

Mexico's failed war against the drug gangs

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Mexicans are calling for an end to the battle against organised crime that has cost 40,000 lives

Police officers secure the area where a body has been dumped on the street in Acapulco, Mexico. A fierce turf war continues between rival drug gangs. Photograph: Alexandre Meneghini/AP

On Sunday thousands of Mexicans marched in the capital, Mexico City, to demand an end to the "[war on drug trafficking](#)" launched by President Felipe Calderón. They view it as an absurd war that has cost 40,000 lives. Similar protests were held across the country.

The massive mobilisation was called by the [poet Javier Sicilia. In March, his son was brutally murdered](#) along with five others in Cuernavaca. Apart from being a great writer who has received a number of literary prizes, Sicilia is a Christian with a commitment to popular causes and a follower of [Ivan Illich](#), the controversial Austrian thinker who lived in Mexico for many years. Sicilia has no links to political parties, and has gathered around him a great many people who are unhappy with the government and with its failed war against organised crime.

Calderón took office as president in December 2006, after [a controversial election](#) beset by allegations of fraud. Seeking a legitimacy that the polls did not give him, he took the military out of the barracks and into politics.

The outcome has been disastrous. Tens of thousands of people have been murdered. Many of them were unarmed, and had not picked a fight. They were not killed as part of the all-out war between rival drug cartels or during clashes between the military and/or the police and organised crime gangs. Their deaths were crimes committed in a country where vast areas are under a non-declared state of siege, patrolled day and night by thousands of police and military.

Human rights have never been respected in [Mexico](#) – but since the war on drug trafficking began, rights violations have dramatically increased. Scores of civilians have been shot dead in their cars at military checkpoints. In many parts of the country there are severe restrictions on press freedom.

The March for Peace With Justice and Dignity that culminated in the capital made demands on the authorities and on the criminal gangs to put an end to the violence. The protesters think that organised crime has infiltrated the government and that there is now a "co-opted state" – a "rotten state". The war on drug trafficking "is not supported" by the people, according to the Catholic bishop Raúl Vera. The protests are supported by the

Catholic church. "We Mexicans must shout a categorical 'stop!'," said the Mexican Episcopate Council.

Calderón's government has reacted negatively to the protests. The public security minister, Genaro García Luna, said it was "unthinkable" that the fight against the cartels might be wrong. Calderón boasted that he had "the law, reason and force" on his side.

Sicilia's initiative converges with other movements: the Walks Against Death in Ciudad Juárez – protests staged by parents of the children who died in a fire at the ABC nursery, which was caused by the authorities' negligence; the No More Blood campaign, promoted by several cartoonists; the actions by the followers of [Benjamín LeBaron](#) – a charismatic figure of the Mormon community who was kidnapped and killed in Chihuahua; and the works undertaken by the priest [Alejandro Solalinde](#) in favour of undocumented migrants.

A sorrowful Sicilia summed up in one phrase the feeling of many Mexicans: "*Estamos hasta la madre!*" (We are all fed up). To express this sense of weariness, the sound of the marches was the furious silence of the participants. "He who keeps silent is ungovernable," Ivan Illich said. Therein rests the force of the demonstration.

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