

The Mexican Crisis Deepens

November 29, 2014

The Mexican government confronts a major political crisis on two fronts. The first is as a result of the massacre and kidnapping that took place on September 26 when police and other assailants in Ayotzinapa, Guerrero killed six, wounded twenty-five, and kidnapped 43 students. Since the massacre and kidnapping took place, there have been demonstrations in Guerrero, Mexico City, and several other states, some of them massive and some violent. Mexicans are appalled at the abduction of these young people and indignant at both the involvement of local officials and police and the national government's failure to deal with the issue.

Then, in early November, the media discovered that, in a flagrant conflict of interest, President Enrique Peña Nieto and his wife Angélica Rivera had a \$7 million home in the exclusive Lomas neighborhood—the president's wife call it "their real home"—a modern house that belonged to a subsidiary of Grupo Higa, a company that had done hundreds of millions of dollars of business with the State of Mexico when Peña Nieto was governor and which had just signed a contract on November 3 with a Chinese-led consortium to build a \$3.7 billion high-speed railroad between Mexico City and Queretaro. The president and his wife quickly announced that the house was not a gift but that she was buying the home and the government canceled the contract for construction of the railroad.

The killing and kidnapping of the students in Ayotzinapa on the orders of local government and carried out by the local police—against a backdrop of eight years of the war on drugs that has taken 110,000 lives, seen as many as 20,000 others disappeared, and left over one million displaced—has led to massive protest demonstrations over the last two months by students, teachers in Guerrero, in the Mexican capital, and in several other states.

While the current crisis is very serious and the mostly peaceful protests have been inspiring and militant, so far the movement — without a strong organization itself and without having created a political leadership — will be challenged to bring significant reform to the Mexican government and to society at large. The movement is large, angry, and in motion, but it does not appear to be big enough yet to move the powers-that-be, who have indicated their willingness to use police and military repression to stop any threat to the government and the economic establishment.

Though many Mexicans throughout the country are concerned and angry about the disappearance of the students and the government and police role in it, the protest movement so far has been concentrated in Guerrero where the crime took place, Mexico City, and other a few other western, central and southeastern states such as Michoacán, Morelos, and Oaxaca. The large and less populous states of the north, distant both geographically and culturally, have also seen some significant protests. The dominant groups at the center of the movement have been teachers and students, with some participation from middle class and working class groups. Most Mexicans have yet to take a stand and the working classes with few exceptions remain observers. With the left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) implicated in the crime, the new Movement of National Renovation (MORENA) party still in formation and committed to an electoral strategy, and the public fed up with politics as usual, there seems to be little chance that this movement can find a political vehicle to give expression to the movement.

Peña Nieto's government has been embarrassed by the revelations of the president's conflict of interest, the government at the highest levels and shaken by the wide-spread criticism and massive protests. Still, it has shown few signs of division and little lack of confidence in dealing with the

crisis.

Realizing the depth of the crisis, the extent of the public disaffection, and the size and significance of the movement, on November 27 Peña Nieto took for himself the movement's slogan "We are all Ayotzinapa!" In a remarkable official statement showing that the government has been shaken by the crisis, he said, "The unfortunate events in Iguala have shown that Mexico has deficiencies and conditions to overcome. The shout 'We are all Ayotzinapa' is a cry to continue transforming Mexico. The shout 'We are all Ayotzinapa' is an example of a nation that has come together in solidarity in difficult moments. As a society we should have the capacity to channel our pain and indignation into constructive propositions. Facing the circumstances in which we find ourselves, we will demonstrate again the unity, the character, and the determination of the Mexican people. The road for Mexico should be peace, unity, and development." At the same time, Peña Nieto proposed the creation new anti-corruption system, government take-over of crime-controlled municipalities, and special economic zones to help the country's most backward regions.

The president, his interior minister, the attorney general, and the head of the army and navy have taken a clear stand indicating their preparedness to use a heavy hand against protestors who become a threat to the established order. Still, should new crimes such as took place in Ayotzinapa continue to be committed or should there be new revelations of presidential corruption, the movement could grow and spread. Or if Mexico's independent labor unions were to throw themselves into the balance on the side of the protest movement that could be decisive. And we have seen some very tentative moves in that direction. But for now it seems the government is intent on dragging out the investigations, accompanied by pledges of its concern, sincerity, transparency, and seriousness, until December 12 when the Christmas season begins, lasting until January 6, no doubt believing that by then Ayotzinapa will have become history.

