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Culture of protest resonates in Oaxaca

Print

On 21 March, Hardy and Kathy Will visited Mexico City and Oaxaca, where their son Brad Will was gunned down at Santa Lucia del Camino on 27 October, 2006. They arrived in the country intent on securing a more thorough investigation into the death of their son, who was shot while convening an annual protest. (06-APRIL-07) by John Hendel for Index on Censorship

What had been an annual teachers' protest held for the past 25 years in Mexico turned into a year-long revolution of leftists against the state of Oaxaca's governor during 2006. Hundreds of thousands protested repeatedly while Mexico also reeled on the national level, coming to grips with a contested presidential election between conservative Felipe Calderon and the populist liberal Lopez Obrador on 2 July. Violence, politics, and the media collided as the 2006 protests continued for months. The costs have yet to be determined.

Echoes of a voice in the wilderness

Accompanied by supporters and other family members, his parents brought crosses and banners to mark his death and demand justice. The state and federal prosecutors often have speculated that protestors were responsible for Will's death, but photographs show police and government officials firing on groups of protestors on the day of his death. Several eyewitness accounts support this version of events.



Will, 36, originally from New York, reported for the collection of media centres known as Indymedia, an alternative press that sought to record the Oaxaca protests on the ground level through videos and reports. The conflict had already lasted four months when Will was killed. He wrote about what he called 'this revolutionary moment', and said the movement was 'building, growing, shaping—you can feel it—trying desperately for a direct democracy.' His death drew international attention and led President Vicente Fox to finally send federal troops into Oaxaca to attempt to deal with the situation. The president had offered a neutral posture in the months before then.

From teachers' wages to waging rebellion

The teachers of Oaxaca, one of the poorest of Mexico's 31 states, went on strike in May 2006 demanding more money for rural schools, but this was nothing new — 2006 was the 25th year teachers have gone on strike for reasons such as those. Normally, though, the strikes quickly end after the teachers gain a small raise. This year changed that, as the protests lasted for weeks throughout May and then evolved into a massive new entity in June. The strike left 1.3 million students from 14,000 schools without teachers, the BBC reported.

The protest shifted focus on 14 June. On that day the state's governor, Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, sent hundreds of police officers to break up the strikers. The resulting street battle left over a hundred people hospitalised. Protestors called for the resignation of Ulises Ruiz, a member of Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and formed the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) on 17 June to help reach that end. The group materialised from 365 grassroots organisations including unions, indigenous and peasant groups and women's movements, and received backing from the rebel Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos and presidential nominee Lopez Obrador.

In the summer months, the power of APPO grew and they took the city centre as well as radio stations and other forms of media. They describe their goals as peaceful, though experienced considerable friction with the local government. They repeatedly demanded the governor's resignation due to what they deemed repressive tactics and corruption. Some members also accused the governor of electoral fraud in his 2004 re-election. In the months between their formation and November, APPO held five mass protests, with the most recent one attracting 900,000 marchers.

Brad Will's death and the violence of 27 October again changed the atmosphere of the protests. The Senate urged Ulises Ruiz to resign and President Vicente Fox proceeded to take an active hand in the Mexican state. Fox sent 4000 federal riot police in to tackle the protestors in the final days of October, leading to a considerable conflict during which some protestors threw petrol bombs at the police.

While the riot police loosened APPO's hold on the city centre of Oaxaca, the organisation continued elsewhere and had not given up on its goals.

The media suffers collateral damage

In addition to Brad Will's death, media throughout the state of Oaxaca faced dire threats throughout the 2006 conflict. This sets a dangerous precedent for a country still grappling with various freedom of expression and democratic issues. 'The events in Oaxaca left a heavy toll on the press,' wrote Robert Ménard, Secretary General of Reporters Without Borders (RSF) in a 5 March letter to the president of the Senate Human Rights Commission, president of the Chamber of Deputies Special Commission for Monitoring Attacks on the Press and Media, and a special rapporteur for freedom of expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

Numerous incidents outline the policy of hostility towards journalists throughout 2006. On 1 August, for example,

APPO activists took over Canal 9, which is part of CORTV, the Oaxaca state public broadcaster, according to RSF. A week later a wave of violence came to the station as hooded gunmen fired on the station, damaging equipment and causing one man injuries. Some sources said the attack was ordered by Governor Ulises Ruiz.

On 24 August, police fired on newspaper photographers Jorge Luis Plata of *Reforma* and Luis Alberto Cruz of *Milenio* and a TV crew with *Televisión Azteca*. The journalists had been covering the police trying to evict APPO members from La Ley radio station, which they had occupied for the past day. APPO members have occupied several media outlets to promote their own programmes and agendas in Oaxaca. They also threatened to attack the newspaper offices of *Tiempo* and *Extra* because APPO members believed they were working with Governor Ulises Ruiz, according to reports. The threats caused the newspapers to close down their offices.

Oaxaca, a typically popular site for tourists, has witnessed a drop in visitors in the past year and the state has been working to amend its tourist appeal in 2007.

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