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Narco Service Provision in Tierra Caliente: La Familia Michoacana, Los Caballeros Templarios, and Los Zetas

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Abstract:

This article analyzes the mutual relationship of dependency between civil society and narco cartels in Tierra Caliente, focusing on civilian experiences in Michoacan, Guerrero and el Estado de México. This paper will examine the functions of La Familia Michoacana, Los Caballeros Templarios and Los Zetas through community service provisions and cartels' governance. Additionally, socioeconomic factors of Tierra Caliente will be examined to determine which types of communities lend themselves to cartels to provide community provisions as I argue that socioeconomic factors drive cartels' operations and behaviors.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been discussion regarding how to approach and eradicate organized crime such as narco cartels. This multidimensional issue has been debated internationally but most commonly within Mexican and American territory. The debate between politicians and government officials prompted the War on Drugs. Popularized by American President Nixon in 1971, the War on Drugs was initiated by President Felipe Calderon in 2006, as violence was on the rise and confrontations between cartels and local police forces were more common.¹ President Calderon's plan to eradicate narco cartels targeted Michoacan but failed as bloodshed broke records not seen since the Mexican Revolution. While the debates on eradicating narco cartels focus on violence and contraband, the Western world fails to acknowledge that cartels play roles in communities. To combat organized crime, we must take a holistic perspective and acknowledge cartels and regions are not homogeneous.

This research does not aim to glorify narco cartels but acknowledge the varying functions of cartels in Mexican communities. Cartels have provided employment, monetary aid and have advocated against state corruption. Civilians have empathized with narco cartels because they acknowledged rural and impoverished areas within Tierra Caliente that the Mexican state neglects. Western generalizations depict cartels as bloodthirsty, cruel, and anti-democratic; yet, that narrative is biased. Narco cartels participate in the illicit market of narcotics — promoted by capitalism — however, they also contribute to civil society in multiple major ways.² Narco cartels' duality is critical to recognize internationally to eradicate violence, acknowledge Mexican perspective and recognize impoverished communities.

¹ Gil Olmos, *Batalla de Michoacán*, 185-188.

² Cartels are defined as illicit business structures by Pino Arlacchi. Arlacchi, "Nations Build Alliances To Stop Organized Crime," 27-30.

Literature Review

A minority of scholars have analyzed the anomaly in organized crime in Mexico. Due to the modern aspect of cartels and the lack of investigation in this area, civil war literature is often used to analyze this complex topic. There are various similarities between civil wars and cartel-state conflict such as intrastate violence and anti-state sentiments. Many scholars take upon the civil war lense to analyze this literature; however, over the years new literature has highlighted the niche of cartel-state conflict. Among questions about disruption or contribution of civil society lies questions of: What social conditions attract cartels to operate in a certain area? What social conditions create cartels that contribute to civil society?

Ana Arjona (2016) explores civil wartime in her book *Rebelocracy* to understand rebel groups and the conditions in which groups are created. While her research focuses on Colombia's paramilitary and guerrilla groups and social order, her research can be extended to Latin American countries as they face similar encounters with organized crime groups. Arjona develops a theory of social order through three main terms: rebelocracy, aliocracy, and disorder.³ Rebelocracy explains the established reciprocal relationship between civilians and the armed group.⁴ Aliocracy describes an unstable relationship between civilians and the armed group usually characterized by opposition.⁵ Disorder describes the failure to establish any type of social contract.⁶ Arjona determines that the strength of civil institutions (prior to the intervention of rebel groups), civilian choice (to comply or resist), and violent or nonviolent behavior of armed groups are critical to understanding how paramilitaries operate. She concludes that low quality civil institutions (prior to the intervention of rebel groups) allow rebel groups to establish a social

³ Arjona, *Rebelocracy*, 10-12

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

contract with citizens. In the case of Tierra Caliente, this occurs as weak local government institutions and low quality civil institutions make an attractive and feasible area to control. Arjona limits her argument and states, “I do not argue that high quality institutions allow civilians to expel combatants from their territories.”⁷ Similarly, in Tierra Caliente high quality civil institutions do not prevent the occupation of cartels.

While Arjona’s research provides a thorough examination of how civil society affects rebel groups’ operations, Raul Zepeda Gil (2018) provides a different approach by analyzing various factors that affect the rise of violence in Tierra Caliente. Zepeda Gil follows a narrow research that aims to observe whether agro-industrial development, income inequality, and scholarship have an effect on violence in Tierra Caliente.⁸ He determines through a series of linear regression, the Preis-Winsten method, that agro-industrial development and income inequality are statistically significant. Meaning that these two factors contribute to the rise of violence within the area.⁹ While scholarship does not contribute to the rise in violence, Zepeda Gil explains that scholarship is relevant to the politics of crime prevention.¹⁰ Zepeda Gil alludes to the social contract — as seen in *Rebelocracy* — as he references the staggering income inequality. He states that the disadvantaged people would opt to join organized crime as a means of income and security which will establish a social contract. In this way, cartels become an authoritative figure in a local community and have the ability to exert their power in nearby communities.

As an authoritative figure in a repressive environment, social order will be established by the cartels. In some instances, narco cartels have imposed political and economic dominion over

⁷ Ibid, 486.

⁸ Zepeda Gil, “Violencia en Tierra Caliente: desigualdad, desarrollo y escolaridad en la guerra contra el narcotráfico,” 125.

⁹ Ibid. 145.

¹⁰ Ibid, 148.

the region of Tierra Caliente in Western Mexico. Cartels such as La Familia Michoacana have delegitimized the Michoacan state government and taken over the agriculture sector by imposing quotas and incentivizing the cultivation of opium poppy and marijuana. Simultaneously, cartels have provided ad hoc services, funded infrastructure, and created jobs in rural impoverished areas.¹¹ This leads to the question of whether drug cartels disrupt or contribute to civil society and to what extent?

