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Between mutual suspicion and fear: Civil-military relations in Mexico

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Executive summary

This CMI Working Paper focuses on the relationship between the military, civilian governments and civilian populations in Mexico. It highlights key dynamics since the Mexican revolution (1910-1917) and up until the Ayotzinapa incident in 2014, revealing that the Mexican military throughout the 20th Century has co-existed with civilian governments in a climate of mutual distrust yet co-dependence. The report also shows that the Mexican military has consistently been involved in repression of the civilian populations, from the clamp-down on “subversive groups” in the context of the Cold War to the civilian suffering produced by the so-called “War on Drugs” of today. These trajectories have in the present produced a crisis of legitimacy both for the security forces as well as for the Mexican state *vis-a-vis* its populace.

Keywords:

Mexico, civil-military relations, security politics, war on drugs

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1. Introduction

In October 2014, 43 students were abducted and presumably killed by an infamous drug cartel in the Mexican town of Iguala in what has become known as the Ayotzinapa incident¹. Although the details surrounding the tragedy remain unclear, investigations reveal that the police and possibly the army played a role in the chain of events, throwing security politics in the northernmost Latin American country into the international spotlight. This CMI Working Paper focuses on the relationship between the military, civilian governments and civilian populations in Mexico. It highlights key dynamics since the Mexican revolution (1910-1917) and up until the Ayotzinapa incident, revealing that the Mexican military throughout the 20th Century has co-existed with civilian governments in a climate of mutual distrust yet co-dependence. The report also shows that the Mexican military has consistently been involved in repression of the civilian populations, from the clamp-down on “subversive groups” in the context of the Cold War to the civilian suffering produced by the so-called “War on Drugs” of today. These trajectories have produced, in the present, a crisis of legitimacy both for the security forces as well as for the Mexican state *vis-a-vis* its populace.

2. Mexican military history in brief

The contemporary armed forces in Mexico were created after the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917), a civil war that overthrew two military dictators: long term-ruler Porfirio Díaz (1911) and Victoriano Huerta (1914). The revolution was a popular revolt against extreme conditions of poverty, exploitation and exclusion that affected most of the country’s population, along with full repression of political liberties.

After the war, the irregular fighters from the rebel peasant ranks replaced the troops originally established by Porfirio Díaz, and the revolutionary generals transformed themselves into the new official commanders. The triumphant faction led by Venustiano Carranza established a new government in 1914, and called to write a new constitution (1917) that responded to the rebels’ demands with regards to i.e. land and labor. The new revolutionary regime officially recognized the newborn military, and the new armed forces used the old military academy established by Porfirio Díaz, Heroico Colegio Militar, to professionally train the young veterans and to recruit new cadres to institutionalize the army.² Thus, in that respect, the Mexican armed forces certainly have roots in historical popular revolts and popular social formation.

In the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, the revolutionary generals possessed great power over economic and political developments within the regions they controlled. This power was sustained well into the 20th century.³ Indeed, political stability after the Mexican Revolution was not born from democracy, but through a pact of mutual recognition between the generals and the institutionalization of central powers in 1929. That year, after the murder of Álvaro Obregón, the newly elected president who had yet to assume office, the outgoing administration of Plutarco Elías Calles called for the formation of a state party, the *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* (PNR). This was intended to unify the different revolutionary groups with ambitions for power and thereby avoid a new civil war. The party changed its name to *Partido de la Revolución Mexicana* (PRM) in 1938, under the guidance of the

¹ The incident is called “Ayotzinapa” because of the name of the Rural Teachers’ School where the students came from. However, the murders and abductions took place in Iguala.

² Camp, *Generals in the Palacio. The Military in Modern Mexico*, 17-19.

³ Tannenbaum, *Mexico; The struggle for Peace and Bread*, 82.

then-president General Lázaro Cárdenas. The party established a military branch (*sector militar*) within its corporative organization, a step that helped to control and organize the political ambitions of the military in favor of the regime.⁴ When this branch disappeared six years later under Mexico's last military president, General Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940-1946), the regime had finally succeeded in reducing the political influence of the army as a whole. Camacho was in many ways a modernizer, and sought to put limits on the ambitions of individual generals, as well as on the conflicts between different factions that formed out of these power struggles. From then on, military officers who had political ambitions would run individually as candidates of the state party for congress, the senate, or even for governor, but never again as presidential candidates.

Between 1920 and 1946, the armed forces had gone through a complex process of institutionalization, which ended up with the formation of the first civilian government in 1946, headed by Miguel Alemán Valdés. Reforms such as the introduction of a law to regulate military promotions, the creation of a Superior School of War for graduate officers and commanders, and the enforcement of political discipline, professionalized the armed forces and secured the subordination of the military to subsequent civilian governments. As made evident by the fact that Mexico did not experience a military coup similar to most of its neighbors to the south during the second half of the 20th century, this subordination has remained stable up until today.

3. Military-civilian relationships: the relationship with political power.

3.1 Closed military spaces

By constitutional precept, the Mexican President is the supreme commander of the armed forces. In contrast to many other countries, Mexico does not have a civilian minister of Defense. Instead, the Ministry of National Defense (*Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional*) has a division general as minister, and the Ministry of the Navy (*Secretaría de Marina*) has an admiral in the equivalent post.

