

A challenge for Mexican president as parents wait for news of missing students

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) As tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets of Mexico to call for the return of 43 students who went missing last month, many demanded an answer to one simple question: Who is in charge?

In the state of Guerrero, it's a simple question with no clear answer. The governor is under fire for doing little to stop rampant crime and violence; a local mayor and police officers are accused of being in cahoots with organized crime syndicates; and nine mass graves containing at least 28 scorched bodies—some possibly the missing students—were recently discovered.

Mexico's President Enrique Peña Nieto addressed the nation last Monday, more than a week after the college students were abducted in the city of Iguala. He promised a thorough investigation and expressed outrage. Despite his tardy response President Peña Nieto has avoided being pulled into the center of attacks on the government, a place his predecessor Felipe Calderón often found himself.

In fact, in his nearly two years in office Peña Nieto has rarely spoken about violence—an issue that consumed President Calderón's agenda, including a public crackdown on organized crime and drug cartels. The former president's approval rating wavered as he often found the media message spinning out of his control. Peña Nieto has taken a markedly different approach, at least publicly.

"The conversation about organized crime changed significantly when Enrique Peña Nieto took over," says Duncan Wood, director of the Mexico Institute and the Wilson Center for International Scholars, a Washington-DC-based think tank. Peña Nieto has deemphasized security as a feature of the "Mexican reality," and focused on the country's economic potential, Wood said.

But Mexico has come under fire for human rights abuses in recent months, including an alleged mass execution by military officials in June—which involved soldiers

shooting the suspects with the victims' weapons, attorney general Jesús Murillo Karam said on Friday. Now there's suspected involvement of local police and the complicity of a mayor in the kidnapping of the missing students in Iguala, a town 120 miles south of Mexico City.

With more than 58 percent of Mexicans saying crime is a principal concern, according to the national statistics service INEGI, whether Peña Nieto can continue to avoid the topic is in question.

The president "doesn't want to fall into the same trap or make the same mistakes that Calderón made, which is you become personally identified with the violence," Wood says. "But at some point, you get a problem so serious, that the president has to get involved."

Changing gears

A month into former President Calderón's administration, he donned fatigues and declared war on organized crime. While Mexicans initially supported his decision to send thousands of soldiers to stamp out crime in big cities and small towns across the nation, their enthusiasm waned as the social cost and death toll mounted.

In January 2010, 15 teenagers were gunned down at a birthday party in Ciudad Juárez, sparking outrage across the country. Calderón said the killings were likely due to connections the teenagers had to local drug gangs; the murders, a settling of scores. But, when it turned out that the teenagers had no illegal ties, the president had to backtrack, acknowledging that innocents were increasingly targeted by cartels. This was a turning point in his administration.

Wood says today's public outcry over the missing students has echoes of when Calderon got involved after the birthday party shooting.

So far, Peña Nieto's sideline approach to the drug war has led him to avoid the spotlight, even when the government has successes like capturing kingpins. Earlier this month, the president left the job of announcing the capture of top cartel leaders Hector Beltran Leyva and Vicente Carrillo Fuentes to trusted deputies, instead focusing his public appearances on ground-breaking energy, education, and telecom reforms.

His government has mostly ended practices like “perp walks,” where captured cartel bosses were paraded in front of the press, and he avoids using phrases like “drug cartel” in national addresses. Observers say that may be changing as crime again becomes a glaring concern. Carrillo, of the Jaurez Cartel, was briefly marched in front of cameras after arriving at the Mexico City airport on his way to federal prison late last week.

The government reports that the murder rate has gone down over the 22 months Peña Nieto has been in office, falling from 22 homicides per 100,000 residents in 2012 to 19 per 100,000 residents in 2013. Mexico’s image abroad has improved, with international headlines heralding “Mexico’s Moment.” Foreign Direct Investment hit a record high of \$35.2 billion in 2013—though GDP growth was a small 1.1 percent that same year.

Erubiel Tirado, security expert at the Iberoamerican University in Mexico City says the government strategy has, in fact, been “Calderón-like,” just with some cosmetic changes. And Mario Patrón, deputy director of the Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Center in Mexico City calls the president’s behavior toward crime “reactionary” and ad hoc.

When so-called self-defense groups picked up guns to confront drug gangs in Michoacán earlier this year, the president responded by naming a commissioner to take control—effectively sidelining the state governor—and pumping money into the state. He named an anti-kidnapping czar in early 2014 after citizen safety groups insisted the crime was worsening in parts of the country.

In August, Peña Nieto announced the creation of a gendarmerie to provide temporary, rapid-response security in high crime areas. The group was deployed to Guerrero and disarmed the Iguala municipal police force soon after the discovery of the mass grave.

'Nothing to defend themselves'

As more information comes to light in the case of the 43 missing students, Peña Nieto may be pulled deeper into the fray.

The missing students, from a college known for raucous protests and clashes with public officials over its budget and role in training rural teachers, went to Iguala on September 26 to ask for donations to fund a trip to Mexico City. They were pulled

over by municipal police after commandeering three buses. The police opened fire on the students, killing three. Scores more disappeared.

A little over a week later, mass graves containing 28 charred bodies were discovered near Iguala. The single path leading to the graves indicates the victims were possibly forced into a “death march,” toward their burial site, reports *The New York Times*. Though the identities of the victims are still unknown, many suspect the bodies belong to the missing. Families of the missing students have provided DNA samples.

“They had nothing to defend themselves with,” says Margarito Ramírez, a farmhand whose son Carlos is among the missing.

Ramírez and other family members await information on the fates of their children at the Raúl Isidro Burgos Normal school in Tixtla, 75 miles north of Acapulco, passing the time worrying and praying at a makeshift altar to St. James.

“We have faith that God wants this . . . that he’ll bring them back,” Ramírez said.

Others took to the streets in protest.

“You took them alive, we want them back alive,” protesters chanted in the Guerrero capital of Chilpancingo this week. Some 22 police officers are currently in custody for their alleged roles in the disappearances.

“The police have been reformed so many times [in Mexico] over the past 20 years, but the problems still remain,” Wood says.

The state of Guerrero, referred to as *el México bronco*—the untamed Mexico—has long struggled with violence and crime. A 2008 judicial reform process, which is supposed to be completed by 2016, has made little headway here nor in many other states across the country. It is up to the states to implement the federal reforms, but many have resisted.

Impunity is a widespread issue in Mexico, with nearly 97 percent of crimes in Guerrero state going unsolved.

“There are cases here of families that are too fearful to file a complaint” for the crimes committed against them, says Sofia Mendoza, a city councilor in Iguala, whose partner, Arturo Hernández, was kidnapped and killed with several colleagues

a year and a half ago.

Others in the city of 128,000 say they're now keeping an even lower profile around town, and they've noticed others staying home due to the perceptions of insecurity.

"Parents won't give their children permission to attend church events," says Manuel Victorino, who works at a local parish.

The president's previous pronouncements on improved security can't be correct, he says.

"If Mexico were calm," Victorino said, "It wouldn't be necessary to say so in the media."