

Mexican Drug War: Six Years of Violent Clashes

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Abstract

Conflicts and their inevitable lethal potential affect the state of security and everyday life of ordinary people, institutions and the whole states. Mexico is not an exception. The Drug War or La guerra contra el narcotráfico generally refers to an intrastate armed conflict initiated as a counter drug policy against the activities of organized crime groups by the Mexican government in late 1990s. Since then, the formal mode of dynamics has been continuously changing with several challenges for the society and its future development. Based on Calderón's 6-years presidential term (2006-2012), the goal of this chapter is to evaluate the patterns of conflict interaction and to identify the impacts on everyday life of Mexican communities. The period of the last six years has been critical in terms of open brutality and wide spreading violence that federal government has responded to by the engagement of military troops which were sent to the northern parts of country. According to many scholars, it has impaired the fragile balance between the drug cartels and created the environment of never-ending clashes. The seriousness and numbers of violent incentives have been since then steadily increasing without any positive change in the terms of fatalities.

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Introduction

Conflicts and their inevitable lethal potential affect the state of security and everyday life of ordinary people, institutions and the whole states. Mexico is not an exception. The current situation in this North American country is struck by the illegal activities of organized crime groups that are motivated for contentious behaviour by economic stimulus that is underlined by the lack of alternative employment opportunities, general poverty and corruption.

Violence, torture and everyday street shootings define the atmosphere of hostility in cities like Nuevo Laredo, Ciudad Juárez, Reynosa and Matamoros. In the context of on-going clashes, the violent confrontation reveals the interaction patterns of criminal groups that are in contrast with the effort of federal government that tries to enforce its monopoly of power over the whole Mexican territory.

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At the beginning of Calderón's sexenio (6-years presidential term), there was one drug-related homicide every four hours. By 2011, the worst year on record, there was one every 30 minutes. Now, roughly half of all homicides in Mexico are attributable to drug violence. In other words, there were over 47 500 documented "organized crime related homicides" from President Calderón's inauguration on 1st December 2006 to 30th September 2011 (Molzahn – Riós – Shirk 2012, 1). Moreover, the annual report published by the Trans-Border Institute at the University of San Diego brought findings that the centres of violence are not static and it is possible to observe a very viable ability in the most violent regions to rearrange the capacities (e. g. Ciudad Juárez, Culiacán, and Chihuahua). It is accompanied by the spread of criminal activities to the formerly more or less untouched areas of the country, including the wealthy industrial metropolis like Monterrey and the busy port city of Veracruz (Booth 2012; Molzahn – Riós – Shirk 2012, 1). Generally, the observed dynamics can be easily referred to as the so-called *balloon effect* that is based on government's effort to "squeeze" illicit trade in one area that results in its expansion elsewhere (Rouse – Arce 2006: 540).

Origins of imbalance

Back in the early 1990s, the situation in Mexico was quite different. The activities of drug cartels were more or less coordinated by the Colombian organized crime groups that controlled the cocaine drug routes to the USA. The local Mexican gangs mostly figured as a link in the chain or carried out businesses that were less lucrative (e. g. marijuana). They were affected more by the domestic arena where the long-standing corruption ties with the long-time ruling party PRI created a sinister network of dependency. As a result, it mitigated the illicit activities and controlled the public space through the system of bribes and favours which subsequently, in a very controversial way, limited the illegal activities of the criminal groups (see Astorga 2005 according to Freeman 2006). After the crackdown of the USA in Colombia in 1998-1999, the suddenly paralyzed market was quickly inhabited by the formerly subordinated Mexican groups that took advantage of the new market opportunities. The effective substitution was positively correlated with the ability to fill the gap that occurred (Freeman 2006, 10; Klesner 1993).

In 2000, when the established cartels have started to initiate their expansion, the newly-elected president Vicente Fox referred to the criminal groups and their activities through the framework of political as opposed to exclusively security agenda. After the diplomatic intervention of the United States, he changed his statements and reformulated the problem as a challenge for the national security. Based on an on-going interest to deal with the rising influence of drug cartels in regions near the borders with the USA, the federal government initiated a policy of criminalization and counter-operations that engaged military troops with central command located in Mexico City (Fernández Menéndez 2002: 22, 24-25).

In 2002, the special unites were pursuing the Arellano's brothers, the bosses of the Tijuana Cartel, which caused an imbalance and initiated a rivalry over the markets and distribution routes in the region. This contestation of influence disrupted the formal equilibrium that was more or less respected by the four main cartels – Sinaloa Cartel, Tijuana Cartel, Juárez Cartel, and Gulf Cartel. They started to fight over the control of important local networks and smuggling corridors that provided business opportunities. The centre of the clashes was Nuevo Laredo, border city on the bank of the Río Grande River (Cook 2007, 11). Federal and local authorities tried to control the escalation of violence but the formal provision of confrontation created a vicious circle of contestation. The drug trafficking organizations sought to marginalize and prevent the Mexican government getting involved in their

activities. The concept of “Plata o Plomo” (Money or Lead) has sent to Mexican government, judicial, and security officials a clear message to take bribes or to be killed. Intimidation and threats were introduced as everyday tools of persuasion (Gonzales 2011, 9).

