

# A New Mexican Revolution?: The Student Movement of 1968

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The Student Movement in Mexico in 1968 was the first major step to ending overt corruption and bringing about changes promised by the Revolution of 1910. Although few changes in the political system took place at the time, students helped to open the eyes of the Mexican people and encouraged them to demand the rights usurped by the bourgeoisie, as had their revolutionary fathers at the turn of the century. In Latin America, university students had a lot of leverage, originating in the fact that most students came from upper class families. As Richard Renner wrote in 1965, university students and faculty were typically the groups which pointed out the problems within the nation.<sup>(1)</sup> In particular, the Mexican Student Movement was able to rally much support from their schools and communities by informing them of the corruption within the Mexican government.

Throughout the 1960s, Mexico experienced great economic stability and growth. The government used recent economic success to distract attention from existing problems. Although Mexico was growing richer, there had been virtually no change in the inequalities between classes. There were many who were impoverished, and few saw more than minor improvements in their standard of living. In contrast to those of European descent or foreign-born people, mestizos and Indians remained in poverty; many lived in the slums or poor villages. Repression of the lower classes had increased since World War II, and most of the income growth fell into the pockets of the elite. The lower classes share of the national income fell. The middle class, from which many students came, saw some economic benefits, but they lacked political representation. The way they felt was reflected by Octavio Paz: "without democracy, economic development has no meaning."<sup>(2)</sup> The Mexican government had sold out to foreign interests, becoming, according to Manuel Aguilar, a "direct agent of big business."<sup>(3)</sup> Even though the Mexican government had always served the bourgeoisie, the government now openly showed such bias. Such actions contrasted with the ideals for which the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) government was supposed to stand: those of the Revolution of 1910, to be a revolutionary government that worked in the interests of all people.

The Mexican students only had to look across the ocean to see how other students dealt with such matters. Revolts were taking place in Paris, Tokyo, and many other major cities. In Eastern Europe, students called for action towards nationalism and democracy. In the West, students strove to reverse the ills of consumer society. Students modeled their ideas on how to organize and inspire people to action on the examples of students from other nations. Unlike most other student revolutions, Mexican students focused little on university problems, and looked at the grander picture, calling for democracy for the entire nation. Mexican students at first avoided the type of violent or radical protest that was used in the United States and France in the same period, trying to maintain a more conservative program.<sup>(4)</sup> Still, repression of the Student Movement in Mexico took a similar turn to that of the other nations. The bourgeoisie had the power and the interest to protect their elevated status, and used their means to maintain it. Police and army forces became a major part of the repression, and blamed foreigners and leftist ideas for the uprising.

The trouble between the students and government began with a fight between a preparatory school student and a technical student in Mexico City, a fight that turned a riot, ending with *granaderos* (riot police) beating students. The events of the night so angered the students that days later, the *Instituto Politecnico Nacional* or the Polytechnic Institute (IPN) formed a protest against the *granaderos'* excessive use of force. This protest met with another demonstration organized by *Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico* (UNAM) students, members of the

largest university in Mexico, and the union of the two most powerful schools was begun. From that point on, the movement was guided by the *Consejo Nacional de Huelga* (CNH-the Strike Committee), the body of student leadership made up of students from both schools, that would plan a series of demonstrations and rallies that took place during the months to come. The movement came to a screeching halt with a bloody massacre in the center of Mexico City on October 2, 1968. This essay discusses this struggle and the forces which helped to make it so powerful.

Although the left was only indirectly involved with the movement, leftist ideals helped to shape the demands which initially led to this revolt. Before the students took action, the left was largely responsible for inspiring changes in the social welfare system of the government. The left has been alive in Mexico for many years, starting with the most important group, the Mexican Communist Party (*Partido Comunista de Mexico*, or PCM), which began in 1918. The PCM organization was not the only place that leftists could be found. In fact, the PRI, the main ruling party of Mexico, at one time almost joined the Socialist International group.<sup>(5)</sup> The left also existed in other political parties and within the universities in groups which stood for the ideals of leftist thinkers such as Mao, Trotsky, and Castro.

