

MEXICO '68  
AN ANALYSIS OF THE TLATELOLCO MASSACRE  
AND ITS LEGACY

by

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On October 2, 1968 the Mexican government massacred hundreds of peaceful protesters in Mexico City's Tlatelolco plaza. Up to this point, Mexico had not experienced large-scale violence since the Mexican Revolution of the 1910s. The government's authoritarian suppression of the movement surprised people throughout the country. The PRI, the ruling party for decades had stayed in power since the triumph of the Revolution, and viewed demands for reform as a threat to their power. With the opening ceremonies for the 1968 summer Olympic Games slated to begin October 12, the government did not want dissent visible to the international powers, and acted quickly to decapitate the movement. Since protest movements had become commonplace globally throughout 1968, both the demonstrators in Mexico and the government learned from the examples set by other movements like those in France and Czechoslovakia in 1968. Ultimately, the government chose the Soviet path and attacked its own citizenry. For years after the massacre at Tlatelolco, the event provided a reminder that the PRI government did not truly represent the interests of the populace. As the generation of protestors from 1968 has grown up, they continue to influence the course of politics in Mexico to this day.

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## Introduction

On the night of October 2, 1968, government troops in Mexico City's Tlatelolco Plaza massacred hundreds of unarmed student protesters. While it is impossible to know the precise numbers of demonstrators due to the massive government cover-up of the attack, it is clear that thousands of students participated in the protest on the evening of October 2. According to eyewitnesses of the chaos, at 6:10 p.m. helicopters surrounding the plaza moved down to the buildings and flares lit up the sky, causing protesters in the plaza to worry that something was awry.<sup>1</sup> For each of the 5,000-15,000 activists in the area, nearly an equal number of soldiers came to put down the movement.<sup>2</sup> Shortly after the flares startled the people assembled in the plaza, the soldiers began shooting at the crowd. For many hours the troops continued to fire indiscriminately on the men, women, and children.<sup>3</sup> Due to the huge military presence, the protesters could not flee the scene and "hundreds were literally slaughtered where they stood."<sup>4</sup> This thesis aims to reconstruct the context in which the Mexican government consciously chose to massacre hundreds of protestors. Additionally, the thesis will offer an interpretation about the legacy of the 1968 massacre on the subsequent political development of Mexico.

In order to preserve the illusion that the Mexican government was a peaceful, democratic institution, president Gustavo Díaz Ordaz immediately covered up the immensity of the event by claiming that the number of deaths was "more than 30 and less

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<sup>1</sup> Preston, Julia and Samuel Dillon, *Opening Mexico: The Making of Democracy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004), 71.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew C. Gutmann, *The Romance of Democracy: Compliant Defiance in Contemporary Mexico* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2002), 63.

<sup>3</sup> Donald J. Mabry, *The Mexican University and the State: Student Conflicts 1910-1971* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1982), 265.

<sup>4</sup> Gutmann, 64.

than 40.”<sup>5</sup> The news outlets, fed information by the government and watched closely by Díaz Ordaz, uniformly portrayed the students as armed attackers who had snipers in the buildings. Thus the government portrayed the whole affair as an unfortunate accident in which the military was simply drawn in due to the violent student actions. Due to this massive cover-up effort by the government, it is still difficult to ascertain the precise numbers of people killed, wounded, or even present at the plaza that night. However, British newspaper correspondent John Rodda estimates based on careful investigation that there were at least 267 people killed and 1,200 wounded at Tlatelolco.<sup>6</sup> Currently, most scholars estimate that around 300 people were killed in the violence of October 2, and many more wounded, reflecting a ten-fold increase of the false government figure of those killed.

The government’s claim that the students instigated the violence also has been proven untrue. The film *Rojo Amanecer*, released in 1992 and based on the events of 1968, portrays the life of a family living in the apartment complex surrounding Tlatelolco and their increasing awareness of impending problems. On October 2, all electricity and telephone communication had been cut off prior to the announced start of the student protest, illustrating careful outside planning. Furthermore the eyewitness accounts that documented the presence of more than 10,000 soldiers and police throughout the complex and the use of helicopters and flares as a signaling device reinforce the argument that the government had planned to intervene. In first-hand testimony from Ernesto Morales Soto, a soldier present at the Tlatelolco massacre, he recalled that many soldiers

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<sup>5</sup> Gutmann, 64.

<sup>6</sup> Gutmann, 64.

were dressed as civilians, but wore identifying white gloves in order to not get caught up in the crossfire. The army put Morales's section in particular in charge of making sure that no one could enter or leave the plaza once the flare signaled the beginning of the attack.<sup>7</sup> After the actual attack, the government even went so far as to coerce leaders of the student movement into "confessing" that the protest movement intended to implement a communist regime for the government.<sup>8</sup> While some foreign newspapers shed light on the actual events of the massacre, the media in Mexico only reported the government's official version of events, despite their fallaciousness.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the government propaganda, the members of the military and police forces did not simply act in retaliation to student violence, but displayed a degree of brutality attributed to a pre-planned event. Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci attended the demonstration, and was wounded during the events of the night. She notes that despite laying "in a pool of my own blood for forty-five minutes," the troops placed in the plaza by the state only took notice of her to remove a watch from her wrist and left her on the ground without assistance.<sup>10</sup> Another first hand account of the horror faced by those at Tlatelolco confirms the viciousness of the night. "There was lots and lots of blood, so much of it that my hands felt sticky. There was also blood all over the walls; it seems to me that the walls of Tlatelolco are drenched with blood. It reeks of blood all over Tlatelolco. Lots of people must have bled to death up there, because there was too much

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<sup>7</sup> Elena Poniatowska, "A Massacre in Mexico" In *Women Writing Resistance*, edited by J. Browdy de Hernandez, (Cambridge, Mass: South End Press, 2003), 140-1.

<sup>8</sup> Mabry, 266.

<sup>9</sup> Vania Markarian, "Debating Tlatelolco: Thirty Years of Public Debates about the Mexican Student Movement of 1968" In *Taking Back the Academy!: History of Activism, History as Activism*, edited J. Downs and J. Manion (New York: Routledge, 2004), 27.

<sup>10</sup> Preston and Dillon, 77.

blood for it to have been that of just one person.”<sup>11</sup> The gravity of the evening did not stop at the horrific accounts of those dead or wounded. In addition to the casualty figures, the government detained nearly 2,500 people on fabricated charges.<sup>12</sup> Thus, in one night the seemingly safe and democratic nation had perpetuated an atrocity associated with brutal authoritarian nations.

To understand why the Díaz Ordaz administration chose to repress the movement on October 2, the political context leading up to the day must be understood. In post-revolutionary Mexico the situation of the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) appeared fairly secure. With impressive economic growth figures and the continual election of PRI candidates since the triumph of the Mexican Revolution, the regime had a lock on power. However, Chapter 2 of this text will describe the origins of the leftist movement in Mexico and the particular goals for which the group struggled, including its quest for educational autonomy and demands for economic redistribution for the poorest sectors of society. Chapter 2 also describes the process by which the demonstrations expanded from student endeavors to gain the support of other sectors of the population. This chapter examines as well a chronology of important events in the relationship between the movement and the government that led to the eventual massacre on October 2. It concludes with the argument that, solely based on the limited aims of the student movement and initial government responses to the student protests, the decision to suppress the movement on October 2 cannot be adequately explained. Thus, other factors must be considered.

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<sup>11</sup> Elena Poniatowska, “A Massacre in Mexico,” 140.

<sup>12</sup> Preston and Dillon, 72.



Chapter 3 centers on whether or not the government of Mexico could be considered truly democratic in 1968. In exploring the concept of democracy, the chapter focuses on the structure of government in Mexico, and the integration of various groups into the state through a corporatist structure. Chapter 3 will discuss the distance between intellectuals and the state in Mexico and how this led the government to take a more radical approach in the face of opposition from students and intellectuals. Finally, the chapter focuses on Díaz Ordaz in particular and notes that his obsession with order encouraged the decision to repress those who openly opposed his policies rather than concede to reform. Unlike Chapter 2, which portrays the massacre as a surprising event based on the demands of the student movement, Chapter 3 argues that the structure of the government as well as the personality of Díaz Ordaz made a harsh response to protest more likely.

Chapter 4 focuses on the role of the 1968 Olympic Games hosted in Mexico City in encouraging the government to suppress the movement, since the massacre occurred just ten days before opening ceremonies. Chapter 4 aims to answer the question of why the government chose to act on October 2 by noting that Díaz Ordaz felt a need to eliminate dissent before the widely broadcast opening ceremonies on October 12. In order to portray Mexico as a developing power ideal for foreign investment, Díaz Ordaz wanted to portray a disciplined youth ready to support Mexico's ascension to power. Therefore, Díaz Ordaz did not tolerate any opposition that could ruin the modernized, civilized appearance of the Mexican people.

Chapter 5 discusses the international movements of 1968 that offered potential models for the protestors and the government of Mexico. Specifically, it focuses on the

uprisings in May and June 1968 in Paris and the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia. This chapter argues that both protestors and the government in Mexico were well aware of these prominent movements, and each group took different lessons from them. Chapter 5 concludes that to some degree the ultimate concessions to the movement in France made students more likely to emulate this movement, while the government more closely followed the Soviet repression of the Czechoslovak movement as their guide to action.