Scholars such as Shawn T Flannigan (2014), suggest that cartels provide community services mainly as a tool to gain political support and military recruits. Flanningan categorizes the service given by cartels as “community service provision”. Community service provisions imply that there is a mutual relationship of dependency.¹² Beneficiaries of the community service provisions depend on cartels to provide monetary aid, resources, and security from other criminal activity. The community provides cartel employees for the extraction of raw materials and the support that legitimizes the narcopower. Flannigan acknowledges that the relationship of dependency is utilitarian as they focus on the outcome of large profits from manufacturing illicit crops.¹³ However, he also addresses the possible ideological motivations behind cartels and states, “It is important to note, however, that these categories [utilitarian and ideological motivations] need not to be mutually exclusive.”¹⁴

Although Flannigan recognizes possible ideological motivations behind organized crime, other scholars consolidate the idea that organized crime in Mexico can and has had ideological motivations. Jaime Andrés Wilches Tinjacá, Xavier Ruiz Collantes, and Hugo Fernando Guerrero Sierra (2021) analyzed the ideological motivations behind organized crime in recent

¹¹ Ad hoc services: temporary, when needed services

¹² Flannigan, “Motivations and Implications of Community Service Provisions by La Familia Michoacana/ Knights of Templar and other Mexican Drug Cartels,” 65.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

years.¹⁵ These scholars have noted that in the absence of populism — *relatos populistas* — within politics, have caused cartels to take the role of embodying the populist character.¹⁶ Under democracy, cartels' involvement in politics is conflicting since cartels are not legitimate institutions within a democracy. For this reason, Wilches Tinjaca proposes: *narcopopulismo*.¹⁷ While in Western politics this concept seems contradictory and ironic, communities have supported *narcopopulismo* due to governmental corruption, income inequality, and other socio-economic factors. Notoriously large narco cartels have provided some sort of stability and order within weak local institutions in Mexico, especially in Tierra Caliente. In the case of Los Zetas, they have purely utilitarian motivation solely to expand territory and extract as much profit as possible. This is what scholar Marcos Mendoza (2021) would distinguish as austere domination, “political rule that used armed forces to hold territory and extract revenue in a way that suggested short term occupation rather than long term investment to incorporate inhabitants into a regime socio economic networks.”¹⁸ Tierra Caliente cartels suggest that utilitarian and ideological beliefs do not have to be mutually exclusive, yet they vary within the objective of cartels.

Prospectively, Ana Arjona's theory of social order in civil war will be applied to this study to examine narco cartels' service provisions. Although scholars such as Stathis Kalyvas (2015) object to the use of civil war literature in organized crime literature due to organized crime lacking “ideological profile, an explicit political agenda [and] they do not seek to take over the government.”¹⁹ Like Wilches Tinjaca et al. I argue that various groups of organized crime in Mexico have an ideological profile and have the ability to participate in politics.

¹⁵ Wilches Tinjacá et al., “Estados en pandemia y narcopopulismos reinventados: consolidación del “narco” como orientador de sociedades ilegales, pero legítimas,” 146-166.

¹⁶ *Relatos populistas*, Spanish for populist stories.

¹⁷ *Narcopopulismo*, Spanish for narc populism. *Ibid*, 150.

¹⁸ Mendoza, “The Tyranny of Narco-Power: Political Rule and Austere Domination in Michoacán, Mexico,” 412.

¹⁹ Kalyvas, “How Civil Wars Help Explain Organized Crime—and How They Do Not,” 4.

Although civil war literature is not the best fit to analyze organized crime, we must aim to evolve organized crime literature with the resources given.

Methodology

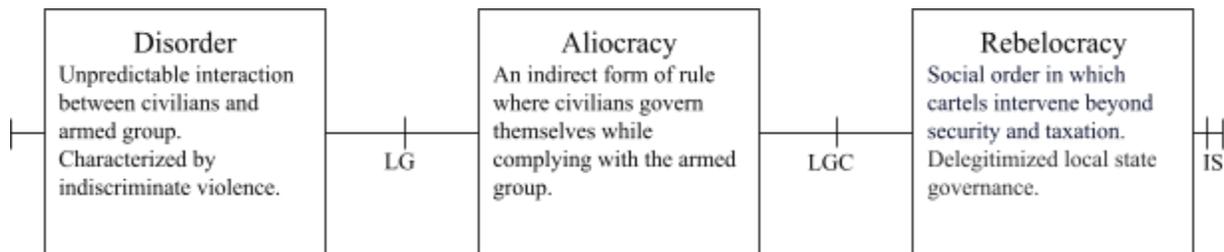
This research will be divided into two phases, allowing a holistic understanding of the nature of cartels in Tierra Caliente. Within the first phase, I will be exploring the service provisions and contribution to civil society provided by cartels. My units of analysis will be the cartels: La Familia Michoacana, Los Caballeros Templarios and Los Zetas. Due to constant change and fragmentations, my units of analysis are not concrete as cartels within Tierra Caliente are fragmented from each other. I will be creating case studies for each cartel composed of interviews, testimonies, and journalistic information. The interviews are provided by Marcos Mendoza (2017) and William Finnegan (2010) within Tierra Caliente municipalities. The selected interviews and testimonies are based on whether they interacted with La Familia Michoacana, Los Caballeros Templarios and Los Zetas and they will reflect negative and positive interactions with each cartel. Journalistic information and interview data was collected through content analysis from Mexican and international newspapers. Publication dates from 2006-2023 and were identified through web based searches within news outlets as shown in *Appendix A* using keywords and key word combinations as shown in *Appendix B*.

Interviews conducted by Marcos Mendoza took place around the time tensions de-escalated, in 2017. Mendoza focuses on Michoacan in the Zinapécuaro municipality where he interviews cartel members and civilians who have direct interactions with cartel members. The interviews are confidential, as he does not provide the name of the person being interviewed, exact location or occupation. William Finnegan provides his testimony as a journalist in Zitacuaro and Apatzingan, Michoacan. He reports his observations as to how people interact

with the government, cartels, and social provisions that cartels provide. Finnegan does not have a structured interview process but does mention testimonies of Michoacanos who interact with, or are beneficiaries of, the services of La Familia Michoacana.