Two Months of Protest

The protests over the murders and disappearances that began in late September continued throughout October and reached a peak on November 20, anniversary of the beginning of the Mexican Revolution when tens of thousands—some say hundreds of thousands—marched and rallied in the zócalo, the national plaza. Beginning in late September, protestors, striking out at symbols of government and politics burned the Iguala city hall, the Party of the Democratic Revolution state office in Chilpancingo, and in a large protest on November 8, burned the door of the National Palace in Mexico City. The tense atmosphere and the authorities' tendency to use a heavy hand can be seen in the police incursion into the National Autonomous University of Mexico in Mexico City and a military unit's entrance into the Autonomous University of Coahuila in Toluca, Coahuila—reminiscent of the military take over of UNAM in 1968 and again in 1971.

The parents of the 43 disappeared students made a pilgrimage through neighboring states on their way to Mexico City for the November 20 demonstration, continuing their demand that their children be released and returned to them alive. While the movement's slogan has been "They took them alive, and alive we want them back," many believe that the students must already have been killed. The Mexico City demonstration was by far the largest, but there have been dozens of others, some protests of thousands in several Mexican states. A number of university campuses have seen not only protests but also strikes by students, faculty, and workers. And in the demonstration in Mexico City on October 28 unions that form part of the National Union of Workers (UNT) joined the students. Yet, at the same time it should be noted that the leadership of the large public employees union (ISSSTE) simply ignored the student disappearance and the scandal of the presidential residence and expressed its continued support for Peña Nieto, for the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and for the government.

As a result of the November protests in the zócalo in Mexico City, eleven protestors were arrested and charged with criminal association, mutiny and attempted homicide of a police officer. Amnesty International and many Mexican organizations have called the charges highly exaggerated. The arrests have led to another protest movement especially among university students calling for their immediate release. Therefore, there are now in Mexico two parallel protest movements, one calling for the 43 students kidnapped at Ayotzinapa to be returned alive and the other calling for the release of the 11 students arrested for protesting the Ayotzinapa disappearances. The missing Mexican students, their families, friends, and the movement have received tremendous international solidarity from groups of all sorts around the world, with protests staged at Mexican embassies and consulates in several countries. Many human rights organizations in Mexico and around the world have decried the Mexican government's failure to adequately respond.

The Government United

The revelations of the presidential couple's occupation of a home owned by Grupo Higa which had done hundreds of millions of dollar deals with Peña Nieto when he was governor and which stood to be involved in a multi-billion dollar deal with him as president caused some embarrassment and discomfort for the president, but it failed to open up any rift within the high levels of the administration. The conservative National Action Party (PAN) in particular went after the issue, but that was of course to be expected from the opposition party. Peña Nieto and his cabinet appeared absolutely united around a hard line toward violent protest accompanied by declarations of their commitment to see justice done.

President Peña Nieto speaking on November 20, the 104th anniversary of the Mexican Revolution, established the government's position and the tone of official statements. "Mexico is wounded, but the only way to alleviate this pain is justice and peace," he said. Mexicans, he told a special meeting of the executive, judicial, and legislative branches, want the law to be observed and want order to be established." Violence, he said, was absolutely unacceptable, stating that both the government and the society reject it. At the same time, he asserted the "loyalty, nobility, and professionalism" of the armed forces.

Similarly, Juan N. Silva Meza, president of the Supreme Court, asserted that Mexico's Revolution of 1910 had left the country with institutions and laws so that it could avoid in the future an event as bloody as the Mexican Revolution. In these turbulent times, he said, all branches of the Mexican government should be united. The Secretary of National Defense, Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda, speaking on the same occasion and receiving an award for fifty years of service, said, "Violence of any kind is unacceptable" but added that the country needs a "plurality of voices." Solving the problem of violence, said the Secretary, was not just a problem of the state but of the entire society. What these statements suggest is that while protest has surged from below, it has had little impact on the government which has dedicated its energy to developing a narrative of the crime and a story about how it is handling the issue which will calm critics and placate the public.

