A Sleeping Giant Stirs: Mexico's October Risings

written by Frontera NorteSur | October 6, 2014

Largely downplayed in the U.S. media, ground-shaking events are rattling Mexico. On one key front, Mexican Interior Minister Miguel Angel Osorio Chong announced October 3 the Pena Nieto administration's acceptance of many of the demands issued by striking students of the National Polytechnic Institute (IPN). IPN Director Yoloxichitl Bustamante, whose ouster had been demanded by the students, handed in her resignation.

Osorio Chong's words were delivered to thousands of students from an improvised stage outside Interior Ministry headquarters in Mexico City. In addition to Bustamante's departure, the senior Pena Nieto cabinet official pledged greater resources for the IPN, the cancellation of administrative and academic changes opposed by the students, the prohibition of lifetime pensions for IPN directors, the replacement of a much-criticized campus police force, and no retaliations against the strikers.

Osorio Chong shared the students' concerns that IPN policies were turning a professional education into an assembly-line diploma mill and reducing "the excellence of schools of higher education." Education Secretary Emilio Chuayfett was noticeably absent for Osorio Chong's presentation, which was held at the conclusion of a Friday afternoon march through the Mexican capital that attracted in upwards of 20,000 students.

Distrustful of the government, the students are reacting cautiously to the Pena Nieto administration's response to their 10-point petition, insisting among other things that Yolo Bustamante be held accountable for alleged transgressions before leaving her job. Student activists said that acceptance of the government's response will be democratically debated and resolved at upcoming meetings of the 44 schools that form the IPN.

"In each school we are going to organize (university) assemblies to analyze the proposal that the Interior Ministry delivered," said activist Ivan Garcia. "This was a gain but not victory."

Under the slogan "We are All the Polytechnic," the IPN students' strike has drawn enthusiastic support from students of the National Autonomous University of Mexico and other public and private

universities, as well as unions and popular organizations. Additionally, the students support the embattled and repressed students of the Ayotzinapa rural teachers' college in Guerrero state.

Erupting on the eve of the anniversary of the October 2, 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre, when hundreds of students were slaughtered by Mexican security forces, the new student movement is drawing comparisons with an earlier landmark event in the nation's political history.

"The giant has awoken," wrote journalist and political analyst Jenaro Villamil. "(IPN students) aren't the same young people with the same demands as during the era of (President) Diaz Ordaz or even #YoSoy132 of 2012, but they share the same impetus for criticism of the federal government and attempts at media censorship or distortion, especially by Televisa."

Villamil continued: "Many of the young people under 20 years of age that are marching today are the grandchildren of the 68 Movement, and they interact with equal efficiency on social media networks and cyberspace as did the youth of #YoSoy132."

Villamil's mention of #YoSoy132 refers to the mass youth movement that arose against the commercial media's promotion of Enrique Pena Nieto's successful run for the presidency in 2012.

Inspired by their students, members of IPN's faculty are now beginning to organize and advocate changes like democratizing the naming of directors and publicly disclosing the management of financial resources.

"We need transparency in the income and expenses of our schools," said IPN Professor Gerardo Angeles. "This continues being a secret and we also don't know how (staff) are contracted."

Founded in the 1930s during the administration of President Lazaro Cardenas as an institution to prepare professionals for the operation of Mexico's newly-expropriated oil industry, the IPN has undergone significant changes in recent decades, according to Erika Celestino, professor of economics at the 170,000-plus student school.

Driving student and faculty discontent are watered-down classes and diplomas; the imposition of "precarious" working conditions on instructors; the whittling away of student rights; and steps toward privatization, she said.

"There is a conflict in the IPN's projects going back 15 years," Celestino said. "On the one hand is the nationalist foundation; on the other, there is the neo-liberal restructuring."