The concluding chapter shifts the focus of the thesis from explaining why the government massacred the students to analyzing the legacy of the massacre at Tlatelolco. The year 1968 was a turning point that shattered the legitimacy of the ruling party, symbolized through the defection of poet and politician Octavio Paz. In addition to this loss of credibility, the final years of the Díaz Ordaz presidency and the regimes of subsequent leaders continued to physically oppress opposition groups, which further angered the citizens of Mexico. The chapter compares 1968 with the earthquake in Mexico City in 1985 as well as the strikes of 1999 as times which reflected the continual distrust and disapproval of the government. Ultimately, this distaste for the PRI led to its downfall as the ruling party in 2000. Finally, the thesis examines current developments in attempts to achieve justice for the victims through prosecution of the perpetrators of the massacre at Tlatelolco and later violence. Contemporary references to 1968 and Díaz Ordaz in relation to the current government of PAN (National Action Party) president Vicente Fox illustrates that the legacy of 1968 is alive and well in Mexico, the distrust and skepticism of the government bred by its actions in 1968 continue to manifest themselves today.

## Chapter 2: A Growing Student Movement

On July 26, 1968, the Mexican police unit known as the *granaderos* assaulted a group of peaceful demonstrators commemorating the Cuban revolution, setting off a string of protests against the interventionist acts of the government.<sup>13</sup> Paco Taibo, a participant in the protests against the *granaderos* emphasizes that rather than ordering the crowd to leave the streets, the police instead began attacking the group without warning.<sup>14</sup> Despite the government use of force intended to deter the movement from spreading, many people instead felt energized and convinced of the need to continue protesting illegitimate acts by the police and government. In fact, Taibo relates that everyone was “happy to find ourselves still in one piece” and that “fear, for now, was gone.”<sup>15</sup>

While the initial protests focused on the narrow issue of government invasion of school campuses, as the supporters of the movement grew in number and levels of organization, the scope of the movement also expanded. The movement began to openly object not only to police intervention on campuses, but also to the incarceration of political prisoners and the hierarchical and authoritarian nature of the PRI.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the presence of Article 145 of the Mexican Penal Code, which allowed the police to arrest any person in Mexico for committing “the ill-defined crime of social disillusion,” angered large portions of the populace who demanded the repeal of this provision.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Tariq Ali and Susan Watkins, *1968 Marching in the Streets* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 165.

<sup>14</sup> Paco Taibo, 26.

<sup>15</sup> Taibo, 28.

<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey Rubin, “From Che to Marcos: The Changing Left in Latin America,” *Dissent*, Summer, 2002, 40.

<sup>17</sup> Ali and Watkins, 165.

Additionally, systemic issues like the prevalent economic disparities and the widening rich poor gap between different income levels of the Mexican population contributed to the student protests. Specifically, the university students found themselves in a position to rebel because these “middle- and upper-strata youngsters felt ashamed that they were doing so well while the bulk of their fellow citizens suffered from privation and despair.”<sup>18</sup> Taibo’s account of the organization of the movement focuses on the diversity of ideological influences of the members of the movement, and notes that all members worked desperately for their particular cause.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the student movement did not have one coherent goal agreed upon by its members; instead the students’ beliefs generally centered on increasing democratization through the granting of individual liberties and opening up of the government along with egalitarian distribution of resources. Taibo summarizes this idea and succinctly states that the demands of the movement were “understood and taken to heart by all” as a “call for democracy.”<sup>20</sup> The broad rubric of reforms not only allowed the movement to easily recruit additional members due to its broad scope, but also its focus on social justice increased the moral force behind the movement as many people throughout Mexico felt the government should be better caring for the people.

To portray the movement in Mexico as limited to a small portion of the population does not aptly describe the influence and resonance of these issues. Instead, “the 1968 student movement was marked by support among broad sectors of the

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<sup>18</sup> Mabry, 247.

<sup>19</sup> Taibo, 19.

<sup>20</sup> Taibo, 49.

populace.”<sup>21</sup> The appeals for liberal reform within the existing political system appealed to a broad range of people. Students, intellectuals, and members of the urban middle class rapidly endorsed the ideals of the movement.<sup>22</sup> While the government continued to repress the students throughout the summer of 1968, other groups showed solidarity with the movement as demonstrated by the huge march of around 400,000 people ending up at the Zócalo, or the main plaza in Mexico City, on August 27. The demonstrators in the protest against PRI policies included in addition to the students “their parents and grandparents, brothers and sisters” as well as “railway workers, oil workers, electricians, taxi drivers and pushcart peddlers, and small groups of peasants.”<sup>23</sup> The descriptions of the event display its importance as a force for change. “President Díaz Ordaz was personally vilified, in spite of the tradition against criticizing the president. The huge public square, bounded on one side by the National Palace, on another by municipal buildings, and on a third by the National Cathedral filled with a mass of humanity...; A red and black flag, the international strike symbol was run up the flag pole. Few government demonstrations could match it.”<sup>24</sup> By this point, the movement had reached a critical mass of support and the success of the demonstration in the Zócalo illustrated that the push for democratization resonated with large and diverse segments of the population.

In a comparative analysis of Latin American protest movements one scholar argues: “a revolution was happening—not Che’s revolution—but a revolution from within the system, nonviolent, driven by euphoria, conviction, and the excitement of

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<sup>21</sup> Gutmann, 62.

<sup>22</sup> Markarian, 26.

<sup>23</sup> Ali, 165.

<sup>24</sup> Mabry, 259.

experimentation around the world.”<sup>25</sup> While the movement’s quest for concrete changes provided an admirable goal, the government portrayed the protestors as dangerous revolutionaries. In fact, the government warned that the protestors sought to impose a communist dictatorship in Mexico. However, these paranoid statements did not reflect the true goals exhibited by the movement.<sup>26</sup> In fact, a German journalist visiting Mexico who observed the student action argued that the protests in Mexico were not revolutionary, as portrayed by the government, but that the demonstrators merely wanted the enforcement of the existing democratic constitution.<sup>27</sup> Unlike the guerilla movements that surged in Latin America during this period—which sought violent change to overthrow a government—the Mexican protesters had a much more moderate and reformist approach to political change. Thus, the criticisms raised by the movement reflected neither a quest for the overthrow of the government or even ivory tower intellectualism, but instead sought concrete freedoms and greater equality in the distribution of resources.

While the August 27 demonstration marked progress for the movement in its attraction of a large support base, the government refused to sit idly by in the face of the growing agitation. Around midnight on August 28, members of the police and military entered the Zócalo and began to attack when many of the protestors refused to leave the area.<sup>28</sup> President Díaz Ordaz’s *informe*, or State of the Union Address on September 1<sup>st</sup> further reinforced the hard line approach of the government, implicitly warning that the

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<sup>25</sup> Rubin, 40-41.

<sup>26</sup> Carlos Montemayor, *Rehacer la Historia: análisis de los nuevos documentos del 2 de Octubre de 1968 en Tlatelolco* (México D.F.: Planeta, 2000), 77.

<sup>27</sup> Mabry, 256.

<sup>28</sup> Mabry, 259.

government would use any force necessary to subdue the movement.<sup>29</sup> With mounting pressure coming from both sides, the situation had become more intense.

Throughout September, the government fulfilled its promise to take action against the growing movement. For example, Taibo recalls the stepped-up efforts through covert police infiltration of their group which led to the arrest and jailing of many students.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the granaderos invaded universities throughout Mexico City, including the UNAM (National Autonomous University of Mexico), which represented a major blow to the protesters.<sup>31</sup> In particular, the invasion of the UNAM marked a major shift in government policy since the term ‘autonomous’ in the university name signified a long-standing tradition of freedom from outside intervention within the universities. However, the government violated this norm in hopes that these aggressive actions would effectively deter members of the movement from continuing to protest.

While the willingness of the government to use force and the invasions of the schools in Mexico City did lead some members to leave the movement in fear of the consequences of speaking out,<sup>32</sup> many people pushed forward in their attempts to achieve reform within the Mexican state. Notably, former president Lázaro Cárdenas, who had been an intensely popular president amongst many groups for his support of many marginalized groups, voiced his support for the protest. At a meeting with the leaders of the student movement, Cárdenas urged that the protesters continue in their quest for reform, and assured the group that Díaz Ordaz would not deploy the military against the

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<sup>29</sup> Mabry, 260.

<sup>30</sup> Taibo, 72-73.

<sup>31</sup> Ali, 167.

<sup>32</sup> Mabry, 263.

group.<sup>33</sup> While the situation had become tenser since the initial protests in July, the former head of state from the PRI, the same political party as the ruling administration, did not realize the potential for impending violence. While in hindsight it perhaps seems obvious that the government was preparing for the use of force based on the variety of warnings, it should be noted how unlikely a large scale operation by the military would have seemed to citizens in Mexico in 1968. Since the triumph of the Mexican Revolution in the late 1910s and early 1920s, Mexico had experienced liberal reforms during the terms of PRI presidents, like under the rule of Cárdenas himself. Given the practical nature of the reforms and the PRI tendency to address concerns within the party structure through cooptation of various movements, it does not seem unreasonable that the student protesters believed in the possibility for change. However, the situation of the movement only became more dangerous. Taibo describes his recognition as part of the movement of the increasing potential for violence. Looking back he recalls: “we expected the blow, but we did not know how brutal it would be.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Dillon and Preston, 68-69.

