

ON THE PROFESSION

Academic Freedoms under Assault in Oaxaca: The LASA Delegation Report

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As they had every year for more than two decades, 70,000 teachers in Oaxaca, Mexico, occupied the Zócalo in the city center in May 2006. They declared that their sit-in would persist until demands for better pay and working conditions were met by the state government. The *plantón* had become a regular part of negotiations each year between the teachers' union, Sección 22, and the governor. That year, however, it was different. In the middle of the night on the 14th of June 2006, state police were ordered by the governor to dismantle the sit-in and clear the teachers out of the downtown.

What ensued in the next five months was a massive social conflict unprecedented in the history of Oaxaca. As was evident in a series of *megamarchas*, eventually hundreds of thousands of citizens, including thousands of university students and a smaller number of professors, became involved in public ways to demand that the governor, Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, resign from office. During this time opposition forces formed a broad coalition known as the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (APPO), protesters occupied and broadcast from 12 radio stations, others erected barricades throughout the city, and, at the end of October 2006, President Fox sent over 4,000 members of the Federal Preventative Police (PFP) to quell the upheaval.

The governor never resigned. Instead, 23 persons were assassinated by government supporters and none of the killers were brought to trial. Hundreds of protesters were illegally arrested, with over 140 of them sent to a distant prison in the state of Nayarit, over 20 hours drive from Oaxaca. And over 1,200 complaints were filed with human rights commissions—including by students, professors, and others from Oaxaca universities and other institutions of

higher learning—alleging torture and harassment at the hands of the authorities.

The Executive Council of LASA received a petition in December 2006, initiated by Mexican anthropologists Aida Hernández and Teresa Sierra, and signed by nearly 100 other Mexican scholars, many members of the association, requesting a fact-finding delegation be sent to Oaxaca to document events there. After discussion and debate, the EC approved the delegation that I was asked to chair. In consultation with then-LASA president Charles Hale, the delegation came to include Marysa Navarro, historian from Dartmouth College and past president of LASA (2002-03); Orlandina de Oliveira, sociologist from El Colegio de México; and Teresa Valdés, sociologist from Universidad Católica de Chile, Universidad de Buenos Aires, and Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo de la Mujer, Chile. Robin Kirk, Director, Duke Human Rights Center, Duke University, was unable to join the delegation for our visit to Oaxaca; nonetheless she served as the special advisor to the delegation.

Delegation Mandate

The mandate of the delegation from the LASA Executive Council was to conduct a fact-finding visit to Oaxaca and then to issue a report based on what we learned. The visit took place between the 15th and 22nd of June 2007, and the Report was submitted to the EC and endorsed in August 2007.

Our purpose as a delegation was not to investigate human rights abuses in general but to focus on the impact of events in Oaxaca on intellectuals and academic institutions. In addition to several state and national human rights reports on the conflict in Oaxaca, the Comisión Civil Internacional de Observación por los Derechos Humanos

(CCIODH) in 2007 published a general and thorough report on the conflict.¹ The charge of the LASA delegation was thus to complement these earlier reports with a focus on personnel and centers associated with higher education.

As a delegation, we went to Oaxaca with the goal of determining whether there was credible evidence of significant violations of the freedoms of intellectual inquiry and expression affecting researchers, teachers, cultural workers, or other such individuals or groups in the area. Such violations were to include, but were not limited to, politically motivated homicides, physical torture or intimidation, illegal judicial detention, the public targeting of individuals on the basis of their political beliefs or affiliations, involuntary separation from employment at educational or cultural institutions on the basis of an individual's political beliefs or affiliations, and so forth.

If, upon investigation, the delegation determined that such violations had occurred, we would fulfill our mandate by ascertaining the principal causes or sources of them. We would also try to make a reasonable effort to identify what actions should be taken by municipal, state, or federal governmental authorities; by national or international human rights organizations; or by other relevant actors to end such violations and to establish conditions for the effective exercise of the freedoms of inquiry and expression.

June 2007 Visit

With the help of several research assistants—especially Jennifer Ashley at Brown, Adriana Zentella in Oaxaca, and Liliana Arrellanos in Mexico City—the delegation was able over the course of five days to formally interview over thirty people from academic

institutions, the state government, human rights and other non-governmental organizations, the church, and artists and intellectuals, as well as to compile relevant written, web-based, and photographic documents.

In order to get oriented to the social actors and chronology of events, we met first with Salomon Nahmad and Margarita Dalton from the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social Pacífico Sur, Gustavo Esteva from Universidad de la Tierra, and Carlos Plascencia from Radio Universidad at the Universidad Autónoma “Benito Juárez” de Oaxaca (UABJO). In the following days we discussed the conflict with intellectuals like Víctor Raul Martínez who had been actively involved with the opposition movement, as well as those like Gloria Zafra who were critical of the teacher’s union and the APPO.

Interviews with representatives from local Oaxaca human rights organizations were crucial in situating our study within a broader context of general social polarization, persecution by the state government, and impunity for those who had committed abuses against protesters. The delegation talked at length with Yesica Sánchez (Liga mexicana para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos en Oaxaca), Sara Méndez (Red Oaxaqueña de Derechos Humanos), and Alma Soto (Comité de Liberación 25 de Noviembre). Through these discussions the delegation was able to better understand the significance of particular turning points in the history of the conflict, including the initial dismantling of the teachers’ sit-in on the 14th of June, the subsequent *megamarchas* demanding the resignation of the governor, the catalytic effect of the murders of North American photojournalist Bradley Will and four others on the 27th of October, and the deployment

in Oaxaca of the Federal Police a few days later.

