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Mexico

Political disappearances spark crisis in Mexico

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Since the end of September, Mexico has been shaken by a growing wave of protest in response to the murder of four students and the disappearance of 43 students in the southeastern state of Guerrero. The first day of solidarity with the students of Ayotzinapa took place on 8 October and a second international day of action on 22 October.

On 26 September, municipal police attacked a group of students distributing political leaflets during a public event organized by local government in the city of Iguala, Guerrero. [1] The students were ejected from the public event and pursued and shot at by police, who also attacked a bus carrying other students who had travelled to Iguala to compete at a soccer tournament. Four students were killed and a number of others were seriously injured. Another 43 students were detained by police and transferred to a police station, from which they were taken away in police vehicles. They have not been seen or heard from since.

The disappearance of these 43 students has taken place in a state where the majority of disappearances of activists and guerrilla fighters took place in the 1970s, so the student response has been swift and massive.

Thanks to the “war on drugs” initiated by former National Action Party (PAN) president Felipe Calderón and continued by Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) president Enrique Peña Nieto, the number of disappearances has grown to 10,000 people in recent years and is now a full-blown human-rights crisis.

One of the absurd and heart-wrenching things about this state terrorism is the fact that most of the disappeared have been random members of the civilian population, described as “collateral damage” of the war against “organized crime”. This is what makes them different from the more than 500 cases taken up in the 1970s and 1980s by the “Eureka!” committee of mothers of the disappeared led by Rosario Ibarra. At the time, we spoke of the “political disappeared” since these were people the government accused – at times falsely – of belonging to armed political organizations.

This latest case of missing students in Guerrero has taken us right back to the kind of disappearances carried out against political and social-movement activists in the past. The government can no longer claim that it is a matter of “collateral damage” of the war on drugs. This act of aggression was explicitly directed against students from the Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa teacher-training college. [2]

The government initially claimed that the students were victims of “organized crime”. In light of evidence provided by surviving students, it was forced to admit that the students had been detained by municipal police and handed over to a leading drug trafficker who ordered that they be killed and buried in secret mass graves in the countryside. Army, police and forensic teams were assembled to locate the mass graves. The teams found more than ten mass graves and then compared DNA from the human remains with that of the missing students’ families. In a show of distrust toward Mexican authorities, the families demanded that Argentinian experts in forensic medicine be involved in the case.

Blaming “organized crime” is a way to create confusion and obscure the government’s responsibility for these crimes. It’s clear that the 43 missing students were initially detained by the police and then transported in police vehicles to destinations unknown. It’s no coincidence that the slogan made famous by Rosario Ibarra and the “Eureka!” Committee in the 1970s and 1980s is once again ringing out in the demonstrations, especially in the contingents of Ayotzinapa students and family members. “They were taken away alive, and we want them back alive!”

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The students were not “picked up” by organized crime, nor are they victims of kidnapping by individual criminals. They are victims of “forced disappearance”, the term used in international human rights law when the perpetrators of the crime are state organizations of any sort. The UN considers forced disappearance to be a war crime.

The other important point about the current situation is that both the Iguala municipal government and the Guerrero state government are run by the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). [3] The events of recent weeks show how low the party has sunk. PRI president Peñ̄a Nieto won the 2012 elections through yet another election fraud. Soon after, in December of the same year, he secured PRI, PAN and PRD support for his Pact for Mexico, which recognized Peñ̄a Nieto as president and promised support for his government agenda.

Andrés Manuel López Obrador, PRD presidential candidate in both 2006 and 2012, broke with the party and created a new one, called the Movement for National Regeneration (MORENA). It embraces the same nationalist strategic perspective advocated by the PRD at its founding convention in 1989. During his first 18 months in power, Peñ̄a Nieto succeeded in getting his harshest neoliberal reforms through a Congress controlled by the Pact for Mexico parties.

Peñ̄a Nieto's reforms have radically altered the content of the 1917 Constitution – in the area of social and economic rights and in relation to the country's national sovereignty. Now, not only does the PRD bear responsibility for supporting this overhaul of the constitution drafted in the wake of the Mexican Revolution, it is now involved in human-rights violations akin to those committed during the earlier decades of PRI rule (when, indeed, most PRD leaders were still in the PRI). The head of the Iguala municipal government requested leave and is currently a fugitive from the law. Guerrero state governor Ángel Aguirre Rivero has rejected calls for his resignation and was backed by his party during the first 15 days of the crisis. He has also received support from the PRI group in Congress, who argue that he should remain in office and track down the missing students.