In the late 1940s, communist parties became illegal in many Latin American nations, including Mexico. The Mexican government continued to harass communist groups up until and including the time of the Student Revolution. Meetings had to be held secretly, so it was hard for a Communist party to recruit members. Membership dropped. The left had little real power by the 1960s, but it continued to serve as inspiration for students to take a stand against the government.<sup>(6)</sup> The intellectual left, what remained of them, was the bridge between leftist ideas and the university student body, voicing the need for anti-imperialism, equality, and social justice. It was the demands of the left, born under the poverty and injustice of the PRI's political monopoly that would be transformed into the reasons for the students' protest.

Aside from the inspiration of leftism within the nation, students were also influenced by the events that had taken place in Cuba just nine years before. The Cuban Revolution showed other Latin American nations that there existed the possibility of a successful revolution in a Latin American nation that does not have a well-developed capitalist system. People who had before believed that any attempt at revolt in Mexico would be unfruitful, saw that the revolution in Cuba served to educate the people, eradicate poverty, and fend off American imperialism. In Mexico, Communist resurgence took place at the university level after the Cuban Revolution, and students raised awareness of government corruption.<sup>(7)</sup>

Although some students leaders were Communist, the ideology in no way dominated the overall purpose of the protest. Jorge Castaneda states that the student movement "shook the 'perfect dictatorship'."<sup>(8)</sup> Although the autonomous university had long been the center for criticism, the 1968 generation of students was the first to step into politics in mass numbers in order to oppose the PRI government.<sup>(9)</sup>

Even though PRI-supported groups existed in the university, they were swept aside by the mass anti-PRI sentiment. On July 26<sup>th</sup>, the first student demonstration was actually staged by a government-supported group of tech students (the FNET), who held the protest in hopes of limiting opposition against the PRI. Instead, the itinerary changed in the middle of the demonstration, and anti-government sentiment won out. From that day on, the FNET was discredited. Later, the CNH (the Strike Committee) was formed to take over leadership of the movement. The CNH represented what the students wanted unlike the FNET, which played as a puppet for the PRI government. The CNH tried to avoid affiliation with any one group, such as the Socialists or the Communists.

The demands of the CNH included: release of political prisoners, dissolving of the *granadero* force, indemnification for the families of students who were killed by the excessive force of *granaderos*, firing the police chief of Mexico City, and repeal of the penal codes that restricted free speech and press. The real motivation for the revolt went much deeper than the release of political prisoners and removal of government officials. The basis of all protest was social inequality and political repression, and protestors sought to fulfill the promises of the Revolution of 1910. Only certain people in 1968 received benefit by the actions of the government, so the protest tried to reveal PRI corruption. Students wanted to shift the focus of state policies from the elite to the poor, the laborers, and lower and middle classes, who had been shunned by the system. The students wanted the government to stop thinking about American business opportunities and, instead, focus on programs for social service. They fought to bury the repression and corruption that had been Mexican government traditions.<sup>(10)</sup>

The government of 1968, on the other hand, focused only on a few key elements of Mexican affairs. Any threats to the success of the Olympic Games (to be held in Mexico City that year and a major source of pride for the nation), the PRI monopoly, or the economy called for serious repression.<sup>(11)</sup> The students represented a threat to

all three and thus faced extreme repression. A preparatory school student commented that "the PRI doesn't go in for dialogues, just monologues."<sup>(12)</sup> The PRI saw to it that people who did not want to comply with the way the PRI worked ended up jobless or worse.

