Corruption in El Salvador: Politicians, Police and Transportistas

By Héctor Silva Ávalos
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This is a shortened version of an investigation by the Salvadoran journalist Hector Silva. The contents are part of a soon to be released book entitled: The Infiltrators: the story of corruption in the police of El Salvador. See InSight Crime's entire series here. http://www.insightcrime.org/tag/El-Salvador-Police-Corruption

Silva is a journalist who worked for 15 years in La Prensa Grafica of El Salvador. Since 2012, he has been a fellow at the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies at American University. For additional information, please contact the author by email: hsilva@american.edu
The Infiltrators: Corruption in El Salvador's Police.

Ricardo Mauricio Menesses Orellana liked horses, and the Pasaquina rodeo was a great opportunity to enjoy a party. He was joined at the event -- which was taking place in the heart of territory controlled by El Salvador’s most powerful drug transport group, the Perrones -- by the town’s mayor, Hector Odir Ramirez, and the infamous drug and people trafficker Jose Natividad Luna Pereira, alias "Chepe Luna." Also present were undercover narcotics agents, who immediately recognized Menesses as the director of El Salvador’s National Civil Police (PNC).

The Special Antinarcotics Group (GEAN) of the Salvadoran police -- an elite unit trained by the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and partly financed by Washington -- had been following Chepe Luna’s trail since at least 2004. In 2005, a GEAN surveillance team tracked the drug trafficker to the Pasaquina rodeo, in the far east of El Salvador.

The rodeo horse procession was led by Menesses, followed by Mayor Ramirez, and then Chepe Luna himself. An undercover antinarcotics agent who participated in the operation said that part of the surveillance team was recognized by Menesses. Moments later, the head of the Antinarcotics Division (DAN) of the PNC, Godofredo Miranda, ordered the undercover agents to withdraw.

Menesses graduated from the Military Academy in 1987. He formally joined the PNC on March 8, 1993[1], nearly a year and two months after leaving the army. On December 12, 2002, his predecessor, Mauricio Sandoval, named him general deputy director. Following Sandoval’s resignation at the end of April 2003, Menesses was appointed director general of the PNC by President Francisco Guillermo Flores Perez.

Previously, Meneses had worked in the Police Intelligence Center (CIP) -- of which he was the first director -- the Financial Division, and the DAN.

According to his superiors, Menesses never stood out for his qualifications or leadership skills. His rise to important posts, said a former director general, was because he was a "controllable" man, and an "absent director.”
In June 2004, Elias Antonio Saca became president, but Meneses kept his post for another year and a half. In the public eye, his mandate was connected with the "Mano Dura" (Iron Fist) and "Super Mano Dura" plans -- anti-gang strategies aimed at putting hundreds of youth connected with the country's "mara" street gangs behind bars. However, from the very beginning, he aroused suspicions among members of Saca's cabinet, officials in the Attorney General’s Office, and even among accredited diplomats in El Salvador. Nonetheless, his close ties with organized crime were unknown until four years later.

In 2005, following various failed attempts to capture Chepe Luna, including the Pasaquina rodeo episode, the activities of Meneses began to attract complaints and private finger-pointing. A cable [2] dated October 15, 2005, sent from the US Embassy to the US State Department, mentions a conversation between the deputy mission chief, the political advisor and Attorney General Belisario Artiga, in which the latter insinuated that Meneses was corrupt and had used his post for personal enrichment.

With the pressure intensifying, President Saca removed Meneses from his post and named Rodrigo Avila director general. However, far from ordering an investigation into Meneses, he sent him into glorified exile in the Salvadoran Embassy in Washington [3].

Nearly four years later, the name of the first police academy graduate to rise to become a PNC director returned to the public spotlight. On July 20, 2009, the Inspector General’s Office opened an investigation into Meneses for his ties with Chepe Luna, based on 2005 reports that he had attended the rodeo alongside the trafficker.

Three months later, the office opened a new investigation, this time for alleged ties with Carlos Alberto Rivas Barahona, alias "Chino Tres Colas," one of the leaders of the Barrio 18 gang, who was later sentenced for extortion and homicide[4]. In February 2010, leaving his post unmanned was added to these charges, for Meneses' failure to attend work after having returned from Washington that past December.

In the end, the PNC’s disciplinary tribunal dismissed Meneses in March 2010 for abandoning his duties, but the other charges against him went nowhere.

Under Ricardo Meneses, the infiltration of drug trafficking and organized crime into the PNC reached even the highest offices in San Salvador.
It was not always like this. In 1993, following the signing of the Peace Accords that ended a 12-year civil war between the guerrilla movement the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) and the Washington-backed government of the Nationalist Republican Alliance party (ARENA), the PNC was a ray of hope.

The Original Sin

The PNC was created under the Peace Accords to take over for the National Police, the Financial Police and the National Guard -- three security bodies closely associated with the armed forces, which the United Nations (UN) Truth Commission singled out as the perpetrators of grave violations of human rights, extrajudicial killings and massacres [5].

The PNC was to be the launch pad for a new culture of peace. Due to its closeness with the people, the role of the new police was considered essential to the process of democratizing the country. The state rested its hopes on the PNC, trusting it would apply the new laws, gain the trust of the civilian population, and, finally, legitimate the state’s right to use force to maintain order and implement legal values during El Salvador’s post-war years, which they worried would be turbulent. If the PNC failed, the UN said at the time, this would threaten the entire peace process in the future.

The PNC did fail, and to this day the Salvadoran process of consolidating peace and democracy remains incomplete and weakened by this failure.

The PNC was able to move beyond the previous status quo: it is now a more professional, less rudimentary, more capable and democratic force, and is better oriented towards the civilian population than its three military predecessors. However, that is not saying much.

This change, moreover, should not be attributed to the Salvadoran political elites on the right or the left, nor to the leadership of the PNC. It was the international community, represented by the UN, the incipient Salvadoran civil society, and even the victims of police abuse themselves, as well as a few visionary police, who stopped the PNC from moving backwards. The good news, however, ends there.
The investigation undertaken in this series -- and in the book "Infiltrators: A Chronicle of Corruption in the PNC," which will be published in San Salvador in the coming weeks -- shows the PNC has failed. It failed in the task of constructing a new culture of legality and in changing the conduct of its officials. It failed in the task of creating effective methods of internal reform. And, with devastating consequences for its mission of pursuing and preventing criminal activity, the PNC failed in the task of training agents capable of investigating and punishing those responsible for breaking the law, without taking into account their political connections, ideologies or socio-economic status. Like its predecessors, the PNC specialized in obstructing justice and guaranteeing impunity for those with sufficient influence or money.

The UN warned time and time again of the risk that the PNC was born contaminated or without effective tools to clean itself up, while certain foreign officials took note of the lack of political will of successive governments to build an independent and professional public force. As they predicted, institutional weakness took its toll. It was through the police that transnational organized crime, above all drug trafficking organizations and money launderers, penetrated the political system and the social fabric of the country.

