

# Brief Summary of the Situation in Oaxaca

Daniel Mathews

November 11, 2006

*(This is an edited version of a post I made to an email list, following a hostile and uninformed post made there. I tried briefly to summarise the situation in Oaxaca. This is not intended to be careful scholarship, but a basic rundown of the situation to give people an idea what is going on. I have indicated sources where the information can be verified. I will be pleased to be corrected if any of this is in error.)*

The uprising in Oaxaca, as I understand it, is largely in response to legitimate grievances. The most recent phase began in June with a teachers' strike, an annual strike to alleviate outrageously bad wages and conditions, included the neglected state of many rural schools, demanding things like shoes for students. There were 70,000 teachers in Oaxaca and they staged a peaceful encampment. That encampment was violently attacked by over a thousand state security forces. Police with dogs destroyed property, destroyed the offices of the teachers' union, their radio station; there were reports of rape, reports of a dozen deaths, burning of tents, helicopters shooting tear gas. About a hundred people were hospitalised. This is the general picture: massive state repression of peaceful, unarmed civilians; and it is largely the picture of more recent months also.

After this critical event, the movement became much more militant - understandably! - and was transformed into APPO, an alternative government, alternative political institutions and so on. It became not a teachers' strike but a broad popular grassroots movement against state repression. The focus of the movement then became the resignation of the state governor Ulises Ruiz, a demand that has now been backed by the Mexican congress. The teachers did not go back to work: given the extreme violence against them, they chose not to return to school, and chose to continue their action. Whatever one thinks of this decision, one can respect the solidarity of Oaxacan teachers for their injured and brutally attacked colleagues. In any case the reasons for their decision are clear.

In the face of such violent repression, APPO remained largely non-violent. It did stage non-violent civil disobedience, including the erection of barricades and taking over television and radio stations. One can imagine what the state-run station was showing. The 500 women armed with spoons and pots and pans who took it over broadcast previously censored footage of police beating protestors. One station was renamed "radio casserole".

In any popular movement there are participants with differing temperaments, differing responses to provocation, differing tactics and strategies and so on. Such movements are vulnerable not only to the fear stemming from extremist elements, but also from the standard state tactics of provocation, infiltration and repression. There were some bombings of banks, which were immediately denounced by APPO; instead they called for continued non-violent civil disobedience. APPO argued that the bombings were probably the work of state or state-sanctioned provocateurs, trying to discredit the movement and portray it as a guerilla movement. I haven't heard any further evidence about it: APPO's argument seems plausible, given the known tactics of the state elsewhere, and more generally. The barricades in the streets were stationed with teachers sitting around fires wrapped in blankets, not militia with guns.

In any case, it is clear that the bulk of the violence is coming from the state, or from state-sanctioned violent individuals and paramilitaries. APPO has been regularly harassed by gunmen and police. Police riding in pickup trucks, armed with machine guns and pistols, fired randomly into radio stations. Molotov cocktails were thrown at teachers. Reports of an imminent military attack were rife, including military overflights and surveillance. Protest leaders were targeted by hitmen; they sought refuge in the churches. This can all be verified: just read the Mexican press, check with some human rights organisations, or watch Democracy Now. And violence erupted in October as the police raided the city, backed with armoured vehicles and helicopters. APPO's tactic in response was to avoid confrontation, desert the main square, and later surround the police with a massive demonstration. Nevertheless, many Oaxacans were killed, overwhelmingly protestors, not police. The casualties are protestors, mostly unarmed, including children. An American independent journalist, Brad Will, was shot dead, capturing video footage of his own death - absolutely horrendous stuff - but still failing to attract any particular attention in the US. The killers are shown in the video, are widely recognised as police and government officials (in civilian clothes at the time), and as of last I heard have not yet been brought to justice. Two weeks ago, police stormed the university which was home to APPO's radiostation, with helicopters firing tear gas and riot tanks driving around university grounds, protestors responding with rocks not guns. And the whole area was soon flooded with local residents who came to assist in solidarity with APPO.

As I understand it, APPO has widespread (though not unanimous) popular support. If you read about it in the New York Times you will mostly find interviews with foreigners, wealthy locals, business owners and so on, whose politics will obviously be more conservative; the focus will be on any violence from protestors; Mexican state pronouncements will be reproduced as authoritative; and that is about the best you can expect from the "liberal" media. But APPO has regularly called protests and attracted hundreds of thousands of participants. It is not an extremist or violent institution; to many, perhaps most Oaxacans, it has more legitimacy than the state.

So the state more or less lost control of the city. This should be seen as a victory for a popular movement, given the state actions. It unfortunately

means that things like sanitation and other civil government functions might not be running as usual. But popular movements in the developing world require courage and determination, and entail risk of violence and death; they are rarely comfortable and entirely pleasant. Of course, there are always issues regarding tactics and strategies in political action, and legitimate discussions to be had about them.

One final thing: the US has done precisely nothing to stop the state violence in Oaxaca. If anything, it has reacted with approval to Fox and Calderon's rhetoric of "restoring law and order", despite the escalation of violence, essentially state terrorism, this undoubtedly entails. If we more privileged individuals can do anything, it is to raise awareness of what's going on in Oaxaca, and speak out about it.