Mexico: Fifty years since the 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre

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6 October 2018

Tuesday, October 2 marked the passage of 50 years since the slaughter of protesting students by Mexico's military in the Plaza of Three Cultures in the Tlatelolco area of Mexico City.

Tens of thousands of university students, teachers, and relatives of "disappeared" persons marched from Tlatelolco to the Plaza of the Constitution or "Zocalo" in downtown Mexico City, as did thousands of others in least 13 states, to "commemorate" the massacre, so that brutal day and the memory of those who perished or disappeared would not be forgotten.

National student strikes, occupations and demonstrations had begun on July 26, 1968 with a march to the Zocalo. A half million attended another demonstration in the Zocalo in August.

The student movement, part of a global radicalization of layers of students, youth and workers, was inspired by major political developments that year, such as Czechoslovakia's "Prague Spring," when workers rose up against its Stalinist regime, and a general strike of 10 million workers in May-June 1968 that brought France to the brink of proletarian revolution.

The student strike committee included delegations from 70 universities and college preparatory schools. Its principal demands included autonomy for the country's universities, the freeing of political prisoners, and an end to police repression and violence.

On October 2, 1968 upwards of ten thousand working- and middle-class students marched to the Plaza of the Three Cultures, joined by university employees, as well as workers from dissident trade unions, including railroad workers. Some demonstrators had brought their spouses and children.

Thousands of army troops and tanks surrounded the Plaza as members of the student strike committee addressed the crowd. At 6 p.m., one green and one red flare slowly wafted down from a military helicopter. As the flares reached the ground gunmen posted in the apartments above commenced firing on the speakers and demonstrators. That was the sign for a combined military and police assault on the protesters.

Army troops sealed off the exits from the Plaza and proceeded to indiscriminately mow down the crowd. Witnesses described how students ran from one end of the plaza to the other in an attempt to escape, only to be met by more machine gun fire.

As the operation proceeded, bodies were loaded onto army trucks and carted away. Anonymous cadavers were dropped that very same night from military airplanes over the Gulf of Mexico. At dawn on October 3rd, apartment dwellers overlooking the Plaza described seeing hundreds of shoes and pools of blood below, as bodies were still being carted away.

The wounded were dragged away by their hair and disposed of. For hours, ambulances were prohibited from coming to the aid of the dying demonstrators. Military personnel even invaded hospitals, seeking to finish off those who made their way there. Many who survived were forced to run a gauntlet of soldiers who beat them with rifle butts.

Over 1,300 were arrested. The whereabouts of many of them are still unknown. The Mexican government has never officially admitted to more than 30 dead. At the time, international press agencies gave an estimate 10 times higher. Others have put the figure between 300 and 400.

The Mexican military was not called to account for its savage repression because the operation had been approved at the highest level of the Mexican state—by President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)—and had been overseen by his interior minister, Luis Echeverría, who succeeded Díaz Ordaz as president.

The two had planned this attack while working closely with the upper echelons of the American security apparatus. Despite posturing behind a veneer of Mexican nationalism and independence from Yankee imperialism, in 1968 Díaz Ordaz and Echerverría had in fact served as de facto agents of the American CIA, in close contact with its Mexico City station chief Winston Scott.

The highest levels of the American government closely followed the development of the 1968 Mexican student movement, and with considerable trepidation. They feared the prospect of a mass movement in what they considered their American backyard. They provided arms and munitions to the Mexican police and military units that were attacking the protestors.

The Mexicans fed the Americans information about supposed Trotskyist cadres organized into an "Olimpia Brigade" that intended to arm themselves and provoke an uprising during the protest at Tlatelolco. Declassified cables show that President Lyndon Johnson and his national security adviser Walter Rostow initially concluded that this heavily armed "brigade" had opened fire on Mexican security forces on October 2, 1968, which in turn provoked the bloody reaction by Mexican forces. This was the official story that had been purveyed by the Mexican government and military heads.

This was soon proven to be a fraud. The initial shooting had come from the army's "Olympic Battalion," a specially trained force that had been planted in civilian clothing as a fifth column, both to create the pretext for the army to intervene, and to terrorize the demonstrators. Battalion members were distinguished by their white handkerchiefs or gloves, so troops would not fire on them as well.

During a 1997 investigation by the Mexican Congress Echeverría admitted to investigators that the students had not been armed, and that the operation had been meticulously planned in advance. In preparation, the army had already occupied the Mexico City's Polytechnic Institute, and the national university, UNAM. Nearby jails had been emptied a few days prior to October 2 in order to house those who would be arrested.

It is widely accepted that Tlatelolco marked a willingness by the Mexican state to resort to a new level of violence in response to social and political opposition and dissent. This systematic violence has continued, with little abatement, to this day.

