

University and Politics in Mexico

The UNAM Conflict

Hugo Casanova Cardiel*
Roberto Rodríguez Gómez*

When in February 1999 a group of students announced their disagreement with the tuition hike at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), Mexico's main university and the largest in Latin America, very few analysts imagined that the student strike that followed would become the UNAM's most serious crisis in modern Mexico.

For 10 months, almost all the university facilities were in the hands of the student group called the General Strike Council (CGH), and not only did the conflict in the UNAM become sharper and sharper, but it also involved other aspects of Mexican public life willy-nilly. Despite the fact that the strike ended in February 2000 when a recently formed police force, the Federal Preventive Police, retook the university and handed it over to university officials, the conflict continues and awaits a negotiated solution between UNAM authorities and the student group opposed to the institutional reforms.

We can put forward some critical factors for characterizing the conflict. In the first place, the list of six student demands continually expands, involving other problems on Mexico's political map, like the capital city's urban community movement.

At the same time, the conflict has felt the impact of different national political phenomena,

* Researcher at the UNAM Center for University Studies.
Visiting scholar at the Texas University in Austin.

** Researcher at the UNAM Center for University Studies.



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among which the 2000 presidential race is one of the most important. The presidential candidates, the parties and other political forces have made statements at different times during the conflict, whether in favor or against CGH demands and supporting or rejecting university officials' actions.

In addition, anyone who expressed an opinion almost inevitably became a protagonist in the conflict. Thus, figures from Mexican political life, intellectuals, spokespersons for big business, the media, nongovernmental organizations and even the Catholic Church have been compelled by the dynamic of the conflict itself to take a stand, thus increasing its complexity and

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raising it to the level of a national crisis. We should emphasize that it is an ongoing, as yet unsolved conflict, and therefore we must be particularly careful in analyzing its causes, its evolution and its possible effects.

THE TECHNOCRATIC REFORM OF MEXICO'S HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

We have to look back to the 1980s for the most important precedents of Mexico's current development model: the problems that would come to the fore in 1999-2000 originated then.

Like other countries of the world, Mexico applied a series of reforms to the higher education system over the last 20 years, eventually touching on each one of our universities. Financial restrictions and a modernizing discourse began to create a new identity of higher education as a whole, a process which, of course, was not without its tensions and disputes.

On the level of the relationship between university and the state, the idea was to formulate a new "contract," and to that end, a series of forms of evaluation and new criteria for funding were developed. At the same time, conditions for redefining the relationship between the university and society were established. Institutions were compelled to create greater links with society's problems, to transform themselves internally and devise better procedures for accountability. The need to increase society's participation in financing higher education, until then almost exclusively subsidized by the government, was also put forward.

In the mid-1980s, the federal government made decisions that affected the profile of the university system by slowing public university growth and stimulating the participation of the private sector.¹ In the 1990s higher education policy included relative growth of overall enrollment based on strengthening the technological sector and increased availability of private universities; lower government spending; and changes in institutional norms and organization based on a model structured for efficiency.

It is important to point out here that the opening up of Mexico's economy and political life, its linking up to international bodies like the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), brought productivity focuses for Mexico's higher education that jibed with the corresponding international bodies' recommendations.²

UNAM institutional policy stayed in step with government policies for those two decades. In that context, UNAM authorities have continued their relations with the federal government at the cost of a relative distancing from academic communities. Beginning in the 1980s, different conflicts arose and Rectors Jorge Carpizo in 1986 and José Sarukhán in 1992 had to stop their respective reforms. Basically, students were successful in maintaining free tuition in the UNAM and, for students graduating from UNAM high schools, automatic admittance to university level studies.³

THE 1999-2000 CRISIS

At the end of the 1990s, Mexico's situation was complex, combining both structural and temporary problems. The transition to democracy still has its dark corners and the state lumbers on with minimum legitimacy. On the political scene, several things should be taken into account: the bank bail-out, an economic question that turned into a political problem; the conflicts caused by armed groups in southern Mexico; the victory of the opposition Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) in the elections for the governorship of Mexico City; and splits and regroupments in the left and right opposition. Naturally, however, the first stirrings in 1999 of the race for the presidency were the defining factor for the political atmosphere of the time.

The economic disparity between rich and poor deepened, and government policy was manifestly incapable of alleviating the deterioration in living conditions or making a dent in the poverty of the majority of the population. Federal spending was cut three times, in January, March and July 1998, due to the drop in international oil prices. These cuts did not keep the country from servicing its foreign and internal debt, but they did affect social spending. Among the items hit was the budget for higher education, which was docked 8 percent.

