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President Enrique Peña Nieto Shakes Up Cabinet

by Carlos Navarro

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In the first comprehensive shakeup of his administration, President Enrique Peña Nieto announced several changes to his Cabinet and other important positions in the executive branch, including the appointment of a new foreign relations secretary, the change of responsibilities of one controversial minister—former social development secretary Rosario Robles—and the ouster of another embattled Cabinet member—ex-education secretary Emilio Chuayffet. The changes came just days before the president was to deliver his third annual State of the Nation address.

As expected, the president's two closest advisors, Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong and Finance Secretary Luis Videgaray, remained in their posts. Videgaray was part of a scandal in which the finance secretary was accused of buying a home from a government contractor at a concessional price. The government's auditing ministry (Secretaría de Función Pública, SFP) cleared Videgaray, but the transaction remains suspect ([SourceMex, Aug. 26, 2015](#)).

Previously, the only other significant change by the administration was the appointment of Arely Gómez González as attorney general (March 11, 2015), replacing the embattled Jesús Murillo Karam, who, along with the president, bore the brunt of the criticism for the federal government's inaction on the disappearance and suspected murder of 43 students from a teachers college (Escuela Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa Raúl Isidro Burgos) in Guerrero state in 2014 ([SourceMex, Oct. 15, 2014](#), and [Jan. 28, 2015](#)).

Foreign relations, social development ministries have new leaders

One of the most significant changes was the appointment of Claudia Ruiz Massieu to the post of foreign relations secretary, replacing José Antonio Meade Kuribreña. Ruiz Massieu, who previously held the post of tourism secretary, is the niece of ex-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994). Her father, José Francisco Ruiz Massieu, was assassinated in Mexico City in 1994 as he emerged from a high-level meeting of officials of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). The murder occurred just months after the assassination of PRI presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio ([SourceMex, March 30, 1994](#), and [Oct. 5, 1994](#)).

Some analysts believe Ruiz Massieu, as head of the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE), is up to the task of managing Mexico's foreign policy. "One must not prejudge the capacity of Ruiz Massieu to perform the job as the new foreign relations secretary, but she will have very few days to prove herself," columnist Pascal Beltrán del Río wrote in the daily newspaper *Excélsior*. "In less than a month, she will have to accompany the president to the UN in New York, travel to Turkey for the meeting of the G20 nations, and fly to the Philippines for an official state visit."

Beltrán del Río said the big challenge for Ruiz Massieu would be a visit to the Persian Gulf at the beginning of 2016.

Meade, an independent who has served in three Cabinet positions under both the PRI and the center-right Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), will assume the management of the Secretaría de Desarrollo Social (SEDESOL), which oversees many important anti-poverty programs. "With

his appointment to SEDESOL, Meade becomes the first Mexican to head four different Cabinet ministries," said Beltrán del Río. "His biggest challenge is to reinvent the fight against poverty, which many say has barely managed to keep afloat the poorest of the poor in the past three decades."

Others agree that Meade, who served as energy and finance secretary under ex-President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), is a capable individual with a proven track record, but his biggest asset is his reputation as an honest individual. "This is going to be a big issue for the PRI because corruption is going to be a big issue during the 2018 presidential elections," columnist Leo Zuckermann wrote in *Excelsior*, pointing out that Meade as a PRI candidate could have a broad appeal to members of that party as well as the PAN.

Still, some critics questioned whether Meade, Ruiz Massieu, and other appointees have the proper experience to run their new Cabinet departments. "None of the appointees seems particularly qualified for their new posts," syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento wrote in the daily newspaper *Reforma*. "José Antonio Meade has performed well as a foreign relations and a finance secretary, which are his areas of expertise. He seems an odd fit at SEDESOL."

Sarmiento also questioned the appointment of former social development secretary Rosario Robles to the Secretaría de Desarrollo Agrario, Territorial y Urbano (SEDATU) after her removal from SEDESOL. "Robles has no experience in either agrarian or urban development," said Sarmiento.

Sarmiento pointed out that Ruiz Massieu has not held a post at any embassy or consulate, and Enrique de la Madrid—who was appointed to replace her at the Secretaría de Turismo (SECTUR)—has not had any experience in the tourism sector.

Furthermore, Sarmiento questioned the qualifications of Aurelio Nuño, a close adviser to Peña Nieto, as the new education secretary, replacing Chuayffet. "He is a brilliant man, but I do not believe that he is the best person qualified to lead the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP)."