During Echeverría's presidency (1970-76), the Mexican state conducted a "Dirty War" against left-wing students, workers, and intellectuals.

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On Corpus Christi day in June 1971, a CIA-trained special shock army unit called the *Halcones* (hawks), formed from Olympic Battalion veterans and right-wing student thugs known as *porros*, massacred at least 120 students who were marching in support of university autonomy, greater education funding and political freedoms for students, workers and peasants.

President Echeverría called for an investigation, but instead he covered up what had been his own operation. Meanwhile, Echeverría postured as a "left populist" in support of "Third Worldism." He sought to the lead the block of so-called non-aligned nations, and reached out to cement good relations with Fidel Castro's Cuba and Salvador Allende's Chile.

From 1968-74 the Mexican army, under Echeverría's orders, also conducted a scorched earth policy in quelling peasant rebellions in the mountains of southern Guerrero state, including one famously led by Ayotzinapa-trained teacher Lucio Cabañas.

In January 1994, as NAFTA took effect, with its abrogation of the article of the Mexican constitution prohibiting the sale or privatization of communal landholdings, an armed insurgency broke out in the southern state of Chiapas, led by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation demanding social, cultural and land rights for the indigenous population. Although the uprising posed little threat to Mexican political stability, the government determined to eliminate the Zapatistas in order to demonstrate to international capital its effective control of the national territory and of its security policies. The Mexican army was sent in to quell the uprising.

Vicente Fox, of the conservative Party of National Action (PAN), who headed the first non-PRI government since the Mexican Revolution (2000-2006), established with much fanfare a Special Prosecutor's Office for Social Movements and Crimes of the Past to look into these massacres and military operations. But this office handed only a single case over to a judge during its six-year existence, charging Echeverría with genocide for his role in the Tlatelolco and Corpus Christi massacres. During the case Echeverría was sentenced to two years of "house arrest," but was soon thereafter ordered freed in 2009.

Similarly, Fox's call for unveiling of "80 million archives" of the federal departments on security operations against social and political movements came to nothing. Documents about the Tlatelolco massacre largely remained hidden based on national security objections by the military. Such documents would detail the number of dead and disappeared, and the manner in which the massacre was organized, including the role that the American CIA and military played in the operation.

Then Fox's successor Felipe Calderón, also of the PAN, unleashed the armed forces in the streets of Mexico in the name of fighting the narcotics cartels. Well over $2 billion in American aid has funded these military operations.

Studies indicate that this warfare has resulted in over 150,000 dead and more than 40,000 persons disappeared. Employment by the military of summary executions, torture, and clandestine prisons became commonplace.

Violence on this level has equaled if not surpassed that seen in Colombia, Guatemala, Argentina and Chile.

In 2006, Enrique Peña Nieto of the PRI, then governor of Mexico state, sent hundreds of state police to clear residents of the town of Atenco who were blocking a highway in support of flower vendors. Two protestors were killed, and dozens of people assaulted, including many women who were sexually assaulted.

The Popular Assembly of the peoples of the southern state of Oaxaca was also violently repressed in 2006, through employment of death squads, summary executions, and shooting of unarmed persons, including medics. Over 27 died.

State and military violence famously continued under the presidential administration of Peña Nieto, which commenced in 2012.

In June 2014, soldiers of the 102nd Battalion of the Infantry of the Mexican Army killed 22 people in Tlatlaya, Mexico state. The soldiers claimed to have fired in self-defense in a shootout with local gang members. An Associated Press investigation later revealed that the killings of all but one involved executions of youth who had surrendered.

Most infamously, 43 teaching students of the Isidro Burgos Rural Normal School in Ayotzinapa, Guerrero state who were protesting regressive federal educational policies were disappeared and likely killed in the city of Iguala in September, 2014. An independent investigation overseen by the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights determined that a local army battalion had participated in the extrajudicial executions of these *normalistas*, and that the chain of command up to president Peña Nieto covered this up. To this day the federal government has blocked any inquiry into the army's role.

In 2016, teachers of a dissident union protesting Peña Nieto's attacks on education and students supporting them who were blocking a highway in Nochixtlán in the state of Oaxaca were fired upon by federal police without provocation. At least six died and 108 were injured.

In 2016 the Mexican Congress amended the Constitution to give the president the power upon congressional approval to restrict or suspend civil liberties in the event of "serious disturbances to the public peace, or anything else that places society in grave danger or conflict," that is, effectively to declare martial law.

In January 2017, over ten thousand police were deployed to quash widespread protests against surging gasoline prices, in what was known as the *gasolinazo*. Upwards of a thousand people were arrested.