The institutional culture within the military ministries is characterized by skepticism towards accepting chains of commands other than those of their own military hierarches. This has led to conflicts with cooperating civilian institutions. Moreover, the military ministries have very few civilians within their ranks, except for some staff recruited for special functions, such as lawyers and psychologists.

Most officials are young people (including some women), recruited from the lower middle class and trained in the military academy and professional schools. The troops usually consist of young men with a poor rural background. Civilians are occasionally admitted by invitation to postgraduate courses in the army's Higher School of War (*Escuela Superior de Guerra*) or the navy's Center for Higher Naval Studies (*Centro de Estudios Superiores Navales*). The lack of civilian personnel within the military institutions has reinforced the lack of socialization among civilians and the military. Indeed, friendship between civilians and military personnel are often not looked upon favorably by the latter. For instance, in the military academies the civilians are called "*civilones*" in a derogative way, and considered as "less worthy" than military personnel.

⁴ Meyer, "La institucionalización del nuevo régimen," in *Historia General de México*, 826. See also Brandenburg, *The Making of Modern Mexico*, 91.

3.2 Contain the military

In the army officer's academy (*Heróico Colegio Militar*) there is a large wall with an engraved word: "Loyalty".⁵ This single word might be said to capture the nature of the relationship between the armed forces and the civilian administrations from 1946 onwards. With the transition to civilian rule in the first half of the 20th century, the military learned that loyalty to civilian governments brought them an above average income, social welfare (housing, medical care, education through military institutions), a stable career and retirement. In contrast, rebellion seemed a rather uncertain endeavor.

One of the early aims of civilian governments after 1946 was the demobilization of civilians. In effect, the civilian governments tried to maintain a balance between enabling the armed forces to coerce civilian protests and turmoil efficiently, at the same time as they had to make sure that the military did not come into a position to attempt a violent take-over. That being said, while the Mexican political regime was certainly authoritarian, it also had some degree of social support and legitimacy from its revolutionary origin. Its authoritarianism relied to a limited extent on direct military coercion against potential threats, though this *ultima ratio* was never dismissed.

Several measures were crafted with the purpose of limiting the military's range of maneuverability: their budgets were limited, and their weaponry was modest and limited to domestic use (for example, the navy did not have a battle fleet, just infantry units to patrol coastal zones). Moreover, commanders of domestic military zones were constantly rotated in order to avoid a consolidation of personal power and influence. There were an unusually high number of generals, thereby diluting any given general's weight. The military were ordered to hold small fuel deposits, thereby disabling their capacity to support a full non-sanctioned mobilization. Moreover, troops and lower-level officials were discouraged by high-ranking officers from having close contact with civilians, thereby further isolating them and avoiding deeper and unsupervised "empathy".

Additionally, the successive Mexican governments were reluctant to allow military officials and commanders to attend foreign academies, such as the School of the Americas in Panamá (and later in the United States) where officials from other Latin American nations were trained. The purpose was to keep the officers from receiving a more concrete idea of a political mission or the capacity to head a government administration.

3.3 Passive by-standers

Thus, a crucial aim for civilian administrations has been to limit the military's sphere of actions and their capacity to assume wider administrative functions. This principle was, for example, applied after the earthquake in Mexico City in 1985. The earthquake devastated the city, leaving an un-known number of people dead⁶, and thousands of victims in agony buried under the crumbled buildings. However, even if the armed forces did have a national defense plan including immediate rescue tasks, the soldiers remained quiet guarding the affected zones, without conducting any of the usual duties they had carried out during more limited emergencies elsewhere. The order to abstain from leading the rescue efforts and the logistics of supplies distribution came from the Miguel De la Madrid

⁵ A picture showing this wall can be accessed at: <http://www.elvocerodigital.com/imagenes/colegio5>

⁶ There is no an official estimate of deaths, but an unofficial one was given by the Mexico City's Civilian Register Office (Oficina del Registro Civil). According to this institution, there are 3,692 death records for September 19 of 1985, plus 200 more registered the following day, after a shorter replica. See Archundia, "A 26 años del sismo, cifra oficial: 3 mil 692 muertes", <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/ciudad/108037.html>

administration (1982-1988) which was in power at the time.⁷ This was a tactical political evaluation of the broader socio-political climate. At a time when the Mexican economy was suffering from skyrocketing inflation and permanent devaluation of the currency, and with social unrest already mounting, the Mexican government was unwilling to let the military roll out its official functions.

3.4 The 1968 turning point

Though the military had been often used to quell civilian protest and even post-electoral unrest since the late 1920s, their participation to dismantle the students' movement of 1968 marked a turning point. Between July and October 1968, students and teachers headed massive urban protests demanding the end of repressive practices, such as the federal criminal code which limited the right to public assembly, and the dismantling of the antiriot police groups in Mexico City, which also functioned as a tool for political repression. Mexico City's antiriot police—the *granaderos*—clashed brutally with the students in the streets but could not break up the movement. Instead, tensions escalated.

At the time, Mexico City was preparing to host the Olympic Games, scheduled to start in October. The administration wanted to use the Games to display the modern face of post-revolutionary Mexico to the outside world. Against this background, the government feared that the social upheavals would erode its prestige. The president at the time was Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, a conservative politician from the PRI party with a particularly authoritarian style of governing. As the opening ceremony was approaching and the demonstrations in the streets continued, the government decided to launch a harsher repression, taking the army out of its barracks.

