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Political Establishment Faces Credibility Problems in Mexico

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The sudden resignation of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas Solórzano from the party he helped found 25 years ago has raised numerous questions about the political establishment in Mexico and the viability of traditional political parties. Cárdenas’ resignation from the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) coincided with a sharp loss of credibility for the party in the wake of the disappearance of 43 students from a teachers college (Escuela Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa Raúl Isidro Burgos) in Guerrero state in September. Two PRD elected officials were linked directly to this case, which has been a catalyst for unrest in Mexico in the past few weeks. Those officials are former Iguala mayor José Luis Abarca, said to be responsible for the disappearances (SourceMex, Oct. 15, 2014, and Nov. 19, 2014), and ex-Guerrero governor Ángel Aguirre Rivero, who looked the other way while Abarca and other officials operated with impunity (SourceMex, Oct. 29, 2014).

"The political climate in our country is facing one of its worst moments," columnist Yuriria Sierra wrote in the daily newspaper Excélsior. "Without doubt, one of the trends we have observed is the weakening of the left. They are the ones who needed to be a true counterweight and become a real opposition. … They have failed in that task."

"The left has completely unraveled, and, what’s worse, it finds itself in the midst of the problem facing our country," Sierra added in the wake of Cárdenas’ resignation and the Guerrero crisis. "And it’s not just the PRD. Didn’t the PT [Partido del Trabajo] and Movimiento Ciudadano support the candidacies of José Luis Abarca and Ángel Aguirre?"

Citizen anger turns toward Peña Nieto, PRI

Frustration with politicians and political parties was bubbling below the surface even before the Guerrero incident, but the disappearance of the 43 students served as a catalyst to spark national protests against authorities, particularly President Enrique Peña Nieto and the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which has had a reputation for colluding with the criminal organizations responsible for the extreme violence in Mexico (SourceMex, July 22, 1998, Feb. 18, 2009, and Nov. 16, 2011).

Furthermore, in two years in office, Peña Nieto has failed to deliver—or even provide any evidence—that the reforms he has launched would do anything to address the high rates of poverty and extreme insecurity prevalent in Mexico. There is also the perception among at least half the population who opposed the energy reforms promoted by Peña Nieto and approved by the Congress that the reforms amount to a giveaway of Mexico’s resources (SourceMex, Oct. 16, 2013).

The anger against the Peña Nieto government was also linked to new revelations of corruption—or perceptions of corruption. In the midst of the reports about Guerrero, reports surfaced that Peña Nieto and his wife, actress Angélica Rivera, were living in a sprawling mansion in Mexico City’s Lomas de Chapultepec neighborhood owned by wealthy entrepreneur Arturo Reyes Gómez.
Constructora Teya—a subsidiary of Reyes Gómez’s firm Grupo Higa—was one of three Mexican companies that formed a partnership with China Railway Corporation to receive a concession to construct a high-speed rail line from Mexico City to the industrial hub of Querétaro. The other companies, GIA and Prodemex, were mentioned more prominently in the awarding of the bid (SourceMex, Oct. 15, 2014).

The Peña Nieto’s government abruptly canceled the concession in November amid reports of an investigation into whether the president granted special favors to Reyes Gómez in exchange for the use of the mansion. During a trip to China, Peña Nieto announced that the bids for the project would be reopened (SourceMex, Nov. 12, 2014). There were reports that the administration had to pay US$16 million in compensation to the Chinese-Mexican consortium after the cancellation, but officials at the Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Transportes (SCT) denied that any payments had been made.

**Peña Nieto begins third year in office**

On Dec. 1, the second anniversary of Peña Nieto’s inauguration, protestors held major demonstrations in almost every state and Mexico City. The focus of the protests was the disappearance of the 43 Ayotzinapa students. The actions against the PRI and Peña Nieto appeared to be led by grassroots organizations and labor unions, as opposed to political parties. Many past protests were organized by center-left leader Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who for now is keeping a low profile because of the direct involvement of some center-left politicians in the students’ disappearance.

While the anger against the political parties and the administration is very discernible, it is unlikely that the wave of protests would have occurred during the past few weeks without the disappearance of the students. Many of the protests are, in fact, focused on the administration’s inability to provide information on the ultimate fate of the students or to provide any new data on the remains of the victims, who were probably killed.

Some observers pointed out that the protests against the PRI were almost nonexistent at this time last year despite opposition to Peña Nieto’s reforms. "It is valid for the protests to occur because the PRI is performing very poorly. The reality is that President Peña Nieto believes that the best way to manage the country is by creating more and more laws instead of governing," columnist Rafael Cano Franco wrote in the online news site ¡Ehui! "The criticisms that the PRI is legislating too much and governing little are right on target. … However, the protests don’t make sense when they blame the PRI entirely for the disappearance of the 43 students and demand that they be found alive."

Still, Peña Nieto is viewed as a young face of the old PRI establishment and has faced his share of protests during his political career. He is blamed for the violent crackdown on demonstrators at San Salvador Atenco and Texcoco while he was governor of México state (SourceMex, May 17, 2006). Students also organized demonstrations against the then PRI candidate during the campaign leading to the 2012 presidential election (SourceMex, May 23, 2012).

Jesusa Cervantes, a columnist for the weekly news magazine Proceso, compares Pena Nieto’s situation to that of another former PRI president, Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-2004), who is considered his mentor. Salinas de Gortari made economic and trade issues the centerpiece of his administration, including the negotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)
with the US and Canada. "There are parallels with Salinas de Gortari, who received plaudits from the global community for having brought Mexico to the club of rich countries," said Cervantes.