Students openly criticized the presidency, which was essentially a six-year dictatorship. The movement encouraged all people to participate, to demand from the government that which they had been denied. Criticism of the President, previously unheard of, was a part of the students' effort to reveal the government for what it really was. The more the government repressed the students, the more the government proved that the students were right. As people outside of the university saw outright displays of repression, they became convinced that changes had to be made in their country. Any media that criticized the government was censored. Any public protest was also prohibited, as could be seen by the response of the *granaderos* to the student protests. Even party members were forced to resign their offices if they questioned the way in which the PRI operated.<sup>(13)</sup>

The students found it difficult to demonstrate their dislike for the government because the *granaderos* interfered, no matter how peaceful the demonstrations were. The UNAM Faculty of Philosophy and Letters Strike Committee best described the *granaderos* as an unconstitutional force that uses excessive brutality and disproportionate force, a microcosm for the functions of the Mexican government. The students demanded relatively little of the government—just fulfilling some of the six demands, which the CNH drew up, would have reassured a good amount of the student population. Instead of trying to work out a solution that both the students and the government could agree on, however, the government decided to crush the student rebellion with the greatest force possible. Students admitted that they anticipated being jailed and even beaten by the *granaderos* for participating in the movement, but it was murder that they did not expect. The *granaderos* were ruthless, beating anyone who appeared to be a student, smashing their cars and stealing their belongings. Most people at the demonstration were peaceful; the havoc that came to be associated with the movement was a result of *granadero* action. One student noted that "a demonstration without the police is a peaceful demonstration."<sup>(14)</sup>

Diaz Ordaz, President of Mexico at the time of the Student Movement, attempted to tarnish the movement's image. Ordaz made it seem as though he wanted to help the students, but that they were out of control and unreasonable. In his annual address to the nation he stated that the government had "been criticized for ... excessive leniency."<sup>(15)</sup> He also stated in the same address that he would use all means possible to halt the student uprisings. The address made it appear that the students were irrational and that the harsh government actions were justified. Perhaps Ordaz did not realize that if he had tried to negotiate early on, he could have saved many lives. On August 13<sup>th</sup>, less than a month into the movement, the students had gone to the National Palace to call upon Ordaz, ordering that he come out and face the students. Taking the advice of his counselors, the president did not appear. This was a huge mistake. If he had appeared, those unsure of the validity of the movement may have been impressed by the gesture, and been persuaded to trust the government once again.<sup>(16)</sup>

It was not until July 22 that the government issued a statement that they would meet with the student leaders in private. Previously, the students had stated that any dialogue must be a public affair, and thus refused to take up the offer of the government. The government demanded that the students be patient and comply with their way of doing things, or no demands would be met. The students did not trust the government because they had seen how the government had dealt with other movements. For example, the Physicians' Movement in 1965 had bowed before the government in hopes of receiving compliance with their demands, but in the end, many of the physicians were thrown in jail and none of their demands were met. The students did not believe the government's promises. Nonetheless, their refusal made the students seem disrespectful and radical.

The students had other battles to wage besides just those with the government. Parents of the students did not understand their children's generation, or why they were protesting. Just the fact that the women wore short skirts and the men grew their hair long was evidence for some parents that the students were radicals. Some people believed that the movement only served to make trouble, not understanding that the students tried to keep the peace and wanted to create a better life for all the people of Mexico. Inversely, the students were ashamed of their parents' generation, believing that they would rather be submissive to the government than to fight for what was important.<sup>(17)</sup>

The students gained support by talking one-on-one with people in stores, factories, and neighborhoods. On the buses and street corners, other students asked for donations. Each day the students passed out half a million handbills describing their cause and asking for support, and collected pesos, which were pored back in the funding for advertisement. Students hijacked buses to use as an important tool for propaganda, serving as a stage for speakers, or painted with pro-movement slogans. They had "lightning meetings," which were dialogues

held from the roofs of stores and buses that broke up as soon as a policeman was sighted. Other means of advertising included painting walls of the city with slogans, even painting on the National Palace.

