

They Got Filthy Rich off Cocaine Trafficking and Killed Leftists. Now AMLO Must Make Them Pay.

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Kurt Hackbarth, *Jacobin*, January 27, 2020



On January 3, 2020, a spectacle flashed across television screens that many in Mexico thought they would never see: Genaro García Luna, secretary of public security during Felipe Calderón's administration, standing before a judge in a courtroom.

Pale and disheveled, handcuffed and in shackles, García Luna pleaded not guilty to three charges of conspiracy to traffic cocaine and one count of making false statements. Denied bail, the once all-powerful top cop was led away, teary-eyed and hugging his mother.

The courtroom, however, was not in Mexico, but in New York City.

García Luna was arrested by the DEA three weeks prior in Dallas, where he'd been living as a naturalized US citizen. The accusations that led to the arrest were grave: that, as secretary of public security, García Luna had effectively served as the representative of the Sinaloa Cartel in the Calderón administration, helping to facilitate its drug shipments as well as leaking information about official investigations and the activities of rival cartels. In exchange, he was to have received somewhere between six to ten million dollars in bribes.

As soon as the story broke, Calderón leapt onto Twitter to insist that he knew nothing about all of this. The denial was less than convincing. Following García Luna's time as the head of the Federal Investigation Agency (the "AFI," Mexico's since-disbanded version of the FBI) in the Vicente Fox administration, he became both the prime architect and executioner of Calderón's bloody "war on drugs."

His record in both roles is nothing short of brutal. With the power of the police and the investigative agencies behind him, García Luna threatened journalists, attempted to tie critical publications to drug cartels, covered up the crimes of his agents, used those same agents as private security in the businesses of his friends, and staged a series of bizarre made-for-TV arrests that perverted the course of justice, all while turning Mexico into a graveyard where anyone could blunder into and be disappeared at a checkpoint. And all while enriching himself to the tune of millions of dollars' worth of luxury homes and cars.

Calderón's panicked protestations notwithstanding, the García Luna–Sinaloa connection was hardly a secret even during his administration. In her 2010 book *Los Señores del Narco*, investigative journalist Anabel Hernández — the recipient of death threats from García Luna — wrote:

The current war on drug trafficking launched by the administration of President Felipe Calderón is as false as that of the government of Vicente Fox. In both cases the "strategy" has limited itself to providing protection for the Sinaloa Cartel. The guarantor of the continuity of this protection has been the sinister police chief Genaro García Luna . . . [He] has even gone to the point of stating that there is no other option except to let El Chapo operate freely and "establish order" among the other criminal groups, as it will thus be easier for the government to negotiate with one cartel rather than five.

Such was the complicity of García Luna's men from the time of the AFI, Hernández notes, that they became known as the *mega cartel*.

In his public appearances before Congress in the Calderón years, moreover, García Luna was subjected to a series of memorable savagings by federal deputy Gerardo Fernández Noroña of the Workers' Party.

"How is it possible," Noroña demanded in 2011, "that the public knows where the criminals are, knows where the drug traffickers are, knows where the safe houses are, knows where El Chapo Guzmán moves, and the intelligence of the Department of Security knows nothing? When Calderón says he's going to catch El Chapo, it's going to be by the hand because he's his accomplice. Who is the main partner of El Chapo? You or Calderón or both?"

Then, shortly after the arrest of García Luna at the end of last year, the Financial Intelligence Unit (UIF) of the Andrés Manuel López Obrador government revealed it had traced a series of monetary transfers made by the Departments of Internal Affairs of the governments of both Calderón and Enrique Peña Nieto to companies linked to García Luna. The transfers, totaling some two billion pesos (\$105 million), were presumably part

of a laundering operation wherein government money found its way into friendly hands through the assignation of bogus contracts, a particular specialty of the Peña Nieto administration.

If the charges against García Luna are true — and there is much to suggest that they are — then a series of further questions becomes urgent. What did Felipe Calderón (and Vicente Fox and Enrique Peña Nieto) know, and when did they know it? How could Fox have named such a person to be his head of intelligence, and how could Calderón (who, as a member of Fox's cabinet, could not have been entirely unaware of his reputation) have subsequently promoted him to head the nation's security policy? Who, besides García Luna, benefitted from the Sinaloa Cartel's multimillion-dollar payoffs? And finally, the question that is making the ex-presidents' club tremble: what information will García Luna spill if he turns state's evidence, as his lawyers are attempting to negotiate?

It is amusing to observe how Fox and Calderón's Twitter feeds, so virulent in their opposition to the new administration over the last year, have mellowed significantly in recent weeks.

The affair also brings the so-called war on drugs into sharper relief. It is no surprise that this crackdown was never about drugs at all, but about repressing social movements, smashing unions, and creating a shock-doctrine atmosphere for conservative administrations to privatize pensions, health services, and the oil sector. That much was known. But on top of all of that, it turns out, the whole thing constituted a colossal enrichment scheme.

The sheer immorality of high-ranking federal officials intervening in a whirlwind of violence they helped create, one that has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Mexicans, in order to run a lucrative protection racket for one of the world's most bloodthirsty cartels goes beyond any words I can add to this page.

Thrust into relief, as well, is the magnitude of what the movement headed by Andrés Manuel López Obrador has managed to pull off. In addition to facing the usual enemies of progressive movements worldwide — financial and corporate elites, the near-totality of the television and print media, a hostile party and electoral system, the United States — it has had to go up against a succession of federal administrations in apparent collusion with a criminal organization present in fifty-four countries and with \$11 billion in annual sales to the United States alone.

Through fear, prudence, or a desire to focus on enacting his policy agenda, AMLO has been reluctant to throw the full weight of the federal government behind prosecuting the crimes of his predecessors. The arrest of García Luna — and the evidence that may emerge at trial — could wind up tipping his hand. He will have to proceed with caution: as last year's failed raid in the city of Culiacán shows, there is nothing the president's enemies would like more than to weaponize the power of organized crime to destabilize his administration.

Failure to dismantle the narco-state, however, means that the alliance of criminal politicians and drug money will continue, making the long-term effort to reshape Mexico impossible.