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### Democracy and Vigilantism: The Case of Michoacán, Mexico

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#### Abstract

The so-called self-defense forces in Mexico must be seen as a form of vigilantism generated by an incipient process of democratization that has not produced the institutional quality necessary to contain the activity of organized crime groups driven, essentially, by the high demand for drugs in the United States. Our qualitative analysis of Mexico's *Tierra Caliente* ('Hotlands') revealed profound processes of institutional deterioration in politics and the economy that have created conditions ripe for vigilantism. In the absence of substantial improvements in the quality of Mexico's democracy, especially at the levels of state and municipal government, the emergence of other forms of vigilantism and ongoing violence are foreseeable.

#### Keywords

Vigilantism; México; Michoacán; Tierra Caliente.

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## Introduction

The objective of this work is to analyze the so-called self-defense forces that have formed in the *Tierra Caliente* region of the state of Michoacán.<sup>1</sup> They are conceptualized as a form of vigilantism that emerged in the context of the development processes of democratic systems still marked by inefficiency. We posit that, unlike cases of vigilantism that have arisen in other areas of the world (Newby 2012; Silke 2001), in Mexico these movements were born as a defensive reaction by local communities seeking to protect themselves from criminal activity, given the absence of the rule of law or a government capable of guaranteeing even the minimal conditions of existence for its citizens.

The study adopts a qualitative perspective to analyze the evolution of self-defense forces in *Tierra Caliente* from their formation in 2014 to the present. This focus is based on documentary sources, in-depth interviews with key actors in the region, and the authors' own experiences in the area. Data-gathering began in 2011 with a series of research projects on topics related to the issue of organized crime.

The formation of self-defense forces in Michoacán arose in the context of the strategy to combat drug-trafficking implemented by the Mexican government in 2007 under then-President Felipe Calderón. The thrust of that program was to attack the largest criminal groups by capturing or killing their leaders, in the belief that this would fragment the structures of organized delinquency. But the result of this strategy has been what we call the 'Balkanization' of those groups in that it has been marked by bloody internecine wars of succession that have generated most of the over 107,000 victims of violence since 2007 (Secretariado del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública 2015), disparagement of the country on the world stage, and a severe curtailment of private investment, while having virtually no effect on levels of drug use in the US.

Perhaps one positive secondary effect of Calderón's war on drugs and the levels of violence it has produced is that it has stimulated broad discussions of the relations among democratic development, drug-trafficking, and violence in the country. But little argumentation has conceptualized the problem of violence in Mexico from a perspective that emphasizes the need to consolidate democratic development, for most analyses focus on police- and military-based approaches to the drug problem.

The formation of self-defense forces – a form of vigilantism – in the state of Michoacán offers a valuable perspective on how the process of democratic development in Mexico could be re-channeled through movements with a social base. Thus, this study analyzes the formation of these militarized groups from the perspective of democratic development, describing specific, singular features of vigilantism in Michoacán, including the fact that it is a transnational phenomenon, and that it seeks to socially vindicate public security as a fundamental right of citizens. Finally, it presents a series of suggestions for public policies directed to governments in Mexico and the US, since the latter is an important actor in the dynamics of self-defense forces in Mexico.

Vigilantism in Mexico emerged in the context of an immature democracy with formal institutions that are not yet capable of providing its citizens with even the most basic conditions of life, especially in the area of public safety. It is, therefore, a phenomenon clearly associated with the democratic process and its consolidation, and not so much with the demand for drugs in the US. According to Johnston (1996), vigilantism is characterized by the following:

- (i) It involves planning and premeditation by those who engage in it.
- (ii) Participants are private citizens whose engagement is voluntary.
- (iii) It is a form of 'autonomous citizenship' and, as such, constitutes a social movement.

- (iv) It uses, or threatens to use, force.
- (v) It arises when an established order is under threat from the transgression, or potential or imputed transgression, of institutionalized norms.
- (vi) It aims to control crime or other social infractions by offering assurances ('guarantees') of security to participants and others.

