10-31-2014

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Ecuadoran Authorities Attack Nascent Student Movement
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Category/Department: Ecuador
Published: 2014-10-31

On Sept. 17, Ecuador experienced a day of protests organized by labor unions. Police broke up the demonstrations violently, particularly in Quito where students had responded to the workers’ call. Students were the main victims of the police action: of the 275 arrested, at least 47 were tortured or treated cruelly while in custody.

Students awaken
The Ecuadoran student movement had not been active in recent years. After police squelched a small demonstration at a school in February 2013 and 12 students were sentenced for first-time rebellion, many became fearful and stayed away from the protests against the administration of President Rafael Correa, most often called by indigenous leaders (NotiSur, July 18, 2014).

Traditionally, the Federación de Estudiantes Secundarios del Ecuador (FESE), an internal student organization, has been linked to the Movimiento Popular Democrático (MPD), a leftist political party that has withstood the regime’s harassment despite having been useful in the administration's early years, especially when authorities needed its force to "convince" former legislators of the need to convene a constituent assembly.

The MPD fell from grace and has been so battered that it was taken off electoral registers, an unconvincing decision made by the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE) without any transparency.

Students also felt these blows, and, in addition, the government announced urban transportation-fare hikes, which affected students directly. Student demonstrators were also spurred on by public criticism of their inactivity. An often-heard comment was, "Before this, if fare hikes were even mentioned, students took to the streets."

Against this backdrop, and with the workers calling for a protest that indigenous and urban organizations had already joined, students—beginning with those at the Colegio Montufar, one of the most traditional schools in the capital—decided to mobilize on Sept. 17. Far from assuming their role of controlling or dispersing demonstrators, police entered into an intense confrontation with the students, provoking violence on both sides.

Student mobilization continued the next day, this time led by Colegio Mejía, another important school in Quito. The result was the same as the day before: police engaged in a confrontation with students even inside the school.

The confrontation between students and police played out in the government’s favor as it helped build official discourse about violence that took attention away from the successful worker mobilization. The Ministerio del Interior reported that 37 police were wounded, one so badly that recovery could require up to eight months of rehabilitation. These injuries justified the police action. Two days later, President Correa congratulated the police, ignoring the allegations of torture and cruel treatment of the students that had begun to circulate in the media and within the court buildings where students were being prosecuted.
Torture and cruel treatment

"We can't stop them with rose petals," President Correa said in justifying the police operation.

Dozens of videos showed police excesses against detained students; police threatened students, kicked them, and hit those on the ground with clubs before putting them under arrest and hauling them away. Based on accounts from students and parents, the Fundación Regional de Asesoría en Derechos Humanos (INREDH) and the Comisión Ecuménica de Derechos Humanos (CEDHU) denounced that police tortured the protestors at police stations and treated them in a cruel manner instead of taking them directly before courts with jurisdiction over such cases.

The ministers of the interior and justice have both vehemently denied the allegations, even rejecting a report by the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) on Oct. 20. The government says there is a plot against "progressive" countries and HRW reports are part of the plot.

However, national human rights organizations defend the HRW report and maintain it is based on eyewitness accounts reported in Quito, medical reports, legal documents of prosecution allegations, and, as to leave no point in doubt, a Red Cross report that said 47 of 53 students examined by its staff still showed signs of having suffering wounds five days after they had been hurt.

Meanwhile, INREDH has backed a criminal complaint against police for the torture of a 17-year-old student detained near Colegio Mejía and taken to a community police station where he was held incommunicado and tortured. After a court appearance, he was hospitalized for two days. The government has ignored this case but hasn’t denied it happened.

Of the 275 students detained during the Sept. 17 and 18 protests, 69 were taken to court and charged with crimes such as damaging property, attacking authorities, or resisting police. Cases against 60 have been resolved; nine are still awaiting trial.

In the face of the scandal brought on by police conduct and independent media follow-up, the Consejo de Regulación y Desarrollo de la Información y Comunicación (CORDICOM) issued a communiqué on Sept. 30 that indicated the media reports were biased as they lacked information about testimony from all parties, thus distorting full understanding of the events. By doing this, according to CORDICOM (NotiSur, July 19, 2013), the media could be fined and forced to apologize. The government could thus limit information about the student protests.

Power won’t be given up easily

After seeing police violence and the government’s support of these actions, the question of why this is happening remains.

Previously, when authorities began to apply the penal code to control social protest, it was clear that it was trying to control protest and prevent delay in the implementation of major projects for the extraction of natural resources (NotiSur, July 18, 2014). The main targets were campesino and indigenous leaders; this time the victims have been students, most of them minors.

The only possible conclusion is that, in the face of the electoral options of the ruling party, whose popularity has been on the decline following the Feb. 23 local elections (NotiSur, March 14, 2014), those in control want to make it clear they won’t give up power easily and that they are willing to
neutralize any protest by social groups that might challenge their power even when protests are peaceful and, like the Sept. 17 and 18 protests, not intended to destabilize the government.

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