

# Can Mexico's National Archive Restore Its Reputation?

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Two alarming episodes of censorship at Mexico's Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) show a curious commonality. In January 2020, researchers found access blocked to the files of the General Directorate of Political and Social Investigations (DGIPS), a secret service that operated between 1918 and 1985, spying on Mexico's social groups and citizens, especially leftists; rumors of the embargo had begun to circulate in the autumn. That August, top radio journalist Carlos Loret had reported that cabinet member Manuel Bartlett owned real estate *sixteen times* the value of the assets he had declared on taking office. Loret's digging into Bartlett's portfolio had already cost him his job at Televisa, the TV behemoth that has long cultivated a coziness with presidents.

Five years earlier, in January 2015, researchers found access blocked to the records of the notorious Federal Security Directorate (DFS), a more sinister secret service that functioned during the Cold War, spying on a broad range of leftists, sometimes torturing or killing them, as well as keeping tabs on political and business elites. Two months earlier, a team of reporters had revealed that President Enrique Peña Nieto's wife owned a \$7 million home in one of the capital's poshest zones, built for her on credit by a developer favored with contracts by the president (Paxman 2015).

Neither exposé gleaned data from the DFS or DGIPS files, but the fact that both were soon followed by embargoes on declassified material at the AGN, much of it fairly contemporary, suggests a governmental tendency to react viscerally to embarrassing investigations by tightening access to potentially sensitive records. After all, the DFS and DGIPS series both contain data about politicians

still active, including Bartlett, labor leader Elba Esther Gordillo, and Mexico's current president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

Second, since the administrations involved pertain to different parties, Peña Nieto's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and López Obrador's Morena, the two episodes suggest that the latter may be less committed to a touted "Fourth Transformation" of Mexico than it claims, at least in terms of freedom of information and holding the human rights abusers and self-enriching bigwigs of the past to account. Shortly after taking office in December 2018, López Obrador announced that all the secret police archives, including those of the Center for Investigation and National Security (CISEN), which replaced the DFS and DGIPS between 1985 and 2018, would be made public at the AGN. But in keeping with an administration famed for mixed signals, the reality was different. Until this February, when a new policy of openness appeared to be taking shape, researchers had found it harder, not easier, to consult the DFS and the DGIPS collections.

Thanks to outcries from the academic community and ample coverage in the press, the embargoes of early 2015 and early 2020 both proved temporary. Yet obstacles to access at the AGN—some affecting the entire institution—have worsened in recent years, owing to a complexity of factors. Laws governing freedom of information, data protection, and archival operation offer room for interpretation that bureaucrats can exploit at the covert bidding of senior officials. The AGN's budget has often failed to provide the means with which to fulfill its brief. Recent directors have done little to tackle a vast backlog of uncatalogued collections. Institutional knowledge has been lost as veteran employees have departed. And a vaunted move of the entire

holding to a new, air-conditioned building was disastrously undertaken, leaving many materials in an archival black hole.

### Transparency or the Lack of It

On January 30 this year, in an auditorium at the AGN, several dozen Mexican reporters were treated to a dose of political theater that recalled the golden age of the PRI, that party's era of uninterrupted rule between 1929 and 2000. The archive director, Carlos Ruiz Abreu, took the stage with Francisco Javier Acuña, director of the National Institute for Transparency, Freedom of Information and Data Protection (INAI), and they jointly announced the full opening of the DFS and DGIPS holdings (*Proceso* 2020).

The conference was premature, for the two parties had yet to hammer out a protocol for reopening these collections. It evidently responded to three weeks of bad press, along with a public petition to the president signed by nearly 200 national and foreign academics. One thing that galled them was the DGIPS closure, supposedly for revision and redaction, after the trove had been freely accessible for 18 years. But there was also anxiety that the DFS archive be reopened too. Access had only been partial since 2015, and while its overseers had developed some 3,200 redacted "public versions" of files on specific persons, to facilitate consultation, all but 400 had been restricted, apparently for further redaction, since the previous spring.

Ruiz Abreu hosted the event, but Acuña stole the show. The INAI director waxed lyrical about this "historical moment ... the liberation of the archives." He identified himself with the generation of 1968, the student protest movement whose bloody repression left a thirst for justice that the DFS archive opening had promised to help quench (Acuña was in fact three years old at the time). Raising his voice he expressed outrage that, until recently, the DFS collection had been overseen by agents ... from the CISEN! (The thousands who have used that archive already knew this.)

One gained the suspicion that Acuña's pandering to journalists belied his having helped set the fire he was now trying to put out. One veteran archivist

considers Acuña an opportunist, more anxious to advance his career and rub shoulders with politicians than protect the public's right to know. And a senior AGN official told me just before press conference: "The problem is not with the AGN, the problem is not with the law, the problem is with the INAI."

To be fair, the problem seems to be with both the law *and* the INAI. Since 2002, the Mexican government has passed no fewer than six laws that have a bearing on archival access: three federal laws and three general laws, the latter covering state-level as well as federal dependencies. These consist of two transparency laws, which require government offices to respond to public request for information; two data protection laws, which restrict public access to sensitive personal details; and two archive laws. So, there are ample grounds for confusion. Where there is doubt about which law applies, or how to interpret the bearing of any one clause upon access to particular files, it falls to the INAI to adjudicate.