Other Cabinet changes were considered neutral. Two former governors were appointed to important posts, with José Calzada Roviroso (who previously governed Querétaro state) put in charge of the Secretaría de Agricultura, Ganadería, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentación (SAGARPA), replacing Enrique Martínez. Former Chihuahua Gov. José Reyes Baeza took over as head of the social service agency for state workers (Instituto de Seguridad y Servicios Sociales de los Trabajadores del Estado, ISSSTE). Rafael Pacchiano Alamán was elevated from deputy environment secretary to head the Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT), replacing Juan José Guerra Abud.

An important non-Cabinet change that was inevitable was the ouster of Monte Alejandro Rubido as public safety commissioner. Rubido, who was replaced by Renato Sales Heredia, became a scapegoat for the government's inability to prevent the escape of notorious drug trafficker Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán Loera in July of this year ([SourceMex, July 15, 2015](#)). Rubido and Attorney General Arely Gómez were frequently the ones who had to explain to the press how the escape occurred.

In a press conference announcing his appointment, Sales Heredia addressed the escape. "We are going to do everything possible to demonstrate that the government is working hard to resolve the situation involving the escape of El Chapo," said the new director of the Comisión Nacional de Seguridad (CNS).

Still, Sales said there were other important matters that his agency had to address, including the confrontation between government operatives and the *Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación* (CJNG) in May of this year. The CJNG went on a 30-hour terror spree in many communities in Jalisco and surrounding states, responding to a government operation targeting many of the cartel's leaders ([SourceMex, May 13, 2015](#)).

Despite the wholesale changes to the Cabinet and other federal agencies, critics said Peña Nieto's moves did little to change the status quo. "Unfortunately, there are no signs with the changes in the Cabinet that the current government is planning to alter its policies and style of governance, which have been the main causes of its deterioration," the daily newspaper *La Jornada* wrote in an editorial. "On the contrary, this comes across as a cosmetic remake and an effort at damage control."

Changes precede annual state address

The Cabinet shuffle occurred just days before the administration was to present its State of the Nation report in a televised national address on Sept. 2. Interior Secretary Osorio Chong was due to deliver the written document to Congress that day.

In his address, the president highlighted advances made during his administration, including a decline in homicides relative to 2012 and the campaign to address hunger (*Cruzada contra el Hambre*), which was launched in January 2013 ([SourceMex, Jan. 23, 2013](#)). The president said the campaign now serves 4.5 million adults, children, and pregnant women in municipalities across Mexico.

Peña Nieto also announced a series of initiatives to strengthen the rule of law, address domestic violence, and promote the construction and repair of school buildings.

On the economic front, the president announced efforts to promote special economic zones in some of the country's most impoverished areas and to boost support for small businesses around the country.

Peña Nieto also highlighted the benefits of the tax reform, which the president introduced in 2013 ([SourceMex, Sept. 18, 2013](#)) and which Congress approved a month later ([SourceMex, Oct. 23, 2013](#)). The president said the reforms have succeeded in increasing tax collections, reducing reliance on oil revenues to fund the government, expanding the tax base, and reducing the size of the informal economy.

Many critics believe the current format of presenting the State of the Nation address discourages discussion of the content of the report. Deputy Jesús Zambrano, a member of the center-left *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD) and president of the Chamber of Deputies, suggested to Osorio Chong that the format be changed so that the president presents the report directly to Congress.

Zambrano's suggestion that Peña Nieto allow dialogue between the executive and legislative branches around the address prompted a rebuke from PRI Deputy Yulma Rocha Aguilar, who accused the PRD leader of wanting to use the occasion to offer "personal and partisan messages."

For generations, the president delivered the yearly address in front of the Congress. This changed in 2006, when center-left legislators took over the podium, preventing then President Vicente Fox from delivering his speech ([SourceMex, Sept. 6, 2006](#)). Facing similar protests, Fox's successor, Felipe Calderón, continued the practice of presenting the report to the public on television and having

one of his Cabinet members deliver the written report to Congress ([SourceMex, Sept. 5, 2007](#)). Peña Nieto did not make any changes to this practice when he assumed the presidency in 2012.

"The only thing that Zambrano did was to put on the table a practice that had not been followed for the past nine years: the need for the chief executive to resume dialogue with the Congress," columnist Francisco Garfias wrote in *Excélsior*."

"Since 2006, the delivery of the state address has been a comfortable act organized by the president's team of collaborators," Garfias added. "A select group of people is invited to attend the event. They are there to applaud during pauses and to congratulate the president when he is finished."

"The current format allows the president to control the spin, placing a strong emphasis on his accomplishments and the projects he has completed ... without outside interference," Jacqueline Peschard, a political science expert at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), said in a guest column in the daily newspaper *El Universal*.

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