

AGUIRRE, Jerjes; HERRERA, Hugo. "Local democracy, crime and violence in Mexico: The case of Apatzingán, Michoacán".  
*Polít. crim.* Vol. 11, N° 22 (Diciembre 2016), Art. 9, pp. 656-674.  
[[http://www.politicacriminal.cl/Vol\\_11/n\\_22/Vol11N22A9.pdf](http://www.politicacriminal.cl/Vol_11/n_22/Vol11N22A9.pdf)]

**Local democracy, crime and violence in Mexico:  
The case of Apatzingán, Michoacán**

**Democracia local, crimen y violencia en México:  
el caso de Apatzingán, Michoacán**

Dr. Jerjes Aguirre Ochoa

[jerjes\\_99@yahoo.com](mailto:jerjes_99@yahoo.com)

Dr. Hugo Amador Herrera Torres

[hugoht@fevaq.net](mailto:hugoht@fevaq.net)

Profesores de la Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo.  
Morelia, Michoacán, México.

**Resumen**

En este trabajo se analiza la relación entre crimen organizado y gobierno municipal en México. Se estudia específicamente el caso del municipio de Apatzingán en el estado de Michoacán a partir de un análisis cualitativo que revela la profundidad histórica de debilidad institucional en México y la falta de consolidación de las instituciones democráticas; dos condiciones que han creado un entorno propicio para las actividades de grupos delictivos. Esto es particularmente claro en los gobiernos municipales mexicanos. A nivel de gobierno local es necesario fortalecer las instituciones gubernamentales y el Estado de Derecho y aplicar una estrategia que ataque las causas estructurales de la violencia. Asimismo, es necesario analizar el fenómeno de la violencia desde perspectivas sociológicas que consideren la inequidad y desigualdades sociales existentes.

**Palabras clave:** Crimen, imperio de la ley, México.

**Abstract**

This paper analyzes the relationship between organized crime and municipal governments in Mexico. Specifically, we study the case of the municipality of Apatzingán in the state of Michoacán from a qualitative perspective that reveals the historical depth of institutional weakness in Mexico and the lack of consolidation of democratic institutions; two conditions that have created an enabling environment for the activities of criminal groups. This is particularly clear at the level of municipal government, and underlines the need to strengthen government institutions and the rule of law, and to implement strategies that attack the structural causes of violence. It is also necessary to analyze the phenomenon of violence from sociological perspectives that consider existing socioeconomic inequalities.

**Key words:** Crime, rule of law, Mexico.

## Introduction

The violence caused by organized crime in Mexico constitutes a serious threat to security both there and in the United States. According to figures from Mexico's Public Security System for the 2007-2012 period, 104,794 homicides were registered as resulting from violent acts associated with organized crime. These figures correspond to the presidential administration of Felipe Calderon. During the current administration of President Enrique Peña Nieto (2013-2015), 50,998 homicides have been registered to date<sup>1</sup>.

This means that from 2007-to-2015 there have been more than 155,000 victims of violence. When these data are added to the constantly-rising figures related to drug use in the U.S.<sup>2</sup>, the only conclusion that can be drawn is that the strategies implemented on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border to combat drugs have failed to produce the expected results. The measures deployed against criminal organizations by the Mexican government have not significantly reduced violence or drug-trafficking to U.S. markets, while the mounting death toll in Mexico caused by violence related to drug-trafficking is shocking and painful for Mexican society.

The discussion of violence originating from drug-trafficking in Mexico has been dominated by a vision that centers on police and military action but demonstrates little comprehension of the profound and pivotal political and economic issues that underlie this terrible plague. Mexico's strategy centered on capturing or eliminating (*i.e.*, killing) the major criminal kingpins in the country. Somehow, it was thought that eradicating criminal bosses would decrease violence and eventually slow the entry of drugs into the U.S. But the result has been the fragmentation of cartels and fierce in-fighting for control of drug organizations and trade routes. Most of the deaths mentioned above can be attributed to these circumstances<sup>3</sup>.

There is abundant literature that explains or connects violence caused by drug-trafficking in Mexico with the corruption and weakness of the Mexican State<sup>4-5-6-7-8</sup>. However, these

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<sup>1</sup> SECRETARIADO DEL SISTEMA NACIONAL DE SEGURIDAD PÚBLICA (SESNSP), *Estadística delictiva México*, (2015), available from <http://www.estadisticadelictiva.secretariadodejecutivo.gob.mx/mondrian/> [15.02.2016].

<sup>2</sup> NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON DRUG ABUSE, *Nationwide Trends*, (2015), available from <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/nationwide-trends> [15.02.2016].

<sup>3</sup> RIOS, Viridiana, "Why did Mexico become so violent? A self-reinforcing violent equilibrium caused by competition and enforcement", *Trends in Organized Crime*, 16(2), (2014), pp 138-155, p. 143.

<sup>4</sup> SCHEDLER, Andreas, "Mexico's Civil War Democracy", American Political Science Association, 2013, Annual Meeting, available from SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2299314> [15.02.2016].