Workers had some problems understanding what the student movement represented. They saw the students as troublemakers. The pirating of buses often caused inconveniences for workers trying to get to their jobs. People wondered why the middle class students were fighting against the PRI system when it was the universities that usually furnished the government with its bureaucrats. Some believed that the students should have started the protest against the university itself, since corrupt government officials were trained there. Even workers who supported the movement rarely participated in the demonstrations, because the workers were heavily controlled by PRI-run unions, and did not want to risk losing what little stability they had. Support for the students sometimes came from small independent unions, but rarely from larger unions because they were PRI-run and did not want changes. Despite negative reactions from workers, the students managed to make some breakthroughs. The movement slowly created some understanding and respect between the workers and the students.<sup>(18)</sup> Workers eventually came to appreciate the fact that the students were fighting on their behalf also. Even though few workers joined in the marches and demonstrations, a number attended as spectators to show their support.

Students tried their best to rally support in a pacific manner; the best example of this was the Silent March, which took place on September 13. The demonstration was held in silence to prove to the government and the public that the students had discipline and self-control, and that the movement was not just a conglomeration of spontaneous riots. The Silent March was seen as a "sincere" and "touching" demonstration, and encouraged many to support of the movement. The power of the silence helped the movement to gain strength, to capture the confidence of the people. One handbill issued at the demonstration explains the purpose of the day: "You can see that we are not vandals or rebels without a cause-the label that is constantly pinned on us. Our silence proves it."<sup>(19)</sup>

The Silent March also served to prove that the students had no interest in disturbing the Olympic Games, as the government led the public to believe. The notice that was posted to announce the rally stated specifically that there was no intent whatsoever to interfere with the Olympic festivities. It is true that the students were not pleased with the Olympics. The money that was used to make the city ready for the Games would have been better spent on social programming to limit the poverty of the nation. People were starving in Mexico, yet the government had millions to spend on new buildings and sports complexes, in order to showcase Mexico to the world. As Evelyn Stevens notes, the "incumbent elite was spending too much for circuses and not enough for bread."<sup>(20)</sup> "Hunger and Misery are the agitators, not us," became a slogan of the student revolution for this reason.<sup>(21)</sup>

As the movement progressed, the government became frustrated with trying to end the students' protests, so within a week in September, the army of Mexico occupied both the IPN and UNAM. The UNAM occupation was more shocking, since the university, unlike the IPN, was autonomous from the government. Although the army occupation of the two campuses made it difficult for the leaders of the movement to organize mass demonstrations, the occupation helped to build support from more members of the community, including taxi drivers, shop owners, clerks, and peddlers.<sup>(22)</sup> The government saw that the occupation had not quelled the movement at all, and decided to take severe measures of force against the students.

The climax of the revolution came on October 2, just one day after the army left the university. It was only 10 days until the Olympics were to be held in Mexico City, so the government was worried that student protests would interfere with the success of the Games. For this reason, many army and police troops were on guard for the last major protest of 1968. Witnesses all tell the same story of a peaceful movement turned into a massacre. The demonstration that day was going to consist of a march to the Polytechnic Institute to demand that the army leave. The march was called off because of the concentration of army troops on the route to the school.<sup>(23)</sup> Instead, the 10,000 or so attendants of the protest listened to "tame" speeches in the Plaza of Three Cultures, right in the heart of Mexico City.<sup>(24)</sup>

Many claimed that flares dropped from a helicopter above the Plaza signaled the army to start firing upon the crowd. The army blocked off the Plaza exits with tanks. Plainclothes policemen, who wore a white glove on one hand to indicate who they were, appeared from all sides and started to shoot. The speakers called for everyone to stay calm and not to move. But people panicked and started to run for any shelter they could find. The heavy fire only lasted ten minutes, but sporadic shooting continued for more than an hour.

After the shooting ended, there was blood everywhere-on the walls, on the ground; few people left the Plaza without the blood of others on their clothing. Ambulances were only able to enter the Plaza around 11:00 p.m.,

after the government vehicles had removed most of the dead and injured. The *granaderos* began to make arrests; two thousand or more people were jailed that night, on counts of murder, destruction of government property and kidnaping. Many people were arrested who had nothing to do with the movement, such as those who lived in the housing nearby and happened to be watching the events. Some people were held two years without so much as a hearing, jailed for being victims of circumstance. [\(25\)](#)

