



#YoSoy132:

A spontaneous Mexican student social movement

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Abstract

During the past presidential elections, in 2012, Mexico endured her own *Mexican Spring*. *Iam132* (*#YoSoy132*) is an ongoing Mexican movement centered on the democratisation of the country and its mass communications. It began as an opposition to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI, Partido Revolucionario Institucional) candidate Enrique Peña Nieto and the Mexican media's allegedly biased coverage of the 2012 general election, surprisingly, by students of an upper-middle class Jesuit University. The purpose of this paper is to provide an insight for readers into the Mexican movement's emergence and the immediate events that led to the outbreak, place these in light of similar spontaneous mass movements that have taken place around the world, and finally, examine common characteristics exhibited by the different movements.

Keywords *#YoSoy132*, mass movements, indignant movements, Arab Spring, social uprisings, social unrest

Introduction

In recent years the world has experienced a number of movements of mass protests primarily headed by young people, who are aware of the social injustices attributed to the actions of governments, politicians of all tendencies, the financial system and banks, big corporations, and the media. These groups, often known as the *factual powers* are primarily responsible

for corruption and impunity observed globally. Some movements, like the *Arab Spring*, have succeeded in overthrowing old dictatorships. Others, less violent, have impinged on large segments of the population, not really making a difference in the way 'business' is done in the world. However, they seem to constitute a force that sooner or later will wield influence in the way both governments and society conduct their affairs. They are organised, connected via Internet, and convinced that the fight is just starting and will go on for many years now.

In this global turmoil where Mexican youngsters apparently played a minor role, a spontaneous movement was sparked by the discomfort produced by the way a presidential election campaign was conducted by a powerful party and its candidate. Unexpectedly, this protest sprang from an upper-middle class private university, a social class not usually involved in this type of mass manifestations. Our main interest is to categorise some of these global mass protests and compare them to the *#YoSoy132* Mexican movement, what they have in common and how, in the case of Mexico, they may influence the decision-making processes of factual powers in the governance of the country.

Framework

Social movements are defined as collective political actors who share with political parties, pressure and interest groups: a) a relative organisational stability,

b) a communion of objectives, ideas and interests among members, c) a coordinated and organised course of action (although with no fixed organisation structure), and d) a will to intervene in politics to exercise influence in the course of social conflict (Martí i Puig, 2013: 1). The author adds that social movements defy dominant interpretations on different perceptions of reality, thus having an impact in all political environments as follows (Martí i Puig, 2013: 2):

- *In the symbolic environment* because it is a system of narratives that pretends to create new cultural referents, explications and prescriptions of how certain conflicts are socially expressed and how the *ante status quo* 'should' be redesigned.
- *In the interactive environment* because it is a political actor that has an impact on social conflict and intends to change the extant correlation of forces in a concrete context of conflict.
- *In the institutional environment* because it has an effect on those spaces that regulate and channel the conduct of actors through unconventional and contentious actions.
- *In the substantive environment* because it is an instrument for change of reality.

However, they differ from political parties and pressure groups in that their organic structure is feeble, their discourse is thematic or cuts across topics, their action strategy is contentious, they have a conflictive attitude towards power, and the nature of their resources are more symbolic (emotional, self-discipline and commitment of members) than material. They generally pursue a goal that comprises bringing about, impeding, or annulling fundamental social changes, using to that end diverse organisational and action strategies (Raschke, 1994: 123). Although many deny any political association, to Mees (cited in Martín, 2013: 3), a social movement is always a political movement, since all social change requires the participation of the political system. As Turner and Killian (cited in Martín, 2013: 2) assert, social movements are about acting collectively with some form of continuity to promote or resist change in the society

of which they are part, or as Sztompka argues (cited in Martín, 2013: 2), such movements are collectives that are loosely organised, and which act jointly and outside the institutions with the aim of producing change in their society.

Closer to movements like those which are the object of this paper, Martín (2013: 4) sees movements as '...factors that are present in the political or cultural conflict, that grow through informal networks, that transcend conventional institutional participation channels...and take advantage of opportunities that emerge in the political structure.'

