

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Mexico: The Rot Deepens

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Events in Mexico seem to be conspiring to validate fears that the country could become a “failed state.”

The latest policy and public-relations disaster for President Felipe Calderón’s government occurred on February 20. Inmates at the state prison in Apodaca, not far from Mexico’s main industrial city, Monterrey, staged a riot. It turned out that most of the rioters were members of the increasingly powerful Zetas drug cartel. They used the riot to kill forty-four members of the rival Gulf cartel, [then escaped](#) from the prison. Mexican authorities immediately launched an investigation of the guards who were on duty at the time, suspecting (with good reason, given their total inability or unwillingness to prevent the bloodshed) that at least some of them colluded with the Zetas cartel.

The Apodaca slaughter and prison break would have been shocking enough if it were an isolated incident, but that is hardly the case. A January prison uprising in the Gulf coast city of Altamira resulted in the deaths of thirty-one inmates. Another riot in a facility in Tamaulipas state in October killed twenty. A year earlier in the state of Durango, a prison riot took the lives of twenty-three inmates, and a 2009 battle at another Durango prison killed nineteen people.

Most troubling about the mounting prison violence is that those earlier bloodlettings also apparently involved fights between rival drug gangs. And in at least two of the episodes, guards seemed to be accomplices who aided one of the factions. That aspect suggests that Mexico’s notoriously corrupt prison system—a problem that has festered for decades—is now totally out of control.

Whichever drug cartel is ascendant in any given region appears to exercise far more power than the Mexican government in those institutions.

The realization that certain drug gangs effectively run Mexico's prisons might come as a shock to most people in the United States, but incident after incident confirms either the impotence or the venality of the Mexican criminal-justice system. Drug capos have been able to control trafficking operations from their prison cells with impunity. Lower-level personnel sometimes have to wait until a prison break can be arranged, but even that is little more than a minor inconvenience.

A typical incident occurred in May 2009 when fifty-three inmates, many them members of the Zetas, escaped from Cieneguillas prison in Zacatecas state without encountering any resistance. Security-camera footage showed that guards at the prison simply stood by as an armed gang led the escapees away. It was not clear whether the guards had been bribed or intimidated, but federal authorities jailed the prison director and all forty-four guards because of suspected complicity.

The degree of collusion involved in that prison break, though, was minor compared to the scandal that broke in July 2010. Guards and officials at the prison in Gómez Palacio in Durango allegedly did a lot more than allow prisoners to escape and resume their lives of crime on the outside—they supposedly let inmates out temporarily so that they could carry out assigned killings on behalf of their employer. After completing their assignment, the hit men would return to their prison cells. In essence, the prison served the drug gangs as little more than a dormitory or hotel—paid for, of course, by Mexican taxpayers.

In fact, it appeared that the prison authorities may have done more than merely allow the inmates to have one-day or weekend passes for their work. The killers apparently were given weapons and even official vehicles to assist them in their rampages. The Gómez Palacio scandal was especially upsetting because the cartel soldiers who were allowed to use the prison as a base of operations were responsible for the slaughter at a birthday party in Torreón that resulted in the deaths of seventeen innocent people.

The cartels have become so potent that leading members routinely conduct business while in prison. As *New York Times* correspondent Marc Lacey notes,

“Mexico’s prisons, as described by inmates and insiders and viewed during several visits, are places where drug traffickers find a new base of operations for their criminal enterprises, recruit underlings, and bribe their way out for the right price.” Jail breaks are so frequent as to be almost routine. A suspected trafficker in a Sinaloa prison disappeared during a party held for inmates, complete with a band. Perhaps the most famous episode occurred in 2001 when Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzmán, the leader of the Sinaloa cartel, Mexico’s most powerful drug-trafficking organization, made his escape by being smuggled out in a prison laundry cart—again, with guards apparently having developed a case of collective blindness.

Drug traffickers typically are celebrities in prison, with other inmates becoming eager followers and guards frequently becoming employees. Cartel leaders stay in contact with operatives on the outside by using newly released inmates as couriers. At least that was the most common method until recently. Now, they usually just use cell phones.

Lacey describes the situation in one prison where many of the top drug lords are held. “The prisoners are a privileged lot, wearing designer clothing and enjoying special privileges ranging from frequent visits by girlfriends to big-screen televisions in their spacious cells.” Not exactly what one would call doing hard time. Pedro Arellano, an expert on Mexico’s prisons, states it succinctly: “The authorities no longer control the prisons—the drug lords do.” There is now overwhelming evidence that he is correct.

The Mexicans’ Choice

The pervasive corruption in Mexico’s prisons is merely one reason among many why Calderón’s controversial military-led offensive against the drug cartels—which Washington has backed so enthusiastically—has failed. Even when Mexican security personnel apprehend traffickers, those miscreants rarely come to trial. Convictions are even less frequent. And even when cartel members are sent to prison, that seems to become little more than a temporary inconvenience—unless, of course, they are targeted by inmates from a rival drug gang.

Mexico will hold a presidential election this summer, when the country’s voters will have an opportunity to decide whether to continue the antidrug strategy that Calderón has pursued for more than five years at a cost of some forty-seven thousand lives. Mexico’s constitution bars him from seeking another

term, and that is probably a good thing. His war against the drug cartels, the centerpiece of his presidency, has become a fiasco.

It will be up to Calderón's successor to decide whether to stay the course or try a different strategy. Whatever overall policy that new leader chooses, though, the need to clean up the rot in Mexico's horrific prison system has now reached crisis levels. A nation that cannot even come close to controlling its own prisons is in danger of sliding into the abyss and becoming a failed state. And that prospect should be a matter of grave concern to U.S. leaders. A failed state—or even a de facto narcostate—on our southern frontier would pose a clear and serious security problem for the United States.

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