Mexican War on Drugs and Corruption

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Introduction
The Mexican government waging war on drugs was not a surprise, but what was striking is the death toll related to it. Since the 2006, the numbers of death related to organized crime increased rapidly and dramatically. By the end of the Felipe Calderón administration in November 2012, the number reached over 70,000. This death toll was the sum of “Drug War”, which contained the Calderón’s war on drugs and the turf wars among the drug trafficking organizations. In December with the new president, Enrique Peña Nieto, the situation was unchanged.

Mexico has been used as a narco-corridor to the United States for the Andean cocaine industry since the Colombian drug cartels were forced to shift their shipping routes in the 1980s. Its geographical proximity and historical ties of the cities at the Northern borders made Mexico an attractive transit point. In the border cities, such as Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, cross border activities are common. Some have relatives at both sides of the border to visit, some may go to the other side of the river for shopping, and transport legitimate and illegitimate commodities, including drugs and people.

The significance of Mexico in drug trade is not only limited to its role as transit state, but also as a major supplier of marijuana heroin, and methamphetamines, which are produced in Mexico. Regarding the opium poppy production, Mexico is a third largest producer in the world since 2005, following the record of Myanmar. Methamphetamine seized was 6 tonnes in 2009, and 13 tonnes in 2010. However, it is marijuana that brings most profits to the drug cartels. The government eradicated about 30,000 hectares of marijuana fields every year until 2006, and made seizures between 1,500 to 1,900 tonnes.

This paper will examine corruption in Mexican Drug War and the efforts of the Calderón administration. First section refers to bribery of drug trafficking organizations. Second section will investigate two types of drug wars: drug cartels’ turf war and Calderón’s war on drugs.

Corruption

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5 Ibid., p 51
In Mexico, corruption is socially accepted as “part of life and the cultural codes.”\textsuperscript{7} Bribes can be incentive for people to accelerate the process in business, tie people, and smooth the situation.\textsuperscript{8} This is also applied to the drug industry, and such arrangements have been enabled by the financial power of the drug cartels. Money allowed drug cartels to facilitate plaza, and someone controlling plaza is paying to and negotiating with the government authorities.\textsuperscript{9}

In the late 1990s, the Tijuana cartel’s operation was described as “approximately 7 tons of cocaine and returned $90 million to Mexico within a 90-day time frame,”\textsuperscript{10} and to afford weekly expenditure of US $1 million on bribes.\textsuperscript{11} Between 2009 and 2012, Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman of the Sinaloa cartel was listed as one of billionaires and powerful people in the world.\textsuperscript{12} It is said that the cartels paid about $3 billion annually for bribes.\textsuperscript{13}

The serious problem of narco-corruption is difficulty in refusing it. According to a Tijuana police chief who was assassinated in 2000, drug traffickers send a suit case full of cash to the target; and being refused the offer, they will send a gun in the same suit case.\textsuperscript{14} It is not merely an exchange of money and services, but an exchange of money and life to the government officials: in Spanish, this deal is known as polomo o plata (lead or silver).

Corruption backed up by intimidation has been a predicament in Mexican drug control operation. Law enforcement and judicial system seems to be almost paralyzed by it.

**Mexican Drug War**

Drug War in Mexico contains two types of wars: one is the series of wars among the drug trafficking organizations over their turfs, and the other is war on drugs waged by the Calderón administration. These wars are different in nature, but in some aspects, they are connected and affecting each other. The following sections will investigate turf wars among the drug trafficking organizations (cartels) and Calderón’s war on drugs.

**Turf Wars of the Cartels**

The origin of Mexican drug cartels was the Guadalajara cartel formed by Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo in the 1980s, which controlled the major part of Mexican drug trafficking. Later, five cartels were separated from the Guadalajara cartel: Sinaloa, Tijuana, Sonora, Juárez and Gulf.\textsuperscript{15} These organizations sometimes cooperate for business, and the alliance was known as...
“the Federation”. The Federation is an ad hoc form of connection, and it is a product of convenience.\footnote{Cook, C. W., *Mexico’s Drug Cartels*, CRS Report for Congress, 16 October 2007, p 1}

Mexican drug trafficking organizations have been notorious for their aggression, and the Tijuana cartel in the late 1990s was described as “one of the most powerful, violent and aggressive trafficking groups in the world.”\footnote{Milford, Op cit.} Some groups formed enforcer units and used them for execution. For example, the Tijuana cartel gathered youngsters from the US and Juárez; the Gulf cartel had death squad known as the Zetas; and the Sinaloa cartel has the Negros.\footnote{Cook, C. W., *Mexico’s Drug Cartels*, CRS Report for Congress, 16 October 2007, p 6; and Grillo, I., *El Narco: The Bloody Rise of Mexican Drug Cartels*, 2011, Bloomsbury: London, p 81} The targets were, however, limited to those who involved in drug trades.

