

# Silence and fear: understanding repression in Mexico

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Alejandro Vélez salas

We still need to better understand the logic of repression to be able to begin countering it, but the dimension it has taken lately urges the Mexican society to take action now. [Español](#)



Protesters block the front entrance of the Public Education Ministry with signs that read in Spanish; "Closed due to repression. Peace" in Mexico City, June 2016. (AP Photo/Marco Ugarte). All rights reserved

In the novel 1984, it sends a shiver down my spine when O'Brien asks Winston, who is begging for mercy, "how does one man assert his power over another?" After hours of torture in Room 101, Winston's answer might seem obvious to us: "by making him suffer." This is precisely the purpose of repression: to hurt, humiliate, frighten, demobilise, divide, and silence. If there were an Oscar award for repression, the Mexican government would win one for its 50 year trajectory. In the acceptance speech, the country could mention the repression which was executed against peasant leaders following the failed attack on the Madera Barracks in 1965, as a milestone achievement. Or perhaps the participation of the Mexican army to quell student riots in the University of Michoacán, San Nicolás Hidalgo, in 1966. The most recent feat achieved by the Mexican government would without doubt be the police's actions in Nochixtlán, 19 June 2016, in dispersing a road blocked by sympathisers of the National Organisation of Education Workers (CNTE), whereby 8 people were murdered and an additional 100 injured.

Such repression is almost synonymous with the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the party which governed Mexico for over 70 years and has recently returned to power. Interestingly, the party's colours are the same as those on the Mexican flag, such that the claim could be made that repression is inherent in Mexico. Nevertheless, it's must be made clear that repression is not used by just one party. After the so called democratic 'transition', it has been conveniently adopted by public officials from many different parties, irrespective of whether they belong to the left or the right. It might seem as though repression is written into the instructions of 'how to govern Mexico', and I'm not talking about the legitimate use of force, but rather the abuse of it. In Mexico, it seems easier to attack than to negotiate, to hide things rather than be transparent, to threat and kill rather than accept mistakes. As we will see, repression in Mexico is employed as the magical solution for everything: corruption scandals, closing down avenues for families searching for disappeared persons, or protests against educational reform, as was the case with the

The murders in Nochixtlán remind us of the fateful events which occurred in 2006. Back then the PRI governor, Ulises Ruiz, ordered the armed forces to remove teachers from Section 22 who were protesting in the main square in Oaxaca about the precarious conditions found in the region's schools. Sticks and stones fought against tear gas and rubber bullets. Nonetheless, the conflict deepened and the teacher's movement grew to include other organisations which together formed the Peoples Popular Assembly of Oaxaca (APPO). The [Oaxaca Truth Commission](#) has documented how, following the failed quelling of this protest, different operations were carried out in conjunction with the Federal Preventative Police (PFP), the Mexican army, the state police and even paramilitary groups, to crush the APPO, who had by then been added to Ulises Ruiz's demands for deposition. The results were disastrous: extrajudicial executions, forced disappearances and the torture of dozens of APPO members and sympathisers, as well as ordinary civilians. For Diego Osomo, journalist and member of the Truth Commission, this repression orchestrated in Oaxaca should be understood as a warning for what the country was to experience in subsequent years.

In May of the same year, there was another tell-tale sign in San Salvador Atenco, Mexico DF. On this occasion, regional and state police embarked on an operation to remove eight flower sellers from the market vicinity of Belisario Domínguez, in a move to do away with all informal commerce. Yet again, bad planning, the lack of memory-- in 2001, Atenco had already been the epicentre for a protest against the construction of a new airport on communal land in Texcoco-- and the excessive use of force meant that the conflict escalated. Inhabitants of Atenco and sympathisers of the Community Front in Defence of Land (FPDT) held public and police officials hostage, and blocked the road between Texcoco and Lechería. In response, Enrique Peña Nieto, the then governor of Mexico DF, asked the federal forces for help to break down the blockade and rescue the officials. Thus the chronicle of repression was foretold. According to the National Commission for Human Rights (CNDH), grave human rights violations were committed including torture, arbitrary and unlawful detention, solitary confinement and forced entering. However, the most prominent atrocities to have occurred in this operation were the sexual abuses and violations suffered by dozens of women at the hands of police agents. Here is the testimony of [Samantha Dietmer](#), a German citizen who lived through this repression first hand and was later deported:

"Since I was above everybody else, the police began to grope me, to touch me. They touched my bottom and began to lift my blouse. I kept trying to lower it, and they slapped my face giving me a nosebleed. Then I couldn't think of anything else. I had to endure everything without moving".

After reading the testimonies of dozens of women who were sexually assaulted in Atenco-- and previously in other places including in la Montaña de Guerrero-- it seems apt to highlight Rita Segato's term "pedagogy of cruelty", which explains that violence is most effective when it is imposed on bodies through sexual means. For Segato<sup>[1]</sup>, this understanding coins both a new type of war and a means to expand the Capitalist system. In Mexico, this won't be the last time that security agents resort to using sexual violence against both men and women. In fact, recently some [young people](#) protesting outside the Oaxaca representative in Mexico City because of the events that took place in Nochixtlán, were arrested and groped by the police, whilst they were told over and over again that they were going to be raped and disappeared.

