

## THE AMERICAS

# Mexicans Vent Their Anger Over Rampant Crime

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A few years back, Leoluca Orlando, a former mayor of Palermo, Italy, visited the Journal's New York offices to promote a memoir. It was no Clintonian rumination about himself. Rather, it was the story of how brave Palermitans beat back the Mafia in the 1990s. The Sicilian experience has a certain global value: There are clear parallels to organized crime problems in Mexico and Argentina.

My memory serves up one point vividly from the hour-long meeting: Mr. Orlando's metaphor of a successful democracy as a two-wheeled cart. One wheel, he argued, is the state, with law enforcement and a working judiciary. The other wheel is civil society. If only one wheel rolls, the cart goes round in circles. To move forward, civil society -- in the broadest sense -- has to be actively involved in both pressuring elected government to fulfill its law enforcement responsibility and in denouncing the criminals who otherwise might enjoy impunity.

I thought about Palermo's rebirth and about Mr. Orlando as I watched film clips from Sunday's march in Mexico City against a crime wave of robbery, kidnapping and killing. An estimated 250,000 Mexicans dressed in white walked on the Paseo de la Reforma toward the capital's historic square, the Zocola. In a city rife with criminal violence, it was an impressive display of peaceful activism. It was "the country's first massive exercise of citizens' rights," says Luis Rubio, a political analyst at the Mexico City-based think tank, Cidac.



Some 250,000  
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against crime in the  
capital.

What is clear is that Mexican civil society -- quashed by the 70 years of Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI) rule that ended only four years ago -- is experiencing an awakening. If the diffused interests of millions of ordinary people become concentrated on a single issue, the lack of adequate personal security, it could make Mexico a more responsive democracy. "The real problem is how to translate this into action," says Mr. Rubio.

There are reasons to hope. The protest reportedly drew participants from every economic and social sector. Marchers carried placards reading: "Enough already!" The day after the march, there appeared another sign of a reviving civil society: A Mexican bishop announced that the Church would excommunicate both the actual and intellectual authors of kidnapping.

Again, I thought of Palermo. Mr. Orlando had said that over the years

the Church in Sicily had informally adopted a practice of turning a blind eye to mob parishioners. As mayor he asked the clergy to use its moral authority to condemn the violence. The Church complied and its action was part of a broader, civic rejection of the Mafia dons who had been socially accepted despite their depredations.

In a post-mortem on Sicilian organized crime, Mr. Orlando wrote, "It died the minute it was expelled from the political system where it had come to dwell during its long sojourn in our national life." Those words resonate in Mexico. Teotihuacan was not built in a day and, all things considered, Mexico's political evolution toward accountable government appears to be proceeding. But the process is neither linear nor certain. The infamous "rule of rule" under the PRI is gone. What has yet to be forced on the old bureaucracy is the framework of a new rule of law. To carry out such change, Mexico's politicians and bureaucrats have to alter an entrenched institutional culture at some risk to their job security.

Clearly, this is not a right-left partisan issue, as some less-sophisticated commentators and Mexico City's far-left PRD Mayor Andres Lopez Obrador want us to believe. The mayor, an old-guard Mexican politician, has accused march organizers of a vast right-wing conspiracy to damage him politically. But Mr. Orlando, a left-of-center politician in Sicily, proved that the old left-right constructs are simply the defenses of the status quo. Notably, Sunday's marchers left political banners at home.

Still, it is a political issue in the traditional terms of power and Mr. Lopez Obrador's reaction is not irrational. As mayor, he has responsibility for the metropolitan police and for the Mexico City attorney general, who investigates and prosecutes crime. It is hard not to see the Sunday march as a repudiation of his record.

The mayor's real problem is that while he brought in a respected secretary of public security there remains a lack of political will to aggressively attack the crime problem by shaking up the law enforcement bureaucracy. This is precisely why Mr. Lopez Obrador feels conspired against: A challenge to the bureaucracy would force him into an extremely risky political position.

To be sure, President Vicente Fox deserves some of the blame. According to Cidac researcher Guillermo Zepeda, in only 4% of reported crimes in Mexico does the accused go before a judge. How silly, Mr. Rubio comments, for politicians to call for new laws and tougher penalties when the existing laws are not enforced. Moreover, distrust and a lack of confidence in the system contributes to a reluctance to report crimes. Former New York City Police Commissioner William Bratton theorizes that focusing on petty crime is the first step toward preventing violent crime. One can easily see then how failure to report crime causes the problem to spin out of control.

The buck passing between Mr. Lopez Obrador and Mr. Fox has also hurt the cause of security. As Mr. Rubio writes, "the politicians have preferred to throw the ball and play the differences between local jurisdiction and federal jurisdiction instead of uniting to act."

Mr. Orlando, the former Palermo mayor, argued that, "people who have known freedom will not willingly go back to degraded collective lives." That was the message 250,000 Mexicans were trying to send their leaders from the Paseo de la Reforma on Sunday.