#YoSoy132 (#I am132)

On 11 May 2012, this social movement was initiated by students of the 'Universidad Iberoamericana', a Jesuit university located in Mexico City. The presidential candidate of the powerful PRI was invited by a student forum, the 'Good Ibero Citizen (Buen Ciudadano Ibero, in Spanish) to discuss his political platform on campus (Cervantes, 2012). Many students really wanted to show their discontent with the candidate because, among many other reasons, for the past six years, when Peña Nieto was Governor of the State of Mexico, a powerful TV consortium had dedicated much of its prime time to promote his presidential candidacy, in what was perceived as a very biased coverage in his favour. Therefore, there were some attendants displaying posters of indignation. To make matters worse, as the students were entering the auditorium where Peña Nieto was going to speak, his assistants were offering them money in exchange for agreeing not to ask uncomfortable questions (Cervantes, 2012).

Many of the attendees questioned and strongly expressed their opposition to the candidate. In addition to the illegal and prolonged propaganda by TV, the questioning centred on the 2006 Atenco incident, in which the then-governor Peña Nieto called in the state police to violently break up a protest by local residents. Two protesters were killed, many were arrested, and human rights groups have charged the police with numerous rapes during those raids. However, Peña Nieto defended his decision to use force in order to prevent an alleged greater evil. This has been

considered one of the gravest political repressions of the last decade. The candidate's answer was highly unsatisfactory and the audience started to chant the motto 'Atenco is not forgotten', and while he was leaving the premises, he was surrounded by a multitude that made it impossible for him to reach the exit. He finally was able to leave with the assistance of his body guards, followed by the students showing posters of repudiation, and shouting slogans in protest. The main TV channels and some national newspapers minimised the incident in their reportage, arguing that the protest was not an authentic expression of university youngsters, but a political boycott. The students were infuriated and put in the social networks a video in which 131 of them showed their face along with the ID card which identified them as university students. From then on, many members of society expressed in the social networks the motto *I am132* (#YoSoy132) as a means to show support for the students. #YoSoy132 became a movement of protest articulated by the initial group of students.

Peña Nieto was allegedly favoured by Mexico's only two nationwide TV networks, Televisa and TV Azteca, with extensive coverage during the years prior to the confirmation of his candidacy. As Governor, Peña Nieto disbursed several million dollars for 'informational support'. Part of that money was paid to two well-known news anchors (CNNExpansión, 2012). Until early May 2012, polls showed Peña Nieto leading with 45% of the vote, a 20-point lead ahead of the next candidate (Torres and Rosenberg, 2012). Peña Nieto has been criticised by those who see the return of the Institutional Revolutionary Party as the re-establishment of corruption and authoritarianism. The long rule of the PRI for 71 years (1930-2000) was tarnished with accusations of corruption and repression, and the students involved in this movement, despite allegations to the contrary, reject that Peña Nieto represents a new face for the PRI. The protests then turned mainly against the media duopoly Televisa and TV Azteca and accused them of poor and biased coverage of the protests. The #YoSoy132 audience via the social networks is relatively small. One pollster, Roy Campos, says: 'The young, upper middle-class university students (active on social

media) are not that important in population terms, but they are a group that can make a lot of noise (cited in Torres and Rosenberg, 2012).

On 19 May 2012, mass protests against Televisa and Peña Nieto were held in the country's major cities, led by students from many different colleges and universities (Montalvo and Torres, 2012). On 23 May 2012, another protest against Televisa was organised by students from public and private universities. This led the network to give widespread coverage of protests and to announce that the second presidential debate would be broadcasted on Televisa's main national TV channel 2 (the first debate was broadcasted on 6 May 2012 by a Televisa local network). On the same date (23 May), the movement released its *manifesto*, of which its General Principles are as follows (#Yo Soy 132: General Principles, 2012):

Non-partisan

First – we are a nonpartisan movement of citizens. As such, we do not express support of any candidate or political party, but rather respect the plurality and diversity of this movement's participants. Our wishes and demands are centred on the defense of Mexicans' freedom of expression and their right for information, in that these two elements are essential toward forming an aware and participating citizenry. For the same reasons, we support informed and well-thought out voting. We believe that under the present political circumstances, abstaining or making a null vote is ineffective in promoting the building up of our democracy. We are a movement committed to the country's democratisation, and as such, we hold that a necessary condition for this goal is the democratisation of the media. This commitment derives from the current state of the national press and from the concentration of the media outlets in a few hands:

Inclusive

#YoSoy132 is an inclusive movement which does not represent one single university. Its representation depends only on the persons who join this cause and form connections among the university committees-

Peaceful

Understood as the absolute rejection to the use or expression of violence as a means to achieve our objectives-,

Student-based

Understood as the foundation of our movement and a catalyst for social change-,

Secular

Understood as having our movement totally unrelated to any faith, doctrine and/or religious institution -,

Plural

Understood by the inclusion of all individuals in any place of the country who share the principles and boundaries contained herein, recognising the bonds of shared solidarity and unity in the struggle along with other movements without recognising the movement as a substitute-,

Of a social character

Understanding this as the guideline to vindicate our society as the main beneficiary of the actions taken by the movement-,

Political in nature

Because the movement is interested in all public affairs and aims to create spaces that will enable more active citizen participation without limiting this responsibility to the existing so-called political class that claims to be the only interpreter of the country's political affairs-,

Of a humanistic character

Understanding this as the search for ways to reassess and develop to the fullest the potential of all people, not only those focused towards the massive consumption of consumer goods, therefore promoting the ethical nature of humankind-,

Autonomous

Because it recognises and values the organisation and internal decisions within each university as their free and democratic expressions-,

Committed and responsible

Understanding the unique courage of building something for our country and recognizing the consequences of our conviction assumed in a shared way among its members-,

Democratic

Understanding this as the attempt of creation and decision-making in a community context, starting with an equitable and symmetrical dialogue in the access of information, advocating for a participatory democracy that goes beyond the representative model we now have, and aiming towards the improvement of our country's culture.

On 1 June 2012, members of the *#YoSoy132* movement demanded from the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE, Instituto Federal Electoral) that the second debate between the four candidates be broadcast nationally, and that a third debate be scheduled for 22 June 2012. The proposed third debate was meant to cover a broader scope of issues. While the IFE declined both requests, Mexico's two national television networks announced that they would broadcast the second debate nationwide.

From June 5 to December 31, 2012, *#YoSoy132* members coordinated several activities to better position their demands. *#YoSoy132* members agreed that the movement should aspire to go beyond the general election and become a national force. They organised a country-wide protest which made political analysts ask whether the movement would cause trouble for the next government. Nonetheless, the leaders of the student movement said that if Peña Nieto won the July 1st elections fairly, they would not stage any more protests. The movement organised the third debate where the topics of the debate ranged from indigenous peoples' rights to the future of Pemex and the country's media. The debate experienced some technical problems on YouTube, but it was also aired in several other websites and in a couple of radio stations (BBC News, 2012). Finally, they organised a protest that participants called the National and International Day against Imposition of Enrique Peña Nieto with the participation of more than 20 founding organisations, including the National Coordination of Education Workers (CNTE, Coordinación Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación), the National Democratic Executive Committee of Teachers (CEND-SNTE, Comité Ejecutivo Nacional Democrático – Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación), and representatives of the People's

Movement in Defense of the Land (FPDT- Atenco, Frente de Pueblos para la Defensa de la Tierra - Atenco). This last event, a peaceful demonstration held on the 1st of December, 2012, the day Enrique Peña Nieto assumed the Presidency, was brutally repressed by the authorities, alleging that the police came under attack by a group of students. They were later identified by witnesses as hired thugs, tactics that are reminiscent of old-day politics, where groups such as these were inserted in peaceful demonstrations to disrupt them. This is similar to the 'white guards' in 1968, known for their notorious role in the famed massacre of students at Tlatelolco, to discredit and criminalise legitimate social movements.

The movement #YoSoy132 seeks to build solidarity links with the people, through which it be possible to articulate an action plan for the transformation of the country. Members of the movement met in Huexca, in the State of Morelos, in trying to reformulate the movement strategies. Meanwhile their actions are diverse, including opposing the construction of 'Dragon Mart', a huge Chinese expo center in Morelos, and supporting water conservation policies. Currently the movement has taken several derivations that deviates from the original objectives. However, the core group remains united and active, as can be seen from its new website #yosoy132media.org where the agenda of the group is presented. Subsequently, #YoSoy132 held two National Assemblies, one in Xalapa, State of Veracruz, on 18 January 2013, and the other one at the School of Economics, National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), on 23 and 24 February 2013.