Within the case studies, there will be focus on longevity and the nature of the service provisions. and governance of the cartels. I will apply Ana Arjona's (2010) terms of rebelocracy, aliocracy, and disorder to conceptualize the relationship between civil society and cartels as shown in *Figure 1*. This will be organized into a scale from lowest to greatest in the following order: disorder, aliocracy, and rebelocracy to scale where Tierra Caliente's prominent cartels stand.

Figure 1: Scale of Order



* LG: Limited Governance, LGC: Limited and Compliance of Local Government, IS: Illegitimate State

This study will test the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Aliocracy is the most common form of social order within Tierra Caliente.

Hypothesis 2: In Tierra Caliente, cartels are more likely to provide ad hoc community services than other service provisions.

In order to address *hypothesis 1*, a comparative qualitative study will be conducted identifying the governance, if any, of La Familia Michoacana, Los Caballeros Templarios and Los Zetas. Cartel rulership will be categorized into four categories: no governance, limited governance,

limited governance with compliance of the local government and an illegitimate state — shown in *Figure 2*.

Figure 2: Categories of Rulership

| | |
|--|--|
| No governance | Cartels are not operating any political sector. Cartels instead recruit, extract and have short term operations in the area. |
| Limited Governance | Cartels operate the economic sector by extracting and producing illicit substances. Voluntary and involuntary civilians work with the cartels to extract goods and create profit. |
| Limited Governance and Compliance of Local Government | Cartels operate the economic sector and cooperate with local political officials to extract resources and produce illicit substances. Characterized by local state corruption. |
| Illegitimate state | Cartels hold long term operations in the area as they operate within the political and economic sector. They have political power and control most of the state institutions such as the police forces, farming regulations etc. |

These categories will be incorporated into the *Scale of Order* to conceptualize how each rulership fit into disorder, aliocracy and rebelocracy. The service provisions that involve the political sector — such as affecting the local electoral processes, influencing policies and cooperating with political officials — indicate order between aliocracy and rebelocracy. Service provisions within the economic sector — such as establishing quotas, employing civilians and providing monetary aid — can indicate any type of order. The determining service provisions will be within the political sector as it will provide information about the strength of local government, corruption and civil society. This comparative qualitative study will identify the

services provided which will correspond to my second hypothesis aiming to pinpoint the most common service provision.

Following the initial phase, I will examine which communities lend themselves to have cartels serve community provisions. Using prior qualitative data from Phase I and quantitative data from Phase II, I will analyze communities through socioeconomic factors such as: violence, agricultural land distribution, and local government stability. Violence will be operationalized by homicide rates between 2011-2017 from INEGI, the Mexican National Institution of Geography and Statistics. These years are critical to this research as this is notably the peak of narco trafficking in Tierra Caliente due to a large number of cartels and the economic success cartels were having. Additionally, agricultural land distribution will be operationally defined by hectares of opium poppy and marijuana cultivation in Tierra Caliente. This data will provide details into how land is utilized in the area and who is utilizing the area. Ultimately, it will lay out whether cartels find the area profitable enough to operate and control. Lastly, local government stability will be operationalized by the number of governors within 2006-2016 in Tierra Caliente states: Michoacan, Guerrero, and el Estado de México. I will be testing the following hypothesis in this second phase:

Hypothesis 3: Communities characterized by a weak local government and profitable agricultural sectors produce cartels that are more likely to adopt aggressive tactics, expand their influence, and maintain long-term operations.

Hypothesis 3 will take into account the independent variables mentioned above to determine what communities are to attract cartels. These findings will indicate what characteristics in communities attract cartels in this region. I want to emphasize that these findings cannot be applied to Mexico nationwide. This research applies to the Tierra Caliente region as each region

in Mexico varies. Cartels and regions in Mexico are not homogeneous and require an appropriate study to fully encapsulate narco trafficking's interaction with Mexican civil society.

Phase I: Case Studies

Los Zetas

Los Zetas emerged from El Cartel del Golfo who smuggled alcohol into the United States in the early twentieth century. El Cartel del Golfo dominated Northern Mexico and was able to extend its power. Once young Juan Garcia Ábrego inherited the cartel, he introduced the cartel into narcotics trafficking such as importing cocaine from Colombia.²⁰ His reign would shortly come to a fall as Garcia Ábrego was imprisoned. His imprisonment was a critical event that fragmented El Cartel del Golfo. Member of El Cartel del Golfo, Osiel Cárdenas Guillén took matters into his own hands as internal conflict grew over who the successor would be. He assassinated members and proceeded to control the cartel along with a former Mexican elite military member, Guzmán Decena.²¹ Decena was in charge of recruiting former elite military members as bodyguards in fear of an attack from other cartels and the state. Soon after, Cárdenas Guillén was caught by military forces as the 'security branch' of El Cartel del Golfo grew to 30 members.²² This introduced Mexican organized crime to a new dimension of violence. Former elite members who were once trained to encounter insurgency dominated organized crime as they became bloodthirsty skilled hitmen. This 'security branch' fragmented as further tensions rose and in 2010 created the cartel: Los Zetas.

By 2010 Los Zetas became one of the most feared cartels in the country and “[built] an image of brutality that would facilitate territorial expansion, personnel recruitment, and a

²⁰ Perez Aguirre et al. “Los Zetas y su expansión en el Norte de Coahuila,” 7.

²¹ Ibid, 10.

²² Ibid. 10.

diversified portfolio of illicit activities.”²³ While Los Zetas held territory in Northern Mexico they soon seized land in Michoacan and established their presence in Zinapécuaro, Michoacan. Along with cartel La Empresa, they cooperated to build inroads to facilitate the illicit trafficking business.²⁴ Citizens were aware of the capabilities and danger Los Zetas possessed. The 2011 San Fernando massacre in Tamaulipas reemphasized the brutal violence they were capable of. In this tragic massacre, 72 Central and Southern American immigrants were killed by Los Zetas.²⁵ Most of the immigrants killed refused to work for Los Zetas or pay a quota. Residents of Zinapécuaro knew to limit contact with Los Zetas and follow what they were told to do. This fear tactic allowed Los Zetas to threaten the population into obedience. Residents of municipality Zinapécuaro like Mateo Palacios remember the dominance in the era as a place where people did not want to do anything because doing anything would cause their death. ²⁶ Palacios also states the following, “They were bloodthirsty. If they killed someone, they didn't feel any fear doing it. They would cut heads off.”²⁷ Under the power of Los Zetas, citizens knew not to report crimes or harassment as local police could have connections to the narcos.