The Fabrication of an Official Story

Since our last report on these events, the government and the media have worked to establish an official story with the goal of proving that they have uncovered the wrong-doers, that they are seeking justice, and that the matter can soon be considered a closed case. Yet, because the Mexican public knows that the police generally use torture to obtain confessions that often prove false, few believe the official story.

The official story goes like this: Ayotzinapa Mayor José Luis Abarca Velázquez and his wife María de los Ángeles Pineda Villa, both affiliated with the leftist opposition Party of the Democratic Revolution

(PRD), were responsible for the police attack and for then turning over the students to “Guerreros Unidos” (United Warriors), a criminal gang that, according to authorities and the media suffocated 15 and then killed the rest one way or another, threw their bodies into a pit, poured on gasoline and burned them, and finally threw the ashes in a river. The Mexican army officers at a local base claim to have somehow remained unaware of the mayhem taking place in Ayotzinapa.

The mayor and his wife, who had been fugitives, as well as police officers have been arrested. The governor of the state, Ángel Aguirre Rivero, also of the PRD, had already resigned on October 3.

Many doubt this quasi-official narrative of the events, having no faith in the government or the police. One reason for the widespread doubt is that Mexicans know all too well that the military and police act with impunity and that confessions extracted through torture always produce statements that corroborate an official narrative concocted by the authorities to cover up wrongdoing.

Mexican Justice: Torture to Support Confession of an Official Story

For decades both Mexican and international human rights organizations have documented widespread torture in Mexico. On Sept. 4 of this year Amnesty International released a report entitled “Out of Control: torture and Other Ill-Treatment in Mexico” stating that “...torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment play a central role in policing and public security operations by military and police forces across Mexico. These practices are widespread and are frequently condoned, tolerated or ignored by other law enforcement officials, superior officers, prosecutors, judges and some human rights commissions. The result is almost total impunity for abusers and a real fear among the population that arrest for any reason is likely to result in torture.

The U.S. State Department’s “Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2013” for Mexico similarly concluded, “There were frequent reports of citizens and foreign nationals beaten, suffocated, tortured with electric shocks, raped, and threatened with death in the custody of arresting authorities. According to the human rights nongovernmental organization (NGO) Institute for Security and Democracy (INSYDE), other torture practices included hanging individuals from their feet, fingers, or neck.” This kind of torture used by the police in the process of their “investigations” means that one can have no trust in anything said by the police or their supposed “suspects.

One of the independent Mexican human rights organizations, CentroProdh, has raised the slogan, “Torture is not justice. Stop the fabrication of guilty persons.” Their website carries a graphic that clearly shows the “cycle of torture,” the system by which the police and military extract false confessions and fabricate narratives to explain crimes for which the police themselves are, not infrequently, responsible. The website recounts the sad stories of men and women tortured by soldiers and police officers.

This scenario is well known, as Amnesty International wrote in its Annual Report on Human Rights Practices 2013, “There was widespread use of arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment to obtain information and confessions from suspects under interrogation. The CNDH reported receiving 1,662 complaints of torture and ill-treatment during the year. There were no reported convictions for torture during the year.” At the same time, says Amnesty in the same report, 98 percent of real crimes go unpunished.

Mexican civilian authorities, the military, and police count upon the passage of time to take care of all of these problems. That is, as time passes crimes become more difficult to solve. Witnesses die, or are killed. Evidence decays or is lost. The media loses interest in old crimes as it moves on to new ones, with new photos of beaten and bruised men, looking terrified, holding guns in the glare of the flash. What was news becomes history.

The most famous example of this strategy, of course, is the story of the femicides, the killing of young women in Ciudad Juárez across the border from El Paso. Since the 1990s hundreds of girls and young women in Juárez have been abducted, their bodies disfigured, and murdered, while others disappeared completely. Many of the murder victims bore the scars of what had apparently been ritual, sexual, sadistic murder. The authorities concocted various narratives over the years, arresting and charging a number of individuals for one or more of the murders representing only a small percentage of all of those killed. All of this takes place in the shadow of the multinational corporations' maquiladoras where many of the young women worked. There have been hundreds of journalistic articles, academic studies, national and international investigations as well as the documentary "Señorita Extraviada" (Missing Young Woman). What emerges from any serious look is, at best, the incompetence of the police and, at worst, their complicity in a cover up and perhaps in the murders themselves.