Ricardo Meneses typified these problems in many ways, beginning with his military origins. He was the first police academy student to rise through the ranks to the head of the institution, but he was also the first PNC director that entered the institution without even having left the army. The Peace Accords stated that army officials that joined the PNC should leave active military duty as part of the process of creating a new police force, removed from the history of corruption, human rights violations and extrajudicial killings that plagued the old security bodies.

On May 12, 1994, President Alfredo Cristiani signed Agreement No. 221[6], which extemporaneously removed 25 officials from the army who had formed part of the old security forces. Among them was Ricardo Meneses. The inclusion of this group in leadership posts in the PNC marked the first major government violation of the spirit of the Peace Accords regarding public security, with the acceptance of high-level army members into the new police. The PNC’s most powerful and most questionable elite emerged from this group.

The group includes the officials who have had the most power since the institution was created, as well as the officials who have been subject to the most serious
journalistic, administrative and judicial accusations. A number of these officials have been investigated for or accused of aiding contraband runners, drug traffickers, gang members and money launderers; of engaging in sexual harassment; of obstructing justice; of torture; of threats; and of attempted homicide. But just one has been put before a judge, in a case related to a death squad dedicated to executing gang members, and he went free. Of the rest, the majority continues to work in the PNC, and a good portion continue to hold powerful posts.

Among the 25 included in Agreement No. 221 there are several that have held high-level posts: a general PNC director, three deputy directors, four heads of DAN, a director of the CIP, a head of the Transnational Anti-Gang Center, three directors of the Criminal Investigations Unit, two heads of Specialized Areas and various advisors of the general directorate.

"In a meeting with the highest leadership of the police and the Security Ministry, I told them: 'You have had power for 20 years, and the good or bad that occurs in the PNC is your responsibility, no one else’s,'" said one member of the Attorney General's Office [7]. His statements were based on a July 2013 meeting in which officials discussed the capture of a drug trafficker and the possible ties that various high-level police officials had with him. The Attorney General, the PNC director, various deputy directors and representatives from the Security Ministry were present at the meeting.

The Inspector General’s Office investigated at least nine of the officials that appeared in Agreement No. 221 for both serious and less serious administrative errors. Six were processed by Inspector Zaira Navas, three by Inspector Raul Melara Granillo, and two by Inspector Nora Centeno de Bell [8]. Menesses was among these officials.

The Ombudsman for the Defense of Human Rights (PDDH) mentioned six of them in reports for violations of the right to life, the right to judicial guarantees, the right to legal due process, the right to effective judicial protection, and the right to truth in various cases. On three occasions -- two [9] of them also recognized by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights -- the PDDH recommended that the Attorney General’s Office and the PNC itself establish administrative and judicial responsibilities. This never occurred.

One person on the list was sued three times for sexual harassment [10] and another time for workplace discrimination in different courts and before the PDDH. The judicial system dismissed the charges in all cases.
Another former soldier was accused by one of the general directors of the institution of procedural fraud. Based on a legislative decree that gave the director special powers to bypass disciplinary processes and administrative sanctions, the director fired this PNC official himself. However, the Supreme Court of Justice reversed nearly all the processes initiated, and the official, like others who had been sanctioned or separated from their posts, was pardoned and given back his position.

One of the few officials who was removed from the PNC, in the same process initiated by Sandoval in 2000, was Douglas Inestroza Ascencio, who was also a member of the group of 25.

A lieutenant from Agreement No. 221 was the only one who had to face a judge when, in 1995, he was accused of forming part of the Black Shadow [11], (Sombra Negra), a death squad that police participated in that was dedicated to executing gang members and members of criminal groups. The official was exonerated a little less than a year after his arrest and since then, has occupied important posts in the PNC.

From the beginning, the PNC was born with its own original sin: the inclusion of former soldiers that worked with criminal groups and preserved a closed power structure that prevented any authority from investigating them for over two decades.

Menesses left of his own accord. And all the officials from that group that was removed from the army in 1994 who were later accused of crimes continue to hold their posts. The majority remain far from criminal prosecution or internal investigations. The sensation of hope that the PNC gave to El Salvador when it was created has fallen far short of its goal.

Footnotes
[6] This is how AGREEMENT No. 221 appears in the government newspaper:

"The executive body of the Branch of National Defense agrees to: TRANSFER from the Active Situation Arms Category to the Reserve Situation in the Same Category the sirs Major ÓSCAR ARMANDO PEÑA DURÁN; Captains ABRAHAM ALBERTO MARÍN LÓPEZ; ÓSCAR OLIVERIO GÓMEZ DUARTE; LUIS ERNESTO NÚÑEZ CÁRCAMO; Lieutenants GODOFREDO ALBERTO MIRANDA MARTÍNEZ; VLADIMIR ALBERTO CÁCERES RIVAS; WILFREDO DE JESÚS AVELENDA ECHEVERRÍA; ÓSCAR ORLANDO CALDERÓN BAIDES; VÍCTOR MANUEL RODRÍGUEZ PERAZA; DOUGLAS OMAR GARCÍA FUNES; JAIME FRANCISCO VIGIL RECINOS; RICARDO MAURICIO MENESSES ORELLANA; WILLIAM LEONEL ORANTES SALAZAR; PEDRO BALTAZAR GONZÁLEZ RODRÍGUEZ; PABLO DE JESÚS ESCOBAR BAÑOS; JORGE ARMANDO FLORES VELASCO; MAURICIO ANTONIO ARRIAZA CHICAS; CÉSAR BALDEMAR FLORES MURILLO; DANIEL DE JESÚS MARTÍNEZ HERNÁNDEZ; DOUGLAS RENÉ INESTROZA ASCENCIO; ALEX ENRIQUE LEMUS RECINOS; ANGEL MIGUEL BARQUERO SILVA; Deputy Lieutenants MAXIMILIANO TORRES JIMÉNEZ; ROMEO ANTONIO MARTÍNEZ MOLINA y MIGUEL ÁNGEL GUERRERO VALLECILOS.

The present move will take effect on this day. COMMUNICATE (Signed by Mr. President of the Republic and General Commander of the Armed Forces). The Vice Minister of National Defense, TEJADA MURCIA.

[8] The officials Luis Ernesto Núñez Cárcamo and Wilfredo de Jesús Avelenda Echeverría were processed on more than one occasion
'Chepe Luna,' the Police and the Art of Escape

As the country debated the validity of imprisoning hundreds of youth linked to gangs in the past decade, along the porous land border with Honduras and coasts of the Gulf of Fonseca, a powerful consortium known as the Perrones that smuggled dairy and undocumented migrants prepared to use their old routes of transfer to move a much more profitable product: cocaine. The group was led by Jose Natividad Luna Pereira, alias "Chepe Luna," and Reynerio Flores Lazo, and reinforced by corrupt police and local judges. Raul, a source who asked not to be identified, and a smuggler who witnessed that transformation, highlighted a common perception: "For someone who understands the contraband trade, anything can happen."

The United States -- which through its antinarcotics, judicial and police attaches was very familiar with the routes used for smuggling, and especially those used for people trafficking and understood that those traffickers are often one and the same -- greeted the new government of Elias Antonio Saca in 2004 with a proposal: take down this Chepe Luna.

