
THE 2008 BEIJING OLYMPICS: REMEMBERING MEXICO 1968

By Jean-Paul Marthoz

Using the Olympics as a pretext for suppressing dissent may turn the Games into a catalyst for political change.

China is bracing itself for the Olympic Games that will be launched in Beijing on August 8, 2008. The autocratic regime is taking no chances. This world event is seen as a celebration of the “peaceful rise of China” and the confirmation of its newly acquired status as a global power.

Beijing is playing to two different audiences. On the one hand, it has been courting the international community by announcing relaxed restrictions on foreign media and promising to become a force for good in Sudan, where its support for Al-Bashir’s dictatorial regime has been denounced as an instrument of the Darfur tragedy. On the other hand, it has increased control over its own population, tightening limits on press freedom, censoring the Internet, repressing social movements and rounding up dissidents.

Chinese leaders would be well advised to look back at the year 1968, when another authoritarian regime surfing on the waves of globalization hosted the Olympic Games and found itself suddenly engulfed in turmoil, controversy and violence.

Basking in the euphoria of strong economic development and expansion of Mexico’s middle class, the Díaz Ordaz government regarded its hosting of the Olympic Games as the nation’s “coming out” on the international scene and the symbol of its modernization. Contrary to all expectations, the Games turned into a nightmare and the beginning of the unravelling of an authoritarian model that Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa would years later refer to as “the perfect dictatorship.”

Internationally, the Mexico City Olympics are remembered as the Games that were sucked into the contentious issue of the US civil rights and Black Power movements. The raised fists of US track medalists Tommie Smith and John Carlos have become icons of the collision of sports with history. But there was another clash, more brutal and yet largely erased from the world’s memory.

Ten days before the opening ceremony of the Games, Mexico City became a war zone. On the fateful night of October 2, the Mexican government, obsessed with eliminating any sign of dissent and challenge to its rule, ordered the army to brutally crush a demonstration by students on the square of Tlatelolco, in front of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Hundreds of civilians were killed and hundreds more were arrested. Journalists were among the targets, and a photograph of Italian reporter Oriana Fallaci lying wounded on the ground made headlines around the world.¹

“The stamped-upon blood of hundreds of students, men, women, children, soldiers and old people has dried upon the soil of Tlatelolco,” renowned Mexican journalist Elena Poniatowska wrote in her wrenching account of the tragedy.² “Today the blood has returned to the place of its quietness. Later flowers will grow among the ruins and the sepulchres.” These were the flowers of democracy that slowly led to the demise of Díaz Ordaz’s Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the victory of the electoral opposition in 2000, after seven decades of one-party rule.

Nothing as dramatic is expected for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The Chinese regime seems to have taken all necessary steps to squelch any potential protest and keep the Games under tight control. Nevertheless, the



University students rounded up by soldiers following protests in Mexico City's Tlatelolco Square 10 days before the opening ceremony of the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. Photo: Associated Press

independent of the United States. (But while Mexico did not join the Organization of American States' embargo on Cuba, it channelled all the information it could get on Fidel Castro to the US Central Intelligence Agency.)

In 1968, the regime's distrust of democracy and obsession with preserving stability and order during the Olympics resulted in the use of brutal force that ultimately proved to be the beginning of the end of PRI dominance. Pushed into the catacombs, a few isolated opponents chose the militant road, but many more built the foundations of an independent civil society alongside and against the paternalistic and authoritarian institutions of the regime, and their efforts finally led to the advent of democracy.

similarities between the current Chinese regime and Mexico's PRI are striking. Claiming its legitimacy in the tumultuous worker-peasant Revolution of 1910–1920 and the collectivist and socially progressive programmes of President Lazaro Cárdenas in the late 1930s, the PRI had implemented an economic model based on a strong state, tight control over strategic resources (mainly oil), the attraction of US investments and the protection of Mexico's small and medium-sized companies.

Reminiscent of the nineteenth century French royalist minister François Guizot, who famously exhorted his populace, "Enrichissez vous!" (Get rich!), the regime had pinned its stability and longevity on sustained economic growth with some trickle-down effect on the rising middle class. This economic strategy went hand-in-hand with strict limitations on opportunities for dissent. Trade unions were tamed, activists were silenced, intellectuals were seduced or repressed. The strategy also paid lip service to the regime's revolutionary roots by following a foreign policy rhetorically

In Beijing, the authorities seem to have forgotten the lessons of Tlatelolco; Amnesty International recently observed that China is using the 2008 Games as a catalyst for suppressing dissent in the name of stability.³ There is still hope, however, that the Games could become a catalyst for fundamental change in China if Chinese civil society is able to peacefully "hijack" them to claim Chinese people's right to enjoy freedom and justice.

Remember Mexico City, 1968!

Editor's Notes

1. See "1968: Student Riots Threaten Mexico Olympics," BBC News "On This Day," http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/october/2/newsid_3548000/3548680.stm.
2. Poniatowska's report "La noche de Tlatelolco," in Spanish, can be accessed at http://amolt.interfree.it/Messico/spagnolo_storia16_tlatelolco.htm.
3. "Games 'Catalyst for China Abuses,'" BBC News, April 29, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6606339.stm>.