

Why Rub Salt in the Wound? Finding Out the Truth about 1968 And the Dirty War

Adolfo Sánchez Rebolledo*



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1. Opening up the secret files on repression, including the ones about the 1968 student movement, the events of June 10, 1971, and the period of the so-called dirty war that lasted into the beginning of the 1980s,¹ is the most important step by any Mexican government toward clarifying this dark period in our recent history. In addition, the government has created the (incredibly named) "Special Prosecutor's Office for the Investigation of Events that Were Probably Federal Crimes Committed Directly or Indirectly by Public Servants

Against Persons Linked to Social and Political Movements of the Past." This office will be assisted in its efforts by a "Citizens' Committee to Support the Prosecutor," in which former student activists and guerrillas will participate, as well as an "Interdisciplinary Committee," that, according to the Ministry of the Interior, will be "in charge of studying, analyzing and presenting the proposals for determining procedures and terms in which reparations are to be made."²

It should be underlined that these measures are the result of decades of efforts by successive independent committees of victims' family members who

never gave up in the face of the silence or cynicism of judicial, political or military authorities who for years denied the facts or validated the decisions by kangaroo courts totally divorced from any rule of law. It is thanks to the tenacity of people like Rosario Ibarra de Piedra and their insistent, irrefutable denunciations, considered by many to be inopportune or politically incorrect, that the issue of human rights violations is now on the national agenda and has become key to the democratic development of the republic.

To these efforts should be added those carried out by some of the 1968 movement leaders themselves, who after being jailed and exiled started a long political and legal road back to make the judicial branch act professionally and legally rectify abuses by magistrates and judges who, under direct orders from the executive branch and without due process, had charged and sentenced citizens for alleged crimes committed in the course of their open political struggle or as part of clandestine armed action. Definitely, if the judicial branch aspires to becoming the independent branch that democracy requires, it must begin by cleaning house.

2. Clearly, as many have said, these measures in and of themselves will not

* Political analyst and contributor to the *La Jornada* daily newspaper.

automatically clear up the truth and bring justice to those wronged, but it must be recognized that the government has cleared institutional obstacles out of the way —although there continue to be some with regard to the armed forces— so that today Mexican society has an arsenal of instruments and sources available as never before. In no way do they resemble, as some have said, a “smoke screen” to gloss over the facts, and they do have the intention of punishing those responsible for the violations of human rights wherever and whenever the law allows. Much less does it seem what others have called, a useless exercise because it is too late, an exercise that can only bring division to our society, a mere act of retroactive vengeance that is of no interest to new generations who know very little about the historic facts in question.

Delving deeply into the underworld of official, secret repression contained in the files recently handed over to the public will reveal the *modus operandi* of the authoritarian state, the codes of impunity, the networks of complicity woven between security forces and the judicial apparatus to cover up the commission of extremely grave crimes. It

will paint a painful picture of violence and irrationality, of pain and stupidity: the death figures that, for reasons of political and moral health, must be revealed without hesitation.

The clarification of the methods and the tragic numbers of repression meets a first condition for beginning to bring to light a very important part of the historic truth. However, a great deal is left to be done if we are to: 1) situate Mexican state policies in their possible relationships with the anti-communist counterinsurgency strategies of the Cold War implemented in Latin America since the victory of the Cuban Revolution; and 2) know the concrete history of the guerrilla movement in Mexico, both the rural movement under the command of Genaro Vázquez and Lucio Cabañas and the urban guerrillas concentrated mainly but not exclusively in the September 23 Communist League,³ sidestepping mythical simplifications. A precise idea of the extent of the so-called “dirty war” has still to be established, since there are those who see continuity running from October 2, through the *halcones* to the repression of the White Brigade,⁴ which sowed terror and death for almost two

decades. Others, by contrast, think that the continuity begins when the disappearance of detainees became a systematic state practice, immediately after businessman Eugenio Garza Sada was murdered by the guerrillas in 1973. This is no trivial matter if we take into account that for juridical effects, it is important to situate the duration in time of certain kinds of behavior and the commonalities to their victims.

