

MEXICO - Repression of Opposition: Fuse for Oaxaca's Conflict

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IPS - The social and political conflict that has the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca in check, with the local government accused of corruption and human rights violations, reached the streets of the country's capital city Monday.

Some 3,000 delegates of the Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca (APPO) walked for 21 days from Oaxaca to Mexico City, where they are adamant that they will remain until their demands are met.

Simultaneously, representatives of the government of President Vicente Fox (of the conservative National Action Party - PAN) met with an APPO delegation to seek a resolution to the conflict. APPO is asking for a complete purge of the Oaxaca police and the immediate resignation of the state governor, Ulises Ruiz.

The state government is in the hands of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which did not lose its grip on the state after it lost its hold on the national government in 2000 for the first time in seven decades.

The protesters, who have taken over public offices and private radio stations and have been camping out in parks and streets in the city of Oaxaca since May, accuse the Ruiz administration of harsh treatment of opponents and of clamping down brutally on dissent.

Many of the APPO activists arriving in Mexico City carried placards demanding the release of political prisoners and protesting police brutality and murders.

Germán Mendoza, one of the best-known social activists from Oaxaca, is one of the most famous victims of police brutality in the state.

The teacher, a member of APPO, has been under arrest since Aug. 9, when plainclothes police drew their guns on him in front of witnesses, dragged him from his wheelchair, pushed him into a car and then held him in close confinement, incommunicado and handcuffed, for three days.

Mendoza has been charged with serious crimes, including murder, robbery and possession of firearms, which means he faces prosecution that may keep him in jail for more than a year, even if he is ultimately found innocent. His case is part of a pattern that has been going on for decades in Oaxaca, according to human rights groups.

The activist became wheelchair-bound 19 years ago, after he was shot by supposed criminals in a confusing bank robbery, of which he was accused by prosecutors, although he was finally acquitted.

Now he is being held at a detention centre two-and-a-half hours away from the city of Oaxaca, where he is allowed no visitors other than his lawyers and his wife, nor is he permitted to read newspapers or "political" books, or listen to radio newscasts.

It was reported that in his first few days behind bars he almost died, because as well as being disabled he is diabetic, and he received no medical care.

Local and international human rights organisations, as well as APPO, maintain that he is a political

prisoner, and that his case is similar to those of dozens of opposition leaders in Oaxaca, who have been persecuted and, in some cases, murdered. "Germán is being punished for political reasons, and that's why they're treating him like the worst of the drug traffickers. That has always happened here in Oaxaca," his wife Sonia Casas, a teacher who has been on strike for five months, along with hundreds of others in the state, told IPS.

Her husband is being held in a tiny room, and Casas fears for his life because he is not receiving specialised medical care despite his health problems.

The judicial process against the 41-year-old Mendoza, who has been active in teachers' unions and small farmers' organisations for more than 20 years, is being pursued by prosecutors aligned with the PRI, which has controlled most of the municipalities and the executive, legislative and judicial branches in the state of Oaxaca without interruption for nearly eight decades.

"In the past, the PRI would at least try to disguise the repression and their operations were discreet and even tactful, but since late 2004 (when governor Ruiz took office) their actions have become barefaced," Florentino López, a leader of APPO, which links more than 350 small farmers', political, labour and human rights organisations, told IPS.

López said that his organisation has documented the murders of some 36 members of different social groups in Oaxaca during the present governor's administration.

Ruiz is a member of the most conservative wing of the PRI, the party that governed Mexico between 1929 and 2000. Although at national level and in most of the states the PRI has fallen from power, in Oaxaca it is still the ruling party.

Human rights watchdogs like the London-based Amnesty International and the New York-based Human Rights Watch have issued reports in recent years expressing concern about the constant violations of the human rights of small farmers and social activists in Oaxaca.

Local human rights groups have voiced similar concerns. But the state commission for human rights, which answers to the local government, has routinely rejected or made light of the denunciations, as it is doing now.

Marked social injustice forms the backdrop to the current situation in Oaxaca. This state and the neighbouring Chiapas and Guerrero have the lowest levels of education, health, infrastructure development and other indicators in Mexico.

"Ruiz, get out, you're a murderer" was one of the many slogans being chanted by the APPO delegates who reached Mexico City Monday. The same phrase is painted on dozens of walls in Oaxaca, which has one of the largest indigenous populations in the country: more than a million out of the 3.5 million people in the state.

