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Local Elections and Organised Crime: The Case of Michoacán, Mexico

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Abstract

This study, based on ethnographic analysis, reveals that municipal government elections in Mexico have become spaces of struggle among criminal groups striving to strengthen their presence throughout the territory. In municipal contexts characterised by institutional vacuums, delinquent organisations have succeeded in capturing political spaces. We argue that the continuous violence that has plagued the country since 2013 can be explained largely by factors of an institutional order coupled with distorted electoral processes in municipalities and states, exacerbated by widespread citizen disenchantment with democracy and especially manifest at the level of local government. This situation suggests the need for strategies that address the influence of these criminal groups that go beyond police-based approaches and for actions designed to improve the quality of state institutions.

Keywords

Mexico; organised crime; municipal government; elections.

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Introduction

One of the principal characteristics of organised crime groups worldwide is their relation to political power. In Mexico, as elsewhere, delinquent groups challenge the functioning of political institutions and battle to impose control over territories. In the Mexican context, organised crime has too easily exploited the weakness of political institutions to penetrate government. Explaining this phenomenon requires adopting distinct perspectives that will uncover the political-sociological aspects involved.

The phenomenon of criminality in Mexico must be examined from a perspective that emphasises the relationship between political elites and criminal groups. One difference between the Mexican case and other regions around the world is that in numerous municipalities in Mexico, these relations have congealed around levels of local government and the elites that control them through symbiotic relations with organised crime (Aguirre and Herrera 2013; De Paz Mancera and Pérez Esparza 2018). Though the precise nature of the structure of relations, collaboration and tolerance between local elites and criminal groups vary from place to place, these groups have penetrated virtually every region of Mexico where organised crime is present. Generally speaking, the route of access that criminal groups use to reach governmental institutions is through influencing elections, which have become mechanisms that allow them to gain legitimisation.

It has been 10 years since Mexico's government implemented its strategy to combat drug trafficking, but that campaign has produced negative results. Drug consumption in the US continues apace (Christensen 2016) with no significant decrease in price, while the number of deaths associated with criminal activity in Mexico has increased exponentially (Heinle, Molzhan and Shirk 2016) and the country's image has deteriorated, affecting other national investments (Rosen and Martínez 2015).

Mexico's national security strategies have predominantly depended on police-based approaches that have shrouded the political roots of crime. Demand for drugs and illicit resources handled by trafficking cartels has flourished through periods of both political instability and the recent phases of democratic consolidation. In fact, the expansion of activities of criminal groups has coincided with the alternation of democratic power and periods during which solid, formal institutions existed to regulate social coexistence. Despite the relation between institutional weakness and crime, the policies adopted by Mexico's government have focused on criminal groups using police and military tactics while ignoring the need to strengthen democratic institutions. This state of affairs has developed mainly because the state government has refused to acknowledge the political aspects of violence; that is, the participation of delinquent groups in political processes, especially elections. Criminal groups have found that elections are an effective instrument for intervening in political affairs and occupying spaces of formal power.

This study seeks to shed light on how local-level elections can be transformed into complex processes that involve and legitimise criminal groups. It sets out to explain how elections in democratic systems that are still 'under construction', like that of Mexico, can become mechanisms for legitimising and consolidating criminal presence in formal institutions of power. It is in this sense that our work contributes to the existing literature on relations between elections and criminal dynamics (Acemoglu, Robinson and Santos 2013; Alesina, Piccolo and Pinotti 2018; Solis and Aravena 2009).