We used to think that Juárez with its 400 or more dead girls and women was as bad as it could get. Then came President Felipe Calderón and his drug wars of 2006-2012. Calderón dispatched tens of thousands of federal police, mostly to the northern border region of Mexico, to fight the drug cartels. The result — in struggles between police and drug dealers and between rival drug lords — was the killing of over 100,000 people, the disappearance of 20,000, and the displacement of an estimated 1.6 million. Investigation of the more than 100,000 homicides committed led to conviction in only 1 to 2 percent of the cases.

There are plenty of atrocities. Mexico has a long history of massacres, many of them political. There was the Aguas Blancas massacre of 17 farmers in Guerrero on June 28, 1995, members of Organización Campesina de la Sierra Sur (South Mountain Range Farmer Organization). Then, too, the Acteal massacre of 45 poor farmers, members of Las Abejas, a pacifist peasant organization carried out by a paramilitary organization in Chenahló, Chiapas on December 22, 1997. Those were political massacres. Then came the drug war period. In June of 2010 Mexican authorities found a mass grave in Guerrero containing at least 55 bodies and perhaps as many as 100, apparently the victims of a mass execution (although we don't know why). That same month, a grave in Nuevo Leon in the north of Mexico was found containing 70 bodies, also apparently a mass execution, reason unknown.

One can go on and on with these lists: 193 bodies in a common grave in San Fernando, Tamaulipas in April of 2011. That same month, 340 in a mass grave in Durango. And many other mass graves of 30 or 40 since then. Also, of course, the 19 mass graves found while investigating the disappearance of the 43 students. The dead were mostly not important people. Many, no doubt, were drug dealers, but there were also workers, farmers, students, mothers, children, old men and women. So the police did not think that their cases called for a serious investigation. Their names went on a list, their photos in some cases appeared in the newspaper. They have been dead a long time now, and so, of course, the witnesses have moved, or died, or perhaps themselves been killed. Evidence has decayed or disappeared. The Christmas holidays have come and gone. They will have become part of history, and their investigation will be not police work, but work for historians.

The Role of the United States

The United States government and American business exert enormous power on the Mexican government in many different ways. U.S. corporations invest billions in Mexico and exert economic and political influence there as well as having a tremendous impact on Mexican society. The American president, U.S. diplomats, government officials, Senators and Congressmen also develop ties to their Mexican counterparts and exert influence affecting policies. The U.S. Military, intelligence agencies, and various police forces such as the DEA, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and others also collaborate with and sometime become directly involved in

Mexico. Washington has spent \$3 billion in the last six years on the Mérida Initiative, a border security, counter-narcotics, and counterterrorism program established by the George W. Bush administration in 2008. The U.S. Defense Department also spends millions of dollars to train the Mexican military. Both the U.S. government and U.S. corporations have millions of dollars that can be distributed in Mexico to help to lubricate the machine of government to manufacture the results they desire.

President Barack Obama repeatedly lauded the government of President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) and its war on drugs and has, in the last two years, praised President Enrique Peña Nieto, even as tens of thousands of Mexicans were killed in the drug wars, thousands more disappeared, and hundreds of thousands were displaced. Yet, it would be a mistake to argue, as John M. Ackerman does that President Barack Obama and the United States Congress are directly responsible for the tragedy of the 3 missing students, and likely massacred student activists in the Mexican state of Guerrero—and for the political crisis that has followed.”

While subject to enormous pressure, Mexico is not a puppet state run by the U.S. government, but an independent capitalist state with its own government, rival political parties, and policies. The Mexican capitalist class and la clase política together with the political parties and the state bureaucracy are principally responsible for what happens in Mexico, although clearly the U.S. support for the Mexican government and military dramatically magnifies the level of violence and damage to Mexican society.

