

The Twilight of the Mexican Moment? The Enrique Peña Nieto Administration Between Perception and Reality

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A few months after appearing on the front page of *Time* magazine with the headline “Saving Mexico” and receiving the World Statesman Prize for 2014, Enrique Peña Nieto was facing a national and international firestorm. Why this switch? What was really revealed by the disappearance of the 43 Ayotzinapa normal school students?

Mainly U.S. and British media sources reported about the disappearance of Ayotzinapa, Guerrero’s 43 Isidro Burgos Normal School students. Both conservative media outlets like *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Economist*, or more moderate ones like *The New York Times* and prestigious magazines like *The New Yorker* reported the events that showed the crisis of human rights and the rule of law, the corruption, the clandestine graves, the government ineffectiveness in identifying the more than 1 000 bodies found in them, the lack of an official figure for missing persons, etc.

Despite the protests, the scandal in the media, and the drop in popularity of Mexico’s president and of the Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI), there has been no clear sign, at least from the government, of wanting to solve the students’ disappearance. What exists is a “historic truth,” which, according to then-Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam, is the legal truth. Why is it that what seems to have been a crisis of governability and the possible fall of Peña Nieto’s government has not turned out that way?

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It is my opinion that the twilight of the “Mexican moment” of Mexico’s president is due to a perception rather than a concrete event, with two arguments: first, the “frontstage” and “backstage” discourses of the political class that explain the “divorce” between it and the citizenry; and second, the fact that the mass media, more than informing, forges public opinion and gives rise to different propaganda strategies to generate consensus and maintain hegemony.

THE POLITICS FRONTSTAGE AND BACKSTAGE

The generalized idea that there is a divorce between the citizenry and the political class persists; this can be explained by what is known as frontstage and backstage politics.

From backstage politics, what is being built is the social inequality between politicians and the public, and the exclusion of the latter from the specialized, technocratic knowledge is what has created the current disillusionment with

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politics, a disenchantment with politicians. Now, in terms of frontstage politics, the media have tended to treat politicians like celebrities, actors, or rock stars. This has fostered a fictionalization of politics and politicians, sharpening the rift between political activity and the public. This is because, instead of the media talking about the truly political actions of those in power (which occur backstage), they focus on other kinds of activities that make them look like people in the entertainment business.¹

And this is just what we see when Mexican political scandals are published, like, for example, Peña Nieto and his family on the cover of *¡Hola!* magazine during his state visit to the United Kingdom, or at the graduation party of his current wife's daughter. This keeps audiences busy with trivial pseudo-news, distracting the broad public from national political events.

It is as if, of the whole, light was being shed on only one part of the situation, and the rest was being left in the shadows. The most critical media, like journalist Carmen Aristegui's news program, *Aristegui News*, and *Proceso* (Process) magazine, have brought to light some of the most disgraceful cases of corruption and conflicts of interest of this administration. However, most citizens get their information from the news programs aired by the Televisa group television and radio stations.

MASS MEDIA, PUBLIC OPINION, AND PROPAGANDA

In 1988, Noam Chomsky and Edwar S. Herman published *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. They explain that the media tend to suppress, shade, emphasize, and select the context, the premises, and the overall agenda, and that this is highly functional for those in power groups. They also talk about a propaganda model that serves the big media, allowing the wealth of the owners and the dominant media companies to benefit by making private and public advertising their main source of income.

This strategy works for all the big media whose main interest is financial and for whom information is nothing more

than a commodity. In addition, they try to have a real influence on political decisions, mainly the ones that benefit them financially and politically.

After the disappearance of the 43 Ayotzinapa students, Enrique Peña Nieto's honeymoon with the international press came to an end. The case was highly scandalous, not only because of the events themselves, but because of the government's inefficiency and inexpert handling of the affair and the investigations, which the international media, even those that at one time had exalted the president's image, could not ignore given their magnitude. The Tlatlaya massacre in the State of Mexico and the Ayotzinapa events are proof that Mexico is a lawless country, and media outlets like *The Economist* took the position that Peña Nieto underestimates law and order, emphasizing that distrust in the administration of justice prevails among the citizenry. In short: for the international media, Mexico is experiencing a failure in issues of security.