Several studies have examined the topic of self-defense forces in Michoacán (Guerra Manzo 2015; Hale 2014; Hoopes 2015), but most analyze only the historical context of these forces while emphasizing the presence of informal institutions, the social tradition of forming self-defense groups, and the profound weaknesses of the rule of law in Mexico. However, there are few analyses of the relation among the processes of democratic transition, institutional weakness, and the formation of vigilantism in Mexico.

The central hypothesis of this article is that vigilantes will not disappear from the Mexican landscape until a process of democratic consolidation is implemented that imposes at least the minimal conditions for the effective rule of law. The quality of Mexico's democracy can be improved in the medium-term by the social pressure that groups of citizens like these vigilantes in Michoacán can exert.

### **The democratic context**

The phenomenon of vigilantism tends to increase in countries that have only recently opened their doors to democracy (Pratten 2008). And this is applicable to the case of Michoacán, one of the states in Mexico that witnessed great vitality and exerted considerable political pressure that, in the late twentieth century, contributed significantly to the process of democratic reform. One might say that Mexico formally achieved democracy in the year 2000 with the election of a President who was *not* from the Institutional Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional* or PRI) that had governed Mexico for over 60 years, usually the only party that postulated candidates for such offices as mayor (*presidente municipal*), state congressman (*diputado local*), congressman (*diputado federal*), senator (*senador*), governor (*gobernador*) and, of course, the Presidency of the Republic. For over 50 years, the PRI never lost an election while transforming itself into the party of a state governed by a President who exercised absolute power over the country's destiny during his six-year term of office. An apt comparison could well be the Communist Parties of Eastern Europe during the period of the Cold War.

Throughout the decades of PRI domination, the President controlled every aspect of the nation's political life, constituting a kind of six-year Caesar endowed with total political authority. This arrangement proved efficient in Mexico as it ensured the political stability that contributed to the nation's economic development and wellbeing. However, by the late twentieth century, Mexico's presidential political system began to show cracks with the emergence of new political actors committed to the struggle for greater democratic development, and to the failure of an inefficient economic model based on state control of the economy. The PRI's longstanding dominance over political life came to an abrupt end in 2000, when the candidate from the National Action Party (*Partido Acción Nacional* or PAN) won the presidency.

At the national level, significant changes in the democratic process in Mexico began in the 1990s. These included the creation of an autonomous electoral organ, more equitable electoral legislation, and greater independence of judicial electoral authorities. This period also saw the empowerment of actors who sought to balance power, including the press and groups of intellectuals. However, changes such as these impacted primarily at the federal government level, and were concentrated in the central region of the country.

The arrival of a President from a party other than the PRI did little to improve the democratic quality of state governments. Indeed, the reality of state and local governments is exactly the

same as that which existed during the period of PRI domination, with the important *caveat* that there is now no central power capable of reigning in the states. As a result, governors began to see themselves as 'emperors' of their states during their six years in power. On a much smaller scale, the same can be said of many mayors (*presidentes municipales*) who ran their governments like small kingdoms during their three years of service.

The forces that propelled democratic change at the national level in Mexico could not, however, operate at the level of state or municipal government. State governments continued to be deeply corrupt with little transparency in their actions, operating with no effective system of checks and balances as independent local congresses. From 2000 to the present, Mexico has witnessed innumerable cases of governors accused and brought to trial for flagrantly corrupt practices, and the same has occurred at the municipal level.

Analytically, democratic development of state governments in Mexico can be examined on the basis of three fundamental indicators. The first is the absence of a balance of power. Generally-speaking, governors in Mexico control state congresses by dominating political parties through vast expenditures of public resources. Because Mexico does not permit the re-election of governors or local congressmen, these popular representatives generally devote their time in office to personal enrichment. For local congressmen, in particular, the fundamental priority is to amass personal fortunes during their three-year term in government that will guarantee their families' economic wellbeing for life. The nominal income of these elected officials is 12 times greater than the Gross Domestic Product per capita of Mexicans, the highest proportion of any country in the OCDE (Ameth 2015).