The army deployed troops and even tanks to maintain control in the vicinity of the National University of Mexico (UNAM) and National Polytechnic Institute (IPN)'s buildings. In spite of the presence of civilians on the site, the army even launched a rocket that destroyed the entrance to a historical UNAM's high school building in downtown Mexico City.

By October 2nd, the Mexican civilian government felt pushed up against the wall. On the one hand, they feared that a military coup might be underway if the military started to perceive the civilian government as unable to maintain public order. On the other hand, the government was persuaded that a revolution, inspired by the Cuban revolution, was about to be plotted by "subversive" groups. Henceforth, the government decided that the upheaval in the streets had to be stopped. General Gutiérrez Oropeza, chief of the *Estado Mayor Presidencial*, sent plainclothes military to shoot civilian demonstrators as well as regular military officials who were policing the demonstrations. The military shot back, trapping civilians in the crossfire. The same plainclothes military took advantage of the confusion to illegally arrest the students who headed the movement. They interrogated and tortured the student leaders in military facilities, while regular police did the same in their own barracks.⁸ The death toll has never been totally clear; but estimates range between 30 and 300.⁹ President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz later assumed full responsibility for the repression. However, the specific implications and actions of all of those who had participated in the massacre were never clarified nor judicially prosecuted.

⁷ Camp, *Generals in the Palacio*, 33, 52, 85.

⁸ Scherer García and Monsiváis, *Parte de Guerra Tlatelolco 1968; Documentos del general Marcelino García Barragán. Los hechos y la historia*, 43.

⁹ <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB201/>.

It is also worthwhile mentioning that Luis Gutiérrez Oropeza, who was in charge of this operation, recalls in his memoirs that President Díaz Ordaz (a lawyer by training), had told him the day before his presidential inauguration in 1964:

*“Colonel, if when fulfilling your duties you need to violate the Constitution, you should never ask for my permission, because I as the President will never authorize you to violate it. But if what is at risk is Mexico’s security or my family’s life, then, Colonel, you violate it. But if I learn of that, I, as the President, will fire you and put you on judicial trail, but your friend Gustavo Díaz Ordaz will be permanently grateful to you.”*¹⁰

This statement shows that in fact, President Díaz Ordaz was giving Gutiérrez Oropeza broad powers to use extra-judicial and illegal measures in the name of Mexico’s security if he deemed it necessary.

3.5 The Luis Echeverría Administration

In 1970, the PRI’s presidential candidate was Luis Echeverría Álvarez, former Minister of the Interior during the presidency of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz. As Minister of the Interior, Luis Echeverría Álvarez had been in charge of the Mexican political police (Federal Security Directorate- DFS), an institution heavily involved in the 1968 massacre.

As PRI’s presidential candidate, Echeverría asked for a minute of silence in mourning for those who had been killed in the massacre of 1968. This infuriated the army to the point that some sources assert that the army sent a request to President Díaz Ordaz that candidate Echeverría be replaced.¹¹ As President (1970-1976), Luis Echeverría tried to portray himself as a liberal politician, close to leftist causes. He implemented some modestly leftist policies in order to ease relations with the 1968 protestors, including appointing some younger politicians to his cabinet and lowering the legal age to 18 years.

Nevertheless, the authoritarian nature of the regime was soon reaffirmed. On January 10th 1971, a plainclothes paramilitary group called the Falcons (*Los Halcones*), trained and controlled by the military, was sent out to repress a new student demonstration.^{12,13} Meanwhile, some leftist groups that had previously suffered the brutal coercion of federal and state governments had become radicalized and evolved into rural and urban guerrillas. The activity and strength of these groups reached its peak during Echeverría’s administration. The government repressed them brutally using the military as well as paramilitary units. However, the most conservative groups blamed Echeverría’s leftist leanings, including his closeness with the Chilean President Salvador Allende, and harshly criticized the government. At the time, rumors circulated about preparations for a military coup in order to overthrow Echeverría’s government.

With a storm coming from a wide range of social and political sectors, Echeverría ordered the construction of a new military academy in the suburbs of Mexico City. According to some sources, Echeverría stated informally when the academy was inaugurated: “It is better to give them cement, instead of weapons.” This phrase is telling of a permanent pattern of civilian strategies for calming

¹⁰ Gutiérrez Oropeza, *Gustavo Díaz Ordaz. El hombre. El político. El gobernante*, 25.

¹¹ Castañeda, *La Herencia; Arqueología de la sucesión presidencial en México*, 339-346

¹² They had been trained and organized by Colonel Manuel Díaz Escobar. Díaz Escobar formed the group after 1968, by orders of General Luis Gutiérrez Oropeza, Chief of the Presidential Major Staff. *The Falcons* operated clandestinely but were formally assigned to the Mexico City major’s offices.

¹³ <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/537572.html>.

potential military arousals: in periods of social conflict, the armed forces have usually received promotions, incremental salary increases, and other non-belligerent material perks.

4. Military-civilian relationships: the relationship with the people

4.1 Fighting guerrillas

Though Mexican civilian governments did not endorse publicly the usual discourse of the Cold War, they took great care in promoting an anti-communist and anti-leftist mindset within the armed forces.¹⁴ Such an ideological leaning went hand in hand with the repression of social demands, mostly in rural areas but eventually in urban areas as well.

The massive use of armed forces in the coercion of civilian actors was permanently present from 1940s through 1970s, and was intensified towards the last half of this period when the army carried out massive operations to fight guerrilla movements in the southern state of Guerrero.