The Crisis of the Party of the Democratic Revolution

While the disappearance of the 43 students has challenged the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) of President Enrique Peña Nieto, it has had a devastating impact on the left-of-center Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). The PRD, founded in 1989 by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and other leader of the PRI, former Communist Party members and other leftists, adopted a social democratic program, affiliated with the Socialist International, and became a major left-of-center political force, although because of corporate media and electoral fraud it was never able to win a presidential election.

Whether the presidential candidate was the more statesman-like Cárdenas or the more populist Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the PRD was a force to be reckoned with. Kept from claiming the presidency, the PRD over the years had a substantial congressional delegation in both the Senate and the House, governed several states, and presided over many municipalities. Despite corrupt political leadership and proof of fraud within the PRD itself, the party continued to win the support of about a third of the Mexican people. The party, however, is now in crisis. The events at Ayotzinapa—a town governed by a PRD mayor in a state headed by a PRD governor—could lead to the crumbling of the party.

Cárdenas, the founder, three-time presidential candidate (1988, 1994, and 2000), the symbolic leaders and the moral authority of the party announced on November 25 that he was resigning from the PRD. Cárdenas, now 75 years old, made the announcement of his resignation after meeting with other historic and current leaders of the PRD who have said that they too may leave the PRD. Cárdenas declared that the PRD was “on the verge of dissolving, or ending up a simple political-electoral franchise subordinate to interests alien to those of the broad base of its members.” Cárdenas’ difference with the party leadership have to do not only with Ayotzinapa, but with the PRD’s having signed the Pact for Mexico, joining with the PRI and the conservative National Action Party (PAN), and for all practical purposes supporting President Peña Nieto’s neoliberal economic program. Cárdenas continues to fight to preserve the Mexican state’s ownership of the oil industry—originally nationalized by his father President Lázaro Cárdenas in 1938—and for keeping

oil exploration, production, and refining out of foreign hands.

Not surprisingly, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who not long ago resigned from the PRD to establish the Movement of National Renovation Party (MORENA), said that Cárdenas had done well to resign. Yet López Obrador, who was the PRD's presidential candidate in 2006 and again in 2012, has also been linked to the PRD establishment in Guerrero. As a presidential candidate of the PRD, López Obrador campaigned alongside the PRD state governor and Iguala mayor in Guerrero, and his opponents have suggested that López Obrador and MORENA are also tainted, a charge denied both by him and leaders of MORENA.

Constituent Congress? What Does He Mean?

Just days before his resignation, alluding to the events at Ayotzinapa, Cárdenas called for the convening of a constituent congress to write a new Mexican Constitution as the only way for the country to escape from the crisis in which it finds itself. Historically in Mexico and other nations, a constituent assembly or congress has usually arisen from a revolution, a deep political crisis, some major social upheaval leading to a new balance of forces and a new leadership group. Such a constituent congress, even if remaining a capitalist system, often completely changes governmental structures.

Over the last two decades the Zapatista Army of National Liberation and other leftist organizations or social movements have also called for a constituent congress but with the notion of the total revamping of the government. Cárdenas, however, seems to see a constituent congress as leaving the country's fundamental institutions intact while providing a space for democratic discussions. It is quite doubtful that there exists a large enough, broad enough, and deep enough social movement at this time to force the calling of such an assembly by the government or to call such an assembly on its own accord.

What are the Movement's Prospects?

The current situation is probably the deepest crisis since the events surrounding the 2006 presidential election, believed by many to have been illegal and fraudulent. At that time, Andrés Manuel López Obrador's followers organized demonstrations of up to one million people and occupied the major thoroughfares of Mexico City for weeks. The current demonstrations, large and militant as they have been, have not reached that level.

Still, the movement calling for the students to be returned alive and in protest against government at all levels has been growing. Should the movement become larger and stronger, the government will be prepared to use such massive repression that it is crushed, the leaders jailed, and the public demoralized. The precedents for this can be found in 1959 railroad workers strike, 1968 student movement, 1976 electrical workers strike.

