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Mexico: Why anger over Trump hasn't spilled into the streets

MODES OF THOUGHT

On Feb. 12, 18 NGOs and universities are organizing 'Vibra Mexico,' nationwide marches against what they say is Trump's disrespect and demanding a stronger Mexican government response. So far, street protests – which are common here – have been lacking.



Henry Romero/Reuters | Caption



Whitney Eulich

Correspondent | [@weulich](#)

FEBRUARY 7, 2017 | MEXICO CITY — In the weeks since President Trump's inauguration, Mexico has confronted a growing list of verbal digs, biting executive orders, and even what sounded to some like casual threats of military intervention.






The response from Mexico's political and academic elites has been swift and strong. There have been pledges never to pay for a border wall, reminders of the role Mexico plays in securing the southern US border, and even encouragement of a boycott of Starbucks and McDonald's.

The public response, however, has been far less visible. Social media has been buzzing with anger and frustration, but the absence of mass marches – a common outlet here – against Trump has been eye-catching in a country at risk of possibly losing the most if the new US president follows through on his protectionist promises.

But that may be poised to change. On Feb. 12, 18 NGOs and universities are organizing nationwide marches against what they say is Trump's disrespect and demanding a stronger Mexican government response. The effort, called "Vibra Mexico," will include a pause at 2 p.m. for participants across the country to sing the Mexican national anthem as a symbol of unity.

The lack of anti-Trump demonstrations thus far may have its roots in domestic woes, which include a 20 percent jump in gasoline prices in the past month, a historically unpopular President Enrique Peña Nieto, a recent history of disruptive protests over narrow issues, and a still developing civil society, analysts say.

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“Mexico is facing two crises right now,” says Lorenzo Meyer, a noted Mexican historian. “There’s the situation with Trump and the United States, but then there’s an internal crisis. Gas prices, corruption, the degradation of institutions.”

While the messages from the north may be angering many, here, it’s the latter that “gets Mexicans into the streets,” Mr. Meyer says. A march that brings the general population out in protest, therefore, can require extra time and strategy.

Pocketbook issues

Even the global woman’s march, which for many served as a platform to speak out against Trump, had a relatively small showing in Mexico. An estimated 500 to 1,000 protesters rallied in the capital, compared with an estimated 100,000 in London.

Yet protests are not uncommon here. Since the start of the new year, demonstrations against the increase in gas prices have swept the country, sometimes leading to incidents of violence and looting. The demonstrations are ongoing, with thousands marching in Mexico City last week, some baring sticks and rocks and facing teargas.

The focus on one very narrow issue, whether it’s gas prices or education reform, has led to protests “losing prestige” in Mexico, says Héctor Aguilar Camín, director of Nexos, a leading cultural and political magazine here. Many people have lost patience with protesters who shut down roads and create hassles for fellow citizens more so than for the government itself, he says.

Because of this, Mexico has “lost the capacity to organize protests for more universal themes,” Mr. Aguilar says, noting that a 2008 march against violence that drew some 150,000 people in the capital was one of the last times he saw a truly unified effort.

“I’d like to stand up and have my voice heard [by the US and Mexico] as a migrant worker,” but there’s more energy around issues like gas prices, says Adareli Ponce, a migrant worker in Hidalgo state who spent several years in the US on temporary work visas, most recently in 2014. Her small community was cut off from the nearest big city for almost three weeks due to roadblocks and demonstrations over gas prices in January. She wishes the protest energy wasn’t just centered on gas prices.

“The thing is, if people in my community can’t go to work legally in the US and send back remittances, or if there are mass deportations from the US, people will return here and see there is no work. There is no way to make money. The price of gas won’t matter if no one has any money,” she says.

Jose, another migrant worker from a small town in north-central Mexico says, “Trump feels out of my hands.” He spent five and a half years working on temporary visas in the United States, and says his community fears “what we are hearing from the US.”

But fear also plays a part in why some people like Jose, who have something to lose, aren’t taking to the streets.

“My entire community would transform if [President Trump’s statements] become a reality,” says Jose. But he doesn’t want to publish his full name or the town where he lives – let alone protest – out of concern for future employment opportunities in the US, he says.

Two unpopular presidents



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President Peña Nieto’s unpopularity may play a role in the slow uptake in protest, as well, Meyer says. He has roughly 12 percent approval, one of the lowest levels of support in recent history. And it’s his name at the center of many of the offensive leaks and remarks made by Trump.

Peña Nieto is “miles and miles away from the average Mexican, and they don’t really care if Trump insults him.”

But there is a breaking point, says Gustavo Mohar, former Mexican undersecretary of migration and senior associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

“The red line has already been painted in terms of paying for the wall,” says Mr. Mohar, who is based in Mexico. “Now the ball is in Trump’s court: How will he say he is fulfilling his campaign promise of Mexico paying for the wall without a clear confrontation with Mexico?”

The effect of Trump’s words and actions on Mexicans is very real, Mohar says, despite the lack of large-scale public protest thus far. The anger, frustration, and shame are discussed at any dinner table, in any taxi, and across social media here. There have been small-scale signs of resistance, like a [woman in northern Mexico](#) returning her US visa to the consulate in Hermosillo last week with a letter explaining her motivations: “I’m offended by your new President Donald Trump’s attitude toward my country, Mexico, and its people.”

And though the process has been slow, “Trump may inspire a new capacity to unite and mobilize,” in Mexico, says Aguilar.



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Aguilar sees the proposed march next Sunday as a bit of an experiment: “We don’t know how this anti-Trump feeling is going to unfold.

“Mexicans are in a state of shock and we’re still looking for the best form of expression.”

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