

1968, Human Rights And Mexican Democracy

Roberto Escudero*



Demonstration at the university. The large placard on the right says, "The monkey [President] Díaz Ordaz"



Students being arrested on the university campus.

In 1968 during Mexico's student movement and even after the October 2 genocide, no one ever talked about human rights despite their clear violation and its impact on Mexican society. Despite the fact that the government committed illegal atrocities to fight two armed rural guerrilla groups that emerged in the state of Guerrero, headed by Genaro Vázquez Rojas and Lucio Cabañas,¹ and the urban guerrilla movements that surfaced in the 1970s, headed by different groups of armed youths, the most important of which was the September 23 Communist League, nobody talked about human rights either.

* Former 1968 student leader, professor and researcher at the Autonomous Metropolitan University, Iztapalapa campus.

Actually, the concept of "human rights" did not become common in our country until well into the 1980s. From that time on, practically everyone knows to some degree what human rights are without the need for a significant background in law, history or philosophy.

Why? Because, in addition to the cases mentioned above that were widely disseminated by the media and therefore known by the general public, and to a lesser degree to the international public, many Mexicans have been the victim of some form of abuse by private individuals or government agents, abuse that in one way or another has violated their human rights.

Little by little, but increasingly rapidly, the country became aware that the abuses and atrocities that Mexicans and some foreigners were often victim of

had a specific name: the violation of human rights, perpetrated by an authoritarian regime that governed us for more than 70 years.

It was very natural, then, that with Vicente Fox's victory on July 2, 2000, and alternation in office, one of the populace's most frequent and constant demands was the defense and updating of human rights, something which people have known for years was one of the country's legal and political priorities.

All of this went along with what was happening throughout the world: the universalization of human rights is one of the most distinctive characteristics of our era, precisely because, as many scholars from different countries have pointed out, they are the result of loathsome collective crimes

that have been committed in many parts of the world.² Today there are only two or three other legal-political concepts that have the same universal standing as human rights.

Mexico's new administration has responded to the severe problem put to it by different social groups, nongovernmental organizations and individuals relatively rapidly, for reasons that seem obvious to me: Vicente Fox's party was not stained with victims' blood. On the contrary, the National Action Party (PAN) had also suffered from repression, while not as constantly and systematically as the left parties and movements, despite the fact—we should emphasize—that its opposition activities were always legal and it also had

guerrillas active in the 1970s. The office's aim is also to clarify all the major arbitrary actions taken against other social movements also subjected to repression and brutal assassinations.

Special Prosecutor Ignacio Carrillo Prieto's revelations about the violations committed in Guerrero, the state where both Genaro Vázquez Rojas and Lucio Cabañas operated, cannot be classified as anything but atrocious: illegal mass graves of guerrillas in what are now buildings; cowardly shootings of youths—some almost children—, adults and old men in small towns as vengeance by the army because they had not found what they were seeking: guerrillas. And the height of cruelty: the day after the massacres, the army would return to

On October 2, 1968, there was an attempt
to partially destroy a national group perfectly identifiable
by its permanent interests and objectives: students.
Therefore, the crime committed was genocide.

always condemned violence. Another reason closely linked to this one is that with regard to this momentous issue, the Fox government uses every possible means to separate itself from the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Not only that, it also tries to differentiate itself from the PRI by righting its wrongs. The last reason is that today one of the most solid criteria for deciding on the quality of a liberal democracy is respect for human rights.

Thus, a few months ago the government created a special prosecutor's office to investigate those responsible for the human rights violations of the past, significantly, those against the participants in the 1968 student movement and the

give "aid" in solidarity with the town that had suffered the visit of the "guerrillas." This was all told to the special prosecutor by relatives of the victims of almost 30 years ago and by other eye witnesses.

This single example makes it possible to say that if the new administration does not clear up these and similar actions, the "government of change" will always carry with it the burden of the PRI government human rights deficit.

I am one of several former student leaders who brought a suit before federal Attorney General Jorge Madrazo Cuéllar exactly on the thirtieth anniversary of the October 2, 1968 genocide. We filed the suit a few hours

before 6:10 p.m., the time when those of us present remember that the aggression against the students and general public began. I would like to take a few lines here and say something about this suit, which illustrates in more than one way the permanent importance of human rights. What did we demand? That more than a dozen individuals be punished, beginning with then-President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz and his Minister of the Interior Luis Echeverría Álvarez; including General Crisóforo Mazón Pineda, the commander of the troops present that day at the Three Cultures Plaza, the place the genocide was perpetrated; and Colonel Ernesto Gómez Tagle, commander of the Olympia Battalion which began the shooting. We also accused the head of the president's general staff, General Luis Gutiérrez Oropeza, one of the clumsiest, cruelest leaders who acted that day.

What did we accuse them of? Of "acts that may constitute the crimes of genocide, illegal arrest, abuse of authority and any and all that emerge against the undersigned" (p. 1 of the suit).

Of all these crimes, perhaps the least understood is "genocide" because of its little-known meaning and, more importantly, because it has only recently been defined as a concept.

While human rights have been respected for a long period, dating back to the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, and were updated by the General Assembly of the United Nations in its Universal Declaration of Human Rights, on December 10, 1948, the concept of genocide is of more recent origin, making it worthwhile to review it succinctly.

The term, as used worldwide today, was coined by Rafael Lemkin when he heard of Turkish leader Talaat Pasha's