The Mexican State: Divided, Corrupt, Tending toward Crisis

The combination of angry protests from below over the murder and disappearance of the students and the scandal at the top have made this the most significant Mexican political crisis since the 2006 elections when protests over election fraud brought a million to the capital and protestors blocked streets for weeks. The President of Uruguay, commenting on the disappearances, called Mexico "a failed state," a remark he almost immediately retracted after Mexico protested. His comment however raised again the question posed only a few years ago by Janet Napolitano, when she was Secretary of Homeland Security, and said that Mexico's drug dealers posed an "existential risk" for Mexico. Many others have suggested over the past several years that Mexico is a failing state. And

others have asked, if it is not a failing state, then what what sort of state is Mexico?

The suggestion has been made by various analysts that it is a “narco-state” controlled by the drug lords, most recently in *Le Monde Diplomatique*. One might draw from a narco-state analysis that the goal should be a return to capitalist rule of law, perhaps as the first stage of a broader struggle. The conclusion that Mexico is a narco-state, however, is fundamentally wrong. Mexico remains a capitalist state representing the great financial and corporate interests of the country—some of which are those of drug dealers—but divided into political fiefdoms, riddled with corruption, and facing tremendous centrifugal forces as a variety of forces from drug cartels to self-defense groups to indigenous movements attempt to achieve autonomy at the expense of the central government, creating the tendency toward a permanent crises of governability.

The government serves the interests of the wealthiest Mexicans and of the largest domestic and foreign corporations, allowing the continued deterioration of the lives of middle class, working class, and poor Mexicans. The power of the state is used principally to enhance the wealth and power of legitimate business, even if it is true that it has also become deeply intertwined at many levels with the drug dealers. Mexico’s politics do not revolve around drugs, they revolve around capitalist finance, production, and trade. The trade policies such as North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) of 1994 and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) now under negotiation are the result of collaboration between politicians, government functionaries, and corporate leaders.

Similarly, the neoliberal economic “reforms” of the last two years that have brought labor, education, and energy production and the oil industry more into line with demands of national and international capital. The labor reforms in particular have increased the power of business and reduced the already limited power of unions and workers to organize, strike, and negotiate.

Drug dealing, it is true, represents a multi-billion dollar business, but it is only one of several sectors which bring billions of dollars to the foreign or Mexican corporations in Mexico. Drugs are more or less of the same magnitude as the other large and important sources of earnings, namely tourism, manufacturing, petroleum, mining, and remittances from workers abroad. In rather rough round numbers the role of these sectors in the country’s earnings are:

- Manufacturing exports – \$110 billion
- Drugs – estimated between \$13 and \$50 billion
- Petroleum – \$32 billion
- Remittances – \$22.4 billion in 2012
- Mining – 19.4 billion in 2013

The Mexican billionaires who control these sectors dominate the Mexican state, and most of them are not drug dealers. The problem is that the federal government’s ability to maintain the monopoly of violence and to control the society tends, because of the drug dealers powerful economic interests, to face a constant, but never realized, crisis of potential disintegration.

There is no doubt that the illegal nature of the drug business leads drug dealers and those they work with in government, military, and the police to adopt an extralegal approach—often brutally violent in their dealings with the citizenry. It should be pointed out that Mexican authorities often used such brutal methods of repression long before drugs became so significant, although it is true that the situation is much, much worse today.

The involvement with drug dealers and other criminal gangs of politicians of all parties, as well as of the government, the military, and the police authorities, at all levels from top to bottom in most Mexican states, does give the government the character of a political mafia that is prepared to use

extortion, kidnapping, rape, and murder against the citizenry. Consequently citizens, who never had any confidence in the police, have increasingly little confidence in government of any sort.

Yet, at the same time, to use a term more often applied to Turkey, "the deep state," that is the "state within the state" remains a fundamentally capitalist state controlled by high finance, major corporations, the political party leaderships, the highest level government officials, the military command, and the top level police officials. The function of this deep state is to protect and enhance the interests of capital over and against those of the Mexican people.

Tens of thousands are in motion throughout Mexico, demanding justice from the government, and many around the world support them. The struggle today is not simply for what government officials and the media call "the rule of law," that is capitalist business as usual, but for a genuinely democratic society and a government committed to social justice. As the call for a constituent congress suggests, many in Mexico believe that the government such as it is now constructed around the interests of Mexican and foreign banks and corporations could ever achieve such a goal. The struggle is for a society where the people come before the politicians, the wealthy, and profits and it is a fight that deserves our full support.