<sup>5</sup> MORRIS, Stephen, "Review of Organized Crime and Democratic Governability: Mexico and the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands", *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 21(1), (2011), pp 148-150, p. 152.

<sup>6</sup> EDMONDS, Poli, "The Effects of Drug-War Related Violence on Mexico's Press and Democracy", (2013), available from [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/edmonds\\_violence\\_press\\_0.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/edmonds_violence_press_0.pdf) [10.03.2016].

<sup>7</sup> CRANDALL, Russell, "Review of Drugs and Democracy in Latin America: The Impact of U.S. Policy", *Latin American Politics and Society*, 48(1), (2006), pp 192-195, p. 193.

<sup>8</sup> BOW, Bryan, *Security and the State in Mexico: Transformation and Crisis in Regional Perspective*, USA: Routledge, 2012, p. 34.

analyses reflect only a general, perspective on the Mexican situation, when what we need are detailed studies that identify specific categories and allow concrete analyses that take into account differences among the three levels of government in Mexico: federal, state and local.

This paper discusses primarily the relationship between crime and municipal (local-level) government weakness. The bloodiest and most notorious cases of violence and death in Mexico are deeply-linked to these issues of institutional weakness, especially at the municipal level. The murder of 43 students in Ayotzinapa in the state of Guerrero in 2014 is but one reflection of the level of corruption of local governments that place the police and the entire apparatus of local government at the service of drug cartels<sup>9</sup>. Another example was the massacre that occurred in San Fernando in the state of Tamaulipas, which was also linked to complicity by local police<sup>10</sup>.

Our research question involves evaluating the relation between the democratic transition at the level of municipal (local) governments and organized crime through a qualitative research approach that focuses on two specific categories of the democratic transition: accountability and the rule of law. To this end, we take the municipality of Apatzingán, Michoacán as a case study. This *municipio* is representative of many other areas in Mexico with problems of violence provoked by organized crime (Santos, 2016).

Data for the study were obtained from 30 in-depth interviews conducted with political and social actors in the municipality in the second semester of 2015. The selection of interviewees took into account figures with experience in public affairs. Local and federal congressmen, local public officials in charge of social programs, former local police officers, prosecutors, local businessmen, journalists and teachers were interviewed, principally when opportunities arose to coincide with potential interviewees in casual, relaxed conditions, such as public events, sports events, family gatherings, school events, etc., or in their offices. We elaborated a research protocol and interview format that established the principle relevant issues for data collection as accountability, the rule of law, and the transition to democracy. These issues are presented as key factors in explaining the situation of violence in the study area.

Given the conditions of insecurity and crime in the region, interviews usually began as casual conversations into which we gradually introduced aspects of local politics, crime and corruption. To improve data-gathering, we judged it best not to disclose our academic interest in crime. Also, to protect our personal safety many specific details of circumstances in Apatzingán have been omitted, though care has been taken to ensure that this does not affect substantive aspects of the study. The project includes research based on documental sources and the authors' own experiences in the area.

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<sup>9</sup> ILLADES, Esteban, "La noche más triste", *Revista Nexos*, Vol. 53 (2015), p. 19

<sup>10</sup> TURATI, Marcela, "La matanza de San Fernando: inconsistencias y falsedades", *Revista Proceso*, May (2015), p. 45.

The analysis of this area from 2007-to-2015 reveals the historical depth of institutional weakness in Mexico and the lack of consolidation of democratic institutions; two conditions that have created an environment conducive to the activities of criminal groups. There are numerous gaps of authority and legitimacy in local governments that criminal groups have proven adept at filling, particularly in tasks related to public security. At the local level, it is necessary to strengthen government institutions and the rule of law, while implementing a strategy that attacks the structural causes of violence while also strengthening interdiction, investigations, and prosecutions.

## 1. Theoretical review.

Organized crime has flourished in Mexico largely as a result of the demand for drugs in the U.S., which has spurred the formation of criminal groups devoted to drug-trafficking. This was made possible as well by the Mexican government’s leniency towards drug-trafficking and the collusion of members of government with the drug cartels<sup>11</sup>. For some time, the Mexican government chose to permit the activity of criminal groups as a way of maintaining a certain level of control over their activities<sup>12</sup>. Drug-trafficking was never perceived as a danger by the country’s governing elites, nor was there much concern for democracy or the pervasive effects that it could have upon emerging democratic processes in the country.

The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) held political power from 1929-to-1997, when the party finally lost its majority in the House of Representatives. From 1929-to-2000, every president was nominated by the PRI. For his six-year term of office, the president was the political leader of the party and ruled absolutely every aspect of political life, including the appointment of governors, mayors, union leaders, and representatives. In other words, Mexico had a six-year emperor who wielded all power during his administration<sup>13</sup>. The existence of strong presidential power weakened the independence of the judiciary, which has always been subject to the decisions of the executive branch. One reason for the deficient rule of law is precisely the lack of independence of the judiciary in relation to the executive<sup>14</sup>. However, this so-called single-party democracy did facilitate control of criminal activity by the Mexican state. The onset of the transition towards democracy in the late 1990s ruptured the PRI’s –and President’s– vertical control over distinct interest groups around the country, including criminal organizations.

