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University Students Organize Massive Protests against Presidential Candidate Enrique Peña Nieto and PRI

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University students are becoming an increasingly vocal voting bloc ahead of the July presidential election, with numerous rallies around the country demanding fairness in coverage of the candidates and warning against a return to power for the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), its candidate Enrique Peña Nieto, and powerful allies like teachers union president Elba Esther Gordillo. Students made their displeasure known during an appearance by Peña Nieto at the Universidad Iberoamericana, also known as the Ibero, in Mexico City and through various demonstrations in the Mexican capital and elsewhere. Groups from a handful of universities in Mexico City, Guadalajara, and other major cities also organized a demonstration on May 23, with much of the communication and coordination occurring via social media.

While the protests appear directed at Peña Nieto, students from the Ibero, the Universidad Anáhuac, the Tecnológico de Monterrey (ITAM), the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), and the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM) said their complaint is just as strong against the giant conglomerates like Grupo Televisa and Grupo Azteca, which control the television broadcast media. One group of ITAM students held their protest just outside one of Televisa's studios in Mexico City. The students hung banners and signs on the doors of the studio with messages that read, "I won't sell my vote, I am well-informed."

In Guadalajara, the protests are led by the Federación de Estudiantes Universitarios (FEU), which includes students from the Universidad de Guadalajara and the Universidad Autónoma de Guadalajara.

The students set a goal to organize a nationwide protest of all university students in Mexico on May 23. "In less than two weeks, the collective of student organizations has brought demonstrations to the streets and shed a light on the role of the corporate media in inhibiting democracy in the campaigns," said the Spanish news service EFE.

Students use social media to organize

Much of the organizing has occurred through social media, especially Twitter and Facebook. "With the hashtag #MarchaYosoy132, the news of the mobilization that some 800 students are organizing on Twitter has literally traveled around the world," wrote the Mexico City daily newspaper *La Jornada*.

"Peña Nieto is the candidate who has the most contempt on social networks," said nationally syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento.

While students have been working behind the scenes to flex their political muscle, the issue came to the forefront during Peña Nieto's appearance at the Ibero on May 11. The PRI candidate's speech contained information that most students would want to hear, including promises of increased opportunities for education and an improvement in the quality of courses offered at all levels of

study. "The education of new generations should be the main tool to combat corruption," said Peña Nieto.

While many students applauded the PRI candidate, there were plenty of jeers from the audience, some even demanding that Peña Nieto leave the premises.

But some observers said the verbal attacks on Peña Nieto, who is also representing the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM) in the July 1 election, were not spontaneous. "The hostilities were deliberate," said Sarmiento. "Even before the presentation, several groups agreed through social networks to make it impossible for the candidate to make his presentation."

Others came to a similar conclusion about the protests against the PRI candidate, who is often known by his initials EPN in media coverage. "A large number of the students at the Universidad Iberoamericana were aware many days before the visit of the existence of the 'Plan to Welcome EPN,' including information about objectives, goals, actions, and points to accomplish," columnist Ricardo Alemán wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper *Excélsior*.

But even if the protests were planned, others noted that the participants had a clear message and obvious motivations. Guadalupe Loeza, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper *Reforma*, pointed out that the organizers had little trouble recruiting students from several universities to join their cause. She said the student protestors were angry about corruption in government and the way the PRI has conducted its affairs while leading a state government or the federal government. "These are middle-class youth who are tired of everything that the PRI candidate represents," said Loeza.

For example, Loeza noted that some protestors were angry that Peña Nieto escaped blame for the deadly protests in the community of Atenco in 2006, even though as governor he ordered a crackdown on rioters ([SourceMex, May 17, 2006](#)). She also pointed to Peña Nieto's close relationships with former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1992) and the family of México state ex-governor and Cabinet secretary Carlos Hank González. Salinas de Gortari and Hank González are among the most despised politicians in Mexico.

Student protestors have also tied Peña Nieto to former PRI president Humberto Moreira, who left a huge debt in the state of Coahuila after he resigned as governor to take over the reins of the PRI ([SourceMex, Dec. 7, 2011](#)).

Gabriel Quadri, Josefina Vázquez Mota smaller targets

The intensity of the protests, which left no room for dialogue, made administrators at the Ibero a little uneasy, especially comments made to Peña Nieto as he left the building where he gave his speech. "The Ibero has always encouraged its students to openly express their ideas in a climate of freedom and tolerance," said university rector José Morales Orozco. "Because of this, we do not share the expressions that surpassed the limits of respect by some students when Mr. Peña Nieto was leaving the university."

The disdain for the PRI has also affected the campaign of Gabriel Quadri of the Partido Nueva (PANAL), a party founded by Gordillo, a leader of the teachers union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación, SNTE). Gordillo is a powerful and enigmatic political figure, who has long been associated with the PRI's corrupt practices ([SourceMex, Dec. 3, 2003](#)), although she also

reached out to former President Vicente Fox (2000-2006), a member of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN).