It is in this context that the present study analyses the relation between elections and organised crime in Mexico, specifically the case of Michoacán, a state that clearly represents the political contradictions of the dynamics of organised criminal activity. Here, the study focuses on municipal government elections. The state of Michoacán in western Mexico has long been characterised by its preponderance of drug production and as a site where drug-trafficking

cartels consolidate to export narcotics (Maldonado and Aranda 2012). These processes are a result of collusion between local political groups and drug-traffickers through established accords, whether explicit or implicit (Guerrero Gutiérrez 2014). The magnitude of these circumstances in Michoacán was such that, in 2006, President Felipe Calderón (2006–2012) chose it as the place to launch his so-called ‘war on drugs’. Michoacán also suffered from the absence of an adequate response to the deteriorating conditions of public security at all levels of government (federal, state or municipal), a reality that propitiated the emergence of self-defence forces on the margins of formal institutions.¹

The state of Michoacán has served as a laboratory for government experiments with combating drug trafficking. Widely known as the ‘soul of Mexico’ (*el alma de México*), Michoacán is a microcosm of the broader problems of institutional weakness and lack of legitimacy affecting the whole country. Throughout its history, this state has nurtured all of the grand political transformations affecting Mexico: independence in the 19th century, the 1910 Mexican Revolution and advances towards democracy in the late 20th century that paved the way for modern democratisation of the nation. Thus, a study of this state is a study of all the problems that currently affect the country, for the political difficulties that beset Michoacán are similarly reproduced in states like Sinaloa, Tamaulipas and Chihuahua, which also suffer intense violence related to organised crime groups.

Since gaining independence, Mexico yet to consolidate as a nation of institutions that effectively regulate social coexistence. For over 60 years of the 20th century, the country was governed at all levels by one ‘official’ political party, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)). The PRI was led by the powerful figure of the President of the Republic, who appointed all candidates for election to public office (Baez 2002; González 2009). This institutional arrangement succeeded in establishing a system of control that provided a period of relative social tranquillity despite the existence of criminal groups that trafficked in drugs, mainly marijuana.

The PRI succeeded in bringing diverse social groups together under the corporative control of the president, in part by establishing a sole channel for citizen participation. All social groups found a home—of sorts—in the PRI because it was made up of three ‘sectors’: ‘popular’, ‘peasant’ and ‘worker’ sectors, although it had no overarching ideology or proposal beyond the banner of ‘revolutionary nationalism’ (Aguilar Camín and Aguilar Rivera 2014). Such an absence of any ideological commitment allowed the PRI to accommodate the ideologies and paradigms of succeeding presidents. The arrangement did nothing to propitiate the emergence of an authentic democracy because it concentrated all opinions in one party and one man—the president—but functioned very effectively as a mechanism of government and social control.

As the nation’s most powerful figure who, through the PRI, controlled the only channel of political participation, the president named state governors who, in turn, appointed local congresses and municipal governments (Carpizo 2004). In fact, the president sometimes participated directly in designating mayors and state representatives, though the norm was to respect a hierarchy of power in which the governors had the power to name local governments. While such an arrangement proved efficient in terms of control, it did not give legitimacy to governors, much less to mayors and government representatives, all of whom were seen as products of the so-called *dedazo* (i.e., direct appointment by the president) and not of authentic decisions by citizens.

The year 2000 introduced an alternate form of power among political parties distinct from the PRI but also propitiated the breakdown of existing systems of control and upset longstanding sociopolitical equilibriums (Mestries 2014). In practice, the absence of a president capable of imposing political direction generated a situation in which state governors could act unchecked by effective counterweights (Granados Roldán 2011; Grayson 2010) and were able to control elected representatives (*diputados*), prosecutors’ offices (*fiscalías*), the judiciary, the police, even

the press. This process was accompanied by interventions on the part of human rights organisations, commissions of transparency, universities and labour unions, all of which were largely controlled by governors who enjoyed the prerogative of determining their state's operating budget.

In the case of Michoacán, the PRI governed uninterruptedly for over seven decades until 2002, after the *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD)) triumphed in the 2001 elections (Herrera Torres and Colín Martínez 2016). From 2003 to 2015, five governors led the state: two consecutively from the PRD (2002–2008, 2008–2012) and three from the PRI (2012–2015), although a 'Public Security Commissioner' was appointed by the federal government and endowed with virtually the same powers as a governor. In reality, over the past 29 years, Michoacán has had 11 governors including that currently in office (2015–2021). As Mexico's constitution stipulates six-year periods in office, 11 governors would normally correspond to 66 years of government (Estrada 2015).