During the twentieth century, Mexico generated political processes that allowed substantive political agreements between social groups that helped create conditions conducive to

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<sup>11</sup> GRAYSON, George, *Mexico: Narco-Violence and a Failed State*, New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Transaction Publishers, 2010, p. 116.

<sup>12</sup> ASTORGA, Luis, “Drug-trafficking in Mexico: A First General Assessment”, Discussion Paper No. 36, (1999), Paris, UNESCO-Management of Social Transformations, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> KRAUZE, Enrique, *La presidencia imperial. Ascenso y caída del sistema político mexicano. (1940-1996)*, México: Tusquet Editores, 1997, p. 67.

<sup>14</sup> ZAMORA, Stephen; COSSÍO, José Ramón, “Mexican constitutionalism after presidencialismo”, *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, 4(2), (2006), p. 411

economic development. In 1997, the country accelerated its process of democratic development when the PRI party lost control of the Federal Congress after 60 years of single-party rule followed, in 2000, by the election of Vicente Fox from the opposition PAN, or National Action Party, as President. With this change, Mexico gained formal recognition as a democratic nation<sup>15</sup>. The coming to power of Vicente Fox in 2000 provided a unique opportunity for a transition process that could strengthen and re-assert the independence of political institutions considered basic for the Mexican people. However, President Fox (2000-2006) did not consolidate law enforcement or the country's systems of justice, failed to establish electoral arbitration as an independent system, and was unsuccessful in cementing democratic ideals as fundamental values in Mexican society; nor did he achieve a balance of basic powers in the workings of democracy. The arrival of a political party other than the PRI should be seen as an essential, though only initial, step in a process of democratic consolidation and advancement in Mexico. One that is not yet consolidated<sup>16</sup>.

At the end of Fox's presidency in 2006, Felipe Calderon –also from the PAN party– was elected president. This succession took place amidst a crisis of legitimacy and legality in the presidential campaign. The election was won by a percentage below 0.5% of total votes, thus generating a crisis for the new government that was compounded by its refusal to allow a run-off election that might have bestowed greater legitimacy on the institution of the presidency.

It was in this context that Calderon launched his so-called “war on drugs” in 2007, and with it the onset of widespread violence in Mexico. For some authors, the war began as a means of legitimizing the Calderon administration, not as a response to a real problem for the Mexican state<sup>17-18</sup>.

With little institutional strength, the federal government had only an incipient federal police force, the army and the navy with which to combat the various criminal groups that had begun to plague the country in complicity with state and municipal authorities, all of whom operated with the huge financial resources provided by lucrative U.S. drug markets. Many governors, mayors and representatives were either in collusion with, or had their campaigns funded by, criminals<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> SCHEDLER, Andreas, “Mexico's Civil War Democracy”, American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, (2013), available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2299314>, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> UGALDE, Luis Carlos; RIVERA, Gustavo, *Fortalezas y debilidades del sistema electoral mexicano*, México: TEPJF, 2014, p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> PÉREZ, Jorge Enrique, “La guerra contra el narcotráfico: ¿una guerra perdida?”, *Espacios Públicos*, 14(30), (2011), pp. 211-230, p 214.

<sup>18</sup> ANGUIANO, Arturo, “Calderón, aprendiz de brujo o la guerra como escape”, *Región y Sociedad*, Vol. 4 (2014), pp. 285-301, p. 290.

<sup>19</sup> WILKINSON, Tracy, “Former Mexican governor indicted by U.S. on drug-trafficking charges”, Los Angeles Times [online]. 6 December (2013). Available from <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/dec/06/world/la-fg-wn-mexico-former-governor-drug-trafficking-charges-20131206> [Cited 13.03.16].

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The beginning of the Mexican government's anti-drug strategy coincides with an unfinished and imperfect process of democratic consolidation. According to Linz and Stepan's definition of democratic and consolidation<sup>20</sup> :

“A democratic transition is complete when sufficient agreement has been reached about political procedures to produce an elected government, when a government comes to power that is the direct result of a free and popular vote, when this government de facto has the authority to generate new policies, and when the executive, legislative and judicial power generated by the new democracy does not have to share with other bodies de jure.”

None of the conditions are met for the case of Mexico. The arrival of a President from outside the PRI brought some judicial independence and a greater balance of power; however clearly identifiable islands of authority still existed, especially at the level of state governments<sup>21</sup>. Achieving alternation in power at the highest level did not consolidate democratic institutions or lead to a clear balance of power at lower levels of government. On the contrary, the emerging political institutions saw their weaknesses accentuated as violence by drug cartels increased. Organized crime was flexing its muscles and demonstrating its ability to affect the process of democratic consolidation by delegitimizing state institutions and feeding the public's tendency to turn to authoritarian and anti-democratic solutions to the nation's problems, with all the corrosive effects that these have on civil society in countries so affected<sup>22</sup>. The Mexican experience seems to have followed the path of other democracies in which crime rates increase with the beginning of the democratic experience<sup>23-24-25</sup>. In the Mexican case, breaking the established order brought an increase in violence and anarchy generated by drug cartels.