But these international media have followed two roads: on the one hand, they have praised Peña Nieto's structural reforms, and on the other, they have criticized the inefficacy with which the government has responded to the demand for the resolution of the case of the 43 disappeared students. Thus, what they underlined as the issues of most concern were the human rights crisis, corruption, impunity, insecurity, and the lack of governability and legitimacy of Enrique Peña Nieto's administration.

The most conservative U.S. media have centered on the issue of the disappeared students, without delving into the causes, without hinting at the idea of a possible forced disappearance or pointing out the government's responsibility. What is truly alarming for these media was that a situation of extreme insecurity and human rights violations could turn into a political and social crisis that could block the implementation of the structural reforms.

For example, *The Economist*, after hurling rebukes at Peña Nieto, and stating that he "doesn't get that he doesn't get it," closes its article saying,

His bold economic reforms may yet bring political reward. The opposition's splits may help him win a congressional election in June. But the past few months have undermined the authority he used to secure the reforms. And with polls suggesting that turnout in the election will be dismal, the main beneficiary of the cynicism the president is engendering may be Andrés Manuel López Obrador, a messianic populist who has twice almost won the presidency. Mexico deserves better.²

At first glance, the image of Mexico's president is deteriorating. However, following the two prevailing trends in the international media, it would seem that what concerns them are the possible consequences; that is, that the social and political crisis and the levels of corruption will make it impossible to deepen the reforms and will scare away capital, investments, and big business. In no functional democracy would the level of corruption and impunity that exists in Mexico be well looked upon or allowed.

DAMAGE CONTROL AND PUBLIC IMAGE AS GOVERNMENT STRATEGY

On July 13, the *Aristegui Noticias* portal published the statement, "During the first two years of the Peña Nieto administration, the federal government has wasted more than Mex\$10.8 billion in official publicity," more than Mex\$900 million of which went to Televisa and TV Azteca in 2014.³ This spending suggests that the current administration is extremely interested in its image and in "informing" the public of its achievements through publicity spots. Despite this onerous spending, the president's image has deteriorated and his popularity ratings have dropped sharply.

The international press has widely reported on corruption and impunity. After the second jailbreak on July 11, 2015 of drug kingpin Joaquín "Chapo" (Shorty) Guzmán Loera from a maximum security prison, *The New York Times* was emphatic in pointing out that Peña Nieto's credibility had waned because of it. It went on to write, "The breakout has come as a symbol of the president's inability to overcome the deeply rooted ills of corruption and impunity and gaping holes in the rule of law."⁴ *Crisis Group* analyst Javier Ciurlizza said that El Chapo's second escape would lead to a crisis of trust and legitimacy for the Enrique Peña Nieto administration and both national and international analysts and media seem to agree. But despite the criticisms of the domestic and international press, the president and the ministers of defense and the navy did not cancel their visit to France, where Peña Nieto received a medal from the University of the Sorbonne in Paris.

I think that despite the demonstrations, the calls by the UN and Amnesty International, the criticisms on the social networks, the demands that Peña Nieto resign, etc., there has not been a serious crisis of governability. We can pinpoint hot spots in the states of Guerrero, Michoacán, Oaxaca, and Tam-

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aulipas, but the Peña Nieto administration maintains hegemony. This is due to the following:

1. Though the demonstrations, petition signing, virtual protests, etc., are an expression of the extent to which the population is fed up, in my judgment, they are only symbolic, well-intentioned acts. Huge demonstrations have taken place in Mexico City, but as yet there is no great national movement with the objective of transforming Mexico. What can be seen are disperse demonstrations with immediate —sometimes not very clear— objectives without an over-reaching political project. I think that the "Mexican spring" is not yet upon us.
2. The UN, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch calls have not had sufficient impact to weaken Peña Nieto's administration, despite the crisis of legitimacy and the public's mistrust of the justice system and the rule of law.
3. Despite the acts of corruption and conflicts of interest that members of the cabinet and even Peña Nieto have been involved in with the Higa Group, the administration continues to be invited to different international activities and conferences, like the Summit of the Americas and the World Economic Forum. It has also made state visits to the United States and the pompous trip to the United Kingdom. In my opinion, it still maintains international support and, therefore, legitimacy despite what is perceived in the media.
4. Until now, there have been no important ousters from the cabinet. To the contrary, the population perceived the appointment of Arely Gómez as the new federal attorney general as a gift to Televisa: she is the sister of Leopoldo Gómez, the vice-president of that TV network's news department. Her predecessor, who will be remembered for revealing "the historic truth" about Ayotzinapa and for famously complaining "I'm tired" amidst the investigation into the case,⁵ Jesús Murillo Karam, moved sideways to head up the Ministry of Agrarian, Territorial, and Urban Development. Despite criticisms leveled at him from different sectors, Eduardo Medina Mora, also associated with Televisa, was ratified as a Supreme Court justice. And finally, despite the so-called "Massacre of Apatzingán" on January 6, 2015, where, according