A highlight of the visit to Oaxaca by the delegation was our interview with the Rector of the UABJO, Francisco Martínez Neri. The main UABJO campus was a central site for social conflict and pitched street fighting took place just outside the campus from June through November 2006. On the 14th of June 2006, with the express desire to “democratize the media,” university students and faculty took over the radio station of the UABJO, Radio Universidad.

The delegation noted in its Report the important role played by UABJO Rector Martínez throughout the conflict. With few exceptions, the people interviewed by the delegation spoke with respect for the Rector and his attempts to preserve the autonomy of the university. The Rector told the delegation that he was also concerned during the conflict to insure that, “We would defend the participation of any professor and any student” in the social protests. After university students took over Radio Universidad, the Rector told the delegation, there were personal attacks on him such as announcements on a radio station associated with the government that persons were headed to his house to burn it down.

In our interview the Rector detailed the events that transpired at the university on November 2nd: after hearing on the radio that the police was trying to enter the university, the Rector called the Mexican President, the Secretary of the Interior, and the Federal Police that had entered Oaxaca days before. He demanded that “they withdraw from the university.” When he arrived at the university himself, “I observed that a group of state police was trying to force a door to enter” the university and helicopters from the Federal police were dropping tear gas within the university that

had become, in his words, “a war zone.” Nonetheless, despite pressure from the government, the Rector defended the autonomy of the university and the police were unable to occupy the university grounds.

The delegation also investigated specific cases of intellectuals who had suffered as a result of their attempts to exercise freedoms of inquiry and expression. Although the percentage of university professors who openly supported the social movements to oust the governor was small, the state government’s persecution of these individuals served to intimidate intellectuals more generally. In an interview with Víctor Raúl Martínez, a professor-researcher at the Instituto de Investigaciones Sociológicas UABJO, we learned that in the years leading up to the conflict he was well known in the city for his participation in a variety of academic, civic, and religious organizations. Dr. Martínez and others we interviewed in Oaxaca believed that because he was active in these ways, he received threats on his life and against his family. These threats were received by telephone calls to him, his wife, and two of his brothers. His photograph was published on an anonymous website with 25 others that announced: “These are the delinquents who have kidnapped your city. Grab them wherever you see them or go find them in their homes!” Five of the 25 persons reportedly had been killed by July 2007. Dr. Martínez was threatened repeatedly on a government-affiliated radio station.

In order to gain the government perspective on the conflict, during our visit we interviewed leading members of the Oaxaca state government. Héctor Pablo Ramírez, Secretario Técnico of Oaxaca and former president of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in the state, and Luz Divina Zárate, Secretaria de Comunicación

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Social for Oaxaca, stated in our interview that “lumpen proletarians from other countries like Nicaragua” as well as malcontents from other states were imported by APPO to destroy the historic city center. This assessment contradicts all other interviews conducted by the delegation, including with people who supported the state government’s actions against the protest movement.

Principal Findings

The principal findings of the delegation were that repression, violations, and a general atmosphere of threats extended broadly among researchers, teachers, cultural workers, and intellectuals associated with universities, schools, nongovernmental organizations, and similar institutions. The delegation found these violations and threats deeply disturbing as specific cases and chilling in their implications for democracy in Mexico.

The social polarization that occurred in the course of events in Oaxaca in 2006 was the result of generalized conflict in Oaxaca society reflecting obvious and extreme social inequalities. The social protest that occurred during this time was unprecedented in the history of the state in terms of scale and impact. We documented in our interviews and materials gathered attempts by the government and police of Oaxaca, and later by federal authorities and police, to intimidate, threaten, punish, and even murder with impunity those who expressed themselves in opposition to the governor and to the violent state repression.

During its visit to Oaxaca in June 2007, the LASA delegation was also able to determine that throughout the conflict in 2006, and in the face of government violations and threats against academic freedoms, universities and

institutions of higher learning and individuals associated with these institutions in Oaxaca performed a vital role in establishing a civic space for information, debate, and independent and critical social commentary and protest. This space was crucial for intellectuals and other academics who wished to participate alongside other citizens to articulate the demands of various social actors, including indigenous peoples and women.

The conflict and social protests in Oaxaca in 2006 represented a time when government repression was met with what one person the delegation interviewed described as “an effervescence of popular initiative.” Numerous intellectuals and others interviewed by the delegation spoke of positive changes and expectations in the state as a result of the conflict, including renewed efforts to address long-standing social problems of access to education and developing public spaces for dialogue and debate. An artist told the delegation that for everyone in Oaxaca regardless of political viewpoint, “there is a before and an after—Oaxaca will never be the same.”

The Report of the delegation concluded with these recommendations:

- That LASA call on Oaxaca state and Mexican federal authorities to uphold Mexican laws and international accords that protect the right to life, due process and freedom of thought, assembly, and expression;
- That LASA call on Oaxaca state and Mexican federal authorities to bring to justice all public officials who have violated these laws and accords;
- That LASA support the defense of university autonomy in Oaxaca;

- That LASA censure the threats, intimidation, and punishment by the state and federal authorities of academics who have sought to exercise their freedoms in inquiry and expression;
- That LASA be vigilant regarding the personal safety of individual academics.

“Violations Against Freedoms of Inquiry and Expression in Oaxaca de Juárez,” the Report from the LASA Fact-Finding Delegation to Oaxaca, may be found in English and Spanish versions through the LASA website:
<http://lasa.international.pitt.edu/news/oaxacareport.html>

Endnote

¹ See: http://cciodh.pangea.org/quinta/informe_final/informesinmarcas.pdf. ■