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For many Mexicans, this government spying scandal feels eerily familiar

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For many Mexicans, this government spying scandal feels eerily familiar

Abstract

This is not the first time Mexico's government has been accused of spying on and harassing citizens whose activities it finds inconvenient.

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For many Mexicans, this government spying scandal feels eerily familiar

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Pegasus statue in front of the Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City. Alberto Correu/ flickr, CC BY-SA

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The National Palace in Mexico City has been home for Mexican ruling classes since the Aztec empire. Its main courtyard is adorned with a fountain crowned by a baroque sculpture of Pegasus, the winged mythological stallion. Pegasus has thus presided over the centre of power in Mexico since 1625.

It was Enrico Martínez (1560-1632), a cosmographer who worked for King Phillip II of Spain, who chose the Pegasus constellation as the cosmic ruler of Mexico's destiny, recalling that Pegasus created a spring whose waters protected the muses and “made men wise.”

Mexico could use a little more Pegasus these days. Last month, the New York Times raised a ruckus in Mexico and abroad when it revealed that President Enrique Peña Nieto's administration was using sophisticated spyware to keep watch over prominent journalists and human rights activists in the country.

#SpyingGovernment, or the autocrat's apprentice

The spyware – known paradoxically as Pegasus – collects all communications of a targeted smartphone if the recipient opens a malicious link sent via text message. It is purportedly meant for fighting criminal organisations, such as drug cartels, and terrorism.

The report spotlighted by the New York Times, which was also distributed through social networks under the hashtag #*GobiernoEspía* (#SpyingGovernment), was prepared by the Mexican NGOs Artículo 19, R3D and SocialTic, with support from the Canada-based Citizen Lab. It alleges that the Mexican government purchased over US\$80 million worth of the spyware from the Israeli NSO Group.

#GobiernoEspía: Investigador del Citizen Lab explica uso de Peg...



Over 76 text messages containing the Pegasus malware were sent to members of the international team investigating the disappearance of 43 students in Ayotzinapa, Guerrero, in 2014, lobbyists working on anti-corruption legislation and to Peña Nieto's political opponents.

Critical journalists were targeted, too. Among them was Carmen Aristegui, the reporter who exposed the biggest government corruption case to date when she uncovered that Peña Nieto's wife, Angélica Rivera, had purchased a lavish mansion in one of the most expensive areas of Mexico City. Aristegui's underage son was also a victim of attempted espionage.

The texted spyware links were accompanied by personalised messages of intimidation or insinuation, many of them sexual in tone. Some people received crude taunts; others, accusations of leaked sex tapes.

The scandal has marked a new low for the crisis-ridden Mexican government. In a June 22 press conference, Peña Nieto acknowledged that his government had bought Pegasus, but denied that it had ordered the surveillance.

The authoritarian's new clothes

This is neither the first nor the only case in which the citizens of an allegedly democratic country have recently been betrayed by technological tools that are supposedly designed to protect them.



Peña Nieto, a technology fan, CC BY

Former US president Barack Obama, for example, created one of the most intrusive surveillance apparatus in the world, a reminder that the nexus between safety and liberty is delicate and violable.

Peña Nieto's Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI), which ruled Mexico unstopped for seven decades, also has prior experience in exercising untrammelled violence over its opponents. For any Mexican born before 2000, there is something uncannily familiar about the turning Pegasus into a Mexican Big Brother.

In 1947, under the PRI president Miguel Alemán Valdés (1946-1952), the Dirección Federal de Seguridad (Federal Security Directorate, DFS) was created with the duty of preserving the internal stability of Mexico against subversion and terrorist threats.

According to Peter Dale Scott, "the DFS was in part a CIA creation", and it soon became a formidable tool for sustaining authoritarian and corrupt governments in Mexico.

How Corrupt Is Mexico?



Throughout the Cold War and after, an unsettled period that in Mexico is often referred to as the *Guerra Sucia* (1954-2000), the DFS was a key element in the conflict between the US-backed PRI governments and the left-wing student and guerrilla groups it was fighting, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s.