Quadri, who managed to portray himself as an independent and thoughtful candidate during the first presidential debate on May 6 ([SourceMex, May 9, 2012](#)), was unable to shake his party's connections to Gordillo during an appearance at the Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro (UAQ). Students at the university interrupted his speech, accusing him of being "Esther's puppet."

While students have centered their criticisms on the PRI and on Peña Nieto, protests against the governing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) and its candidate Josefina Vázquez Mota have been more low-key. Students at the Ibero had planned a small protest against Vázquez Mota during a scheduled appearance at the university. As part of the protest, students planned to wear T-shirts poking fun at the PAN candidate, who is a graduate of the Ibero, but she cancelled her appearance to avoid conflicts.

There were no protests against Vázquez Mota when she spoke at the private Universidad de La Salle in Mexico City. "But the uncomfortable questions were not absent, and she was unable to provide answers without someone disputing her responses," Luis Miguel Rionda, a professor at the Universidad de Guanajuato, wrote in Milenio.com.

López Obrador benefits, but how much?

The candidate who seemingly would benefit from the trend is Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who is representing a coalition of center-left parties. The candidate has been well-received during speeches on campus, and his complaints about a lack of democracy in the media coverage of the elections resonated well with the students. López Obrador has complained that media moguls like Emilio Azcárraga of Grupo Televisa and Ricardo Salinas Pliego of Grupo Azteca are sympathetic to the PRI, and their coverage reflects these preferences ([SourceMex, May 9, 2012](#)).

López Obrador has acknowledged and thanked the student organizations for their support, but some campaign officials who are working on promoting the youth vote have tried to distance themselves from the strong attacks. "We are inviting people to attend a march in support of López Obrador," said campaign official Ulises García Soto. "We want to make it clear that we are not promoting a negative campaign against any of the candidates and that we are merely supporting López Obrador."

The demonstrations have likely consolidated support for the center-left candidate, who has surpassed Vázquez Mota in voter preference in some polls but remains far behind Peña Nieto. A survey released by respected pollster María de las Heras in mid-May had Peña Nieto still ahead with 39% of voter preference, compared with 31% for López Obrador, 26% for Vázquez Mota, and 2% for Quadri. López Obrador's support was only up about two percentage points from the most recent poll released by De las Heras.

Another poll by Con Estadística and Radio Fórmula in mid-May found a decline in voter support for Peña Nieto to 36%, compared with 42% in an earlier poll by the same organization. But López Obrador ranked third in voter preference, with 21%, up four points from the previous poll, while Vázquez Mota was up two points at 23%.

The protests have given López Obrador more visibility, but analysts note that this might not be sufficient for him to catch the PRI front-runner. "López Obrador is advancing, but not enough, considering that his goal is to catch up with Peña Nieto and not just Josefina Vázquez Mota," said Sarmiento.

Others agreed. "The protestors have not been able to capture the entire anti-PRI vote because the anti-PRI sentiment is divided," José Antonio Crespo, an analyst at the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE), said in an interview on Radio Fórmula. He noted that many who oppose the PRI's return to power are PAN sympathizers who would not likely vote for López Obrador.

And there is some question whether the university students represent the sentiments of all young voters. Observers acknowledge that a large share of the voters under 30 are disenchanted, but many might choose not to participate in the election. "On paper at least, these 24 million voters under 30—nearly a third of the electorate—could be a powerful voice for change," said the Los Angeles Times. "But many have come to view the democratic transition as so much blah-blah-blah in the face of a system that remains deeply marred by corruption and filled with politicians who are as self-interested as ever."

"This is not a question of a generation that wants to disconnect itself," Manuel Alejandro Guerrero, a communications professor at the Ibero, told the Los Angeles Times. "No, it's a generation that wants to participate but isn't finding the issues in the candidates' discourse or the proper mechanisms to make this connection."

Peña Nieto promises democratic presidency

Even if the PRI and Peña Nieto win, which appears likely, the students have put the party on notice that they won't tolerate the party's corrupt and authoritarian policies of the past. "The protests that occurred over the weekend offer ample evidence that our country has changed," columnist Leo Zuckermann wrote in *Excelsior* on May 21. "Please tell me, do you think these students will allow us to return to an authoritarian regime? Furthermore, are we who support a broad democracy going to allow it? I don't think so."

The student protests did succeed in putting Peña Nieto on the defensive and forcing him to address some of the issues that they raised. The PRI candidate prepared a manifesto presented to a group of politicians, business leaders, and academics, in which he spelled out a commitment to a democratic presidency. Among other things, he pledged to respect freedom of expression and the freedom to protest, to protect human rights and religious freedom, to oppose all discrimination, and to ensure transparency in all activities of his administration. The PRI candidate also pledged to respect the electoral process, keep the presidency out of state and local elections, and respect the boundaries among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.

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