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Mexico's New Government: Crime and Drugs Issues

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The presidency of Felipe Calderon, though it has in many ways achieved positive results, will likely be remembered mainly for the sharp upward spike in drug-related violence that took place under his administration (2006-2012). In 2006, the drugs trade was pervasive, but not particularly violent. This is no longer the case. By the end of Calderon's term, [drug-related violence had increased markedly](#). Ironically, it was Calderon's decision to send the military into his home state of Michoacan that triggered the increase in violence.

There are essentially three reasons for this unexpected, unwelcome but unequivocal outcome. Ironically one of them was that the Mexican state did indeed enjoy some success in its campaign against crime bosses. Measured in terms of the killings of criminals, the confiscation of drugs and weaponry

and the extradition of high profile suspects to the US, the Mexican government has enjoyed some success. However, this success was ultimately self-defeating in that it created vacancies for leadership positions both within and between the main cartels. These gaps became the object of violent forms of competition. This violence was not only a matter of direct action against rivals but also included indirect forms of competition, including some highly publicised killings that deliberately used gruesome means for publicity purposes and also to spread terror. Many of these 'publicity seeking' killings were directed at the media and [many journalists died](#). Then there has been change within the drugs trade itself. In recent years the US has had some success in closing down the main drug transportation routes through the Caribbean. Transit of drugs through Mexico has taken centre stage instead. A third factor has been that the main thrust of Calderon's 'war' initially put the military and police centre stage. This is despite the existence of a consensus among experts that the government cannot hope to achieve any kind of victory by military means and that policy effectiveness requires institutional reform.

If one is an optimist, one can perhaps trace a gradual learning process by which the authorities have gradually come to appreciate the importance of good governance and the rule of law rather than armed force. However the initial thrust of what Calderon notably called a 'war' was to enhance the role of Mexico's military and quasi-military forces. This approach was politically understandable. The Mexican military has for many years been unconditionally loyal to the president of the day in return for it not being expected to answer too many embarrassing questions about its distinctively [mixed human rights record](#). The military is also generally well regarded by public opinion within Mexico. Loyalty and public prestige are not obviously attributes of Mexico's civilian institutions. An additional political consideration was that Calderon's election was extremely narrow and contested. Calderon might well have hoped that an anti-crime campaign would serve as a unifying theme for his entire administration. If so, this proved to be a serious miscalculation.

Mexico now has a new government, whose general thinking about policy is not yet clear. Cynics assume that a president from the PRI will feature a return to the days of authoritarianism and corruption. This may be too hasty a judgement. What may be a significant pointer in another direction is the appointment of [Medina Mora](#), formerly Attorney General under Calderon, to be Mexican Ambassador to the US. Medina Mora was previously ambassador in London and a well-known figure at LSE. He has discussed the security issue in public many times, adopting a relatively hard-line without opposing the decriminalisation of marijuana per se. His main point is that organised crime in Mexico will not stop just because of the legalisation of marijuana. Kidnapping, extortion, the preying on undocumented migrants from Central America are unfortunately common enough and no civilised state can afford to turn a blind eye to them. Turning a blind eye to the criminal gangs would be a superficially attractive but ultimately destructive policy because of the size of the threat. The gangs, though not an immediate threat to the Mexican state, are too big and too violent to ignore.

There are some things that clearly stand in the new government's favour. The Mexican economy is in somewhat better shape than six years ago. Mexico is certainly not a 'failed state' in the sense of being bankrupted by its problems. It has the resources to move further in the direction of combating crime. The Peña Neto government is also stronger politically than Calderon's was. It lacks an overall congressional majority but is much closer to having one than any administration since 1997. It should be able to bargain its way to a majority on most issues. The PRI is also overwhelmingly strong in most state governorships and

municipalities. Unlike Calderon, Peña Neto should be able to build any necessary political alliances without any need for political dramatics.

The outcome of the 2012 US presidential election was also enormously positive for Mexico. It was not just that Obama won but that he won despite the fact that the [WASP vote](#) turned out in force to support Romney. Politics is of course an uncertain business but, from where it looks now, the Republicans will in future have to learn to compete for the 'hispanic' vote rather than seeking to outpoll it. That must be good news for Mexico whose government may get a hearing in Washington on issues such as gun control and undocumented migration. Organised crime, for the most part, flourishes under conditions of state weakness. Now that there is a stronger and better-resourced Mexican state, the tide may just have turned.

[Professor George Philip](#) is a professor of Comparative and Latin American Politics in the [Department of Government](#) at LSE. In his recent book "[Mexico's Struggle for Public Security](#)", Professor Philip argues that organised crime is best combated by institutional reforms directed at strengthening the rule of law and winning over public opinion rather than by a heavy reliance on armed force. Such reforms, which have indeed taken place in Mexico, are discussed in the book.

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