



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## Mexican students protest for greater democracy, 1968

*Time period notes: Although open student dissent after July 22, these first actions seemed largely violent, so the beginning of this nonviolent campaign is taken as early August*

August

1968

to: October

1968

**Country:** Mexico

**Location City/State/Province:** Mexico City

### Goals:

A petition distributed on August 5 included demands such as: the release of political prisoners, the disbanding of the granaderos (government police force), the dismissal of the police chief General Cueto and his assistant General Mendiola, compensation for acts of police brutality that initiated protests, the repeal of Article 145 and 145A of the constitution, and punishment of the guilty within the police and government. These specific demands were part of a larger demand for a more open and democratic government.

## Methods

### Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 026. Paint as protest
- 028. Symbolic sounds
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 062. Student strike
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 178. Guerrilla theatre

### Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 026. Paint as protest
- 028. Symbolic sounds
- 032. Taunting officials
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 052. Silence
- 062. Student strike
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 170. Nonviolent invasion
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 178. Guerrilla theatre

**Methods in 3rd segment:**

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 026. Paint as protest
- 034. Vigils
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 062. Student strike
- 140. Hiding, escape, and false identities
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 178. Guerrilla theatre

**Methods in 4th segment:**

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 026. Paint as protest
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 062. Student strike
- 140. Hiding, escape, and false identities
- 178. Guerrilla theatre

**Methods in 5th segment:**

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 026. Paint as protest
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 062. Student strike
- 125. Boycott of government employment and positions
- 140. Hiding, escape, and false identities
- 178. Guerrilla theatre

**Methods in 6th segment:**

- 062. Student strike

**Notes on Methods:**

The 6th segment covers the period after the mid-October Olympic games, when small protest may have continued, but there were no known methods used.

## Classifications

**Classification:**

Change

**Cluster:**

Democracy

**Group characterization:**

- Mostly high school and university students
- professors

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

Most of the campaign was coordinated by the National Strike Committee (CNH) and smaller "brigades"

**Partners:**

Parents, teachers, professors, workers, and nurses

**External allies:**

Some university administrators

**Involvement of social elites:**

Mexican writer Octavio Paz supported the students and urged the government to act calmly and with restraint in its response to the protesters. He resigned as ambassador to India in protest of the government's actions on October 2nd.

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

- Teachers
- University Administrations
- professors

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**

- Nurses
- Parents
- workers

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**

**Groups in 4th Segment:**

**Groups in 5th Segment:**

- Octavio Paz

**Groups in 6th Segment:**

**Segment Length:** *Approximately 2 weeks*

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**

The Mexican government led by President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**

The government held counter-demonstrations in an attempt to undermine the support for the student campaign.

**Campaigner violence:**

Students threw rocks and sometimes Molotov cocktails when the military attempted to take over the National Polytechnic Institute. There may have been other instances of similar violence during the nonviolent campaign, but they are not known. The nonviolent campaign grew out of clashes between students and police forces in late July 1968

**Repressive Violence:**

Police often attacked demonstrators, firing live ammunition, arresting leaders and demonstrators, and beating others. The most notable instance of repressive violence was the orchestrated massacre of 200-300 (maybe more) demonstrators and the arrest of 1,000 more during an assembly on October 2 in the plaza at Tlatelolco. This action effectively slowed the campaign, which essentially ended after that day and the Olympic games in mid-October.

## Success Outcome

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**

0 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**

0 points out of 1 point

**Growth:**

3 points out of 3 points

**Notes on outcomes:**

None of the stated goals seemed to have been achieved, despite the shift in mindset of the average Mexican citizen as a result of the campaign.

The CNH and the brigades fell apart soon after the October 2 massacre.

Despite the failure of the campaign, it grew hugely from its start in late July and early August. An August 27 rally reached 500,000 participants and many parents and workers joined the campaign begun initially by students.

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In July of 1968, as the student-led uprising of May and June in France was fading away, a new one was just beginning in Mexico City. Students inspired by the success of the movement in France saw their own opportunity to bring more open democracy to Mexico. They saw the summer Olympics that were to take place in Mexico City in October as an opportunity to put pressure on the government, led by President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).

The dissent that had been simmering previously was finally triggered on July 22nd when a street fight between rival high school students was brutally repressed by police, causing students from both factions to barricade themselves within a school. After several days of rioting and fights between police and students, high school and university students initiated student strikes and occupations of school buildings in order to protest the police repression. Each protest caused more anger among students as they were met with more police brutality. On July 30th, known as “el día del bazookazo” (the day of the bazooka) police and army units took over schools that had been occupied by students, in one famous case using a bazooka to blow through a historic door dating from the colonial age.

In response to this day of massive repression, the rector of the Autonomous National University of Mexico (UNAM), Javier Barros Sierra, led 100,000 people in a protest march. After the July 30th repression, the student demonstrators became more organized in their protests and the result seemed to be a diminishment in the level of violence on their part.

