



OPINION

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El Chapo proves Mexico is failing

The solution is to reconnect the government with marginalised communities that provide social base for El Chapo et al.



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10 Jan 2016



Mexican drug lord Joaquin 'El Chapo' Guzman [AP]

The re-recapture of Mexico's dreaded drug kingpin, Joaquin Guzman Loera or El Chapo, after an epic manhunt by security forces is a significant event in the history of countering organised crime. But hauling him back into prison is not in itself a solution to chronic lawlessness and insecurity.

Rather, the fact that it took so long and so many sensational jailbreaks and near-misses before he was yet again pinned down means that he is more a symbol of what is sorely amiss in Mexico's corroded legal and political systems.

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Joaquin 'El Chapo' Guzman seen as Mexican 'folk hero' by some

A man who topped charts as the most-wanted fugitive in the world, El Chapo was no ordinary thug.

His legendary status as the merciless and wily head of the Sinaloa drug cartel, his Robin Hood cult as a billionaire messiah of the poor, and the ease with which he would give chasers a slip made him a parallel authority who mocked at the flawed Mexican state that has struggled under the weight of multiple institutional flaws.

Larger than life

For his faithful, he was the de facto state and the law – a demigod who killed at will, built vast transnational linkages to siphon cocaine, marijuana and heroine, and commanded a private air force, navy and army to spread his empire. Where a smuggler could become so larger-than-life and unstoppable for decades, it exposes misguided policies and relationships involving the formal state structure.

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Now that El Chapo is back behind bars (hopefully for good at least this time), it is worth recalling that he was the byproduct of a proverbial weak state riven by a culture of clientelismo or patronage networks wherein federal and provincial governments were integrated with local warlords to sustain themselves in power.

El Chapo and his ilk ravaged Mexico but they have been paradoxically worshipped by many laypersons...



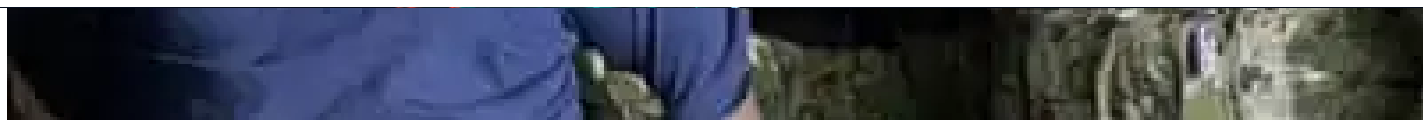
From cabinet ministers to local mayors, judges and lawyers to beat cops, the entire body politic was compromised and conducive for a superhuman criminal to exploit the chinks and ride his way to glory.

The lure of the market for contraband in the United States, the nefarious connections with US banks, and the easy availability of weapons across both sides of

nections with US banks, and the easy availability of weapons across both sides of the US-Mexico border were the perfect backdrops for drug syndicates to flourish and exercise brutal control over millions of Mexican people.

The state and its arms were so enmeshed in graft and nepotism that they abdicated in delivering social services, justice and clean government, allowing the cartels to step in as a substitute. El Chapo and his ilk ravaged Mexico but they have been paradoxically worshipped by many laypersons because they addressed the needs of the poor better than the legal institutions.

There are fascinating parallels between El Chapo and Matteo Messina Denaro, the still-at-large Italian mafia boss who goes by the nickname Diabolik. The chief of the Cosa Nostra gang, Diabolik has operated with impunity across several continents and has the blood of countless victims on his hands.



Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman [AP]

As in the case of Mexico, the mafia is deeply entrenched in the fabric of Italy's dysfunctional state, with connections in the highest corridors of power and a share in every pie from construction and food services to drugs and industry.

The world's number six most-wanted fugitive according to Forbes, Diabolik has evaded arrest endlessly due to criminalisation of the police force and turf battles among politicians.

Like El Chapo, Diabolik is lionised as a hero among his vast multitude of beneficiaries in Sicily even though he openly crowns about committing so much mass murder that "I filled a cemetery all by myself".

The sandalwood bandit

Similar figures have vexed other countries and brought to light the agonising failure of the formal governance and justice systems. In southern India, the notorious sandalwood bandit Veerappan cocked a snook at the law and ran a kingdom of his own spread over 6,000 square kilometres for three decades until he



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The extortion rackets and assassinations he conducted with impunity exposed close ties with top politicians, who shielded him for years in pursuit of their own

ethnic polarisation agendas as well as a share of the illicit profits from smuggling sandal, which has a huge demand in the cosmetics sector.



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Then there is the saga of Naw Kham, alias Godfather, the Myanmar drug smuggler and kidnapper who amassed a fortune and ran a private militia to evade justice in the Golden Triangle region of Southeast Asia.



aid and systematic bribing of security forces in Myanmar, Laos and Thailand.

In the process, he exposed weak states which can be penetrated and patrons within their establishments who are on the take from the drug business.

Since the common thread to all these scofflaws is a defective state, the solution lies in what Vanda Felbab-Brown of the Brookings Institution terms as “multi-

faceted state-building efforts” to reconnect the government with marginalised communities that provide the social base for El Chapo-like folk heroes.

The tagline of a popular Bollywood mob movie, Sarkar, says: “When the system fails, a power will rise.” But the world cannot afford more ruthless and arbitrary power centres like El Chapo. The hard but only way out is to gradually fix the system and improve its integrity and accountability.

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The views expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera’s editorial policy.



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