Family and friends had no way of finding out what had happened to those who were jailed or killed. They were refused information at jails and hospitals as to who had been admitted. Sometimes it was weeks before a mother found out if their child had lived through the massacre. The government claimed that only forty-three people were killed. Many Mexicans, especially those who had lived through the massacre, believed that many hundreds, probably more than one thousand, were killed that day. The government refused to allow any investigation into the matter. It was as though "causality counts were treated as state secrets." [\(26\)](#) It is believed that the bodies of the dead were taken outside the city and buried or burned. Some witnesses at a prison claim that they saw huge bonfires and smelled burning flesh. [\(27\)](#) Many people disappeared on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, and it can only be assumed that they were killed.

Since the majority of leaders of the movement were jailed or killed before or on October 2, the movement came to all but a standstill. The CNH members who were not jailed started to argue about which direction to take the movement-to increase demands or stop protesting before things got worse. The protests that continued after the massacre mostly concerned the release of political prisoners, with little attention given to the political demands. The CNH held demonstrations outside the prisons, calling for the release of the political prisoners. The demonstrations helped to restore some hope to the prisoners, who could hear the chant of the students from their cells, that they would be freed. There was support from others besides students also, including some well-known figures. Octavio Paz, a famous writer, resigned his post as an ambassador, and Barrios Sierra quit his job as the rector of UNAM to protest the madness of the government. Foreigners, including reporters, who had come early to the Olympics, stated their disgust. International publications revealed the truth about the lack of democracy and the presence of corruption in Mexico. Despite the support that the students received, the CNH called off the strike on November 25, one month after the Olympics.

Just because the CNH stopped protesting did not mean that students forgot about what the government did. Radical students who were tired of appealing to the government in a civilized manner started an armed rebellion against the government. Out of the student movement grew a passionate and irrational guerilla warfare movement. The fight, which once had the purpose of reforming the state, was now set on destroying it. [\(28\)](#) A committed minority of students entered this phase which lasted only until, robbing banks and kidnaping. Most people made less radical statements through electoral absenteeism and creation of anti-government literature.

The government took a very casual approach to the aftermath of the movement. The government's weak attempt to justify the events of October 2, was to have the newspaper print a phony story that student sharpshooters had started the incident and had provoked the police. The government cared only that they succeeded in quieting down the students before Mexico hosted the Olympic Games. For the government's part, the Olympics were viewed as a success, because no disruptions occurred. But still, the government faced a problem. The October 2<sup>nd</sup> incident had provoked a lot of sympathy for the students, and anger towards the government. The movement in general had "ripped away the benevolent mask of authoritarianism and drew attention to the foundation of poverty upon which the economic miracle was built." [\(29\)](#) It was obvious to all that government reform was the only way to stop the conflict between the people and the state.

After Diaz Ordaz left the office of President and Luis Echeverria stepped in, steps were made to legitimize the government in the eyes of the people and reduce the likelihood of insurgency. Those who the public held responsible for the massacre of the students were Ordaz, the Chief of Police, the Secretary of Defense, and the mayor. Echeverria tried to win support of the people by firing the Police Chief and the Mayor of Mexico City. He also made steps towards the demands of the people, making mass participation in government easier by allowing new political parties to be recognized. Government criticism also became more acceptable under Echeverria. The President increased spending on welfare, housing, and education, and expanded the social security program. Another action that regained public support was the release of all the prisoners jailed in 1968 protests by the end of 1971. The former prisoners were also offered state and federal government jobs. [\(30\)](#)

Changes made to the Mexican political system during Echeverria's term were just the start of the breakdown of corruption. Yet in spite of progressive changes, there is still a lot of crookedness deep-rooted in the political system, for the habit of Mexican politics to be unfair and underhanded is hard to break. Still, the Student Movement of 1968 is significant to Mexico today because it was the event which caused a major push towards

ending corruption and giving the people of Mexico a voice. The message which was conveyed to the government was that people were not afraid to stand up to the unjust ways of the government. In the legacy of 1968, student protests persist to the present, objecting to many of the same aspects of the government that the students opposed in 1968.

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