6.3 Civil Society's Strategies to Confront Growing Insecurity and Violence in Mexico

*by Ingrid Spiller**

For around the past five years, both public and private life in Mexico have been dominated by violence and insecurity to a shocking extent. This can be mainly attributed to the influence of organized crime, and in particular to the actions of drug cartels. However, the state security forces such as the police and the military are often also involved in crime through corruption and nepotism. In turn, they enjoy the protection of politicians at almost every level for their illegal – and often cruel – activities.

Mexican society has been slow to react to these recent developments. Most of the population appears to be paralyzed by this escalation of violence, as if to say, "It's not happening to me, but to other people, and it is best not to get involved." Consequently, the election campaign for the 2012–2018 presidency in Mexico took place with almost no mention of the issues of lack of security and violence, although this was perceived as the second most pressing problem after the state of the economy.[1]

"Enough is enough!"

Despite this general paralysis, there are more and more courageous people who refuse to simply accept the current situation and have decided to fight for security, justice, and the rule of law. The Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity, formed at the beginning of 2011, has gained international attention. The Mexican poet and journalist Javier Sicilia set up the movement following the brutal murder of his son Juan Francisco and six other people. The murderers were linked to the world of organized crime.

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1 | Consulta Mitofsky: México Evaluación De Gobierno, Trimestre 21 de Felipe Calderón, February 2012.

Juan Francisco's murder became a wake-up call for the paralyzed civil society. He was a member of "mainstream society" with no suspicion of links to organized crime, nor was he connected to the circles of money and power.

Sicilia is held in high regard in Mexico, and his very public display of grief and his open accusation of those responsible for his son's death touched a nerve with many people. His call "*Estamos hasta la madre*" ("we are fed up") was adopted by many as their motto. Sicilia criticized the government and the political classes for their complicity in – or their inability to put an end to – the violence and terror. The success of President Felipe Calderón's strategy, introduced at the start of his presidency in 2007, of deploying the military to combat organized crime, was far less than promised. Indeed, those years saw a literal explosion of violence and increasing numbers of people who were not directly involved were caught in the crossfire, many losing their lives. Their deaths are brushed off by the government as "collateral damage." Activists and human rights organizations, however, also claim that the security forces use their deployment to target inconvenient political activists.

Sicilia was also the first to address the cartels directly with his accusations: "Sort out your business among yourselves. Why kill us?" Thanks to his privileged access to the media and his friendship with many intellectuals, people working in the culture and media industries – as well as his own celebrity status and his work as a journalist – Sicilia's message was heard throughout the country. This is despite the fact that the large media outlets, in their usual way, were interested more in sensationalizing his grief and less in promoting his political message.

Many thousands of people heeded his call for protest marches across the country; the three-day silent march from Cuernavaca to Mexico City had swollen to some 100,000 participants by the final rally on May 8, 2011. Two "Caravans of Consolation" across the republic followed. One set off in June of the same year from the north of the country, traveling through the cities of Monterrey, Saltillo, and Durango to Ciudad Juárez – all of which have been particularly hard hit by the violence. The second march began in September and led through the states of Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Chiapas to Mexico's southern border. One year later, a caravan set off for the United States.

"Protest march in white"

These demonstrations were not the first mass outcry in the country against violence and crime. In August 2008, almost 200,000 people in Mexico City alone heeded the call of businessman Alejandro Martí to attend a protest march in white, after his 14-year-old son was kidnapped and murdered. In 2004, an estimated 250,000 people marched in silence through the capital in protest against the rising number of kidnappings and the increasing lack of security. The large response was due in part to the fact that the major media outlets supported the call to protest that was issued by members of the business community. Many from

the political left distanced themselves from the actions at the time, believing them to be right-wing propaganda; these included the then PRD mayor of the capital, Andrés López Obrador, who saw the demands of the protest marches in 2004 as a direct political campaign by the right against his government project. In 2008, the left also found it difficult to give its support to the "Protest march in white." The calls for a greater presence of the (often corrupt) state security forces and tougher punishments for the perpetrators – even including for the reintroduction of the death sentence – made these differences appear to be unbridgeable.