As a result, the scenario is plagued by political clientelism where, in exchange for ratifying the proposed legislation, outlays of funds, public budgets, and so on, that governors send to their state legislatures, representatives receive substantial resources from both the governors themselves and public funds that they adjudicate for themselves.

And citizens? Well, they are simple spectators of these processes since they cannot punish governors and representatives by, for example, voting them out of office, since re-election is prohibited by law. Term after term, citizens can only look on as the carnival of corruption among governors and local representatives plays out before them. These conditions, including corruption scandals, of course, wrest all legitimacy and authority from these supposed public servants in the eyes of citizens, while informal arrangements grant complete authority and power to the governor, who wields it vertically – that is, 'top-down' rule unhindered by many checks and balances – during his six years in office, virtually free of any kind of institutional counterweight.

In most cases, the governor is from the party that holds a majority in the House of Representatives, so he is even freer to control the representatives (equivalent to members of Parliament). In the few cases in which the governor's party does not enjoy a majority, he exercises power and control by buying off the political loyalties of representatives from other parties.

The press, a fundamental element in processes of democratic development (Ranjan and Kashyap 2014), is practically in the pockets of state governments. The survival of the print, digital and electronic media depends fundamentally on payouts received from state governments, such that when this source of *largesse* is denied, they are basically unable to perform their journalistic work. In short, they are almost completely dependent on government.

The second element has to do with the absence of formal mechanisms for sanctioning corrupt or inefficient governors. The judicial vigilance of governors could only emanate from an efficacious judicial power capable of establishing conditions of harmonious co-existence. But in most states

in Mexico judicial power is also controlled by the governor who exerts great political pressure over such processes as appointing the President of the Supreme Court, magistrates, and judges at the state level.

The politicization of justice reached its apogee during the long epoch of Mexico's 'Imperial Presidency', as presidents gave direct orders to judges and tribunals of justice regarding the sentences they were to impose. This did not occur in all judicial litigation; rather, in those cases in which the president or some member of his political team had a special interest in 'guiding' a judicial decision (Yamin and Garcia 1999).

The subordination of judicial power to the executive branch generated deep mistrust and delegitimized the juridical actions performed by courts. To make matters worse, the absence of mechanisms of internal control within the judicial power produced scandalous corruption in most apparatuses of justice. Money or political contacts allowed individuals to resolve almost any kind of legal impediment or sanction applicable to the crime committed. Obviously, this meant that judicial power could not perform its role as the constitutional counterweight to executive power, a situation that was reproduced at the state level, as in Michoacán, where the subordination of judicial power to executive power was even more intense.

It was in this context that the PRI's failure to secure the presidency in 2000 and maintain the six-year presidential tyranny left governors virtually free to continue exercising their role as emperors of their states during their six years in government. The functions of presenting evidence to the courts and prosecuting suspects are performed by state prosecutors named directly by the governor, who in this way guaranteed full support from, and control over, both the administration of justice and the tribunals themselves.

The third element concerns the development over several years of a political culture among Mexican citizens based on clientelistic and paternalistic relations, not on a growing consciousness of citizen responsibility. From childhood, Mexicans of all generations have been educated in a culture in which the government fulfills its obligations and responsibility to citizens simply by delivering resources and services in exchange for their votes. People generally do not receive an education that stimulates consciousness of solidarity with the society as a whole; nor is there a culture of accountability and transparency among politicians or citizens. Consciousness of 'the society as a whole' is almost non-existent in terms of its importance for respect for law and formally established norms.