Such an extraordinary number of governors since 2002 reflects the institutional and democratic chaos in Michoacán. The discontinuity in state government precluded the consolidation of long-term government projects and public policies which has, in turn, caused stagnation in economic development and deterioration of wellbeing indicators in the state. As a result, informal employment has spread and environmental degradation has worsened in the state over the past 20 years (Animal Político 2016; Chávez 2018; López 2016).

Another important aspect about Michoacan's political situation is the question of civil liberties. According to calculations by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and others, from 2010 to 2015 the political rights and civil liberties of citizens in the state suffered negatively by all assessments (Fundación Konrad et al. 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015). Based on assessed indices, Michoacán was among the lowest states in the nation. The rights and liberties established by Mexico's institutions were severely constrained by high levels of public insecurity and worsened by citizens' non-compliance with the proposals of political parties, which led to the use of methods for selecting candidates to governorships based on decisions imposed from federal level of government. Internal elections in the political parties were held, but they further undermined the credibility of political parties and widened the distance between the circles of power and the parties' popular bases. The discretionary power that leaders enjoyed in forging deals behind party members was enormous, with the resultant political infighting and machinations in Michoacán further eroding the political rights of all citizens.

In Michoacán, alternate leadership in the governor's office, or at the level of municipal government, failed to bring significant changes to people's quality of life; rather, it has produced mostly negative results.

Alcaldes (municipal presidents or mayors) are elected for a three-year period but can now be re-elected for one additional term. While the position of mayor is an office of popular election, it is not subject to any real judicial oversight. In the context of Mexico's new federalism in the early 21st century, local governments secured larger budgets that made occupying the *alcalde's* chair quite attractive.

Most municipalities in Michoacán are characterised by high levels of poverty and limited economic activity, so gaining the position of mayor or occupying an office in local government is tempting from a cost-benefit perspective. Without doubt, participation in local politics has become a lucrative business, since the *ayuntamiento* (i.e., municipal government) now administers its own public resources, which are sourced from the state but can be complemented by federal funds. Finally, mayors receive a salary of around USD 2,000 per month during their three years of service. For these reasons, the quest to secure a position in local government has become, simply, an entrepreneurial activity. Local elections to choose mayors are controlled by

the decisions of political parties, not citizens, and supervised by electoral agencies that answer only to the interests of parties and lack the financial resources necessary to effectively oversee the process and formalise the results (Perea Curiel 2017).

It is essential to understand that municipal governments in Mexico enjoy a certain political and administrative autonomy within their boundaries, including the power to impose taxes on property and grant permits, and control such public services as water, sewers, public safety and basic infrastructure.

Literature Review

The literature on organised crime and politics stresses how delinquent groups tend to resort to violence to influence electoral processes and the democratic life of nations (Kruijt 2012; Miklaucic and Naim 2013; Sullivan, 2013). Criminal groups attempt to wrest from the state its monopoly on the use of force, especially in the context of weak governments and then pursue their own agendas for their own benefit (Acemoglu, Robinson and Santos 2013; Alesina, Piccolo and Pinotti 2018; Solis and Aravena 2009). In general, organised crime presents enormous challenges to formal institutions of nations where it exists and to the type of society that is envisioned (Allum and Siebert 2003).

According to Sung (2004), the initial stages of the processes of democratic construction, which include free elections and the recognition of political rights, facilitate the infiltration of criminal groups into public life. Then, as these democratic processes become more firmly established and strengthened, they create the conditions necessary for adequate management and counteraction of criminal activity. This perspective fits well in explaining the case of Mexico, for the zenith of criminal activity in that country coincided almost perfectly with the commencement of democratic processes in the year 2000. At the level of local government (*municipio*), the case of Italy offers a critical illustration. According to Buonanno, Prarolo and Vanin's analysis (2016) of electoral processes in municipalities with a mafia presence, shows evidence that between 1994 and 2008, a specific political party (involved with mafia), received higher vote shares in municipalities with mafia presence.