The new protest movement

The new protest movement today is substantially different from the two other demonstrations, which were basically sporadic, if impressive, manifestations without far-reaching consequences. Today, Mexican society has changed somewhat. The movement – particularly in its infancy – gathered together a very broad spectrum of people in spite of their disparate political standpoints: Christians and Zapatistas, feminists, human rights organizations, indigenous groups, the political left, young adults, and media representatives. Notably, the movement was the first time victims' relatives also became organized. Until then, such people had been largely left to fend for themselves, with little support. Not only had their loved ones been killed by criminals, the police, or the military, for a long time the government, in its "war against the drugs mafia," also denounced the victims as involved in organized crime. This made the death or unexplained disappearance of these people seem unimportant, as if to say, they had brought it upon themselves. This also resulted in the stigmatization and isolation of their families.

The movement managed to change society's perception of these events somewhat. The media now increasingly reported on the deliberate or accidental targeting of innocent people by the cartels or the security forces. Family members joined together to search for their missing relatives. They received almost no state support in their efforts, and eyewitness reports say they were often deliberately led astray. The movement began to draw up a register, not only to give the victims a name and an identity, but also to keep their cases open and eventually achieve justice. Finally, the movement attracted so much attention, both nationally and internationally, that government members and President Calderón found themselves personally obliged to show they were willing to engage in dialogue. The first meeting of the president and members of his security cabinet at Chapúltepec Castle, which was streamed live on the Internet, was followed by further meetings, including with members of parliament and with the presidential candidates during the election campaign. The results of these meetings were rather meager; many high-profile promises, for example to investigate the fate of family members, were not kept. However, some real political successes were achieved, although they were insufficient in number. For example, it was possible to stop the passage of a security law that would have given the military even more wide-

ranging powers. Also, a special state prosecution service was set up for the victims of violence. The required victims' law remains under political debate, after President Calderón vetoed a law drawn up jointly with Congress, due to concerns about its constitutionality.

Diversity is not always strength

Political and strategic differences have now caused the movement to lose some of its power to mobilize people. Members of the more radical spectrum on the left in particular were unwilling to enter into a dialogue with the government and parliament. They did not believe there was serious interest in a real exchange, especially since they held many members of the government and parliament directly responsible for the violence; consequently, they had no wish to be utilized for propaganda purposes. There was also disagreement within the movement concerning some core demands. The platform of issues became very broad, weakening the movement overall. Agreement was eventually reached on six demands and areas, yet these can barely be tackled using the existing human and material resources. They range from demands to investigate the fates of murder victims and the disappeared, to fighting corruption and impunity and calls for a participatory democracy.

Even if the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity cannot live up to the initial, excessive expectations to instigate political and social change, it has attained a high degree of significance in the fight to tackle the apparently hopeless situation regarding violence and the lack of security.

The fight against the "normalization" of violence against women

Numerous initiatives have been set up at the local level that carry out extremely courageous and important work in the field – often at great risk to those involved. In Ciudad Juárez in particular, as well as in other northern Mexican cities, (women's) initiatives and organizations have formed in response to the insane number of unsolved murders of women. Activists call this phenomenon "feminicide," highlighting the specific character of these murders, which are directly related to the gender of the victims, and which are often particularly gruesome. They are an extreme expression of the structural violence against women. The perpetrators are to be found mainly in the family environment, but also within organized crime structures. The lack of sufficient data makes it impossible to establish a systematic link between the cartels and feminicidal murders. Although different motives may lie behind each individual case, they are all characterized by the incredibly low esteem, or even hatred, in which women are held, which in turn is an extreme expression of structures within Mexico's "macho" society.

Within these structures, it is then only "logical" that the police and justice system, as well as the political system, have little or no interest in investigating

and punishing these crimes, and may even display a certain tolerance for them. For this reason, activists are also fighting the "normalization" of violence against women. Their demands are not only for the state to accept its responsibilities to investigate these crimes, punish the perpetrators, and to protect women, but also for society as a whole to accept its responsibility. In this context, many female activists are themselves in the firing line, including for example, Norma Andrade, founder of the organization Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa (May Our Daughters Return Home), who has been the target of several attacks. Another activist, Marisela Escobedo Ortiz, was killed in cold blood and in broad daylight by an unknown assailant in December 2010 as she demonstrated outside the Governor's Palace in Chihuahua in protest against the authorities' inaction in seeking the person who murdered her daughter, then aged 16.

No impunity for the military

One of the issues tackled by traditional human rights organizations is that of the role of state security organs in the fight against organized crime. In this respect, the military has been the focus of observation in recent years. The Mexican military has repeatedly committed human rights violations during its anti-organized-crime operations in the country. These crimes almost always go unpunished, since soldiers are subject only to military jurisdiction due to the *fuero militar* (special code of justice for the military), which has generally given cover to the perpetrators. Organizations have now succeeded in garnering important international support for their demands that the military courts be reformed and their remits curtailed; this support came in part from a decision handed down by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. After both Mexico's Supreme Court and President Calderón spoke out in favor of such reforms, it is now in the hands of the legislative powers to turn them into law. Human rights organizations and others are working to ensure that the new draft law on military jurisdiction is based on the American Convention on Human Rights.