With so much legalese to hand, a nervous official seeking to justify his bending to political pressure may be tempted to misapply a clause or give it the strictest possible interpretation. AGN officials claim that the General Archives Law of 2018, which took effect in mid-2019, forced them to be more rigorous in their supervision of the DFS and DGIPS series, and that when researchers lodged petitions for access with the INAI, the institute inclined in favor of "restrictive criteria" (*Proceso* 2020).

Following the initial spate of protest at the DGIPS closure in January, the AGN first reacted by partially reopening the collection: any papers dating between the agency's founding and 1950 could be consulted. Yet the concept of a 70-year embargo appears nowhere in the transparency or data protection laws. It does appear in Article 36 of the General Archives Law, but only in relation to documents still in the possession of government departments, not those that have been passed on to historical archives like the AGN. Further, in apparent contradiction of AGN officials' claims that they were forced by the new law to restrict secret service records, given their inclusion of sensitive

personal data, the same article states that materials held in historical archives “cannot be classified as reserved or confidential.”

At any rate, by late February open access to the DGIPS collection had been restored, so had consultation of the 2,800 DFS “public versions” restricted the previous April, and so had consultation of original DFS documents (reviving the access that existed between until 2014). However, veteran archive hounds report that the DFS collection is poorly curated, that neither a partial catalogue made under director Aurora Gómez (2009–2013) nor the DFS’s own card catalogue are being made available to researchers, and that the vast majority of the DFS collection lacks description. Maybe these are teething pains that will diminish over the course of the year. Maybe the protests early of January, which continued with a demonstration involving Dirty War veterans outside the AGN on February 20, will prove to have driven the INAI and the archive to open the secret service records for good. Maybe.

### The Friends of Mr. López Obrador

Many politicians wrestle with fulfilling the idealism that permeates their rhetoric vis-à-vis a need for pragmatism in government. But López Obrador’s struggle to reconcile these two impulses seems unusually pronounced, resulting in a style of leadership that often looks inconsistent and improvised. Specifically, observers attribute this improvisational quality to two factors: a discursive style, often termed “messianic,” that has found its apogee in the presidents’ five-mornings-a-week conferences, dubbed “*mañaneras*,” which run largely unscripted for up to two hours; and the president’s willingness to forge pacts of convenience with some of the political and business elites he spent much of his career vilifying.

In terms of accountability there may be something admirable about López Obrador’s facing the press, Monday to Friday; many of the questions he is asked are hardballs. And in terms of realpolitik, there may be something admirable about López Obrador allying with those he once vilified as “the mafia of power.” But both practices have raised major problems affecting freedom of information.

The first is López Obrador’s tendency to label media that call his government to account, or report on its inconsistencies, as “the opposition press,” “the posh press” (*la prensa fifi*), or even “the mob” (*el hampa*). Some published criticism of his administration is indeed visceral and unfair. But the president’s frequent and public attacks upon media he does not like—immediately amped up in alarming language on social media—sets a troubling tone in a country where more media workers are murdered per year than anywhere else outside war zones (Committee to Protect Journalists 2019).

The second problem is that some of López Obrador’s newfound friends of convenience likely have a lot to hide. Whoever was responsible for the clampdown on DFS and DGIPS records over the last year, precedent suggests that, regardless of the law, holdings containing potentially sensitive information may continue from time to time to undergo politically motivated restrictions. It is this reasoning that drove Paul Gillingham, a history professor at Northwestern University, to launch an initiative called the Mexican Intelligence Digital Archives, or MIDAS, in 2015. Now a joint venture between Northwestern, the Colegio de México, freedom-of-speech organization Article 19, and the Center for Research Libraries, MIDAS is a crowd-sourced, public access archive that hosts digital copies of DFS and DGIPS documents (Mexican Intelligence Digital Archives, <https://www.crl.edu/midas>).

Despite his problems of tone, López Obrador has set a positive precedent for access to information through his public expressions of support for archives and of sympathy for victims of the Dirty War, in which leftists radicalized by the events of 1968 were persecuted, tortured, killed, or disappeared by state agencies. With hefty symbolism, the former headquarters of the DFS, a five-story building on a leafy crescent in Colonia Roma, was reopened in June 2019 as the General Directorate of Strategies for Attention to Human Rights. Personnel offer Dirty War victims or their relatives a variety of aid, from health services to restitution of property. Says adjunct director José Reveles, a veteran investigative reporter: “This is the first government that’s really listening to them.”

And to the good fortune of the AGN, López Obrador's party Morena, which holds an absolute congressional majority, has twice voted to boost the archive's operating budget. In 2019, the line item of 78 million pesos (around US\$4 million, standard in recent years) was augmented at director Ruiz Abreu's request by 21 million pesos. For 2020, the budget was raised to 101 million and then, again thanks to Ruiz Abreu's lobbying, boosted by a supplement of 150 million (making US\$13 million in total). The increments are just as well, because the AGN is a mess.