In late 1998, the background for Rector Francisco Barnés' proposal to increase UNAM student tuition was the adjustment in the budget. In addition, it was no different from the tuition policies implemented by the rest of the country's public universities from the 1980s on. An interesting fact is that when the UNAM announced its tuition hike, it was the only remaining Mexican university that was practically free for its students. Lastly, it should not be forgotten that among the 1996 OECD recommendations to the Mexican government for reforming the higher education system was that of "accompanying the increase in student contributions to the cost of their educations with the development of a scholarship program."⁴

THE PHASES OF THE CONFLICT

The UNAM conflict has gone through three phases: 1) *Rise* (February-May 1999). This phase began with the expectation by the university reformers that the conflict would not deepen and the positioning of the different student groups. Chronologically, it goes from the announcement of the proposed reform to the proposal to repeal the General Payments Regulation. The reform itself would have basically increased tuition per semester from Mex\$0.20 to Mex\$1,300 for high school and Mex\$2,100 for undergraduate stud-



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Current UNAM Rector Juan Ramón de la Fuente.

ies (at a time when the U.S. dollar was worth 10 pesos). This decision was made in the traditional manner: after consulting exclusively the university collective bodies and, as we shall see, it was implemented without achieving sufficient consensus. The argumentation on which it was based spoke essentially to the economic viability of the project, and only in the second place to academic questions. The political estimate of reactions to the reform was obviously wrong, and the blossoming student movement grew stronger.

The institutional sector—and probably the government—was confident and sought to convince by presenting the community with a *fait accompli*. The press published opinions to the effect that the left had been consulted, emphasizing that it supported university authorities in

the matter. The appreciation was that traditionally critical sectors were outside the UNAM (in the Mexico City government or busy with partisan activities) and that they would not intervene. Other voices, however, did question both the decision and the way it was implemented, although as yet without success.⁵

On April 20 the student strike broke out; while Rector Barnés stated to the news weekly *Proceso* that he was “prepared for a long strike,” the General Strike Council (CGH) said, “We can last.” The CGH put forward four demands:

- Abrogation of the new General Payments Regulation (which stipulated the tuition hike)

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- No retaliation against strikers
- Rescheduling of classes missed during the strike
- Holding a university congress with decision-making power.

Soon, two more demands would be added:

- Repeal of the 1997 reforms (that limited automatic admission to the university for UNAM high school graduates)
- Severing of UNAM ties to CENEVAL (a private body that accredits and evaluates to select which applicants will be admitted to the country’s high schools and undergraduate university programs).

2) *Confrontation* (May–November 1999). This phase began with the out-and-out clash between university authorities and the activists who held the university facilities. Divisions inside the CGH also deepened and the limits of university institutionality began to show. There was no effective leadership in the UNAM conflict and the officials and academic groups were noticeably disperse. The CGH gained strength

vis-à-vis the authorities, but conflicts also began to arise within it, conflicts that would lead to the expulsion of groups accused of being “moderate” and to the incorporation of social organizations totally divorced academically from the university.

In this phase, the University Council accepted the modification of the General Payments Regulation originally approved in March, which essentially meant that tuition once again became voluntary. The CGH, however, would no longer accept this solution and insisted that all its demands be met.

During the strike, several schools held extramural classes. CGH activity concentrated on trying to prevent them. However, most of the students who went to class outside official classrooms passed by taking special exams.

The inability of the CGH and university authorities to come to an agreement led groups of intellectuals and well-known academics to take action as mediators, proposing several different ways out. This fanned hopes of a solution and was even backed by the rector’s office, but was finally rejected by the CGH which, from then on, demanded to be recognized as the “only spokesperson” for solving the conflict.

The position of Mexico’s president, Ernesto Zedillo, was very important at this juncture: he called those who requested the intervention of police forces “barbarians” and demanded that members of the university community explain what they meant by “applying the rule of law.” The ministers of the interior and education and the attorney general confined themselves to calling for harmony and saying that the state’s position was one of “non-intervention” in university matters.

Isolated by the state, although he continued to enjoy the support of the University Council, Rector Barnés presented his resignation in November 1999.

3) *Containment and new scenarios*. We are still in the third phase, one of containment of the conflict (November 1999–May 2000). It has brought the participation of the federal govern-

ment, police and an important part of the academic community who agreed with keeping the conflict within bounds. The UNAM Board of Governors named Juan Ramón de la Fuente, until then Mexico's minister of health, as the new rector.

De la Fuente took office with the explicit commitment to foster dialogue and negotiate a way out by consensus. He set up a dialogue in which CGH and UNAM representatives participated. He also held numerous meetings with different academic communities to try to come up with a collective proposal. After agreeing with the CGH on the conditions and format for a dialogue with binding results, the rector's office presented a general proposal to carry out a university congress in which all the CGH demands would be discussed.