3. People too easily recognize the need to clarify the facts so that “the violence is not repeated,” at the same time saying that it is not a good idea to apply the law to events that “no longer matter.” This is false. They also come up with legal arguments about the statute of limitations having run out and the supposed lack of interest in the events among the new generations of citizens. However, some opinion polls show that a sizeable number of Mexicans know what happened and recognize the responsibility of the governments of the time.

In that sense, a poll done by the Parametría company for television’s National Polytechnic Institute’s Channel 11⁵ concluded that 62 percent of those



Demonstration of former 1968 students demanding those responsible for the October 2 massacre be tried.



Luis Echeverría, president of Mexico from 1970 to 1976, arrives at the prosecutor's office to make a statement about his responsibility in the crimes of 1968 and 1971.



A poster of the time highlights those responsible for the repression. The third figure from the left is former President Echeverría.

surveyed knew what had happened October 2, 1968, a very high figure if we take into account that for the last 35 years only scant and marginal information has been available about those events, information generally limited to left milieus. It is also important to note that “72 percent of those who know what happened October 2, 1968 and June 10, 1971, and who know who Luis Echeverría is, think that the former president is responsible for both events; 69 percent think that he should be charged and tried, while 16 percent think that these events should be left in the past to avoid division of Mexicans today. On the other hand, 43 percent of those polled think that the emergence of the issue today is an attempt to divert attention from [current] national problems, while 45 percent think that [the government] really does intend to see justice done with regard to the events of 1968 and 1971.”⁶ According to this survey, Mexicans think that “even though the events are in the past, the former president should be prosecuted.”⁷

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4. We need to know the truth not only because of an ethical imperative, the urgency of rationally coexisting based on tolerance and respect for the law, but also because of the necessity of drawing the lines of demarcation between the methods for preserving the state, even if they passed over the rule of law, and what must be a political regimen based in the rule of law. In other words, delving into these tragic, violent events is valuable if it is useful in eliminating from our social conscience and the political culture inherited from an authoritarian regime the idea that the “raison d’état,” interpreted in a dis-

cretionary manner by governments without any control by society, can protect itself through the suppression of its adversaries. Nothing condemns an authoritarian regime more than the description of the atrocities committed in the name of the law and national unity by those who should have protected the constitutional rights of all citizens, even those who at one time or another committed crimes. The recognition that that other history is real and not the product of a subversive imagination is a warning against the common idea that any social problem that can cause disturbances and threaten stability can only be explained by an external conspiracy or as the result of a shameful plot. In the past, impunity and repression went along with the paradigms of the so-called Cold War that the Mexican government —political specificities aside— accepted completely.

Anyone examining early 1970s publications will find, with very few exceptions, a determination to present Mexico as an exceptional island of stability and peace, particularly compared to the violence that plagued a convulsive Latin America. Mexico was different, said the propaganda; nothing was going on here despite the fact that very shortly before, on October 2, 1968, the world had witnessed a cruel massacre of students by army troops and plainclothes police who acted behind the civic, democratic facade of the presidentialist regime. The state, which considered itself the heir of a revolutionary movement, maintained political control thanks to a single party without apparently placing too much importance on the subversive activities of small, isolated organizations that had risen up in arms. But this was not the case. The silence about the bloody events of October 2, 1968, and



Detainees in University City during the 1968 student movement.

Manuel Gutiérrez Paredes' Archive, CCSU/UNAH-Historic Archive

later, the impunity of the perpetrators of the June 10, 1971 massacre, under the administration of Luis Echeverría, was due precisely to the authoritarian logic of not recognizing dissidence, which in the end was the justification for the armed movement. Anyone who tries to study and understand the roots of democratic change in Mexico will find in this gap between the dominant ideological illusions and the conflictive reality that no one dares talk about one of its original sources.

I will never tire of saying that the 1968 student movement was the first large modern protest of the second half of the century in Mexico whose broad, democratic demands could not be dealt with by the authoritarian state. The government's tragedy was that it could not summon up a minimum of flexibility to face a protest that turned around questioning the "principle of authority" that was the basis for the political

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system's normalcy. Even today some essential files about the period are kept under lock and key.

