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## Meeting with Trump further damages President Enrique Peña Nieto's Image in Mexico

by Carlos Navarro

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President Enrique Peña Nieto, already considered the most unpopular president in modern Mexican history, further hurt his legacy with his decision to invite US presidential candidate Donald Trump to Mexico City for a private meeting. The decision to invite Trump, who is highly unpopular in Mexico, came from a divided Cabinet, with Finance Secretary Luis Videgaray strongly pushing for the visit and Foreign Relations Secretary Claudia Ruiz Massieu and Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong reportedly in strong opposition. A day after Trump's visit, reports surfaced that Ruiz Massieu had offered her resignation. The foreign relations ministry (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, SRE), however, denied she had done so. Videgaray tendered his resignation on Sept. 6, and left office immediately.

Trump's visit to Mexico came a few days before Peña Nieto was scheduled to deliver the fourth annual state-of-the-nation report. Osorio Chong presented the written document to the Mexican Congress, which complied with the president's obligation under the Mexican Constitution. However, Peña Nieto broke a 70-year tradition whereby the sitting executive held a nationally televised news conference to highlight the content of the report. Peña Nieto opted instead to hold a series of meetings with young people around the country to discuss the state of the nation.

The most unpopular president in the modern era

Peña Nieto's decision to keep a low profile is perhaps a reflection of his low standing in the polls. The latest survey, conducted by the daily newspaper Reforma on Aug. 4-7, showed 23% of respondents held a favorable opinion of the president, the lowest standing for any Mexican executive since Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000), who presided over the country during the height of an economic crisis in the mid-1990s ([SourceMex, Jan. 3, 1996](#), and [July 24, 1996](#)). The poll, conducted among 1,200 adults around the country, had 3.3% margin of error and a confidence level of 95%.

Peña Nieto's popularity has been eroding over the past several months. A similar poll conducted by Reforma in April showed a favorable opinion of 30% for the president. Other recent polls have also pointed to Peña Nieto's decline in popularity. In July, the daily newspaper El Universal and the polling company Buendía & Laredo conducted a survey showing similar results. The poll, conducted on June 24-28, indicated that 63% of respondents rejected Peña Nieto's performance, compared with 56% in March.

Several factors combined to sink the president's popularity. Significant factors were the surge in crime and insecurity, along with the sluggish economy and the lack of tangible results from the energy, finance, and telecommunications reforms enacted early in the president's term ([SourceMex, March 27, 2013](#), [Oct. 23, 2013](#), and [Dec. 18, 2013](#)). The education reforms and a lack of resolution of the conflict with a dissident teachers union in Oaxaca, and other states ([SourceMex, May 25, 2016](#), and [July 6, 2016](#)) have also hurt Peña Nieto.

“The structural reforms are at the top of the list of complaints about the president, followed by the lack of action against organized crime, the ongoing conflict with teachers in Oaxaca and the ongoing economic crisis,” El Universal said in conjunction with the July poll.

The question of corruption was also on the minds of the people surveyed. This included the corrupt practices of the president, his family, his collaborators, and politicians associated with the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) over the last several years ([SourceMex, April 29, 2015](#), [Aug. 26, 2015](#), and [June 22, 2016](#)). A broader theme was the perception that the government was not honest with the citizens.

“The perception of corruption on the part of the federal government increased from 40% last year to 55% this year. Furthermore, seven out of 10 Mexicans believe that Mexico is on the wrong path,” said the online news site Publimetro, alluding to the latest Reforma survey. “These results indicate that Peña Nieto is the president with the worst rating since Ernesto Zedillo.”

Two cases were of special concern to respondents. One was the government’s alleged complicity and cover-up in the murder of 43 students from a teachers college in Guerrero state in September 2014 ([SourceMex, Oct. 15, 2014](#), [April 20, 2016](#), and [Aug. 10, 2016](#)). The other was the administration’s lack of transparency in explaining the government’s role in the Army massacre of 22 people in the community of Tlatlaya in June 2014 ([SourceMex, July 8, 2015](#), and [April 27, 2016](#)). The easy escape of notorious drug capo Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán Loera from a maximum-security penitentiary in July 2015 also hurt the president’s popularity ([SourceMex, July 15, 2015](#)). Guzmán Loera was recaptured six months later ([SourceMex, Jan. 20, 2016](#)).

Corruption has often been linked to rising crime and insecurity, which has increased significantly over the past year. Official statistics indicate that the largest number of homicides during Peña Nieto’s term in office occurred in 2015.

On top of the big-picture problems, Peña Nieto’s personal image continues to face increasing challenges. In late August, a report surfaced that the president plagiarized a large portion of his undergraduate law thesis at Universidad Panamericana in 1991. According to a report published on the online news site Aristegui Noticias, which is managed by investigative journalist Carmen Aristegui, the 200-page thesis, entitled “El presidencialismo mexicano y Álvaro Obregón” (Mexican Presidentialism and Alvaro Obregon), contained 197 plagiarized paragraphs.

“Aristegui Noticias gained access to a broad analysis of Peña Nieto’s thesis by a group of specialists and academics who discovered that the thesis was produced with plagiarized materials,” said the news site, which checked the paragraphs in question with the original sources. According to the report, Peña Nieto borrowed most heavily from the writings of former President Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado (1982-1988), particularly the document “Estudios de Derecho Constitucional” (Studies of Constitutional Law) without giving him credit. Other authors included several prominent historians and legal experts.