to the media, the federal police executed 14 unarmed persons in Michoacán, then-federal-commissioner in the state, Alfredo Castillo, after being ousted from that post, was appointed to head up the National Sports Commission. And up until now, everything points to only minor functionaries being removed from their posts after El Chapo's escape.

5. Yet another example showing that despite everything, the Peña Nieto administration is calling the shots, is the scandalous silencing of journalist Carmen Aristegui, who after a difference with the MVS Group, was taken off the air. The population has understood this as a government manoeuvre to silence one of the most critical voices in the media, the person who broke the story of the case called "The White House."⁶

It is important to underline that in June 2015 mid-term elections, the party in office received 29.18 percent of the vote nationwide, a little over 11 million, making it once again

the majority in Congress. For all of the aforementioned reasons, I think we will continue to be witnesses to different manoeuvres for damage control so the economic project initiated by Enrique Peña Nieto with its reform package continues to move full speed ahead, since the structure is intact and continues to receive major international support. Examples of that are the visit of the king and queen of Spain and Peña Nieto's very enthusiastic reception by the French government, despite the many protests both there and in Mexico.

Before finishing, it should be noted that El Chapo's escape and the presidential trip to France took place at the same time that the first round of bidding for 14 blocks of oil investments began. In that context, a phrase from *The New Yorker* comes to mind: "If a man like that [like El Chapo] can buy his freedom in Mexico today, then there is nothing in the country that is not for sale."⁷ ■■■

NOTES

¹ César Colorado, "Una mirada al análisis crítico del discurso. Entrevista con Ruth Wodak," *Discurso y sociedad* vol. 4, no. 3, September 30, 2010, pp. 579-596.

² *The Economist*, "The Mexican morass. A president who doesn't get that he doesn't get it," January 24, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/americas/21640397-president-who-doesnt-get-he-doesnt-get-it-mexican-morass>.

³ *Aristegui Noticias*, "¿En qué medios gasta más el gobierno?: en Televisa, TVAzteca, Grupo Fórmula...", July 13, 2015, <http://aristeguinoticias.com/1307/mexico/en-que-medios-gasta-mas-el-gobierno-en-televisa-azteca-grupo-formula/>.

⁴ William Neuman, Randal C. Archibold y Azam Ahmed, "Mexico Prison Break by 'El Chapo' Is a Blow to President Peña Nieto," *The New York Times*,

July 13, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/14/world/americasmexico-joaquin-guzman-loera-el-chapo-prison-escape.html?_r=1.

⁵ "Por qué Murillo Karam dijo 'Ya me cansé'. Él mismo responde," November 10, 2014, <http://mexico.cnn.com/adnpolitico/2014/11/10/por-que-murillo-karam-dijo-ya-me-canse-el-mismo-responde>. [Editor's Note.]

⁶ About MVS's reaction to Carmen Aristegui's investigation into the president's wife's presumptive corruption case so-called the "White House," in reference to a very expensive house owned by the first lady, see <http://aristeguinoticias.com/2303/mexico/mvs-pidio-no-emitir-reportaje-de-ca-sa-blanca-revela-aristegui/>. [Editor's Note.]

⁷ Patrick Radden Keefe, "El Chapo escapes again," *The New Yorker*, July 12, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/el-chapo-escapes-again>.



All of us at *Voices of Mexico* sincerely regret the death of **Dr. Monica Gambrill Ruppert**, a highly regarded researcher at the UNAM's Center for Research on North America, and a frequent, enthusiastic contributor to our magazine.

We send our most sincere condolences to her family, friends, colleagues, and students.

Rest in peace, **Monica**.