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In Dramatic, Low-Risk Move, President Enrique Peña Nieto Orders Arrest of Teachers Union President Elba Esther Gordillo on Corruption Charges

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In a dramatic but low-risk move, President Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration arrested powerful politician and teachers union leader Elba Esther Gordillo Morales on charges of corruption and racketeering. Gordillo, who has led the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación, (SNTE) since 1989, has been accused of embezzling more than 2 billion pesos (US$156 million) in union funds.

The Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) said Gordillo spent more than US$2 million in SNTE funds for spending sprees at a Neiman Marcus department store in California, US$17,000 for plastic surgery, US$1 million for a home in La Jolla, California, and an unknown amount for a private jet. In addition, she rewarded SNTE officers for their loyalty with Hummer vehicles.

The Peña Nieto administration said the arrest of Gordillo, who was detained in the Toluca airport as she descended from her aircraft, is part of an effort to root out corruption and graft. "We are trying to meet our commitment to combat corruption, which was one of the president’s promises," Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam said shortly after the arrest.

Peña Nieto later took to the airwaves to explain the decision. "[The law] applies to everyone equally, and no one can be above the law," the president said in a nationally televised address in which he did not mention Gordillo’s name.

**Move compared to similar maneuver by ex-President Salinas**

But the arrest of Gordillo, known to many as la maestra, is reminiscent of a similar action taken by ex-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) in the early days of his administration. During the recent presidential campaign, rumors surfaced that Salinas was one of the powerbrokers behind Peña Nieto’s campaign (SourceMex, Dec. 7, 2011, and May 23, 2012).

Just weeks after assuming the presidency on Dec. 1, 1998, Salinas ordered the arrest of Joaquín Hernández Galicia, the powerful leader of the petroleum workers union (Sindicato de Trabajadores Petroleros de la República Mexicana, STPRM). In 1992, Hernández Galicia—known most commonly by his nickname of La Quina—was sentenced to 35 years in prison (SourceMex, Sept. 16, 1992).

Hernández Galicia, who clashed with President Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988) and several of his predecessors, openly supported center-left candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in the 1988 election against Salinas.

Salinas viewed La Quina as a potential obstacle to implementing free-market reforms that would allow some private participation in the state-run oil company PEMEX (SourceMex, Feb. 6 1991, May 5, 1993, and Oct. 27, 1993).
Some observers said there is a strong similarity between Salinas’ maneuver to remove Hernández Galicia as an obstacle to his proposed PEMEX reforms and Peña Nieto’s move to take Gordillo out of the equation as recently approved reforms to the educational system are implemented (SourceMex, Dec. 12, 2012).

"Little more than a month after Carlos Salinas de Gortari took office, he ordered the arrest of petroleum workers leader Joaquín Hernández Galicia, also known as La Quina," said Sopitas.com. "And just over 20 years later, with the PRI back in power, history repeats itself."

The irony in Gordillo’s arrest is that it was Salinas who originally maneuvered to have her ascend to the leadership of the SNTE to replace then SNTE leader Carlos Jongitd Barrios, who fell out of favor with the president.

While Gordillo’s arrest could represent a significant move in the Peña Nieto administration's effort to address corruption, some analysts say the proof will come if and when the administration follows up with other actions. "This is an old tactic, let's hope that it doesn't just stop there, as it did in the past, when a single case was enough to calm things down and add legitimacy [to the presidency]," said José Antonio Crespo, an analyst at the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE). "Let's hope that this doesn't stop and that it becomes something more systematic, for which there is a burning need."

**Arrest removes obstacle to education reform**

Many observers have suggested that the principal reason behind the move was not to fight corruption but to remove an obstacle to reforms to public education, even though Peña Nieto had little difficulty convincing opposition parties to accept the changes. The president, the PRI, and the opposition parties in Congress signed an agreement to work together to implement much-needed changes in that area as well as in labor, tax policy, and energy (SourceMex, Dec. 5, 2012).

With Gordillo’s removal, the powerful SNTE, with 1.5 million members, is less likely to create obstacles to implementing the educational reforms. Because of the union’s strong grip on the education system, the government often found itself out of the loop when it came to major decisions dealing with public education. This disconnect, say some observers, kept Mexico from making needed changes to public education. A recent evaluation by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) among 65 countries found Mexico at the bottom of the list.

There is some recognition among rank-and-file SNTE members that change was inevitable. This was evident in the decision of almost all local chapters to refrain from organizing demonstrations to protest Gordillo’s arrest. "The SNTE is a labor organization that respects the institutional process, and the only thing we ask is that any trial be conducted according to the law," said Emilio Salgado Néstor, secretary-general of the SNTE chapter in Puebla state.