In the mountains of the state of Guerrero, one of the poorest states of Mexico, two rural guerrilla movements were formed in the late 1960s: the Revolutionary National Civic Association (*Asociación Cívica Nacional Revolucionaria*, ACNR), which existed between 1968 and 1972; and the Party of the Poor (*Partido de los Pobres*, PDLP), which conducted subversive operations between 1967 and 1974. Their two leaders were both rural elementary school teachers: Genaro Vázquez Rojas who taught in the Rural School for Teachers (*Escuela Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa*) and Lucio Cabañas Barrientos who had been a student there before becoming a teacher himself.¹⁵

Though both leaders were members in socialist or communist parties, their radicalization was mostly linked to the brutal acts of repression conducted by the local authorities and *caciques* (local powerful political brokers) against peasant communities. Their attacks against such elements—Lucio Cabañas' guerrilla even kidnapped the *cacique* Rubén Figueroa, a senator who was running for governor—triggered a massive deployment of military that, along with local and federal police, harassed many poor villages in a counterinsurgent strategy. This siege continued until the guerillas were eradicated.¹⁶ Some were killed in ordinary armed clashes between the guerillas and the military; others were abducted and murdered by different branches of the security forces.

4.2 The School of the Americas (SOA)

Neither the Mexican post-revolutionary administrations nor their armed forces fully endorsed the US-promoted national security doctrine that was prevalent in the southern hemisphere during the Cold War. This doctrine can be traced back to the end of World War II, when the defense and intelligence apparatuses of the United States were deeply transformed. At the core of such transformations was the idea that modern warfare was total—that is, it called on all available resources, whether civilian or military, to achieve victory. Moreover, the doctrine rested on the assumption that two competing

¹⁴ Camp, *Generals in the Palacio*, 46.

¹⁵ Sierra. “Fuerzas armadas y contrainsurgencia (1965-1982)”, in *Movimientos armados en México, siglo XX*, 376.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 383.

blocks—the West and the Soviet Union—were fighting for world hegemony and that in an atomic era most conflicts would be unconventional, without the clash of whole armies. That implied that in the conflicts fought in the Third World, any internal enemy (that would purportedly be cooperating with the rival block) should be discovered and suppressed.¹⁷

In Latin America, this ideology led to the establishment of a US military institution to train the region's armed forces: the now-infamous School of the Americas (SOA).¹⁸ At its installation in Panamá, Latin American officers and chiefs were not only taught new strategic approaches and corresponding methods of identifying and eliminating “internal enemies”, they were also given training in civilian government administration. The result was often the weakening of the already fragile control that many Latin American civilian governments wielded over the military, and many SOA graduates would later become leaders of military coups.¹⁹

4.3 The Mexican version

Though the Mexican government sent a few officials to receive instruction at SOA, their number was consistently lower than those sent by other military forces of the region. Moreover, the Mexican government carefully avoided including the term “national security” in its own official discourse. Indeed, the term “national security” was never used in official writing until the Ministry of Interior used it in an internal planning document in 1973.²⁰ No matter their reluctance towards the concept, in practice both the Mexican civilian government and the armed forces actually adopted many of the elements and strategic approaches of the national security doctrine, specifically those related to the suppression of “internal threats and enemies” represented by domestic social unrest.

At a time when the Soviet and the Cuban revolutions inspired many groups to perceive a socialist revolution as a viable option for social change, rural guerrilla groups surged in states like Guerrero, whilst urban guerrilla movements were formed in Jalisco, Nuevo León and even Mexico City.²¹

While the participation of the army in the fight against rural guerrillas was public, their role in combating urban guerrillas was less visible. For this purpose, a clandestine group was formed. Its name was White Brigade (*Brigada Blanca*), and it included military, federal judicial police officers, agents of the Federal Security Directorate—the political police of the Ministry of Interior—and even Mexico City police members. They conducted nation-wide operations against urban guerrillas, and had their headquarters in military facilities in Mexico City (*Campo Militar Número 1*). These groups operated by way of forced disappearances and torture of detainees.^{22,23}

¹⁷ Comblin, *Le pouvoir militaire en Amérique latine: L'ideologie de la securite nationale*. See also Birtle, *U. S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine. 1942-1976*, 9-12. In regard to the fore-mentioned institutional transformation, see the Congress of the United States of America, National Security Act, July 26, 1947, <http://research.archives.gov/description/299856>

¹⁸ Mechling, “Contraingurgencia, la primera prueba de fuego”, in *Contraingurgencia, proingurgencia y antiterrorismo en los 80. El arte de la guerra de baja intensidad*, 43-44.

¹⁹ <http://www.soaw.org/about-the-soawhinsec/soawhinsec-grads/notorious-grads>.

²⁰ Flores Pérez, *Seguridad nacional y democracia en México. La redefinición de un concepto en un nuevo marco de convivencia*, 132-133.

²¹ Sierra. “Fuerzas armadas y contraingurgencia”, 379-385.

²² Aguayo Quezada, *La Charola. Una historia de los servicios de inteligencia en México*, 188, 232.