On the other hand, from a sociological perspective, the violence perpetrated by organized crime is due to the fact that basic social institutions, including state organizations, have largely lost legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenry<sup>26</sup>. The democratic transition intensified this loss and so generated voids of authority and order that criminal groups were soon more than happy to fill. From this perspective, it becomes clear that these gaps in legitimacy

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<sup>20</sup> LINZ, Juan; STEPAN, Alfred, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> MÁRQUEZ, Daniel, “Democracia y partidocracia en México: la decepción democrática”, *Revista de Derecho Estasiológico Ideología y Militancia*, Vol. 3, (2014) p. 37.

<sup>22</sup> KARSTEDT, Susanne; LAFREE, Gary, “Democracy, Crime, and Justice”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 605(6), (2006) pp. 6-23, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> WANTCHEKON, Leonard; ETIENNE, Yehoue, “Crime in New Democracies.” Preliminary draft, November 8, 2002, available at <http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/politics/faculty/wantchekon/research/crime.pdf> [Accessed 05.07.16].

<sup>24</sup> BURIANEK, Jiri, “Democratization, Crime, Punishment and Public Attitudes in the Czech Republic”, *Crime, Law and Social Change*, Vol. 28, (1998), pp 213-222, p. 220.

<sup>25</sup> BERGMAN, Marcelo, “Crime and Citizen Security in Latin America – The Challenges for New Scholarship” (Review Essay), *Latin American Research Review*, No. 41, Vol. June, (2006), pp. 213-227, p. 215.

<sup>26</sup> LAFREE, Gary, *Losing Legitimacy: Street Crime and the Decline of Social Institutions in America* Boulder, Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1998, p. 157.

were more pronounced at the level of municipal governments, traditionally the weakest level in Mexico.

## **2. Municipal problems.**

Violence in Mexico has coincided with the emergence of public institutions, particularly at the level of state and local governments. Mexico is a Federal Republic composed of three levels of government: federal, state and municipal. Each level has undergone some positive changes since the democratic reform of 2000. However, at the state and local levels these changes have been very slow and largely ineffective in generating more legitimate governments that base their actions on the rule of law. With a president elected from a different party in 2000, many state governors found themselves obliged to operate without the control and support of the federal level that they had always enjoyed.

During the long PRI regime, second-level decisions by governors were consulted with the president who maintained absolute power over public life and elections in Mexico's 31 states and Federal District. With the demise of the strong presidency in Mexico in 2000, governors became masters in their states during their six-year term in office, broadly free of political or institutional checks and balances over their performance. State-level representatives, who theoretically represented a counterweight to governors, were actually appointed by state leaders, as were the members of the judiciary. With no possibility for reelection, the representatives' main concern was to maintain the support of the governor and so be able to continue their political careers; while judicial decisions were subject to the interests of governors. Because Mexican electoral law prohibits the reelection of officeholders, citizens can neither reward nor punish representatives at the voting booth for their performance; thus, there is no incentive for elected officials to actually represent their constituents' interests.

To a degree, state governors came to fill the power void left by the president, but this new centralization of power was accompanied by deep corruption in state governments. During the period of democratic transition from 2000-2013, no fewer than 41 Mexican governors were accused of corruption, though only 16 were investigated, and only four punished<sup>27</sup>. Political parties defended their former governors fiercely, strengthening the real perception that political power was above compliance with the law.

In 2006, in the aftermath of the decline of presidential power, Michoacán like many other states, found itself in an orphan-like situation, estranged from the central authority through a process that strengthened the power of the governor; unfortunately, however, he lacked the legitimacy to govern based on the rule of law. This situation of political weakness provoked violent demonstrations by various social groups, including unions of state employees. Street riots and attacks on government buildings were frequent. Additionally, the low rates of growth of the Mexican economy hit the state of Michoacán particularly

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<sup>27</sup> DAINZU, Patiño, "Impunes, los gobernadores corruptos: IMCO". *El Financiero* [online]. 21 May 2015. Available from: <http://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/economia/impunes-los-gobernadores-corruptos-imco.html> [Cited 02.03.16].

hard as private investment tended to dry up. Astonishingly, the state's principle source of income consisted in the remittances sent back by migrants in the U.S., not in employment income from jobs generated by business or industry.

The situation at the level of local governments, or municipalities, was even worse. The consolidation of the democratic process in Mexico yielded little fruit at the municipal level. During the 1997-2015 period, local governments recorded virtually no substantive change or improvement in quality or democratic legitimacy. Municipal governments cannot be re-elected and their term lasts only three years. Among other effects, this means that mayors generally fail to consolidate any project that requires more than three years. In many poor and isolated regions, mayors have little formal education and almost no administrative experience. Thus, the three-year period barely allows them time to come to understand the basic arts of governing. Indeed, they rarely experience the steep learning curve required to run a proper local government.

