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The government's decision to seize control of the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM) from a group of dissident students could have repercussions on the presidential and Mexico City mayoral campaigns this year. The students took over Mexico's largest university in April 1999 to protest the UNAM administration's decision to begin charging a modest tuition to compensate for increasing costs and reduced government subsidies to the university (see SourceMex, June 2, 1999). Moderate factions among the student strikers readily accepted compromises from the university administration, including an offer by former rector Francisco Barnes de Castro to make the tuition increases voluntary (see SourceMex, August 25, 1999). But the compromises failed to mollify the more radical student factions, who demanded greater concessions. The radical factions, known as the ultras, refused to relinquish control of the UNAM campus and forced authorities to cancel classes for several months. In January of this year, new rector Juan Ramon de la Fuente decided to seek an end to the student strike by conducting a referendum among UNAM students, faculty, and staff. Participants overwhelmingly accepted de la Fuente's proposal to suspend tuition increases indefinitely and organize an all-inclusive forum at the UNAM to draft university reforms (see SourceMex, January 16, 2000). The ultras refused to accept the results of the referendum and instead continued to push for deeper reforms. The refusal of the radical groups to give in led authorities to take drastic action. In early January, authorities sent in unarmed federal police officers (Policia Federal Preventiva, PFP) to retake the UNAM campus. The PFP arrested more than 600 students, many of whom were eventually released. But authorities decided to prosecute 52 student leaders on charges ranging from sabotage and destruction of property to terrorism. Analysts said the decision by authorities to move in to end the strike could have serious implications for the campaigns leading to the July 2 elections. The government's action received strong public support. Public-opinion polls showed general approval of the government's decision to resume control of the UNAM. In one poll conducted by the daily newspaper Reforma among Mexico City residents, 61% of respondents said they backed the government's actions. "Most people were fed up," political scientist Jose Antonio Crespo told the Los Angeles Times. "The legitimacy that the student movement had at the beginning...went over to the university rector's side."

Government accused of human-rights violations

The administration made a great effort to prevent a repeat of the 1968 student massacre at Tlatelolco. The PFP forces who retook control of the university were accompanied by notaries and federal human-rights officials. "I think that 1968 scarred a generation of Mexicans, without a doubt," said Interior Secretary Diodoro Carrasco. "No one wants a repeat of that." But some political analysts said the administration could end up losing public support, especially if strike leaders remain imprisoned for an extended period. Some human rights organizations have already taken the government to task for the treatment of imprisoned strikers. The Mexico City-based Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustin Pro (Prodh) said some arrested students have been subjected to abuse, including torture and sexual harassment. "The mass arrests, indiscriminate accusations, and
collective punishments reinforce the illegal and political nature of the authorities' actions," Prodh said. Political columnist Roberto Mena of the daily newspapers The News and Novedades said the administration also failed to convince many critics that retaking the university was not a political move to enhance the chances of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) candidates. "The fact that a district judge ruled the walkout against the law, ordering federal police to recover UNAM installations, only makes the administration look truly bad," said Mena. Mena said the move only proved that the executive branch still has undue influence on decisions of the judicial branch. "It seems evident that the rule of law, President Zedillo's pet concept, is still subject to the discretion of government officials rather than something that's applied evenly and equitably to all," said Mena. Many respondents to the Reforma poll also said they were concerned that the government action had violated statutes that guarantee autonomy for the UNAM. Many respondents who applauded the government's decision to retake the campus also said they opposed any further involvement by law-enforcement personnel in the university. While the ultras generated only meager public support, they managed to use the strike as a forum to denounce the neoliberal policies of the administration of President Zedillo and his predecessors Carlos Salinas de Gortari and Miguel de la Madrid. The ultras said the tuition increases that UNAM had proposed were consistent with directives from the World Bank and other multilateral institutions to reduce government spending. Furthermore, they said, the tuition increases would prevent the poorest members of society from obtaining a university education. The ultras gained sympathy from labor groups and student groups at other universities throughout Mexico. On Feb. 9, more than 20,000 demonstrators marched down one of Mexico City's busiest avenues to demand the release of the students who had been arrested. The marchers included several thousand members and sympathizers of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), including mayoral candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. The PRD candidate told reporters that the government's decision to remove the strikers from campus was a ploy by the PRI to remove the issues presented by the ultras from the campaign to boost its candidates for president of Mexico and mayor of Mexico City. Some PRI officials had privately expressed concerns that prolonging the strike would portray an image of a weak federal government and damage the chances of the party's presidential candidate Francisco Labastida Ochoa and to a smaller extent its mayoral candidate Jesus Silva Herzog in the July election.