As described in police profiles compiled during the administrations of President Francisco Guillermo Flores Perez (1999-2004) and President Elias Antonio Saca (2004 - 2009), Luna was a successful cattle rancher who became involved in moving contraband and smuggling people and drugs. He got his only identification card (DUI) in Santa Rosa de Lima, La Union, in eastern El Salvador, on August 16, 2003. He registered his personal details at 9:59 a.m. and 13 minutes later, he had his identification, number 2936356: Born on February 25, 1970, in the municipality of Pasaquina, La Union, the 5’4” Jose Natividad Luna Pereira is the life partner of Marlenis Sonia Cabrera.

This was no ordinary procedure. To receive his DUI, Luna presented a birth certificate he had obtained four months earlier, on May 6, in the office of the Pasaquina mayor. Municipal employees said he already had Honduran identity; information and documents registered in his name at the mayor’s office did not match those that now exist. The obstacle was not hard to overcome: six days before Chepe Luna’s visit to city hall, Hector Ramirez Odir, an old neighbor of his from Santa Clarita -- a small town where both spent part of their childhoods [1] -- had taken over as mayor, representing the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) party.
At the time Chepe Luna processed those documents, he was already facing charges, had arrest warrants and some judicial procedures against him had been initiated. He had also been identified as one of the most important human traffickers in Central America by the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and a New York court had issued a warrant for his arrest on suspicion of drug trafficking and money laundering.

From Cheese to Cocaine

Records belonging to El Salvador’s National Civil Police (PNC) certify that on March 21, 2002, Luna participated in the assault of two officers who had pursued a vehicle loaded with contraband cheese. He was later arrested for this incident. During the trial, five days later, the Attorney General’s Office added charges of issuing threats, after he shouted at and accosted his accusers. Three years earlier, he had been arrested for smuggling. On both occasions, the cases fell apart due to a lack of evidence, and he walked free unscathed.

Soon, he established himself as the most powerful smuggler in eastern El Salvador, thanks to the territorial control he exercised over the wetlands bordering the Gulf of Fonseca, his access to goods in Nicaragua and Honduras, and most importantly, an extensive network of collaborators he slowly built up within the state, especially in the PNC, but also in the Attorney General’s Office and the judicial system. A 2004 report prepared by the Finance Ministry said:

> The smuggling of all kinds of goods increased because police chiefs began receiving gifts from the powerful structures (...) in late 2003 and the first nine months of 2004; the police favored smugglers to the extent that merchandise owners who paid bribes went untouched.

Chepe Luna’s strategy was the same as that of other smugglers on the continent who ultimately became drug traffickers: territorial control; access and management of a logistics transport network capable of moving goods safely and quickly; and enough money to buy off the authorities and even bring them into the business.

A press release from September 2004 highlights his modus operandi [2]: agents from the Financial Division cleared the route for the cheese smugglers in the blind passage of El Cusuco. Other agents colluded with the smugglers, and an army captain oversaw soldiers who helped unload blocks of cheese. Everything happened just meters from a
house owned by Chepe Luna in Barrancones, on the Gulf of Fonseca, near the shared sea entry by El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua, through which all types of weapons and contraband passed during the Central American wars in the 1980s.

Another police report, drawn up in 2004 by an institutional committee led by the Finance Ministry to combat smuggling, includes testimony from a police intelligence group that talks about the social base the smuggler had built: “Luna coordinates speedboats and has landing docks in the gulf. There is one on Perico Island, at the entrance of the Barrancones channel, in the Goascoran River. Chepe Luna has a property on a small island there, where 25 families work for him. The report says Chepe Luna handled similar communities on the islands of Muruhaca, El Cedro and San Juan, and in the estuaries of La Manzanilla and El Robalon.

The newspaper report also quoted an unidentified PNC source who threw air trafficking into the mix of activities: "There is also an Air Force airstrip near El Tamarindo Beach, where villagers have witnessed night flights." Chepe Luna also had people working for him near the airstrip, the investigation said.

In mid-2004, according to the Finance Ministry’s report, his influence extended far beyond bribes to agents and managers in the province of La Union:

Oscar Aguilar, alias "Cachorro," permitted the growth of these smugglers operating in the East, who later became known as the Perrones. He had direct contact with the large structures, and his underlings, agents and local chiefs, went after the small-time operators and after receiving an immediate payment, they arrested them, quickly let them go and retained their merchandise, which is how the judicial system benefited. Cachorro was the head of the Financial Division.

In 2010, the Inspector General's Office opened a file on Cachorro for his favorable treatment of Chepe Luna. In 2012, he was appointed head of the Police Intelligence Center (CIP), the PNC unit that is supposed to collect and analyze all information related to organized crime.

The Art of Escape

In late 2004, under the DEA's watch, the administration of President Antonio Saca had formed a working group to profile Chepe Luna and prepare an operation to capture him. In addition to a US delegation, the PNC, the Attorney General’s Office, the Security
Ministry and the special investigations unit of the Finance Ministry’s General Internal Revenue Directorate all participated in the group.

"The idea that the US sold us was that we should, as the new government, demonstrate our commitment in the fight against organized crime, which was something that seemed feasible in those early days. And they suggested doing so through complicated operations that involved monitoring crimes such as evasion, or smuggling. That is to say, the investigation was focused on the financial side," one of the ministers who participated in the group said in 2009.

The group decided to begin a relentless pursuit of Chepe Luna. Capturing him would mean demonstrating that the PNC had not been infiltrated, that the Technical Secretariat of the Presidency was really working to control smuggling as part of its fiscal policy, and that El Salvador was serious about the war on drugs. But the mission failed in these goals because the first premise was false: the PNC had for years been infiltrated by smugglers from the east.

The researchers began by gathering intelligence reports and court records, including those open against Chepe Luna in New York. They also called on the National Registry of Natural Persons and the Finance Ministry to develop a complete profile of him. During Semana Santa (a week-long Easter celebration) in 2005, in an international operation that included the assistance of the Nicaraguan police, they made their first attempt to capture Luna.

One of the ministers who knew about the operation had gone to his beach property on Ash Wednesday. In San Salvador, in the eastern region of the country, and in northwest Nicaragua, teams were about to be deployed to implement the plan that he, the PNC, and other senior US officials had planned over and over again during lengthy meetings in the sitting rooms of the ministry, in embassy offices and even at the National Palace. If all went well, the minister would be able to return from his vacation to tell President Saca they had done something exceptional: capture the drug dealer most wanted by the DEA in El Salvador. So, on alert, the minister went to his ranch, ready to rest for a couple of days. He left his cell phone turned on.