Another key aspect is that of financial resources. Municipal governments depend almost entirely on funding from the federal and state governments. Their only sources of local revenue are property taxes and some special permits, such as granting permission for social events. At the same time, however, they are constitutionally obliged to provide their residents with basic services, including water, roads, sewers and public safety.

This lack of financial independence at the local level severely limits the ability of municipalities to provide these services in the quantity and with the quality that the population needs<sup>28-29</sup>. Earlier, under the single-party regime, governors used to control the political party that proposed the mayors and named the "candidates" for elected office. Thus, "mayors" had to answer only to the interests of the governors, conditions that led to the emergence of schemes of political patronage under the PRI that relegated the interests and needs of citizens to a distant second place.

Many of the shortcomings of local governments in Mexico lie, precisely, in the impossibility of reelection, since this impedes the consolidation of administrative careers in politics that might permit proper accountability to citizens. There exists little culture of accountability and transparency in government. For many years, the lack of mechanisms that could have established clear responsibilities for politicians and public officials with respect to the citizenry resulted in a virtual absence of any form of accountability. As a result, the population became inured to corrupt and inefficient local governments. Local governments tend to be corrupt and delegitimized, since the primary concern of mayors is to pocket as much money as they can to ensure a life of ease after three years of government service.

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<sup>28</sup> GARCÍA DEL CASTILLO, Rodolfo, "Análisis del municipio mexicano: Diagnóstico y perspectivas. Parte I", México: CIDE, 1995, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> ACOSTA, José Octavio, "El municipio en México (Diagnóstico)", México: Centro de Servicios Municipales Heriberto Jara, 1995, p. 2.

According to Trejo and Ley<sup>30</sup>, controlling local governments was adopted as an alternative source of income by criminal groups to complement their drug-trafficking activities. Somehow, criminal groups took advantage of the existing structure of corruption in local governments and began to exploit it for their own benefit. For example, public works have long been a source of corruption at the local level. Most mayors inflate the price of such projects and then pocket some of the money. Thus, it became a common practice for criminal groups to extort money from local construction companies: the corrupt practices of mayors were appropriated by criminal groups.

Another key area of interest for criminal elements was controlling local police forces so as to prevent the entry of other criminal groups, the federal police, and, in some cases, foreign drug enforcement agencies. Controlling the local police was an essential step in establishing a power structure that entrenched terror among the citizenry while allowing free reign for criminal activity. Once organized crime groups controlled the local police and either bought-off or threatened mayors, many local governments became, in effect, parallel structures of criminal power.

### **3. Analysis of the case of Apatzingán.**

The history of criminal groups in Michoacán includes a long tradition of drug cultivation as a commercial activity. Cannabis has been grown in lowland areas of the state since the 1970s. Although, local, state and federal authorities were informed of these activities, they continued as every day, undisturbed practices. People do not remember any bloody events related to crime and drug-trafficking in that period<sup>31</sup>. All levels of government were aware of this criminal activity, but tolerated it as long as it did not affect local life and produced some economic benefit. Kidnappings, killings and extortion by criminal groups were virtually non-existent, and activities related to narcotics cultivation and marketing were centered mainly in the *Tierra Caliente* where the main town is Apatzingán.

The municipality of Apatzingán is located in southeastern Michoacán, at the coordinates 19.05 degrees' north latitude and 102.21 degrees' west longitude. It is at an elevation of 300 meters above sea level, and about 200 kilometers from the state capital of Morelia. It covers an area of 1,656.67 km<sup>2</sup>, which represents 2.81% of the surface area of the state. Traditionally, the main economic activity in this municipality has been export-oriented farming, but for years, local governments have been known as major producers of cannabis. The area's relative remoteness from the state capital and the rugged mountainous terrain that separates them allowed Apatzingán to become a production area where, in addition to cannabis, opium poppies are grown in the higher, drier areas of the municipality.

There, two of the last four mayors who served between 2000 and 2012 are currently under criminal investigations for alleged links to organized crime. Interviews with functionaries close to those governments uncovered diverse ties, from formal to informal links. The

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<sup>30</sup> TREJO, Guillermo; LEY, Sandra, "Municipios bajo fuego (1995-2014)", *Revista Nexos*, Vol. Feb. (2015), p. 218.

<sup>31</sup> MALDONADO, Salvador, "Globalización, territorios y drogas ilícitas en los estados-nación. Experiencias latinoamericanas sobre México", *Estudios Sociológicos*, Vol. XXVIII, May-August (2010), p. 421.

access of criminals to public powers in this *municipio* occurred mainly by financing local political campaigns. Indeed, the implicit or explicit support of criminal groups has been a key factor in recent municipal elections and periods of government. Using the brute force and intimidating power provided by criminal groups proved to be very effective for the machinations of local government. It was also important to gain the support of criminal groups in order to intimidate political rivals during electoral campaigns. In fact, the activities of criminal groups were decisive factors in many hotly-contested local elections. Society sometimes perceived the best candidates as those who had the most links and relations with criminal groups.