The IPN struggle was high on the agenda of this year's October 2 anniversary commemoration in Mexico City, where an estimated 25,000 students, union activists, members of popular organization and veterans of the 1968 movement rallied not only to honor the martyrs of '68 but to call to attention to contemporary struggles.

Representatives of Sonora's indigenous Yaquis, who are embroiled in a water conflict with their state government, demanded freedom for imprisoned leaders Mario Luna, Fernando Jimenez and Tomas Rojo.

Residents of San Salvador Atenco, clutching machetes in their left hands and corn cobs in their right ones, reiterated opposition to renewed government intentions of building an airport on their land outside Mexico City.

A special homage was paid to Raul Alvarez Garin, a prominent leader of the '68 Committee that has kept alive the October 2 commemoration. The IPN representative on the 1968 student strike

committee, Alvarez passed away only days before the event on September 26- ironically just as the 2014 IPN student strike was getting off the ground and on the very day another massacre of students was unfolding elsewhere in Mexico.

“You see it. You feel it. Raul is present!” thousands chanted.

Besides the Mexican capital, October 2 demonstrations- both large and small- were reported in at least 15 states. The events ranged from a demonstration of 5,000 in Morelia, Michoacan, and a 12,000-strong rally in Tuxtla Gutierrez, the state capital of southern Chiapas state, to much smaller protests in Tijuana and Ciudad Juarez on the U.S.-Mexico border.

More than 50 members of the Teachers Resistance Movement occupied a toll booth on the Tijuana-Tecate highway, allowing motorists to pass free of charge as they remembered October 2, denounced the repression against the Ayotzinapa students and protested the national education reform passed in 2012.

In Ciudad Juarez, about 50 students from the Alta Vista High School marched to the giant flag near Chamizal Park. “October 2 is not forgotten,” the students chanted. “If they do not allow us to dream, we won’t let them sleep!”

The students were following in the footsteps of a previous generation. Alta Vista was one of the schools that formed the old, city-wide Student Struggle Committee which emerged after the Tlatelolco Massacre and conducted various protests in the border city between 1968 and 1970.

The October 2 commemorations were especially intense in the state of Guerrero, where memories of an old government massacre merged with revulsion and anger over a new one.

For the first time in 10 years, students and their allies commemorated October 2 in the streets of Tlapa, where between 1,200- 2,000 people paraded in the streets. Other protests were reported in Zihuatanejo, Atoyac, Tecpan de Galeana, Acapulco, Ometepec, Chilapa, Iguala, and Huamuxtitlan.

In Mexico City, Guerrero and across the nation, the protests reverberated with a word that is now part of the October 2 vocabulary: Ayotzinapa.

Demonstrators called for the safe return of 43 missing students- all of them young men- from the Raul Isidro Burgos Teachers College of Ayotzinapa, Guerrero, who disappeared after they were attacked by September 26 by municipal policemen and civilian gunmen in the city of Iguala while they were collecting money to pay for a trip to Mexico City for the October 2 protests.

Six people were killed and 25 wounded in an attack now blamed on the Iguala municipal government working in conjunction with the Guerreros Unidos drug cartel. On October 2, in the Guerrero state capital of

Chilpancingo, about 20,000 people marched and then blockaded for six hours the Highway of the Sun connecting Mexico City with the tourist port of Acapulco.

Besides the return of the missing students, the protesters demanded punishment for the intellectual and material authors of the September 26 massacre; the sacking of Guerrero Gov. Angel Aguirre; and the arrests of Iguala Mayor Jose Luis Abarca Velasquez and Felipe Flores Velazquez, the city’s public safety chief.

Both Abarca and Flores are fugitives, and it is suspected they could have been tipped off that Mexican soldiers and police were looking for them before they vanished from sight last week.

According to Guerrero State Attorney General Inaky Blanco, more than 30 policemen and others have been arrested in connection with the Iguala killings and disappearances. More arrests will be forthcoming, he said. On this score, witnesses reported seeing some of the missing students detained and put into municipal police vehicles. In a swift action, the federal attorney general's office took charge of the investigation into the attack on the students.

