

Ex-president stonewalls Mexican massacre probe

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Mexico's former president Luis Echeverría continued to deny any responsibility for the repression carried out by security forces during the 1960s and 1970s after appearing July 9 for a second time before a prosecutor investigating the bloody events of that period.

Following the recent opening of the intelligence files of the now-defunct secret police agencies—the Federal Directorate of Security and the General Directorate of Political and Social Investigations—President Vicente Fox ordered an investigation into the “dirty war” that the Mexican security forces carried out against the student movement and left-wing oppositionists during the 1960s and 1970s. The probe is also to follow up a report issued by Mexico's National Human Rights Commission, which confirmed the “disappearance” of at least 275 people detained by security forces in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Fox was elected president as the candidate of the PAN, or National Action Party, in 2000 ending 71 years of unbroken rule by the PRI, or Institutional Revolutionary Party. While espousing a right-wing social and economic program of “free market” reforms, he pledged to wage a battle against corruption, endemic to PRI rule, and to introduce greater “transparency” in government.

After more than a year and a half in office, Fox can point to few successes and his popularity ratings have declined precipitously. His strategy of hitching Mexico's economy even more tightly to that of the US has only mired the country in a deeper slump. While promising during the election to run Mexico's government “like a business” and lift the growth rate to 7 percent, he has instead presided over the first annual negative growth rate in six years, resulting in the destruction of nearly a million jobs.

The Fox government's creation of a special prosecutor's office on “social and political movements of the past” is aimed at deflecting domestic opposition and improving the country's image abroad.

Despite its pledge to put an end to extra-legal repression and authoritarianism, the Fox government has itself come under sharp criticism from international human rights groups. Amnesty International recently issued a report declaring that “disappearances” of people detained by the country's security forces have continued since Fox took office in December 2000.

While the government signed an international treaty against disappearances and passed a law against the practice, critics noted that the measure was crafted to grant impunity to the security forces. It left secret military courts in charge of prosecuting human rights charges against soldiers—the Mexican army is heavily involved in internal policing—and exempted all disappearances committed before the law was passed.

Echeverría, who was president from 1970 to 1976, is the first Mexican leader ever to face a prosecutor, and the case has attracted tremendous public attention. The prosecutor, Ignacio Carrillo, has centered his questioning of the ex-president on two student massacres carried out in 1968 and 1971. He has based his case on the complaints filed by a committee of survivors, many of whom were themselves imprisoned and

tortured.

As Minister of Government under then-president Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970) Echeverría exercised authority over security forces during the massacre of the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Mexico City on October 2, 1968, in which as many as 500 unarmed students were shot to death. Dozens more were killed in the 1971 massacre carried out against students who dared to protest against the government's repression.

Pressure mounted for an investigation into the 1968 killings, known in Mexico as the Tlatelolco massacre, following the publication of a series of 35 photos sent anonymously to the Mexican news magazine *Proceso*. The images, apparently taken by Echeverría's photographer, provided proof of allegations long made by survivors of the bloodbath.

The photographs clearly showed heavily armed men in civilian clothes, each wearing a white glove on his left hand. Survivors of the massacres had long insisted that the shooting that day had been initiated by agents provocateurs in civilian clothes, who distinguished themselves from the protesters by wearing white gloves. The photos show these gloved gunmen grabbing students and handing them over to uniformed soldiers.

Successive PRI governments have defended the conduct of the police and military in the 1968 demonstration, ludicrously underestimating the death toll at barely 30 and insisting that the shooting had been initiated by the protesters themselves.

Testimony of both survivors and participants in the massacre as well as subsequent investigations have made it clear the massacre was a carefully planned ambush aimed at beheading the emerging movement of opposition to the PRI government. At its center was the so-called “Olympic Battalion,” an elite unit formed with the ostensible purpose of ensuring security for the Summer Olympics that were to take place in Mexico City later that month. Elements of the presidential guard provided many of the plainclothes provocateurs.

After the initial shooting, more than 2,000 army troops deployed at the scene sealed off all exits to the plaza and began mowing down the unarmed student demonstrators, who had been joined by railway employees and other workers, with machineguns. Tanks and soldiers with bazookas were also brought into the operation, as if the Mexican army were confronting a full-scale invasion.

When the shooting ended, the plaza was littered with the bodies of the dead, the dying and the wounded. The US embassy gave a conservative estimate of between 150 and 200 dead, while independent observers, including foreign reporters covering the event, put the death toll between 300 and 500.

To cover up their crime, the military brought in large trucks and hauled the bodies away to military bases where many are believed to have been incinerated or thrown into the sea.

Echeverría, whose position was the equivalent of interior minister, would have had to play a central role in organizing this historic and massive state crime.

The second massacre took place while he was president, on June 10,

1971. Thousands of students marched to protest government repression. An elite police unit known as the Halcones, or Falcons, attacked the crowd with machine guns, pistols, clubs and tear gas.

Again, the official story was that the students were responsible for the violence, with the government claiming that rival factions of protesters had attacked each other. The authorities turned over only six bodies, but it is known that well over 30 were killed.

