



# HISTORY OF A MOVEMENT / HISTORIA DE UN MOVIMIENTO



## STUDY GUIDE

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## **History of a Movement**

A group of friends met during #YoSoy132, a Mexican student-led movement that emerged in 2012 to protest media bias and electoral manipulation during Enrique Peña Nieto's presidential campaign. This movement marked a significant political awakening among youth in Mexico and laid the groundwork for subsequent protests, particularly those advocating for justice in the case of the 43 disappeared students from Ayotzinapa.

## **Mexico's Government**

Mexico is a federal republic. "Federal" means that there is a national government, but each state also has its own government, meaning that the power of the national government is restricted. "Republic" means that the power of the government ultimately rests in the hands of the voters, who choose representatives to represent them in government.

At the national level, the power of the federal government is divided between the president, the courts, and the legislature. The president is elected by the people and serves a single term of six years. The president chooses a number of high-level officials including the attorney general, Supreme Court justices, and his cabinet. The president has the power to issue executive decrees that are treated as law. The legislative branch of government is made up of an upper house which is called the Senate, and a lower house which is called the Chamber of Deputies.

Mexico has a federal constitution, which was created in 1917, and has been amended a number of times. It guarantees many civil liberties and personal freedoms.

Mexico has 31 states and a federal district, which is known as Mexico City or CDMX, each of which has its own governor and congress. Like the president, state governors serve for six years, and they cannot be reelected. While each state has its own government, Mexico's government is highly centralized, meaning that the federal government holds a high degree of power and authority.

## **PRI**

The Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party), often just referred to as the PRI, is a political party in Mexico. It was founded in 1929 and dominated the country's politics from its founding in 1929 until 2000. In 2000, a candidate from the National Action Party (PAN) won the election. In 2012 the PRI gained power again when PRI candidate Enrique Peña Nieto was elected. However, since his term ended in 2018, no more PRI candidates have won election.

## **Drug Cartels**

Mexico is home to many large and powerful drug cartels, which are responsible for widespread violence. Thousands of Mexicans die or are disappeared every year because of drug-related

violence in this country. In 2006, the Mexican government launched a war against the cartels, however, it has been unable to successfully curb the violence or the drug trade. Contributing to the problem is the fact that cartels often coerce or pay off government officials to get their cooperation. According to an article by the Council on Foreign Relations, drug cartels became particularly powerful during the many years when the PRI controlled the government. It explains, “The cartels flourished during the seven decades that Mexico was ruled by a single party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Within this centralized political structure, drug trafficking groups cultivated a wide network of corrupt officials through which they were able to gain distribution rights, market access, and protection.”<sup>1</sup>

## **Human Rights**

Numerous reports show that violent crime and human rights abuses are common in Mexico. In a 2023 summary, Amnesty International states, “The authorities continued to criminalize and use excessive force against people exercising their right to protest.”<sup>2</sup> According to a recent report by Human Rights Watch, thousands of people disappear in this country every year, and it is one of the most deadly countries in the world for human rights defenders. In addition, the report states that the majority of the crimes and abuses that occur go unpunished. It says, “Around 90 percent of crimes are never reported, a third of reported crimes are never investigated, and just under 16 percent of investigations are ‘resolved,’ (either in court, through mediation, or through some form of compensation), meaning authorities resolved just over 1 percent of all crimes committed in 2021, according to the national statistics agency.”<sup>3</sup>

## **Dirty War**

The dirty war was a war between the government and political dissidents that occurred in Mexico from 1965 to 1990. During this period of time, the government disappeared, tortured, and executed thousands of people—including many students—in an attempt to silence dissent.

## **Presidents**

Felipe Calderón was president of Mexico from 2006 to 2012. He belonged to the PAN party. His approach to confronting the country’s drug cartels was to declare a war on drugs. However, critics say that this only made violence and human rights abuses worse, with soldiers and police using torture and violence to obtain information, disappearing and killing thousands of people, and trying to hide their crimes.