Those working to defend human rights in the field face increasing threats as a result of their activities. According to the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 156 attacks against human rights activists occurred between 2006 and 2010, of which 98.5 percent remain unpunished. In an open letter to the Rapporteur for Human Rights Defenders at the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights in August 2011, more than 100 social organizations criticized this climate of menace, which had increased notably since the beginning of the "drugs war" in 2006. Soldiers or police officers are responsible for many of these attacks.

Since journalists in Mexico who report on the illegal activities of the cartels and their links to political and business circles also place themselves in great danger,[2]

2 | Reporters Without Borders names Mexico as the world's second most dangerous country for journalists.

both groups have demanded that the state provide guaranteed preventive and protective mechanisms in risk situations. They were supported in their demand by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, which repeatedly called on the Mexican government to act in this matter. One initial success has now been achieved – the Mexican Congress passed a protection law in April 2012. The law's final form will decide how effective it is. However, those affected by such threats and attacks believe the best protection lies in effective prosecutions. In view of the fact that an estimated 96 percent of all crimes go unpunished, effective action is urgently required.

Migrants are particularly at risk

The individuals and networks who advocate for the protection of migrants are few in number but of great importance, since migrants have almost no rights. Most of these people originate from Central and South America and intend to pass through Mexico en route to the United States. They are particularly vulnerable, since they generally travel with little money and no official papers. They have been exposed for some considerable time to the terror tactics and unpredictable violence of the youth gangs, known as *maras*, and of the Mexican state security forces, who rob them, extort money from them, harass them, and sometimes even kill them. Women face the additional threat of rape. This situation has worsened in recent years, since the drugs cartels have begun targeting migrants as an additional source of income. The Mexican cartels – and in particular the extremely violent Zetas (made up of former members of Mexico's elite forces) – have specialized in kidnapping migrants and holding them for ransom. If the kidnap victims or their relatives cannot, or will not, pay the demanded ransom, the victims' only choice is to work for the cartel. Those who are unwilling or unable to do this are summarily executed. Repeated discoveries of mass graves bear witness to these brutal crimes.

Support initiatives have been founded – mostly by a range of different churches – along the main transit route to the United States. They provide shelter, a place to sleep for migrants – for a few hours or a few days at least – as well as food and medical care. They are public reminders of what is so often suppressed – that is, the huge dangers faced by migrants, their lack of any rights, and the complicity of local politicians, police, and migration authorities with organized crime. The case of the priest Alejandro Solalinde, which attracted international attention, gives an idea of just how dangerous such work is. His shelter, opened in 2007 in Ixtepec, Oaxaca, has been the object of repeated attacks. He has also received several death threats himself, and had to leave the country for some months in the summer of 2012.

Searching for the disappeared

The bloody drugs war in Mexico has claimed many lives over the past five-and-a-half years, but there is also an increasing number of people who have disappeared and about whose fate nothing is known. They may already be dead, buried in one of the many mass graves that are regularly discovered. Or they may be alive, perhaps kidnapped by the cartels, or even the police or the military. Their families receive little or no support from the state. Corruption and the complicity of politicians, security forces, and civil servants, as well as a lack of training or resources and a lack of interest on the part of the relevant authorities, all conspire to make the search for these disappeared people more difficult. Often, the families of the disappeared invest a great deal of time and money to find information on the whereabouts of their children, parents, or spouses. However, even when they do manage to come by important information and pass it on to the authorities, there is usually no result. Their only sources of support are organizations like Fuerzas Unidas por Nuestros Desaparecidos (United Forces for our Disappeared), which began working locally in Saltillo, Coahuila, but which has spread throughout Mexico as the number of new cases has increased. These organizations gather and collate information and give advice on how to negotiate around the state's indifference, as well as apply public pressure by means of their public relations operations.

No education, no job: Is organized crime the only alternative?

The groups and initiatives working at the local level who find themselves confronted with organized crime now also include many organizations engaged in traditional prevention work with young people. In locations where young adults have no prospects for the future, since no education or employment opportunities are available to them, these people are particularly susceptible to recruitment into the drug cartels. These "ninis" (*ni educación ni trabajo* – neither education nor work) may be attracted by the prospect of making a relatively large amount of money quickly, and the opportunity to acquire other symbols of power such as cars, girls, and respect within their group. Many subscribe to the popular maxim that it is "better to die young and rich than old and poor."

