

Why Cartels Are Killing Mexico's Mayors

By IOAN GRILLO JAN. 15, 2016

Mexico City — ON the morning of Jan. 2, a team of hired killers set off for the home of 33-year-old Gisela Mota, who only hours before had been sworn in as the first female mayor of Temixco, a sleepy spa town an hour from Mexico City. Ms. Mota was still in her pajamas as the men approached her parents' breezblock house. She was in the bedroom, but most of her family was in the front room, cooing over a newborn baby. As the family prepared a milk bottle, the assassins smashed the door open. Amid the commotion, Ms. Mota came out of her bedroom and said firmly, "I am Gisela." In front of her terrified family, the men beat Ms. Mota and shot her several times, killing her.

Such violence has plagued areas of Mexico during the decade-long blood bath we know as the Mexican drug war. But Ms. Mota's killing illuminates some worrying features of how this conflict is changing. While the global media is fascinated by billionaire kingpins like Joaquín Guzmán Loera, known as El Chapo, who was recaptured on Jan. 8 after his second prison escape (and a secret interview with the actor Sean Penn), the war is evolving far beyond the drug trade. Cartels now fight for political power itself. After arresting two of the men suspected of killing Ms. Mota, the police said the murder was part of a regional campaign by Los Rojos to control town halls and rob the towns' resources.

Five days after the killing, Ms. Mota's mother, Juana Ocampo, joined a march through Temixco along with hundreds of residents dressed in white. Ms. Ocampo, a veteran community activist, knew her daughter had taken a dangerous job; hired killers, known as sicarios, have killed almost 100 mayors in Mexico in the last decade. But Ms. Mota had been undeterred.

"Since Gisela was a child, she wanted to get into politics, to change things," Ms. Ocampo told me. Ms. Mota had called for an end to corruption in Temixco and for police reform, which may have made her a target. Still, Ms. Ocampo said, "I had never imagined that something like this could happen." Ms. Ocampo, her face strong, held back her pain and tears. "I hope there is justice. Or we will have to take actions to demand that justice is done and the case is cleared up." Marchers held banners proclaiming, "I am Gisela."

Ms. Mota's murder is the latest turn in the evolution of the Mexican drug business, a process that American and Mexican officials seem unable to grasp. For a decade, Mexican troops have worked with American agents to pursue kingpins, in what is known as the cartel decapitation strategy. Flamboyant gangsters with nicknames like "Tony Tormenta," "the Engineer" and "the Viceroy" have been shot down

or arrested. El Chapo, or Shorty, has been detained twice in less than two years. Yet while these kingpins rot in prisons and graves, their assassins have formed their own organizations, which can be even more violent and predatory.

Morelos State, which is home to Temixco, is a bloody example. Dotted with green valleys and hot springs, it had long been used by a drug lord called Arturo Beltrán Leyva, alias “the Beard,” to fly in cocaine from Colombia before taking it north. Mr. Beltrán Leyva was an ally-turned-enemy of El Chapo who rivaled him in his capacity to move product. But during the early 2000s, while Mr. Beltrán Leyva built his empire in Morelos, murder rates were relatively low.

In 2009, American agents from the Drug Enforcement Administration got intelligence on Mr. Beltrán Leyva's whereabouts. The D.E.A. gave the address to Mexican marines — an elite American-trained force — who stormed in, killing Mr. Beltrán Leyva and four of his accomplices. A senior D.E.A. official told me they paid their informant a \$5 million reward for the information that led to the takedown — taxpayer money spent to try and win the drug war.

Without their leader, sicarios who had worked for the Beard formed their own splinter cartels, including Los Rojos and Guerreros Unidos, or Warriors United, and went on a killing rampage. The two cartels now fight over turf in Morelos and neighboring Guerrero State, leaving piles of bodies. Last year, Guerrero had the highest number of murders per capita in Mexico; Morelos was fourth.

These new cartels continue to traffic drugs, some switching from Colombian cocaine to Mexican heroin to feed an epidemic sweeping parts of America. But they have also used their armies of assassins to move into new endeavors: rackets, extortion, oil theft, even wildcat iron mining. And they are now muscling in on one of Mexico's most lucrative businesses of all: local politics.

Ms. Mota isn't the first politician to fall afoul of the cartels' new business interests. In a Jan. 11 news conference, the governor of Morelos, Graco Ramírez, revealed that Los Rojos had threatened 13 more Morelos mayors in recent months, and are using the murder of Ms. Mota as a somber warning. It was a “deliberate and premeditated action that aims to sow an environment of terror, both among authorities and citizens,” he said.

