

Review - Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico

Written by Robert Bonner

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ROBERT BONNER, MAY 28 2013

Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico and the Americas: The Gangs and the Cartels Wage War

Edited by: Robert J. Bunker

Routledge: London and New York, 2012

In December 2012, Enrique Pena Nieto, the youthful-looking, charismatic leader of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) was sworn in as President of Mexico. He replaced Filipe Calderon of the Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), the first President of Mexico to take on organized crime and attack the powerful Mexican drug cartels. Although Calderon made progress against the cartels- large, powerful and corrupting criminal organizations- during his presidency the cartels were at war with each other. This led to a large increase in violent crime and homicides, particularly in those states with a significant cartel presence, including Tamaulipas, Chihuahua and more recently Guerrero. The best estimates are that over 60,000 people were murdered in Mexico as a result of cartel warfare in the six years of the Calderon presidency.

What Pena Nieto Could Learn from ‘Criminal Insurgencies’

In his 2012 campaign, Pena Nieto promised to reduce the levels of violence wracking Mexico. He said that his

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strategy for doing this, and dismantling the cartels, would be different from that of Calderon, but the details were, and continue to be, excruciatingly vague. The new President of Mexico and his security team would do well to read 'Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico and the Americas', edited by Robert J. Bunker, in order to gain a better understanding of the serious threat that Mexico faces from organized crime and the need to confront this threat with a comprehensive strategy. The book, which is broken into three parts- 'Theory', 'Mexico', and 'The Americas'- will help them to understand the dimensions of the problem. The book contains a sobering assessment of the corruption of the Mexican government by the cartels, in particular the Sinaloa Cartel, as well as a fascinating overview of the recent rise of another cartel, Los Zetas, which split off from the Gulf Cartel several years ago. One essay, 'Integrating feral cities', measures the collapse of law and order in Mexico's urban centers, characterizing Ciudad Juarez, where the cartels have been warring with each other, as "the most violent" city in North America (p.66). Nuevo Laredo, on the other hand, is under the control of an organized crime group (p.67).

These essays illustrate how the cartels have increasingly gained power and influence over the legitimate institutions of the Mexican government at both the state and federal levels. Unless the new leaders of Mexico comprehend this problem, they will not be able to devise a strategy to break the power and grip of the cartels. As an American philosopher George Santayana once famously observed: those that fail to understand history are condemned to repeat it. And this is a special danger here, as the new PRI government may be tempted to think it can return to a Faustian pact with the cartels as existed for many years under PRI rule. It was this pact that allowed the cartels to become so powerful, and beyond the control of even the Mexican federal government. The strategy so sorely needed is one designed to weaken and destroy the handful of powerful and corruptive transnational criminal organizations that are commonly referred to as the drug 'cartels'. This compendium of informative, thought-provoking essays on the Mexican cartels should also be required reading for U.S. policy makers because it discusses how the Mexican cartels have penetrated into Central America and are attempting to corrupt U.S. governmental agencies, such as, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP).

The essays in 'Criminal Insurgencies' cover several discrete but interrelated issues surrounding Mexico's security crisis; a crisis that has arisen from unprecedented violence and mayhem perpetrated by organized crime in various states of Mexico. The essays range from the aforementioned analysis of the rise of Los Zetas, one of the most violent and vicious of the cartels, to a candid discussion of the historical collusion between the Mexican government, at both the state and federal levels, and the Sinaloa Cartel led by the notorious 'El Chapo' Guzman. As is evident from Samuel Logan's essay titled 'Los Zetas and a new barbarism', the Zetas are more ready to use *plomo* (lead) to protect their criminal enterprise, whereas in the essay 'A broken Mexico', Malcolm Beith makes clear that the Sinaloa Cartel will first resort to *plata* (silver). However, the reality is that both will use whichever of the two is needed to preserve and expand their criminal enterprises. Indeed, these are the two most powerful criminal organizations left standing at the end of the Calderon Administration, and they easily qualify as the largest, most powerful criminal enterprises in the world. Although hampered by weak police and judicial institutions, Calderon made surprising headway, eliminating several of the cartels, including the Tijuana or Arellano-Felix cartel, the Juarez cartel, and the Beltran Leyva organization.

Will Mexico and the U.S. Cooperate?

Despite Calderon's successes, the security challenge remains, with many areas of Mexico still awash with drug-related homicides. Kidnappings and extortion, both staples of organized crime, remain rampant. A reading of 'Criminal Insurgencies' strongly suggests that robust cooperation between Mexico and the US, particularly the sharing of intelligence by U.S. agencies with their Mexican counterparts, must continue if Pena Nieto is to have any chance of vanquishing the major drug trafficking organizations and their associated violence in his six years in office.