This can make the work of organizations extremely difficult. They have to gain the trust and respect of young adults, who often have no family roots. In the industrial zones of the north of the country in particular, which were built rapidly to respond to the growing global demand for processed products, without considering the need for social infrastructure, many children are left to fend for themselves. Often, they are the children of migrants from rural areas of Mexico who have to work long hours with no opportunity to arrange childcare for their offspring. Today, these children do not even have the prospect of getting a job in the same factories as their parents, the world's hunger for cheap products resulted long ago in the relocation of production to other countries with even cheaper labor.

All this has led, over the past five years, to an apparently insatiable hunger for new members of Mexico's cartels. The so-called drug war has already claimed between 50,000 and 60,000 lives, and most of those deaths occurred within the environment of organized crime. But for every member who dies, there are others willing and eager to take his place. Prevention work in such a situation is both challenging and dangerous. How can young people be offered an attractive alternative life path? Many organizations offer sporting or artistic activities as a way of boosting self-confidence; they also raise awareness of violence and launch education and even business projects. They campaign for state recognition of this social group and the corresponding funding. They also campaign to improve the public's perception of young adults. All this work must always be based on a foundation of trust from the young people, and this often results in organizations gaining a close insight into the structures and crimes in the field. The result can be hazardous, for example when the cartels begin to feel inconvenienced by such work or when state institutions assume they are complicit in the activities of the cartels.

Indigenous self-determination

Special mention must also be made of the initiative launched by the residents of Cherán, a community in the federal state of Michoacán, where the majority of residents are of indigenous descent. In April 2011, after the La Familia cartel had allowed illegal loggers to cut down and sell much of their forest over a period of three years and for high profits, the residents decided to set up a blockade along the transport route through their village and thus stop the illegal logging. Initially, the community came out victorious in the ensuing violent clashes with the cartel. The route through the village is still patrolled, particularly at night, by guards organized by the residents themselves. The mayor and his people have been driven out of office, since they were accused of maintaining close contacts with the cartel. The community now runs itself according to traditional indigenous rules. They also boycotted the local and federal state elections of November 2011, as they decided no party was deserving of their trust. Violence and crime rates have fallen significantly, and the village is now possibly one of the safest in the entire country. However, attacks from the outside have recently increased – the battle for control of the natural resources has not yet been won.

The important role of civil society

Mexico is a state with weak public institutions. Corruption, unpredictability, and impunity all negatively affect their ability to function. Against this background, the drug cartels have been able, in recent years, to increase their influence continuously. In some regions, particularly in the north of the country, the state has virtually lost its monopoly on the use of force. In other areas, that monopoly has been seriously weakened by the high levels of corruption among the police, authorities,

and politicians. In some areas the local population definitely show acceptance of the "new rulers" – not only out of fear, but also out of gratitude when the drug barons move to improve the social development and infrastructure neglected by the state. In such a context, all efforts by the state to combat organized crime and the lack of security – as well as the high levels of violence that accompany it – must be very limited.

This explains why the many (local) civil society initiatives are so important. They are not able to replace the necessary state functions, and must certainly not allow the state to shirk its responsibilities. But they remain an important and necessary complementary factor in the establishment of security, justice, and the rule of law. They are not only indispensable in the raising of the public's awareness of injustice and abuse and in demanding fundamental reform, they also carry out important, real work, for example in prevention and in victim support. At the local level in particular, their commitment is admirable, especially in the face of the dangers and obstacles they must deal with in order to achieve anything.

It is difficult to make predictions about Mexico's future. The situation is changing constantly and at breakneck speed. Every success achieved by the state's security policy, every gap left, for instance, when a famous drug baron is arrested, is instantaneously filled by organized crime structures. The Sinaloa cartel, for example, began long ago to turn its hierarchical structure into a network, making it much more difficult to pursue and break up.

The answer to the question of whether Mexico will continue devolving in the direction of a failed state,[3] or whether it will manage to introduce the reforms that are urgently needed for the rule of law to be re-established – resulting, partly at least, in preventing illegal activities – will depend, not least of all, on whether a strong and active civil society will be able to unite on the most fundamental issues.

3 | Mexico currently is in the mid-range of the Failed State Index, at position 98. By comparison, El Salvador occupies position 93, Honduras 75, and Guatemala 70. Source: Fund for Peace: The Failed State Index 2012 Interactive Grid.