Mexico exemplifies well a nation with an incipient democratic process characterised by gaps or lacunae in legitimacy—especially at the level of local government—that has been filled by criminal groups (Aguirre and Herrera 2013). The intensity of electoral competition and the weakness of institutions that exist to regulate the process generate an environment that allows vast amounts of illegal money to influence political campaigns, especially at the level of local government.

In Mexico, candidates who seek posts as mayors usually invest huge sums of money in their campaigns. According to Casar and Ugalde (2018:74):

There are three illegal mechanisms for funding campaigns: diverting public resources, illegal campaign contributions from the private sector, and money from organized crime. As with all investments, the people who risk their money do so with the expectation of receiving some kind of future return. Governors or public servants participate to support their party's candidate or, sometimes, the candidate of another party in order to guarantee 'immunity' or construct networks of political support that will help them advance their own political aspirations. Entrepreneurs or contractors cooperate in order to gain access to the new government with a view to winning contracts, receiving permits or establishing favorable regulations. Finally, organized crime groups get involved to protect their

businesses by gaining, for example, unimpeded access to transport routes and police protection, or by infiltrating government and seizing sales places.

The state institutions that oversee elections either turn a blind eye or are incapable of blocking the use of illegal funds in candidates' campaigns (Espinosa Silis and Rojas Choza 2017; Marvan-Laborde 2014). Worse yet, the participation of state-level electoral agencies that supervise local elections—broadly speaking—is controlled by party-based quotas, while administrative positions are distributed among party members. Thus, local elections provide ample opportunities and incentives for criminal groups to intervene. The opportunity to control local government and municipal police forces and to obtain a share of the municipal budget, are substantial motivation. The vulnerability of local and state governments to infiltrations by organised crime groups is cause for doubting the integrity of Mexico's political and judicial systems (Aguirre and Herrera 2013).

The links between mayors and delinquent groups have been thoroughly demonstrated elsewhere; they usually take one of three distinct forms: 1) passive submission to extortion that is limited to paying quotas under threat; 2) active submission that consists of appointing people with links to a cartel to key positions in state or municipal government; and 3) intentional complicity in which mayors protect cartel members and participate in their illicit activities. These three distinct forms or linkages are by no means mutually exclusive. In reality, they often operate complementarily with functionaries operating as go-betweens over time (Rivera Velázquez 2014).

The institutional weakness of municipalities is also manifest in local governments' inability to provide basic public services to their citizens. Mexican municipalities depend primarily on funding by the state and federal governments, but these sources are always insufficient to satisfy the enormous needs of the population. Local governments also lack professional administrative organs and effective internal legal frameworks to fulfil their assigned functions. Moreover, public office positions are awarded to members of political groups that support the sitting mayor, distributed not as a function of their abilities but according to their level of political commitment or the role they played in the electoral campaign. Thus, those rewarded in this way include the most generous contributors and individuals who have gained the mayor's trust. In general terms, the deficiencies of Mexican democracy are most clearly visible at the municipal level.

Another problem is the large amount of money spent on political campaigns. The country's journey towards democracy included the adoption of measures designed to equalise the resources available to each political party, but this soon evolved into a system of public funding of parties that resulted in Mexico becoming one of the most expensive democracies on the planet (Ugalde 2015). Today, several parties have no real political identity and exist only to obtain a share of those public resources. In 2018, the cost of elections in Mexico was equivalent to USD 1.55 billion (Luna 2018), an amount that is 46 times more than the total budget of the federal government's program for maternal, sexual and reproductive health! Despite these electoral processes, there has been little progress with consolidating the political institutions that should act as effective counterweights to the president, governors and mayors. The dispensation of justice in Mexico, meanwhile, is in the hands of prosecutors who are appointed by the president and governors. Obviously, this direct dependence means that prosecutors lack autonomy and do not necessarily apply the law impartially (Zapata Cruz 2017).