For many years, the existence of a single political party in Mexico generated clientelistic relations with citizens that led to the perverse consolidation of a culture of '*let it go, let it be*' among citizens, as long as some kind of financial compensation or public service was received in exchange (Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith 2002; Hernández Muñoz 2006). But this 'contract' expired during the financial crises of the 1980s that left the government bereft of the monetary resources necessary to hold up its end of the bargain in existing social contracts.

At the level of state governments, the effect was even more marked since governors' closer contact with citizens facilitated the establishment of more intimate clientelistic relations. As a result, public infrastructure projects, employment opportunities in government, authorization of credits, and other sundry supports that the government could dispense were allotted on the basis of these relations.

Additional complications included the grim realities of a social order in which the educational levels of the general population are low. In Mexico as a whole, mean years of schooling is just nine, but in Michoacán this falls to 7.9 years (INEGI 2015). Of course, where people are poorly-educated, it is easier to maintain clientelistic schemes of political control based on disbursing resources (Abdulai and Hickey 2016; Berinsky and Lenz 2010). The vast majority of citizens

consider that structures of mutual patronage between governors and the governed is in their best interest, even though they are outside the legal framework.

### **The case of Michoacán and self-defense forces**

The state of Michoacán well reflects these conditions of democratic underdevelopment in Mexico, where the governor's virtually personal power, the absence of checks and balances in the political sphere, the control of judicial power, and omnipresent clientelistic practices configure political life. Moreover, Michoacán is the geographic region where the most important political changes have occurred. For example, in 1988 it witnessed the birth of the National Democratic Front (*Frente Democrático Nacional*), the political movement that propelled the electoral changes of 1997 which sanctioned the existence of a legal framework that made free electoral competition possible and that created the conditions which eventually led to the election of a President from a different party in the year 2000 and of a non-PRI governor in 2002.

But this role as protagonist of political change at the national level generated instability and a vacuum of political leadership in the state. From 1988 to 2015, Michoacán had more than ten different governors when there should have been only four! During the dominion of the PRI, the existence of a strong central power embodied in the figure of a President who delegated authority to the state governors ensured the presence of a power that, when anarchy threatened, could swiftly and efficiently impose order. But the aforementioned end-of-century democratic changes fractured this scheme and left the state government of Michoacán profoundly weakened, as a void of authority allowed political groups, which had long been controlled, to exercise power and fulfill their aspirations. Exemplary cases include labor movements, especially the powerful teachers' union, and organized crime groups.

In the early years of the twentieth century, the *Tierra Caliente* was characterized by the presence of the figure of the *cacique*, a kind of political and economic 'boss' who literally controlled people's lives and livelihoods (Karst and Rosenn 1975). This political figure was the primary referent power and authority there. Later, the diverse changes in the relation between government and citizen molded, in this zone, clientelistic political arrangements that followed the model implemented by the PRI throughout Mexico. Municipalities in the region have never known conditions approaching those of democratic normality in terms of such indicators as political participation, the quality of local institutions, freedom of the press, and participation by civil society.

For years, and still today, *Tierra Caliente* has been entangled in political problems derived from land tenure, the lack of adequate public policies, geographic isolation, inequitable models of local economic development, and a woefully inefficient educational system (Maldonado 2010). It is an area where a plethora of social programs and government initiatives have been implemented, the vast majority of which proved completely fruitless, serving only to consolidate the personal fortunes of politicians and local public officials. For decades, deeply-rooted corruption and the use of public administration as a mechanism for paying political favors (Amparán 2000) have generated a governing apparatus that is terribly inefficient in terms of administration and the operation of public policies (Lehouq et al. 2005).

This region also exemplifies the existence of phenomena of micro-corruption, as virtually all structures of government entrusted with applying public policies and performing administrative functions are inefficient and poorly-organized. Bureaucracies are rife with corruption and no mechanisms of any kind exist that might allow ordinary citizens to sanction this inoperability and inadequate realization of most government programs. This is particularly applicable in the case of education, where the presence of powerful teachers' unions and

collusion between authorities and teachers has established clientelistic relations in which political activity takes clear precedence over teaching.