Under the consecutive presidencies of Luis Echeverría (1970-1976) and José López Portillo (1976-1982), espionage was a crucial tool for both identifying opponents of the Mexican state and hiding or eliminating the information that would have made the government accountable for its actions.

This history was hidden away for years. In 2003, president Vicente Fox, the first non-PRI president to rule the country in 70 years, requested a report on the Mexican government's counter-insurgency actions during the Dirty War.

The final document stated that over the course of a half century the Mexican army had "kidnapped, tortured, and killed hundreds of rebel suspects", accusing the state of genocide.

False accusations

The Pegasus scandal thus marks the second time in 15 years that Mexican citizens have learnt the dangers of unfettered state intrusion into their private lives.

Under Mexican law, any intervention on private communications must be authorised by a judge in cases that involve grave crimes. So, in his June press conference on the subject, Peña Nieto promised an investigation into the misuse of the spyware.

Then he moved onto threats, warning that the attorney general's office would "apply the law against those who have levelled false accusations against the government".

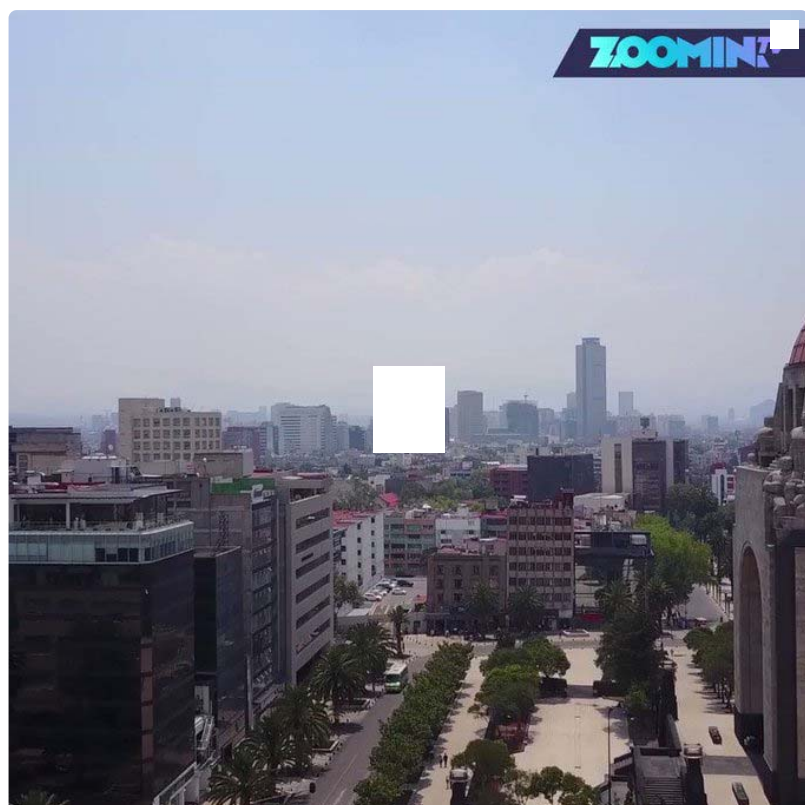
The reaction was bald shock.

"This not the expected behaviour of the head of state of a young democracy," Juan Pardinas, the head of the Mexican Institute for Competitiveness, who was a hacking target, told the New York Times.

"This is the statement of an apprentice of Vladimir Putin."

Peña Nieto later said he misspoke and did not intend to threaten anyone.

"What I said," he clarified, "was precisely to follow up on the criminal complaints that some activists have filed regarding this supposed spying."



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Even this recanting avoids directly responding to Pardinas' critique of the implications of using spyware to monitor individuals that the Mexican government finds inconvenient or uncomfortable.

It is now impossible to see Pegasus ruling over the National Palace and take to heart its aspirational motto: *ic itur ad astra*, thus one goes to the stars. For nearly a century, what this mythological creature has embodied is Mexican authoritarianism, the legacy of a state that vows to protect its citizens by exercising violence over them.

If Mexicans want to recover the 17th-century promise of Pegasus, they must firmly reject its modern reincarnation. Democracy is a fragile thing, and no one can buy safety by sacrificing liberty.

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