The lack of capacity of municipal governments to provide adequate services to citizens, combined with the questionable processes of designating people to mayorships, generated a serious lack of political legitimacy. Moreover, the enormous amounts of money invested in campaigns and the—almost daily—cases of corruption involving municipal presidents revealed vacuums of authority at this level of government (Rojas Rodríguez 2017).

In reality, the electoral system stands out as one of the principal elements of processes of democratisation. Assessments of Mexico's governance system can be conducted by examining electoral competitiveness and citizen participation in elections (Sánchez Ramos 2006).² In the most recent local electoral process, the percentage of the distribution of votes and the margins of difference between first and second place have shown a downward trend that reflects improvements in electoral competitiveness among parties vying for mayorships. Municipalities have abandoned the format of one-party dominance and adopted a multi-party model. However, such a multi-party model does not necessarily mean that democratisation has been achieved; it may be mere democratic veneer. The methods of selecting candidates to occupy the office of the municipal president, for example, have been reduced to top-down designations, although (sham) internal elections may be held and the distance between party leaders and their bases remains far. As we have emphasised in this article, the other factor that qualifies the advances achieved in this minimalist democracy revolves around the participation of drug cartels in electoral processes.³

All of the above leads to illegitimate municipal governments. In the 2010–2014 period, criminal groups in many municipalities of Michoacán in practice took on government functions and powers. The justice and order that these groups imposed often proved to be more effective and expeditious than the legal mechanisms established by the country's regulatory frameworks. Therefore, it is no accident that the main criminal group that controlled Michoacán during 2010–2014 (the *Caballeros Templarios* or Knights Templar) had both a written creed and a code of values that stressed respect for society and a commitment to protect citizens: two functions that correspond to those of the mayor's office.

In addition to continuing their drug-trafficking activities (especially of synthetic substances), criminal groups in the state became involved in resolving problems of land tenure, litigation between private parties, union disputes and defaulted debts; they also imposed sanctions on common criminals. In fact, they took on many of the functions that were the responsibilities of local government. The same institutional weakness propitiated the participation of other organised groups, such as labour unions in the educational sector, in decision-making on public issues.

Another facet of cartel involvement in the political life of municipalities is that it was very convenient for these criminals to be able to count on local government support when they became the targets of military and police actions (Aguirre and Herrera 2013). The federal government's strategy to prevent the spread of organised crime emphasised the use of federal police and military because municipal police were so often in cahoots with criminal groups (Aguiar-Aguilar and Azul 2014). We were surprised to discover that such attacks by the central government on criminal groups could be seen as 'intromissions' into local public life that violated municipal government autonomy.

In some cases, municipal police served as sentinels for criminal groups by advising them of significant deployments of federal troops and police in the zones where they were conducting delinquent activities (Jiménez 2018; Montero 2012; Proceso 2014). Indeed, police operations planned by the federal government often failed because of the protection that local police provided to criminal groups (Cervantes 2016; Topete 2018). Through their control of local governments, criminal organisations have sponsored protests against the actions of the federal police and army, disguised as legitimate social demonstrations that denounced 'invasions' by the federal government and demanded that public security be addressed by municipal police. There is no doubt that in some municipalities, these criminal groups were successful to a point in propagandising their creed and proposals by presenting themselves as protectors of the people, integrity and property.

Methodology

In reality, no substantive methodological approach has yet been elaborated to deal with topics related to organised crime in Mexico. This field of study has become 'taboo' due to the extreme danger that researchers are likely to confront. A point of comparison for the risks of academic research into these topics can be found in the activity of investigative journalists. According to the organisation *Artículo 19* (Article 19), Mexico is the second most dangerous nation in the world for journalists and the most perilous country in Latin America (de la Luz 2018). Most journalists assassinated there were involved in covering news on organised crime activity (Franco 2017).