To implement its counterinsurgent strategy, the Mexican government relied on leaders and officials who had been formally trained in the United States.²⁴ Participation in counterinsurgent strategies would become the most expedient path to fast promotion, no matter how disruptive of constitutional warranties these strategies might be.²⁵ Among the military's strategies was the creation of militia groups that informally contributed to fighting the guerrillas. These groups relied on the support of local *caciques*, many of whom were already producing illicit crops and were directly connected to the illegal drug trade.²⁶ The militia groups provided information or even formed paramilitary groups which victimized civilians in small villages who were relatives of the insurgents or considered sympathizers of the subversion. The formation of these alliances would foster the operations of some of the drug networks that plague the Mexican countryside today.²⁷

4.4 Counterinsurgency revisited. The fight against EZLN

On January 1, 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), or the Zapatistas as they are normally called, declared themselves at war with the Mexican state. The EZLN is a militant movement that has emerged from indigenous communities in the state of Chiapas in southern Mexico. These communities have traditionally suffered from abject poverty as well as discrimination based on language and ethnicity. The Zapatistas are also concerned with the struggle for land and opposed to the Mexican government's neoliberal policies. After the January 1994 declaration, on the same day that the free trade agreement NAFTA²⁸ between Mexico, the United States and Canada entered into effect, the guerrillas seized several towns and villages and attacked police stations and military barracks. However, the Mexican army soon quelled the uprising, and the Zapatistas have since resorted to a defensive strategy in efforts to protect their indigenous territories.

Four years before the rebellion, after a strongly contested election in 1988, President Carlos Salinas decided to modernize some corps of the army as a way of increasing the army's capacities should it face political unrest and social turmoil. Among other measures, the army formed and trained new combat units for counterinsurgent missions. In 1990, the Ministry of Defense created the Airmobile Group of Special Forces.²⁹ Their first big operation would be the fight against EZLN in Chiapas. After

²³ It is worth mentioning that one of the most prominent leaders of this group was General Francisco Quiroz Hermosillo. He had already participated in the fight against the rural guerrillas in Guerrero. Several years afterwards, along with General Mario Arturo Acosta Chaparro, Quiroz Hermosillo would be prosecuted under charges of protecting Amado Carrillo Fuentes, one of the most powerful Mexican drug-lords in the 1990s.

²⁴ See, for instance, the information of Darrin Wood, "La conexión de EU con la guerra sucia", in *La Jornada*, November 2, 2002, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2002/11/02/017a1pol.php?printver=1>.

²⁵ *Always near, always far: the Armed Forces in Mexico*, 6-9.

²⁶ http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB180/060_Guerra%20Sucia.pdf. In the official report, only one of the two paragraphs remained which referred to the link between the military and drug traffickers to combat guerrilla in the state of Guerrero. In the draft, such a link was formerly documented. For the official version, see Fiscalía Especial para Movimientos Sociales y Políticos del Pasado, *Informe Histórico a la Sociedad Mexicana*, 350.

²⁷ Evidence pointing to this might be seen in: Padgett, "La gran traición: la inteligencia en manos del narco", <http://www.sinembargo.mx/05-09-2013/742900>; Aristegui Noticias, "Los procesos contra el general", <http://aristeguinoticias.com/2304/mexico/los-procesos-contra-el-general/>, Aranda and Castillo, "A la luz, pruebas que vinculan al Ejército con la Brigada Blanca", <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2004/10/18/003n1pol.php?origen=politica.php&fly=1> among others.

²⁸ [North American Free Trade Agreement](#) (NAFTA).

²⁹ Federal Institute for Access to Information (IFAI), Resolution number 0000700140013, File RDA 5175/13.

the rebellion, the army started an accelerated process of “modernization”.³⁰ Again, the leaders of operations in the conflict zone would be generals who were experts in counterinsurgency and unconventional war.³¹ And, again, the army supported and trained paramilitary groups to provide support for the fight against the guerrilla.³²

4.5 Covert plans

One of these groups seems to have been linked to the massacre in Acteal, Chiapas, where 45 indigenous peasants, including women, children and elderly people, were murdered by paramilitaries in December 1997.^{33,34} This massacre was a turning point for the counterinsurgent strategy of the government due to the outrage it caused in the public opinion. The Minister of Interior, Emilio Chuayfett, was forced to resign from the cabinet in tacit acknowledgment that the federal government at least had neglected to guarantee the security of these communities.

However, information emerging in the aftermath of the massacre points to a much direr conclusion.³⁵ Some days after the massacre, a political magazine, *Proceso*, published evidence of a government strategy of creating paramilitary groups to dismantle the social basis of EZLN. The measures to follow included forced displacement of the local population and even direct and violent clashes against pro-EZLN communities.³⁶

Several years afterwards, disclosed documents from the US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) also showed that the Mexican Army had carried out direct actions to establish a network of paramilitary organizations in Chiapas in order to fight the EZLN.³⁷ No relevant public official was ever prosecuted for the Acteal massacre.

In August 2014, a civil organization closely linked to the Acteal community, The Bees (*Las Abejas*) denounced the freeing, since 2009, of 54 of the 70 paramilitaries who had been sentenced for participation in the massacre.³⁸

³⁰ <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=638>.

³¹ <http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=118165>

³² <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB283/>

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Acteal was a small town in the municipality of Chenalhó, Chiapas. The villagers supported the EZLN movement. On December 22, an armed group of approximately 100 men attacked an unarmed camp of refugees based on Acteal. They murdered 18 children, 22 women and 6 men. (Reyna, “Cronología. El caso Acteal”, <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/617362.html>).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Marín, “Censurar a los medios, controlar a las organizaciones de masas, cooptar secretamente a sectores civiles... Plan del Ejército en Chiapas, desde 1994: crear bandas paramilitares, desplazar a la población, destruir las bases de apoyo del EZLN...”