Thousands of millions of pesos of social budgets have been invested in *Tierra Caliente* with no perceptible effect in terms of improving the population's living conditions. It is not difficult to understand the emergence of criminal groups in a social milieu in which the state lacks a strong, formal presence, where the rule of law does not exist, and where opportunities for economic development are nil for most inhabitants.

Up to the year 2007, diverse delinquent groups operated in this zone, but they were mostly small bands of drug-traffickers that produced marihuana and heroin destined, primarily, for US markets. But later these groups began to merge with the major criminal cartels in Mexico to commercialize their products and aid in the logistics of transporting them to the US. In those years, these criminal groups in Michoacán did not intervene in the political life of their sub-regions; nor were they involved in the commission of such crimes as kidnappings, murder or extortion. Local populations were aware of the existence of what they called *marihuaneros*, but left them free to go about their business as long as they did not interfere in the daily life of their communities.

In 2007, Mexico's federal government introduced a drastic change in its strategy for dealing with drug-trafficking as it implemented a policy based on capturing – or simply killing – the principal leaders of the drug cartels. The first effect of this onslaught was to fracture the existing balance in narcotics markets by triggering internecine wars inside the cartels over positions of leadership and control of transportation routes to the US (Ríos 2013). A second impact was that members of the bands disarticulated by police/government/military action simply coalesced into new gangs and groups beyond the reach of the traditional leadership established by criminal groups in past decades that had maintained policies of non-violence and rejected involvement in other common forms of criminal activity.

One consequence of this new policy for the drug cartels in Michoacán, principally the *Caballeros Templarios* ('Templar Knights'), was that they lost the relationship with the large criminal cartels in Mexico that had provided them with the logistics necessary to reach drug markets in the US. Their response, logically, was to look for ways to accede those markets on their own account. One strategy they adopted was to introduce synthetic drugs.

Another approach was for delinquent groups in the state, taking advantage of the existing, solid criminal structure, to adopt a 'business model' that emphasized extracting 'rents' from civil society. Suddenly, small merchants, cattle-ranchers, farmers and professional people all found themselves targets of extortion by criminal groups that demanded weekly payments (protection money) in exchange for allowing them to carry on their daily affairs. In return, those criminals offered to protect the inhabitants from interventions by other delinquent groups. To this end, the main criminal group even elaborated a 'Declaration of Principles', which established its obligation to 'protect' the population and to respect a series of norms of conduct that reflected positive moral values, though it simultaneously intensified their penetration into the political life of the state.

By the year 2007, collusion among the governor, local and federal representatives, senators – indeed the entire local political class – and criminal groups, specifically the aforementioned *Caballeros Templarios* – the dominant cartel in Michoacán – was evident to all. Availing themselves of the absence of the rule of law, drug-traffickers emerged as 'legitimate' political actors who financed electoral campaigns, mediated conflicts between private citizens, fixed prices for agricultural products, and provided the services of Notary Publics, among sundry other activities.

As time went on and as criminal groups extended their control to practically every aspect of the life of local populations, the situation in *Tierra Caliente* became increasingly chaotic. In the face of the weakness and deep corruption of state and local governments, people came to accept the political offer of criminal groups to impose order and authority in every nook and cranny of social life (Flanigan 2014). Their authority was exercised through local 'chiefs' (*jefes de plaza*) appointed by the criminal groups, who extorted money and goods from citizens, stole, and made kidnappings and murders almost daily occurrences.

It was in this context that the self-defense forces emerged in 2013: heterogeneous groups made up of small agricultural and service entrepreneurs, farmworkers, ordinary citizens, and even individuals linked to organized crime and delinquency. It is important to point out that one forerunner of these vigilantes in *Tierra Caliente* occurred in the community of Cherán, located in the indigenous zone of the state, where an armed Rural Guard had existed since 2011 with the approval and support of community members (Tomas 2014).