This generalised atmosphere of insecurity has steered research mainly towards quantitative studies carried out from the 'confines of secure offices' and based on official statistical data, which often fail to provide precise details on the country's highly complex criminal processes and their related subtle sociological and cultural factors. In this context, qualitative approaches can generate many particularities concerning criminal phenomena. However, a subject matter of this nature requires researchers who are knowledgeable and deeply experienced in the field, precisely because of the highly dangerous nature of the work.

With these considerations in mind, the present study was undertaken from an ethnographic perspective, using interviews with key informants who were identified on the basis of the researchers' considerable experience of more than 10 years of fieldwork in the most conflict-ridden zones of the state of Michoacán. Our personal acquaintance over a period with many of the actors in the state facilitated the identification and consent of participants to the interviews. We held 40 in-depth interviews with key political actors at the municipal level, municipal and state leaders of political parties, state and federal representatives, members of local governments and journalists in several municipalities. All interviews took place in either the winter of 2017 or spring of 2018. In all cases, our objective was to document and then disentangle the intricate relations that exist among processes of local elections, the legitimacy of local governments and criminal activities.

Though we framed our interviews as informal 'chats', we made appointments with each proposed interviewee, informing them that our topic of interest was local-level development. The topic of the influence of criminal groups on electoral processes was never mentioned as the main reason for wishing to speak with the selected individuals; however, as the interviews progressed we sought to broach issues of crime and delinquency that could have been affecting the territories where they worked. In this way, we succeeded in conducting a free-flowing fluid exchange guided by a previously developed 'script' designed to gather information while avoiding so-called politically correct responses; doing so was important in light of the public roles that many of our interviewees have in society. The interviews lasted an average duration of approximately one hour and took place either in a public place or, in some cases, in the interviewee's home.

Most of the interviews ($n = 34$) were held in seven municipalities with high levels of homicide linked to organised crime: Apatzingán, Múgica, Uruapan, Peribán, Huetamo, San Lucas and Tumbiscatío. During the interviews, the researchers took notes and then prepared a summary of the key aspects and phrases that were uttered immediately after the interview.

Results

Information from the interviews reflected the existence of a clear economic motivation for participating in political and public activities among citizens, one that far surpassed an interest in carrying out a specific government program or pursuing a certain political view. At the same time, it clearly revealed the enormous amounts of money handled during electoral processes. Most of our interviewees had aspirations to develop activities in politics and/or business: 'people here want to set up businesses, participate in agriculture, or go into politics; that's what'll bring

you the most money. Why toil away breaking your back if you can go into politics and obtain loads of money.'

Another finding was that participating in politics for purely personal enrichment was perceived as legitimate. No interviewee expressed the view that aspiring to public office to fill one's pockets constituted an illegal or immoral act. Indeed, they considered it 'normal' for people to run for public office (mayor, council member [*regidor*] or administrative official) and saw it as a legitimate way to obtain wealth:

one of the few things you can do is go into politics or become the mayor's friend, then you can do a little business with his support. Those who work in local government always come away with some kind of business or money.

Thus, local elections were understood as an entrepreneurial activity that required investment in anticipation of future returns. Mayoral candidates often had to sell their ranches or other properties, incur significant personal debt or take money from relatives in the US to defray the costs of their campaigns, which generally included preparing print and electronic propaganda, travelling extensively around the municipality, paying the food and travel expenses of people who participate in rallies and other campaign events and bribing regional leaders with gifts or cash (Muñoz Aguilar 2016).

Our interviewees added that on election day, candidates had to mobilise large groups of supporters to manipulate the process, by buying votes for cash and/or paying political operators to transport crowds of voters to polling stations: 'generally, a vote is worth 500 pesos [but] you have to get people to the voting booths [and] then take them back home. A good operator can bring as many as 100 voters to different stations on election day'. In this context, candidates are likely to be highly tempted to take the money offered by criminal groups to support their campaign and to allow them to 'operate' for them on election day. Such support may also include accepting the protection they offer and/or looking the other way as their thugs coerce political rivals.