UNAM becomes issue in tight Mexico City mayoral race

The opposition candidates also questioned the timing of the government's actions. "The federal government wants to take votes away from us," said Lopez Obrador. "They are trying to control our country's political, social, and electoral climate." PRI mayoral candidate Silva Herzog turned the tables on the PRD, criticizing Mexico City's PRD Mayor Rosario Robles for distancing herself from the federal government's decision to retake the UNAM. In a televised speech, Robles had denounced the government takeover of the UNAM, saying her administration had no role in the decision. "This is definitely a matter where her office should have direct responsibility, since it affects the lives of millions of residents of the capital," said Silva Herzog. The PRI mayoral candidate said the action was justified because many of those involved in the strike were not actually students, but members of outside organizations. The heated exchanges between Silva Herzog on one side and Lopez Obrador and Robles on the other indicate the competitiveness in the Mexico City mayoral race. One public-opinion poll published by the daily newspaper La Jornada showed Silva Herzog and Lopez Obrador tied with each having 25% support. The poll, conducted by Mund Opinion Services, showed candidate Santiago Creel Miranda of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional
(PAN) running a distant third with only 11% support. Creel supported the UNAM takeover but also called for a continuation of dialogue between the strikers and university authorities. The Mund poll was in stark contrast to another public-opinion survey published by Reforma in late January. It showed Creel Miranda and Silva Herzog tied with 27% support each, and Lopez Obrador running a close third with 22%. The UNAM strike has also become the subject of speeches by the major presidential candidates. PRI candidate Labastida regretted that the student strikers and university authorities could not resolve their differences through negotiations. "When dialogue fails to yield results, we have no other alternative but to apply the law," said Labastida. Cuauhtemoc Cardenas Solorzano of the PRD and Manuel Camacho Solis of the Partido del Centro Democratico (PCD) both denounced the takeover. They said the Zedillo administration was responsible for the conflict for proposing the tuition increases in the first place. PAN candidate Vicente Fox Quesada supported the police takeover, but also called for an investigation of whether the PRI had any role in delaying a solution to the conflict. "The federal government has to clarify whether it intends to resolve the problems at the university or use the takeover as a ploy to boost the PRI candidate," said Fox. (Sources: Agence France-Press, 02/06/00; The Washington Post, Copley News Service, El Economista, Notimex, San Antonio Express- News, 02/07/00; The Christian Science Monitor, San Diego Union-Tribune, 02/08/00; The Dallas Morning News, 02/06-09/00; The New York Times, 02/07/00, 02/09/00, 02/10/00; Associated Press, 02/06/00, 02/07-09/00, 02/13/00; Novedades, 02/07-11/00; Reuters, 02/06/00, 02/08/00, 02/12/00, 02/15/00; Excelsior, 02/07-10/00, 02/15/00; Los Angeles Times, 02/07/00, 02/15/00; Reforma, 01/31/00, 02/07-11/00, 02/14-16/00; The News, 02/07/00, 02/08/00, 02/10/00, 02/11/00, 02/14/00, 02/16/00; El Universal, 02/07-11/00, 02/15/00, 02/16/00; La Jornada, 02/07-11/00, 02/14/00, 02/16/00)

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