The cartel makes telling demands of the mayors, Mr. Ramírez said — for example, contracts for valuable building projects or the right to name the town police chiefs. And they are forcing mayors to give them 10 percent of their annual budgets. As Mexico's government provides much of the financing, this means the cartels are feeding from the federal pot — and in turn from the United States, which provides the Mexican government with about \$300 million a year in drug-war aid.

Corruption in Mexico is as old as the country itself, and traffickers have been bribing politicians during the century that they have been smuggling drugs to Americans. Mayors, governors and federal officials have turned a blind eye to opium fields and meth superlabs. In 1997, the federal government's drug czar himself was arrested on suspicion of taking bribes.

But now gangsters are flipping this century-old deal. Instead of handing out bribes, they are making

the mayors pay them. Politics is not just a way to help their criminal businesses; it is a business in itself. And as they take control of these politicians, the cartels transform themselves into an ominous shadow power, using the tools of the state to affect anyone who lives or works in its jurisdiction.

With more than 2,000 mayors in Mexico, most of whom have little protection, the cartels have a big market to tap. The combined booty is potentially worth billions of dollars a year. And, indeed, the tactic of shaking down mayors appears to be expanding beyond Morelos. In 2014, it was revealed that the bizarrely named Knights Templar cartel, based in Michoacán State, was also forcing mayors to hand over a percentage of their budgets. Videos and photos even emerged of the Templar's leader, Servando Gómez, also known as "La Tuta," sitting down and talking with various mayors.

Sometimes cartels cut out the middleman and put one of their own directly in the town hall. This was allegedly the case in the Guerrero city of Iguala, whose mayor, José Luis Abarca, is now in prison on organized crime charges, accused of being a member of Guerreros Unidos. Dozens of his police officers are also in jail, accused of being sicarios in uniform.

In September 2014, the Iguala police and sicarios reputed to work for the Guerreros killed or disappeared more than 40 students in one of the most heinous crimes in modern Mexico. After federal police officers arrested the mayor, residents searched for family members who had disappeared under his rule. Some 130 bodies have been dug up in Iguala since. These atrocities provoked thousands to march on Mexico's streets. Some protesters set fire to the Iguala town hall.

International companies continue to operate in such cartel-dominated areas, especially in mining and increasingly in gas and oil. They have to work with mayors to coordinate operations and regulatory compliance; as a result, an American executive for one mining company in Guerrero told me, businesses have no choice but to deal with suspect officials (though they try to identify and avoid working with the worst of them).

Company bosses prefer not to talk publicly about the level of cartel control, as it offends their political partners in Mexico. But last year Rob McEwen, the chairman and chief executive of the Canadian company McEwen Mining, broke the silence after gangsters stole more than \$8 million worth of his gold from a mine in northwest Mexico.

"The cartels are active down there. Generally, we have a good relationship with them," McEwen told the Business News Network. "If you want to go explore somewhere, you ask them, and they tell you, 'no,' but then they say 'come back in a couple of weeks, we've finished what we are doing.'" After protests from Mexican politicians, Mr. McEwen retracted his statement, saying he was referring to a good relationship with local "property owners and community members" rather than gangsters.

As cartels have entrenched themselves in Mexico's local politics, finding a solution to the drug war mess has gotten even tougher. Drug policy reform, meaning wider legalization of some drugs, like marijuana, and better addiction treatment to reduce the use of others, like heroin, can help bleed the gangster financing. But with cartels now diversified into a portfolio of crimes and taking over the

political establishment, it won't stop them.

The most obvious response is to build an effective justice system to crack down on sicarios. Police reform, including incorporating Mexico's city-level officers into unified state forces, a step that Ms. Mota had supported, could help confront cartels. City police alone are too weak against the firepower of the gangster militias. Such a reform would also take some heat off mayors — if they didn't command their own police forces, they would be of less use to the crime bosses.

Yet, Mexico also needs to fight the narco corruption that infests its police and politics at state and federal levels. Tragically, many of the biggest parties have had members with alleged links to cartels, including the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, and the opposition. The fight against this rot needs to be a national struggle, and could last a generation. Party leaders have to support investigations into their own people. Groups such as *Transparencia Mexicana* can help by lobbying for politicians to reveal their assets. And the United States should use its drug-war aid to push harder for such reforms.

Mexico also needs local politicians who can stand up to both the silver of bribery and lead of bullets. Unfortunately, the sheer brutality of murders like Ms. Mota's is a chilling example for those brave young people who might venture to follow her.

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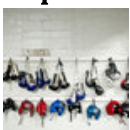
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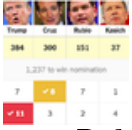
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