Alas, Michoacan was not Los Zetas’ only target, by 2010 they fully expanded and reached the state of Guerrero. Their main goal was to continue drug operations by cultivating opium poppy; however, they came across the profitable business of mining. Narco cartels notably controlled mines in the Northern and Tierra Caliente region of Guerrero .²⁸ A criminal leader stated the following about cartel operations, “ it was not about heroin anymore but it was

²³ Mendoza, Marcos. “The Tyranny of Narco-Power: Political Rule and Austere Domination in Michoacán, Mexico,” 415.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Garcia, “La masacre de 72 migrantes que conmovió a Centroamérica.”

²⁶ Full Testimony within: Mendoza, Marcos. “The Tyranny of Narco-Power: Political Rule and Austere Domination in Michoacán, Mexico,” 416.

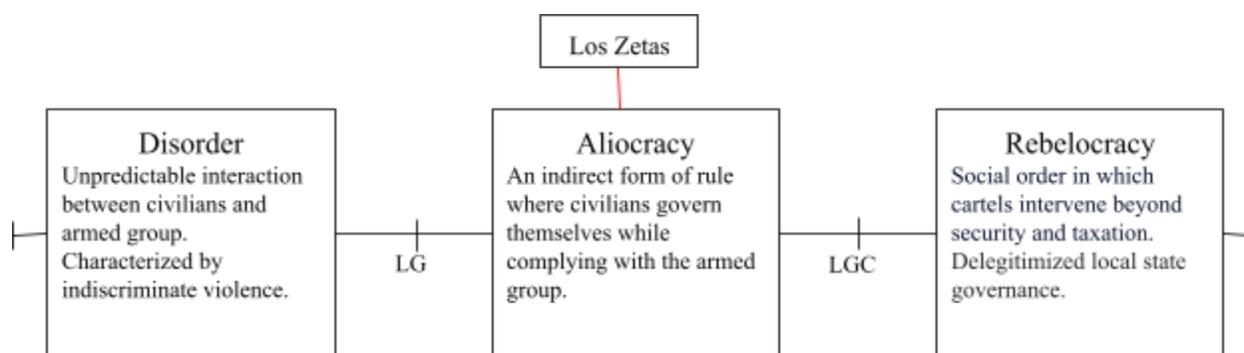
²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸Castro, “Mineras ceden a extorsión en Tierra Caliente.”

mainly mining.”²⁹ Los Zetas demanded quotas to be paid for the use of the mine in ‘their area’ or fully operated the mines. Often miners would pay the quotas instead of reporting it to the Mexican authorities as they could lose their livelihood.

Overall, Los Zetas used limited governance to control a portion of Michoacan and Guerrero. Their ultimate goal was to expand and grow profit by any means necessary. The inroads built by the cartel La Empresa and Los Zetas in Michoacan facilitated their transport of goods and allowed them to expand. Los Zetas did not attempt to establish any true social support through service provisions but rather built their empire through an image of brutality. Los Zetas’ characteristics of limited governance align with aliocracy as civilians govern themselves but are expected to comply with their occupation. Their indiscriminate violence resulted in hundreds dead and disappeared. It reached a breaking point in Michoacan as residents created auto defense groups and coalitions. Eventually, Los Zetas’ violence prompted the appearance of La Familia Michoacana in 2006 in efforts to gain land back and end political corruption.³⁰

Figure 1A: Los Zetas within the Scale of Order



* LG: Limited Governance, LGC: Limited and Compliance of Local Government

²⁹ International Crisis Group, “La guerra cotidiana: Guerrero y los retos a la paz en México.”

³⁰ Gil Olmos, *Batalla de Michoacán*, 89-90.

La Familia Michoacana

La Familia Michoacana (La Familia) was built upon fragmented cartels such as Los Zetas, La Empresa etc. headed by Carlos Gonzalez Mendoza *El Tisico*, José de Jesús Méndez Vargas *El Chango Mendez*, Servando Gómez Martínez *La Tuta*, and Nazario Moreno González *El Chayo*. Their presence was initially captured by media in 2006, in Michoacan where five severed heads were thrown into a nightclub with a message stating the following, "The Family doesn't kill for money. It doesn't kill women. It doesn't kill innocent people, only those who deserve to die. Know that this is divine justice."³¹ Most messages shared by La Familia held anti-corruption and Christian sentiments in narcomantas.³² Unlike other narco cartels, La Familia incorporated Catholic and Evangelist ideals to recruit and indoctrinate its followers. *El Chayo*, Nazario Moreno González, became the figure behind the religious aspect of the cartel and many admired his leadership, religiosity and philosophy. This religious aspect allowed the cartel to justify acts of violence and territory expansion as "divine justice".

Their territory expansion was over a period of time as La Familia attempted to regain all native land back from Los Zetas to Michoacanos. This dispute expanded to el Estado de México, within Tierra Caliente territory. The turf war between Los Zetas and La Familia led to the death of 4,927 people — including cartel members and innocent civilians — between 2006 and 2011.³³ As La Familia participated in a turf war, they also shared propaganda on state newspapers such as *La Voz de Michoacan* and *Sol de Morelia*, sharing their motives and introducing themselves. Their statement declared that La Familia would eradicate kidnapping, extortion and paid homicides. Within the statement La Familia explained they have participated in those activities however they participated as "it is the only way to keep order within the state and will not let it

³¹ Ibid, 89.