From the early hours of that Ash Wednesday, long before the minister set off on his route to the beach, a couple of agents and their Nicaraguan counterparts finished refining the surveillance operation in Nicaragua that, according to the plan, would kick off the hunt. The idea was to make Chepe Luna fall into a trap. Undercover agents had
made an agreement for him to deliver a shipment of cattle and cocaine from the shores of Chinandega, in western Nicaragua, to the Salvadoran side of the Pan-American Highway. Intelligence analyzed in San Salvador, collected by narcotics agents with the help of the DEA, had given them a pretty good idea of the routes used by Chepe Luna: Chinandega, the Gulf of Fonseca, Barrancones or Las Tunas, Pasaquina and Santa Rosa de Lima, the last of which lay along the Pan-American Highway. The operation involved monitoring points in several of these places, including San Miguel, the last point of departure to the capital and Guatemala.

In San Miguel, Rosario and Marcial, [3] two officers involved in the arrest operation, who were not identified by their real names, awaited a signal near the Metrocenter Mall. Sitting in a white Nissan, they pretended to be a loving couple taking advantage of the first day of vacation to exchange kisses in the half-empty parking lot.

Late into the night, the minister continued to await a phone call at the beach.

According to the account later given by the minister, a child left his bike on the pavement near the white Nissan’s driver’s door and knocked on the window a couple of times. Agent Marcial lowered the glass. "If you want, you can leave. The gentleman you are waiting for is not coming," said the boy.

And indeed: the man that Salvadoran, American and Nicaraguan police all awaited would not come. Chepe Luna had escaped.

When the minister’s phone rang finally rang at the beach house, he was told the whole plan had collapsed. The only possibility, thought the minister, was that the group had missed its chance to capture the drug trafficker. From the outset, the minister suspected police officers had been involved. It was not the first time that complicity at the highest levels had destroyed investigations like this. And it would not be the last.

In 2006, a year after that failed operation, the Salvadoran government embarked on a kind of silent cleansing that included the transfer of PNC Director General Ricardo Menesses to the Salvadoran Embassy in Washington, as a police liaison, in a position created ad hoc by the executive.

Three years later, Inspector Zaira Navas would investigate him and four other senior police chiefs for alleged links to Chepe Luna, including Cachorro, who the PNC director in 2008, Francisco Rovira [4], had rescued from ostracism by naming him head of the
Police Intelligence Center (CIP), despite internal reports linking him with the Perrones.

Ultimately, Zaira Navas' investigations were overshadowed by the lack of political support for President Mauricio Funes Cartagena, with attacks coming from the PNC and some right-wing parties.

After the failure of the operation against Chepe Luna in 2004, one of many failures caused by complicity between the capo and police, the minister decided to restrict access to the group at the end of 2005. "I informed the executive of everything. What just happened was very serious. They knew everything. We also shared our suspicions about the PNC," said the minister in 2009. What did President Saca do? Nothing, or very little, said the former official.

Footnotes
[1] Interview with Odir Ramírez, Mayor of Pasaquina, La Unión, La Prensa Grafica.
[2] A team of journalists from El Diario de Hoy attested to the smuggling of milk along a blind passage in La Union.
[3] Pseudonyms are used for two officers who an ex-minister of Saca spoke about as involved in the capture operation.
[4] Francisco Rovira was named as the replacement for Rodrigo Avila on February 5, 2008, and resigned on August 23 of that same year amid accusations of corruption against him and his assistants.
Operation Chameleon: Anatomy of a Failure

The experience with Jose Natividad "Chepe" Luna -- the drug trafficker who had eluded a giant dragnet in 2004 -- had demonstrated the leaks from the National Police of El Salvador (PNC) were continuous and, in general, all the history of the contraband in the west had an extensive element of police and district attorney collusion. With that in mind, the Special Antinarcotics Group (GEAN) decided to send the newest police to the stations of La Union and San Miguel to collect intelligence about the movement of drugs and to begin assembling cases against the transporters. Thus was born Operation Chameleon.

Agent 1, one of the GEAN investigators who participated in Operation Chameleon, explained the origins of the name: "The idea was to change what had been there and adapt to the terrain to be able to function, to really be able to obtain information; it was known that the PNC there worked with the drug traffickers."

From the moment the GEAN arrived in Santa Rosa de Lima and to El Tamarindo, one of the beaches suspected of receiving cocaine shipments, they could see the corruption in the police and the politicians in the area.

Oscar Rene Molina Manzanares, one of the members of Los Perrones, who was convicted in 2010 of money laundering, was one of the most familiar names in the area."He threw the parties in El Tamarindo," Agent 1 said. "For example, I have seen the checks he used to finance local festivals [1] in the Santa Rosa sector of El Tamarindo. There were letters that some mayors sent to this man asking for him to help them do these parties. The guy was loved. He had money and brought musical groups, the expensive groups from Mexico...The parties were courtesy of Mr. Molina Manzanares."

The parties, say the police, not only served to win supporters and buy politicians, but they were also the perfect meeting point for narcotraffickers: "We began to see that expensive cars arrived in the middle of the parties and that [the same] people [we] profiled met in an El Tamarindo hotel to plan things," Agent 1 explained. "This was something that interested the DEA, that we might discover if Mexicans came to these parties."
Hunting Daniel Quezada

While lawyers and investigators were failing to find properties and commercial holdings on the beaches connected to traffickers, a special unit of the GEAN -- between 15 and 20 agents -- began to comb police stations close to the drop off points. The Antinarcotics Division (DAN), the head of San Miguel regional antinarcotics, and Inspector Darwin Serrano Lemus, alias "Makey," were all part of the operation.

One of the first things the GEAN did was to send agents from the DAN's "group of field intelligence" to El Tamarindo. The group's job was to verify if the Hotel Playas Negras, a beachfront location and the property of Daniel Quezada -- another of the leaders of Los Perrones -- was being used to receive cocaine from Nicaragua. In addition to placing three specialized agents in the police station of the area, the GEAN sent other undercover field agents into the area. They posed as motorists, street vendors, or businessmen. They also did inspections of maritime routes and of beaches, houses, and stores on isolated islands and islets in the Gulf of Fonseca [2].

On April 7, 2008, Sergeant Rudis Mauricio Santos Vasquez wrote a report for his boss, the Sub inspector Cabrera Soriano, in which he summarized their actions following almost a year of investigations: "I left here at 14:00 hours for the Gulf of Fonseca with the intention to intercept boats and glean information about firearms, drugs, and other illicit contraband."

That same day, agents under the command of Sergeant Santos Vasquez contacted one of the informants of Operation Chameleon, who told them the story of Pablo Quezada, MS-13 gangster and one of the principal intermediaries for receiving cocaine shipments in El Tamarindo.

The PNC learned later that the profile of Pablo Quezada was very common in the east: a gangster wanted in the United States for serious offenses -- homicide in his case -- who returned to their home country seeking refuge and took advantage of the skills they learned on the east coast of the United States to begin small trafficking or drug dealing operations.

The GEAN informant, who the investigators called "Beto," had this to say about the Pablo Quezada:
He had grown up in Virginia, and about two years ago he and his two brothers were involved in a homicide. One of his brothers is in prison in the United States, and he and the other fled to El Salvador, establishing themselves in El Tamarindo. Six months later, they found out Interpol was looking for them, and they decided to leave for Nicaragua, where they stayed for about six months. There they made contact with people that gave them cocaine to take to El Salvador. They made three trips and unloaded the drugs in front of Hotel Playas Negras.