The increasing violence and brutality led the new president Felipe Calderón in 2006 to give a public speech in which he stressed his intention to fight against the drug cartels and eliminate the source of instability in the country. In conjunction with the United States, he launched a massive crackdown against the drug trafficking organizations and initiated an open campaign to hinder the illicit drug trade. Since then, the Calderón administration has sent more than fifty thousand soldiers to the northern regions of Mexico. Billions of dollars have been invested in equipment and training, in an attempt to vastly reform the police and judicial systems, and strengthened Mexico's partnership with the United States (Rawlins 2011). The formal provision of this high-profile, top priority policy has however brought also an adverse legacy of political manipulation of law enforcement and judicial branches, which limited professionalization and enabled widespread corruption (O'Neil, 2010).

A putatively negative outcome of Calderón's counter policy can be seen in the accusations of serious human rights abuses that have occurred in the previous years, after the initiation of the campaign. Human Rights Watch found in its 2011 report that “rather than strengthening public security in Mexico, Calderón's *war* has exacerbated a climate of violence, lawlessness, and fear in many parts of the country” (Human Rights Watch 2011, 5). The contra arguments of Calderón's proponents defend the initiative and portray it as a successful policy with relevant and measurable outcomes. They argue that by mid-2010, the crackdown resulted in the seizure of 7,000 small and large calibre arms, nearly 5,000 grenades, 6,500 tons of marijuana, 950 kilograms of heroin, 100 tons of cocaine, and over 400 million dollars in cash or other highly valued forms of goods. As positive outcomes of the campaign, some point to the dramatic success with the arrests or killings of more than 35 “important targets” (Rawlins 2011, 3).

The USA as a third party to the conflict

In 2007, the USA has initiated the *Merida Initiative* with budget of 1.4 billion dollars designated for Mexico, Central America region, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. The goal of the agreement with regard to Mexican case was to break the power of organized crime

groups, strengthen the U.S. southern border, improve Mexican institutional capacity, and reduce the demand for drugs (O'Neil 2010). In 2010 the initiative was broadened and new amendment – *Beyond Merida* was signed with focus on political and judicial corruption (Rawlins 2011).

By this decision, the USA has confirmed its diplomatic dominance in the Latin America from previous years with intention to further influence the decision-making process in Mexico and to assist in the creation of counter-drug measures in the next few years. Paradoxically, the official policy of US government has demonstrated a significant lack of self-reflection and one-sided critique. The responsibility for increasing consumption of drugs and blossoming drug trade on the whole was placed on Mexico where the ineffective approach reportedly fuelled the illicit trade with narcotics (Santana 2004, 194). This has changed only recently when the US officials conceded that the situation is more complicated and both countries should reconsider the principle of shared responsibility (O'Neil 2010, 68-70).

Aside from the diplomatic talks, the whole framework of the US involvement is perceived very critically in Mexico where most of the population sees it mainly as a problem of consumption along the lines of no demand – no business. What is more serious, however, is that the legitimacy of Mexican government is considerably weakening due the visible US intervention in the internal affairs of the country (compare with Carlsen 2011; New York Times 2009; Mabry 1992: 46). It supports the arguments of those that accuse the central government of selling its own nation and serving the oppressors. In addition, the authorities are unable to stop the illicit flow of weapons which are legally bought on the US side of the border and then smuggled back to Mexico where they are used to equip members of drug cartels. According to statistics, the USA supplies 90 percent of the weapons that are confiscated in Mexico, many of which are found at crime scenes (see Rawlins 2011). We are talking about weapons like assault rifles, grenades and explosives which encourage violence in the area where fragile balance defines mutual relations between cartels and the army. And the Mexican society is a hostage in this game.

