

MEXICO - How Many Deaths is the Oaxaca Governor Worth?

Diego Cevallos, IPS

Friday 3 November 2006, posted by [Manuela Garza Ascencio](#)

IPS - The governor of the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca is clinging to his post, bringing the months-long local conflict to boiling point. More than 15 people are dead, 5,000 police are unsuccessfully trying to quell the social protest, and there political rancour simmers nationwide.

The main demand of those involved in the popular uprising in Oaxaca — which began in May, flared up in June and is now at its worst — is the departure of Governor Ulises Ruiz, member of the ultra-conservative wing of the long-lived Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI. The governor, elected in 2004, is accused of corruption and authoritarianism, but remains steadfast in his refusal to resign or take a leave of absence.

The situation in Oaxaca's capital city has become more serious in the last few days. The Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca (APPO), a group of 350 social organisations that is in the vanguard of the uprising, said that it would hold no further negotiations with the Vicente Fox administration while the city remains occupied by the federal police, who entered it by force on Sunday.

On Fox's orders, the police took control of the city of Oaxaca from the APPO, which had maintained encampments and barricades there since June. The police operation was carried out after a particularly violent day, when a U.S. cameraman and activist was shot dead by municipal police in civilian clothes.

The APPO has bunkered down in the Benito Juárez State University, on the outskirts of Oaxaca. Meanwhile, the police are gradually taking total control of the city, reportedly with the help of tear gas and some beatings.

Most of the primary and secondary schools in the state have re-opened for classes for the first time since May. In the capital, lessons have started again in only some of the schools.

On Thursday there was fighting between students at Benito Juárez State University and police, who were clearing the roads around the university. Reports from the scene said that several people were injured from beatings.

The conflict appears to have no end in sight, and as Fox has acknowledged, it will be inherited by president-elect Felipe Calderón of the governing National Action Party (PAN), who is to take office on Dec. 1.

The leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), the second political party in Mexico, announced it would carry out marches and hunger strikes in support of the APPO, and to demand that federal police leave Oaxaca.

The PRD has reiterated its intention of preventing Calderón from becoming president. It accuses him of winning the July elections by fraud, and holds him responsible, with the Fox administration and PAN, for the situation in Oaxaca.

The leader and former presidential candidate of the PRD, Andrés López Obrador, has in the last few days tried to approach the APPO to organise joint protests, but the APPO declined to receive him and said their movement has no links with political parties..

"How many more deaths is Ruiz worth, and how many more problems must mount up?" asked political scientist and professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, Miguel Morales, criticising in an IPS interview the governor's insistence on holding on to power.

"I will not resign nor take a leave of absence, because that would not solve the conflict," Ruiz declared. The Fox administration has asked him to step down from the governorship, and senators and deputies from all the political parties are urging him to do the same, in their different ways.

But no one can force him to go, unless Congress declares the "disappearance of powers" in Oaxaca. There was an attempt to do this in October, but it failed to get the number of votes required.

The PRI, which governed Mexico from 1929 to 2000, and has held the governorship of Oaxaca uninterrupted for 77 years, is divided over Ruiz. The more moderate sector has asked him to consider withdrawing, but the other says he should not resign under any circumstances.

The president of the party in Oaxaca, Héctor Ramírez, said Thursday that "the patience and tolerance" of PRI activists and supporters has been exhausted, and that from now on "they will respond to every aggression by the APPO," an organisation he believes to be led by "delinquent and subversive" persons.

"If the institutions do not fulfil their obligation to ensure the rule of law (in Oaxaca), then we will," he warned. "There are many more of us than there are of them (the rebels)," he said.

Several APPO leaders have warrants out for their arrest on charges of mutiny, robbery and subversion, issued by the Oaxacan judicial authorities.

"If the impugned governor should finally decide to take a leave of absence or resign, as even some PRI members are demanding," it would help to calm the conflict in the immediate future, said Lorenzo Meyer, historian at the College of Mexico.

"However, even then the basic problem would not have been solved. In Oaxaca, the police occupation is just a band-aid that barely covers a deeply infected social and political wound," he said.

The conflict in this state broke out in May when the local teachers' union went on strike and carried out protests, including an encampment in the capital city, to demand higher wages.

In June, Ruiz tried to break up the protest by sending in state police. After that, social discontent flared up and the APPO emerged spontaneously.

Since then, the crisis has grown. The APPO occupied all public offices and some private radio stations, and took the streets and squares of Oaxaca to demand Ruiz's departure. Now they no longer have control of the streets, but the crisis continues.

During the time that the conflict has lasted, irregular armed groups, acting on Ruiz's orders according to the APPO, have attacked the activists on several occasions, and 15 people have died so far as a result.

The APPO accuses Ruiz of taking an excessively hard line with social movements, acting in an authoritarian manner, and detaining and torturing his opponents. In Oaxaca, the legislative and judicial powers are also dominated by the PRI.

Alongside Chiapas and Guerrero, Oaxaca is one of the most marginalised states in Mexico. Out of its population of 3.5 million, 80.3 percent lack sanitation services, public lighting, drinking water and paved streets, according to the Oaxacan Human Rights Network.

The Network, founded in 1996 by several human rights centres, said that eight out of every 10 Oaxacans live in extreme poverty, and the richest 10 percent of Oaxacan households receive 13 times more income than the poorest 10 percent.

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