New Report Reveals U.S. Spying Operations on ex-President Felipe Calderón

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Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2013-10-23

Critics hammered President Enrique Peña Nieto for an overly timid reaction to a report that the US National Security Agency (NSA) spied on him by intercepting his emails and cellular phone communications while he was still a candidate for president (SourceMex, Sept. 11, 2013). Now, new allegations have surfaced in a German magazine that the US was engaged in a massive spying campaign during ex-President Felipe Calderón’s administration (2006-2012), prompting the Peña Nieto government to talk tough again but not take any direct action against the northern neighbor.

"This practice is unacceptable, illegitimate and contrary to Mexican law and international law," the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) said in a statement. "In a relationship of neighbors and partners, there is no room for the kind of activities that allegedly took place."

Latest report published in German news magazine
In a report published on Oct. 20, Germany’s weekly news magazine Der Spiegel, citing a document leaked by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden, said an NSA division known as Tailored Access Operations reported it had gained access to the email account of then-president Calderón in 2010 and turned his office into a "lucrative" source of information.

Der Spiegel said the NSA, in an operation dubbed Flatliquid, succeeded in hacking a central server in the network of the Mexican presidency that was also used by other members of Calderón's Cabinet, providing a wealth of information on diplomatic and economic matters.

Calderón government took precautions
Some officials from the Calderón administration said the NSA might not have gained as much sensitive information as suggested in the German report. The Calderón government, concerned that its communications might be subject to hacking, decided to deliver sensitive documents in person or by telephone. During telephone conversations, officials spoke in code, so that they would not be understood if the phones were tapped.

"The most important information was given to the president in printed form," said Rafael Fernández de Castro, an international affairs advisor to Calderón. "Whenever he had to hold an important conversation, he preferred to do so during a walk through the Bosque de Chapultepec [park in Mexico City]."

Fernández de Castro suspected that his cellular telephone and the landlines in his office were tapped during the time he served Calderón (2008-2011). "I did not know whether [the spying] was conducted by Mexicans or foreigners," he said in an interview with CNNMéxico.

Sen. Javier Lozano, a member of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) who served as Calderón’s labor secretary for five years, said Cabinet members resorted to using encrypted emails to communicate. The reports from Snowden, however, showed that those cautionary measures did not work. "We
had a system of encryption that went beyond the conventional means of encryption," said Lozano. "But the instruments of espionage are so sophisticated that one could not be sure whether our system of protection was vulnerable."

Other members of Calderón’s party also expressed indignation about the new allegations revealed in Der Spiegel. At a press conference in Mexico City, Sen. Jorge Luis Preciado, the floor leader of the PAN delegation in the upper house, described the allegations of US spying as unfortunate and unethical. He made the comments to reporters after discussing his party’s strategy regarding tax-reform negotiations in the Senate.

Snowden's leaks also have revealed NSA spying operations in other Latin American countries, with Brazil reacting in an especially strong manner. Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff canceled her planned state visit to the US in October and denounced the US espionage during a passionate speech at the UN. Many Mexicans wondered at the time why Peña Nieto did not take a similar approach.

Others said the Mexican president was simply being pragmatic. "The US-Mexico relationship is too deep, multifaceted, and important for both countries for this to really rattle relations," Shannon O’Neil, a senior fellow for Latin America Studies at the Council of Foreign Relations, said in an interview in September.

The latest allegations have put Peña Nieto on the spot, but once again the administration is proceeding with caution. "By means of a diplomatic note, Mexico will re-emphasize the importance for our country of this investigation, which should be concluded as quickly as possible," the SRE said.

The SRE said US President Barack Obama had promised to carry out an "exhaustive investigation" into who was responsible for the suspected espionage.

Analysts urge energetic response from Peña Nieto

Other observers noted that US espionage on Mexico is nothing new, that only the methods of obtaining information are more sophisticated. In the Mesa Política program hosted by journalist Carmen Aristegui on MVS Noticias, prominent political analyst Lorenzo Meyer said the US at one time relied extensively on "many informants."

Meyer, a professor emeritus at the Colegio de México, said it has always been easy for foreign governments to ask someone from the private sector, the church, or the government for information about the current president and draw their own conclusions based on that intelligence.

The analyst said elected officials should always be aware of the possibility that their decisions are being monitored by somebody outside their inner circle. "There are no secrets to keep from the US," said Meyer. "The question is how to respond."

While technological advances leave Mexico at the mercy of the US, Meyer suggested that the Peña Nieto administration at least attempt to make a "serious protest" to the US.

Analyst Denise Dresser, also appearing on Aristegui’s program, offered the same recommendation to the administration. "What is the Mexican government going to do in the face of a violation of its sovereignty," said Dresser, a political analyst at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM).
Dresser suggested that at the very least the Peña Nieto government offer an energetic public protest similar to the one that Brazilian President Rousseff made in September. "This is not a matter to sweep under the rug in the name of keeping the peace," said the analyst. "The Mexican government should set aside its weak and cowardly attitude."

Former President Vicente Fox (2000-2006), a PAN member who preceded Calderón as Mexico’s chief executive, pointed out that espionage is a practice that every government undertakes, even Mexico. He said the Mexican government very closely monitors the movements and actions of its citizens. "In my electoral campaign, I was followed at every step. I was filmed and tape-recorded," said the ex-president. "This is a common practice."

Fox said he was aware that his communications and actions were monitored by the US and Cuba while he was in office. The ex-president also became embroiled in a very public spat with Britain over allegations that the administration of then Prime Minister Tony Blair was spying on him (SourceMex, March 31, 2004).

Fox said, however, that espionage is an inevitable byproduct of governance. "One has to become used to [the practice of espionage]. Everybody engages in these types of tricks, so this is nothing new," he said. "I don’t understand why this is such a big deal."

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