Photo by Damaris Vilchis.

A 2011 mass demonstration against violence in Mexico City.

MEXICO

Reclaiming Mexico's Democracy

by Tara Buss

Mexico is in crisis. Large swaths of the country are at war. Mass graves, beheaded bodies and public shootouts have become a regular feature of the Mexican news cycle. Meanwhile, government institutions are even more corrupt than they were under one-party rule, according to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, and trust in government — and the concomitant willingness to pay taxes — remains low. This was not how democracy was supposed to be.

For Professor Sergio Aguayo, a journalist, scholar and human rights advocate considered one of Mexico's foremost public intellectuals, the decade following democratization has been rife with paradoxes.

Increases in political freedom have served to facilitate the growing power of drug cartels, the primary source of violence in the country. Economic gains have been elusive. Drastic changes are necessary to reduce the turmoil and violence that plague large swaths of the country, Aguayo argued in his CLAS talk, and the key to initiating these changes is the mobilization of citizens determined to hold politicians accountable.

The year 2000 ushered in a new era for Mexico. Presidential power was democratically exchanged, and President Ernesto Zedillo — a member of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI), which had ruled for 71 years

— ceded power to Vicente Fox of the Partido Acción Nacional (National Action Party, PAN). This democratic turnover was accompanied by substantive changes in the internal political and economic structuring of the country. In a process that had begun under President Zedillo, decentralization efforts increased dramatically, with federal budget allocations to state governments increasing from 11 percent to 30 percent annually. At the same time, funding for the Department of the Interior decreased sharply, and regressive fiscal policies were adopted, including extensive tax refunds to large corporations. These changes, made under the auspices of political opening and modernization, served to reduce the government's resources and, in turn, its capacity for domestic control.

Ironically, Aguayo pointed out, it was the undemocratic nature of the PRI that allowed the party to come to an "understanding" with the cartels. Under the PRI, the president and the minister of the interior were at the helm of a well-controlled, institutionalized hierarchy. Cartels could negotiate with municipal and state officials, assured that those officials had real, effective power with the central government and a specified, stable role in the hierarchy. Their power was not circumscribed by the need to be responsive to their constituents.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given decreased stability and increased violence, democracy has not yet pervasively influenced Mexican culture and attitudes toward authority, which Aguayo argues is indicative of a nation that is not truly democratic. According to the 2006 World Values Survey, democratic values were embraced by 80 percent of those polled, but simultaneously, authoritarian rule by the army was supported by 41 percent. Human rights were endorsed by 55 percent of the populous, but bribing officials and tax evasion were seen as justified by 65 percent and 60 percent of the population, respectively. These data show that public acceptance of tax evasion and bribery has increased since democratization. Aguayo maintained that the results of the survey show not only a "society in flux," but a society that can be seen as "schizophrenic."

Aguayo interprets the main problem as stemming from a lack of trust in institutions. Less than a quarter of the population trust political parties, and less than

