A drug bust that was just for show

By Andrew Reding

Since taking office, President Ernesto Zedillo has repeatedly pledged to create a “nation of law”—to put “an end to impunity” and strictly apply the letter of the law to all citizens, regardless of power or status. The arrest last week of reputed drug trafficker Juan García Abrego is a welcome first step. Yet, it is nowhere near the coup portrayed by the U.S. and Mexican governments.

García Abrego and the Gulf Cartel that he allegedly headed were largely spent forces. Unless followed by far more daring ventures against the country’s flourishing drug mega-enterprises and their political protectors, his capture will neither materially reduce the flow of drugs into the United States nor bolster the rule of law in Mexico.

García Abrego’s fall probably had more to do with the fate of his political protectors than with good police work. It is thought that the onetime Tamaulipas kingpin became the dominant force in Mexico’s narcotics transshipment business in the early 1990s by cultivating ties with the family and key political associates of former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

*Newsweek* reports that García Abrego’s links with Salinas’ older brother Raul date back at least to the beginning of the Salinas presidency. According to Eduardo Valle, former head of the federal police task force targeted at García Abrego, the kingpin also developed links with two key cabinet officials through a former federal policewoman on his payroll. That woman met repeatedly with then-Secretary of Transportation and Communications Emilio Gamboa, the man in charge of the roads and airfields used to ship cocaine to the U.S. Gamboa also introduced the intermediary to Jose Cordoba, Salinas’ alter ego and chief of staff. At the very least, Cordoba, the second most powerful man in Mexico as coordinator of the cabinet and of the narcotics intelligence agency, had a long-running extramarital affair with a person known by Mexican intelligence to be working for the head of the Gulf Cartel.

Those links made García Abrego untouchable. When Eduardo Valle asked the office of the presidency for military assistance to nab García Abrego, he was turned down. Given that the kingpin had a private army at his disposal, that made apprehension impossible. Valle resigned, then began exposing the ties between mobsters and politicians from the relative safety of Washington.

Ultimately, however, García Abrego’s links to the Salinas presidency would become his Achilles’ heel. With Carlos Salinas’ dramatic fall from grace after the December 1994 collapse of the peso, García Abrego’s empire began to crumble. The former president and his chief of staff went into de facto exile abroad, and Raul Salinas was arrested on charges of masterminding the September 1994 assassination of the majority leader-elect of the Chamber of Deputies. More recently, Swiss authorities arrested Raul’s wife as she was trying to retrieve part of more than $100 million stashed by her husband under
assumed names in European bank accounts. With his protectors immobilized, García Abrego lost his competitive advantage. The Gulf Cartel has been shrinking ever since, to the point where it had become but a pale ghost of its former self when federal agents seized the once-proud kingpin on January 14.

By the time Zedillo made his move, the arrest was less a blow against organized crime than masterful political theater. With the Mexican government due for another U.S. certification that it is cooperating in the war on drugs, Zedillo offered up García Abrego, who was on the FBI’s 10 Most Wanted list. In so doing, the Mexican president repeated a similarly theatrical move by his predecessor.

Six years ago, President Salinas ordered the arrest of accused drug trafficker Miguel Angel Félix Gallardo, who was wanted in the murder of U.S. drug-enforcement agent Enrique Camarena. Although the action won accolades from the Bush administration, it also cleared the way for the rise of far more powerful criminal enterprises, including the Gulf Cartel.

Similar high praise is now coming from the White House. It’s not that the Clinton administration doesn’t know better. The Drug Enforcement Agency is well aware that most of the drugs now crossing the border are being handled by the Tijuana and Chihuahua cartels. Yet, President Bill Clinton wants to maintain good relations with Mexico City and create a record of achievement in controlling drug trafficking as he prepares for his reelection campaign.

Unfortunately, the major cause of lawlessness in Mexico continues to be unaddressed: the impunity with which high-ranking members of the government and the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party can break the law. Under an unwritten rule dating back to formation of the PRI, no present or former president or cabinet officer may be indicted for any crime, no matter how serious. Zedillo skirted that rule with the arrest of Raul Salinas, but he was careful not to break it. To head off any complication, he asked former President Salinas to leave the country. For the same reason, evidence that may implicate prominent members of the Salinas administration in the assassinations of a cardinal, a PRI presidential candidate and the majority leader-elect of the lower house of Congress has seemed to freeze the investigations.

Although Zedillo seeks to avoid further rifts in an already fractured PRI, his reluctance to punish criminality among the well-connected has serious implications for both Mexico and the United States. Just consider what it means for the Tijuana Cartel, which dominates narcotics delivery routes to California. The cartel is allegedly run by the Arellano Felix brothers, two of whom stand accused of leading the hit team that murdered Cardinal Juan Jesús Posadas in Guadalajara.

Yet, according to Eduardo Valle, they are being protected by Carlos Hank González, a billionaire former secretary of tourism and agriculture, and the power-broker who consolidated PRI support for Zedillo’s presidential candidacy. The bodyguard of one of Hank’s sons murdered a Tijuana newspaper editor who was probing the son’s business dealings; two flight attendants filed affidavits affirming that the same son accompanied the Arellanos on the return flight to Tijuana after the assassination of the cardinal; and the New York Times reported that a Boeing jetliner loaded with Colombian cocaine landed at an airstrip used by an airline founded by the Hanks.
Just as the Hanks have proven untouchable, so have the Arellanos. Though repeatedly seen in public in Tijuana since federal warrants were issued for their arrest, no serious effort has been made to apprehend the brothers.

The Chihuahua Cartel, based in Cuidad Juarez, is even more successful. Because of the legendary discretion of its alleged kingpin, Amado Carrillo Fuentes, little is known about its operations other than it is widely considered to be Mexico’s counterpart to the Cali Cartel. Both the Chihuahua and Tijuana cartels owe their success, in part, to their ties with politicians, police chiefs and army commanders, who enable its smugglers to achieve delivery rates as high as 90%. Such efficiency returns staggering amounts of hard currency to the syndicate and its political associates. Overall, the Mexican attorney general’s office estimates Mexico’s cartels gross $30 billion a year.

A better test of Zedillo’s commitment to fighting drug trafficking and enforcing the rule of law will be whether he follows up on the Garcia Abrego arrest by moving on the reputed kingpins of the Tijuana and Chihuahua cartels. Inevitably, that would entail confronting their political protectors and breaking what little peace is left in the PRI. Yet, unless he does so, Mexico risks looking more and more like a Mafia state, at a serious cost to its political and economic stability.

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