

Mexican government uses malware to spy on journalists and political opponents

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On June 19, a report by the *New York Times* and research center Citizen Lab revealed that Israeli software purchased by the Mexican government was used to spy on prominent journalists and human rights activist in the country, including one minor. The software, known as Pegasus, collects all communications of a targeted phone if the recipient opens a malicious link sent via text message.

Pegasus spyware lets hackers silently monitor all emails, texts, contacts, and locations of an infected phone, as well as activate a phone's microphone and camera at will, even when the device is off. Over 76 text messages containing the Pegasus malware were sent to lawyers working on the investigation of the 43 missing Ayotzinapa students, lobbyists working on anti-corruption and consumer health legislation, political opponents of the government and journalists critical of the Peña Nieto administration. A few individuals reportedly opened the malicious links and fell victim to this targeted surveillance.

According to the *New York Times*, at least three federal agencies—the Secretary of Defense, the Office of the General Prosecutor, and the Center for Research and National Security—have purchased over \$80 million worth of the spyware from the Israeli cyber arms firm NSO Group, itself owned by US private equity firm San Francisco Partners. NSO Group sells products exclusively to governments under the guise of fighting crime and terrorism.

The hacking attempts coincided with key investigations critical of the government led by the targeted individuals between January 2015 and August 2016, after which Citizen Lab published a report linking Pegasus spyware to the targeting of a human rights advocate in the United Arab Emirates. Due to media coverage of the incident at that time, it is

possible that the Citizen Lab investigation led to the termination of the program on Mexican soil.

Although records indicate the Mexican government began purchasing Pegasus spyware in 2011, the first known instance of NSO surveillance in Mexico dates from early 2015, when prominent journalist Carmen Aristegui began receiving suspicious messages appearing to be Amber Alerts, or sent from her bank and her colleagues. A few months earlier, Aristegui had broken a national conflict of interest story related to the purchase of a \$7 million house by Peña Nieto's wife from a government subcontractor, which was awarded lucrative contracts when Peña Nieto was governor of the State of Mexico.

After targeting Aristegui for over a year and a half, the hackers began contacting her 16-year-old son while he was in the United States. One message impersonated the embassy of the United States to Mexico, which may have violated US law. Overall, Aristegui and her son received over 45 messages containing Pegasus malware.

Other hacking attempts targeted journalists who were investigating possible military killings and corrupt officials. Carlos Loret del Sol, a journalist for national television channel *Televisa*, received text messages with Pegasus malware while reporting on extrajudicial killings by the military in western Mexico and the their subsequent cover up by government officials. Salvador Camarena and Daniel Lizárraga, both journalists for Mexicans Against Corruption and Impunity (MCCI), were targeted while investigating Mexican officials and prominent businessmen named in the Panama Papers.

Other charges of NSO government spying shed light on the growing role of surveillance in defending the ruling elite's business and political interests. In February, a separate investigation by Citizen Lab

revealed that proponents of a national soda tax—including a scientist at the Mexican National Institute for Public Health and directors of consumer rights NGOs—were sent Pegasus malware. In the eyes of the ruling elite, this was deemed an unacceptable encroachment on the profit interests of soda companies in a country where 40 percent of the population is obese.

Last week, it was also revealed that NSO spyware was found on the phones of leading members of the right-wing opposition Party of National Action (PAN), including the phones of party president Ricardo Anaya, potential presidential candidate Roberto Gil Zuarth, and party spokesperson Fernando Rodríguez Doval. These messages were received in June 2016, the same month that the PAN won 12 governorships in the country, three of which were previously held by the ruling PRI.

“It is unacceptable that attempts to infect the phones of PAN members was carried out by a program whose license can only be acquired by the government to fight organized crime,” stated PAN president Ricardo Anaya. Despite Anaya’s feigned opposition, the software was reportedly purchased in 2011, when the PAN’s Felipe Calderón was president.

Andrés Manuel López Obrador, presidential candidate of the “left” Movement of National Regeneration (Morena), also postured as an opponent of spying and claimed he would eliminate surveillance programs if he won the presidency: “Instead of dealing with public security issues, they are spying on opponents and now journalists...when Morena wins, [the Mexican spy agency] Cisen will disappear, there will be no political espionage, freedom will be guaranteed, there will be no phone surveillance.” López Obrador’s mention of “public security” proves he is a firm defender of the military and is merely proposing a tactical shift to give a facelift to the corrupt Mexican political establishment.

Mexico’s president responded to the investigation by threatening those making accusations against the government and doubling down on claims the surveillance technology was used to “ensure the security of all Mexicans.”

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“None of the injured parties can prove their life has been affected or hurt by these supposed interventions

and by the alleged espionage...I hope justice can be served against those who have raised false claims against the government,” stated Peña Nieto.

Following the *New York Times* article, the Office of the General Prosecutor (PGR) started an investigation into the spying allegations, despite being one of the agencies that reportedly purchased the software. The PGR has ignored calls for an independent investigation of the surveillance program and has refused to release a list of targeted individuals.

Despite broad popular opposition, the crisis-ridden government has been pushing to expand its surveillance capabilities. The Interior Security Law, introduced by both the PRI and the PAN during the last legislative session, was aimed at further institutionalizing spying measures by granting the military the ability to engage in data collection without any form of accountability and forcing private companies to hand over user data.

In Mexico, attempts to spy on journalists take place in the context of broader attacks against freedom of the press. Mexico is the third deadliest country in the world for journalists, with many targeted for their coverage of organized crime, drug trafficking, and corruption. Not a single conviction has resulted from the 103 journalist killings in the country since 2000.

The efforts of the Mexican government to curtail freedom of speech and of the press are by no means an isolated phenomenon. All around the world, the capitalist system is resorting to mass spying of the population to attempt to monitor and control rising social discontent under the framework of protecting “national security.”



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