But some critics downplayed the significance of Gordillo’s arrest. "The arrest has occurred in an undeniably political context. It was only because she did not accept the reforms to public education," Roman Catholic Bishop Raúl Vera López of the Diocese of Saltillo told the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada.

Peña Nieto is also interested in furthering reforms to PEMEX, expanding on the advances made during former President Felipe Calderón’s administration (SourceMex, Oct. 29, 2008, Dec. 15, 2010,
and Nov. 30, 2011). And analysts believe that Gordillo’s arrest might be a signal to STPRM leader Carlos Romero Deschamps to get on board with the reforms, or he too could be ousted.

Romero is vulnerable in much the same way as Gordillo. The petroleum workers’ leader has led a lavish lifestyle allegedly financed with union funds. Peña Nieto would rather not have to oust Romero but instead win his endorsement for the reforms.

"If [Romero] were worrying about swallowing the toad of reform before, I think this is going to encourage him to do it," analyst George Grayson, a Mexico expert at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, said in an interview with the Los Angeles Times.

Poll finds strong support for Gordillo’s arrest

Still, the decision to arrest Gordillo was a very low-risk move for Peña Nieto. A telephone poll by BGC-Excélsior found that 86% of respondents approved of the move and 76% said that Gordillo was guilty of the charges levied against her. "It is worth noting that opinion of President Enrique Peña Nieto improved as a consequence of Gordillo's arrest," said the Mexico City newspaper Excélsior, adding that 53% of respondents said their opinion of the president was either more favorable or unchanged. Conversely, another 27% that said the arrest either worsened their opinion of the president or reinforced an already bad opinion. Many of these respondents likely opposed Peña Nieto in the presidential election.

But there was widespread skepticism on whether Gordillo would have to serve a long sentence. "As it happens with many of these controversial cases, there are doubts about whether the law will be applied fully," said BGC-Excélsior. "Because of this, 48% said they believe that Gordillo will be set free because of her position as a politician and a union leader. But another 39% said they believe that the full weight of the law will be applied."

Business organizations also endorsed the move. "[The arrest] was an action that is very much based on the rule of law," the Consejo Coordinador Empresarial (CCE) said in a press statement.

The CCE expressed hope that the action would set a precedent for firm, efficient, and impartial action against the types of corruption that are prevalent in the country. "If Mexico aspires to become a nation with a mature democracy, with justice, security, and prosperity, it cannot have anyone who is untouchable and who is a symbol of abuse and impunity."

But some analysts said the true reasons behind the arrest are difficult to ascertain at this time. Political columnist León Krauze said the theory of political revenge against a weakened union leader who overplayed her hand in opposing reforms to the educational system is plausible. "Elba Esther Gordillo became not only an easy target but also a useful target [for the Peña Nieto government]," Krauze wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio.

But Krauze said it is possible the administration’s action might have been a single pragmatic move, dealing less with the fight against corruption and more with Peña Nieto’s need to show a firm hand. "This is the less likely motive, but the one that would be better in the long run for Mexico," said the columnist.

Gordillo slick political skills helped her survive for many years. For example, she supported Calderón in the 2006 presidential election but also formed a party supported by the SNTE, the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL), to promote union interests. She convinced a prominent
environmental advocate, Gabriel Quadri, to represent the party in the 2012 presidential election (SourceMex, May 9, 2012). Quadri obtained about 2% of the national vote, enough to maintain PANAL’s registration as a political party (SourceMex, July 11, 2012).

The three major parties have all courted Gordillo at one time or another because of her influence with the SNTE. But analysts said her political maneuvering caused her to burn bridges with the PRI, PAN, and center-left parties led by the PRD. "She charged a high price for her love," columnist Leo Zuckermann wrote in Excélsior. "In this past election, PRI presidential candidate Enrique Peña Nieto had to break an agreement with her because of a rebellion from many members of his party who thought Gordillo’s cronies had obtained a large number of the PRI candidacies."

"Elba Esther Gordillo's sin was not her move to become an obstacle to educational reform. Politicians are not interested in having an educated constituency," wrote Renato Consuegra in La Otra Opinión. "Rather, her big sin was to become obsessed with power, to believe that she could do almost anything, thus ignoring her role as a pawn on the chess board that is Mexico’s political system. She wanted to be queen." [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on March 6, 2013, reported at 12.78 pesos per US$1.00].

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