<sup>34</sup> Taibo, 85.



### **Chapter 3: Democracy in Mexico?**

The discussion of the goals and makeup of the movement provides an understanding of why the students chose to protest. However, solely focusing on the movement does not adequately explain the government rationale for the brutal repression on October 2. The type and structure of government that existed in Mexico contributed to the decision to repress the protesters. In particular, the post-revolutionary Mexican government crafted a corporatist structure, which encouraged strong state control. Additionally, the obsession of Díaz Ordaz with the maintenance of order illustrates that regardless of how reasonable the student demands seemed to participants in the protest or even to outside observers, the government felt threatened by the movement. Thus, an investigation into the practices of the so-called democratic Mexican government provides insight into their decision to violently repress the students.

After the Mexican Revolution, the party that would eventually be called the PRI began to emerge as the major political entity in the country. By 1968, the PRI had long since firmly established itself as the virtually uncontested ruling party and had amassed popular support based on economic growth and the tenures of a string of popular presidents. The PRI established a corporatist structure in which the government created ties between various sectors of society and integrated them into the party and therefore the state apparatus through official networks. In general, corporatist systems attempt to subvert competition for power by incorporating them into the state structure and weakening potential opposition by placing them at a lower level position in the hierarchy

than the top levels of government.<sup>35</sup> In Mexico various groups such as workers organizations and agricultural groups occupied agencies and positions within the state, which were meant to provide stability and mutually beneficial outcomes for both the government and the group. This governmental system helped to provide stability in the ruling regime; however, it did not encourage dissent toward the government. In particular, the focus on eliminating opposition and the cooptation of outside factions illustrates that the Mexican government under the corporatist did not display democratic arrangements. Thus the governmental structure aimed for stability at the expense of true representation of the citizenry.

Although the government did not always uphold democracy, the PRI “had been thoroughly popular—even though not thoroughly democratic—thanks to several decades of economic growth, civilian rule, and international peace.”<sup>36</sup> While Díaz Ordaz portrayed Mexico as a successful ‘one-party democracy,’ this illusion only served to prop up the government. In fact, the institutionalized nature of the revolution made the PRI one party state much like the oligarchy that the leaders of the Mexican Revolution had initially opposed.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, the government of Mexico was willing to do what it felt like it needed to do in order to stay in power without regard for the democratic ideals laid out in the revolutionary Constitution of 1917, as long as it enjoyed enough popularity to maintain the regime. However, maintaining control became the overarching goal.

The government, which relied on appeasing a variety of corporate groups, faced potential threats from external organizations that faced less severe losses for rocking the

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<sup>35</sup> Reyna, José Luis, “Redefining the Authoritarian Regime” In *Authoritarianism in Mexico*, edited by José Reyna and Richard Weinert, (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1977), 156.

<sup>36</sup> Markarian, 26.

<sup>37</sup> Ali, 165.

boat against the government. In particular, although the economy of Mexico grew at a relatively rapid rate throughout the twentieth century and particularly after World War II, the poorest sectors of society faced economic decline as a result of unequal income distribution because the richest members took increasingly larger portions of the wealth.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the government could not adequately offer the poor a place within the state apparatus, making them prime agents for revolt due to their dissatisfaction. Rather than representing the interests of the entirety of the population, a corrupt government allowed itself to be bought off by the most wealthy and more advantaged members of society in exchange for their political support.<sup>39</sup> This self-perpetuating cycle allowed little space for the poorest members of society to advance economically.

In addition to the bad relationship between the state and the poor, the intellectuals in Mexico remained relatively detached from the government.<sup>40</sup> The separation of the universities from the jurisdiction of the government fit within the physical autonomy of the University system. Although the schools received funding from the government denoting some linkages between the groups, in general the relation between the state and the universities remained very separated in comparison to other groups. Therefore, since neither the universities nor students garnered many rewards from the Mexican government, and the student movement to some degree felt guilty about their middle class position in relation to the poverty experienced throughout the country, it is not surprising that the poorer sectors of society and students would unite to struggle against the government. As a result, a split developed between those groups inside the PRI

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<sup>38</sup> Reyna, 156.

<sup>39</sup> Ali, 173.

<sup>40</sup> Roderic A. Camp, *Intellectuals and the State in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1985), 208-209.

structure, and those like the poor and intellectuals who remained outside the government apparatus and generally protested more frequently against the PRI hold on power.<sup>41</sup>

Despite the relative popularity and strength of the Mexican state, the government feared these groups due to the lack of available means that they maintained to deal with adversaries. Specifically, “the corporate political structure is designed for political manipulation of demands, but it has no structure to absorb autonomous political mobilization. The Achilles’ heel of the system may therefore be that sort of political protest.”<sup>42</sup> Therefore, the structure of government in Mexico did not provide any mechanisms to deal with broad-based movements like the half million people who demonstrated during the summer of 1968 in Mexico. Since the PRI had never faced such widespread opposition in the post-revolutionary period, the government in power found no blueprint for dealing with these opposition groups, increasing the anxiety of the government, and providing no guarantees for what type of action the government would take when faced with the opposition.

In addition to the basic structural problems in terms of dealing with external groups, the personal characteristics of president Díaz Ordaz also led to an increased propensity for repression of social movements. As president he stated that his primary concern lay in the maintenance of law and order within the society. Furthermore, in the personal sphere he did not enjoy many close friendships and generally maintained a

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<sup>41</sup> Jorge G Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed: the Latin American Left After the Cold War*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1993), 156.

<sup>42</sup> Reyna, 164.

suspicious stance toward the world surrounding him.<sup>43</sup> In fact, Diaz Ordaz's reaction to the coverage of the massacre of October 2 displays his paranoid nature:

President Díaz Ordaz followed the media coverage in minute detail. Televisa the television monopoly had broadcast no taped footage of the attack on the students, and Jacobo Zabludovsky, the network's anchorman, had faithfully conveyed the government's version of events. But Díaz Ordaz noticed that Zabludovsky was wearing a solid black tie. Zabludovsky always wore a plain black tie on the air, but Díaz Ordaz didn't know that. Imagining enemies on all sides, the President viewed the newscaster's tie as a surreptitious sign that Zabludovsky disapproved of the killing. Díaz Ordaz called Zabludovsky and chewed him out ferociously.<sup>44</sup>

As the person ultimately in charge of deploying the military at Tlatelolco plaza, Diaz Ordaz's paranoia and obsession with order encouraged him to take any necessary action to suppress the movement, since students protesting in the middle of Mexico City did not fulfill his ideal vision of society.<sup>45</sup> Unlike his obedient, model members of Mexican society, these students threatened the stability of the regime through their demonstration against its actions. While the President's personal issues should not excuse him from responsibility for the decision to massacre the students, his obsession with order and paranoia toward the world illustrates why he felt the need to act. Coupled with the dearth of peaceful methods available to combat opposition to the government, his personality ultimately makes his decision to send in the military less surprising.

While PRI-led governments had displayed democratic qualities like freedom of the press and ability to assemble, these basic democratic freedoms became much more sharply limited in the aftermath of the massacre. Díaz Ordaz officially offered to negotiate with the protest movement shortly after it began to take shape, however, the

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<sup>43</sup> Preston and Dillon, 64.

<sup>44</sup> Preston and Dillon, 74.

<sup>45</sup> Gutmann, 67.

actual terms of the agreement revealed that the government left no room for compromise from its hard line stance. When Díaz Ordaz offered his “outstretched hand” to members of the movement, the terms of the pact stated that the students must promise to acquiesce to the government position, and apologize for their actions.<sup>46</sup> The pact would have then signaled capitulation to the government position or face severe consequences, which did not support democratic principles of the Constitution.

By the time late September rolled around, the situation became even worse for individual liberties. A “state of siege” developed where false arrests, detention without allowing access to lawyers and illegal searches and seizures became commonplace.<sup>47</sup> Whatever opinion one held about the nature of the “one-party democracy” in Mexico prior to the Díaz Ordaz government and the student protests, the situation became markedly worse for the democratic freedoms in the last months of 1968. Even after the massacre, the President continued to use coercive tactics to yield support for the remaining years of his term. Doña Fili, a woman not present at the demonstration on October 2, learned first hand about the strong arm of the state. She recounts: “We didn’t find out about what had happened at Tlatelolco right away. But my daughter was in a daycare center [run by the Mexico City government] and the director called on us to support the government’s position. He hold us that if we didn’t support President Díaz Ordaz they would throw our child out of the daycare center.”<sup>48</sup> Therefore, the situation in Mexico of 1968 remained far removed from any definition of democracy.

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<sup>46</sup> Taibo, 41.

<sup>47</sup> Preston and Dillon, 69.

<sup>48</sup> Gutmann, 64.