³² Narcomantas: a banner left by cartel members containing threats or explanation of criminal activity

³³ Gabinete de Seguridad Pública 2013.

get out of control.”³⁴ La Familia branded themselves as liberators and protectors of Michoacan which gained support of many Michoacanos as they became the prominent cartel in 2010. La Familia would also conduct trials, investigations and administer punishment for crimes. A Michoacan resident concurred with the previous statement and declared the following,

“They’re the second law...Maybe even the first law. If you need to collect a debt, you go to them. They’ll charge you a fee, but you’ll get your money. The police works for them. When they arrest people, they don’t take them to police headquarters but to La Familia.”³⁵

Moreover, La Familia provided ad hoc services for impoverished families as a Michoacan resident state. “If you were sick and had no money, they’d take you to the hospital and pay for medicine. If you couldn’t afford tortillas, they’d buy some for you.”³⁶ While these services were temporary, it helped families in Tierra Caliente. La Familia broadened their services and provided long term service provisions as they offered low-interest loans, rehabilitation centers for drug addicts and alcoholics.³⁷ Some scholars point out that “drug trafficking is not a primary activity for La Familia Michoacana.”³⁸

La Familia was not limited to community service provisions such as law enforcement and welfare support; in fact, La Familia Michoacana interfered in state politics and governance activities. They established their control in “regulating prices of agricultural products, establishing harvesting periods, changing incurred debts...giving permission for festivals and religious events, giving licenses for forestry exploitation.”³⁹ Local government functions were replaced by the governance of the La Familia which deemed the Michoacan government as

³⁴ Gil Olmos, *Batalla de Michoacán*, 92.

³⁵ Finnegan, “Silver or Lead.”

³⁶ Ibid.

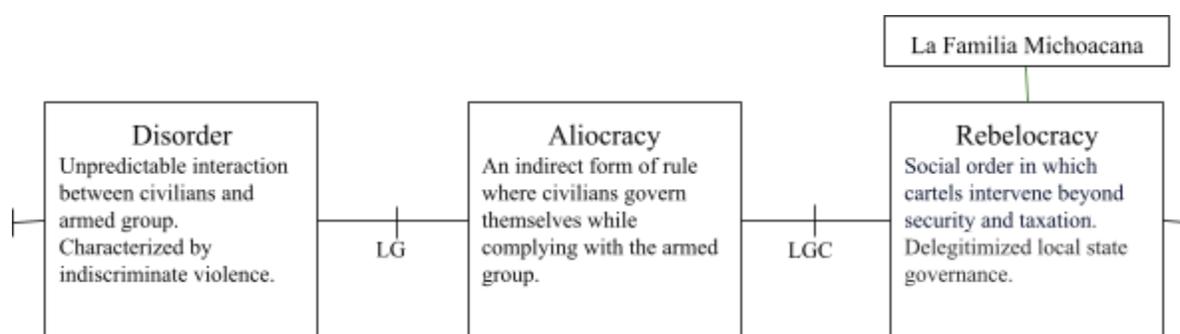
³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Aguirre et al., “Institutional weakness and organized crime in Mexico: the case of Michoacan, 225.

³⁹ Ibid, 224.

illegitimate. La Familia led a rebelocracy, where they established the social order that civilians abided by. Jorge Aguirre and Hugo Amador Herrera (2013) illustrate the scenario, “ it is not anarchism that exists in some municipalities, but parallel governments.”⁴⁰ By this point, Michoacan was branded as the first narco state who was captured by organized crime. This was possible by cartels as weak local institutions left a void in governance that cartels were capable of fulfilling.

Figure 1B: La Familia Michoacana within Scale of Order



* LG: Limited Governance, LGC: Limited and Compliance of Local Government, IS: Illegitimate State

Ultimately, the presumed death of Nazario Moreno González in late 2010 led to the fragmentation of La Familia Michoacana over discussion of the next successor.⁴¹ While la Familia Michoacana had multiple leaders, Moreno González held the most power as he became the image of the cartel. Following his death, José de Jesús Méndez Vargas *El Chango Mendez* attempted to take charge of the cartel but Enrique Plancarte Solís *El Kike* and Servando Gómez Martínez *La Tuta* did not agree with his executive position. Disagreements lasted around three months which led *El Kike* and *La Tuta* to establish operations under Los Caballeros Templarios.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 225.

⁴¹ Nazario Moreno González was presumed dead after a confrontation with Mexican security forces. However, they were not able to find his body and in 2014 it was confirmed that Nazario had been killed during a shootout.

Los Caballeros Templarios

By March 2011, Los Caballeros Templarios (Los Templarios) spread brochures in Apatzingan, Lazaro Cardenas, Morelia, and Zitacuaro informing residents that their members would be in charge of previous operations that La Familia controlled. In retaliation, La Familia became allies with Los Zetas in an attempt to recover territory through a bloody turf war, but their attempts failed as *El Chango Mendez* was detained. Los Templarios were able to take over Michoacan territory and begin their operations immediately. They were able to dominate a prominent area of Tierra Caliente within a year as they picked up from where La Familia left off. In the hands of Servando Gomez *La Tuta*, Los Templarios led the strongest and best designed cartels as they assimilated a company with many branches.⁴² They followed a pyramidal structure as at the peak stood those with the most experience who took executive decisions.⁴³ Los Templarios continued to brand themselves as liberators and kept Christian aspects developed by Nazario Moreno González. All members of Los Caballeros Templarios were expected to follow a code which consisted of 53 articles and an oath. The code and oath was created to assure that members fought against injustices and did not lose motive.

Los Templarios further established a parallel government as they held meetings with businessmen, entrepreneurs, farmers and laborers to notify them that they have to pay taxes to them. They notified government officials that they would be controlling police departments and would take 10% of municipal budgets.⁴⁴ This received attention from the media as civilians expressed their frustration from the government corruption. Civilians and auto-defense groups advocated for a “state cleanse” to get rid of all corrupt officials. Jose Manuel Mireles, leader of auto-defense groups expressed the following,

⁴² Gil Olmos, *Batalla de Michoacán*, 125.

⁴³ Ibid, 127.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 126.

“A good percentage of the budget, 15 to 20 percent, directly goes to the hands of organized crime...since the state government receives its budget and of its municipalities.