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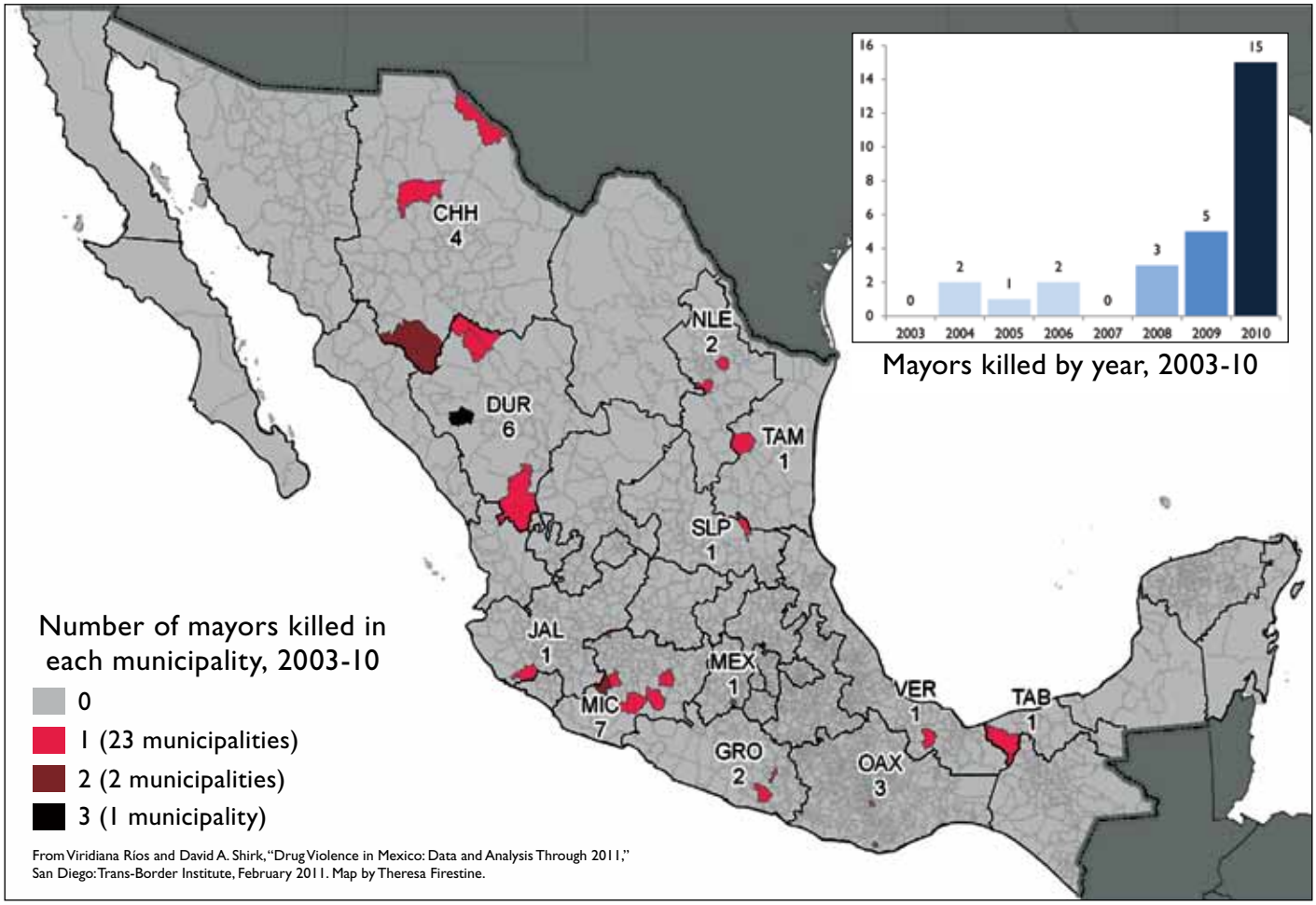
The widespread and increasing killing of government officials represents a direct threat to Mexican democracy.



From Viridiana Ríos and David A. Shirk, "Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2011," San Diego: Trans-Border Institute, February 2011. Map by Theresa Firestine.

Photo by Xareni Guzmán.

A demonstrator at the May 8, 2011 march in Mexico City.

a quarter express willingness to involve themselves in politics. This mistrust is well-founded: corruption within public institutions has increased, not decreased, since the PRI handed over power, despite their opening to political competition. Indeed, in comparative perspective, the country fell back 40 places between 1999 and 2010 on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, going from 58th to 98th in the world.

According to Aguayo, the effective results of democratization have been decentralization, tax breaks for large corporations and the weakening of the Department of the Interior, which destabilized the strong, hierarchical structure through which the PRI had effectively suppressed cartel violence. In 2007, Calderón admitted that 40 percent of Mexico was controlled to various extents by cartels — a statistic that has led people in both the United States and Mexico to question the legitimacy of the Mexican state.

What can be done to rectify this crisis of growing violence? Aguayo has a simple prescription: "get involved." Aguayo estimates that the 21 percent of citizens who had signed a petition, according to the 2006 World Values Survey, is reflective of only a fifth of the population actually being engaged substantively in civil society. Yet, civic participation is one of the most powerful ways in which citizens can hold their government accountable and reverse Mexico's trend toward ever-greater corruption.

Beyond increases in civic participation, Aguayo provided several more explicit prescriptions for reducing narco-violence in Mexico. First, the Mexican government must acknowledge that democracy is not functioning in the way in which it was intended. While Mexico has managed to hold competitive elections to decide between three viable political parties, the uncomfortable truth is that the parties themselves are corrupt.

Second, government officials must acknowledge that the country is at war. Their persistent denial that Mexico is experiencing a state of national emergency has suppressed civic participation, negotiation with elites and systematic seeking of solidarity and support from neighboring countries such as the United States. Acknowledging the severity of the situation could have explicit, instrumental purposes as well. Currently, the U.S. government does little to stem the flow of assault rifles into Mexico, the majority of which end up in the hands of cartels. Stopping the illegal export of assault rifles would likely increase the cost to the cartels of escalated violence.

Third, Aguayo insists that journalists must be protected and the right to freedom of information enforced. Media is still considered to be one of the more trusted institutions in the country, but Mexico is one of the most dangerous countries in the world to be a journalist. In the last decade, almost 600 journalists have been threatened, and 89 have been assassinated or disappeared, and yet media remains one of the most important access points through which pressure can be exerted on the government. For example, the newspaper Reforma began the first count of the casualties of the war on drugs in 2007, forcing the issue of the social cost of the war into the public arena at a time when the national government was unwilling to officially record the death toll. Without more explicit and extensive protections for journalists and support for freedom of the press, the Mexican media will not be able to continue to play its crucial role in civil society, disseminating information and challenging the government.