"The reality is that an armed indigenous insurrection was brewing in Chiapas," added Cervantes, in reference to the emergence of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), which actually rose up against Salinas’ successor, ex-President Ernesto Zedillo. Cervantes says Peña Nieto is experiencing a similar situation, where the president is receiving accolades around the globe for implementing reforms, but this has shielded him from a growing reality. "He has not noticed nor does he understand that citizens are frustrated with injustice, poverty, impunity, and corruption."

**Peña Nieto announces new plan to overhaul local police**

The constant protests in the past several weeks did accomplish one objective, which was to force the Peña Nieto government to put insecurity, crime, and violence at the top of its agenda rather than have those concerns share the spotlight with the president’s efforts to prioritize economic growth, reforms, and foreign investment.

The Guerrero situation appears to have attracted the president’s attention. In an address to the nation on Nov. 27, Peña Nieto pledged to push for profound changes in the structure of local police forces and to establish the rule of law across Mexico. Peña Nieto’s promise is the latest in a list of proposals to overhaul the law-enforcement system in Mexico, including proposals by ex-President Felipe Calderón to eliminate all municipal police departments and replace them with a single police force in each of Mexico’s 31 states and the Federal District (SourceMex, July 28, 2010). While the national police has never become a reality, Peña Nieto in August of this year announced the creation of a 5,000-member "corruption free" elite police force to be deployed to areas of conflict (SourceMex, Aug. 27, 2014).

In the latest plan, Peña Nieto proposed to disband the more than 1,800 municipal police forces and replace them with new units under the control of state governments. The federal government would have the power to dissolve municipal governments found to be corrupt. Furthermore, the plan creates a mechanism for citizens to lodge complaints about police and clarifies jurisdiction between local, state, and federal police, which in the past has hampered investigations.

"[This speech] reflects a change from a government that thought that economics would fix security issues to one that acknowledges that security—and rule of law—is needed to allow economic growth to happen," said security analyst Viridiana Ríos, who heads the civic organization ¿Cómo Vamos? Others wondered whether the public believes that Peña Nieto will bring about any changes. "The real question is whether the Mexican people, who have been promised investigations, overhauls, special commissions, anti-corruption campaigns, and institutional reorganizations by this president—and nearly every other authority since the Mexican Revolution—will believe these latest promises," Eric L. Olson, a security expert at the Washington, DC-based Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, said in an interview with The New York Times.

**Cardenas leaves PRD over differences with leadership**

While the Peña Nieto government struggles to retain its credibility, the main center-left opposition, the PRD, also appears to be falling on hard times in the wake of the Guerrero crisis. On Nov. 25, Cárdenas publicly announced he was resigning from the PRD because of differences with the
current leadership. He explained that the handling of the crisis in Guerrero and the refusal of party leaders to resign after the disappearance of the 43 students expedited his departure from the party.

In his letter, Cárdenas highlighted his differences with party president Carlos Navarrete and other leaders on how to restore the party's credibility in light of the Guerrero situation. "On previous occasions, hoping to at least open an internal debate about the approach, the answer from the party leadership was silence," the PRD founder wrote.

Some political observers said Cárdenas, who presided over the PRD from 1990 until 1994, was actually seeking to gain the party leadership following the Guerrero crisis but met strong resistance from the Nueva Izquierda faction, which has led the party for several years. The faction is commonly known as "Los Chuchos," named after its two founders, Jesús Zambrano and Jesús Ortega.

"A few weeks ago, [Cárdenas] sought to become the new president of the PRD," Alejandro Caballero wrote in Proceso. "However, he imposed one condition: that he have no one oppose him in an internal election. Los Chuchos, who control the PRD, shut down that proposal."

The rift between Cárdenas and Nueva Izquierda also comes on the heels of a failed effort by the PRD and the Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena) to organize a citizen referendum on the energy reforms promoted by Peña Nieto and the Congress. Cárdenas—son of Lázaro Cárdenas, who nationalized Mexico's oil sector in 1938—was the public face of the PRD's efforts to bring the issue to the citizens for a vote (SourceMex, Oct. 16, 2013, and March 19, 2014). On Oct. 30, Mexico's high court (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación, SCJN) rejected separate motions by the PRD and Morena to bring the issue to Mexican voters. The court said the proposal violated Article 35 of the Mexican Constitution, which clearly states that the restriction of human rights, electoral matters, government income and expenditures, as well as national security and operation of the armed forces cannot be subject to referendum (SourceMex, Nov. 5, 2014).

A public opinion poll by the daily newspaper El Universal found strong public support for Cárdenas' decision to leave the PRD. The poll was conducted by telephone among residents with landlines (rather than cellular phones). Some 57% of respondents said the PRD founder made the right decision to leave the party, while 16% said the move was a mistake. A majority, about 53%, also agreed that the move would weaken the PRD, while 31% said it would have no effect and 7% said the party would be strengthened with Cárdenas' departure.

Cárdenas, who is now 80 years old, emphasized that the decision to leave the PRD was purely personal and that he was not recommending the same course to other members of the party. "There are a lot of good people [in the PRD], the base of the party is strong," the elder statesman said in an interview on the television network Televisa.

Furthermore, he emphasized that he was not seeking to form another party or join Morena, founded by López Obrador. "I have decided to separate myself from the political party structure, but I will continue to raise the same issues that I have advocated," Cárdenas said.

Navarrete agreed the PRD is in need of a transformation. "If we do not change, we will continue to weaken, and our voters will change preferences," said the PRD president, who decided to stay in his post despite continued pressure for him to resign. "We need to understand this and take action."