**Police, Protection, and Leaks**

Beto confirmed in 2008 various pieces of information the PNC had been hearing since 2006 from other informants about drug trafficking on the beaches of La Union and the participation of police who protected these traffickers. Beto also reinforced or confirmed things another informant, a woman, had begun telling the PNC in 2006. The most relevant: the transfer was important, included suppliers in Colombia, traveled by boat and was unloaded into planes in a runway in El Jaguey, in the eastern part of El Salvador, and had police protection from the stations near the runway and in Playas Negras [4].

Beto also confirmed that the agents assigned to the station in El Tamarindo, near the hotel, worked for Daniel Quezada, the brother of the gang member Pablo Quezada.

"This man [Daniel Quezada] presumably has the police of the area on his side and is the one in control there," Beto said.

Beto explained that Quezada was a fisherman in the 1990s who began to acquire properties from 2000 onwards. He then got control of the police. Specifically, Beto said that: "Vehicles of the PNC, and the police facilitated and certainly gave coverage to the disembarkations" at Playas Negras.

In his April 2008 report, Sergeant Santos Vasquez cited another informant who gave more details of the participation of agents in El Tamarindo, but this time not in the Hotel Playas Negras: "The 28 of March, [the witness] saw a boat that was transporting drugs docked in front of the police station on the beach where the police were unloading the packages; they were trafficking drugs." [5].

Agent 1 explained that all the information the field teams gathered between 2007 and 2008 served as the basis for subsequent investigations into Los Perrones and corrupt police. Chameleon, says Agent 1, confronted serious obstacles from the beginning.
mainly concerning PNC leaks, which put at risk the necessary secrecy with which this type of operation typically functions.

The leaks were numerous and came from those who were not part of the plan. In San Miguel [6] and at the beach, some suspected the police had tinkered with the regular rotation. Little by little, according to reports by the GEAN, police outside of the loop in San Miguel began to sound the alarm that in El Tamarindo, the DAN and the GEAN controlled the police station. The reaction of the narcotics was immediate.

"The first incident was at this beach when a large pick-up that belonged to the narcotics pulled up alongside a patrol the narcotics knew was the DAN, that is, they were not the police with whom they had been working. Then they opened fire," says one report on Operation Chameleon.

But leaks also came from the leadership.

"In the reports we were receiving, it was clear in the east that there were heads of investigation, officials moving in the drug traffickers' vehicles, all this had an effect," said Agent 1. "By God, if the information they had was that the same agents were guarding the shipments; the drug traffickers had bought the police."

The doubts of the GEAN -- or at least, of some officials -- grew around Inspector Makey, an official vetted by the DEA and selected to receive an advanced course in investigation with United States instructors in 2007[7]. The rumors connecting this official grew as the operation moved ahead. In one report, the GEAN said they had received tips about the participation of Makey in the sale of cocaine in Santa Rosa de Lima and in the protection of vehicles loaded with drugs. Later the attorney general would bring charges of drug trafficking against a junior employee of Makey named Jose Contreras Mejia, alias "Tanque."

The PNC captured Tanque on April 7 of 2008 after confiscating $23,000 he was trying to take through the border crossing at La Hachadura, in the Ahuachapan province, in the west of El Salvador, to buy three kilos of cocaine in Guatemala [8]. Just over one year later, in May 2009, the attorney general offered a deal: his liberty in exchange for information. Tanque remained a free man.

Makey, mentioned in a journalistic investigation as one of those responsible for the failure of Operation Chameleon, later denied publishing a letter alleging he was the object of political and media persecution. In a meeting with the reporters conducting
the investigation linking him with drug traffickers, Makey issued a warning: "Be careful this doesn’t become a Mexico-like situation; in Mexico the journalists play police, and when the police meddle with the narcos they end up dead." [9]

The Misery of Scant Results

The final assessment of the operation does not provoke heartache among the agents that participated or knew of it. Both Agent 1 and Agent 2, another of the investigators that participated in Chameleon, recognized that it gave them more information about the routes and the drug traffickers in the east than anything they had done prior. Judge Jorge Gonzalez [10], of the Specialized Court of San Miguel, brought charges against both Daniel Quezada and Juan Colorado, who also formed part of the structure of the Perrones, and recognized that the investigation that helped these cases get made was supported, "through the accumulative acts of the investigation... of plan Chameleon deployed by the DAN."

In one of the resolutions he signed against Daniel Quezada, Judge Gonzalez made a special request of the attorney general: in light of the information they established as part of the investigation, he asked the attorney general’s office to continue investigating the links between drug traffickers and the PNC in El Tamarindo, Conchagua, Playas Negras, El Jaguey, Los Ranchos, and other neighboring areas.

Four years later and owing to the judicial plea, Judge Gonzalez confirmed that the Inspector General, under the brief direction of Inspector Zaira Navas, opened administrative records to investigate these accusations. But this archive, as with others referring to drug trafficking, was closed by orders of General David Munguia Payes, then minister of security in the administration of President Mauricio Funes.

While it started some investigations, the operation did nothing to address "jealous institutions" [11] and leaks from the PNC; it also led to the death of an undercover agent: Walter Nahun Ayala Castillo.

Agent Nahun Ayala, who had made a name in the DAN thanks to various arrests of drug dealers and was called in 2008 to work undercover in Operation Chameleon, was shot dead in El Tamarindo. It was a strange death, one of his colleagues said.
"I wouldn't call it revenge, but another form of scaring the staff, to say: it stops here!" this colleague added. "What more of a message could they send to the personnel [that were investigating the people of Daniel Quezada]?

Agent 1 said it was in El Tamarindo during the operation that many began to suspect that police commanders in San Miguel were beginning to act as intermediaries for Daniel Quezada. Agent Nahun Ayala -- who handled informants, some of whom spoke to him about cocaine distribution in that area -- may have found out too much.

One day, an informant provided a tip that a small drug cargo would be departing from Playas Negras. Nahun Ayala told his support team he was going back to Daniel Quezada's territory to find the drugs. No one arrived to help him. There, in the sticky dirt paths that separate the beach from the salted village woods, a group of assassins were waiting for him. "But the team heard nothing, and the team was there. It was premeditated," Agent 1 said. The PNC never opened an internal investigation into the homicide.

Romeo, a collaborator of Reynerio Flores Lazo, one of the leaders of Los Perrones, said that he had heard Daniel Quezada had a clandestine grave in El Tamarindo: "In Santa Rosa, they always said this man, the policeman [Ayala], is buried there."