#### **Chapter 4: The Games of the XIX Olympiad**

An understanding of the domestic political context within Mexico helps to explain why the government reacted harshly in the face of student demands. However, the broader international context surrounding the Mexican events also helps explain why the Díaz Ordaz government reacted in such a severe manner to the protests. Mexico stayed relatively isolated from other foreign powers during this time period, which provided them more freedom in their ability to deal with their domestic political problems. This separation from foreign powers factored into the government's decision to repress the students since "the isolation made it possible for the government to militarily crush the student movement with relative impunity; the strongest censure from abroad that they received for the massacre was a mild finger-wagging from the representatives of a few foreign governments."<sup>49</sup> Even those countries that kept up close ties with Mexico either turned a blind eye to the massacre or applauded Mexico's handling of the crisis. The United States government, rather than condemning Mexico for its repressive actions, directed the Central Intelligence Agency to share information about leftist movements throughout the world and supported moves to repress these groups. Despite the US embassy's full knowledge of the immensity of the massacre, the embassy maintained that the event was "a strictly Mexican affair."<sup>50</sup> Even Cuba, a country whose government just a decade prior to October 2, 1968 came to power through a leftist movement, refused to cover the shootings in their media outlets. In fact, Mexican students in Cuba who

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<sup>49</sup> Gutmann, 62.

<sup>50</sup> Gutmann, 66.

protested the killings found themselves censored by the Cuban government.<sup>51</sup> The PRI felt that it could act with relative impunity against the students since even nations that praised themselves for their democratic governments and openness like the United States collaborated with the Mexican government about the massacre. Therefore, when Díaz Ordaz weighed the consequences of taking military action against the protests, he could rest assured that most powerful countries would not speak out against his actions.

Despite this lack of close ties internationally, Mexico did occupy an important role as the host of the 1968 summer Olympic games in October. The Mexican government had lobbied for the 1968 Olympic bid years prior to the event in order to become the first among developing and Spanish-speaking countries to host the games.<sup>52</sup> For the Mexican government, the success of the Olympics meant a great deal since they aimed to use the opportunity to showcase the country's advancement to a modern, "civilized" country. The government particularly wanted to show off the "Mexican Miracle," or the high percentage of economic growth experienced year after year, to demonstrate their prominence as an up and coming global power.<sup>53</sup> In order to help this image of Mexico as an advanced, industrialized nation the government poured money into the construction of new facilities for the Olympics. For example, "thousands of millions of pesos have been spent on new arenas and running tracks, housing for the foreign teams and vast amounts of publicity—despite the fact that the Mexican government can never find such sums to spend on its own impoverished population."<sup>54</sup> Therefore the Mexican focused its attention on the Olympic Games, as advances in

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<sup>51</sup> Gutmann, 66.

<sup>52</sup> Mabry, 246.

<sup>53</sup> Mabry, 246.

<sup>54</sup> Ali, 164.



equitable distribution for the population would not have drawn the same type of attention as traditional displays of wealth.

The Olympic Games did not just serve as a media stunt to gain acceptance amongst the international powers, but also offered tangible economic benefits to the government. Linked to the drive for acceptance as a developed nation, the government and elites wanted to portray Mexico as a steadily growing economy, with a stable foreign investment climate. While displaying the new infrastructure for development provided one method to showcase its stability, the Olympics also allowed the government to exhibit its ideal members of society in its regimented, diligent young athletes and other hardworking members of society.<sup>55</sup> Therefore while politically the government did not fear a backlash based on its treatment of the student movement, the aims to achieve economic advancement became complicated by the presence of the protesting masses. To the Mexican government, the movement represented a threat to its image of a stable country for potential investors.

While the imminent presence of a variety of representatives from foreign powers might have caused Díaz Ordaz to act with restraint toward his own populace for fear of criticism from other countries, the government's economic aims took the trump card and provoked the intense repression. Additionally, the collaboration of nations such as the United States and other nations' relative indifference to Mexico's treatment of its domestic issues likely made the government even more apt to act decisively against the movement to make sure that the positive economic changes would be noticed. The Mexican government did not want the images of protesting students to take precedence

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<sup>55</sup> Reyna, 157.

over Mexico's success story as a developing nation. Thus, by October 2, 1968, the government had become desperate since athletes and foreign press had already begun arriving in Mexico and the still active demonstrations risked exposing the darker aspects of the nation. For Díaz Ordaz and the Mexican government, "hosting the Olympics was the most important act of the year, if not of decades" therefore, "nothing could be allowed to interfere with this great enterprise."<sup>56</sup> In addition to the desire for investment opportunities, Mexico also wanted to be described as a country that valued social justice.<sup>57</sup> The presence of protests demanding various forms of social justice would not create the image that the PRI wanted to project during their hosting of the rest of the world. As a result, the government aimed to eliminate the internal dissent that threatened its ability to shine in front of its foreign visitors. The government even went so far as to gather fake confessions from student leaders who supposedly indicated that the movement had explicitly aimed to overshadow the Olympics with its opposition.<sup>58</sup> The government appeared willing to do whatever it took to prevent the student protests from tarnishing its desired international image in order to promote its interests.

While the government thought that immediate suppression of the movement would erase the opposition from the country and provide a quick fix to the problem, the crackdown itself created problems with its image as a democratic, modernizing nation. The Mexican government, which had been particularly excited to host the Olympics in "El año de la paz" or "The Year of the Peace" appeared hypocritical as a host to the

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<sup>56</sup> Mabry, 246-247.

<sup>57</sup> Preston and Dillon, 68.

<sup>58</sup> Mabry, 266.

theme of peace based on its acts toward its own youth.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, since the foreign press had already arrived in Mexico City to begin covering the games, around one hundred reporters from other nations came to the demonstration on October 2, preventing Mexico from fully utilizing its normally isolated international position.<sup>60</sup> Despite protests by the Italian and Australian members of the Olympic committee, who were angry in particular about the injuries to their citizens, the emergency meeting over how to act in light of the massacre concluded that the Olympic games should continue based on the regular schedule.<sup>61</sup> The President of the International Olympic Committee viewed the Olympics with reverence and assured that all was well since: “we have full confidence that the Mexican people, universally known for their sportsmanship and great hospitality, will join participants and spectators in celebrating the Games, a veritable oasis in a troubled world.”<sup>62</sup> The head of the committee’s words illustrate the proclaimed importance put on the Olympics as a panacea for global troubles. The conflict over the protest did not register as important in comparison to the Games. Therefore, the gamble that Díaz Ordaz took in suppressing the movement in order to prevent interference with the Olympics achieved his goals of showcasing the sanitized version of Mexico. Without the presence of the Olympic Games in October 1968, the government would have been less likely to massacre its own citizens on October 2.

Despite the shock among the population that the government had killed hundreds of its own peacefully protesting citizens, the press chose to focus on the Olympic Games

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<sup>59</sup> Gutmann, 65.

<sup>60</sup> Preston and Dillon, 70.

<sup>61</sup> Preston and Dillon, 77.

<sup>62</sup> Ali, 176.

instead of the atrocities at Tlatelolco.<sup>63</sup> The television crews and newspapers focused not on the youth brutally murdered at the hands of the Mexican government, but on Díaz Ordaz's ideal ordered and patriotic youth who participated in the Olympics or helped portray the illusion of the modern Mexico.<sup>64</sup> Various accounts of the 1968 Olympics illustrate that this falsely portrayed democratic, civilized, and economically advanced display captured the attention of the visitors to Mexico. British coverage of the opening ceremony states: "as the doves soared away from their captivity, the Olympic flame burned brightly...All was well in Mexico, the city of 1968."<sup>65</sup> Another account emphasizes that attention shifted from the tragedy at Tlatelolco to the Olympics:

Outside the stadium troops and tanks were poised beyond the view of television cameras. There were no international protests, no delegations withdrew, and some, notably the Soviets praised the Mexican government for its handling of the crisis. The Tlatelolco Massacre—the worst bloodshed in the country since the Mexican Revolution—was a fleeting news item in the international press, one more social scare of that turbulent year. To this day, the 1968 Olympics are far more likely remembered internationally for African American athletes' protests.<sup>66</sup>

Unfortunately, in the case of Mexico, 1968 was not a year of peace, but a year in which the obsessive focus of the Mexican government on the "oasis" of the Olympic Games contributed to the massacre of hundreds of its own citizens.

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<sup>63</sup> Preston and Dillon, 77.

<sup>64</sup> Jorge Volpi, *La Imaginación y El Poder: Una Historia Intelectual de 1968* (México D.F.: Ediciones Era, 1998), 367.

<sup>65</sup> Preston and Dillon, 78.

<sup>66</sup> Gutmann, 65.

## **Chapter 5: International Protest Movements: Paris 68 and the Prague Spring**

The year 1968 not only saw attempts to change the government in Mexico, but “nineteen sixty-eight was an attempt to create a new world, a new starting point for politics, for culture, for personal relations” throughout the world.<sup>67</sup> “From Prague to Paris, London to Tokyo, San Francisco to Peking, student revolts erupted with unforeseen suddenness” which gripped the world.<sup>68</sup> None of these movements occurred in a vacuum. Each subsequent movement provided a potential model for agitators throughout the globe. Once a violent action broke out in a particular nation, the prior examples from other countries offered the government lessons in how to deal with the uprisings that threatened the stability of the existing order. In particular, the Mexican protest movement and the government looked to the situations in other countries to gain information to guide their actions. As the movement in Mexico developed throughout the late summer, the protests of Paris in May 1968 had already peaked and declined based on the reforms of leader Charles de Gaulle. In Czechoslovakia, by August 1968 the movement, which clamored for democratization, was suppressed by the Soviet military intervention, two months prior to the massacre by the Mexican military. Therefore, to gain a better understanding of the Mexican student movement, the two prominent cases of France and Czechoslovakia will be examined to understand what kind of signals and lessons these examples provided to the students and government in Mexico.