They [government officials] come to combat crime and portray themselves with them.”⁴⁵

Despite civilian frustration and resistance, some civilians were acceptant of Los Templarios control due to “acts of generosity.” For instance, Los Templarios would approach farmers to offer money for their harvest and would buy them agricultural tools. In exchange, the farmers would let cartels use their lands, throw private parties and reunions. Farmers knew that the “acts of generosity” were not free and had to offer something. In Ucareo, Michoacan a farmer recalls this experience and states, “I could have been bold and rejected their price. But that would have caused me a ton of grief. They would have taken everything they wanted and not give me anything.”⁴⁶ Like Flannigan (2014) suggests there is a relationship between service provisions by organized crime and the acceptance of recipients. Usually the more service provisions are provided, the greater the support.

Furthermore, Los Templarios’ control continued to grow and by 2012 they controlled municipalities and the media. In 2012, Los Templarios contacted journalists and television reporters for a reunion with business people who wanted to invest in Michoacan. This was a hoax, instead Los Templarios presented an assigned press commissioner for the media to obey and respect. The duty of the press commissioner was to regulate what the media published and push the image of “liberators” and “brotherhood” among civilians.⁴⁷ Reporters and journalists were incentivized to do so as they would be paid monthly and if they did not participate they

⁴⁵ Trans. “Un buen porcentaje del presupuesto, del 15 al 25 por ciento, va directamente a las manos del crimen organizado... desde que el gobierno estatal recibe su presupuesto y también de los municipios. Vienen a combatir al crimen y se retratan con ellos.” Redacción AN. “Del 15 al 25% del presupuesto de Michoacán, va a manos del crimen: Mireles.”

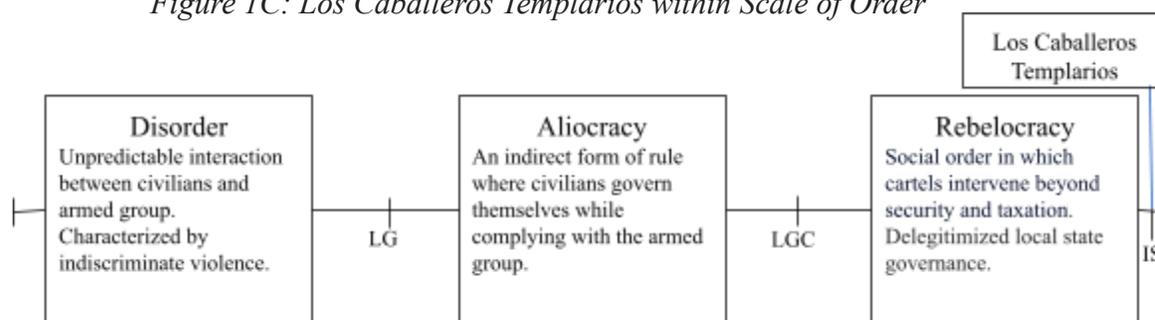
⁴⁶ Mendoza, “The Tyranny of Narco-Power: Political Rule and Austere Domination in Michoacán, Mexico,” 422.

⁴⁷ Gil Olmos, *Batalla de Michoacán*, 150.

would be killed. In a military seizure, the government confirmed major Mexican media sources such as Televisa and Agencia Esquema had connections with Los Templarios.⁴⁸

All in all, Los Caballeros Templarios created an illegitimate state run by organized crime. They provided community services and filled voids left by the state governments. Los Caballeros Templarios were able to operate as a government which other cartels were not able to do in the early 2010's. Yet, Los Caballeros Templarios' empire came to a fall in 2015 when charismatic leader *La Tuta* was arrested. Following the pattern of numerous cartels, Los Caballeros Templarios fragmented and lost a large portion of its dominance.

Figure 1C: Los Caballeros Templarios within Scale of Order



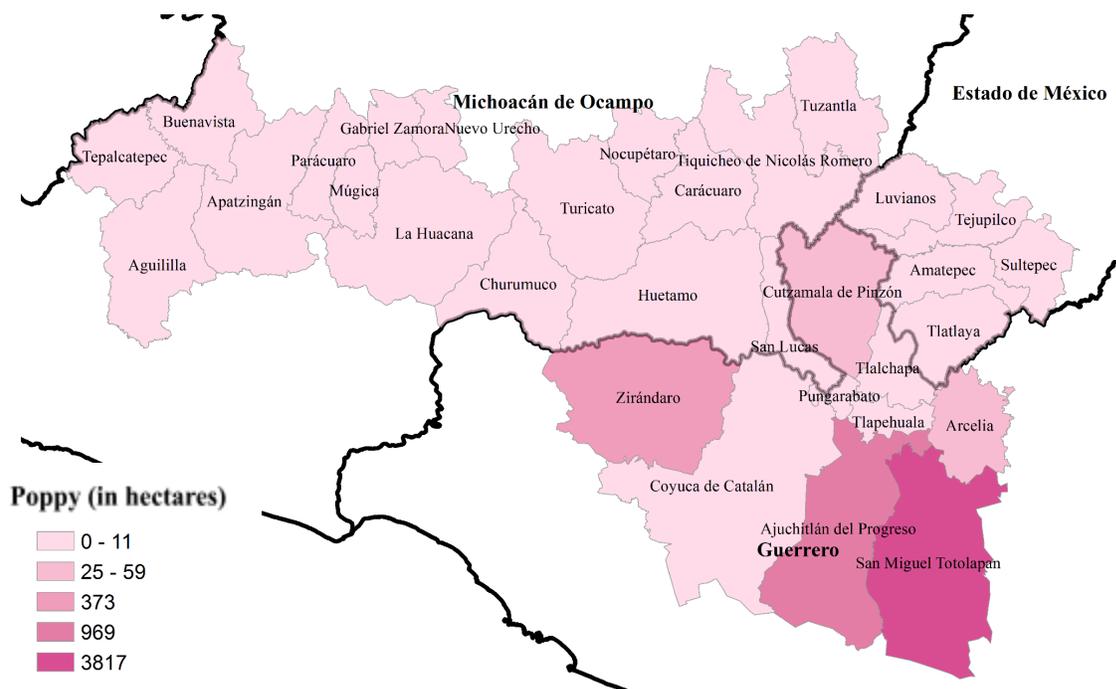
* LG: Limited Governance, LGC: Limited and Compliance of Local Government, IS: Illegitimate State

Phase II: Cartel Behavior

Cartel behavior can be explained by socioeconomic factors within the region as these factors indicate the area's economic condition and stability. This area in particular is well known for *sierras*, mountain ranges, that have the optimal climatic conditions for the cultivation of opium poppy and marijuana. The area's conditions make this region desirable for many cartels as it produces one of the largest cultivations in Mexico. According to a study done by Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana (UAM) in Mexico City, between 2007-2015 Guerrero was the state with the most illicit cultivation with 73,404 hectares, Michoacan with 9,361 hectares and el

⁴⁸ Ibid, 149.

