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## Defining Protest As Terrorism, El Salvador Returning To Repressive Past

by Mike Leffert

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El Salvador's downward spiral of violence and repression took another turn on July 2, when 12 members of popular organizations and a journalist were arrested and accused of "acts of terrorism" for taking part in demonstrations against the privatization of water resources. The protests occurred in Suchitoto, a colonial tourist town some 44 km outside of San Salvador. Hundreds of activists were there to attend a forum on the water issue and to protest the arrival of President Antonio Saca, who was there to announce what he called a plan to decentralize drinking-water services.

The demonstrators were attacked by riot squads of the Policia Nacional Civil (PNC) as they blocked roads in anticipation of the arrival of the official party, and hundreds of campesinos from surrounding communities confronted officers of the Unidad del Mantenimiento del Orden (UMO) with sticks and stones in the town square. The police fought the protesters using tear gas and rubber bullets. The protest stopped the official rally and caused Saca to be evacuated by helicopter.

Police injured several people, including Reuters photographer Luis Galdamez, who was covering the events, but the more serious and lasting damage may have been that done to the fabric of civil society. The police took prisoners under a recently passed terrorism law, and, according to witnesses, they were subjected to torture and other indignities reminiscent of the civil war. One of those arrested was a journalist, Haydee Chicas.

### *If it's terrorism, then torture's OK*

Police overreaction was amply documented. David Morales of the Catholic human rights agency Tutela Legal said, "The police attack on July 2 was arbitrary and reflects an authoritarian attitude." He said the PNC used "disproportionate force" in injuring more than 100 people. He said Tutela Legal lawyers determined that some of those arrested were subjected to torture while being transported in a police helicopter. Morales told Inter Press Service (IPS), "The police beat, threatened, and tortured several detainees, swerving the helicopter around in such a way that the handcuffed prisoners slid toward the doors and were in danger of falling out." After landing, "the police carried out simulated summary executions," he said.

Another prisoner, Yanira Mendez, confirmed that she had been threatened with being thrown from the helicopter. "They held me by the neck, and it was not to protect me but preparing to throw me out, and they made dangerous maneuvers." She said she had bruises from blows that have been verified by a forensic doctor.

The arrest of Chicas, the journalist, was caught on videotape and broadcast locally. The tape shows police intercepting a vehicle carrying protest organizers Lorena Martinez and Rosa Maria

Valle, president and vice president, respectively, of the Asociacion de Comunidades Rurales para el Desarrollo de El Salvador (CRIPDES). The driver of the CRIPDES car is shown being pulled violently from the vehicle and thrown down on the road.

Martinez and Valle were arrested when they complained. Chicas, who was filming the event, was arrested, too, while shouting that she was a journalist. After some days in prison, Chicas told reporters, "From the first day we entered the prison, the threats started, telling us they were going to throw us in the dungeon. Human rights don't exist here, the conditions of all the inmates is appalling. Life here is tough, difficult, especially when you are innocent." Martinez later said of her capture that it was like "a scene from the past civil war, the militaries with their armed vehicles; it was terrible and an outrage to all the people."

Other video shows demonstrators asking the PNC not to use force and then shows the police using clubs, tear gas, and rubber bullets, and beating victims as they vomit from the gas. It then shows protesters responding with rocks. Galdamez of Reuters reported seeing army vehicles with machine guns. Despite showing his credentials and telling them he was a journalist, police beat him. The detainees were sent to prison on terrorism charges. They can be held for three months and then, if found guilty, could get sentences of up to 60 years under the terms of the 2006 anti-terrorism law.

From the point of view of CRIPDES, the terrorism is by the government. Organization leaders said the arrests "are part of a policy of state terrorism by the Saca administration against any protest by social organizations. In El Salvador, fighting for a solution to the communities' problems, and against water privatization, is interpreted by this government as a terrorist act."

Commenting on this clash of views, political scientist Napoleon Campos told IPS that what has taken place is "deterioration in political coexistence, since the basic conditions for mediation have broken down." Campos blamed both left and right for the breakdown and said that to call those arrested political prisoners, as social leaders have done, "exaggerates the case," but the PNC use of force and the charges of terrorism are no less reprehensible.

Oscar Luna, counsel for the Procuraduria de los Derechos Humanos, interviewed on television, agreed that, whatever else the protests were, they were not "acts of terrorism." Concurring with Luna's assessment was vice president of the Asociacion Nacional de la Empresa Privada (ANEP) Carmen de Alfaro. The Federacion Internacional de los Derechos Humanos (FIDH) said the arrests in Suchitoto were actions that criminalize freedom of expression. FIDH has joined other international organizations in condemning the authorities' actions.

Meanwhile, the arrest of Chicas brought the Asociacion de Periodistas de El Salvador (APES) and the international organization Reporters Sans Frontieres (RSF) into the situation, both demanding her release. "The detention of Chicas represents a grave abuse of authority. It is ridiculous and dangerous to claim that someone who was just doing her job as a journalist was caught in the act of 'terrorism.'" said an RSF statement.

The international broadening of coverage seemed to get Saca's attention. A July 13 RSF report said, "President Antonio Saca promises to look into case of journalist jailed for 'terrorism.'" Saca was

reported to have said, "Certainly I am going to speak to the minister of security and justice to find out about this case. I do not know this case, but I will look into it. I promise to examine it." The RSF responded, "These comments suggest that the president, while reacting cautiously, is aware of the absurdity of the accusations against Maria Haydee Chicas and her 13 fellow detainees. We urge the head of state to resolve this situation as quickly as possible." Saca's awareness of absurdity is a matter for argument, however.

As Gregorio Rosa Chavez, Roman Catholic auxiliary bishop of San Salvador, put it, "The government does not recognize that the causes [of violence] are linked to structural injustice and that the injustice continues. Therefore we have another kind of war, and we see people dying every day."

The administration's upping the ante with mechanisms that create the possibility of 60-year sentences for social protest came at the same time that the Comision Ciudadana de Paz y Seguridad Social, set up in late 2006, delivered to the government its plan for reducing violent crime. The commission is made up of deputies, religious leaders, academics, and representatives of international organizations. The plan has 75 recommendations, most of which are aimed at strengthening and purging police and security forces.

Rather than mete out the occasional severe security policy, as the government has been doing, the commission asks the government to launch a comprehensive package of coordinated measures. The measures fall into seven strategic lines: prevention, reinforcing deterrence, improving the way institutions work and report to the government, improving training, improving inter-agency coordination, overhauling the judicial code, and increasing funding for these.

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