It is unclear whether the cooperation recommended in 'Criminal Insurgencies' will occur under Pena Nieto's rule. So far, Pena Nieto's only strategy appears to be changing the political narrative from violence, homicides and organized crime to more positive topics, including the Mexican economy and economic, energy and labor reforms. In this, at least so far, he has been moderately successful. Pena Nieto, however, has directed some organizational changes. He has transferred the Federal Police, which Calderon built up to a force of 35,000, from the ministry of Public Safety and Security (SSP) to Gubernacion, the powerful ministry of Government, similar to a European style Interior

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Ministry. He is creating a separate federal police force, modeled after the French Gendarmerie, which will eventually be able to replace the Mexican army as a show of governmental force, for example, in urban areas overrun by cartel violence. The new Gendarme may also function as a border police along Mexico's southern and northern borders. CISEN, Mexico's internal security agency, also housed in Gubernacion, is to play a key role in coordinating the Mexican government's efforts to reduce violent crime and curtail the cartels. But none of this is a substitute for a strategy. Pena Nieto needs to address this problem directly.

U.S. Policy and the Cartels

As for U.S. policy towards the cartels, in the essay titled 'Grand strategic overview: epochal change and new realities for the United States', by Robert J. Bunker, it is asserted that the Mexican drug cartels and narco gangs are the number one security threat facing the U.S.- a greater security threat now than Al Qaeda (p.20). This assertion is not as outlandish as it might appear at first blush. Al Qaeda central has been severely weakened, and its franchises do not appear as hell-bent or capable of pulling off a major attack against the U.S. homeland. The Mexican drug cartels, on the other hand, have branch offices operating in hundreds of cities in the U.S., and they frequently carry out murders in the U.S., although not the visible kind of hanging torsos from highway overpasses so common in Mexico. Although there is little so-called spillover violence on the U.S. side of the border, the cartels are responsible for the smuggling and distribution of massive amounts of cocaine, methamphetamine, and not inconsiderable quantities of heroin into the US, all of which contributes to America's drug problem and weakens our national vibrancy and economy, not to mention the tens of thousands of lives that are destroyed. And the cartels have the capacity to undermine Mexican democracy and the legitimate institutions of the Mexican government. If unchecked, the specter, not of a failed state, but of a narco-state on the United States' southern border is within the realm of possibilities.

The Problem with the Term 'Insurgency'

For all the important factual information contained in 'Criminal Insurgencies', the very title of the book and much of the essay titled 'Rethinking insurgency: criminality, spirituality and societal warfare in the Americas', by John P. Sullivan and Robert Bunker, are misleading and unhelpful to the development of an analytical construct to attack the problems plaguing the state. Mexican sensitivities to the use of the term 'insurgency' to describe the operations and control of the cartels over certain areas of Mexico is well known, although this sensitivity was on full display in October 2010 when then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used the term 'insurgency' to describe the actions of the cartels. The problem with this term and the authors' line of thinking is that they suggest that the same tactics that are used against political insurgencies (those aimed at taking political power and control over a national polity), principally military force, can be effectively applied to defeat organized criminal groups. My experience teaches otherwise, that organized crime is essentially a law enforcement problem, not a military one. It requires destruction of the organization, root and branch. Thus, an attack on the criminal organization is required- one that entails a sophisticated law enforcement approach and the right set of laws and tools- and this is only doable by law enforcement and a functioning criminal justice system. This strategy of attacking criminal organizations is essentially the approach used by the FBI to demolish the Mafia families in the U.S. and reduce them to a laughing stock. It is the approach used in Colombia to defeat the organizations that made up the powerful Medellin and Cali cartels. Characterizing the Mexican cartels as an 'insurgency', even a 'commercial insurgency', as suggested by Sullivan and Bunker, takes us down a path that mistakenly suggests that a military approach will work, yet this is a path that is bound to fail. The military can help, but it cannot defeat criminal organizations.

Perhaps Pena Nieto and his security team understand this. While Calderon, out of necessity, had to rely heavily on the Mexican military, a better course for Mexico is not to militarize the effort, but rather to professionalize its police, federal and state, and strengthen the criminal justice system. Police, prosecutors and the courts need to adopt anti-corruption best practices and become more far more effective. These reforms are essential to establishing the rule of law in Mexico and ending the era of impunity. In the interim, Mexico needs to strengthen, not weaken, security cooperation between U.S. law enforcement agencies and their security counterparts in Mexico. This will help Mexico achieve the objective of breaking the power and grip of the cartels over the legitimate institutions of the Mexican government. And coincidentally, it will unleash Mexico's full economic potential which will also benefit the U.S. and the entire North American economic region.

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Conclusion

'Criminal Insurgencies' covers many diverse aspects of the Mexican drug cartels and associated organized crime and gang activity. The book's strength is its opening of our eyes to many facts about the cartels and their rise that are not commonly known. Unfortunately, the book is short on policy prescriptions, and the strategies needed to address the problems of entrenched, violent and corruptive organized crime groups. Notwithstanding these shortcomings, I recommend this informative collection of essays to scholars and students interested in Mexico, the U.S.-Mexico bilateral relationship, and the criminal justice system generally.

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