President Enrique Peña Nieto Starts New Administration by Signing Political Agreement with Opposition Parties

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The election of Enrique Peña Nieto marked the return of the long-governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) to the highest office in Mexico, but the jury is still out on whether the old authoritarian party is back in office or whether a transformed party will be governing Mexico for the next six years.

Shortly before and after taking office on Dec. 1, 2012, Peña Nieto took steps to try to convince Mexicans that this is a new era for the PRI and that his administration would be politically inclusive and employ a more efficient style of governance. One of the new president's first moves was to bring together representatives from his party and the two major opposition parties—the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) and the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN)—to hammer out an agreement to promote reforms to strengthen democracy, address social inequalities, and foment economic growth in Mexico.

The accord was negotiated by veteran legislators Santiago Creel and Francisco Molinar of the PAN, Jesús Ortega and Carlos Navarrete of the PRD, and José Murat for the PRI. The administration was represented by newly appointed Finance Secretary Luis Videgaray and Chief of Staff Aurelio Nuño.

"This agreement is important because it signals the willingness of all the parties to find areas of agreement without surrendering their political agendas, and to put them in writing," Peña Nieto said at a signing ceremony attended by party presidents Cristina Díaz of the PRI, Gustavo Madero of the PAN, and Jesús Zambrano of the PRD. "This agreement will give Mexico stability, certainty, and direction.

Center-left PRD divided on accord
But the PRD signed the accord without the full agreement of the rank and file in Congress. Some center-left legislators, including Sen. Dolores Padierna and Deputy Gisela Mota Ocampo, complained that they were not consulted by the leadership, especially Zambrano. "It is not right for the party's national president to make a unilateral decision," said Mota Ocampo. "He is not the only one in the party, and he has to respond to the national committee. This agreement has not been endorsed by us."

PRD secretary-general Alejandro Sánchez Camacho said the PRD does not oppose dialogue among the parties that would lead to a national agreement. He noted that the party would be amenable to an accord that leaves certain issues in fiscal-reform and energy-reform negotiations off the table. In particular, the PRD opposes any move to impose a value-added tax (impuesto al valor agregado, IVA) on food and medicines and any energy reform that could be construed as privatization of the state-run oil company PEMEX.

Some political analysts gave Peña Nieto credit for using the agreement to establish the framework for the parties to negotiate on important issues. "I think this is a very positive move," said Julio
Labastida, a social sciences researcher at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. "The question for all of us is whether this rhetoric translates into facts."

While there seem to be some pockets of discontent in the PRD, the participation of Navarrete and Ortega in the negotiations and the endorsement of key legislative leaders like Sen. Silvano Aureoles appears to give Peña Nieto some cover with the PRD. The same is not true with the Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena), a movement led by center-left candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Morena broke away from the mainstream parties to become an independent movement, with the aim of eventually becoming a political party (SourceMex, Sept. 19, 2012, and Nov. 7, 2012)

**Violent protests mar inauguration**

On inauguration day, Morena organized a massive rally at a Mexico City landmark, the Ángel de la Independencia, to denounce the election that brought Peña Nieto to office. López Obrador and other Morena leaders repeated their complaint that the PRI candidate won the election because of a broad campaign to buy the votes of poor and some middle-class Mexicans (SourceMex, July 11, 2012, and Sept. 5, 2012). An independent report showed, however, that a large segment of the poorest Mexicans voted for the then governing PAN (SourceMex, Nov. 7, 2012).

In his speech, López Obrador called for Morena supporters to engage in acts of civil disobedience to protest the PRI's return to power. "Our protest about the electoral fraud that was committed will not be confined to rejecting the illegitimate government of Peña Nieto," he said. "We will put into practice what we consider peaceful civil disobedience, which implies our commitment to continue to educate and organize the people as well as protect them against injustices."

