

Plan Mexico

A new president deserves US support in his bold moves to tackle drug gangs and other deep problems.

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A new Mexican president, Felipe Calderón, has taken extraordinary steps to give fresh hope to a country that needs it. He's extradited drug kingpins to the US and sent troops into violent drug zones. This just may be a Mexican leader the US can get behind.

In 2005, Mexico surpassed Colombia as Latin America's main producer and distributor of narcotics. And like "Plan Colombia," the multi-billion-dollar aid and law-enforcement effort supported by the US since the 1990s to suppress drug growing in that country, Mexico could now use a "Plan Mexico" to curb its own drug-gang scourge.

Mr. Calderón realizes he must first tackle the drug lords if he wants to improve the rule of law, human rights, and governance. Only then can he draw enough foreign investment to create jobs for the 40 percent of Mexicans who live in poverty and see El Norte as the promised land. (See a [three-part Monitor series](#) on Mexico that ends today.)

His boldest move since taking office Dec. 1 has been to deploy federal troops into places like Tijuana and Michoacán to confront both drug chieftains and corrupt local officials. (Tijuana police were disarmed during the operation.) Last year, Mexico saw more than 2,000 drug-related killings.

In recent days, Calderón has also sent more than a dozen captured drug bosses to the US for prosecution – a clear acknowledgment that Mexico's prisons and courts are too graft-ridden to safely contain them.

A US-educated technocrat who has shown the backbone of a live action figure, Calderón also launched a program to help Mexico's 100 poorest communities and another one to give cash incentives for companies to hire young workers. And he's proposed health insurance for infants.

Those compassionate moves indicate this leader of the conservative PAN party knows he barely won July's election against the leftist populist, Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

But they may also signal that the country's entrenched political establishment knows it must fix the country's fundamental problems or else it will see the election of a Hugo Chávez-style firebrand in 2012 by the "other Mexico."

Calderón is up against a deep culture of corruption and a concentration of wealth and power that only began to erode with the ouster of the long-ruling PRI party in 2000. His next steps, after cracking down on organized crime, must be to clean up the police and courts, while curbing public unions and breaking up monopolies. Last week's surge in the price of tortillas – a staple dominated by one company – shows the task he faces.

He has begun to open government actions to scrutiny and set up a uniform system for public spending. His severest test, however, may be in forming coalitions in the legislature, something his predecessor, Vicente Fox, failed to do. The PRI, which lost badly in the last election, may be open to assisting him.

The US should back Calderón's bold moves. For starters, it can reduce its consumption of illegal drugs and make it more difficult for Mexicans to cross the border and abandon their

country. But now may be the time for the US to ask what more it can do to finally help fix its neighbor's seemingly intractable social and economic problems.