³⁷ National Security Archive, “Breaking the silence.”

³⁸ <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/ultimas/2014/08/23/libres-54-paramilitares-sentenciados-por-la-masacre-de-acteal-las-abejas-9405.html>.

5. From counterinsurgency to anti-narcotic operations

As the military conflict in Chiapas seemed to de-escalate, the government's attention turned towards the rising problem of public security. Part of this effort entailed massive operations against drug trafficking—efforts that soon turned into a security problem in themselves for the civilian population as human rights violations escalated.

The military's anti-drug operations began several years before the militarization of public security in the late 1990s. The most emblematic operation involving massive participation of the military in anti-drug tasks was called *Operation Condor*. Launched in 1975 but lasting until the 1980s, it was the Mexican government's answer to US President Nixon's pressures against Mexico to halt the production and trade of illegal drugs. The goal was to eradicate illicit crops in northern Mexico. The operation entailed the deployment of 10,000 troopers in the three states which were producing most of the illicit crops. The clashes against peasants who produced cannabis or opium poppy were frequent and bloody, as the role of the army was to incinerate the whole plantation where they found any such crops.³⁹

However, whilst military efforts in these early phases of “anti-drug” efforts were limited by and large to the eradication of illicit crops, they now had much broader involvement in both anti-drug campaigns and public security at large. Indeed, since the late 1990s, civilian governments have increasingly relied on the military to carry out police functions and tasks.⁴⁰ Many retired generals have been appointed as civilian police commanders-in-chief in several states, or even to high positions within civilian federal security institutions. The official but tacit assumption was that these retired generals would be better prepared and have better coordination with the armed forces, and, thereby, better success in executing operations against organized crime.

In the late 1990s, the federal government formed a federal police designed to control massive riots, among other tasks. The purpose of this was twofold: to create a civilian force able to deal with an increasing crime problem, and to reduce the public profile of the armed forces. By then, the frequent use of the armed forces in controlling civilian political protest had started to receive considerable criticism. Nonetheless, most of the police officers assigned to this division came from a military background: they were troops merely transferred from the army to the new federal police.⁴¹

The broader effects of appointing military commanders to civilian positions at all levels was an infusion of the military mindset, traditionally contemptuous of human rights, into the civilian police and justice system. This was a system already infected by corruption, but, now, suffered the addition of increased levels of authoritarianism as made evident by serious failures in granting due process, a predilection for armed confrontation instead of police investigation, and widespread use of illegal detentions and torture.

³⁹ Craig, “Operation Condor: Mexico's Antidrug Campaign Enters a New Era”, 353-354.

⁴⁰ González Ruiz, Portillo V. and Yáñez, *Seguridad pública en México; Problemas, perspectivas y propuestas*, 84.

⁴¹ *Always near, always far: the Armed Forces in Mexico* 58.

5.1 Human rights violations

As a whole, the militarization of public security has clearly had negative consequences for the armed forces and for the country. There has been a notable increase in human rights violations⁴² and a string of notorious cases of corruption related to crime, including cases showing collusion between the armed forces and criminal gangs. For example, General Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo, a Mexican “Czar” in charge of fighting drug trafficking in the late 1990s, was arrested in 1997 accused of protecting Amado Carrillo Fuentes, a powerful drug-lord of that time. Another notorious example is the very existence of *Los Zetas*, a ruthless and highly sophisticated criminal organization formed originally by deserters of the Mexican army’s special forces. It is suspected, though the Mexican army as well as the United States denies it, that many of the renegade soldiers were originally trained in the United States by US special forces at Fort Bragg. The sophistication of these groups has led some analysts to comment that the crisis of violence in Mexico might be considered a sort of criminal insurgency.⁴³

The human costs of the militarization of public security have become even more evident when President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) declared a “war on drug trafficking” upon assuming his presidency. His government initiated the massive deployment of military forces to several states—allegedly to fight criminals directly—involving 45,000 troops between 2006 and 2012.⁴⁴

International human rights organizations have documented the pervasiveness of human rights violations perpetrated by the armed forces during the most recent years after the beginning of the “war”.⁴⁵ Among the most notorious cases was the murder of two graduate students from the *Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey* (ITESM), in Monterrey, Nuevo León, in November of 2010. Military troops were engaged in gunbattle with criminal groups, and shot the students assuming that they were delinquents. When they discovered afterwards that they were not criminals but students, they planted weapons on the corpses to justify the killings.⁴⁶

Over the recent decades, the War on Drugs has consolidated many military careers. There are, however, voices inside the military expressing discomfort with this mission with the view that it is off the chart of the army’s core institutional responsibility. Moreover, some have expressed concerns about anti-drug efforts that expose the armed forces to institutional erosion and social condemnation, as well as increased public scrutiny and the risk of being legally charged for human rights violations. Some voices have expressed clearly that they are discontent with being blamed for the results of bad civilian decisions.

⁴²For example, there were 113 formal recommendations by the National Commission of Human Rights (CNDH) between December 2006 and November 2012. However, complaints before the CNDH, for the same period, were 7,441. See *Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional*, <http://www.sedena.gob.mx/images/stories/D.H/2013/abril/resultados2006-2012.pdf>.