Evasive and almost cynical in his attitude toward the questioning, Echeverría has denied responsibility for both massacres, claiming that the first was the work of his superior and the second of those under him. The army intervened in 1968, he said, because of “certain circumstances” of then-president Díaz Ordaz, who he described as “the supreme commander of the armed forces.”

He adopted the opposite alibi, however, in relation to the 1971 massacre, as well as the subsequent killings and disappearances carried out by the military against alleged guerrillas and their supporters. He was president then, and Echeverría insisted there had been “a distribution of responsibilities” leaving him out of day-to-day decision making. While he acknowledged ordering the repression of supposed guerrillas, “you can’t be ordering every day; it is a permanent action,” he said.

Those demanding that Echeverría be tried for his crimes also are insisting that the surviving members of the military hierarchy and those who directed operations during the two massacres be prosecuted. The ex-president has thus far refused to provide any formal reply to the questions put to him by the special prosecutor, asking for 30 days to submit written answers.

After his second meeting with the prosecutor, the former president stepped outside the government building in Mexico City in what onlookers described as a provocation. His appearance led to a rush by the assembled media and subsequent clashes between demonstrators and members of his security detail. While he claimed that he had wanted to talk to the press, he was hustled away by his armed guards.

The ex-president’s lawyer, meanwhile, has denounced his accusers among the massacres’ survivors as “criminals and guerrillas.” He has argued that they have no basis to accuse Echeverría because they themselves were tried and convicted by Mexican courts.

Of the 3,000 people detained on the night of the 1968 massacre, 86—most of them leaders of the student movement—were tried and convicted on 10 criminal counts, including the murder of two soldiers killed in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas. The survivors have insisted, however, that these trials were based on false confessions extracted through torture and other manufactured evidence.

Documents released by Mexico as well as material declassified by Washington indicate that Mexican security forces received intensive training in counterinsurgency techniques from the US during the period leading up to the two massacres. Echeverría and Richard Nixon were in regular contact over the handling of Mexico’s internal security, and the country on the US southern border was a key battlefield in the continent-wide campaign of repression backed by the Pentagon and the CIA in the 1960s and ’70s.

While in most other Latin American countries this campaign led to the installation of right-wing military dictatorships, in Mexico the PRI remained in power. While defending the interests of the Mexican ruling elite and US interests, successive PRI governments sought legitimacy in the legacy of the Mexican revolution and adopted a nationalist posture.

Mexico City stood alone among Latin American nations in its friendly diplomatic ties to the Castro regime in Cuba. It also welcomed exiled leftists from other Latin American countries, while covertly spying on them and sharing the information with the CIA. At the same time it engaged in a ferocious repression against any sign of internal dissent. Documents declassified by the US indicate that Mexican military and police officials undergoing training would often cross the border on tourist

visas in an attempt to hide the real purpose of their trips.

Echeverría has urged the media to place the bloody events of 1968 in the perspective of the counterrevolutionary aims of the state during that period, stating that the repression was “grave,” but necessary. “Because of the euphoria of the Cuban revolution, they organized with the aim of installing a socialist regime in this country,” he said.

The ex-president has insisted that he has a clear conscience and expressed confidence that he will never be tried or serve a day in jail for his crimes.

He has good reason not to fear a prison sentence. No one in Mexico’s political establishment appears to desire such an outcome. Leaders of the PRI have criticized the government investigation as an attempt by Fox to gain political advantage over the former ruling party.

Fox himself is not inclined to pursue the probe to its logical outcome. After his inauguration, he called in military commanders and told them his objective was to “humanize” the army’s image. He has shown no interest, however, in limiting its power or punishing those guilty of past human rights abuses.

Moreover, Fox is dependent upon the old ruling apparatus of the PRI. For all of his populist demagoguery about breaking up the corrupt state structures, he has done next to nothing along those lines since taking office. The state machine, still largely in PRI hands, is the only instrument available to maintain social order, and the ruling elite fears that any major overhaul could open up conditions for popular unrest.

Finally, Fox’s own right-wing PAN is among the staunchest defenders of the military and the repression carried out in the name of anticommunism and has shown little enthusiasm for pursuing the investigation.

Most government officials voicing support for the probe talk in terms of it yielding a “moral condemnation” and resulting in “reconciliation.”

In this sense it would share much in common with the so-called “truth commission” established in Argentina, which collected evidence on the murder and disappearance of some 30,000 people in that country under the military dictatorship, only to let the generals responsible go free. Similar immunity was granted to military chiefs responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths during 36 years of repression in Guatemala in conjunction with a probe by a “Commission on Historical Clarification” in that country.

The investigation coincides with an intensification of social polarization and poverty in Mexico, as well as growing instability for the Fox government. At the same time, the Mexican military is establishing ever closer ties with the Pentagon. Talks are well advanced toward the establishment of an “American Command,” with the Mexican army reporting directly to a US four-star general as part of a continental “war on terrorism.”

Under these conditions, a real accounting for the heinous crimes carried out in the past by the Mexican ruling class and backed by Washington will not come from any section of the political establishment. It will require the emergence of a new movement of the Mexican working class fighting to put an end to a system of inequality that continues to produce killings, massacres and “disappearances” of Mexican workers, peasants and youth.



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