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<sup>67</sup> Ali and Watkins, 7.

<sup>68</sup> Ronald Fraser, et al, *1968: A Student Generation in Revolt*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 1.

Although Mexico did not suffer international censure in 1968, this does not mean that the government or its citizens were unaware of international developments in social movements. The Mexican ambassador to France, Silvio Zavala, worked tirelessly throughout 1968, providing reports to Díaz Ordaz about the events unfolding in Paris.<sup>69</sup> Díaz Ordaz's paranoia led him to specifically focus on the real and imagined foreign links to the movement. The PRI government believed that the roots of the movement in Mexico came from foreign dissenters in some sort of conspiracy against the government. The government followed this theory and instructed the police to keep a list of 'principle agitators' in the protest movement, in which those with supposedly 'foreign names' garnered maximum suspicion.<sup>70</sup> Taibo's first-hand account of the movement confirms this distrust: "there had been a roundup of foreigners, most of them onlookers picked up on the fringes of demonstrations because they looked like hippie or student types—quite consistent, of course, with the hallowed Mexican political and police custom of rounding up a few aliens as proof of an international plot."<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, some members of the government alleged that the protestors in Mexico were financed through foreign powers deemed to be "hostile," like the United States, France, and the Soviet Union.<sup>72</sup> While it was possible that the movement received some degree of foreign financing, the concern about foreign revolutionary influence on Mexico approached hysteria. Of the supposedly hostile countries, the United States government had shared intelligence efforts in regards to the protests and the Soviet Union leaders complimented the PRI's quick resolution of the student movement. Although the foreign groups providing tangible assistance to the

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<sup>69</sup> Preston and Dillon, 83.

<sup>70</sup> Ali, 165.

<sup>71</sup> Taibo, 30.

<sup>72</sup> Mabry, 256.

growing movement remained negligible in terms of financially making or breaking the success of the group, it demonstrates that the Mexican government was quite aware of the international climate of protest and followed the events closely.

The members of the movement in Mexico also took note of the international events regardless of the presence of tangible outside assistance. At the beginning of the movement, the students strove “to make the same links their French comrades did, to widen their protest into a social revolt.”<sup>73</sup> Thus, while fears of communist infiltration and foreign funding were based on Mexican government paranoia, the students did look to other movements to garner information about successful and unsuccessful protests. While the French movement offered a more successful example for the students with a peaceful resolution to the crisis, the Czechoslovak example provided a model for repression that it appears the Mexican government chose to follow more closely.

### **Paris ‘68**

The uprising in Paris of 1968 held the possibility for truly revolutionary action as the state stood precariously close to being overthrown due to the pressure exerted by the movement. By the beginning of May, student protests against inadequate institutional support for schools had broken out in pockets throughout Paris.<sup>74</sup> On May 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> two universities, Nanterre and the Sorbonne, were closed down due to these intense political confrontations.<sup>75</sup> At the Sorbonne, the situation became particularly chaotic when the University rector called the police to their request intervention to stop a political

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<sup>73</sup> Ali, 165.

<sup>74</sup> Ali, 89.

<sup>75</sup> Andrew Feenberg and Jim Freedman, *When Poetry Ruled the Streets: The French May Events of 1968* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 10, 13.

meeting.<sup>76</sup> Throughout the following week students became outraged based on the arrests and constant police presence, and began to unsuccessfully demand the freedom of the political prisoners, the reopening of the Universities, and police withdrawal from the Latin Quarter of the city.<sup>77</sup> On May 10<sup>th</sup>, the students established barricades in the Latin Quarter to protest the continued imprisonment of their peers as well as police intervention in the area. Eventually the police began to launch tear gas and students fought back.<sup>78</sup> At this point in May, the conflict between the students and the state escalated into a much more violent phase of protest. From this point the conflict only became more intense as the fervor spread across the country beyond just the students. In particular, the student movement formed a strong alliance with worker groups leading to the promulgation of large-scale general strikes. These strikes debilitated the nation as nearly two-thirds of the productive force stopped work and joined forces with the students, affecting virtually all sectors of the economy.<sup>79</sup> The government faced an extreme crisis that had grown from what had initially been a small student demonstration.

By the end of May, De Gaulle realized his precarious position as the leader of a nation in revolt, and secretly met with the French military to confirm their armed support against the immense number of students and workers protesting against his regime.<sup>80</sup> While De Gaulle at one point considered resigning in the face of such broad-based protest against his government, he eventually decided to hold new legislative elections as a

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<sup>76</sup> Feenberg and Freedman, 12.

<sup>77</sup> Ali, 91.

<sup>78</sup> Ali, 98.

<sup>79</sup> Volpi, 156.

<sup>80</sup> Ali, 105.



diversionary tactic to quell the dissent and remain in power.<sup>81</sup> To appease some members of the opposition, De Gaulle also submitted to other reforms demanded by the movement, including shorter workdays and higher wages for workers.<sup>82</sup> Despite achieving change, the movement did not reach its revolutionary goals. Given the immense numbers of people participating in the events of French May, the crowds did not disappear immediately, as many people still did not find the outcome satisfactory. But with elections looming in the future for the various political parties, the government successfully shifted the focus toward campaigns for winning seats in the congressional assembly.

In the Parisian protests, cooperation between students and laborers worked exceptionally well in their ability to coordinate both interests.<sup>83</sup> Thus, the French movements provided a model to other protest groups throughout the world showing the viability of a coordinated worker and student approach. As discussed above, the students in Mexico certainly knew about the relative success of the Parisian movement, and in many ways modeled themselves after that movement in hopes of garnering widespread backing like the movement in France. The students in Mexico allied with various workers groups in order to protest against the government, albeit not to the same degree as in Paris. In Mexico, this alliance also worked since both sides gained from the other sector. For the workers, the physical space of the autonomous university allowed a separate location away from intense state control. For the students, the workers'

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<sup>81</sup> Feenberg and Freedman, 62-63.

<sup>82</sup> Michael Seidman, *The Imaginary Revolution: Parisian Students and Workers in 1968* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 12.

<sup>83</sup> Seidman, 8.

demands for equitable economic distribution fit easily into the economic equality agenda of the students and provided the initial movement more broad-based support.

Despite the links between the movements in Paris and Mexico City, the students in Mexico also differed from the French case in a variety of ways and did not exactly copy their example. In terms of overall aims of the movement, the protestors in Mexico generally had more moderate demands overall and did not intend to overthrow the government. Prior to the massacre at Tlatelolco, the students had agitated in order to ensure democratic freedoms and equality instead of government intervention, whereas the Parisian case demanded of resignation of the Gaullist government.<sup>84</sup> Therefore the international movement did not offer an exact blueprint for the movement, but instead offered some degree of inspiration and solidarity for their cause.

For the government of Mexico, the power of the French worker and student movement was frightening. While De Gaulle did manage to stay in power, Díaz Ordaz likely wondered about his prospects for maintaining control in case similar events broke out in Mexico City. While a foreign protest movement did not threaten to impose a communist regime as the Mexican government charged, the case of France in 1968 offered a lesson to the PRI regime that a small student movement could spread with popular support throughout the entire country and potentially paralyze its economic and daily life. While De Gaulle's political maneuvering did provide some lessons to Díaz Ordaz, the Mexican president did not have much time to deal with the protest due to the imminent opening of the Olympics. By the time October 2 came around, Díaz Ordaz likely thought that attempts at negotiation or small concessions would not immediately

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<sup>84</sup> Gutmann, 70.

disarm the movement and restore order like a swift attack. Thus, while practically the demands of the movement in Mexico were less radical than those in France, the government reacted more harshly based on the presence of the Olympic Games, which demanded a quick restoration of order in the country in order to broadcast the desired international image.

### **The Prague Spring**

Unlike the moderate success of the protest movement in France, the Czechoslovak demands for democracy faced a greater degree of suppression. Throughout early 1968 increasing numbers of students clamored for democratization and liberalization within the government.<sup>85</sup> In early January many members of the Communist party demand that then current party head Antonin Novotny step down from power, and allow Alexander Dubcek, a reformist proponent within the party, to take over. Dubcek successfully took over as party head and proposed a change to “socialism with a human face.”<sup>86</sup> This type of socialism aimed to provide reforms like free elections, a truly independent parliament and the opening up of the economy to free enterprise.<sup>87</sup> However, hesitant to act too quickly in the face of a looming, hostile Soviet presence, Dubcek waited three months until April to lay out the details of his plan, the Action Programme. As a whole this program amounted to a reassertion of the power of the Communist Party within Czechoslovakia as opposed to Soviet power and influence. The plan also made modifications that legalized other political parties and promised to respond more to

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<sup>85</sup> Volpi, 163.

<sup>86</sup> Ali, 23.

<sup>87</sup> Ali, 56.

demands from the general populace.<sup>88</sup> While the program did not officially challenge Soviet control of Czechoslovakia as a satellite state, the new orientation of the doctrine caused many in Moscow to worry about the reforms in Prague.