Guerrero activists and residents charged that government officials had ignored complaints for more than a year that Iguala was a virtual fiefdom under a reign of terror. They cited numerous murders, extortions, arbitrary detentions, tortures, police beatings, and forced disappearances of both activists and the everyday citizens allegedly committed by Mayor Abarca and his henchmen.

"The events of Iguala might not have happened if the Mexican state had duly investigated the previous violent events in the region," wrote Abel Barrera, director of Guerrero's Tlachinollan Human Rights Center.

"The disappearance and execution of the Popular Unity activists (2013), the penitentiary massacre, the armed incursions in Carrizalillo: all this was tolerated and remained submerged in the only state of law that really exists in Guerrero: the state of impunity."

At an October 3 forum in Acapulco sponsored by the municipal government, the director of a National Autonomous University of Mexico cultural institute dedicated to the legacies of October 1968 called the Iguala slaughter a "state crime." Esmeralda Reynoso Camacho assessed the differences that might exist between 1968 and now.

"Not much has changed," Reynoso said. "Deaths, disappearances and repression continue, as the power elite does not understand that it has to listen to the people, that it's not just about voting for (politicians) but also to see what can be done. As long as the power elite does not realize this, violence and social uprisings are latent."

Reynoso's words were echoed separately by acclaimed writer Elena Poniatowska, author of a celebrated chronicle of the Tlatelolco Massacre, during an October 4 ceremony at the Autonomous University of Guerrero where she was awarded an honorary doctorate.

"(Iguala) is a human tragedy and a disgrace in a country that presumes to be a democracy like ours," Poniatowska said. "And besides, it is a tremendous blow to the regime…"

The Iguala events have captured international attention. The United Nations condemned the violence, urging an effective response from the Mexican government, while the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ordered protective measures for the Ayotzinapa students. In England and Argentina, demonstrations were held in solidarity with the students.

In Mexico, students of all the country's rural teacher training colleges have declared a strike until the Ayotzinapa students are returned. Relatives of the missing young men plan a national demonstration for Wednesday, October 8, which is expected to be accompanied by a nationwide work stoppage in schools and other protests organized by the National Coordinator of Education Workers. On Sunday, October 5, about 700 students and parents conducted another blockade of the Highway of the Sun in Guerrero.

Nearly 2,000 Mexican soldiers, police and Guerrero state employees scoured the vicinity of Iguala for the disappeared students. Authorities said they will check the identities of 28 burned bodies uncovered from a mass grave found in the area on October 4, to see if any of them matched the missing students.

Reportedly tipped off by some of the individuals detained for the Iguala violence, the clandestine burial ground was located in the same zone where 30 bodies were discovered last April and May. Local residents called the site, which offers a panoramic view of Iguala, a “narco-cemetery.”

One young girl remarked, “On many nights, stinking trucks pass by here. Really, they stink.”

If the bodies are confirmed as belonging to the Ayotzinapa students, the September 26 massacre could prove to be the worst such incident in the long and bloody political history of Guerrero. Previous massacres include Chilpancingo (1960), Iguala (1962), Atoyac (1967), Acapulco (1967), Aguas Blancas (1995), and El Charco (1998). In the both the 1960s and 1990s, the slaughter of unarmed civilians precipitated guerrilla uprisings.

Meanwhile, about 500 friends and family members of 23-year-old Ayotzinapa student Julio Cesar Chavez Ramirez Nava, murdered in Iguala on September 26, paid their last respects in Tixtla.

Friends recalled how the young man suspended his studies for some years in order to work as a construction laborer so he could support his family. Ramirez’s activities as a member of a local soccer club and as a musician in the Ayotzinapa school band were likewise remembered.

“Your place in the band will never be erased,” said the band leader about his murdered companion. “You will always be remembered by us.”

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