### **Ruiz Abreu: Trying to Correct the Chaos**

Ruiz Abreu has repeatedly referred in interviews and public statements to the "chaos" he inherited when taking over in 2018. The López Obrador-appointed director, who built a solid reputation over the previous 16 years as director of the Historical Archival of Mexico City, encountered a slew of problems. Many of these were the legacy of profound mismanagement under his predecessor, Mercedes de Vega (Paxman 2015). "Every day we are discovering new problems," sighs Ruiz Abreu.

Perhaps the biggest dilemma is tangible: the AGN has lost a lot of its stuff. Not lost in the sense of it having been stolen—although that has often happened in Mexico: in Puebla, so this writer found when doing his doctoral research, most of the state's executive archive had been sold by the Ávila Camacho brothers (governors Maximino and Rafael) to a paper mill for recycling, while much of the Tehuacán municipal archive had been peddled to street vendors for the wrapping of tamales. No, the AGN still has all of its material, but staff do not know where much of it is.

Archivists' ability to locate materials for researchers depends on effective cataloguing and efficient management. Cataloguing formed a large part of what AGN directors accomplished between 1960 and 1995, with 106 collections completed, but since then only 18 further series have been fully catalogued, as directors often prioritized organizational aid to state and municipal archives. According to a diagnostic prepared by Ruiz Abreu and his team, the proportion of materials catalogued is 71 percent for the New Spain era,

40 percent for the nineteenth century, and just 33 percent for the twentieth century. The director will spend part of his increased budget on hiring a team of cataloguers; colonialist that he is, Ruiz Abreu intends for them to complete the ancient collections first, which he thinks will take two years.

Since the AGN's holdings are so vast, Aurora Gómez, director from 2009 to 2013, opted to invest in Siranda, a management software developed by Spanish company El Corte Inglés for the Archive of the Indies in Seville. She had also seen it put to good use in the Colombian national archive. Gómez was criticized at the time for its cost of 34 million pesos, but she covered the initial purchase using an excess left over from a special budget set for the building of an air-conditioned wing at the AGN that would rehouse the entire collection. She then haggled down the annual maintenance fee. Siranda allowed her team to locate materials topographically; any series that was entered in the program would never again be lost, and when the transfer to the new building took place, the new location of every box could be registered. The program also facilitated a broadly thematic description of boxes, which under Gómez included all of the thousands that had never been catalogued, and the incipient digitalization of the collection.

Her successor De Vega, however, deemed the annual fee too pricey and declined to pay it. Although the AGN suffered budget cuts on her watch, it struck observers that De Vega was happy to spend on first-class air travel and fancy events. When Ruiz Abreu took over, four or five annual payments had been missed, Siranda was next to nonfunctional, and it would cost 11 million pesos to pay the arrears and revive the system. The director opted not to do so. "We're going to develop our own software," he says. Gómez believes Ruiz Abreu is underestimating the complexity of the task and laments that all the thematic cataloguing and digitization carried out on her watch has been for naught. "It's a tragedy," she says.

Worst of all the AGN's calamities was the transfer to the air-conditioned facility in 2017. Rather than entrusting the task to professionals, who would have tagged all the boxes electronically to guard

against misplacement, De Vega hired a moving company, “the kind you’d hire to move house!,” says Ruiz Abreu. Junior employees’ spouses were reportedly hired to help out. The result was bedlam. Boxes were piled on top of each other, often at random. Because of the amateurism of the move, the exit of veteran archivists on De Vega’s watch, and her failure to maintain the Siranda program, entire collections went missing. Even today, researchers requesting documents from the Presidential Branch, one of the most used collections, must not only note the file number but also look up the box number (on a terminal in a separate room), due to the faulty ordering of the series at its new home. Five years ago, it took an anarchist 5 to 10 minutes to pull a file from this branch. Now it takes an average of 45 minutes.

Ruiz Abreu calls restoring order to the holdings his first priority. Another is technical: when the AGN gained autonomy from the Interior Ministry last year, it lost access to its servers, which slowed its online catalogue almost to a halt. Much of the archive’s extra budget will have to be spent on new servers. Then there will be the task of fulfilling López Obrador’s wish that the AGN house and offer access to the CISEN archive. The director believes the way to proceed is by tranches, this year taking possession of materials from 1985 to 1990, followed by 1991 to 1995 next year, and so on.

What access to the CISEN collection will look like is a major unknown. Among other things, its files presumably cover the latter years of the Dirty War, the persecution of members of the left-wing Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD, est. 1989), and combat of (or connivance with) the increasingly powerful drug cartels. If the General Archives Law were observed to the letter, it would fall to the CISEN’s successor, the National Intelligence Center (CNI), to embargo or redact personally sensitive information before passing any files on to the AGN. That process itself may well prove contentious, and if precedent is an indicator, the AGN, under duress, may well enact further restrictions.

The academic and journalistic communities have been remarkably vigilant of political interference at the AGN over the past five years. They will need to remain so.

## References

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