The self-defense forces in Michoacán can best be conceived as informal social aggregations, continuing a long history of informal institutions in Mexico (Molina 2008; O'Donnell 1996) that have guided political life. Due to the absence of a democratic system or governments with sufficient legitimacy to impose forms of social regulation based on the rule of law, the self-defense forces should be seen as a natural defense mechanism of society to protect itself from rampant delinquency.

These forces soon became aware of the collusion between the state government and criminal groups. In a normal democracy, the implementation of checks and balances and legitimate forms of representation would lead to the establishment of systems of defense and equilibriums that would make it unnecessary for the civil population to take up arms and confront the criminals in their midst. However, in *Tierra Caliente* local representatives are mere pawns subject to the governor's interests whose future political careers depend, above all, on 'loyalty'. There is no evidence that these representatives have ever defended the interests of the citizens that they supposedly represent. In fact, the evidence that does exist suggests exactly the opposite: collusion between local politicians and criminals (Michangoonga 2014). Worse yet, the senator of the Republic for this region lobbied for representatives of criminal groups to be received in the Senate chambers! Amid the absurdity of Mexican democracy, the resources of criminal groups far outweighed those of the citizenry (De la Rosa 2014).

Another interesting aspect of these self-defense forces is the broad participation of migrants from communities in *Tierra Caliente* residing in the US, for their remittances in dollars went a long way towards purchasing firearms and otherwise funding these groups. Although Mexican law allows migrants and *michoacanos* living in the US to vote, the number of ballots cast in local elections has never surpassed 500, out of a total pool of some two million potential voters (Garcia 2015). Thus, the participation of *michoacanos* residing in the US did not materialize through votes cast at polling stations but, rather, through their response to a concrete situation; namely, requests for support issued by the self-defense forces. This reflects, once again, the lack of trust in, and legitimacy of, democratic mechanisms in relation to conflict settlement, as well as the role of the state as mediator of peaceful social co-existence.

In 2015, Mexico's federal government sent a 'Commissioner' (*Comisionado*) to Michoacán. His mission was to 'clean up' the state from the plague of organized crime. Wielding the Presidential power invested in him, the Commissioner forced the governor and his entire cabinet to resign. Sending such a Commissioner to a 'Free and Sovereign State' – according to the terms of Mexico's Constitution – was an act that violated all laws and legal norms. Apparently, the meta-constitutional faculties of the President and the threat of sending the governor to prison sufficed to convince the latter to resign his post (Carpizo 2006). Almost immediately, the local PRI representatives who held a majority in the state congress were compelled to appoint an interim

governor who could do nothing more than follow the directives of the Commissioner, who thus became a kind of Viceroy of Presidential power.

These facts have strong qualitative implications for they demonstrate the government's shallow interest in finding concrete, effective solutions to the problem of organized crime in Michoacán, solutions that would respect legal channels and help strengthen the quality of democracy, the rule of law, and government institutions. Instead, the government chose the traditional way of Mexican politics: utilizing informal channels to resolve problems.

The Commissioner sent by the federal government lent a façade of legality to the self-defense forces by allowing them to operate. But from the outset the government's aim was to take advantage of these vigilantes and their intimate knowledge of the terrain to locate the members of criminal groups, hunt them down, and imprison them. However, members of delinquent groups opposed to the dominant cartel had already infiltrated the self-defense forces, seizing a perceived opportunity to gain control of the territory.

Certainly, the year 2015 saw the capture or killing of the principal leaders of the main organized crime group in the state. However, vigilante activity continued there, forcing the federal government to later capture and imprison the main leaders of the self-defense groups as well!

As of 2016, several self-defense forces are still active in the state of Michoacán, and outbreaks of violence are common as these groups block highways, organize demonstrations, and burn vehicles to pressure the government to respond to a broad range of demands, from urgently needed public works to freeing their jailed leaders.