Enrique Peña Nieto was president of Mexico from 2012 to 2018. He was a politician who belonged to the PRI. At the time of his election, there were widespread criticisms of irregularities in vote counting, and also charges that the PRI had bought votes. The results of the election were

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/mexicos-long-war-drugs-crime-and-cartels>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/americas/north-america/mexico/report-mexico/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/mexico>

officially challenged, however, the court ultimately upheld the results. One of Nieto's biggest promises during his campaign for presidency was to end drug-related crime and violence. Despite this, forced disappearances, murders, and other types of violence continued during his presidency. As a result of this, and a number of scandals that occurred throughout his presidency, Nieto became unpopular with many people in Mexico.

When Nieto's term ended, he was replaced by Andrés Manuel López Obrador, of the National Regeneration Movement political party, who served from 2018 to 2024. Mexico's current president is Claudia Sheinbaum, who was elected in 2024 and is the first woman to hold this title.

### **1968 Protest**

In 1968, an estimated 10,000 students gathered in Mexico City in a peaceful protest of government policies. Government troops opened fire, with estimates of the dead ranging from more than 40 to close to 400. In addition, hundreds of students were beaten and arrested. This is known as the Tlatelolco Massacre. It was not acknowledged by the government as a state crime until 2018.

### **2014 Student Disappearance**

In 2014, 43 students from the rural teacher-training school of Ayotzinapa vanished. They were travelling on buses with a larger group, when the group was shot at by police. According to news reports, six people were killed, and 43 students were taken away. According to government investigations, the police had been colluding with organized crime members. In 2018, President Obrador called the disappearances a "state crime."

### **Study Questions**

1. What did the student activists do that was unique?
2. What was the role of social networks in spreading the message of the student activists, as shown in the film?
3. What was the effect of state violence against protestors in the 2012 demonstrations?
4. As shown in the film, what are some examples of nonviolent means that students used as a means of protest?
5. What is the impact on the justice system if the government commits criminal acts, as explained in the film?
6. As revealed in the film, how do forced disappearances have a lasting impact on communities?
7. Why do you think some student protestors end up turning to violence?
8. What is the importance of remembering the past, as explained in the film?
9. How do demonstrations cause change, as explained in the film?

## Additional Resources

- CFR.org Editors, “Backgrounder: Mexico’s Long War: Drugs, Crime, and the Cartels,” Council on Foreign Relations, updated August 5, 2024.  
<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/mexicos-long-war-drugs-crime-and-cartels>
- Vanessa Garcia, “We are all 132! Mexico’s Student Movement for Defense of the Vote,” Institute for Policy Studies, July 9, 2012.  
[https://ips-dc.org/we\\_are\\_all\\_132\\_mexicos\\_student\\_movement\\_for\\_defense\\_of\\_the\\_vote/](https://ips-dc.org/we_are_all_132_mexicos_student_movement_for_defense_of_the_vote/)
- Luis Gómez, “#Yosoy132,” NACLA, October 26, 2012.  
<https://nacla.org/article/yosoy132>
- Alexandra Helfgott, “El Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) – Explainer,” Wilson Center, October 24, 2023.  
<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/el-partido-revolucionario-institucional-pri-explainer>
- Alexandra Helfgott, “The Structure of Mexico's Government – Explainer,” Wilson Center, October 24, 2023.  
<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/structure-mexicos-government-explainer>
- Patrick J. McDonnell, “Sheinbaum, a ‘Child of 1968,’ Apologizes for Historic ‘Atrocity’ in Tlatelolco, Mexico City,” Los Angeles Times, October 2, 2024.  
<https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2024-10-02/child-of-1968-sheinbaum-apologizes-for-1968-atrocity-in-tlatelolco-mexico-city>
- U.S. Department of State, “2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Mexico,”  
<https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/mexico/>

## Contact

For inquiries, please contact:  
EPF Media - [info@epfmedia.com](mailto:info@epfmedia.com)

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