
Struggling for Freedom of Expression in El Salvador

by
Vida Cuadra

The Agencia Periodística Independiente (API) was created in 1978 by a group of independent journalists in El Salvador to promote independent, objective journalism. API specialized in denouncing human rights violations. I acted as Director-President. We published a newsletter and a weekly international magazine.

In October 1979, a junta took power in El Salvador. Three months later, a state of siege was declared. We began to receive threats. In 1980, the office was raided for the first time by the national guard. I was detained and brought to their headquarters where, after one hour, I was set free. No charges were laid.

We continued to be threatened by paramilitary gangs ("death squads") and by telephone calls demanding that the agency be closed and that I leave the country. Despite the perpetual climate of fear, we continued our work convinced that we were bringing a measure of truth to the Salvadorean people.

The Events

On January 15, 1981, a raid was conducted by soldiers and the national police. Most of the staff were taken to prison.

I was not in the building when the soldiers arrived, but upon hearing of the raid I immediately went to API. The block had been cut off by the armed forces; 200 soldiers occupied the building.

I entered the building accompanied by other journalists, among them Francisco Ramirez Avelar (secretary of the journalists' union), who worked in our international news bureau. I asked the head of the military operation to explain their presence. He replied that, given the existing state of siege in the country, API had to be closed and all of us had to be taken in for interrogation. The soldiers emptied API of its equipment and files.

In addition to the three journalists, two printers, the proofreader and two secretaries were taken to National Police Headquarters. We were detained there for one month. Our food consisted of beans, stale tortillas and coffee with iodine three times a day; the iodine was intended to minimize the sexual

drives of prisoners. The prison cells were dark and filthy, the interrogations intensive. We were not tortured, but during our entire stay, we were held "incommunicado".

On February 13, 1981, we were assigned to military courts and transferred to different detention centres. The men were sent to "La Esperanza de San Luis de Mariona" prison in the city of Mejicanos. The women were sent to the "Women's Jail" of Llopango (Department of San Salvador).

Illegal Detention

Six of the prisoners were freed in June, 1981 by the Supreme Court. Francisco Ramirez and myself, however, were found guilty under the charge of "misinformation". Four months later, our case was handed over to the Military Courts of First Appeal.

Our detention was ruled illegal because "misinformation" is not a crime under any of the country's Legal Codes. The judge of the Military Court ordered our release. The Ministry of Defense opposed his ruling and arbitrarily decided to continue our detention, which lasted two years and four months.

Life in Llopango, the Women's Jail

In the penitentiary, the political prisoners were grouped in one section with four common dormitories, a kitchen and a service area. We rose at 5:00 A.M. and retired at 7:00 P.M., with lights out at 10:00 P.M. During the day we did housework in teams. Food was deficient. No milk products, fruits or vegetables were available. Medical attention was minimal.

We organized ourselves into a committee called "Committee of Salvadorean Political Prisoners" (COPPE). COPPE pushed for improvements in the living conditions in the penitentiary. When a necessary reform was identified, COPPE would present it to the Minister of Justice and to the Direc-

tor of Penitentiaries. If the demands went unattended, national and international campaigns were organized to denounce injustices.

While I was in prison, three hunger strikes were organized, one of which lasted 42 days. During these strikes, only water and honey were available. Those on strike were placed in one of the dormitories while the rest of us helped by boiling the water, preparing propaganda, etc. At the end of each strike, approximately 72% of the demands were met. The quality of food and sanitary conditions were improved. More medical consultations per day were obtained, including the use of an ambulance for emergencies. Two visiting days were allowed. During those days political and cultural activities were organized. We were able to obtain blackboards and desks which were used for teaching in our section. We even had a newspaper where we could denounce the innumerable disappearances and human rights violations in El Salvador.

Amnesty Law

On May 16, 1983, the 60-day Amnesty and Rehabilitation of Citizenship Law was enacted. Through it, 600 out of 800 political prisoners were released. Nevertheless, the Committee of Mothers of Political Prisoners and Disappeared People of El Salvador denounced the Law, stating that it would actually increase repression in El Salvador. They also claimed that the numbers of disappearances and political prisoners had actually increased (by 1,000) at the same time the Law was decreed.

I left prison on May 21. My colleague, Francisco Ramirez, did so a couple days later. While in prison, I had been offered asylum by the governments of Belgium and Canada through the office of the Archbishop of San Salvador. On July 7, sorrowful at having to leave El Salvador, I entered Canada with my son.

Vida Cuadra Hernandez is a 30-year-old journalist from El Salvador. She came to Canada in July 1983 after being freed from prison under the 60-day Amnesty declared in May 1983.