Many Morena supporters participated in inauguration-day protests that turned violent. Before the president’s public swearing-in ceremony at San Lázaro, the site of the Chamber of Deputies, hundreds of protestors banged on security barriers erected around Congress, threw stones, bottle rockets, and firecrackers at police, and yelled "Mexico without PRI!" Police responded by spraying tear gas from a truck and using fire extinguishers to put out flames from Molotov cocktails. One group of protesters rammed and dented the barrier with a large truck before being driven off by police water cannons.

Protestors followed Peña Nieto from the Chamber of Deputies to the National Palace, in an attempt to break down barriers that had been set up. Along the way, protestors smashed windows of stores, banks, and a hotel. The clashes between protestors and police turned violent at times, with at least 76 individuals treated for injuries, including 29 who were hospitalized. Mexico City authorities arrested 103 individuals, including 11 minors.

Legislators from the three major parties condemned the violence, but some members of the center-left parties suggested that López Obrador and Morena should not be blamed for the acts of individuals. "López Obrador’s movement has always been peaceful and has chosen to act in a nonviolent manner during our country’s most difficult political times," said PRD Sen. Manuel Camacho Solís.

But others pointed to López Obrador’s silence in condemning the violence that erupted on inauguration day. "Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard described the violent protests as 'barbaric,' and PRD leader Jesús Zambrano distanced his party from these actions," columnist Alejandro Ramos Esquivel wrote in El Financiero. "And Andrés Manuel López Obrador, de facto, condoned them."
Is "old PRI" returning to power?

Beyond the inauguration-day demonstrations, Peña Nieto’s detractors are worried that his election has opened the door for the old PRI to return to power. "One word sums up Dec. 1: restoration. The return to the past," said Deputy Ricardo Monreal of the Movimiento Ciudadano (MC).

Peña Nieto, who campaigned as the new face of the PRI, offered a conciliatory speech at his inauguration. "I will respect every voice," said the president. "I will run an open government that speaks with honesty, seeks opinion, listens to its citizens....I will be a president who is close to the people."

Columnist Hilda Gómez wondered whether there was a real reason to fear the return of the old PRI. "What is it that they are afraid of?" Gómez asked in a column published in Milenio.com. Gómez said structural changes that occurred when the PRI lost the presidency in 2012 have made the opposition parties stronger and the electoral process more competitive. The key changes, she said, were strengthening the elections watchdog Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE), increased plurality in the Congress, and reforms to telecommunications and information access.

But Gómez also offered a note of caution. "The PRI's return to the presidency will put to the test the strength of these public institutions, which were able to attain democratic advances with the political transition in our country," said the columnist. "Personally, I think that it would be difficult to turn back certain advances, such as transparency, electoral competition, and freedom of expression."

In the months before inauguration day, Peña Nieto was already maneuvering to establish his agenda, but he was supported in part by outgoing President Felipe Calderón. It helped that the new Congress elected on July 1, 2012, took office at the start of September, allowing action on the agenda supported by the outgoing president and his successor.

The two presidents appear to have struck a deal, with the cooperation of their parties, on the appointment of the two new justices to the Supreme Court (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación, SCJN) in November (SourceMex, Nov. 28, 2012). There were also indications that Calderón and Peña Nieto both had a strong influence on the new labor code approved in mid-November (SourceMex, Nov. 14, 2012).

Peña Nieto consolidates two ministries

The major change that Peña Nieto promoted during the 2012 legislative session was his own proposal. The president-elect moved to eliminate two government ministries, the Secretaría de Seguridad Pública (SSP) and the Secretaría de Función Pública (SFP), and his supporters in Congress introduced legislation to that effect.

The most controversial was the proposal to eliminate the SSP and transfer its functions to the Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB). The SSP, created on Nov. 30, 2000, developed a reputation for corruption and abuse under ex-secretary Genaro García Luna. Additionally, there was some friction between SEGOB and the SSP (SourceMex, Sept. 9, 2009).

"The reforms make sense, especially if you consider that the SSP became an entity with enormous power and was empowered to compete for influence, without institutional controls, with the armed forces of our country," columnist Saúl Arellano wrote in La Crónica de Hoy. "The SSP was created..."
without an adequate analysis of the situation of insecurity that our country was experiencing and the broad reach of organized crime."

