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Government Offers Major Reform to Public Education; Measure Would Also Curb Power of Teachers Union

by Carlos Navarro
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A constitutional reform addressing education is not a topic that normally would make the top headlines of Mexican newspapers. But the changes proposed on Dec. 10 in the Congress have far-reaching political implications, not only because of the broad support from all major political parties but also because the initiative has the effect of ending the stranglehold that the powerful teachers union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación, SNTE), and specifically its longtime leader Elba Esther Gordillo, has had on Mexico’s educational policies.

The move to change the structure of education, which President Enrique Peña Nieto promised would take place early in his administration, was endorsed by leaders of the three major parties, including opposition-party presidents Gustavo Madero of the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) and Jesús Zambrano of the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD). "The fact that we are presenting this as a joint initiative is evidence that dialogue and consensus are the most effective means to transform Mexico," Peña Nieto told reporters.

The president had promised that the change in education would be one of his first priorities, along with democratizing the broadcast media and reducing the debt of municipalities. These goals were spelled out in the political agreement signed with the major opposition parties after inauguration day (SourceMex, Dec. 5, 2012).

One of the most significant individuals absent from the press conference—and from the negotiations on the educational initiative—was SNTE president Elba Esther Gordillo Morales. The union has been one of the major influences on how education policy has evolved in Mexico, and the new initiative seeks to greatly reduce the role of the teachers union.

Education ministry regains oversight of national system

The main thrust of the initiative is to make changes to Article 3 of the Mexican Constitution to boost the quality of public education. A major element of the plan is to put the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) in charge of overseeing the evaluation, promotion, and training of teachers. The SNTE—which has 54 affiliates around the country representing about 79,000 teachers—previously took a leading role in those areas.

Under the plan, the SRE would create an autonomous agency known as the Instituto Nacional de Evaluación Educativa (INEE) to determine the procedures and policies for evaluating teachers, programs, student progress, and local school authorities. The INEE would not have the power to fire teachers. INEE members would have to be ratified by the Senate.

"A reform of this nature is going to transform the institutional structure of the educational system because a teacher’s professional status will now be based on academic merit and not on union and political membership," educational specialist Ricardo Raphael said in an interview with the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma.
Improvement in Mexico’s educational system is seen as a key to boosting the quality of education. "Many of us in this country believe that education—more and better education—is a solution to help resolve some of the problems facing our country," said José Narro Robles, rector at Mexico’s largest university, the Universidad Nacional Autóñoma de México (UNAM).

**Union leader Gordillo loses power**

Others agreed that the changes would greatly weaken the SNTE, which for generations had determined policies for teachers via an arrangement made with the government back in 1943. "This represents a very substantive reform," said Jorge Javier Romero, a researcher at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM) in Mexico City.

But Peña Nieto and others emphasized that the changes would not eliminate or dilute the individual rights of teachers, who would continue to receive raises and promotions based on experience and professional skill. "[This change] does not violate the rights of teachers," said Zambrano. "Rather, it protects the rights of the students."

Raphael compared the dwindling influence of Gordillo and the SNTE in the educational system to a nuclear submarine losing its reactor. "If you take control of the teacher positions, you are taking away the SNTE’s ‘reactor,’" said the specialist. "How far do you think this submarine is going to travel without its reactor?"

Others said the move to reduce Gordillo's power was essential for the plan to work. In recent years, the SNTE leader had more influence on policy in the government than most union officials, except for Carlos Romero Deschamps of the Sindicato de Trabajadores Petroleros de la República Mexicana (STPRM). Through arrangements with successive PRI and PAN governments, Gordillo was able to place relatives and collaborators in key positions in the SRE and other institutions. For example, Gordillo’s son-in-law Fernando González headed the SRE’s basic-education division during the administration of former President Felipe Calderón.

But Gordillo, who has been a lightning rod for political controversy, had her share of conflicts with the PRI, her party of affiliation. In 2003, while Gordillo was floor leader for the PRI in the Chamber of Deputies, a very public power struggle took place among party leaders because of her support for programs promoted by President Vicente Fox of the PAN. As a result, the Chamber of Deputies voted to strip Gordillo of her leadership post, instead electing Emilio Chuayffet as the party’s floor leader (SourceMex, July 9, 2003, and Dec. 3, 2003).

Controversy also erupted when the PRI tried to block Gordillo from taking the reins of the PRI after party president Roberto Madrazo resigned to run in the 2006 election (SourceMex, Aug. 17, 2005).

So when Peña Nieto appointed Chuayffet as education secretary shortly after his inauguration, the move was seen as a slap in the face of Gordillo.

Other appointments were apparently also intended as a dig against Gordillo. "If the selection of Emilio Chuayffet to head the SEP was bad, the appointment of Alba Martínez Olivé to lead the SEP’s basic-education division was even worse," columnist Arturo Rueda wrote in SDPNoticias. "She is an academic very much opposed to the SNTE, and during the last decade she has dedicated herself to criticizing Elba Esther in her speeches and in her academic articles."

Still, Gordillo was very adept at playing the political game. After a falling out with the leaders of her own party, she became closer to the PAN administrations of Presidents Vicente Fox and Calderón.
while maintaining her PRI affiliation. During the two PAN administrations, Gordillo and the SNTE also had major influence in appointments to the Instituto de Seguridad y Servicios Sociales de los Trabajadores del Estado (ISSSTE), the agency in charge of social security for government employees.

And even as she was becoming cozy with the powers that be, in 2006 Gordillo also formed a party supported primarily by the SNTE, the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL), which competed for the first time in the 2006 election (SourceMex, July 12, 2006).

In the 2012 election, PANAL presidential candidate Gabriel Quadri impressed voters with his performance during the debates, particularly the first one (SourceMex, May 9, 2012). Even though the strong performance did not translate into massive support for Quadri in the presidential election, the party received enough votes to maintain its registration.

And, while the education reform received strong support in Congress, it was not surprising that PANAL legislators came to the defense of Gordillo and the SNTE. PANAL Deputy René Ricardo Fujiwara Montelongo, who is Gordillo’s grandson, called the criticisms of the SNTE leader "simplistic" and "lacking in substance." He also pointed out that the SNTE is a union that has overseen many important changes in Mexico.

Still, Fujiwara said that, "for the good of education" in Mexico, PANAL is willing to give Chuayffet the benefit of the doubt in his role as education secretary.

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