“In our revision of the text [of the thesis] it was evident that Peña Nieto also copied complete paragraphs from books written by Linda Hall, an academic at the University of New Mexico, and historians Enrique Krauze, Alberto Morales Jiménez, Víctor López Villafañe, José María Calderón, and Emilio Rabasa,” Aristegui Noticias reported. “There was also text from a handful of doctors

of law: Diego Valadés, José de Jesús Orozco Henríquez, Felipe Tena Ramírez, and the recently deceased jurist Jorge Carpizo.”

The office of the president initially did not offer comment but later issued a statement downplaying the situation. “It appears that style errors such as quotes without quotation marks or the lack of reference to authors in the bibliography are, two-and-a-half decades later, a matter of journalistic interest,” said presidential spokesperson Eduardo Sánchez, pointing out that Peña Nieto met all the requirements needed to graduate as a lawyer from Universidad Panamericana.

### *A surprising invitation to Trump*

Given his poor standing in the polls and the plagiarism scandal, it was a major surprise when Peña Nieto invited US presidential candidate Trump to meet with him in Mexico City. Trump is much reviled in the country for making disparaging comments about immigrants from Mexico and for pushing for the expansion and strengthening of a wall along the US-Mexico border. Trump has proposed that Mexico would pay for construction of the barrier ([SourceMex, May 11, 2016](#), and [July 27, 2016](#)).

The details of the private meeting between Trump and Peña Nieto were confusing and contradictory. At a joint press conference, Trump said that the wall had been a topic of conversation between the two men, but that there was no discussion of how the project would be financed. A few hours after the meeting, Peña Nieto sent out a message on Twitter indicating that he had made it clear to Trump that Mexico would not pay for the wall.

Trump was relatively reserved during his public appearance in Mexico, offering low-key comments on immigration and emphasizing a few points to improve the bilateral relationship between the two countries, including cooperation on security, a revision of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and joint efforts to control smuggling of drugs, arms and money. Trump described Peña Nieto as his friend and a “wonderful” president.

Peña Nieto, for his part, described the meeting with Trump as “open and constructive,” but later lashed out at the US presidential candidate. “His policy stances could represent a huge threat to Mexico, and I am not prepared to keep my arms crossed and do nothing,” Peña Nieto said. “That risk, that threat, must be confronted. I told him that is not the way to build a mutually beneficial relationship for both nations.”

In contrast to his almost polite speech in Mexico, Trump offered a defiant message at a subsequent rally in Arizona, where he pledged that an “impenetrable, physical, tall, powerful, beautiful southern border wall” would be constructed, and that Mexico would pay 100% of it although Mexicans “don’t know it yet.”

The lack of public condemnation from Peña Nieto during the press conference prompted strong rebukes from critics in Mexico. “The absence of leadership was apparent,” columnist José Buendía Hegewisch wrote in the daily newspaper *Excelsior*. “We need someone to speak out on behalf of Mexicans inside and outside our borders.”

Buendía Hegewisch and others said there was no reason for Peña Nieto to invite Trump in the first place. “The government and other voices are calling for pragmatism and a connection to a candidate who has a legitimate chance to reach the White House,” said the *Excelsior* columnist. “However,

there is no reason to believe that opening up Los Pinos [Mexico's presidential palace] would end the hateful and xenophobic speech that has led other countries to close their doors to this candidate."

The sentiment is shared by most Mexicans. A survey conducted by Reforma suggested that 85% of respondents felt that Peña Nieto's meeting with Trump was a mistake. Furthermore, almost two-third of those who participated said the decision to move forward with Trump's visit lowered their opinion of Peña Nieto.

### *A divided Cabinet*

Later reports indicated deep divisions among Peña Nieto's key Cabinet members, with Finance Secretary Videgaray strongly pushing for invitations to Trump and Democratic Party nominee Hillary Rodham Clinton. According to administration sources, Clinton declined the invitation to meet with Peña Nieto. Foreign Relations Secretary Claudia Ruiz Massieu and Interior Secretary Osorio Chong strongly opposed Trump's visit. According to reports, Videgaray and Peña Nieto moved ahead with the visit without consulting Ruiz Massieu. They also ignored a plea from Osorio Chong to cancel the visit.

There were widespread reports that Ruiz Massieu offered her resignation in the aftermath of Trump's visit, but the president declined to accept it. "Angered by the manner in which her opinion and the stature of her office were ignored, [Ruiz Massieu] presented her resignation, which Peña Nieto rejected," said Raymundo Riva Palacio, a respected columnist for the daily business newspaper El Financiero. The foreign ministry (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, SRE) later issued an official statement denying that Ruiz Massieu had resigned.

Even though Osorio Chong also opposed Trump's visit, he displayed loyalty to his boss when speaking with the media. Osorio Chong said the invitation to Trump "was not a mistake," but later took the opportunity to criticize the US presidential candidate, suggesting that Trump does not understand the complications that his proposals generate.

"[Trump] does not only hurt Mexicans, but the entire world," Osorio Chong told reporters shortly after presenting Peña Nieto's written report to Congress. "That is why we invited him, to expand his awareness. Mexico's president acted to ensure that Mexico's position was clear."

While Ruiz Massieu and Osorio Chong remain in the Cabinet, Videgaray surprisingly tendered his resignation on Sept. 6. He did not explain his departure, other than to say that he would not be assuming another Cabinet post or position in Peña Nieto's government.

Videgaray had come under pressure for proposing a drastic cut in spending in recent federal budgets, and the budget blueprint that the administration had prepared for Congress had a significant reduction in expenditures. However, some observers noted that Videgaray's hand in pushing for Trump's visit might have led to his departure. "Beyond the decisions on the budget, Trump's visit sealed Videgaray's fate, since this contributed to hurting Peña Nieto's image further," said the daily newspaper La Jornada.

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