Violent contestation

The headlines of global and local newspaper bring evidence about the violent clashes on a daily basis. The pattern of contestation itself is predominantly affected by the principles of

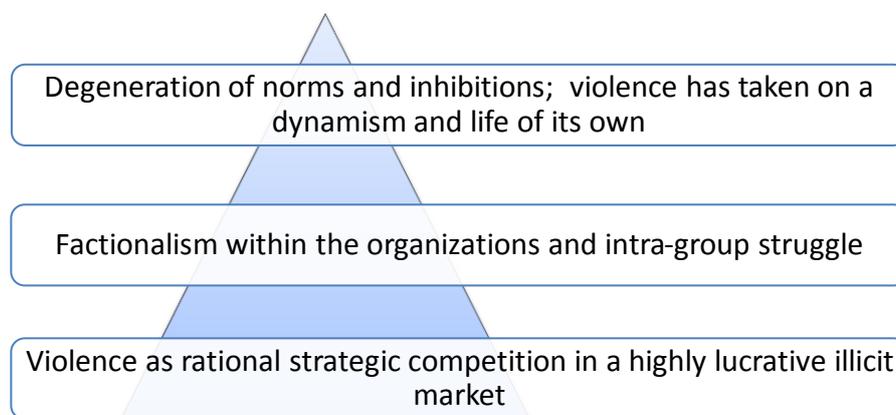
diversification and further fractionalization that are in contrast with the traditional picture of organized crime groups from the end of the 20th century. Nowadays, the arena has different stages with various intensities, intentions and outcomes. The key conflict cleavages can be identified between the federal government and organized crime groups, and between the organized crime groups themselves. This distinction is also supplemented by the internal tensions inside the cartels and raised allegation that federal government selectively intervenes towards certain criminal organizations (see Molzahn – Riós – Shirk 2012).

In order to maintain control over the drug routes and maximise the business opportunities, Mexican cartels employ individuals and groups of enforcers, known as *sicarios* who are in charge of coercing the obedience within the controlled territories as well as the fight against the rival groups. The most dangerous of them are Zetas, Negros and Pelones (active in 2005-2008) that consist of former members of elite military units and professional criminals. These gangs of hitmen have become increasingly powerful as they filled the vacuum left in the cartels when their leaders were arrested by the US or Mexican government. Subsequently, they have started to operate independently with their own business interests and smuggling corridors (Cook 2007, 6). This professionalization of killers leads us to the conclusion that in simple numbers of violent deaths in 2010, Mexico had almost twice as many killings as Iraq and Afghanistan combined. However, we have to be aware that the motivation is different. The intensification of brutality and the element of symbolism in the actions of “new” criminal groups can be understood as a rational part of a strategic competition, initiated in order to intimidate rivals. Threats and intimidation are used as a tool in the same way as military practice uses the so-called strategic communications (Williams 2012, 259-260).

Despite the on-going discussion that sees the brutality of violence through the scope of terrorism (e. g. beheadings, disfiguring of corpses and bomb attacks), the fact is that most of the violence in Mexico has been selective and not designed to kill indiscriminately (compare Flanigan 2012). This statement is presented in the form of intentional simplification that tries to identify some sort of general pattern. The motivation for violence comes primarily from the economic stimulus that originates from extremely profitable illegal activities. Perhaps the only drug trafficking organization with more ambitious political aspirations is La Familia Michoacana which is a curious organization, combining what appeared to be cult behaviour with the operations of a modern trans-national drug trafficking organization (Cook 2007; Williams 2012, 262).

The formal source of mobilization that is crucial for the activities of the cartels comes from the symbiotic relationships with political elites, federal agencies and popular support. It is conducted through the exhibit of some degree of paternalism that is used by criminal entities in order to maximise the outcome of business activities. The support is rewarded by services, employment, and the network of protection in local communities. If we talk about the dynamics that empowers the violent contestation, we have to take into consideration the various levels of the confrontation. Within this notion, it is plausible to present the pyramidal approach to violence, originally created by Phil Williams, that provides comprehensive scope for understanding the patterns of drug-related struggles in nowadays Mexico (Williams 2012, 262-265; see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1



Source: Author according to Williams 2012

The base of the pyramidal structure consists of drug-related violence that is perceived as rational strategic competition in a highly lucrative illicit market, where the main actors are cartels and their allies. This perspective helps us to identify the core source of violence that is closely related (in logic) to the rational actor model that is central to economics and political science. The fundamental level that describes the clashes is primarily defined by the rational decisions and purposes that could be rephrased as a continuation of business by other means. The acts of violence are used in defensive as well as offensive situation with primary intention to utilize opportunities and/or to protect the business interests. In this context we can claim that the violent intentions are not irrational and the main logic follows the patterns of capitalistic competition that is under no control and unfettered by laws or regulations (see Williams 2012, 265-269).

The second stage of the structure is defined through the factionalism and bottom up-violence that comes from the paradoxes of Mexican drug-trafficking environment. There are

simultaneous tendencies towards the consolidation and inter-organizational violence on the one side and towards the fragmentation and intra-organizational contestation on the other. This level of violent interaction explains the clashes that cannot be covered by the highly centralised and monopolised decisions made by the leadership of cartels. As an outcome of outsourcing, the major trafficking organizations have been continuously losing control over the streets that are operated under the conditions of bottom-up violence incentives. The main principle of this power constellation refers to an interest of dough-foots that try to establish their own reputation based on the ruthless violence that attracts the attention of their superiors. This perspective moves the violence from the grand strategic level that is motivated by economic profit to the micro-level, where individuals or small groups of people fight for the reputation and dominance. Violence can be used to stop or punish defection, to maintain internal discipline, to impose order, to reinforce loyalty, and/or to enhance security (see Williams 2012, 269-271).