The waves of violence expanded to Mexico were triggered by the death of Amado Carrillo Fuentez who was controlling the plaza in Ciudad Juárez in 1997.\footnote{Milford, Op cit.} Due to its location, the turf of the Juárez cartel was a lucrative one. Therefore, the cartels in the neighbouring cities challenged to the Juárez cartel to expand their territories.

Controlling plaza means someone is paying to the authorities in order to ensure the safety and security of trafficking business. The drug war, therefore, was originally limited in the North of Mexico, the territories of the Gulf cartel, the Sinaloa cartel and the Tijuana cartel trying to take advantage of the Juárez cartel.


In addition, there are some groups separated from the main body and operate independently tend to lead territorial disputes. Split of the organizations is often caused by the arrests of leaders, and increased frequency of turf wars. The Gulf cartel, which controls cocaine and marijuana via Matamoros, was separated to a group loyal to Jorge Eduardo Costilla Sanchez and to Osiel Cardenas Guillen after their arrests, and increased disputes in Reynosa.\footnote{‘Mexico’s Gulf Cartel leader captured after military operation’, *New York Post*, 18 August 2013, http://www.nypost.com/p/news/international/mexico_gulf_cartel_leader_captured_pigQApTRQszOlaFpxoGbgJ (accessed 23 August 2013)}

Apart from the power struggle within the organizations, the Gulf cartel faced conflicts with its former enforcer unit the Zetas. The Zetas and the Gulf cartel start fighting in 2010, which
turned Tamaulipas a dangerous area.\textsuperscript{23} Due to the repeated aggressions, the Gulf cartel was weakened by the end of Calderón’s administration because of the loss of big bosses and fight with the Zetas.\textsuperscript{24}

Territorial disputed of the drug trafficking organizations was expanded by the key traffickers arrests, and emergence of new organizations. Since 2006, the Calderón’s war on drugs added fuel to the use of violence by the cartels, adding the government authorities, and even to innocent bystanders to their targets.

\textit{Calderón’s War on Drugs}

The term ‘war on drugs’ is often referred as a metaphor to describe strong will to deal with drug problem or to indicate the perception of drugs as a security threat. The Calderón administration, however, seemed to have waged war against drugs literary. Administration’s drug control policy may be characterized by the use of military force against drug trafficking organizations, “kingpin strategy”, and police reform with the support of Mérida Initiative.

Military Deployment

Soon after the Calderón administration functioned, the military was deployed to Michoacan, home to \textit{la Familia} cartel, to conduct counter-organized crime operations. More than 4,000 personnel were engaged in drug control operation in 2006, and the number of military deployment increased by year.\textsuperscript{25} By 2011, more than 96,000 personnel, about half of the entire military, were sent to fight against drug cartels.\textsuperscript{26} The largest number deployed to Tamaulipas where the Gulf cartel and the Zetas frequently had disputes, and 15,400 personnel were stationed in 2011.\textsuperscript{27} Other headquarters of major drug trafficking organizations are also under protection of the military, such as Nuevo León.

They deployment of the military in civil matter generated lots of concerns including human rights violations as they are not trained for policing.\textsuperscript{28} According to Longmire, there are two reasons why the military was allocated for the mission: the army was the “cleanest” organization in the government; and the military command lines are simpler than that of the police.\textsuperscript{29}

According to a statistics from the National Survey on Victimization and Perception of Public Safety 2012 (la Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y Percepción sobre Seguridad Pública, ENVIPE), 35% of the Mexicans have “little confidence” in the federal police, which is lot lower than their confidence in the army and the navy, 14% and 11% respectively have “little

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{25} 'Mexico troops sent to fight drugs’, \textit{BBC News}, 12 December 2013, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/6170981.stm (accessed 15 August 2013)
  \item \textsuperscript{29} Longmire, S., \textit{Cartel: The Coming Invasion of Mexico’s Drug War}, 2011, Pargrave MacMillan: New York, p 113
\end{itemize}
Therefore, Calderón made the decision to facilitate it in anti-drug cartel operations.

Kingpin Strategy
The operations the military engaged were aiming at the arrests of the major drug cartel leaders in order to weaken the organization, known as “kingpin strategy”. This strategy was applied in Colombia, and believed to have contributed to the demolition of the Medellin cartel and the Cali cartel. The Calderón administration caught 25 out of 37 most wanted drug traffickers. Some of them are extradited to the United States and serving their time in US prisons.

Captures of kingpins fueled the violence in Mexico because the cartels retaliated the government for their leader’s arrests. The Mexican drug traffickers have no hesitation to display their disapproval to the government. The acting chief of the federal police, Edgar Millán Gómez, was assassinated in 2008. This murder of the federal police chief was regarded as retaliation by the Sinaloa cartel. It is because a few months prior to the incident, the Sinaloa cartel was busted and one of the key members of the cartel, Alfredo Beltrán Leyva, and 10 sicarios were arrested. In Sinaloa, police car was ambushed by drug traffickers and federal and state police officers were killed. It was cartel’s fight against government’s anti-drug policies.