## **Conclusions**

It seems that the phenomenon of vigilantism has come to stay in Michoacán. The explanation of these events lies in the lack of democracy and the fragile network of government institutions which has generated a situation of weakness that continues to produce gaps of legitimacy that both criminal groups and vigilante forces seem more than happy to attempt to fill. In the absence of the democratic reforms required to generate the rule of law, of an effective judicial system, and a system of checks and balances in the Executive branch, there is no way that the conditions and justification of vigilante activity will disappear. Without doubt, the conditions that explain the emergence of self-defense forces in Mexico still persist today, especially in Michoacán.

Recent years have seen only modest democratic changes in the country. The President of the Republic has not implemented an independent system which would ensure sanctions for the widespread corruption, that omnipresent and blatant scourge of Mexico's political class and, worse still, administrative bureaucracies. There is no authority independent of executive power that could enforce limits on the sophisticated and systematic embezzlement of public funds practiced by the political class.

The vision of the political elite that governs Mexico has always been oriented towards changing the country's economic structure, *not* its political structure. This has marked Mexico's recent history since the time of President Salinas (Heine 1996), with priority given to economic reforms that, in theory, improve material conditions for the population and open the way to modest political reforms that do not constitute an abrupt turn in political life in Mexico. However, recent economic reforms have not generated the anticipated results. Mexico's economy continues to grow at a very low rate, increasing already widespread poverty and the miserable living conditions of the majority of the population, with the notable exception of individuals linked to politics or the administration of public resources (*The Economist* 2015).

In the short term, the Mexican political system will not generate the mechanisms required to gain popular legitimacy and representativeness and so impede emergence of self-defense groups and vigilantism in the future. In fact, vigilante groups now operate in urban areas of the state – having learned from the experience of the groups in *Tierra Caliente* – intent on preventing common criminality. The conditions of governmental illegitimacy and weakness are still clearly present. To make matters worse, these phenomena of illegitimacy and weakness are reproduced more markedly in state and local governments, where no significant changes have occurred that might improve governance and citizens' acceptance of their governors. Without such substantial changes at these levels of government, the future will be characterized by continuing violence and irate reactions by citizens fed up with the lack of public security.

At the levels of state and local government, mechanisms need to be implemented that will ensure accountability to the citizenry, prevent the emergence of a 'pristine' clientelistic culture, and guarantee transparency in the administration of public resources. Moreover, the independence of the judicial system must be cemented, and the press must be free to criticize, but this is only possible if it is no longer dependent on government for its subsistence.

Prospects for the medium term include the increasing delegitimation of government. Specifically, it is likely that the next President of the Republic will win by a very narrow margin of votes in a hotly-contested election involving numerous candidates. The absence of a second round of voting or of some other mechanism capable of generating greater strength and legitimacy in government will mean that the next President will probably occupy that post having received less than 30 per cent of the popular vote (Soto 2013).

Improving the quality of democracy and establishing the rule of law require urgent attention, as these are the only effective ways of putting an end to vigilantism in the country. Otherwise, the Mexican people will have no other recourse than taking the law into their own hands to defend their integrity, thus usurping one of the fundamental obligations of the State in a democratic nation.

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<sup>1</sup> The term *Tierra Caliente* alludes to the hot climate characteristic of this area of Michoacán, which includes the municipalities of Buenavista, Parácuaro, Tepalcatepec, Aguililla and Apatzingán. The state of Michoacán is located in West-Central Mexico and occupies three per cent of the country's territory with 58,599 square kilometers and a population of approximately four million inhabitants. It borders on the Pacific Coast between the states of Guerrero to the south (where Acapulco is located) and Jalisco to the north (with its famed tourist resort, Puerto Vallarta). It is one of the 31 states plus the Federal District (including Mexico City) into which the country is divided politically.

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