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**I KEPT MY EYES
OPEN FOR
127 HOURS**

December 14, 2010

Politics Enables Mexican Fugitive to Defang a Law

By **RANDAL C. ARCHIBOLD**

MEXICO CITY — Despite being a federal fugitive, accused of laundering millions of dollars for one of Mexico's most ruthless drug cartels, Julio César Godoy says he simply walked into the national legislature here unnoticed in September, right past the cordon of federal police officers watching the building.

He then raised his right arm, swore allegiance to the Mexican Constitution and, 15 months after disappearing from public view, finally claimed the congressional seat he won last year.

It was too late for prosecutors to do much about it. Mr. Godoy's newly conferred status came with a special perk: immunity from prosecution.

Now, a political saga that underscores the persistent fears of political infiltration by drug cartels and the many frustrations of rooting it out continues to swirl around him.

Mexico's attorney general has been incensed at Mr. Godoy's ability to hide in plain sight, while others debate intriguing details in local news reports, like accounts that Mr. Godoy had actually been spirited into the building's basement garage in another lawmaker's car.

"It undermined the seriousness of the Chamber of Deputies and the rule of law that he could just show up and take the oath," said John J. Bailey, a [Georgetown University](#) professor who studies organized crime and democracy in Mexico. "The natural reaction was, 'What is going on here?'"

On Tuesday night, the chamber, Mexico's lower house of Congress, voted overwhelmingly to strip Mr. Godoy of his immunity and legislative duties, a development that could lead to his eventual arrest and trial — if he can be found.

Mr. Godoy has professed his innocence, calling the charges a political vendetta against him by President [Felipe Calderón](#)'s governing party. But he was not at Tuesday's session. His lawyer attended the session in his place, leaving Mr. Godoy's own whereabouts unclear.

That mystery has only added to an affair that for lawmakers and analysts has stood out for its sheer brazenness and fed a political firestorm that has lasted months.

It is certainly not unusual for political and government figures here to be implicated in organized crime. Dozens of mayors suspected of ties to criminal networks have been arrested or killed in recent years, and even the country's former senior antidrug official [was arrested](#) and accused of taking bribes from a cartel.

Federal prosecutors contend that Mr. Godoy is an important associate of the top leaders of La Familia, a cultlike drug organization that is among the most violent in Mexico. A legislative panel on Monday said it found that Mr. Godoy had, among other things, not explained the origins of \$2.2 million deposited in his bank accounts or calls from his cellphone to known leaders of the gang.

A memo from federal prosecutors to lawmakers said Mr. Godoy had been among a group of local mayors, police officers and other officials in the state of Michoacán serving as paid informers for the cartel. Mr. Godoy is the half brother of the state's governor, Leonel Godoy, who has said he was unaware of any illicit activity his brother may have engaged in.

In a twist to a case with many of them, Julio César Godoy was supposedly caught on tape discussing cartel affairs with Servando Gómez, a top cartel leader known as La Tuta, who emerged last week in a drama of his own. It was discovered that Mr. Gómez had been collecting a salary for the past 15 years from the Education Ministry, from a previous job as a schoolteacher.

A former mayor, Mr. Godoy was elected to the legislature in 2009, but he disappeared from public only days later after federal charges were filed against him accusing him of ties to organized crime and money laundering. The federal government considered him a fugitive.

How Mr. Godoy eluded the police for so long remains a mystery.

When he surfaced, he no longer had a mustache, and news reports said his hair was noticeably grayer. Mr. Godoy said he was at his home the whole time.

But his supporters worked to get him into his legislative seat and attain the immunity that comes with it. Mexican law provides legislators freedom from prosecution as a check against political persecution by the executive branch.

Some experts have noted that the broader investigation in Michoacán initially swept up more than 30 mayors and other local officials, mostly members of Mr. Godoy's party, which Mr. Calderón narrowly beat in 2006 to win the presidency. Michoacán is Mr. Calderón's home state, and he has focused federal forces on it to break up organized crime.

But most of the people initially arrested have been released for lack of evidence or other problems with the case, said John M. Ackerman, editor of the Mexican Law Review. "Instead of collecting evidence they acted way too quickly, right around the 2009 elections," Mr. Ackerman said.

While Francisco Blake Mora, the interior secretary, has insisted that the evidence against Mr. Godoy is solid, a judge last summer issued a ruling that Mr. Godoy had the right to take his seat despite the pending charges — though the ruling said nothing about how he would get into the legislative building without being arrested first.

The government had posted police officers around the building to prevent him from doing just that.

Still, Mr. Godoy arrived at the legislative building in the heart of the capital on Sept. 23 — driven in by a leader of his leftist Democratic Revolutionary Party, according to the Mexico City newspaper El Universal — and was sworn in, to the shock and dismay of the authorities.

Afterward, he walked out free, saying later, "I am no little angel, but neither am I a criminal."

Since then, he has been swarmed by reporters, instead of police officers, at nearly all his public appearances.

One of the more intriguing tidbits came in October, when audio tapes were leaked to news organizations with a voice that sounded like Mr. Godoy's chatting with Mr. Gómez, the cartel leader from La Familia. Mr. Godoy said the voice was not his.

La Familia, which blends its own form of Christian teachings with methamphetamine trafficking and the beheadings of rivals, is now also the focus of an assault by federal forces aimed at dismantling it.

The spiritual leader of the group, Nazario Moreno González, was believed to have been killed last week in a confrontation with the federal police, the government said.

Antonio Betancourt contributed reporting.