For Ramón Alvarado, events such as that in Atenco, Oaxaca and others which also occurred in the same year, may seem to be unconnected, but they contribute to "generating a climate of tension which feeds the collective fear in society when faced with such unstable politics and social violence"<sup>[2]</sup>. Devastatingly, this climate of tension has become ever-present in Mexico, ever since Felipe Calderón put in place the National Security Strategy, which saw the beginning of military operations in different states of the Republic. As usually happens when one resorts to the military for matters of public security, the presence of human right violations rocketed. In Mexico, homicides were suddenly occurring at an uncontrollable rate. The government tried to convince us that those who died were "evil" and therefore they deserved to be murdered. What's more, ex-president Calderón also tried to deceive us by claiming "they were killing amongst themselves", as if there were a de facto death penalty and the state was a mere

spectator.

During Calderon's six-year term in office, the murder and disappearance of journalists also increased. Although many of these claims are usually attributed-- conveniently-- to organised crime, the truth is that almost half of the attacks against journalists are committed by state agents in various levels of government. This information comes from the organisation Article XIX, which has documented the different threats received by journalists whilst simply carrying out their profession, since 2006. The most recent [report](#) states that 46.9% of such attacks were committed by public officials.

Perhaps the most emblematic murder to have taken place under Felipe Calderón's time in office was that of Regina Martínez, correspondent for the magazine *Proceso*, who was beaten to death in her own house. Although this crime has been thought of-- again, conveniently-- as a 'crime of passion', her colleagues cannot rule out the significance of her articles in her murder, which were very critical about the government in Veracruz. Rafael Rodríguez Castaneda, director of the [semanario](#) has just made this tribute to Regina:

"In fact, this crime is just a stepping stone, a before and after, in the tale of the relationship between the press and political power in Mexico-- in Veracruz in particular. Ever since, such relationships are and will continue to be marked by a underlying threat; the lack of trust, violence and aggression. But we remain loyal to basic journalist principles, that of searching for the truth, and we continue onwards".

Since Regina Martínez was killed, 17 journalists have been murdered in Veracruz. This is not a coincidence. This state has become one of the most dangerous places to be a journalist precisely because of the connection between organised crime and the government. For example, under Fidel Herrera-- governor of the state from 2004 to 2010 and today a flashy consul in Barcelona-- the Zeta cartel mysteriously boomed. Furthermore, a [member](#) of this gang has confirmed that the governor "opened up the doors of the state for them." That is, the current governor Javier Duarte, who, in addition to stealing hefty amounts of public money, has turned the region into a 'Mordor' for journalism. A defender of human rights has told me that trying to defend journalists in this state is a near impossible task-- the best thing to do is give them a passport so that they can leave Mexico. For example, Rubén Espinoza, a photojournalist for *Cuartoscuro*, believed that by seeking refuge in Mexico City he would be safe from the threats from the government of Veracruz. But this was not the case. On 31 July 2015, he was murdered in one of the safest regions of the city, together with four others: Nadia, a human rights defender, Alejandra, a maid, Yesenia, a beautician and Mile, a model.

This multiple homicide had an enormous impact on human rights defenders and journalists. On the one hand, it proved Veracruz to be a miniature dictatorship in which dissenting, conducting investigations and protesting can cost you your life, wherever you might go. It also demonstrated that Mexico City is not the safe haven it is believed to be by many. Finally, the poor-- or rather non-existent-- investigations into the crime by local authorities in the capital, on the left, make us question both the will of the police and the institutional capability to resolve such crimes. What's more, it supports the hypothesis that there is some sort of impunity pact between political elites.

The tacit existence of these pacts reminds me of another of Rita Segato's concepts, this time that of "ownership". In a conference, the Brazilian academic suggested that the colonial period has not in fact yet ended in the Americas. The political and economical elites continue to behave as if they own both bodies and territory in the region. Upon hearing this, I found greater meaning in the small vice-royalties or the 'strongholds' where the real powers-- some prefer the term narco-government-- control illegal business and a significant part of legal business as well. It also explains the fury with which any and all attempts to make visible or to derail these businesses have been reprimanded.

In this sense, threatening, attacking, beating, murdering or forcibly disappearing anyone who attempts to put themselves between the political and economical interests of the local elite is profitable, because nobody investigates it. This is what happened on 1 December 2012, when Enrique Peña Nieto assumed office, in the midst of great controversy. Many protests were organised in Mexico City as much to make visible the social harms which

were caused during Calderón's six-year term as to avoid the young candidate-- who already had the repression in Atenco under his belt-- from returning to presidency with the PRI. The protests were fiercely repressed by both federal and local police. In the middle of this operation, José Francisco Kuykendall, activist and theatre director, was injured with a tear gas grenade which caused his skull to fracture and he died soon after. As was expected, this case continues to sleep in the palace of impunity, as it were. Nevertheless, there was an opportune moment to underpin those responsible, which came through Teodulfo Torres's testimony-- "el Tío"-- who accompanied Kuykendall in the protest. However, on 26 March 2013, "el Tío" could not be found. When his companions began to search for him, his phone rang with just three beeps. It seemed as though he had vanished in mid air. In all likelihood, this was a case of forced disappearance at the hands of Peña Nieto's government.