These parties argue that “organized crime” bears responsibility for these crimes, and that it is pointless to call on Ángel Aguirre to step down, and that the conflict shouldn't be “politicized”. This can only be because they realize that the situation in the country is explosive, with so many wrongs having been committed against workers and the people generally speaking. They know that the dynamic of the student protests and solidarity movement can quickly evolve toward challenging government, from the local level to the federal one. The protests of recent days are a clear signal.

There were renewed clashes with police when Ayotzinapa students and teachers gathered to protest in Chilpancingo, prompting protestors to set fire to the state-government complex and city hall and rain stones down on the local Congress building. The following day, the protest movement announced plans to occupy more than 40 municipal-government buildings across the state of Guerrero.

A first national and international day of action in solidarity with the Ayotzinapa students was organized on October 8th. The event was a resounding success, given the large number of cities where protests took place and the breadth of the social-movement and political forces involved – stretching from the Catholic church to militant trade-union organizations such as Mexican Union of Electrical Workers (SME) and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), which has once again taken to the streets of San Cristóbal in the southern state of Chiapas.

Immediately following the day of action, a 48-hour work stoppage was organized in the main universities of the central part of the country, and most significantly at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). The work stoppage coincided with the general strike underway for several weeks at the National Polytechnic Institute (IPN) – another educational institution established at the time of General Lázaro Cárdenas to give the children of workers and peasants access to higher education, and which the neoliberals now want to overhaul.

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The committee in solidarity with Ayotzinapa students has called for another national and international day of action on 22 October to demand that the 43 missing students be returned alive and that the guilty parties be punished to the full extent of the law. The second day of action is expected to be even bigger than the first.

The Workers and People's Political Organization (OPT) has pointed out that the current protest movement shows how wrong the government is to say that neoliberal reforms are the result of broad national consensus. [4] The OPT says that genuine opposition to these reforms is not to be found in the Congress, but rather in the country's streets, highways and rural areas, where a huge number of resistance movements are active. What is lacking is a political and social reference point to unite sectoral struggles within a political movement aimed at dislodging the neoliberal oligarchy and its Pact-for-Mexico party mouthpieces from power. The SME seeks to build such a political and social force with initiatives like the OPT and the launching of a new Trade-Union Centre (NCT, whose first national congress took place on 17 and 18 October). The goal is to build such an alternative as quickly as possible within the resistance movements and new social movements that are breaking away from the parties of the current order.

[1] Iguala is the third largest city in the state of Guerrero after the tourist port city of Acapulco and the state capital Chilpancingo.

[2] During President Lázaro Cárdenas' term in office (1934-40), a network of rural colleges was established to train elementary-school teachers to work among the rural population and in indigenous areas. The students at these colleges themselves come from the same rural milieu and return to work in these communities upon graduation. Successive neoliberal governments have undermined this system of rural teacher-training colleges and closed a number of them. The Ayotzinapa college, near Chilpancingo, is one of those that have survived and where the Federation of Socialist Peasant Students of Mexico (FECSM) remains active. The main leaders of the rural guerrilla forces of the 1960s and 1970s studied at Ayotzinapa, such as Professor Genaro Vázquez Rojas and Professor Lucio Cabañas Barrientos.

[3] The PRD was established in 1989 on the initiative of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the son of President Lázaro Cárdenas, following his break with the PRI, which had been taken over by neoliberals. Cárdenas ran as the presidential candidate of the opposition in 1988 and was deprived of victory by massive electoral fraud that brought PRI candidate Carlos Salinas de Gortari to power. A majority of socialist organizations dissolved into the PRD at its founding convention, but not the Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT).

[4] In 2009, the government of Felipe Calderón shut down the Luz y Fuerza del Centro electric company in order to speed up privatization of the energy system and destroy the SME, a trade union with a long tradition of struggle founded a century ago in December 1914 when the peasant armies of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata occupied Mexico City. The SME was against the liquidation of Luz y Fuerza and called on its members to reject the severance package the government was offering, since acceptance would mean waiving labour-law protection. After five years of resistance, fewer than half of SME members (or more than 16,000 workers) have accepted the package and continue to demand their jobs back. After exhausting all channels of recourse, and confronted with government opposition at every level, SME leaders argued that their struggle did not concern merely the labour rights of its members but was political in nature. It was the neoliberal oligarchy, they argued, that had rammed through the privatization and anti-union measures, so the struggle had to be a political one aimed at removing the neoliberals from power. A trade union alone was not up to this task, so SME leaders spoke of the need to build a political organization. This was the basis upon which the OPT was founded in 2011, bringing together SME activists and different currents and organizations of the socialist Left, including the PRT. Although the OPT is not officially recognized as a political party, it is being built shoulder-to-shoulder with social movements and struggles. During its 2013 membership drive, it promoted itself as project aimed at building broad party of the working class.