Footnotes
[1] The patronage festivals, done to honor the patron or patroness of the Catholic saint of the cities and towns, were organized and financed largely by the mayors. In the Salvadoran political tradition these events were very important to collect money and seek votes.
[2] One of the agents that participated in Operation Chameleon facilitated access to a good quantity of the police dispatches and reports that GEAN gathered in the area in 2008. One of the agents that participated in Operation Chameleon facilitated access to a good quantity of the police dispatches and reports that GEAN gathered in the area in 2008.
[3] This runway served the Armed Forces during the war for supply operations and to watch the routes that in the first decade of the 21st century was used by the narcos and in the 1980s by guerrillas to supply arms. See the interview with Jose Luis Tobar Prieto, head of the DAN, El Diario Hoy, June 1997.
[4] GEAN report Ref. 06-SASGGEAN7-06-114-UEDNA7-09, added to the judicial investigation for trafficking of drugs against Daniel Quezada in the Specialized Court of San Miguel.
[5] Testimony of sergeant Rudis Mauricio Santos Vasquez, annexed to open judicial investigation against Daniel Quezada in the Specialized Court of San Miguel.
[6] Although the strategic command and tactics of GEAN and of Operation Chameleon functioned in San Salvador, the special ops and undercover agents supported the regional DAN of San Miguel, normally charged with operations in the western area.
[7] Cable 06SanSalvador851, sent to the embassy informing about personnel of the PNC approved by the DEA and taken to received specialized training.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Interview with the author, August 2012.
How an El Salvador Drug Trafficker Smuggled Cocaine Into the US

The woman phoned the office of the antinarcotics division (DAN) in Bolivar on August 13, 2008, at 1:30 PM. Investigators later established that what she told agent Javier Ramon Aguilar Ordoñez during that phone call was the story of a drug trafficking network led by Juan Maria Medrano, alias "Juan Colorado."

The report that agent Aguilar Ordoñez wrote based on their conversation leaves little to the imagination regarding Colorado.

"He works illegally trafficking drugs and is part of the [criminal] structure known as the Perrones, (...). They are in charge of sending large amounts of cocaine to the United States, and they do so by using people with visas, as well as errand runners who deliver drugs by smuggling them in; on the journey back, they carry the money in small quantities in order to avoid problems at the airport." [1]

San Salvador – New York Route

The report tells the story: a drug trafficker bought cocaine from suppliers in Honduras at $3,000 per kilo and then resold it at $6,500 to associates who, thanks to his contacts with DAN agents at the airport, could guarantee that the packages would fly without problems in commercial airplanes going from San Salvador to New York.

In Queens, a contact received the travelers and the primary operator of the journeys, who later delivered the drugs to two Salvadoran distributors. One of them was a member of the Barrio 18 gang and the other was a Colombian from Freehold, New Jersey. Alex, the gang member, transported the drugs to College Park, a city in Maryland 20 minutes away from downtown Washington DC by car.

A quick calculation based on the numbers that appear in the investigation opened by the Attorney General’s Office provides an idea of the size of Juan Colorado’s trade. The ring, which trafficked an average of 20 kilos per trip, made nine deliveries between June 2007 and January 2008. That is to say, 180 kilos in seven months were put directly on East Coast markets, for three times the original price, according to calculations by the Salvadoran National Civil Police (PNC). Juan Colorado sold a kilo at $6,500, meaning that the 180 kilos trafficked would have added up to a gross profit of almost $1.2 million.
Every trip, then, meant a $130,000 net profit. Out of this money, Juan Colorado paid $5,000 to Romulo Antonio Portillo, alias "Tony Sinaloa," his chief operator; $10,000 to those who facilitated contact with the PNC at the airport; and $1,000 plus $200 in travel expenses to each of the two or three errand runners who carried the drugs on each trip. All in all, around $18,600 went to operating expenses for each journey.

In this operation, there was a spiritual aspect that was important in addition to the money. Two witnesses cited in the police investigations and in the document produced by the Attorney General’s Office said that prior to embarking on a journey to the north, Juan Colorado’s men would always travel to Panchimalco, a municipality in the San Salvador province, to visit a witch who would bring them good luck and ward off evil.

"Gilma Xiomara Vasquez has a black center... There was a room where he was attended to by a woman of around 30 years, mulatto, with a normal complexion, long hair," the witness said.

"She asked him for his date of birth, then asked if anyone had tried to harm him and at the end she told him that he was clean to travel, that he could go without fear, that nothing was going to happen to him," reads the account given by one of Juan Colorado’s errand runners, who later served as a witness in the process opened by the Specialized Court of San Miguel against the drug trafficking group.

Xiomara was not only a spiritual counsellor. She also chose the houses where the drugs were stored, decided the dates of the journeys and even hid money for them by hiding it in her home.

Once he had received the blessing of the spiritualist, Tony Sinaloa followed a routine. First, he collected the drugs from his boss, sometimes from houses in San Miguel, other times in Placitas or in San Jorge, at the foot of the Chaparrastique volcano. With the car loaded -- the drugs in briefcases -- Tony Sinaloa set off along the Litoral Highway to meet up in a gas station with the most important contacts of the journey, the Carlos brothers, Nelson and Tito Castro, [2] of Puerto El Triunfo, Usulutan, a state in the east of the country.

Tony Sinaloa had met the Castro brothers in 2005, when they had offered him free passage through the airport. "When you want to get something through the airport, I can help you; I’ve got a friend who works in the DAN and is of a high rank, who we can contact to facilitate the deliveries," reads the statement made in the case against Juan Colorado’s network.
In 2007, after giving Juan Colorado the contact that would allow him to move through the airport with ease, Tony Sinaloa became his deputy, and was the person who established the gang’s modus operandi.

The drugs would go from San Miguel to the airport, where the Castro brothers would alert their contact in the DAN -- agent Leonel Alexander Granillo Santos -- and the drugs would be loaded on the plane without a problem. In the airports of Newark and JFK in Queens, New York, there were no problems for months. On one occasion they even stopped two travelers in the New Jersey terminal. "They made us pass through the X-rays, but they didn’t detect anything," a witness recounted during judicial proceedings.

Alex, the Barrio 18 gang member, transported the cargo to a warehouse in College Park, Maryland, 398 kilometers from the New Jersey airport, from where it entered the market in Washington’s metropolitan area. The testimonies gathered in Juan Colorado’s trial by the Attorney General’s Office indicate that Alex made his own subcontracts with transporters to move the drugs, and it was precisely some messy contracts between the subcontractors of the subcontractors that began to tear up the business. At the start of 2008, for example, Juan Colorado suspended his deliveries for some time after Alex lost 24 kilos between New Jersey and Maryland.

Captures and Releases

On December 5, 2009, after receiving information from certain members of the ring and from US antinarcotics agents, and following an investigation that had lasted at least half a year, the PNC captured Juan Colorado in one of his favorite places: a majestic race track located between San Miguel and Santa Rosa de Lima. The track was a quarter of a mile long, with stands and a control tower, and the drug baron went there to display his automobile collection at Sunday festivals attended by people from outside the region. The agents found two firearms during the operation, a Magnum Smith & Wesson with 7 cartridges and a 9 mm with a white finish. They also found a bag of cocaine.

