

# Mexico, a criminal country

by Rafael Barajas and Pedro Miguel

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**Without drug money, the Mexican economy would collapse, which is why politics, economics and gangsterism are entwined at the highest levels.**

When a police force arrests 43 students and hands them over to narco-gangsters who kill them as a “lesson”, then the police work for a narco-state that entwines organised crime and political power. The same police force also machine-gunned students, killing six and seriously wounding six more; it seized a student, tore the skin from his face, ripped out his eyes and left him lying in the street. This is a narco-state that practises terrorism.

These things happened in Iguala, the third-biggest city in the state of Guerrero, Mexico. The police attacked a group of students from the Ayotzinapa rural teacher training college and are accused of leading them to their deaths. Iguala’s mayor, José Luis Abarca, and his wife, María de Los Angeles, who have close links with a cartel in the region, are suspected of ordering this operation. They were arrested on 4 November.

Mexico’s rural teacher training centres were established 80 years ago to provide high-quality rural teaching and give young teachers from poor backgrounds the chance to better themselves. But these aims, inherited from the revolution (1910-17), have clashed with the neoliberal economic model adopted since the 1980s. According to neoliberal logic, public education limits the scope to exploit education as a commodity, and the countryside harbours relics of the past (indigenous communities or peasant farmers who stand in the way of expanding export-focused agro-business). That is why Mexico’s 15 remaining rural teacher training centres are under threat, as is evident from budget cuts and the accusation by the media and politicians that they are “seedbeds for guerrillas”, according to the former secretary general of the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI), Elba Esther Gordillo; havens for “good-for-nothings and delinquents”, according to a debate on Televisa (1 December 2012); and “dens of organised crime,” as Ricardo Alemán wrote in *El Universal*, 7 October 2014.

The Ayotzinapa students are fighting for their college’s survival. They have been topping up meagre state subsidies — \$3.6m a year to cover tuition, accommodation and medical care for just over 500 students, 40 instructors and six administrative staff — through fund-raising. The Ayotzinapa students kidnapped on 26 September had gone to Iguala to organise a fund-raiser. A police witness has revealed that the injured students were made to walk a long distance before being beaten, humiliated, doused with petrol and burned alive. All that remained was ashes, teeth and bone fragments.

## Drug money oils the economy

Mexicans have grown used to news of decapitations, group executions and torture, but this story has aroused unprecedented indignation, leading to widespread protests in late November. This proof of terrorism stemming from the way power is shared by politicians and cartels raises troubling questions about the reach of Mexico’s narco-state and its capacity for repression.

It also exposes a structural problem: drug money makes the Mexican economy go round. A 2010 US-Mexican study estimated that the cartels are responsible for an annual cash flow of between \$19bn and \$29bn from the US to Mexico. According to Kroll, the leading risk and security consultancy, the figure fluctuates between \$25 and \$40bn. So the drugs trade may be the main source of foreign currency revenue, ahead of oil exports (\$25bn) and remittances from expatriates (\$25bn). This money feeds directly into the financial system, which is the backbone of the neoliberal order. Stemming the flow would lead to the economic collapse of the country. Mexico and the narco-economy are mutually dependent.

The alliance between politics and drugs extends throughout the country. Entire regions — including the states of Sinaloa, Chihuahua, Michoacán, Guerrero, Tamaulipas, Veracruz and Oaxaca — are under the cartels' control. They appoint civil servants and police chiefs and cut deals with state governors. Irrespective of the political affiliation of the state's representatives, authority remains in the hands of organised crime. A few weeks ago, a video released by the Knights Templar cartel showed Ricardo Vallejo Mora, the son of the former governor of Michoacán, in relaxed conversation with Servando Gómez Martínez, known as "la Tuta", the godfather of the criminal organisation that runs this state. In these regions, organised crime takes its cut, and engages in kidnap, rape and murder with impunity. Inhabitants live in a nightmare, and in some states their only option has been to organise self-defence militias.

