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Chaos on the Border

by Ted Galen Carpenter

09.11.2009

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Mexican President Felipe Calderón's surprise move on September 7 to replace his attorney general, Eduardo Medina Mora, has fueled speculation that he may abandon his confrontational strategy toward the country's drug cartels. That strategy, which has used the army to an unprecedented degree against traffickers since Calderón took office in December 2006, has backfired badly. More than thirteen thousand people have perished in the soaring violence since then, and the carnage in 2009 is on a record pace.

Even before Medina Mora's surprise ouster, there was a growing buzz that Calderón might be rethinking the drug war, and that in marked contrast to Washington's long-standing attitude, the Obama administration would support a less aggressive approach. In mid-August, Calderón signed a measure that the Mexican Congress had passed in April decriminalizing the personal possession of small quantities of all illegal drugs. Under the new law, anyone caught with the equivalent of as many as five marijuana joints or four lines of cocaine can no longer be arrested or fined—much less imprisoned. Police will simply give them the address of a rehabilitation clinic and urge them to overcome their habit.

That was precisely the sort of apostasy regarding drug policy that used to generate outrage and threats of retaliation from officials in Washington. This time, the reaction was dramatically different. When asked about the reform measure during a visit to Mexico in July, U.S. drug czar Gil Kerlikowske merely responded that the United States would "wait and see" how it worked out.

Despite such developments, there is little evidence that Calderón's government is about to abandon the military campaign against the cartels. Indeed, it is more likely that these changes are designed to clear the decks for the escalation of that war.

Medina Mora's departure is more than a little ominous. Throughout his tenure, he had feuded with Genaro Garcia Luna, the secretary of public security. The departure of Medina Mora and his replacement by a less prominent figure, obscure federal prosecutor Arturo Chavez, strengthens Garcia Luna's relative position in the administration. Since his approach to the drug war is even more hard-line than Medina Mora's, his rise in status does not suggest the onset of an appeasement or accommodation strategy regarding drug traffickers.

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Moreover, Chavez comes from the same faction of the governing National Action Party (PAN) as Garcia Luna, and the two men have been longtime political allies. George W. Grayson, a professor of government at the College of William and Mary and the author of *Mexico: Narcoviolence and a Failed State?*, concludes that Chavez's appointment not only is a victory for Garcia Luna in a bureaucratic power struggle, it "backs the muscular approach as they try to ramp up their capabilities to fight the cartels."

The official justification for Calderón's signing of the drug-law reform also indicates that the hard-line policy toward the cartels is still in place, and might even intensify. Commenting on the reform measure, Bernardo Espino del Castillo, an official with the attorney general's office who helped write the new law, stated: "This frees us from a flood of small crimes that have saturated our federal government and allows the authorities to go after big criminals."

Nor is there any indication that Washington would welcome a de-escalation of Mexico's offensive against the cartels. While the Obama administration seems more receptive than its predecessors to mild "harm reduction" drug-policy reforms in Mexico, any truce or accommodation with the drug lords would be another matter entirely. Such a move would

signal that Mexico City had decided to abandon—or at least greatly scale back—the goal of trying to stem the flow of illegal drugs into the United States in exchange for a commitment from the traffickers to cool the violence.

That step, in the view of zealous U.S. drug warriors—and even relatively moderate Obama administration policy makers—would be a devil's bargain. Although the U.S. response to Mexico's new drug decriminalization law was relatively low-key, officials went out of their way to reaffirm an uncompromising stance toward the cartels. "We know that Mexican law-enforcement authorities are continuing their efforts to target drug traffickers," U.S. Department of Justice spokesperson Laura Sweeney emphasized,

Our friends and partners in Mexico are waging an historic battle with the cartels, one that plays out on the streets of their communities each day. Here in the United States we will continue to enforce federal narcotics laws as we investigate, charge, and arrest cartel leaders and their subordinates in our joint effort to dismantle and disrupt these cartels.

The bottom line is that the drug-war violence in Mexico is likely to get worse, not better, in the coming months. Calderón is a stubborn man, and he seems intent on ignoring pleas for a de-escalation even from some of his political supporters. "The people of Mexico are losing hope, and it is urgent that Congress, the political parties and the president reconsider this strategy," said Senator Ramon Galindo, a Calderón ally and fellow PAN member. Galindo may have a special vantage point to be alarmed, since he is a former mayor of Ciudad Juarez, the city on the Mexico-U.S. border that has been the epicenter of the drug violence.

Washington should be concerned about the possible escalation of Calderón's ill-advised strategy as well. The chaos on our southern border is already at alarming levels. Yet, as bad as the situation has been over the past three years, it may just be a mild prelude to what we will encounter going forward.



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Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign-policy studies at the Cato Institute, is the author of eight books on international affairs, as well as the February 2009 Cato Policy Analysis, “Troubled Neighbor: Mexico’s Drug Violence Poses a Threat to the United States.” He is also a contributing editor to *The National Interest*.

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