The arrest of Juan Colorado was the final episode in a police operation headed by the Attorney General’s Office and US agencies aimed at capturing the main leaders of the Perrones. This was the official version given from the central offices of the PNC. In the end,
Juan Colorado was sentenced to 25 years in prison for trafficking between 180 and 200 kilos of cocaine using a network of errand runners with a "hormiga" ("ant"-like) system. In contrast with other traffickers in the group, such as Reynerio Flores Lazo or Daniel Quezada, Colorado’s product reached the streets of Maryland and New Jersey.

There are still, however, some pieces of the puzzle that do not quite connect. Daniel Quezada was freed by a judge who, in March 2011, determined that there was insufficient proof to prosecute him. Operation Chameleon received its coup de grace that day. The operation had been set up in 2007 by anti-drug agents of the Special Anti-Narcotics Group (GEAN) with the goal of dismantling the Perrones based on the investigations against Daniel Quezada, and led to the discovery of the involvement of at least four members of the PNC in the trafficking of narcotics from Nicaragua. No head of police or medium-ranking official has since faced criminal proceedings, however, let alone jail, for the death of agent Walter Nahun Ayala Castillo nor for the corruption in the coastal police offices.

The drug ring was also found to have links to the Navy, but no military official was prosecuted. Tony Sinaloa was prosecuted for drug trafficking but decided to collaborate with the Attorney General’s Office in 2009 and 2010 by providing information on the gang. He had been accused of organizing the network of collaborators that the gang had in the DAN’s airport branch.

Even with Juan Colorado imprisoned in El Salvador and Tony Sinaloa detained in the United States, the DAN network at the airport continued to operate: in January 2013, the PNC captured nine other agents that were letting drugs pass through, but this has not led to the investigations or accusations, let alone incarceration, of any medium or high ranking official.

Of all the leaders, the worst off was Reynerio Flores Lazo, the head of the Perrones criminal group: the Attorney General’s Office accused him of trafficking 2,400 kilos of cocaine, and a judge sentenced him to 80 years.

By 2010, the Perrones had reassembled, according to reports by the Police Intelligence Center (CIP) and the State Intelligence Service (OIE). Other leaders that were never investigated nor prosecuted, such as Elmer Bonifacio Medrano Escobar, regrouped and began to expand towards Honduras, buying more land on the coast and moving away from their traditional areas of influence [3].
In 2012, both the head of the Armed Forces' Joint Chiefs of Staff [4] and the general director of the PNC [5], admitted that the drug traffickers of the eastern zone were regrouping and that their transport capacity had increased. A year earlier, despite the arrests of drug kingpins in El Salvador, a record number of up to 11 tons of cocaine transited through the country, according to a report by the US State Department. [6].

From Honduras, Romeo, one of Reynerio's collaborators, gives his own version of events: "Everything's still the same. Reynerio and Chele Colorado [Juan Colorado] were locked up because they thought they could be Mexican narcos and started showing off their money."

The following sentence reveals another reason for the arrests, perhaps the most important of them all: "Reynerio had to pay a political price because he stopped paying politicians."

Romeo concludes:

"Already in 2006 they told us that there was a lot of pressure to pursue organized crime. We would pay informants at customs, and they told us that something big was coming. Reynerio put in more drugs and more money, a ton of money. He even began trafficking drugs in Ilopango. The problem is that the government had to show something for it. They [Perrones] all began to show off their cars, and go boasting at country fairs over in the east, with their horses and all that. They found them alright. They looked them up and down and decided: these are the guys."

Footnotes
The Fixer and El Salvador's Missed Opportunity

In the photograph, they are both smiling. In the foreground, on the left hand side, a man in a short-sleeved buttoned white shirt, jeans and a metal watch, holds a bottle of water in his right hand. He laughs heartily. He is Herbert Saca. On the right hand side is a man in a hat, also in a white shirt, but with a blue neckerchief. He is Juan Umaña Samayoa, a candidate for re-election for mayor of Metapan, located in the department of Santa Ana, in the west of El Salvador, for the Party of National Reconciliation. In the background, a red tent and the silhouettes of an apparently large group of people.

Juan Umaña is one of the politicians linked to the Texis Cartel, a structure even bigger and more influential than the Perrones -- the powerful group of dairy and undocumented immigrant smugglers -- according to intelligence sources quoted by El Faro in various articles in which the structure of the organization is revealed.

The photograph in which Umaña and Saca share a smile was taken a few weeks before the former was re-elected mayor of Metapan, a municipality in the Texis Cartel’s zone of influence. Investigations by El Faro reveal that two unionists from the Metapan mayoralty have been assassinated, a municipal councilor captured with five kilos of cocaine and even the mayor himself attacked. "The five cases," say the online newspaper, "have one common denominator: they involve the word 'narcotrafficking.'"

When Herbert Saca took the photo at the end of 2011, his position before President Mauricio Funes Cartagena was already one of privilege. Another journalistic investigation and various testimonies confirm that fact, as do intelligence reports produced by the Intelligence Organism of the State (OIE) from 2009 onwards.

"Herbert began to enter the Presidential House because the inner circle of the president had driven him crazy with the idea that the FMLN (Farabundo Marti Front for National Liberation) was watching him and wanted to fuck with him. The Amigos de Mauricio (Funes) people thought that they could use him as a political operator but they were wrong: Herbert used them to get on the inside."

The person quoted is an ex-official of President Funes, a member of the FMLN, who left government in 2011 after a change in the security ministry.
The Fixer

It is impossible to tell the story of the underworld in El Salvador without mentioning the police and Herbert Ernesto Saca Vides. Saca is, according to those who know him, an affable man. His friends -- many and powerful -- say that he typifies the folksy style that used to mark success in Salvadoran politics. His enemies -- who also include people with power, above all on the right of the political spectrum, represented by the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) -- say that he is one of the darkest political operators of the last two decades.

"He is a very astute man, with a grand capacity for relationships, but also a great figure for darkness," describes another ex-official from the Funes administration, independent of the FMLN, who has known him for the past five years. "He is, without a doubt, an effective operator. Though clearly not for a healthy political operation."

For his relations with the upper echelons of political power; for his capacity to make his influence transcend both the last ARENA administration and the first FMLN administration; for his links forged with organized crime since the beginning of the decade; for being on the radar of the United States since at least 2008; for knowing how to take advantage of and widen the corrupt structures found within the Salvadoran National Police (PNC), Herbert Saca can be considered the most effective operator of political power. He is also responsible for the money from criminal organizations that finances electoral campaigns, according to testimonies collected from drug traffickers and senior ex-officials from three different governments. His life history reflects, better than that of any other political operator, the history of infiltration in El Salvador.

To get an idea of its scope, analysts at the State Intelligence Agency (IEA) gathered around 1,797 calls made or received between February 15 and June 15 of that year for the 7833-7110 and 7180-4034 numbers registered in the name of Herbert Saca. These reports register calls made, which, according to intelligence investigators, the OIE is empowered to do. But no telephone conversations were recorded.