There are indications that the narco-state has infected the highest spheres of Mexican political life. No party or region is immune, especially the biggest: the ruling PRI, the National Action Party (PAN) and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). The cartels cannot operate without the cooperation of politicians and civil servants at all levels. Money plays a determining role in election campaigns, which also offer an effective means of laundering cash.

President Enrique Peña Nieto of the PRI has been in power since 2012, and there is no direct evidence linking him to organised crime. But during one of the most expensive election campaigns in Mexico's history, the press revealed murky dealings amounting to several million dollars. The scandal made waves in Mexico, but the international community stayed silent. It is impossible to measure just how much money Peña Nieto spent to win the election. But on 5 November an electoral commission established that the PRI had spent more than 4.5bn pesos (\$330m, 13 times the legal limit). The commission was unable to investigate many secret transactions that would have produced a higher figure. Officially, no one knows the source of this money, a worry in a country riddled with drug trafficking. In territories dominated by organised crime, the local cartels actively support the PRI.

## **Promises not kept**

Promises to tackle narco-trafficking effectively were a key part of Peña Nieto's campaign; he guaranteed results within a year. That was three years ago. Many of the electorate hoped that the PRI's policy would be more effective than that of its predecessor, led by Felipe Calderón, but its security plan is almost exactly the same: the US is watching to ensure its security doctrine is followed. So the murders have gone on. According to a federal government agency, the National Public Security System (SNSP), there were 57,899 wilful homicides during the first 20 months of Peña Nieto's government.

The violence from organised crime tends to relegate the crimes of the state to second place, yet they are far from insignificant. The government claims that the Ayotzinapa killings were an isolated incident. Mexicans have good reason to think otherwise. Peña Nieto, during his time as governor of the state of México in 2006, ordered a crackdown on the citizens of San Salvador Atenco, who had long resisted the seizure of their land for the building of an airport. Many human rights violations were committed, including sexual assaults on female detainees. No charges have ever been brought.

Since Peña Nieto came to power, the prisons have been full of people whose only crime is to have fought for their rights, land or patrimony and defended their families against organised crime. This August, the Nestora Libre committee, a defence organisation for political prisoners, claimed that since December 2012 at least 350 people had been locked up on political grounds. In Michoacán, Dr José Manuel Mireles, the founder of a self-defence militia, was arrested with 328 members of his group. In Guerrero, Nestora Salgado, 13 community police officers and four people's leaders who opposed the construction of La Parota dam were also imprisoned. In Puebla, 33 people are behind bars for opposing the building of a highly polluting thermo-electric power station. In Mexico City, Quintana Roo, Chiapas and many other states, it is impossible to count the number of political prisoners. In the states of Sonora and Chiapas, citizens who protested about water privatisation have been jailed, along with those who asked for fertiliser.

Since the start of Peña Nieto's administration, the forces of order have employed dirty war tactics, reminiscent of the political repression in Latin America from the 1960s to the 80s. Nepomuceno Moreno, a member of the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity, was tortured and killed in the

state of Sonora while taking part in a caravan for peace. In Chihuahua, assassins killed Ismaël Solorio and Manuelita Solís, who were defending water resources against Canadian mining companies. Atilano Roman, the leader of a movement for people displaced by the construction of the Picachos dam, was killed in the state of Sinaloa.

The atrocities in Iguala have increased popular anger, now visible in traditionally apathetic sectors. The survival of the regime is under threat in a previously unthinkable way. None of the PRI's traditional weapons — co-optation, hostile media coverage, infiltration, provocation, defamation — have managed to contain it. Attempts to buy families' silence, acts of repression, incitements to violence, the campaign against Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the main leader of the opposition left, trying to blame him for the violence against the students, and the mainstream media's defence of the president, have only heightened anger and increased the desire for change.

The movement in support of the students and their families took unprecedented action on 10 November and blocked Acapulco's international airport for more than three hours. This is a major tourist entry point to the country. It is likely that further action will follow, targeting Guerrero's other major airports and motorways.

Mexico's prosecutor general, Jesús Murillo Karam, repeated that Ayotzinapa was an isolated case on 7 November when he was asked if he believed it was a state crime. "Iguala is not the state," he replied. But what happened there shows what this state has become.