

OTHER VIEWS

The high-stakes push to control Mexico

By J. MICHAEL WALLER

Is the new political violence in Mexico a rule-or-ruin gambit by organized criminal mafias and their foreign friends who feel threatened by President Carlos Salinas' market-oriented, pro-U.S. reforms? Washington insiders are starting to ask that question.

The recent assassination of Salinas' presumed successor Luis Donaldo Colosio came at a fortuitous time for three ruthless forces: the out-of-power faction of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) that plundered the country of billions in the 1970s and early '80s; Mexico's ever-growing organized crime cartels; and the desperate government of Cuba, which has depended on Mexico as a channel to break out of its isolation.

The first two forces may be joining with the third in a high-stakes move to push the country toward a Colombia-style internal war for wealth and power.

The PRI faction that thrived under the fantastically corrupt presidencies of Luis Echeverria (1970-76) and Jose Lopez Portillo (1976-82), known as *echeverristas*, drove the economy into the ground as they discouraged foreign investment and stashed their ill-gotten wealth offshore. Though their powers within the PRI have eroded, they retain impressive strength. It is often difficult to see where their political machine ends and organized crime begins.

Under Salinas' expiring six-year term the *echeverristas* lost some of the impunity they once enjoyed. Ruben Zuno, a leader of the Guadalajara drug cartel, is an example. As Echeverria's brother-in-law, he was untouchable, operating freely to become one of Mexico's most notorious kingpins until Salinas began cooperating with the United States. Now Zuno sits in a Los Angeles prison for the torture-murder of U.S. Drug Enforcement Agent Enrique Camarena.

Salinas' anti-drug efforts with the United States caused him so much internal political trouble that he was forced periodically to retreat. The retreats only encouraged the drug mafias. With state police and politicians in their pockets, their crimes became bolder, such as the assassination of the Catholic archbishop of Guadalajara last May.

Another cause for urgency is the North American Free Trade Agreement, which among other things allows the United States

unprecedented intrusion into the Mexican electronic communication and banking systems used by the mafiosi to maintain and expand their empires.

The day NAFTA went into effect, on Jan. 1, a guerrilla war broke out in the impoverished southern state of Chiapas, where peasant Indians took up arms against government abuse and the trade pact. With university-educated leaders who are not Indians, the Zapatista National Liberation Army bears the hallmarks of Cuban-backed guerrilla organizations from Central America to Columbia in their military tactics, which were coincided by bombings and kidnappings in Mexico City and elsewhere.

Similar too are the Zapatistas' political methods: Marxist-Leninist rhetoric, liberation theology, slick propaganda handed out in the capital, professionally organized support rallies around the country (joined by prominent *echeverristas*), and "solidarity committees" abroad. Furthermore, the Zapatistas' debut symbolized more than NAFTA. Jan. 1 was the 35th anniversary of Fidel Castro taking power in Cuba.

One's imagination is stretched to believe the 2,000 guerrillas could organize and train for years without coming to the attention of Mexico's coldly effective secret police, a force run for years by the *echeverristas*. In the 1970s and early '80s, concurrent with the government's open diplomatic and political backing of Cuba and the Central American revolutionaries, the state security organs covertly provided logistical support, safe havens, base camps, infiltration and exfiltration routes, and transshipment of weapons from Cuba through Mexican territory.

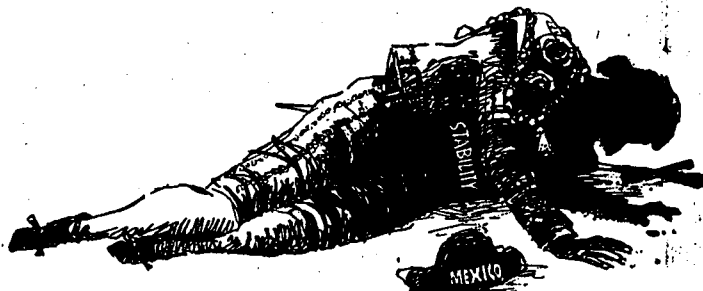
Salinas never proved able to take full control of a vital lever of power: the huge Interior Ministry

called *Gobernacion*, which among other things runs the PRI's vote-rigging activities, security for the PRI leadership, and the secret police. His own *Gobernacion* chief, a former governor of Chiapas, failed to warn him of the impending guerrilla conflict.

Salinas' responses to the crisis seem to show he may be weaker than most people believe. He inadvertently strengthened the guerrillas politically by recognizing them within days as a legitimate force, their pillaging and killing notwithstanding. At about the same time he appointed two *echeverristas* to important Cabinet posts, naming Jesus Silva Herzog minister of tourism, a very lucrative position that wields enormous patronage in one of the country's largest industries; and Carlos Tello as foreign minister.

As violence spread, Tello curiously renewed calls to lift the U.S.-led embargo of Cuba. His statement causes one to wonder if the *echeverristas*, traditionally extremely close to Castro, may be planning to save the Cuban leader in his greatest hour of need by trying to persuade Washington to lift the embargo while bailing out the Cuban economy with fuel, cash and credits as a stopgap. In return — like the Colombian cartels — they may be using Cuba as an ally to build guerrilla forces as their unofficial private armies to squeeze the central government and its local loyalists.

If Tello does what some suspect and presses the United States to release Echeverria's brother-in-law from prison, Washington should take it as a sign that, as in Colombia, organized crime may be poised to seize power in Mexico by any means necessary.



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