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The discussion on whether Mexico should develop an emergency presidential-succession plan in case something happens to the chief executive resurfaced at the end of July when President Enrique Peña Nieto underwent surgery. The last time that the issue became a major topic of public discussion was in 2003, when then President Vicente Fox announced he would undergo surgery to correct a pinched nerve in his back (SourceMex, March 26, 2003). Mexico has no vice president.

Peña Nieto’s surgery, performed at the Hospital Central Militar in Mexico City, involved removing a nodule from the president’s thyroid. The procedure took less than two hours and was considered routine and fairly minor. "The diagnosis shows no evidence of malignancy," said Brig. Gen. Juan Felipe Sánchez, the doctor who headed the surgical team.

A presidential spokesperson also said that an earlier biopsy had shown no evidence of cancer in the president’s thyroid.

Even though this was a minor surgery, the presidential team attempted to reassure the Mexican public that everything was okay. "Even though the surgery took about two hours and required general anesthesia, there was an attempt to minimize the procedure," Raúl Contreras Bustamante wrote in a guest column in the Mexico City daily newspaper Excélsior. "Two hours after the surgery was concluded, Enrique Peña Nieto’s Twitter account was reporting that he was well and recovering in his room."

Still, having Mexico’s chief executive out of commission for a short period reignited the debate on whether Mexico should set up a better plan for presidential succession.

"The government’s actions are logical, given that the administration has to send out signals to keep the citizens calm," said Contreras Bustamante, a constitutional expert at the School of Law at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). "But this development demonstrates that we still have legislative deficiencies to deal with possible contingencies."

A public-opinion poll by the polling organization Opinion Pública Marketing e Imagen found a public divided on whether the political structure should be changed to allow another official to take over the presidency immediately. In a poll conducted among 400 men and women, 32% agreed with the need for an emergency appointee, while 42% said such a move was not necessary. Another 13% were uncertain, and 14% declined to answer.

"We consider that Mexico’s laws, in fact have a big gap in not providing for an immediate substitution," said the online news and opinion site La Otra Opinión, which carried the results of the poll. "Nevertheless, it is also true that this particular situation did not require the absence of the president and did not merit the implementation of an emergency measure."
Problems remain, even after 2012 reforms

There was an effort last year to address the problem with a series of constitutional reforms. Under constitutional changes enacted in August 2012, the Congress is empowered give the president a leave of 60 days and then ratify the interior secretary as interim president. If the Congress is not in session, this power falls on the Comisión Permanente (the standing joint committee of legislators from both chambers).

While the changes implemented last year have removed some uncertainties, Contreras said the process is still cumbersome. "Legal constraints prevent the president from simply requesting medical leave," said the UNAM expert. "If you follow the constitutional process, you first have to ask permission from Congress, and the presidency is transferred provisionally to the interior secretary, who can only assume this role once during the term of the executive. If the president requires a second leave, he must remove the interior secretary and appoint another one to assume the presidency on a temporary basis."

The analysts pointed out that if Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong—or any other interior secretary—had been forced to assume the presidency at any point, even temporarily, that individual would be barred not only from repeating as an interim chief executive but also from eventually serving as a permanent president.

"Even though the president was incapacitated for a very brief period (90 minutes) and there was no need to request a leave, the same Article 83 of the Constitution that allows the president to temporarily give up his post also creates constraints for the current interior secretary," columnist Jesús Cantú wrote in the online news service NoticiasNet.

Although the surgery lasted less than two hours, the absence of a figure that could immediately step in for the president left the country in a very vulnerable position. "When an immediate decision is required, a few minutes could make a difference for the well-being of our country," said Cantú.

The reality is that there has been significant turnover at the Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB) during recent administrations. Ex-Presidents Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000) and Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) each had four different interior secretaries, while three people served in that role for ex-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994). Two men served as interior secretary for former President Vicente Fox (2000-2006). The last interior secretary to serve for an entire six-year term was Manuel Bartlett Díaz, who was head of SEGOB during the administration of ex-President Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988).

While Mexico has not had a vice president since 1913, the interior secretary has traditionally been the second-most-powerful position in Mexico. Still, the post has not been exactly a springboard to the presidency, as none of the men who have headed SEGOB in the last seven presidential administrations has been elected as chief executive. Two ex-interior secretaries—Francisco Labastida Ochoa and Santiago Creel Miranda—sought the presidency but were defeated in either a primary or a general election. Former President Luis Echeverría Álvarez (1970-1976) was the last interior secretary to win an election to the presidency.