But some critics said the downside of the proposal to eliminate the SSP would be to greatly expand the power of SEGOB. This ministry was associated with the repressive practices employed by the PRI, particularly during the governments of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970), Luis Echeverría Álvarez (1970-1976), and José López Portillo (1976-1982)

"Enrique Peña Nieto’s proposal to restore the status of 'super ministry' to the Secretaría de Gobernación has raised red flags among several sectors of society," columnist Esthela Damián Peralta wrote in the daily newspaper La Jornada Guerrero. "We could be witnessing the return of the political police, the one that operated under the PRI governments during the 1970s."

But Damián Peralta acknowledged that institutional controls are in place, which was not the case in the 1970s. "The [opposition] political parties are strong and want a true democratic transition," said the columnist. "We are also very much aware of the growing strength of nongovernmental organizations, which want to guard against a government that is violent and authoritarian and which violates human and political rights."

Many opposition legislators in the Chamber of Deputies voted against Peña Nieto’s proposal to reform the Cabinet structure, including the proposal to eliminate the SSP and fold its duties into SEGOB. But the opposition was split, and enough support from opposition legislators allowed the legislation to pass by a large margin. The measure was approved by a vote of 333 to 50, with 84 abstentions.

In addition to eliminating the SSP, the proposal included the disappearance of the SFP, with its functions transferred to a new agency called the Comisión Nacional Anticorrupción. The commission would be in charge of preventing, investigating, and sanctioning acts of corruption among federal officials as well as looking into complaints filed against local and state federal officials.

Another element of the legislation was to expand the role of the Secretaría de Desarrollo Social (SEDESOL) and the Secretaría de la Reforma Agraria (SRA). Under the plan, the SRA would become the Secretaría de Desarrollo Agrario, Territorial y Urbano.

**Close collaborators named as top Cabinet officials**

The changes were reflected in the Cabinet that Pena Nieto unveiled the day before his inauguration. As expected, his closest collaborators and confidants received some of the plum posts in the new administration. Former Hidalgo Gov. Sergio Osorio Chong, who played a major role in the presidential campaign, was named as the new head of SEGOB. Another top campaign aide, Luis Videgaray, was appointed to head the Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público (SHCP).

The president also appointed Jesús Murillo Karam as attorney general. Murillo, who left his post as a newly elected member of the Chamber of Deputies, is considered one of the architects of Peña Nieto’s political career. Like Osorio Chong, Murillo is also a former governor of Hidalgo state.

A number of veteran PRI members were selected for the Cabinet, including Pedro Joaquín Coldwell as energy secretary, Emilio Chuayfett as public education secretary, and Alfonso Navarrete Prida as
labor secretary. Peña Nieto appointed a holdover from the Calderón administration, José Antonio Meade, who served as finance secretary, to the all-important post of foreign relations secretary.

Three women were selected for the Cabinet, but the positions were not as high profile as the Cabinet secretaries who served under Calderón. Mercedes Juan López will serve as health secretary, Claudia Ruiz Massieu as tourism secretary, and Rosario Robles Berlanga as social development secretary. In his first Cabinet appointments, Calderón selected Georgina Kessel as energy secretary and Patricia Espinosa as foreign relations secretary. Marisela Morales was appointed as attorney general in the last years of the Calderón government.

Robles Berlanga, formerly a member of the PRD, is the only woman to hold the post of mayor of Mexico City. She was appointed to that post after then Mayor Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas resigned in 2000 to concentrate on his presidential campaign.

Ruiz Massieu is the niece of former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari and the daughter of the former Guerrero governor and ex-PRI secretary-general José Francisco Ruiz Massieu, who was gunned down in Mexico City in September 1994 (SourceMex, Oct. 5, 1994).

The other new Cabinet appointments include Economy Secretary Idelfonso Guajardo, Agriculture Secretary Enrique Martínez, Communications and Transportation Secretary Gerardo Ruiz Esparza, Environment Secretary Juan José Guerra Abúd, National Defense Secretary Salvador Cienfuegos, and Navy Secretary Vidal Soberón Saénz.

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