⁴³Sullivan, *From drug wars to criminal insurgency: Mexican cartels, criminal enclaves and criminal insurgency in Mexico and Central America. Implications for global security*.

⁴⁴<http://www.oem.com.mx/laprensa/notas/n2686488.htm>

⁴⁵ Amnistía Internacional, *México; Nuevos informes de violaciones de derechos humanos a manos del Ejército*.

⁴⁶<http://mexico.cnn.com/nacional/2010/03/20/tec-de-monterrey-confirma-muerte-de-2-estudiantes>. See also Salazar, “Tec demanda justicia para 2 estudiantes asesinados”, <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/estados/84909.html>.

5.2 The Tlatlaya massacre

One of the most recent cases showing the human cost of militarizing public security is the Tlatlaya massacre of 2014, when the army killed 22 civilians in what was considered a summary execution.⁴⁷ On June 30, 2014, in the early hours of the morning, the army reported a fight against an armed group of criminals in the village of San Pedro Limón, municipality of Tlatlaya, in Estado de México, a neighboring state of Mexico City. According to the information that the army gave to the media, the violent confrontation caused 22 civilian casualties and none from the military—only a wounded soldier. The armed forces alleged that the clash resulted from a patrol operation in which they freed three kidnapped persons who were being retained by the criminal gang.⁴⁸

One day later, the governor of Estado de México, Eruviel Ávila, backed up the army's version of events and publicly thanked them for what he considered a brave and legitimate effort on the part of the Mexican armed forces to guarantee the people's security.⁴⁹

However, a week later, a new article from the Associated Press drew attention to many gaps between official information and evident facts. For instance, the army alleged that they had been patrolling the zone when they repelled a direct attack from the criminal group. Notwithstanding, the ambush had not caused relevant losses to the patrol unit. Blood pools and stains from the fight appeared odd for direct combat and were located mostly within a warehouse, not in the forest. No bullet casings, the usual trace of heavy automatic weapons firing, were left. Moreover, additional official information about the corpses' autopsies was not provided.⁵⁰

On September 19, 2014, Esquire magazine published testimonies of a witness who declared that the army had fired first, and that only one civilian had died in the clash while the other 21 victims were executed by the military once they had already surrendered. The witness also said that she had been kept isolated without food for three days, that afterwards she had been forced by federal (including naval) and state officials to declare that all the victims were criminals, and then made to sign many documents without being allowed any copies.⁵¹ After the executions, the military had allegedly placed weapons beside the corpses in order to support their alibi, claiming the death toll was the result of a violent fight instead of murder.⁵²

5.3 The Ayotzinapa case

Shortly thereafter came the Ayotzinapa incident that truly brought the world's attention to Mexico's security problems. Albeit allegations about the direct participation of the army have not yet been clarified, the event does point to a matrix of highly problematic collusions between criminal gangs, political figures and public security forces.

On September 26, 2014, young students of the Rural School for Teachers (Escuela Normal Rural) "Isidro Burgos", in Ayotzinapa, Guerrero, were kidnapped by municipal police officers in Iguala, a nearby small city. The officers handed the students over to assassins of a criminal organization called

⁴⁷<http://mexico.cnn.com/nacional/2014/11/02/un-juzgado-civil-consigna-a-siete-militares-por-el-caso-tlatlaya>

⁴⁸<http://aristeguinoticias.com/2210/mexico/cronologia-del-caso-tlatlaya-desde-el-30-de-junio-al-21-de-octubre/>

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/mexico-lopsided-death-tolls-draw-suspicion>

⁵¹ <http://www.esquirelat.com/reportajes/14/09/17/esxclusiva-esquire-Testigo-revela-ejecuciones-ejercito/>

⁵² <https://es.scribd.com/doc/243894394/RECOMENDACIONTLATLAYA-pdf>

“*Guerreros Unidos*”.⁵³ The result was the forced disappearance of 43 students and the murder of six more.

The Mexican federal government claims that the only people responsible are the Mayor of Iguala, José Luis Abarca, who ordered the local police to attack the students, and his wife, María de los Ángeles Pineda Villa, who is relative of known drug traffickers.⁵⁴ The presumption is that the Mayor had ordered the police to make sure that the students were stopped from holding a protest at the same time as his wife were scheduled to hold a public speech, and that the police somehow had ended up—with the Mayors knowledge or not— handing the students over to “*Guerreros Unidos*”.

However, additional information from several sources indicates otherwise. For instance, some survivors have pointed out that the army’s 27th Battalion, garrisoned in Iguala, knew of the events as they were happening. Moreover, these survivors maintain that not only did the soldiers neglect to protect the students, they participated in harassing them as they were dragged from civilian hospitals by local police officers and criminals. The survivors say the soldiers aimed their weapons at them and declared: “You were bringing it upon yourselves” (“Ustedes se lo buscaron”) and that they took pictures of the detainees and asked them for their actual name, or otherwise, the students were told “they will never find you”.⁵⁵

The parents of the disappeared students have requested that the military facilities of 27th Battalion be searched for the students. But Federal Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam has denied such demands claiming that his office (*Procuraria General de la Republica*) knows that the students are not there.^{56,57}

At the time of the writing of this report, the events in Iguala are far from being clarified and the victim’s parents are keeping pressure on the government to investigate and reveal what has actually happened to their children. It remains to be seen if they will ever get the full truth.