Figure 4: Eradicated Poppy Hectares in Tierra Caliente from 2006-2012



Map from “Violencia en Tierra Caliente: desigualdad, desarrollo y escolaridad en la guerra contra el narcotráfico” by Raul Zepeda Gil.

Incidentally, these profitable lands are states with instability within local governments. This has allowed for coexistence of local governments and cartel governance; eventually completely replacing governmental functions.⁵⁰ The instability of local governments can be observed through governors as governors have the capability to set the state budget, appoint local officers and the veto power.⁵¹ The governor position is one of the strongest local positions within the Mexican government system. It is important to note that governor term is a six year term in Mexico. In the case of Michoacan, between 2006 and 2016 there were a total of six governors. In 2012, Michoacan was the center of controversy as governor Leonel Godoy Rangel and Fausto Vallejo were suspected to be linked to cartels. Godoy’s governance was cut short to four years as

⁵⁰ Aguirre et al., “Institutional weakness and organized crime in Mexico: the case of Michoacan, 225.

⁵¹ Sevilla, “El poder de los gobernadores. Conceptualización y medición en los ejecutivos locales mexicanos.”

Fasuto Vallejo took charge and took a medical leave in 2013 as he returned months later to renounce his position in 2014. The instability of the governor position has allowed for Los Templarios to take lead as political figures are surrounded by controversy covered by the media. Similarly, Guerrero faced political instability as they had four different governors within ten years. Political instability reigned between 2014-2016 after the disappearance of the 43 students in Ayotzinapa, Guerrero which led to mass protests demanding answers.⁵² In contrast, el Estado de México had two governors who held complete terms. This is noteworthy since el Estado de Mexico holds the least hectares used for illicit substances which does not necessarily attract cartels.⁵³

Profitable lands and political stability influence cartel presence in the area; the more profitable and fertile the lands are, the more desirable the land will be. This has caused violence to surge in Tierra Caliente as homicides (per year) escalated between 2011 and 2017. The cause of the violence can be explained by turf wars between cartels as well as government intervention in the area as innocent civilians became collateral damage. The following data, in *Figure 3*, exemplifies the violence within 2011-2017 within the region however, it does not exclusively state homicides caused by cartel violence rather homicides in general.

Figure 5: Number of homicides from 2011-2017 in Tierra Caliente

| Federal Entity | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 |
|------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Guerrero | 2416 | 2646 | 2283 | 1729 | 424 | 2594 | 2637 |
| Estado de Mexico | 2623 | 2907 | 3311 | 2908 | 2683 | 2768 | 3076 |
| Michoacan | 855 | 827 | 922 | 932 | 874 | 1428 | 1732 |

**Data from INEGI from Press Release 418/23, July 25, 2023.*

⁵² De la O, “Ángel Aguirre Rivero: la invisibilidad política después de Ayotzinapa.”

⁵³Table displaying governors within each Tierra Caliente state is provided in *Appendix D*.

Within 7 years, Michoacan had an 102.57% increase in homicides while Guerrero had a 9.14% increase, and el Estado de México a 17.27 % increase. Although the number of homicides is not a conclusive indicator that cartel violence caused these deaths it displays the increase of violence between 2011 and 2017 as cartels resided in Tierra Caliente.

Limitations

Limitations on this study include lack of qualitative data about cartel violence and cartel related homicides. Due to the nature of this study it is difficult to encounter credible and representative data of all the victims of cartel conflicts. This study also aims at analyzing how socioeconomic factors influence cartel behavior yet, few factors are analyzed due to time constraints. For the sake of redundancy - as this study was done by Raul Gil Zepeda - I opted to focus on violence, agricultural land distribution, and local government stability. Local government stability was operationalized by the number of governors between 2006 to 2016. This is a proxy variable as there is no collective standard measure for government stability. Again, this study solely focuses on Tierra Caliente and is not representative of all Mexico.

Conclusions and Implications

The overall findings of this paper suggests that cartels are not homogeneous nationwide or regionally. While there are similarities between cartel behavior in Tierra Caliente such as instilling fear to expand and providing service provisions to receive support from civilians, cartels operate in different manners. This disproves *hypothesis 1* stating that: Aliocracy is the most common form of social order within Tierra Caliente. Los Zetas, Los Caballeros Templarios and La Familia Michoacana did not act in one uniform way. In fact, Los Zetas aligned with aliocracy, La Familia Michoacana aligned with rebelocracy and Los Caballeros Templarios built an illegitimate state. La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios were capable of