Finally, at a protest on August 5th, organizers circulated a petition with a list of demands. It asked for the release of political prisoners, the disbanding of the granaderos (government police force), the dismissal of the police chief General Cueto and his assistant General Mendiola, compensation for acts of police brutality that initiated protests, the repeal of Article 145 and 145A of the constitution, and punishment of guilty members within the police and government. These specific demands were part of a larger demand for a more open and democratic government.

The August 5th petition had been put together by the newly organized National Strike Committee (CNH). This committee organized the protests to some extent; however, much of the campaign was based on work carried out by individual “brigades”. These brigades were small groups of students who produced their own fliers, often with different demands from other brigades and the CNH, and staged their own lightning protests. In these lightning protests students would quickly organize and then disband before police arrived. They also performed street theatre with political themes, staged political conversations in public spaces, made speeches in social gathering spaces such as squares or markets, and painted slogans on walls and telephone poles.

The groups organized two massive marches on August 13th and 27th to the Zócalo, the main square in Mexico City. Between 150,000 and 300,000 people participated in the first march and reclaimed the square, which had previously been used for PRI demonstrations. Over 500,000 people participated in the second march. During the 4-hour assembly in the Zócalo, demonstrators entered the nearby cathedral to ring the bells and shouted insults towards the Presidential Palace. The students, both during these assemblies in the Zócalo and in everyday life, used songs, slogans, and jokes to voice their demands for democracy. As part of these two actions in August parents, workers, teachers, and nurses joined the students in their demands for greater democracy in Mexico.

Throughout the campaign the PRI government also attempted to undermine the student protests by arranging demonstrations of their own. One such demonstration on August 28th revealed the extent to which the government had lost public support. As the PRI began this rally in the Zócalo by raising the flag, nobody in the audience cheered. Instead, the silence was broken by some 500 protesting university students, who chanted as they marched directly into the midst of the governmental rally. The gathered crowd cheered on the students, only to be dispersed by armed police forces when the students had reached the front of the Presidential Palace.

Despite the massive, open protests in Mexico City, President Díaz Ordaz dismissed the public unrest in his national address on

September 1st and threatened continued violence against any future demonstrations of dissent. Nonetheless, the CNH and the smaller brigades continued their organizing and distribution of leaflets.

On September 13th the students held a silent march and on September 15th they organized a fair on the UNAM campus, which had become a center for pro-democracy protests. However, on September 18th the military took over UNAM. When the military attempted to take over the National Polytechnic Institute, another center for dissent, students and residents in the area retaliated with stones and Molotov cocktails, leading to three days of clashes between students and military troops. However, this attempted suppression of the campaign did not stop the protests, as students simply began circulating fliers explaining yet another act of government repression.

However, as the October 12th date for the beginning of the Olympic games approached, the PRI became increasingly anxious to suppress the civil unrest. October 2nd was the tragic day that marked a turning point in the campaign. On that day, in the plaza of the housing project, Tlatelolco, between 5,000 and 15,000 people gathered peacefully to protest and listen to speakers. Suddenly, soon after the speeches had begun, special military units began firing on the crowd. Hundreds of peaceful protesters, as well as residents living in the buildings surrounding the plaza, were killed and 1,000 more were arrested by police and military troops. The horrific scene was represented in government-controlled newspapers as a violent student uprising which forced military action throughout the city.

Protests continued after October 2nd, but the CNH agreed to a truce beginning on October 9th in preparation for the Olympic games. After the Olympics there was little more protest action. In December, the CNH was dissolved and students returned to their schools, ending the student strikes. The dissolution of the movement after the brutal crackdown at Tlatelolco is a marked contrast from the effect that police repression had on the student campaign in France. In France the repression fueled the movement and helped students incorporate the whole society. However, repression in France was much less severe than it was in Mexico City so it is difficult to tell whether the different effects of the repression was due to the Mexican student campaign's handling of the situation, or if the more closed and ruthless Mexican government made it impossible for students to have used the repression to their advantage.

Although the student protests in Mexico City did not lead to any direct political change, they did lead to a change of mindset in the population. The student demonstrations illuminated the repression and hypocrisy of the government, and can be seen as the root of continuing social discontent that eventually led to a more open government far in the future. Unfortunately, the 1968 student campaign had been suppressed before this change was brought about.

## Research Notes

### Influences:

France's May Revolt and Prague Spring earlier in 1968 influenced the Mexican students' campaign (1)

### Sources:

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Soldatenko, Michael. "Mexico '68: Power to the imagination!" *Latin American Perspectives* 32(4), July 2005. pp 111-132.

### Additional Notes:

The revolt began violently, with students throwing rocks and Molotov cocktails at police who had violently repressed the first

skirmish on July 22. Although there was still some campaigner violence throughout the campaign, after those first days the campaign became largely nonviolent, which is why it is now in this database.

This case was originally written by Shandra Bernath-Plaisted (20/10/2008), then researched again and added to by Max Rennebohm (22/05/2011).

**Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:**

Shandra Bernath-Plaisted and Max Rennebohm, 20/10/2008 and 22/05/2011

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