The university authorities also offered to put a lid on all the reforms that had caused the conflict until after the congress. In exchange, they requested the university grounds and buildings be returned and that academic activities be renewed. The CGH rejected the proposal, and the rector put it to the vote in a university plebiscite in January 2000. The results were favorable: the vast majority of the university community who voted supported the rector's proposal, seeing it as a way to end the conflict. Striking student groups questioned how representative the plebiscite was, stating that only half the university community had participated.

Under these circumstances and after a few attempts to renew the dialogue, on February 6 the Federal Preventive Police occupied the UNAM. One thousand students were arrested during the police operation, the facilities were returned to the authorities and activities were renewed in University City and other schools, although not without some difficulties.

Little by little most of the arrested students have been freed. The president assumed responsibility for the intervention of the federal police and the rector called for reconciliation. Activities resumed Monday, February 14, although some groups of strikers continued to try to take

over university buildings again. In May, dialogue resumed between the authorities and the CGH, but with no positive results. Students continue to stage sudden take-overs of some schools and are keeping up the political pressure. The university congress is by no means a certainty.

POSSIBLE OUTCOMES

This conflict has had many repercussions, both for the UNAM and all UNAM participants and externally, including the state, political parties and society at large.



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In the university sphere, the most visible problems are the loss of two semesters of classes, many students' abandoning their studies and the paralysis and slow-down in the country's most important research center. Other effects are the unprecedented polarization of the university community; the break in different levels of institutional codes of coexistence; and the community's wariness with regard to institutional decisions.

Externally, the electoral process itself has been influenced by the university conflict: the candidates from the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) became involved in the movement and that has affected their campaigns. In the end, President Zedillo's administration had to

make the decision to use force to open the university. The Mexico City government has also been accused of influencing one of the sectors of the student movement and negotiating behind the strikers' backs. Paradoxically, given that the movement considers itself progressive and close to the left, the party that has been most negatively affected by the conflict has been the PRD, since one of its most important arenas is the university and it has paid a higher price than its political adversaries.

More broadly speaking, Mexico's left and intellectuals have also suffered and been noticeably divided as a result of the conflict. Business

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and religious groups have questioned the role of the UNAM, and the legislature initially attempted to act as a mediator, but was totally unsuccessful.

At this writing, we can say there is an impasse in the university crisis. Both the rector's office and the CGH are facing a series of dilemmas, the unraveling of which will define the direction the conflict will take and its eventual solution. Above all, the rector of the UNAM will have to decide between hastening the activities to prepare for the university congress or waiting in hope of a more favorable balance of forces. The CGH, for its part, is not interested in taking its demands to a congress organized by university authorities, but rather aims to achieve them through a direct dialogue in which binding decisions can be made with the rector's representatives.

If UNAM authorities manage to rally the different currents of opinion in the university community around the need to hold a congress as the only way out of the crisis, this could be the final solution. With or without a congress, how-

ever, we should expect CGH activism to continue indefinitely, including actions to block the full reestablishment of normal academic operations and institutional governability.

In the context of a highly complex political situation and given the most competitive presidential elections in 70 years, the UNAM's 1999-2000 crisis has had an impact on both the elections themselves and on the domestic and foreign image of the current administration. As we pointed out in the beginning of the article, it has been the most serious crisis in the contemporary history of the UNAM. It is the responsibility of the members of the university community, but also of the holders of public office, to create the conditions to solve it and ensure that the institution recover its academic stature. Whatever the eventual solution to the conflict, it must be kept in mind that the UNAM's future as an institution is at stake, and that, in a broader sense, the end of the university conflict will help define the direction that Mexico's political and social processes will take. ■■■

NOTES

¹ In 1986, guidelines were announced to control public university growth: a) Universities with more than 35,000 students should stop expanding; b) Those with an enrollment of between 15,000 and 35,000 should aim for moderate growth; c) Those with fewer than 15,000 students could grow up to 25 percent. ANUIES, *Programa Integral para el Desarrollo Educativo (PROIDES)* (Mexico City: ANUIES, 1993).

² For example, in the document "Seguimiento de las reseñas de políticas educativas nacionales" (Follow-up on Reviews of National Educational Policies), published by Mexico's Public Education Ministry in April 2000, the Mexican government reports to the OECD its advances in the implementation of 1996 OECD recommendations (see <http://se-sic.sep.gob.mx/ocde/>).

³ The UNAM offers three different levels of education: high school, undergraduate degrees and graduate programs. UNAM high school graduates have the prerogative to go right on to undergraduate college-level studies at the UNAM without taking an entrance exam.

⁴ OECD, *Examen de la política educativa de México* (Paris: OECD, 1996).

⁵ Among others, the Union of UNAM Workers (STUNAM), some academic groups and, in general, the organized left.