafficking routes, have perished.

Most candidates have squads of bodyguards, and officials in Michoacán, many of whom wear bullet-proof vests, have advised of possible mayhem in Cherán, Tancítaro, Apatizgán, and 17 other municipalities plagued by the Knights Templars.¹⁹

CONCLUSION

Peña Nieto has pledged to curb the narco-barbarity that has snuffed out more than 44,000 lives since outgoing Calderón took office on December 1, 2006. Rumors abound in Mexico City that the putative “new face” of the PRI, will cut deals with kingpins—a prospect that he has continuously and vehemently denies. The traditional PRI forged “rules of the games” that required narco-barons to pay enormous *mordidas* to government officials in exchange for importing, storing, processing, and shipping drugs. Meanwhile, they refrained from harming civilians, acquiring high-powered weapons, treading on competitors' turfs, running candidates for political posts, and showing disrespect to politicians.²⁰ In fact, through the early 1990s, it was not unusual for mayors, legislators, and governors to go to parties thrown by cartel bosses—and vice-versa. Former PRI governor of Nuevo León, Sócrates

¹⁴ . “Mexico Violence: Monterrey Police Find 49 Bodies,” *BBC News*, May 13, 2012.

¹⁵ . “EPN conserva más de 15 percent de ventaja sobre AMLO,” *El Universal*, June 19, 2012.

¹⁶ . “Leading Candidates in Mexico Elections Say They'll Change Drug War Strategy,” *Homeland Security News Wire*, June 11, 2012.

¹⁷ Bruce M. Bagley, E-mail to author, June 21, 2012.

¹⁸ . Quoted in Anylu Ayala, “Zambrano pide a partidos cerrar camino a violencia en elecciones,” *OMCIM: Los medios y las elecciones 2012*, June 11, 2012.

¹⁹ . “Michoacán ‘blindará’ 20 alcaldías para elecciones,” *Notimex*, June 19, 2012.

²⁰ . Mexican scholars Luis Astorga and Leo Zuckerman have written widely and cogently on this subject.

Rizzo, admitted that his party's administrations even allocated corridors to traffickers.²¹

The multiplication of DTOs and the unreliability of Los Zetas, the Knights Templars, and gangs like La Linea (linked to the Juárez Cartel) make it impossible to crystallize nationwide live-and-let-live "arrangements" as in the past. In addition, the next chief executive will be under too much scrutiny to take the risk, even if he wanted to. More likely governors, who have gained enormous power in the last decade, will continue to hammer out compromises—that is, informal pacts that either benefit state executives directly from drug commerce or ensure that they turn a blind eye to this nefarious business.

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²¹ . "Ex gobernador evidencia los nexos del PRI y narco: PAN," *El Universal*, February 25, 2011.