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HEADLINE: Will Mexico's culture of corruption ever fade? Analyst says it 'seems to be part of our DNA'

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BODY:

MEXICO CITY - Last year, a member of Mexico City's legislature was videotaped accepting a bribe. The brother of a former president is widely assumed to have built a \$100 million fortune through influence peddling. In 1997, the head of the country's drug interdiction office was dismissed - for involvement in drug trafficking.

Those and other examples illustrate the perennial stigma of Mexico, considered one of the most corrupt countries in the hemisphere. The recent furor over a video in which four enforcers for the Gulf cartel are interrogated and one is executed has sharply refocused attention on corruption.

The men on the video suggested links between drug traffickers and the government, and authorities have conceded that federal law enforcement officials and perhaps current or former members of the military may have been involved in torturing the four men and making the video.

The videotaped allegations are a reminder, analysts say, that in Mexico corruption not only is a disease that afflicts government and public officials, but also a national pathology.

And, some add, corruption is so deeply embedded in the society that there's no prospect of eliminating or even curbing it anytime soon.

"Unfortunately, corruption seems to be part of our DNA," said political analyst Jorge Chabat.

"What we have discovered ... is that this is not endemic," said Eduardo A. Bohórquez, executive secretary of Transparencia Mexicana, or Mexican Transparency. "It's more epidemic."

For Mr. Bohórquez, whose agency measures corruption in Mexico, "Corruption is the abuse of the public trust to gain a private benefit. You take a mandate from a public group and act on your own behalf."

Used to the bribes

But other experts say the problem goes far beyond that, extending from the ordinary citizen to high reaches of government. They say most Mexicans have become accustomed to paying bribes and to the notion that the average police officer will try to shake them down in some way.

Children are told from an early age that they should not trust authorities - including the police, experts say.

"My instinct is that it is deeply learned sitting at the table listening to one's parents," said Dr. John Bailey, a Georgetown University professor. "Police are there to be avoided." Dr. Bailey said many Mexicans regard bribery as standard operating procedure. Further, he and others say, police officers assume they are expected to use extortion to augment their salaries, which are generally low.

Gabriel and Mayela, a Guadalajara couple who declined to give their last names, insist they want "a new Mexico" without corruption. Asked, however, if they have ever paid a bribe, they reluctantly said yes.

"Of course I have, but that doesn't mean I'm corrupt. I'm just practical," Gabriel said.

Added Mayela: "You get nowhere trying to play by the rules. You only go crazy because you run into so many walls."

Such responses are instructive, experts say.

"If I live in a society where to advance myself I have to be corrupt, I probably would change my behavior," said Dr. David A. Shirk, director of the **Trans-Border Institute** at the University of California-San Diego. "In Mexico, the rules are such that people can thrive by using corrupt behavior."

But Dr. Shirk said he does not believe corruption is somehow part of Mexico's collective psyche.

"As a political scientist, I have a hard time saying people are more corrupt because they're Mexican or grew up a certain way.

"That's disproved by the fact that Mexicans who go to another country behave the way the laws and rules of that country dictate. We have 20 million Mexicans in the U.S., and I don't think they're bribing the police."

Dr. Shirk said many Mexican police officers earn \$300-\$600 a month. That compares with officers' annual salaries of about \$55,000 in Chula Vista, one of the southernmost cities in California.

"That to me shows the investment we are willing to make in a professional police force," he said. "It's not just giving a guy a gun and a badge and saying, 'Go out and do a good job.'"

Poor examples at the top

In Mexico, the poor salaries are compounded by the poor examples set by top officials, including law enforcement leaders, analysts say.

A former drug czar, Gen. Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo, was sentenced to more than 70 years in prison in 1997 for working for the late leader of the Juárez cartel, Amado Carrillo Fuentes.

Last year, video images showed Mexico City legislator René Bejarano Martínez of the Party of the Democratic Revolution receiving \$45,000 from businessman Carlos Ahumada Kurtz. The legislator denied the money was for doing favors for Mr. Ahumada. Mr. Bejarano spent eight months in jail.

Raúl Salinas de Gortari, brother of former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari and who was jailed for 10 years on a murder charge before being exonerated, was accused of receiving millions of dollars for influence peddling and stashing the money overseas. He has not been convicted of any crime related to the money.

Some analysts say the 71-year reign of the PRI, the Institutional Revolutionary Party, was largely responsible for creating an atmosphere of impunity and for cementing Mexico's culture of corruption.

"In Mexico, certain interests colluded to maintain power through the PRI," Dr. Shirk said. "There was no accountability to the governed by the government. In the PRI, when your successor was going to be from your own party you could steal with impunity."

When President Vicente Fox of the National Action Party, or PAN, finally ousted the PRI in 2000, some were hopeful that corruption would decline.

In March, Mr. Fox declared that his administration was in a "head-on battle against corruption."

"Together, we work for a Mexico full of justice, legality and democratic opportunities," the president said.

But the latest measurement of corruption by Berlin-based Transparency International found that 50 percent of Mexicans remain pessimistic about corruption and believe it will get worse.

Mexicans' views

The 2005 survey, released Dec. 9, showed that Mexico was one of the top four countries (along with Cameroon, Paraguay and Cambodia), where the largest number of respondents - between 31 percent and 45 percent - answered yes when asked if they or someone in their family had paid any kind of bribe in the last 12 months.

A majority of the Mexicans told pollsters the bribes had been directly solicited by authorities.

"In Mexico, corruption does not have a party," said writer and political commentator Homero Aridjis. "It's the same with the PRI, the PAN and the PRD."

"I grew up with the PRI and looked forward to the end of corruption with a different party in power. But it does not matter. For people like me it's a moral collapse."

This year, Arturo Montiel, who was seeking to become the PRI's presidential candidate in 2006, withdrew from the race after media reports revealed that he owned half a dozen expensive real estate properties, including a \$2.1 million apartment in Paris.

Party officials later said an investigation was not warranted because he could have earned the money during his tenure as governor of the State of Mexico.

But an analysis by the Mexico City newspaper, Reforma, showed that Mr. Montiel could not have earned enough money as governor to pay for the properties.

That's similar to what occurred in the JosÈ LÛpez Portillo administration (1976-82), Mr. Aridjis said. "That was the epitome of corruption. The country almost collapsed under the weight of corruption. They built the Parthenon of corruption with a terrible chief of police, Arturo Durazo Moreno.

"And when they accused him of getting rich from corruption, he said he got the money from his savings."

Dr. Bailey said he does not believe the rule of law is very important in Mexico.

"Socialization about the law is pretty negative," he said. "Learning about the law and the government is pretty negative. The lesson is how to deal with the law pragmatically - how to avoid the law."

Taking responsibility

Analysts said Mexicans cannot look to their elected leaders to change the country's culture of corruption. Civil society must take responsibility, they say. Several maintain that the legal and judicial system must change to make everyone - especially police - accountable.

James Cooper, assistant dean at California Western School of Law in San Diego, is spearheading a program, Proyecto Acceso, to reform judicial systems in Latin America.

He said the program has seen considerable success in Chile and that his team has been encouraged by the reception in Mexico from Mr. Fox's office.

"That's where the change has to take place," he said.

Mr. Chabat, the political analyst, added: "The legal system is very complicated, cumbersome and slow. They say, 'You need a few honorable men.' But we have a structural problem. Even with evidence of say, police corruption, it is difficult to prove. We have impunity. Even if you have a decent attorney general, as we do now, he has limited instruments, few tools to fight corruption.

"We have to change the law and get a more efficient judicial system."

Staff writer Alfredo Corchado contributed to this report.

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