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Why it matters that Mexico's president is a plagiarist

By Marion Lloyd, for the Houston Chronicle

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Photo: AP, Pat Sullivan

Enrique Peña Nieto, president of Mexico.

A report by one of Mexico's top investigative journalists finds that President Enrique Peña Nieto plagiarized nearly a third of his undergraduate law thesis, including pilfering large tracts from one of his predecessors.

The report, released by Carmen Aristegui on her website Sunday night, claims Peña lifted at least 197 paragraphs from writers and historians, and

failed to give attribution. Peña's office said the lack of citation was simply “style errors” and that the president had fulfilled the requirements to graduate from Mexico's Panamerican University in 1991.

The news itself is shocking. A petition circulating on Change.org, urging the university to rescind Peña's degree, had gathered more than 130,000 signatures by Friday.

But the allegations are even more disturbing, given that Peña has staked his presidency on a high-profile reform of the country's education system—a system he himself has apparently played.

The government's strategy has centered on breaking the back of the national teacher's union, which amassed enormous power and fortune during its decades as a key ally, first of Peña's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and later as an independent political player. One of the president's first acts after taking office in December 2012 was to jail the union boss, Elba Esther Gordillo, on charges of embezzling 2 billion pesos (\$110 million) in government funds during her 24-year stint at the head of the National Union of Education Workers. The PRI, with support from opposition parties, then pushed through a law in 2013 imposing mandatory evaluations for teachers, ending a system in which jobs could be bought or inherited.

In theory, the strategy makes sense. International studies have shown the quality of teaching to be the single-most determining factor in the success of a country's education system. However, by villainizing the teachers as the sole culprits for the poor showing of Mexican students on international tests, the government is unfairly passing the buck. In reality, the government bears the brunt of the responsibility for handing over control of the education system to the union starting in the 1940s, in exchange for votes. Nor does the reform include significant proposals to

improve the quality of education, beyond some upgrades to rural schools and taking punitive measures against teachers who don't make the grade.

As a result, thousands of members of the union's dissident wing—the National Coordinator of Education Workers (CNTE)—have taken to the streets over the past three years, virtually shutting down the public-school system in several states. The government has responded by cracking down on the protesters. Federal police are accused of killing as many as 11 people in a clash in the southern state of Oaxaca in June. The deaths followed the forced disappearance in 2014 of 43 teachers' college students in Ayotzinapa, Guerrero, who were abducted by municipal police associated with a local drug gang; the students were staging a protest to demand more government scholarships. Neither case has been resolved.

The government has also deployed thousands of soldiers to guard against protests at the sites where the teachers' evaluations are being conducted. The CNTE, which represents about 300,000 of the country's 1.4 million public-school teachers, has urged its members to boycott the tests, on grounds that they were not consulted on the reforms. They also argue that the evaluations do not accurately measure the quality of teaching.

In many ways, they are right. The new law is more about curtailing workers' rights than reforming education. Amid criticism from prominent academics to that effect, the government finally released its proposal for a new educational model in July—three years after the education reform passed in the Mexican congress.

However, the model is largely a repackaging of existing education policy, and includes its own “style errors,” according to an analysis by Mexican education expert Roberto Rodríguez. The 104-page document borrows heavily, and without attribution, from the Integral Reform to Basic Education, a set of curricular changes implemented by the previous

government of Felipe Calderón in 2011. Worse yet, Rodríguez found, the document lifts four paragraphs from a 2012 report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on Mexico's education system—again, without using quotations or citing the source.

Meanwhile, the standoff between the CNTE and the Mexican government threatens to disrupt yet another school year. As millions of students returned to school in Mexico on Monday, teachers in at least 2 states controlled by the dissident faction refused to hold classes. The public education secretary, Aurelio Nuño, responded by threatening to end the dialogue with the CNTE and to dock the pay of striking teachers.

Such heavy-handed tactics on the part of the Peña administration are not new. Aristegui was fired from a radio station in 2015, in what many believe was retribution for her investigation into a questionable real estate deal involving Peña's wife. In what became known as the “Casa Blanca” scandal, Aristegui revealed documents showing that a government contractor had designed and built a multimillion-dollar mansion for the presidential family, at the behest of the first lady.

The president was absolved of wrongdoing last year by the head of the Public Function Secretariat, whom he had recently appointed. But the scandal rumbled on. In June, at a ceremony unveiling Mexico's new National Corruption System, Peña apologized for what he called the “error” over the Casa Blanca. He stated that “this affair confirms my belief that public servants, in addition to being responsible for acting in accordance with the law and with integrity, are also responsible for the perceptions that we create with our actions, and in this case I recognize I made a mistake.”

The president's response to the allegations of plagiarism, however, shows no such sign of contrition.

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