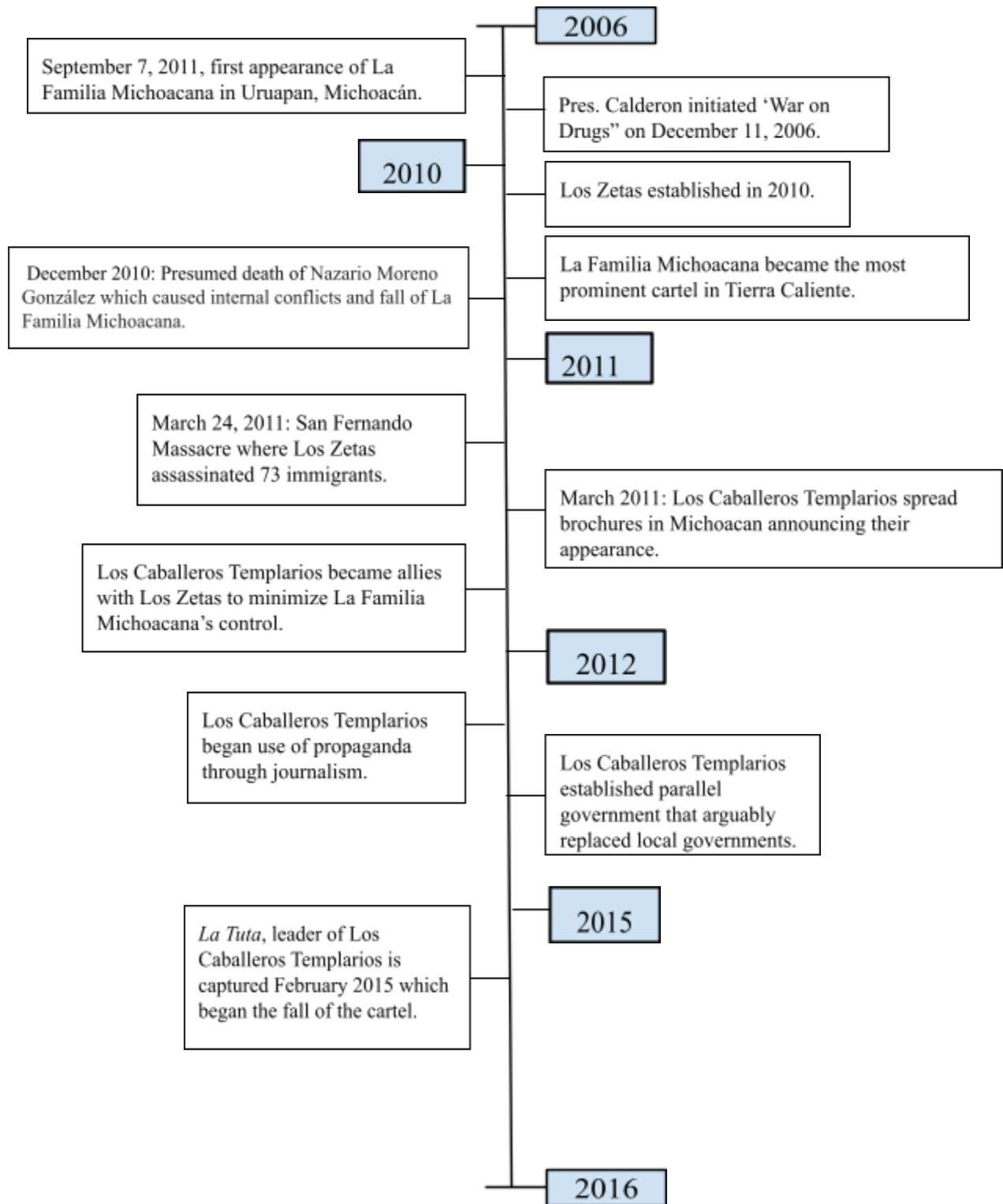
operating within Tierra Caliente by gaining civilian trust through community service provisions. These two cartels provided loans, security from other organized crime, food and amenities at the cost of controlling the area. This mutual dependent relationship established a society in which civilians relied on cartels rather than the government for resources. This prompted local governments to eradicate drug rehabilitations and clinics funded by cartels. Cartels opted to provide ad hoc services instead of long term services. This confirms *hypothesis 2* that highlights that ad hoc services are the most provided service provision.

This leads to the next pattern uncovered in this study: cartels will reside in profitable areas to continue their participation in the illicit market and maintain long term operations. Communities with profitable lands and weak local governments are key characteristics of communities in Tierra Caliente. Therefore, it is a zone that is often disputed by multiple cartels as they attempt to mark their territory and expand. The high rate of violence between 2011-2017 illustrates the situation. All in all, this confirms *hypothesis 3* in which it is hypothesized that communities characterized by a weak local government and profitable agricultural sectors produce cartels that are more likely to adopt aggressive tactics, expand their influence, and maintain long-term operations. These findings are aimed to stress that cartels must not be generalized in Mexico or within regions of Mexico. In efforts to understand cartels and Mexican civil society, cartels should be understood as individual entities that behave in distinct ways.

Appendix A: News Outlet Included in Content Analysis

| Name of Newspaper | Web Address |
|--------------------------|---|
| BBC Mundo | https://www.bbc.com/mundo |
| El Imparcial | https://www.elimparcial.com/ |
| El Pais Mexico | https://elpais.com/mexico/ |
| El Sol de Acapulco | https://www.elsoldeacapulco.com.mx/ |
| Insight Crime | https://insightcrime.org/about-us/ |
| Milenio | https://www.milenio.com/ |
| La Jornada | https://www.jornada.com.mx/ |
| La Jornada Michoacan | https://www.jornada.com.mx/tag/michoacan |
| La Voz de Michoacán | https://www.lavozdemichoacan.com.mx/ |

Appendix C: Cartel Timeline



Appendix D: Governors in Tierra Caliente 2006-2016

| Federal Entity | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 |
|------------------|-----------------------------|------|-------------------------|------|------|------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| Guerrero | Carlos Z.T. Galindo (CZTG)* | CZTG | CZTG | CZTG | CZTG | CZTG | Angel H.A Rivero (AHAR)* | AHAR | AHAR | Salvador R.O. Martinez* | Hector A.A. Flores* |
| Estado de Mexico | Enrique P. Nieto (EPN)* | EPN | EPN | EPN | EPN | EPN | Eruviel A. Villegas (EAV)* | EAV | EAV | EAV | EAV |
| Michoacan | Lazaro C. Batel (LCB)* | LCB | Leonel G. Rangel (LGR)* | LGR | LGR | LGR | Fausto Vallejo (LGR)* | Jose Jesus R. Garcia* (FV) | FV (Salvador J. Guerrero*) | SJG | Silvano A. Conejo* |

* Information gathered from CANAGO (National Governors Conference) website. *= Governor who completed 6 year term, *= Interim governor, *= Governor with uncompleted term.

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