In a March, 2017 speech before 32,000 active military members which was watched online by another 86,000 military personnel, Peña Nieto fervently defended the Mexican military against criticisms of human rights abuses. He charged that denigrating the armed forces or their work was "inadmissible and unacceptable," bordering on the treasonous.

In December 2017, the Mexican Congress enacted an Internal Security Law which grants Mexico's armed forces, federal police and intelligence services jurisdiction over civilian matters, but without civilian review. The law grants these state agencies the power to identify domestic "security threats," lead security operations, and collect information from civilian institutions.

Raids and arrests can be carried out without a judicial order. The Center for Investigation and National Security (CISEN) in the interior ministry is to assign a level of risk to national security to any social or political group or protest, for example, a risk of "ungovernability by mobilizations."

The Peña Nieto government had already been caught employing a program called Pegasus to spy on its media and political critics. The Internal Security Law also lays a legal foundation for mass spying on the Mexican population. Telecommunications service providers can be forced to deliver private communications, real-time geographical location or delivery of retained data on mobile communication equipment, without judicial overview or accountability.

After hearing testimony on the Internal Security Law, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights sharply criticized the scope of the increased role of the military and intelligence, while the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights warned the law "may be implemented extensively and in an arbitrary manner."

Drawing on earlier conceptions of Marx and Engels, Lenin in his 1917 work *The State and Revolution* defined the state as "an organization of violence for the suppression of some class." Lenin stressed that the fundamental nature of the "order" imposed by a state involved the oppression of one class by another, and the systematic denial of means of struggle to the oppressed class.

Lenin's definition well captures the violent nature of the Mexican bourgeois state of the last half century, operating in the interests and at the behest of Mexican and international—primarily American—capital.

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This is a capitalist state that is incapable of bringing justice to the workers and youth who have been victimized, because the needs of the state for social control are opposed to the aspirations of the masses for equality and democratic rights.

Moreover, the use by the Mexican state of widespread force and police-state measures has only increased in scale and intensity since 1968. This itself is a concentrated expression in Mexico of the intensifying class struggle arising from the world capitalist crisis, including the increasing aggression of American imperialism, and bourgeoning inequality.

There can be little doubt that American imperialism would bring strong pressure to bear on the Mexican government in order to head off any significant turn away from these policies.

On Wednesday of last week, in marking the fourth anniversary of the disappearance of the Ayotzinapa 43, Mexico's incoming president Andrés Manuel López Obrador of Morena, the National Regeneration Movement, promised their families that he would institute a "truth commission" to get to the bottom of the atrocity.

However, when the question of whether the role of the army would be thoroughly investigated, the man López Obrador has designated as the next Undersecretary of Human Rights of the Ministry of the Interior, Alejandro Encinas, who will oversee the operation of the truth commission, insisted that the object of the commission could not be to investigate the armed forces.

On Saturday, López Obrador spoke at Tlatelolco to observe the fiftieth anniversary of the massacre. The president elect said "In this historical square we commit ourselves never to use the Army to repress the people of Mexico."

In virtually the same breath, however, AMLO backtracked from his campaign promise that he would immediately order the military to be withdrawn from the streets and send soldiers "back to their barracks."

Members of the "Committee of '68," who organized Tuesday's Mexico City demonstration, called upon López Obrador reactivate the Special Prosecutor's Office established under President Fox. López Obrador responded that while he would consider the matter, "we do not want to open prosecutors for everything."

López Obrador has otherwise made contradictory pronouncements about fully investigating state atrocities "without impunity" for those involved, while at the same time dangling amnesty before their perpetrators. Such statements signal that sooner rather than later the Morena government will undertake to actively suppress an investigation as to past and future state killings, including the bloody state crime that was Tlatelolco, as well as its coverup.

As Ricardo Raphael, director of the UNAM Cultural University Center on Tlatelolco—which is currently digitalizing and making public hundreds of documents from the 1968 period—warned earlier this year, "Whoever wants impunity will try to destroy the memory."

Many in Mexico, including veterans of the 1968 student movement, such as the "Committee of '68," have expressed grandiose expectations for López Obrador, who has long been depicted as a "left populist." He has been lauded by the pseudo-left as a progressive social democrat who will pursue what he calls a "fourth Mexican revolution," and has even been supported "critically" by political groups claiming to be Trotskyist.

But as his recent equivocations as to investigating government atrocities express, López Obrador is a thoroughly bourgeois politician, who will not challenge the fundamental nature or operation of the Mexican state.

In truth, the Mexican ruling class, and international capital, have made their peace with this his victory precisely because he is seen as better suited to convince the Mexican working class that its fundamental interests can be protected through tepid and half-hearted reforms, rather than through a socialist revolution to take power and overturn the capitalist system.

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