

Mexico's student massacre has unravelled the federal government

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This new stage of civic insurgency cannot be ignored. People want an honest explanation and change from the top down

On 23 September, Mexican president [Enrique Peña Nieto received](#) the World Statesman Award 2014, with the [Appeal of Conscience Foundation](#) citing his leadership and his country's recent achievements. Three days later, his government entered the deepest and most dramatic [crisis](#) of any Mexican administration since 1968.

In the weeks since, in classrooms, on the streets and using social media, millions of angry citizens, especially young people, have been demanding Peña Nieto's resignation. The federal government has come adrift. Its strategy seems to be to buy time, waiting for the discontent to vanish and a miracle to appear.

The crisis stems from an unexpected event. On 26 September, in the southern state of Guerrero, a group of 80 students from the Normal Rural (Teachers Training School) of Ayotzinapa were savagely attacked by the municipal police of Iguala. The police reportedly opened fire without warning, captured 43 young men and later disappeared them, with the aid of the criminal gang Guerreros Unidos. One student was tortured, his eyeballs taken out and his face skinned. To this day, their whereabouts remain unknown.

Four related facts explain this massacre. Trainee teachers from rural areas are stigmatised in [Mexico](#), partly because their commitment to social reform displeases the economic and political elites, and the way that they use radical forms of struggle to keep their schools running. This stigma; the general impunity of the state of Guerrero, where many activists have been murdered or disappeared; the criminal climate there and elsewhere, with gangs disputing drug production centres and markets; and the existence of a "narco state", in other words an area that is controlled by drug cartels.

The government's inability to solve the case and the way some politicians have been protected has aroused a wave of anger throughout the country.

Massacres are not unusual in Mexico. But protests have spread across the country since 43 student teachers disappeared after being detained by police in the town of Iguala, Guerrero, on 26 September. Guardian

The aggression against the Ayotzinapa students was the final straw for the public, who have long faced violent harassment. In the last eight years, in the context of the war against drugs, about 120,000 people have been killed and 30,000 have disappeared, mostly young people.

The disappearance of the students and the countrywide protests have shocked the world. The White House, Pope Francis and the EU have all taken up the matter. The image of Peña Nieto, who attracted worldwide attention for driving through neoliberal reforms, without social consensus – especially the privatisation of the oil industry – was broken. Efforts from his trade partners to bring him afloat have failed.

The day the students were attacked, María de los Ángeles Pineda de Abarca, chair of a social welfare institution of the municipality, submitted a mandatory public report of her activities. Apart from being the wife of Major José Luis Abarca Velázquez, she was said to be a member of a drug-trafficking clan.

Major Abarca, who is among those alleged to be responsible for the crisis, was a former peddler of hats turned jeweller who owned a commercial mall (built in a estate donated by the Mexican army). The centre-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) made him its candidate even though he was said to be a friend of prominent drug lords in the region.

Iguala is a key city for drug trafficking. It is the gate to the Tierra Caliente, where cartels grow opium and marijuana. Mexico is the third largest poppy producer in the world and Guerrero is where 60% of it is grown.

The war between cartels for this marketplace has been savage. Guerreros Unidos fights other gangs such as La Familia and Los Rojos to gain control of the smuggling trails. However, the war in Guerrero is part of a wider one across the whole country. Guerrero is, as other states in the country, a narco state. Local politicians, federal and state lawmakers, party leaders, police chiefs and military bosses are closely tied with the criminal gangs. All of this is associated with the generalised impunity in the judiciary system. According to Catholic bishop Raúl Vera, who presided over the diocese of Altamirano between 1988 and 1995, impunity is Guerrero's most striking feature and its most urgent challenge.

The rural teachers school of Ayotzinapa is a teacher training centre for farming communities. Founded in 1926, it is one of the last strongholds of the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1917, with its promises of radical land reform and a free, secular education for all people. These rural training schools are one of the few ways open to the youth in rural Mexico to go upward socially. Whatever progress they make through their education is relevant for the life of their communities. They see the schools as their own, as a living legacy of the Mexican Revolution that they don't want to give up.

Fire consumes a vehicle in front of the government palace in Chilpancingo. In the chassis of another one that has been thrown aside, an angry hand wrote the word "justice". Guerrero is in flames.

The fire that devours public buildings and vehicles express the growing rage of more and more youths in the state. It is the thermometer of a civic and popular insurgence that extends through its municipalities and sectors, the evidence of an ire that gets more radical every day.

The flames of popular anger have rapidly reached the local politicians and the governor Ángel Aguirre Rivero, who has taken a leave of absence. Now they have gone as far as President Peña Nieto. The demand for his resignation is a clamour throughout the state and the country. About 22 of Guerrero's 81 municipalities are occupied by the people, and the number grows each day. Sit-ins in public squares sprout like mushrooms. The revolt hinders the functioning of city councils, and the crowds consider launching parallel governments.

As a result of the civic uprising, the local economy works awkwardly. Hotels are empty. The unending road blockades strangle the transport of cargo and passengers. There are constant pickets in shopping centres.

Insurgent organisations have been acting in Guerrero for 45 years. There is serious evidence of the presence and operation of at least five of them. They are enrooted in society, have fire capacity and experience in action. Several of them have devised ways of communicating and coordinating with each other. The expansion of this insurgency has been accompanied and protected by a wide and growing national movement of solidarity.

The government strategy to deal with the crisis has been disastrous. Each erroneous step taken by the authorities gets them closer to the abyss. Unable to understand the nature of this civic insurgency, they have resorted to cheap politics and gross manoeuvres.

This is what happened with their last trick. The official version that the Ayotzinapa students were executed, burned in a landfill near Cocula and their ashes thrown to the winds has enraged people still more. Far from offering a convincing explanation, it raised more doubts and disgust.

The federal government pretends to establish an official narrative of the massacre and a legal truth so as to evade its negligence and responsibility in the events. It tries to hide that it was a state crime and a crime against mankind. However, its explanation is full of omissions, inconsistencies and contradictions.

Time and again, in demonstrations throughout the country, the crowds demand the president's resignation. Civic and popular insurgency has entered a new stage. It cannot be ignored.

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