The Soviet Union did not sit idly by in light of the proposed reforms. Troop maneuvers by the Warsaw Pact members began in Czechoslovakia in early June, and showed no signs of ending in the near future. The military exercises tempered the popular exuberance of the movement by stifling the likelihood for reform and offered a threat of returning to the status quo.<sup>89</sup> A widely published manifesto signed by leading figures in Czechoslovakia illustrated the ominous situation within the country. “The recent great apprehension springs from the possibility that foreign forces may interfere with our internal development. Being faced with all these superior forces, the only thing we can do is to hold our own decently and not to start anything. We can assure the government that we will give it our backing.”<sup>90</sup> The situation continued to worsen throughout the summer. Notably, the Warsaw Pact troops remained in Czechoslovakia, and the other Eastern European nations held a summit and jointly sent a letter to the Czechoslovak government demanding Communist Party control of the media, removal of freedom of the press, and elimination of “opposition” groups within and outside the party. Dubcek, however, rounded up a coalition of supporters on the Central Committee of the party signifying that he would not roll over in the face of Soviet desires.<sup>91</sup> By mid-August, Soviet leaders feared that the liberalization and democratization process

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<sup>88</sup> Philip Windsor and Adam Roberts, *Czechoslovakia 1968: Reform, Repression, and Resistance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 35-36.

<sup>89</sup> Ali, 121.

<sup>90</sup> Ali, 121.

<sup>91</sup> Ali, 132.

would become irreversible if not halted immediately.<sup>92</sup> Therefore, on August 21, 1968, Soviet tanks rolled into Prague, suppressing the budding reform movement by forcefully eliminating its opposition. Under the code-name Operation Danube, the Soviet Union led an invading force of 165,000 soldiers into Czechoslovakia.<sup>93</sup> Ultimately the conflict from this invading force and subsequent occupation resulted in 100 civilian deaths and hundreds of casualties. The Soviet Union had firmly suppressed the democratizing forces in Czechoslovakia and placed them more securely under their orbit. Rather than achieving success through demands for change, the invasion and subsequent occupation led to hundreds of additional casualties. Thus Czechoslovakia was placed more firmly under Soviet control.

While the Mexican and Czechoslovak movements differed in a variety of ways, the similarities between the two movements did not escape the notice of people in Mexico. Politician and writer Octavio Paz likened the Mexican movement most closely to the student protests in Czechoslovakia rather than France, the United States or Germany because in both the Soviet Union and Mexico “an authoritarian party had presided over decades of extraordinary economic progress.”<sup>94</sup> However, despite these similarities the student demands for change in the Czechoslovak model did not offer an ideal movement for emulation in comparison to the French movement. The Czechoslovak situation involved a conflict between a superpower and its satellite state while the Mexican movement focused on internal political dissent, lessening the applicability of the Eastern European situation. The ultimate repression of the

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<sup>92</sup> Kieran Williams, *The Prague Spring and its aftermath: Czechoslovak Politics, 1968-1970* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 30.

<sup>93</sup> Williams, 112.

<sup>94</sup> Preston and Dillon, 84.

burgeoning democratization offered a less than desirable outcome that did not fit with the movement's hope for peaceful reform of the government. Thus, the Mexican students likely more closely emulated the students and workers in France rather than their Czechoslovak counterparts. However, the government of Mexico likely looked upon the unfolding events in the Eastern bloc with a greater propensity to model the Soviet actions.

Although the Díaz Ordaz government eyed the Soviet Union suspiciously due to its communist government, even highlighting them as a potential donor to their student protest, both governments found themselves in similar situations with regard to how to resolve growing protest and reform movements. While the near loss of power by De Gaulle alarmed Díaz Ordaz and made the French government path a less appealing option, the firm Soviet display of power over Czechoslovakia marked the course of a strong regime that would not rescind its hold on power. In both states, the current administrations of Leonid Brezhnev and Díaz Ordaz respectively maintained a vertical hold on power. In addition, both countries had maintained the dominance of one party within the political sphere for decades since their respective revolutions. Thus, despite all protestations of Soviet intervention into Mexican politics, the commonalities between both regimes made the Soviet response to protest a fruitful learning tool for the Mexican government.

In contrast to the French government, which acquiesced to some reforms in the face of opposition, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovak territory with tanks and troops did not cave in to the social movement, providing a more attractive model to Díaz Ordaz for maintaining his control on power. While the demands of the student movement were

not particularly radical and only asked for reforms to prevent government intervention, the PRI did not want to lose its stranglehold on power. Instead, the idea of quickly eliminating the eyesore of the movement on an otherwise prosperous and modernizing nation seemed appealing. The Díaz Ordaz government's deployment of a coordinated military presence to put down the movement in one fell swoop more closely followed the Soviet-style response to opposition more than any other movement of 1968. While it is difficult to conclusively state that the Mexican government analyzed all of the 1968 movements in great depth and then consciously chose the Soviet path as a model, the similarities between the two situations and government actions shows that the Soviet case did influence Mexico path toward repression. At the least, the Soviet actions provided another situation from which to learn from another nation's experiences. In this case, the Soviet's ability to suppress the movement without losing their stronghold on power in the area likely appealed to the PRI in Mexico.

Furthermore, with the imminent presence of the Olympics in Mexico, Díaz Ordaz did not want to risk something like the chaos that reigned in Paris in 1968. In the interest of time, the Soviet solution looked like a better approach to quell movement that had been flourishing throughout the summer in Mexico. Whereas in Paris the reforms did not immediately stop the protest, the military presence in Czechoslovakia quickly led to a situation where people would not speak out against the government. While neither example provided an ideal model for action, with the Olympic games only ten days away, the quicker suppression appeared more appealing. Thus, absent the international pressure provided by the Olympic games and the examples by other movements throughout the world, the situation in Mexico could have been resolved completely differently. In this

way the Soviet government's compliment to the Mexican government over their handling of the crisis provides an important political and figurative event. The leaders of the large number of governments facing protest movements recognized the commonalities facing each nation, and under this light the Soviet Union's compliment to Mexico not only served to boost Mexican government confidence in their handling of the crisis, but also provided a figurative pat on their own back for their actions against the Czechoslovaks.

The ultimate decision of the Mexican government to use military force on October 2 becomes much less surprising with an investigation into the specific context of the time period. Regardless of the relative merit of the protesters demands, the corporatist structure of the PRI-led government did not provide a mechanism to peacefully deal with opposition from outside the state structure. With the additional pressure felt by the government from hosting the Olympic Games, and the Soviet example of suppressing a similar movement earlier in the same year, the choice to intervene militarily proved the most attractive method to Díaz Ordaz at the time. While the government did not face immediate repercussions through international censure or increasing domestic upheaval, the choice to kill the protestors at Tlatelolco carries with it a negative legacy that the PRI continues to bear.



## Chapter 6: The Legacy of Mexico '68

The date October 2, 1968 endures as a significant date in Mexico. In particular, within the popular culture of Mexico, specific dates have become closely associated with ideas such that the statement of the date “1968” draws up memories of the massacre at Tlatelolco and the subsequent changes in Mexico.<sup>95</sup> In fact, “the student movement of 1968 is today one of the most powerful Mexican political myths.”<sup>96</sup> With the date 1968, many people think of the rupture in the peaceful development of Mexico under the PRI to something more violent and repressive. However, as with any myth, in the years since the massacre, different people continue to use a variety of interpretations about the year in Mexico. Taibo, as a member of the student movement, remarks that for him 1968 signifies the hundred days of growing protest against the government, however, for most people 1968 connotes images of the massacre on October 2.<sup>97</sup> As years have passed since 1968, new developments altered the meaning of what happened based on new information that aids interpretation of the past. To understand the continuing legacy of 1968 this concluding chapter will investigate both the changes that occurred in Mexico after 1968, and how political actors and events have altered the way that people view 1968.

Many scholars and everyday citizens of Mexico cite the loss of political legitimacy as one of the most widely documented results of the massacre at Tlatelolco. Through the loss of political innocence in Mexico, effectively the government became

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<sup>95</sup> Gutmann, 67.

<sup>96</sup> Markarian, 25.

<sup>97</sup> Taibo, 108.

subject to scrutiny to a much greater extent as people began to doubt its efficacy and ability to justly govern.<sup>98</sup> While the economy continued to expand in many areas, and people hoped for continued prosperity for future generations, their confidence in the current president, the PRI, or even the Mexican Revolution as the agents to deliver Mexico into a better tomorrow subsided in the face of increasing skepticism and cynicism.<sup>99</sup> While Díaz Ordaz successfully portrayed a sanitized image of Mexico internationally through the grand displays at the Olympic Games, the domestic political situation became much more precarious as he lost support throughout many sectors of society.

The resignation of Octavio Paz, Mexico's ambassador to India and popular poet over the government repression at Tlatelolco served as a blow to the legitimacy of the ruling regime. Paz had worked closely with the government on the investigation of student movements throughout the world, and through this post advised that rather than use force against the students, the government should submit to their demands for democratization.<sup>100</sup> While Díaz Ordaz paid lip service to Paz's advice in affirming that "poets sometimes have the most accurate intuitions," his choice to violently crack down on the movement shows that Paz's input was essentially ignored.<sup>101</sup> The decision to deploy the military greatly angered Paz, and as a result he resigned his post with the Mexican government. While the rest of the government officials stood by Díaz Ordaz in promoting the official line, Paz's resignation provided a crack in the cover story, which

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<sup>98</sup> Gutmann, 61.