5.4 Paradoxical trust

Paradoxically, the armed forces have traditionally enjoyed relatively high levels of approbation in the Mexican public opinion. For instance, in a 2014 survey, 84.4 percent of respondents answered that they had “a lot or some trust” in navy officials in charge of public security tasks. The navy enjoyed

⁵³ <http://aristeginoticias.com/2611/mexico/a-2-meses-de-la-desaparicion-de-43-restos-fuego-y-conteos/>

⁵⁴ <http://mexico.cnn.com/nacional/2014/11/04/abarcay-pineda-la-pareja-que-en-un-mes-vio-el-fin-de-su-suerte-en-iguala>

⁵⁵ <http://aristeginoticias.com/3010/mexico/el-ejercito-tambien-esta-involucrado-en-el-ataque-a-normalistas-revela-omar-garcia/>

⁵⁶ <http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=389808>.

⁵⁷ The former mayor of Iguala, Jose Luis Abarca, now under arrest, used to boast about the support that he had from the 27th Battalion in the area. Abarca recently even built a mall, Plaza Tamarindos, right in front of the 27th Battalion garrison post. The mall itself was a rather unusual investment coming from a newly rich man, who would have amassed his fortune quickly after previously having earned his living from selling hats in Iguala. The military intelligence—which nominally was focused on organized crime in the zone—did not question that rather odd investment. It has been pointed out by unofficial sources that the land where the mall was built was formerly a public property in the management of the Ministry of Defense. Hernández Navarro, “La matanza de Iguala y el Ejército”, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2014/11/18/opinion/017a2pol>

the highest levels of trust among all the public institutions in charge of public security. Second was the army, with an 80.7 percent positive response to the same question.⁵⁸

The ambiguity of the question perhaps makes it difficult to differentiate between those who have “a lot” from those who only have “some” trust in the armed forces. However, the armed forces are generally considered by Mexican society as the most reliable among all those in charge of security, despite the serious violations of human rights they have been linked to.

The reasons for this paradoxical condition might be twofold: first, a long tradition of public relations management, combined with the social services that the armed forces have traditionally provided to low-resource communities. But, most likely, the results reflect above all that, given the notorious corruption of police forces and the judicial system, the armed forces seems the lesser evil. The Mexican population is confronted not only with inefficient and corrupt civilian institutions, but also with the firepower of criminal organizations that have unleashed extreme violence in many regions of the country. The armed forces provide at least a *hope* of order—in spite of its potential for authoritarianism and violence as well as corruption.⁵⁹

6. Conclusion

In Mexico, the relationship between the military and civilians has been shaped by the historical legacy of a political regime that, notwithstanding its authoritarian nature, did not depend on permanent coercion, as was the case of other authoritarian regimes in Latin America. The civilian political class has always known that ultimately their rule relies on military loyalty. Consequently, governments have always taken measures to guarantee such fidelity through material endowments, at the same time limiting the military’s operational capacities.

The Mexican military’s army has gone through several phases following the shifting national and international political conjunctures. From the guerilla insurgency in the countryside in the context of the Cold War, to the Zapatista uprising, to the new public security mission and War on Drugs, the military has been an executive arm of political concerns, often bringing them into conflict with predominantly rural populations—paradoxically the same social sectors from which their troops predominantly emerge.

Currently, the military as well as the government have faced not only increased international attention for public security polices, but also escalating protests from its own citizens. Notwithstanding the promise of the current Peña Nieto administration to gradually withdraw the armed forces from public security tasks, the administration has recently mobilized the army to take full control of public security in 32 municipalities in the states of Guerrero, Michoacán and Estado de México.⁶⁰ This strategy appears to constitute the continuation of the failed crime-combating strategy of the previous administration of Felipe Calderón. However, considering the current turmoil in the country, such

⁵⁸ INEGI. *Boletín de Prensa Num. 418/14. Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y percepción sobre seguridad pública (ENVIPE 2014)*, 21.

⁵⁹ Another explanation worth considering for the survey results is that the harsher violations of human rights involving the armed forces—mostly the army—usually have taken place in rural areas in the countryside, whereas surveys to address the military’s popularity are by and large conducted in the cities

⁶⁰ <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion-mexico/2014/sedena-asume-la-seguridad-en-tierra-caliente-1059304.html>

actions may well have more to do with an attempt to strengthen social control rather than actually fighting crime.

Notwithstanding the extensive record of human rights violations of the armed forces, they still enjoy relatively high public approval. However, this may change quickly if the civilian authorities choose to continuously implement a hard line strategy that puts the armed forces in charge of clamping down on increasing social protest.

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INDEXING TERMS

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This CMI Working Paper focuses on the relationship between the military, civilian governments and civilian populations in Mexico. It highlights key dynamics since the Mexican revolution (1910-1917) and up until the Ayotzinapa incident in 2014, revealing that the Mexican military throughout the 20th Century has co-existed with civilian governments in a climate of mutual distrust yet co-dependence. The report also shows that the Mexican military has consistently been involved in repression of the civilian populations, from the clamp-down on “subversive groups” in the context of the Cold War to the civilian suffering produced by the so-called “War on Drugs” of today. These trajectories have in the present produced a crisis of legitimacy both for the security forces as well as for the Mexican state vis-a-vis its populace.