The succession of mayors in Apatzingán were well aware of this, and their policies included looking for, and working with, the ringleaders of criminal groups. The presence of an entrenched culture of tolerance for criminal activity was key to this collusion between municipal authorities and criminal organizations. Those mayors also knew about the collusion between criminal groups and the state government of Michoacán<sup>32</sup>. Criminal groups –somehow– became ‘legitimate’ social-political stakeholders with which it was necessary to establish bonds in order to maintain minimum of conditions of governance.

Interviews yielded a perceived lack of confidence in democracy and government institutions that justified acting outside the law. Support for criminal activities was often deemed valid, even legitimate, given a political system considered deeply corrupt, inequitable and not conducive to the rule of law and accountability for political acts. In a way, this falls within a sociological explanation based on the new criminology of the seventies<sup>33</sup>, in which criminal activity is justified in an environment of social inequality, political injustice and a popular culture that epitomizes drug-traffickers. The following table presents some indicators that reflect the conditions of poverty in this municipality.

Apatzingán. Indicators of basic well-being, 2016	
Percentage of population with high degree of marginalization	41%
Percentage of population with lack of resources for food	29%
Average years of schooling of the population	7
Illiterate population over 15 years	11%
Percentage of population living in overcrowded conditions	42%

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<sup>32</sup> RIVAPALACIO, Raymundo, “Michoacán, ejemplo de narco Estado”. El Financiero [online], 14 May (2014) Available from: [http://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/opinion/michoacán\\_-ejemplo-de-narco-estado.html](http://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/opinion/michoacán_-ejemplo-de-narco-estado.html) [Accessed 03.02.16].

<sup>33</sup> TAYLOR, Ian; WALTON, Paul; YOUNG, Jock, *The New Criminology*, London: Routledge, 1975, p. 12.

Percentage of population without health services	57.4%
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Source: Coneval. Annual report on poverty and social backwardness. 2011

Up to 2001, this municipality followed the same path as other municipalities in Michoacán and the rest of Mexico: every three years, a mayor was elected, along with local and federal representatives, most of whom were designated by the state governor who represents the supreme power of Mexico held by the President of the Republic<sup>34</sup>. The existence of that strong, well-defined central power imposed order and authority on the states and on municipalities like Apatzingán, where “abnormal” situations were quickly controlled by a government free to operate with little or no regard for legal frameworks or human rights exigencies. Indeed, that presidential system made it possible to disregard constitutional powers and law when political circumstances required the use of force<sup>35</sup>.

During the first decade of 2000, diverse criminal groups in Apatzingán long involved in the drug trade grew stronger while new ones emerged to challenge them. These “new” criminal organizations differed from those of the 1970s and 80s because of their extensive business connections with the major cartels in Mexico, their preference for producing heroin and synthetic drugs, and their greater propensity to resort to violence. In addition, as mentioned above, new delinquent groups began to mix in politics while steadily expanding their activities and operating horizons.

To summarize, the circumstances that affected the operations of delinquent organizations had changed in four key aspects:

1. The end of the mechanisms of control traditionally exercised by the Mexican government over criminal activity;
2. The change in drug-trafficking routes that made the area of Apatzingán a central place for drug-dealing because of its advantageous location near the Pacific coast;
3. The implementation of anti-drug strategies by the Mexican government that broke the balance among the cartels that already existed in the country;
4. The growing demand for synthetic drugs in the U.S.

As a consequence of these factors, drug-trafficking increased in Apatzingán. By 2007, the year when President Calderon initiated his anti-drug strategy, the region was in full criminal effervescence. Subsequent years (2007-2015) were marked by wars between criminal groups and the federal government that resulted in hundreds of people dead or missing, low levels of private investment, and the emergence of a perverse criminal business model based on extorting revenue from the civil population. There are several reasons why violence was so much more pronounced in Apatzingán than other regions of the state: its location, which facilitates the movement of drugs; the existence of an entrepreneurial class already experienced in the drug trade; long-established connections

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<sup>34</sup> KRAUZE, *La presidencia imperial*, cit. note n° 13, p. 114.

<sup>35</sup> AGUILAR, Héctor, “La captura criminal del Estado”, *Revista Nexos*, Vol. 445 (2015), p. 18.

with international criminal groups; and, above all, the presence of criminal leaders who understood the institutional weakness of local governments and were fully-equipped and prepared to take advantage of it.

Apatzingán’s local government should have been the first institution to attempt to control criminal groups, and most certainly should have warned state and federal authorities of that growing threat. In a context of institutional deterioration at the level of state government – the second stop-gate– no formal institutions were called in to impede, much less prevent, the reign of criminal groups. Interviews indicated that the absence of accountability played a substantial role in the process of institutional weakening in the region. Also, our contacts with politicians and public functionaries revealed little concern for the judgments of citizens, largely due to the inexistence of a political culture based on accountability and the rule of law. Rather, money and influence (*palancas*) are seen as the keys to resolving legal problems, an opinion reiterated by many of our interviewees.