During the Calderón administration, not only police officers but other government officials were targeted, such as mayors of small towns with active drug trafficking organizations. More than 20 mayors were taken their lives by the drug cartels. Mayors in Mexico have authority to command municipal police forces which deal with local crimes.

In Monterrey, the mayor found out that “400 out of 750 police officers under his command passed reliability test”, and clearing up the municipal police aggravated local drug cartel, the Zetas. The cartel kidnapped two top officials from the Monterrey’s municipal government. Tijuana municipal police repeatedly replacing officers, and in 2008, 500 officers were

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replaced because of suspected corruption and connection with the cartel. Although the municipal police forces do not play major role in drug control as it is a jurisdiction of the federal police, the municipal police are vulnerable to corruption.

Police Reform and Mérida Initiative
Reforming the police forces and increase reliability and efficiency have been agenda to the Mexican government for long time. There are police forces at three level: federal, state and municipalities. Federal police forces play a major role in anti-drug operations, and the government has been focused on the reform of it. President Vicente Fox tried to establish effective investigative police institution to tackle drug problems by replacing corrupt police agency to new one.

The Federal Investigation Agency (Agencia Federal de Investigación, AFI) established in 2001 was a counterpart of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). AFI was an elite squad, vetted, trained by US officers and well-paid. Four years later, nearly 1,500 out of 7,000 AFI agents were under investigation due to the suspected involvement in drug related crime and corruption. In 2008, it was reported that a kidnapping related to La Familia, a powerful drug trafficking organization based in Michoacán, was conducted by a group in AFI uniform.

Furthermore, it was revealed that former head of SIEDO was on the payroll of Sinaloa based drug trafficking organizations: one was Beltrán Leyva brothers and the other was Zambada brothers. Noe Ramirez Mandujano sold information in exchange for $450,000 as a part of monthly payment. In addition, 35 officials of SIEDO were discharged due to suspicion of corruption. Anti-drug agencies and Mexican drug czar were often connected to drug cartels, and frequently replacing members.

Distrust to the existing agencies made the Calderón administration to rely on the military, and reform police institutes. The AFI was eventually replaced by the Federal Police (Polícia Federal, PF) established under the Secretariat of Public Security (secretario de Seguridad Pública, SSP) and the Federal Ministerial Police (Polícia Federal Ministerial, PFM) set under the Attorney General of Mexico (Procuraduría General de la República, PGR) in 2009. Following the new structure, the government discharged 300 federal police commanders, and set a new educational requirement for recruits.

39 ‘Crime-torn Mexican ‘FBI’ Investigates 1,500 Agents,’ Reuters, 4 December, 2005
The Federal Police advanced quickly with the support of the Mérida Initiative, $1.5 billion package for counter-narcotics operation in Mexico and Central America, provided between 2008 and 2010. One of the four aims the Mérida Initiative had was reform of police and judicial system. It focused on “training and equipping Mexican security forces engaged in counterdrug efforts” and the PF had benefit of receiving those support from the early stage.\(^4\)

In order to minimize the risks of corruption and increase efficiency, the Calderón administration allowed the US law enforcement officials to work directly with Mexican counterparts. This approach was welcomed by the US government as it provided a benefit to “bypass more corrupt agencies.”\(^4\) Mérida Initiative increased in US anti-drug assistance to Mexico, and closer working relationship in security and intelligence communities.\(^5\)

Calderón’s efforts brought good training opportunities and equipments for the Mexican police, and more fund and support from the United States. The effectiveness of the new police institutions, however, may require more time to show results and to earn confidence from the citizens. In 2010, there were nearly 50,000 homicide cases in Mexico, but only 5% of them were investigated.\(^6\) The death toll continues to rise. At the same time, 3,200 officers (10%) of the federal police were dismissed for the charge of linkage with drug cartels, and disciplinary actions were taken to another 1,000 officers.\(^7\) Reported incidents of police involvement in drug related kidnapping and violence, ENVIPE statistics indicates that 57% of people think the federal police is corrupt.\(^8\)

**Summary**

Mexican Drug War may be an unfortunate mixture of criminal’s turf wars and government efforts to eliminate these organizations. Drug traffickers’ financial power allowed them to penetrate their influence into government authorities, particularly police forces. Their infiltration prevented the government to reform their law enforcement units, and endangering credibility of the police. Despite of the efforts to reform police forces, corruption still remains widely in the police.

The deployment of the military forces into counter-narcotics operations generated criticisms, but the military seems to have more resistance to corruption. Therefore it gained credit from the Mexicans.

Regarding the numbers of death and prosecution, Calderón’s war on drugs does not seem to have clear success. It, however, weakened large cartels, such as the Tijuana cartel and the

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\(^7\) Gibler, J., To Die in Mexico: dispatches from inside the drug war, City Lights Books, 2011, p 202

\(^8\) Longmire, Op cit., p 118

Sinaloa cartel, and left small to medium size drug trafficking organizations. Whether having large numbers of small drug trafficking organizations is a step forward to controlling drug trafficking successfully may be arguable. However, smaller organizations with less financial resources might have less power to corrupt officials.

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