Among others, Saca called PNC inspector Walter Reymundo Lazo Merino, the former head of the Organized Crime Elite Division and a big player within Interpol El Salvador. He also called the wife of Marcos Gregorio Sanchez Trejo (president of the Court of Auditors); a unit of the Legislative Assembly; the mayor of Santa Cruz Analquito, Cuscatlan; the Supreme Court; four cellars assigned to the Supreme Electoral Tribunal; Genaro Ramirez (president of the Association of Salvadoran Bus

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Companies); and a company represented by Irving Pavel Tochez and Nicholas Antonio Salume Babun.

The report also listed four calls to the number 7190-9100, the corporate account assigned to President Funes’ Presidential Residence.

Aside from managing campaigns and political deals, Herbert Saca -- even while he was an advisor to President Elias Antonio Saca Gonzalez and later to Funes -- has had relationships with various people investigated at different moments by the government for drug trafficking and organized crime, and he appears linked to Perrones and the Texis Cartel.

Herbert Saca also shared a lawyer with Reynerio Flores Lazo, one of the principal leaders of Perrones. He was subject to an investigation for selling cars to the other leader of Los Perrones, Jose Natividad "Chepe" Luna Periera. When his cousin Antonio Saca became president, Herbert Saca started to charge various narcos for "protection," but Reynerio refused to pay.

"He had a chance to fix things, but by then he didn’t want to," said a source about Reynerio’s decision not to pay Saca.

The decision was fatal. In 2008, after several failed attempts by the El Salvadoran police to nab several members of the Perrones, the government finally succeeded. This round of investigations ended with accusations against Reynerio, his wife, his brother Hector Armando and Armando's wife. The Flores Lazo's claimed that this was a political vendetta directed by Herbert Saca. Reynerio was sentenced to 60 years.

By that same year, Washington had taken notice of Herbert Saca -- and the entire administration of President Saca.

"A group came from the United States, which initially didn't identify itself as an official investigation, but later it became clear to me that it was, and they began to ask questions about corruption," says a member of ARENA who was an official in the Saca presidency.

Another ex-official confirms that he was called by Washington in 2010 to talk about the president’s cousin, Herbert.

In mid-2013, two officials from Barack Obama’s administration, from two different agencies that analyze law and politics in El Salvador, confirmed that the United States
had open investigations into Herbert Saca. That, they both explained, did not mean that Washington was considering taking action against him, but neither did it mean it was not.

Herbert Saca’s rise coincides with that of 25 ex-military officials within the PNC -- the moment at which the cancer of corruption began to spread through the PNC. Organized crime, above all in the east, reaped the first fruits of its investment in agents and officials that had passed through the national anti-drug trafficking body (DAN), the Financial Division, the eastern division and the border division. The influence ceased to limit itself to just the relationships formed by bribes in local brothels and police stations. These friends were now fully in bed with the powerful, such as the central headquarters of the PNC in San Salvador. But it wasn't until the period of Saca’s presidency (2004 - 2009) and the arrival of his brother Herbert to the circles of power, always with the PNC director Ricardo Menesses in front, that the infiltration became institutionalized.

By 2004, organized crime's penetration of the state through the PNC had brought the mafia into politics through three mechanisms: one, the financing of political campaigns, first at local level and later at a national level, such as the presidential elections in 2009; two, the payment of bribes to political operators to guarantee the free operation of criminal networks and the passage and protection of their merchandise; and three, the prior warning by moles within the PNC of operations aimed at capturing gang members. And from then on the cancer was there for life.

**Missed Opportunity**

"The problem with the PNC is that the commissioners spend more time seeing how to fuck one another over than really getting anything done... At this stage it could be that the only solution is to get rid of those promoted early on and look for new leaders," says a US federal agent in a San Salvador cafe. His words are still a surprise, as Washington has been one of the principal allies of the PNC; one of its main financers. Its primary supporter.

But 2012 and 2013 were not good years for the relationship between Washington and the PNC. The truce between the MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs marked a distancing between state security forces and the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).
In 2013, US Senator Patrick Leahy had harsh words for the current Salvadoran president, Mauricio Funes, about corruption within the police, the lack of transparency and inaction of the government against money laundering and organized crime. Dissatisfied with Funes’ actions in the area of security, which had allowed officials accused of corruption to gain power with the PNC, Leahy was at the point of freezing a multi-million dollar US/El Salvador cooperation program known as Fomilenio II. In the end, the senator did not stop the aid, but he made it clear that the final package would depend in part on the cleaning up of the police.

At the heart of Leahy’s complaints about the PNC were the oft-repeated questions about the failures of the state to go after organized crime, about corruption within the PNC, about the lack of institutionalization and about the presence of suspect officials in public office.

"Although El Salvador shows some signs of progress … it remains a country with weak democratic institutions, in which the independent judiciary has been attacked, corruption has increased and transnational criminal organizations and money laundering have flourished," the senator said in Vermont during a Senate plenary on September 18, 2013. He continued: "In the last few years I have seen how Salvadoreans are victims of violence, of a corrupt police, of individuals in security positions who worry more about getting rich than improving conditions for their people."

Senator Patrick Leahy’s words about the PNC very much resembled those 20 years before by officials from the United Nations who were supervising a territorial deployment following the signing of peace accords and who spoke, frustrated, about the lack of controls and transparency in the new police institution.

Awaiting the new El Salvador government, which will take office in June this year, after the second voting round which will take place on March 9, discreet voices among US and El Salvador officials are starting to sound alarm bells: "At this stage it could be that the only solution is to get rid of those promoted early on and look for new leaders," said a US federal agent in mid-2013.

Those first promotions, those which have dominated the PNC since the days of the first transgressions -- which allowed officials, values and a culture of impunity to flow unchecked -- have retained power for 20 years. Those first promotions have ruled
over two decades marked in general by investigative failures, the absence of internal controls and the consolidation of organized crime.

Yes, there were exceptional periods marked by the bravery of officials and agents who took advantage of the few loopholes that existed to try to stop the institutional inaction, complicity and neglect. It was during these exceptions that there were various attempts at purging, behind closed doors or openly. It was then when some officials, during the years of Armando Calderon Sol's presidency (1994-1999), dared to accuse political elites of involvement in organized crime. But all these gestures of integrity and ethics were, however, isolated acts and exceptions -- not a sustained trend capable of stopping the infiltration of organized crime which today still infects the PNC.

**Footnotes**


[3] Between September 2012 and August 2013, the interviewer spoke to two former officials from the Saca administration and half a dozen politicians of the administration of President Funes to expand on the relationship with Herbert Saca. They and two U.S. officials, off the record, confirmed the closeness.

[4] To develop the profile of Herbert Saca, the author undertook interviews with officials from the administrations of Presidents Flores, Saca and Funes. He also spoke with members and former members of The Perrones that established working relationships with him and have shared that information with U.S. agents. Information was also corroborated by two dozen law enforcement officials in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and the United States.

[5] The author spoke with this official, a member of a law enforcement agency, in a cafe in San Salvador. The author also talked about the PNC with another U.S. official, a diplomat, in a coffee shop in Washington. They had no trouble in making its assessment of the PNC, the force with which the United States has collaborated most in Central America, but they did so on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to publicly discuss their country's position regarding Salvadoran domestic policy.