<sup>99</sup> Gutmann, 67.

<sup>100</sup> Preston and Dillon, 80-81.

<sup>101</sup> Preston and Dillon, 81.

portrayed the movement as the villains and the government as a just ruling force.<sup>102</sup> Paz ridiculed the decision of the government to intervene and stated: “the massacre of the students was a ritual sacrifice, an act of terrorism, pure and simple, carried out by the state.”<sup>103</sup> In addition to Paz’s importance as a member of the government, his fame as a literary figure made his dissenting voice against the official line particularly important within Mexico and abroad. The example of Paz led many intellectuals within Mexico to reevaluate the legitimacy of the state, and summarily many of them broke from cooperation with the government.<sup>104</sup> The Díaz Ordaz government quickly attempted to vilify Paz and sweep his statements aside. However, opposing narratives from Paz and others that circulated like the following lines surely hurt the image of the government:

(The municipal  
employees wash the blood  
from the Plaza of the Sacrificed.)  
Look now,  
    stained  
before anything worth it  
was said:  
    lucidity.<sup>105</sup>

Paz’s poetry and political stance were supported by other important writers like Carlos Fuentes and Gabriel García Márquez who supported Paz’s decision to resign in protest.<sup>106</sup> Thus, while Paz did not set off a crusade of government resignations and take down the regime, his dissent provided a symbol for the growing resistance to PRI politics within Mexico and throughout the world.

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<sup>102</sup> Markarian, 27.

<sup>103</sup> Preston and Dillon, 83.

<sup>104</sup> Camp, 211-212.

<sup>105</sup> Preston and Dillon, 82.

<sup>106</sup> Preston and Dillon, 83.

Despite the loss of popularity by the PRI and the Mexican government, president Díaz Ordaz and future leaders cracked down even further and failed to recover the confidence of the citizenry. In his remaining years in power, Díaz Ordaz upgraded police weaponry including providing new tanks while also continuing to arrest students for protesting. Furthermore, the granaderos continued to intervene in the University and other parts of Mexico City, while those imprisoned during 1968 continued to languish in prison without bail or hope of a quick trial.<sup>107</sup> The election of Luis Echeverría as the PRI party successor in 1970, provided hope for political reform and reestablishment of PRI legitimacy, but skepticism reigned due to his position within the government as Ministry of the Interior during the Tlatelolco massacre. In comparison to Díaz Ordaz, Echeverría made some gestures to gain back the confidence of the populace by paying attention to the popular sectors neglected under prior administrations.<sup>108</sup> Specifically, he freed some political prisoners and increased funding for higher education.<sup>109</sup> However, these token actions toward conciliation should not be overstated as Echeverría also continued the repressive legacy established during the prior presidency.

The suppression at Tlatelolco did not mark an end to the deaths at the hands of the government, as the massacre was “the beginning of a long government crackdown on its real and suspected enemies. Hundreds of people were killed over the next 15 years.”<sup>110</sup> Under Echeverría the most well publicized example occurred in June 1971, when government-sponsored forces gunned down protestors in Mexico City, killing 42 people

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<sup>107</sup> Mabry, 267.

<sup>108</sup> Reyna, 159.

<sup>109</sup> Markarian, 27.

<sup>110</sup> Tim Weiner, “Mexico Digs at Last for Truth About 1968 Massacre,” *The New York Times*, 7 February 2003, final edition, Lexis-Nexis via UO Library, <http://libweb.uoregon.edu>.

and wounding at least 100.<sup>111</sup> Students that day in June marched in support of workers, freedom in the universities, and the release of political prisoners, but instead found forceful opposition rather than steps toward conciliation. While the government distanced itself from responsibility for the deaths, police had collaborated with rightwing students who disliked the leftist politics and participated in the attack.<sup>112</sup> Thus, despite the image of reconciliation displayed by Echeverría, the substance of his politics did not differ from the repression of the previous administration.

Despite the token attempts at reconciliation, even these seemingly positive reforms like increased university funding did not come without strings attached. While the students protested for greater educational autonomy, the state responded by increasing funding to certain educational projects overseen by the state. However, with the corporatist state structure instead of giving the universities more autonomy, the government aimed to integrate them into the state apparatus. Therefore, “by financing institutions that support the activities of intellectuals, the state has created a buffer organization, thereby allowing the intellectual to save face while still being supported by the state.”<sup>113</sup> The legacy of 1968 clearly haunted Echeverría and encouraged attempts to gain back the trust of the population. However, the continued brutal repression of peaceful democratic movements further cemented ideas linking the PRI to the brutality of 1968. These attacks disillusioned members of the populace who became convinced that

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<sup>111</sup> Diego Cevallos, “Rights-Mexico: Court Blocks Genocide Trial of Ex-President,” *Inter-Press Service*, 24 February 2005, Lexis-Nexis via UO Library, <http://libweb.uoregon.edu>.

<sup>112</sup> Mabry, 268-269.

<sup>113</sup> Camp, 211.

their peaceful attempts for incremental change would never bring about the desired political reforms.<sup>114</sup>

The realization by many youth that the government would not provide desired democratic political reforms came to predominate in Mexico. The movements of 1968 did not succeed in forcing reform in the PRI led government, however, “millions of young Mexicans had been touched in one way or another by the protests.”<sup>115</sup> Some students and intellectuals began to support guerilla movements; others teamed up with peasant causes, joined workers organizations, or went back to the university to continue their protest against government persecution.<sup>116</sup> These varied responses indicate that no uniform way existed by which these energetic students displayed their political convictions. However, many people remained convinced that they had to become involved in politics in order to fight against the period of repression established in 1968.<sup>117</sup> While for the government 1968 operated as a thorn in their side, for an entire generation, 1968 encouraged a resurgent involvement in politics and fights for justice.

More recent political experiences have also reaffirmed the lessons of 1968 through the government’s continued failures at caring for the populace. The severe earthquake in Mexico City on September 19, 1985, in which the government stood idly by as thousands of people remained trapped under rubble, further convinced people of the problems with the PRI government.<sup>118</sup> Just like in 1968, the government refused to take any responsibility for the high number of deaths and vastly undercounted the number of

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<sup>114</sup> Preston and Dillon, 87.

<sup>115</sup> Preston and Dillon, 85.

<sup>116</sup> Markarian, 27-28.

<sup>117</sup> Markarian, 28.

<sup>118</sup> Gutmann, 67-68.

victims from the disaster in its reports to the press.<sup>119</sup> As a result, “people once again experienced a profound loss of faith in the governmental authorities, as they were persuaded anew of the futility of relying on anyone in a position of power. Perhaps the most salient difference between 1968 and 1985 in this respect is that in 1985 this perception was less shocking, representing as it did a compounded knowledge built on the lessons of 1968.”<sup>120</sup> In response to the government uselessness in dealing with the earthquake, citizens organized informal networks to aid those in need from the disaster and also attempted to rescue the victims of the earthquake.<sup>121</sup> The similarities between these local movements of 1985 and the student-led movement of 1968 struck many of the now aged members of the 1968 movements. In fact these original demonstrators met to discuss the similarities between the two movements and agreed on the value of keeping the legacy of 1968 alive in their protests for PRI reform.<sup>122</sup> By this point, sixty-five years had passed since the triumph of the Mexican Revolution that had sought social justice and economic prosperity for the entire population. The failure of the Mexican government in the 1985 earthquake reminded an entire generation of the government’s failed promises for decades, and continued the decline in the legitimacy of the ruling party.

The legacy of distrust of the PRI hold on power, continued to strengthen in 1999 when students at the UNAM went on strike and effectively shut down the University for many months. Due to the similarities of location and primary role of students in the

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<sup>119</sup> Gutmann, 68.

<sup>120</sup> Gutmann, 68.

<sup>121</sup> Markarian, 28.

<sup>122</sup> Markarian, 28-29.

protest many people compared the events at the University in 1999 to those of 1968.<sup>123</sup> Reflecting the cynicism and distrust in the government, one resident of Mexico City who had been quite young during the massacre at Tlatelolco asked members of the current movement: “What exactly do you want? Do you want another ’68, like when there was a student movement before, and a massacre? I told them it seemed to me like that’s what they wanted.”<sup>124</sup> While students continued to mobilize, emulating the prior generation of protestors, many people like the person cited above who questioned the protesters about their intentions, feared that the government would repress the movement just like in 1968. Thus, although over thirty years had passed since the massacre at Tlatelolco, the situation remained eerily similar to the past with the PRI still maintaining its hold on power and its refusal to grant democratic reforms. However, the 2000 presidential election changed the course of Mexican politics.

The PRI’s strategy of suppressing its opposition could not go on forever, and the election of opposition party candidate Vicente Fox in 2000 represented a fundamental shift in Mexican politics. Journalist Kevin Sullivan notes the link between the massacre and the election since “many believe the Tlatelolco massacre helped hasten the end of decades of authoritarian rule in Mexico”<sup>125</sup> The youth of 1968 had grown up into a generation distrustful of the government, and eager to embark on a new path for Mexico. One of these youth, Vicente Fox, the president elected from the PAN in the 2000 election recalls the personal impact of the 1968 massacre. In particular he recalled in his 1999

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<sup>123</sup> Gutmann, 68.

<sup>124</sup> Gutmann, 69.