Like Mendoza, whose lawyers state that the case against him is based on trumped-up charges, there are at least two other activists who were arrested in Oaxaca in the past two months on similar charges and in similar circumstances: Ramiro Aragón and Erangelio Mendoza.

All three are teachers, and members of Section 22 of the teachers' union, which is opposed to the PRI. For the last 26 years, ever since they broke with that party, the teachers have carried out regular protests to demand better salaries and political change in Oaxaca.

IPS learned from a source close to the Ruiz administration that prosecutors have prepared 37 arrest warrants for APPO leaders. Some of the charges on the warrants are murder, robbery, mutiny, and conspiracy to commit crimes, which are considered so serious that no bail or writs of habeas corpus are allowed.

Eder Gris, Mendoza's lawyer, told IPS that these charges, like those against his client, are fabricated. He said it was a desperate strategy on the part of the Ruiz administration to finish off APPO and the teachers' union.

In the capital of Oaxaca, where no branch of the state is functioning any more, a large proportion of residents are saying that Ruiz is no longer governing at all, and are calling for his immediate resignation.

Both supporters and opponents of APPO agree on this point. "It's easy to see all over the city that Ruiz no longer has any support," Marlene Santiago, director of a non-governmental centre that provides assistance to street children, told IPS.

In the APPO encampments in the city of Oaxaca, where the teachers are in charge and appear to be most numerous, placards and effigies of the governor can be seen, with added horns and tail representing the devil.

The conflict began with a teachers' strike on May 22, when they occupied the main square in the state capital. Ruiz had previously forbidden any demonstrations there "so as not to harm tourism." On Jun. 14, the governor sent in hundreds of police with high-powered weapons, who unsuccessfully tried to clear the square.

Over the following days, a large number of social organisations in the state spontaneously declared their support for the teachers, set up camps in the city and created APPO, whose central demand is that Ruiz resign.

The movement's camps have frequently been attacked by armed irregular groups.

Teachers opposing the local union, numbering some 10,000 out of the 70,000 teachers in Oaxaca, say that they too have been attacked, but by their own colleagues.

Last Thursday night, René Calva, a math teacher, was stabbed to death. Unlike most of his colleagues, he had continued to teach his secondary school students. His fellow opponents of APPO blamed the movement for his murder.

But the teachers' union said he was slain by hired killers paid by the state government, with the aim of derailing the negotiations between APPO and the federal government.

The conflict in Oaxaca began to take shape in 2004, when the opposition denounced that Ruiz had won the post of governor by rigging the elections.

When he took office in December 2004, the police occupied the pressrooms of the local newspaper Noticias due to purported union problems at the paper, which has taken a critical stance towards local authorities.

Next, Ruiz and the Oaxaca city hall, which is also in the hands of the PRI, announced a programme of restoration and changes in the city costing more than 75 million dollars, in order to boost tourism. Several sectors opposed these plans, arguing they were unnecessary and that the money should be spent on the fight against poverty, but their protests fell on deaf ears.

Ruiz then announced that he would provide credit for hoteliers, construct a high-speed railway through rural areas, build a hydroelectric station and dam, and promote industrial development projects on smallholder lands.

Each one of these projects was rejected by social organisations, but the governor said the groups were not representative of the people, and threatened to call out the police if they took to the streets in protest.

Furthermore, to the annoyance of local residents, Ruiz absented himself from Oaxaca for most of the presidential election campaign that took place between January and June this year, to support PRI

candidate Roberto Madrazo.

In the Jul. 2 elections, Madrazo suffered a crushing defeat by both governing party candidate Felipe Calderón, who will take over the presidency in December, and the runner-up, leftwinger Andrés López Obrador.

To squelch the opposition, Ruiz "used force and did whatever he wanted, with PRI backing, since they form a majority in the local legislature, and they also name the judges and magistrates," lawyer Eduardo Arteaga, the head of a private business consultancy in Oaxaca, told IPS.

"The governor didn't listen and instead went to extremes, to the point that his intransigence and authoritarianism backfired on him and affected us all," said the lawyer who, with hundreds of other professionals and shopkeepers in Oaxaca, complains of the large economic losses sustained as a result of the APPO protests.

Ruiz refuses to submit his resignation to the national Senate, which has the power to remove him from office, although not enough senators are willing to impeach him. However, support for the governor has been dwindling in the governing PAN, and it is possible that his luck may run out.

In addition, unconfirmed reports suggest that President Fox is in favour of Ruiz's departure from office.

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