Interviewees further indicated that it was acceptable and 'valid' for candidates to obtain the approval (*visto bueno*) of criminal groups:

It's necessary to have the support of [criminals] to make a career in politics here; you need to [negotiate] with them so they'll leave you alone to conduct your campaign ... if you don't, you run the risk that they'll do something to you or to the people in your campaign. This isn't so urgent now, since the Knights Templar went away, but it's still something you need to take into account.

...

[Name withheld]⁴ had the support of all the bad guys in the last election. The Knights Templar approached the opposing [candidates] and threatened to kill them if they didn't stop campaigning against him. They were afraid because they know [what those guys] are like, so they chose to back off. When [name withheld] took office, everybody knew he was going to turn over control of the police and who knows what else [to them].

According to this interviewee:

Once mayors are in power, the bad guys call them to late-night meetings in some abandoned place where they tend to leave them waiting for hours until they finally show up for brief encounters in the dark of night; just the mayors and heavily armed criminal groups.

In exchange for having supported his/her campaign, criminals negotiate with the newly elected mayor for a share of the local budget—funds usually destined for public works—and for control of the municipal police who, in theory, are entrusted with the task of ensuring public security in the municipality. Their domination of municipal police forces mean that these forces become the first line of defence against incursions by state or federal police: ‘By controlling the municipality, criminals ensure that the local police won’t bother them’.

However, it is important to emphasise the indifference that both state and federal governments have shown towards the critical situation in municipal governments. The counterweights that should exist at those levels of government are simply absent. Some former mayors expressed this situation as follows:

We couldn’t do anything. If we went and complained to the state attorney, or even the governor himself, it was always the same [because] they too might have compromises and agreements with the bad guys; so that made things even worse, because then they would come after you with even greater violence.

In this regard, the state functionaries whom we interviewed emphasised the scarcity of resources and personnel available to address the issue of security in Michoacán’s municipalities: ‘We lacked police and intelligence to attend to the situation of the most violent municipalities; we didn’t have sufficient funds’. However, many local officials also identified a tacit acceptance and even normalisation of violence in those municipalities: ‘There have always been problems of violence and death in those regions of the state. We were never going to be able to fix that during the years we had left in government’.

In Mexico, a state government has a six-year term with no possibility of re-election, so all public functionaries are removed from office every six years, or every time there is a change in the secretary in charge of any particular sector, which is a very frequent phenomenon.

Another interesting finding is that municipal governments were viewed as lacking legitimacy:

Everybody knows that mayors only take office to steal; some carry out a few public works and attend to us in their office, but most end their terms with lots of money, ranches and lands, [while] the people end up as screwed as ever.

Our interviewees indicated that they mistrust municipal officials and their ‘supposed’ commitment to the citizenry. Interviewees’ main complaint is the lack of well-paid jobs and public services, which they relate specifically to public safety:

People live in fear they’re going to be assaulted [and] that criminals will return and do more dirty work. Times aren’t like they used to be, when folk were poor but lived in peace. Now, [migrants] no longer return from the United States because of the bad reputation here due to all the problems.

It is also highly significant that interviewees expressed widespread disenchantment with democracy in Mexico:

Being able to elect the president or representatives hasn’t served any purpose at all. Candidates only come here on their campaigns, but then forget all about the people. Frankly, all we see is that they spend lots of money on posters and announcements, but we never see any improvements. We’re just as poor and screwed as ever.

Our interviews further identified a symbiotic relationship between local political power and criminal groups, both of whom benefit from this 'partnership'. The criminals offer protection and gain enormous amounts of money, while the mayors can count on formidable armed forces that allow them to exercise political power in the municipalities they govern. Through such unwritten and informal agreements, commitments cement the local political classes and criminal groups. Based on our interviews, these political commitments continue to bind when mayors accede to higher rungs on the political ladder; for example, as congress members (*diputados*) in state congresses, or even in the federal congress: 'Senator [name withheld] was in collusion with the Knights Templar, and everybody here knew it, so nobody could understand how the federal government never realised who she was really representing'.