The top of the pyramid, and the last and probably the most dangerous stage of this model of violence is a spread of anomic violence that can be referred to as an epidemic. Based on data from the last six years, there are identified trends that cannot be explained rationally and are based on the mixture of carelessness and brutality. The violence has spread and includes killings of women, children, whole families, as well as illegal migrants – all these without any rational purpose or motivation. Mass killings have also occurred at drug rehabilitation centres where addicted people were assassinated with no reason. These irrational killings are in contrast with the already mentioned selectivity that described the modus operandi of the cartels of previous years. The general meaning refers to the degeneration of rules and norms and the emergence of forms of behaviour unconstrained by standard notions of what is acceptable. In effect, anomaly involves a behavioural and ethical collapse. This moral deprivation that rises up from society is backed by the huge adolescent frustration that comes from the situation where young people do not have a job nor attend school. As the Mexican artist Pablo Szmulewicz put it “people are losing the ability to be shocked, and when you lose the capacity for shock, it creates an opening for worse things” (see Williams 2012, 271-274).

Conclusion and future perspectives

Previous years have shown the seriousness of the situation that is the outcome of violent contestation. Drug cartels have created a whole subculture that operates in its own boundaries

with significant level of independence (Fernández Menéndez 2002: 19). Central government is portrayed in this framework as an incompetent actor that is not able to fulfil its commitments. The organized crime groups therefore substitute the state with a network of patronage that provides opportunities to escape from poverty and misery and help local communities to survive (Astorga 1996, 35-150). It is supported with a strong tradition of Catholicism and Catholic patrons provide a mythical backdrop with a label of moral authority with intention of helping the poor and people in need. This assumption can be applied more or less to almost every criminal group in Mexico with an understandable variation on the scale of Christian commitments (see Milenio 2012).

The president elect, Enrique Peña Nieto has to deal with these problems without any mistakes in the next few years that would eventually deepen even further the crisis of trust in Mexican society. He has to face his opponents and persuade them that authoritative tendencies of PRI belong to history and that he is able to deal with the current problems of the country. During his electoral campaign he has stressed several times that he is willing to fight organized crime without any intentions for entering into pacts with criminal organizations. He proclaimed that his government would be democratic, modern and open to criticism (Castillo – Corcoran 2012). This is crucial for future development that is based on the re-establishing trust in central government that has been lost in recent years. It is more than clear that it will not be possible without close cooperation with the USA and the international community involved in the region. However, there is also a chance that the initiatives will ignite a backfire that will undermine the whole effort in the eyes of the domestic population and the distrust will be deepened.

As a response to shared dissatisfaction, it is more than important to discuss the various approaches multilaterally and implement the final decision on the basis of consensus. Some voices call for innovative solutions that have been designed and evaluated for many years now; however, the veto position of the USA has prevented their implementation (see Freeman 2006, 17-24; Robinson – Scherlen 2007: 153-180). One of the most controversial is the decriminalization of possession of small amount of light drugs in order to initiate change in the market. Calderón stressed in his speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2011 that the way to eliminate the activities of cartels is to cut the demand. If it is impossible, the governments are obligated to consider other market alternatives for successful solution of the problem (see JMP 2011). This position is in accordance with the opinions of experts on Latin America and drug eradication that are convinced that the drug war requires a paradigm shift

with focus on de-criminalization and health services for the drug- addicted (Rawlins 2011). The thesis itself is strongly criticized by the conservative groups in the United States that argue that it would put even more drugs into the hands of users and increase the size of cartels' export markets. As opponents, they judge the idea of liberalization as misleading and instead of that recommend the US enforcement programmes and international cooperation initiatives, basically the approach that is being implemented nowadays (Kleiman 2011, 99-101).

Based on the presented arguments we can assume that the whole dynamics is going to reflect the counter- drug policy imposed that will affect every-day life in Mexico in the next few years. It is hard to predict the progress in the numbers and fatalities that occur as a result of violent contestation and campaign against drug cartels. However, several academics assume that violence will not continue at the levels recorded in recent years (Molzahn – Riós – Shirk 2012). On the other hand, regardless of the proposals and applied policies, there is no optimism about the situation improving in the short term. There is no doubt that drug-trafficking in Mexico will remain one of the top priorities in the next few years and will affect the security situation in the country and the whole region of North and Central America.

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