Democracy is not working in Mexico. The country is at war. Newly democratized institutions have failed. The expectations that frequently accompany democratic transitions — for increases in public safety and more power in the hands of the citizens — have not been met. Nor has corruption waned. Instead, it has been transferred from a centralized, bureaucratic exchange within the PRI, which exercised high levels of control over the territory, to other parties that now compete democratically but have systematically failed to maintain internal control and stability. Aguayo argues that increases in citizen participation, protection for journalists and human rights advocates, explicit acknowledgment of the pervasiveness and extent of drug violence and the social costs of the war, and close ties between the United States and Mexico are crucial first steps toward ameliorating the violence and increasing social and economic prosperity.

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Sergio Aguayo works on the campaign against gun trafficking, May 2011.

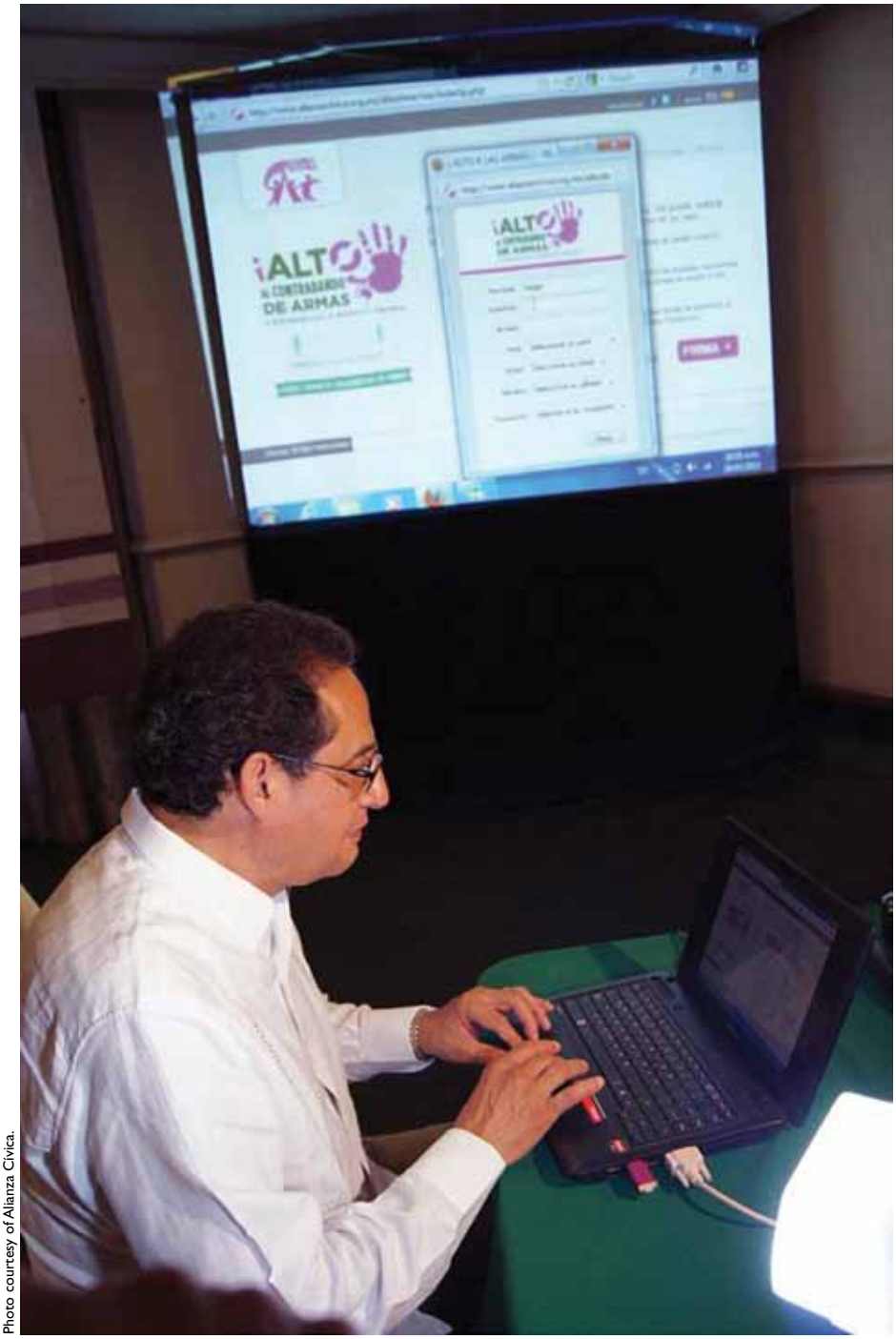

Photo courtesy of Alianza Cívica.