

Mexican 'Dirty War' Case Nears Court

International Body Set to Probe Fate of Activist Missing Since 1974

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MEXICO CITY -- Rosendo Radilla was the Renaissance man of [Mexico's](#) 1960s and '70s social justice movement.

He led rallies and built schools. He also composed and sang corridos, or ballads, crooning in a nasal, unpolished voice at community meetings and forums during troubled times in the state of Guerrero.

His followers heard him sing for the last time in 1974. One day in August of that year, witnesses say, soldiers arrested Radilla, then 60, and took him to a military prison without formally charging him. There, other witnesses say, he was tortured. After a month or so, he disappeared and has not been seen since.

More than 33 years later, Mexican human rights experts say Radilla's case is likely to be the first from Mexico's "dirty war" to go before an international human rights court. Attorneys involved in the case say it will be submitted next week to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, which is composed of judges elected by member nations of the [Organization of American States](#).

The Radilla case could be a watershed for a Mexican human rights movement plagued by setbacks. In July, a Mexican court decided not to charge former president Luis Echeverr;a with genocide in a 1968 student massacre. Current President Felipe Calder;n has closed a government office that was investigating the dirty war, which lasted from the 1960s to the 1980s.

"The Mexican government has never recognized what happened during the dirty war," said Fabi;n S;nchez, director of the Commission for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights, a private advocacy group that represents Radilla's family. "Calder;n is not interested in the theme of human rights."

A spokesman for Calder;n's Foreign Ministry, which is responsible for defending the Mexican government in the Radilla case, did not respond to interview requests.

During the dirty war, Radilla was one of 470 people who disappeared from Atoyac de Alvarez, a Pacific coast city of 61,000 northwest of [Acapulco](#). That's more than disappeared from any other city in Mexico, which registered more than 1,200 disappearances nationwide.

Human rights groups call the 1960s and '70s the period of Mexico's dirty war because, they say, the Mexican government systematically squelched dissent by killing members of activist groups, including students and indigenous leaders. Radilla was in the forefront of social activism in Guerrero, where he and others were calling for an end to one-party rule, demanding equal rights for all Mexicans and pressing for economic changes to diminish the huge gap between rich and poor.

Sánchez and other rights advocates hope Radilla's case will set a precedent and spark legal action on behalf of other families seeking apologies from the Mexican government, judicial reforms and reparations. But the cases are complex and the process can be labyrinthine, testing the resolve of even the most persistent.

Radilla's daughter, Tita Radilla, has been filing complaints with various Mexican government human rights bodies since 1990 but says she has never gotten a fair hearing. Her father's case was recently heard by the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, an autonomous body of the Organization of American States that investigates rights abuse claims. The commission's report in the Radilla case is confidential, but Sánchez's group has said that it "establishes a degree of state responsibility."

The commission also established requirements for the Mexican government, saying that it must initiate a formal investigation and prosecute those responsible for the disappearance, Sánchez said. The deadline to comply is Monday, and because it appears that deadline will not be met, the case will go immediately to the human rights court.

Tita Radilla said in an interview that she is pleased that it appears her father's case will get an international airing, but disgusted that she has to seek answers about her father's fate by filing legal papers outside Mexico.

"We know that here in our country we do not have access to justice," she said. "The government of Mexico has always tried to give the impression to the outside world that it respects human rights, but the reality is that it doesn't."

Tita Radilla was 20 years old and pregnant when she last saw her father. At the time, he was a member of the Emiliano Zapata Revolutionary Brigade of the South, a civic group named for the flamboyant leader of peasant armies during the Mexican Revolution.

Rosendo Radilla, who was mayor of Atoyac de Alvarez from 1955 to 1956, came to her house the night before he disappeared, his daughter said. He was worried. He told her that he was going to take a bus to the nearby city of Chilpancingo because his activism was making him a target in Atoyac de Alvarez.

"He looked at me," Tita Radilla recalled, "and said, 'I won't be coming back for a long time.' "