Conclusions

Clearly, there is an interaction between criminal activity and elections in Michoacán as delinquent groups seek the benefits that can accrue from political participation. One of the most efficacious means of intervening in public life is through electoral campaigns, especially at the municipal level. The exercise of political control over local governments protects organised crime groups from actions by federal and state governments and the possibility of access to the financial resources that are assigned to municipalities.

The lowest rung of the Mexican government is precisely the municipal council, which governs municipalities. As an institution, the council should be the first to guarantee the forces of the state. However, the limited financial resources it administers, its lack of legitimacy and the inability of electoral agencies to regulate and control political campaigns, combine to impede their ability to fulfil their functions. People have yet to see any tangible improvements in their daily lives since an alternate form of political power began in the country in 2000. Thus, it is necessary to strengthen the institutional capacities and legitimacy of municipal governments so that they can perform their assigned role as the community's first line of defence against criminal groups.

The case of Michoacán reveals that high levels of criminal activity result from political underdevelopment exacerbated by low levels of human development, poor quality of education and low-income levels. These are the very socio-economic characteristics of a large percentage of the population in the state. As these conditions have coalesced to strengthen the presence of criminal groups, the current situation cannot be attributed exclusively to the enormous demand for drugs in the US, though this demand was unquestionably the spark that ignited a whole series of political and economic contradictions in Mexico.

Finally, recent modifications in Mexico to the framework of electoral regulation allow the re-election of municipal governments for two consecutive periods. This change was an attempt to establish more efficacious mechanisms of accountability and control the acts of municipal presidents. However, given the existing context of institutional weakness, re-election would result in mayors serving for six years, with no obligation to make any real improvements in public administration. For these reasons, it is urgent that greater attention is focused on processes that will help consolidate Mexico's democracy and on constructing effective institutions to combat crime as part of the country's anti-delinquency policies. Today, it is clear that military- and police-based measures are severely limited in terms of their efficacy against organised crime in a setting where democratic and juridical institutions are so weak.

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¹ The first case of self-defence forces occurred in the municipality of Cherán in 2011 to combat illegal forest exploitation, presumably by, first, a drug cartel called *La Familia Michoacana*, then by *Los Caballeros Templarios*. The people of Cherán decided to take matters into their own hands and formed groups of armed guards, installed checkpoints to control access to the municipality and refused to recognise the municipal government. Events culminated upon the election of a new local government with its own security apparatus through a procedure based on 'uses and customs'. In the same year, self-defence groups appeared in the municipalities of Buenavista, Tepalcatepec, Coalcomán, Chinicula and Aquila to defend people's lives, integrity and property (Rivera Velázquez 2013, 2014). Groups soon emerged in other municipalities as well. The *Caballeros Templarios*' model of extracting protection money was successful, but its very success pushed it to its limits, for their demands soon exceeded a threshold that people could tolerate (Rivera Velázquez 2014).

² What is electoral competitiveness? According to Sartori (1976), electoral competitiveness is basically the conditions that formal institutions establish for electoral processes. Electoral competitiveness indicates the real situation of an electoral process at a specific moment. Thus, while a particular electoral system may have rules designed to ensure fair competition, this does not guarantee that any specific electoral process will be competitive or fair (Del Río 2017; Valdés 1995).

³ From a maximalist perspective, democracy refers to a specific context in which social agents enjoy institutionalised political rights and civil liberties that—obviously—are accepted by those social agents themselves (Cansino 1997; O'Donnell 1996). In relation to political rights and civil liberties during 2010 to 2015, Michoacán was evaluated as having performed poorly by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and others (2010–2015). Indeed, in the years 2011, 2013 and 2015, this state was among the lowest rated in the nation, in part because the political rights and civil liberties established by institutions were severely constrained by problems of public insecurity.

⁴ The name is withheld for security reasons.

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