With their actions, the students proved that the regime preferred to sink into the swamp of repression than to concede even an insignificant amount in the monopolistic exercise of power. That is why the 1968 crisis marked the course of history in a way that other equally tragic events in this extremely long transition did not.

5. The October 2 repression crushed the student movement, but the mas-

sacre became the justification for a violent armed confrontation that was objectively fed by the lack of political freedoms and the excesses of the security forces employed to curb the growing democratic demands of a society that no longer fit in the straightjacket of a regime unable to satisfy them. Of course the guerrilla movement is a response that has particular social, political and even ideological causes according to the individuals that promote it, the stage they act upon and the means they practice to achieve their ends, but it is difficult to say that it was the continuation of the student movement "by other means."

It is true that underlying the attitude of the guerrillas was a direct and emotional spring born of the experiences of 1968 and 1971 that was marked by repression. Subjectively, the guerrillas borrowed their ideas from "foco-ist" theory, based on a rudimentary, dogmatic Marxism that was barely enough to "theoretically" justify armed actions. However, in the words of a former member of the September 23 Communist League, Manuel Anzaldo Meneses, "The reality was that they didn't leave us any alternative. The persecution, the massacres in the streets were everyday events. If you went to a normal demonstration you were shot at, massacred, murdered; the *porros*,⁸ the white guards simply executed you and threw you into an alley. In the morning you appeared knifed or shot by police, riot police, soldiers."⁹

Was there really no other alternative, as the guerrillas said? That issue must be addressed if we wish to learn from the past. In other words, the Truth—capitalized—will not be known as long as we do not have a general history of the armed movement, not just as

a victim of repression, but as the expression of a political proposal whose aim was taking power through revolution and whose evaluation, particularly by left thinkers, is far from having begun. Regarding this point, we lack a minimal history that would allow us to move from accepted generalities to real comprehension of an inexplicably little understood period. We must go beyond the —absolutely necessary— description of the atrocities of repression and move toward the analysis of the conception of the state and revolution that the left shared and then abandoned but without the self-critical look that the issue and the political tasks demanded. Unfortunately, there is no balance sheet on hand despite the fact that for more than 30 years the need to discuss the political and ide-

ological implications of the armed road has been on the table and that the current question of whether all forms of struggle are legitimate simply because they confront an oppressive state has not been answered. **MM**

NOTES

¹ On October 2, 1968, the Mexican government ended a student movement for democratic reforms with a massacre in which hundreds were probably killed. Many others were jailed or exiled. This was known as the massacre of Tlatelolco. On June 10, 1971, a student demonstration was repressed by government forces, resulting in dozens of dead and wounded and an indeterminate number of disappeared. [Editor's Note.]

² Secretaría de Gobernación, *Informe de la Secretaría de Gobernación sobre Derechos Humanos* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Gobernación, 2002).

³ Both Vázquez and Cabañas were guerrilla leaders in the state of Guerrero in the early 1970s, while the September 23 Communist

League was the most active of the urban guerrilla groups. [Editor's Note.]

⁴ The *halcones* were the paramilitary group that massacred students on June 10, 1971. The White Brigade was the armed branch of the government office in charge of repression, the Federal Security Office. [Editor's Note.]

⁵ Channel 11 is a public television station that belongs to the National Polytechnic Institute, one of the academic institutions whose students, researchers and teachers suffered most in the repression of 1968 and the "dirty war." [Editor's Note.]

⁶ <http://oncetv-ipn.net/noticias>, consulted on 17 September 2002.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Groups of fake students that the authorities hired to break up demonstrations and carry out repression. [Editor's Note.]

⁹ Forum to Commemorate the Attack on the Madera Barracks, Mexico City, 23 September 1995. The attack on the military installation at Madera in the state of Chihuahua was the first "revolutionary" action of the guerrillas of the 1960s and 1970s. [Editor's Note.]