Here, it is important to reiterate the role played by the democratic reforms generated during this period that intensified electoral competition and translated into contested elections but, at the same time, often made the candidates’ respective financial resources the decisive factor in outcomes. This opened the door to criminal groups, which soon began to fund electoral campaigns. Candidates for mayor in Apatzingán sought financial support from *narcos* who were already entrenched in the municipality. As a result, upon taking office these mayors had strong commitments to organized crime<sup>36-37</sup>. Perhaps the most significant difference between the drug-trafficking groups of the 1970s and contemporary traffickers is precisely the latter’s involvement in politics, especially at the local level<sup>38</sup>.

Although Mexican electoral law stipulates that all funding for political parties and campaigns must come solely from government coffers, much of the money used in campaigns is beyond the capacity of Mexico’s electoral authorities to regulate or control. The 1997 electoral reform established that only government funding could back political campaigns and the activities of political parties. Paradoxically, these measures were conceived to keep unidentified groups from supplying resources to political campaigns, but the amounts granted by the government are almost never respected, given the inability of electoral authorities to adequately monitor campaign expenses. According to Ugalde and Guzmán<sup>39</sup>:

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<sup>36</sup> “Delincuencia organizada, por doquier en Apatzingán: Beltrán”. SIPSE.COM [online], 20 February 2014. Available from: <http://sipse.com/mexico/delincuencia-organizada-doquier-apatzingan-estanislo-beltran-76799.html> [Accessed 03.03.16].

<sup>37</sup> VELEIDAS, Juan, “Apatzingán: La política en la red del narco”. El Universal [online], 7 November 2007. Available from: <http://archivo.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/155648.html> [Cited 02.03.16].

<sup>38</sup> RAMÍREZ, Rubén, “Camino de Michoacán: elecciones, narcotráfico e izquierda”, *El Cotidiano* May-June (2012), p. 22.

<sup>39</sup> UGALDE, Luis Carlos; GUZMÁN, Mario, “En las urnas: Más dinero, más corrupción”, *Revista Nexos*, Vol. 35 (2013), p. 16.

“Electoral democracy in Mexico has become more expensive in recent years, in terms of both its budgetary aspect and financing from illegal, unregistered sources. Although the electoral reform of 2007 reduced public funding for campaigns, the fact is that the costs have increased and so the flow of private resources has also intensified. The increased cost of campaigning has had a corrupting impact on the functioning of governments and the democratic system as a whole...”

This is clearly the case of local governments, the level where organized crime comes in. In this context of fierce electoral competition, criminal groups fund political campaigns at all levels, but it is at the local level where compromises are forged that later must be fulfilled while exercising power. The case of Apatzingán shows that for local governments in Mexico democracy has resulted in greater electoral competition that is funded by all kinds of interest groups –many of them involved in criminal activities– leaving citizens with deeply-flawed mechanisms for choosing their local governments; a situation exacerbated by the law that prohibits the re-election of mayors.

In the particular case of local governments in Michoacán, the country’s recently inaugurated democracy has allowed the almost triumphant entrance of organized crime into municipal councils (*ayuntamientos*). Though candidates for local government were aware of the dangers and commitments implicit in accepting monies from organized crime, the intensity of electoral competition obliges them to accept financial support from such groups.

For people in Apatzingán, democracy has not produced any significant results. People are clearly disappointed and disillusioned, and openly express their desire to return to the way things were in the past, when the existence of a central government guaranteed more order and a certain level of public tranquility.

### **3.1. Municipal police.**

One particularly interesting aspect of this case concerns the municipal police. In Mexico, it is the responsibility of the municipal government to provide a local police force. Given the context of budgetary weakness, most municipal police forces in Mexico lack appropriate training, equipment and social recognition. Almost all officers are recruited for a period of three years with no formal process of training in police procedures and no intention of pursuing a professional service career as a municipal police officer.

The municipal police force of Apatzingán has long operated in collusion with criminal groups. Like most municipalities with problems related to organized crime, the local police were coopted by criminal groups through extortion. Those who resist corruption were assassinated or fired from the force. Municipal police officers thus became accomplices – *even employees!* – of criminal groups, who saw in them authority figures who could patrol the streets, interfere with the activities of other criminal groups and, above all, monitor the movements of the federal police in Apatzingán and its surrounding area. Federal police, in contrast, are independent of local government. To further complicate matters, most local-level policemen receive little training, their educational levels rarely exceed high school, and they are hired without any kind of psychometric evaluation or formal procedure that

might guarantee at least a minimal aptitude for police work. Even worse, some officers already had criminal records when they were hired<sup>40</sup>.

Behind the problem of an adequate police model lies the lack of financial resources and administrative capacity. As has been noted in most municipalities in Mexico, public resources are scarce because of the severe restrictions on revenue collection. As mentioned above, local governments collect some taxes but depend almost entirely on federal and state subsidies. Without money, it is difficult to articulate an honest, effective police force.