<sup>125</sup> Kevin Sullivan, “Memories of Massacre in Mexico; Long-Hidden Photos Detail '68 Army Shootings of Students,” *The Washington Post*, 14 February 2002, final edition. Lexis-Nexis via UO Library, <http://libweb.uoregon.edu>.



autobiography “now that time has passed, I’m convinced the government was responsible for that massacre, and not just when it used violence to quiet the students. The lack of democracy and its dictatorial attitudes were what fed the movement.”<sup>126</sup> Fox did not involve himself in politics to a great degree in 1968 as a young man working for the Coca Cola Corporation in Mexico.<sup>127</sup> However, despite this distance from politics, he still recalled the 1968 movement as a turning point in Mexican politics that he condemned. Therefore, Fox’s election to the highest office in Mexico also denoted an important shift in the political atmosphere.

Taibo, in his reflection of 1968 in a section of his text entitled “Thirty-Five Years After” remarked: “in the June 2000 elections the PRI fell for the second time.” This statement highlights the continually held belief that the PRI hold on power had been illegitimate for many years.<sup>128</sup> Taibo’s text asserts a link between the events of 1968 and the ultimate downfall of the PRI in 2000 through the loss of political legitimacy. As an enduring political myth in Mexico, “every political actor refers to these events in order to legitimize his or her voice in Mexican politics. Past and present volley back and forth in the political game: narratives of the events of 1968 support present-day political positions, which, in turn, act upon these narratives.”<sup>129</sup> In this way when Fox denounced the PRI failures during the past regimes, the legacy of 1968 which had first haunted Díaz Ordaz and Echeverría continued to bear down on the PRI candidates for office in the 2000 election. In particular Fox’s calls for accountability and denunciation of 1968

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<sup>126</sup> Preston and Dillon, 86.

<sup>127</sup> Preston and Dillon, 85.

<sup>128</sup> Taibo, 140.

<sup>129</sup> Markarian, 27.

resonated with the population, offering him a political advantage that aided his victory in the 2000 election.

Since Fox's election in 2000, the massacres at Tlatelolco continue to be discussed in terms of righting the wrongs of the past. Prior to Fox's election, attempts to prosecute the perpetrators, such as the attempt to establish a Truth Commission in 1993 to investigate the crimes, failed due to a lack of political will by the PRI government.<sup>130</sup> However, Fox has taken a more active approach toward reconciling the government with the massacre; first, by overseeing a government commemoration of the deaths at Tlatelolco on October 2, 2000.<sup>131</sup> Also, in January 2002, Fox selected Ignacio Carrillo as special prosecutor to investigate the crimes and find justice for the atrocities of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s.<sup>132</sup> Additionally, the Fox administration aimed to prosecute 25 officials with the charge of genocide based on their actions relating to the massacres throughout the PRI rule.<sup>133</sup> The break from the silence of the government "made accountability an unavoidable condition for real democracy in Mexico."<sup>134</sup>

However the progress toward responsibility and reconciliation with the past has been stilted in many ways under Fox. For example, members of the movement who had always held a commemoration ceremony did not agree with the government on the specific details for the commemoration, and as a result the event split into two distinct ceremonies. Taibo reflected on the continuing fights over 1968 noting that: "as long as

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<sup>130</sup> Markarian, 30.

<sup>131</sup> Markarian, 31.

<sup>132</sup> Ian Campbell, "Inside Mexico: Sins of past and present," *United Press International*, 7 October 2003, final edition, Lexis-Nexis via <http://libweb.uoregon.edu>.

<sup>133</sup> Ioan Grillo, "25 face genocide charges from '68; The indictments are part of Fox's plans to punish offenses of former Mexico regimes," *The Houston Chronicle*, 14 January 2005, final edition, Lexis-Nexis via <http://libweb.uoregon.edu>.

<sup>134</sup> Markarian, 30.

the murderers are not brought to justice, the wounds will fester. The special prosecutor's office has moved only under external pressure, lurching this way and that, opening investigations and calling on ex-presidents to testify, which they refuse to do. As for us, obdurate as ever, thirty-five years down the line, we are back in the street yet again."<sup>135</sup> Despite the steps toward prosecution, the Mexican Supreme Court recently dealt a blow to attempts at achieving justice by ruling that despite the Genocide Convention's clause that no statute of limitations exists for the crime of genocide, Mexico's accession to this convention does not apply retroactively.<sup>136</sup> Other nations in Latin America like Argentina have already begun prosecuting criminals from the Dirty War, but Mexico still has not successfully prosecuted those responsible for the atrocities. Not only does this hurt the victims and participants in the movement, but also additionally, "Mexico faces the real possibility of obligatory amnesia, or forced forgetting."<sup>137</sup> While some people view Fox's creation of an independent commission to prosecute the attacks as "a very critical baby step,"<sup>138</sup> other critics of the current administration's handling of the situation contend that Fox merely wants to maintain the appearance of bringing people to justice, but is not actually willing to take on the PRI.<sup>139</sup>

Recent actions by the Fox administration to prevent the PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution) candidate from running for office in the 2006 presidential election have also created further doubt over whether the Fox regime has substantially

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<sup>135</sup> Taibo, 141.

<sup>136</sup> Cevallos.

<sup>137</sup> Denise Dresser, "Mexico Stubbornly Denies Its Dark Past," *Los Angeles Times*, 27 February 2005, Lexis-Nexis via <http://libweb.uoregon.edu>.

<sup>138</sup> *The Boston Globe*, "Mexico's New Openness," 24 February 2005, Lexis-Nexis via <http://libweb.uoregon.edu>.

<sup>139</sup> Dresser.

differed from the actions of the PRI. Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the current mayor of Mexico and 2006 frontrunner for the presidential election, has found himself in a precarious position based on Fox's political maneuvering to keep him out of office. Specifically, the current administration argued that he should be tried for "contempt of court" since the city government did not mandate the stoppage of work on a new hospital on a piece of land that was part of a litigation dispute.<sup>140</sup> While the government pushed forward in the prosecution, which would prevent the mayor from running for president in the 2006 election, many people in Mexico have turned out to protest in favor of López Obrador. On April 24, photographic evidence confirms that around 1.2 million people participated in a silent demonstration to support the Mexico City mayor, while the government claimed that only 120,000 actually attended the event.<sup>141</sup> While the Fox administration thus continued the tradition established at the Tlatelolco massacre of falsifying the number of people involved in the event, the demonstrators aimed to continue the legacy of the 1968 movement by holding a peaceful protest to demand change despite its past failures.<sup>142</sup> Unlike 1968, however, international opinion lies firmly against the Fox administrations actions as "even rightwing US publications criticised the government's determination to prosecute López Obrador."<sup>143</sup> Therefore, the international political climate, which aided the Díaz Ordaz government's ability to massacre its own population without consequences in the international sphere, has turned against these anti-democratic actions.

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<sup>140</sup> *Mexico & NAFTA Report*, "The Lopez Obrador Saga: Swings and Roundabouts," 26 April 2005. Lexis-Nexis via <http://libweb.uoregon.edu>.

<sup>141</sup> *Mexico & NAFTA Report*.

<sup>142</sup> *Mexico & NAFTA Report*.

<sup>143</sup> *Mexico & NAFTA Report*.

In addition to the international political changes, the situation within Mexico has gradually changed since 1968. Ultimately, rather than continuing its illegitimate case against López Obrador, the Fox regime encouraged the resignation of the attorney general who led the case against the mayor.<sup>144</sup> Elena Poniatowska, who collected accounts from the events at Tlatelolco, stated that the government and military today are much less likely to suppress the peaceful protests.<sup>145</sup> Given the more open political system where new parties have triumphed, certainly no single group can guarantee its hold on power as in the past. Additionally, credit must be given to the protestors since today, “people have an idea what real democracy is, and they know they don’t have it quite yet. They want governments that represent them and they will go out on the streets to get that.”<sup>146</sup> Therefore, while the Fox government did not live up to the lofty expectations of many within Mexico, the legacy of protest ingrained from 1968 help achieve political opening within the country.

The election of Fox did not provide a panacea for the problems of 1968 and the legacy of protest continues in Mexico. With the 2006 election around the corner, the world will watch as Mexico’s populace decides whether to continue with the PAN, Fox’s party, return to the PRI just six years after they fell, or to pursue a different path with the leftist PRD. Regardless of the outcome, the legacy of 1968 in which the populace distrusts the government and doubts the prospects of positive reform remains alive. For Fox, the investigation into the massacre of 1968 offered him a politically popular opportunity to avenge the past problems of the PRI, however, he still faces criticism

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<sup>144</sup> Danna Harman, “People power rattling politics of Latin America,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 29 April 2005, Lexis-Nexis via <http://libweb.uoregon.edu>.

<sup>145</sup> Harman.

<sup>146</sup> Harman.

based on his slow movement toward prosecution and inability to coordinate the official commemoration with the interests of the current movements.

The people of Mexico carry on the lessons of the 1968 massacre through their calls for democracy. Until the government fully accedes to the necessary reforms, the distrust and skepticism in government action will continue. Perhaps in the future a new regime will establish a truly democratic government that will finally bury the legacy of governmental failures. However, until that day occurs, the year 1968 will remind many people of a time when the Mexican government killed its own unarmed citizens, and illustrates that despite progress, movements must continue to fight against the type of politics practiced in 1968.

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