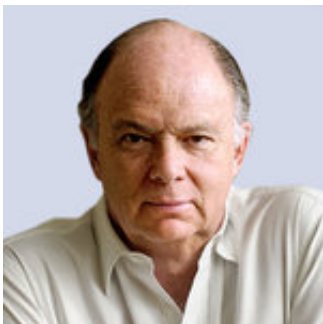




THE OPINION PAGES | CONTRIBUTING OP-ED WRITER

Mexico's Vigilantes on the March

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MEXICO CITY — In the past, Mexico's revolutions and internal wars have all been eruptions stemming from deep social problems. They unleashed enormous destructive power and took decades to run their course. But they were always followed by long periods of peace and economic development.

The country's present social unrest has a different source and is of a different nature. If the sweeping economic reforms of 2013 attract investment and are implemented efficiently and honestly (two big ifs), the major remaining obstacles to real social progress will be the powerful force of organized crime and the weakness of legal and practical measures to stem it.

Since democracy came to Mexico in 2000, the country has sunk into a cycle of violence fed by intense criminality. Images circulating on social media starkly depict its horrific cruelty. It is true that narco cartels and other organized crime groups (with allies in high political positions) have

grown vastly stronger since the 1970s. But no one foresaw the paradoxical cause of their huge expansion: the limits set by democracy on the formerly near-dictatorial power of the president.

The arrival of democracy has had a centrifugal effect in sharply strengthening local power. In places where local politicians and the police are corrupt, criminals have become autonomous and fearless. A kind of civil war with multiple fronts has developed — an intensifying conflict between the state and the cartels, as well as among the cartels.

President Vicente Fox, in office at the start of the millennium, sinned by omission, essentially avoiding the problem. With respect to criminality, his policies smacked more of an ostrich than the Mexican eagle. His successor, Felipe Calderón, who took over in 2006, moved in the opposite direction, trying to take on the cartels with direct military power. But that effort only poured gasoline onto the fire, and the toll of the dead stands at more than 80,000.

Now, slowly, region by region, the government has begun to regain some control. Some of the bloodiest groups have been undermined, like the Zetas, who operate mostly in the states along the Gulf of Mexico. Other key cities of the frontier plagued by narco violence — Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, Monterrey — have reimposed a minimal degree of order.

But the weakening of some cartels (including the Gulf and Tijuana organizations) and the death or capture of various capos have permitted the rise of smaller groups acting on their own. Their activities center not on the complex enterprise of drug trafficking but on kidnapping and extortion.

In the state of Michoacán, in the western part of the country, armed citizens have risen up to directly confront the tyranny of organized crime. In recent years, colluding with corrupt local authorities, a narco group called The Family of Michoacán (La Familia Michoacana) acquired great power and huge profits, mostly from making methamphetamine in labs hidden in the harsh mountains of the state. It boasted a primitive, pseudo-religious ideology and claimed to be concerned with bettering the lives of

the citizens of Michoacán. A rival, splinter group, the Knights Templar (Los Caballeros Templarios), characterized by similar “religious” ideology and consummate brutality, has now muscled them aside.

In Michoacán, with its significant population of traditionally independent Tarascan Indians and its impressive colonial cities and striking landscapes, The Knights Templar have added their own sinister complement to the panorama of local crime: systematic extortion on an unprecedented scale. Anyone who resists risks loss of property or life. The Knights squeeze homeowners, pharmacies, doctors’ offices, schools, industries, gas stations, public services, even tortilla factories and growers of lemons. No one is safe.

Fed up with this situation, armed “self-defense” groups began to appear in Michoacán in February 2013. Their members come from various walks of life, including small ranchers, business people and emigrants returning from the United States.

These associations of vigilantes are not the first to take justice into their own hands in Michoacán. Three years ago, the Indian community of Cherán decided to disown the local (ineffective and corrupt) authorities, dig trenches and post armed guards at the entrances to their village property in order to resist the depredations of illegal wood-cutters decimating their forest reserves, the millennial patrimony of the community.

The epicenter of the present vigilante confrontation with the Knights Templar is the area known as the Tierra Caliente, a relatively isolated zone that, since colonial times, has been marked by its torrid climate, fertile soil, aggressive animals, poisonous plants, and a tendency toward violence among its inhabitants. Fray Diego Basalenque, who composed chronicles of Michoacán in the 17th century, wrote about the Tierra Caliente: “For someone not born here, it is uninhabitable. For its natives it is unbearable.” It has become a preferred sanctuary for the Knights.

The national government recently sent a substantial federal force (both military and police) to the region. Corrupt municipal police officers

have been stripped of their authority and national troops have established a modus vivendi with self-defense groups. The vigilantes have the support of the majority of the population and of respected clerics.

Unverified rumors have it that some of the self-defense units are connected with a narco gang in a neighboring state called Jalisco New Generation Cartel (Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación). Regardless of whether that is true or not, President Enrique Peña Nieto, who came to power in 2012, would be wise to press for the incorporation of the vigilantes into a legal entity, as two powerful presidents in the 19th century, Benito Juárez and Porfirio Díaz, did when they were dealing with crime. They developed a mobile strike force (Los Rurales) that suppressed rampant banditry. The elimination of a gang like the Knights Templar, however, will require much intelligence-gathering and coordination among various law-enforcement agencies. And it will take time.

After the recent seizure of Knights Templar safe houses in a Michoacán village, the vigilantes displayed some confiscated items, including a sword encrusted with diamonds said to have belonged to the Knights' paramount leader and to have been used in a "religious" ceremony imposing total commitment on new members of the gang.

The vigilantes believe their actions are necessary to combat the outrageous wealth, extortion and savagery of the Knights. They say their goal is to clear out the gang, village by village, town by town. The strategy is working: In the city of Zamora, for the last 15 days gas stations and other businesses have been free from extortion. The vigilantes have let it be known that their next objective is the principal city of the Tierra Caliente, Apatzingán, where the Knights are deeply entrenched. If they can take back control of Apatzingán, the vigilantes will doubtless feel a provisional sense of "mission accomplished" — appropriate enough in the town where, in 1814, Mexico's first constitution was proclaimed.

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