The limited ability of local governments to generate revenue leads to deeper problems, such as the lack of legitimacy of municipal councils. This factor inhibits the development of local collection schemes that would allow them to gather additional resources. Because of the rampant corruption among local authorities, it is very difficult to convince citizens that they should pay local taxes; a point of view that was expressed repeatedly during our interviews in Apatzingán. The deeply-rooted corruption of the political and security systems and the resulting –and generalized– mistrust of the population towards local authorities in places like Apatzingán, all contribute to increasing the risk of converting local governments into dead-end streets. Lacking legitimacy and even a minimal level of trust among citizens, it will not be possible for local governments to collect the necessary resources to fulfill their obligations to residents. Another clear reflection of this disillusionment with local government is the low level of civic participation in municipalities in Mexico in general, and in Apatzingán, specifically. Given the circumstances described above, it is little wonder that citizens have little interest in the political life of their communities and surrounding areas.

Another important aspect related to public security is the existence of public policies designed to combat criminality. The main government initiative in the area of crime prevention is encapsulated in a program called *poligonos de seguridad* (security polygons), which concentrates pre-existing social programs in specific areas<sup>41</sup>. Although Apatzingán is incorporated into one such polygon, none of our interviewees suggested that this program had exerted any influence on lessening criminal activity in the municipality. While crimes such as homicide decreased after 2013, when the program was implemented, in 2015 the perceptions of citizens, especially the local community business is still negative in relation to the Polygon Program. Finally, no innovative proposal or specific crime prevention program has been designed for, or applied in, Apatzingán.

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<sup>40</sup>ARISTEGUI, Carmen, “Ejército desarma a la policías de Apatzingán y Uruapan”, available from <http://aristeguinoticias.com/1401/mexico/desarman-a-la-policia-municipal-de-Apatzingán>, 2016 [Cited 15.02.2016].

<sup>41</sup> SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR, Mexico, Bases of the National Program for Social Prevention of Violence, 2013.

## Conclusions

Crime and violence in Mexico are subject to complex sociological explanations that go far beyond the current juncture of drug-trafficking, as poverty, the lack of economic opportunities and highly-visible inequalities combine to create an environment that clearly propitiates criminal activity. For the case of Apatzingán, in addition to the aforementioned circumstances, information gathered in the field reveals a tacit acceptance of the absence of the rule of law and accountability. Municipalities in Mexico should have emerged as the main guarantors of the security of citizens and the first line of defense against organized crime groups, but as the case of Apatzingán shows, precisely the opposite has occurred: the weakness of democratic institutions at the local level of government has generated a series of perverse incentives for criminals to enter local political life. The lack of legitimacy, inadequate financial resources, and the short terms in office of municipal councils has prevented or prohibited local governments from fulfilling their obligations to their citizens and society as a whole.

Clearly, the strategies implemented to date to combat violence in Mexico, specifically in relation to the drug trade have failed, so it is necessary to modify the approach. The change in perspective should emphasize the need to strengthen democracy, rule of law and local institutions. Also, it is necessary to improve the socioeconomic conditions of the population.

In addition, the factors that have encouraged the growth of organized crime in many regions are precisely the handcuffs that impede local governments and political actors from developing honest, well-trained and effective police forces. Since 2015, the actions that the Mexican state has instituted to counteract the institutional weakness of local governments have consisted in taking away their control of the municipal police and centralizing the several existing police forces in a unified command that answers to the state authorities, led by the governor. But this measure has only postponed the urgent need to get to the root of problems at the municipal level, while doing nothing to resolve the lack of financial resources, of transparency and accountability, and of professionalization.

Moreover, the measure of transferring control of police forces to state-level authorities has also had severe consequences because that level of government is also plagued by corruption, also lacks legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenry, and is subject to the same pernicious influences from organized crime that we have detailed at the local level. As described above, governors continue to be virtually absolute monarchs in their states due to the absence of formal mechanisms to ensure a balance of power.

The proposal to allow the re-election of mayors and representatives at the state and federal in 2018 level might change the equation and eventually lead to a greater balance of power, but political parties will remain as the only means of expression available to citizens to control the nominations to positions of popular representation. Mexico's complex electoral laws make it extremely difficult for independent candidates to compete for political office, since government funding can *only* be channeled to registered political parties, *not* individuals. Given the costs involved in mounting an election campaign –as mentioned

AGUIRRE, Jerjes; HERRERA, Hugo. "Local democracy, crime and violence in Mexico: The case of Apatzingán, Michoacán".

earlier— very few individuals can hope to participate effectively in elections at any level of government without the backing of a registered political party. Mexico has thus become a 'partidocracy' in which political power grows increasingly remote from citizens.

Our conclusion is that the strength that organized crime groups in Mexico have achieved is due much more to the conditions of institutional weakness documented in this text than to the enormous demand for drugs in the U.S. In a context in which the possible legalization of drugs in Mexico's northern neighbor seems to be an ever more remote possibility, it is necessary that drug-generated violence in the country become a catalyst for profound, internal democratic change.

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