Despite this, in the 2012 presidential elections it was Peña Nieto himself who created the notion of a 'new PRI', capable of negotiating with the mafia cartels and at the same time respecting human rights. But neither of those two things actually occurred. All that Peña Nieto's administration managed to achieve was to abandon the war rhetoric of Felipe Calderón's government, and in its place he propagated the notion that Mexico as a country could make progress if everyone pulls together. The new administration ran a gross campaign with the media, hiding much of the pernicious impacts of the war against drugs behind a thick veil. Thus they seized to be published in the press, giving media attention instead to the discussion of structural reform.

Despite that fact that many gave Peña Nieto the benefit of the doubt, it didn't take long for the mirage to fall. In February of 2014, *Time* magazine gave him the front page ironically titled *Saving Mexico*. Unfortunately just a few months later it was discovered that the Mexican army had shot down 22 supposed criminals in a confrontation in Tlatlaya, in the state of Mexico. But truth is not usually found in official headlines, and the events that took place in Tlatlaya were only discovered thanks to a brave group of reporters. On 17 September 2014-- one day after the Independence Day celebrations-- the magazine *Esquire* published the testimony of a survivor, who painted a completely different picture from that which we had been told.

" (The soldiers) told them to surrender, but the young boys pleaded for them to spare their lives. So, (the soldiers) say "you're not man enough you sons of bitches! Are you scared?" That's what the soldiers said to them as they left the store. Everyone left. They surrendered, they definitely surrendered (...) Then they asked them what they were called, and they hurt them, they didn't kill them. I was saying don't do it, and they were saying that "these dogs don't deserve to live" (...) Then they stopped them, like this in a line, they were murdered. (...) There was a large cry, you could hear their cries echo everywhere".

These cries from the Tlatlaya massacre could still be heard when, on 26 September 2014, students from the Rural Education College, Isidro Burgos in Ayotzinapa, were attacked by agents of the local police force in Iguala, Guerrero. The case is widely known thanks to research conducted by the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI)[3], created by the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights (CIDH). On the night of the 26th and early the following morning, over 180 people were victim to serious violations of their human rights: six individuals were executed each in different circumstances. One of them, Cesar Mondragón, had his face skinned. A further 40 people were seriously injured, and one is still in a coma. Approximately 80 people suffered different forms of persecution and threats, and, as we know, 43 training teachers were detained and forcibly disappeared. In just a few months we went from *Saving Mexico* to *Slaying Mexico*.

Irrespective of the stance taken by international spectators reflecting on Mexico, cynicism and simulation became official strategy faced with such evident repression. To underpin this manoeuvre and guarantee impunity, the federal government and various other state organisations have invested in what [Alberto Escorcia](#) calls "tech-censorship", and which [Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera](#) takes even further and coins cyber paramilitarism. This is the manipulation of public opinion; the construction of official discourse by way of attacking and re-writing news sites, direct threats on social media, stealing passwords and hacking, spying on public opinion leaders and political rivals, amongst other tactics. But none of this is possible without money. [Escorcia](#) has also documented the existence of large robot

'farms' which operate on state budget to influence social media trends and to threaten those that dare to bring any topic related to Ayotzinapa to the public agenda. On the other hand, the declarations made by [Andrés Sepúlveda](#), a Colombian hacker who was captured a few months ago, confirm that espionage was used by Peña Nieto's team before the electoral campaign, which have been expanded thanks to state software purchases and government dependencies on businesses such as Hacking Team.

[Baudrillard](#) says that "repression follows the same unforeseeable cycle as that of terrorism. Nobody knows where it's going to stop nor the twists and turns it could take." Mexico is in the middle of a whirlwind that seems to have no end and has affected journalists, tweeters, bloggers, victims, academics, human rights defenders and even citizens who use social media platforms as a means to protest and dissent. As a result of the war-- and repression-- many Mexicans have been displaced to other cities in the country, and many more have had to flee abroad. However, even in the most terrible of circumstances there are lessons to be learnt, and in the midst of this repressive spiral networks of solidarity have been woven which are breaking the silence and converting fear into a driving force for change. We still need to better understand this logic of repression to be able to begin countering it, but as the social activist Aung San Suu Kyi says: "when the sun comes out and the ice melts we become aware of all the life that was living beneath it."

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Translated from the original in Spanish by Mary Ryder, member of openDemocracy's Volunteer program

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[1] Rita Segato. "Las nuevas formas de la guerra y el cuerpo de las mujeres". *Sociedade e Estado*. Vol.29 no.2 Brasília May/Ago. 201

[2] Ramón Alvarado. "Discursos testimoniales. La subjetividad en juego". *Anuario de investigación 2006*. México: UAM Xochimilco, 2006. p. 336.

[3] GIEI. *Informe Ayotzinapa*. México, 2015.



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