Comparison with other movements around the world

As is well known, a number of movements of protest have spread all over the world. Standing out among these of course, is the wave of government-toppling movements that wreaked havoc in 2010-2011, known as the *Arab Spring*. Others, less decisive but significant nonetheless, are designated by the generic name of *los indignados*. Some of its common characteristics are: they are headed by young people against the political

and economic establishment, highly against the way finances are handled, political but not seeking power, against corruption, particularly at the high levels, leaderless, committed to improve the social conditions of people in general (Allemandou, 2011). Sociologist Monique Dagnaud (Allemandou, 2011) says of them, when asked if the movements had a future: 'I'm absolutely sure of it. As long as these people have a reason to protest, they will continue to do so. And seeing that a reprieve from the financial crisis, or an improvement in the situation for young people is nowhere in sight, then it looks like they aren't going anywhere.'

The following table outlines essential differences between the YoSoy132 Mexican student movement and the movements known as the 'Arab Spring', which originated in North Africa on 18 December 2010 with the Tunisian uprising, and other movements generically known as the 'Indignados' that include the Spanish 'Puerta del Sol', New York's 'Occupy Wall Street', and movements that took place in Rome (one of the most violent), Berlin, Frankfurt, Stockholm, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo and Manila. (For a complete overview of the movements that comprise the 'Arab Spring', see Ajmal, 2014).

These waves of protests taking place all over the world have many aspects in common. They are a reaction to how things are being done globally, and voice their demands to seek equality of opportunities for all in relation to power and economy. They are initiated by young, educated people willing to demonstrate their resentment for an elitist, corrupt society incapable of producing opportunities for personal development. They do not want to become politically involved, which is why leadership is collective. Regardless of their resemblances, each movement has its particular specific motives as to why they took place.

Clearly, #YoSoy132 belongs to the 'Indignant Movements' category. The Arab Spring, in addition to protesting against social injustices, goes further to overthrow dictatorship regimes that have remained for many years in power. This fact makes them violent in nature, producing grave consequences as the prolonged civil war taking place in Syria.

Table 1. Comparative of the different social movements along key characteristics

Characteristic	#Yosoy132	Arab Spring	The Indignant Movements
Spontaneous	Yes	Yes	Yes
Student participation	Yes	Yes	Yes
Use of the social networks	Yes	Yes	Yes
Political nature	Yes	Yes	Yes
Violent	No	Yes	No
Seeking power	No	Yes	No
Leaderless	Yes	Yes	Yes
Against corruption and impunity	Yes	Yes	Yes

Myths vs. social realities

In what we believe to be a reasonable appreciation, Protesilaos Stavrou (2011) identifies what he calls *the four myths of the Indignant movement* that could be synthesised as follows:

First Myth

It refers to `the belief that a similar uprising took place in another part of the world, Egypt/Arab World and was successful. Therefore it can be used as a model to have the same results in the European societies. He asserts that the fact that some regimes were overthrown in Africa and Asia does not mean that the situation has changed; *only the visible heads changed but the social/political conditions remains*. In effect, each culture and nation presents a particular social issue,

with very particular social, economic and political conditions. The `enemy`, the target of social and popular discontent is indeed much more visible in autocratic states as is the case of Arabic and African regimes. In a liberal democracy, the overthrow of a head of state is largely without significance, in terms of continuity of power or governance; change is a much more complex affair.

Second Myth

The belief that `by expressing their frustration about the current situation, they will in fact bring change`. To Stavrou, it is not enough to express discontent of what the situation is for changes to take place. It is necessary to go further and propose alternatives to produce changes in the sense visualised by the protesters. It is necessary to have practical ideas. At best,

in this view, massive demonstrations such as the ones that have occurred in different parts of the world constitute what may be perceived as merely 'social thermometers.

Third Myth

The third myth surrounding the movements is that 'they are fighting for a cause, to change society by bringing 'direct democracy'. To Stavrou, 'direct democracy' is itself a myth 'since in history no such thing has ever existed, even in ancient Athens, the cradle of democracy. There, those who participated in the decision-making processes (in the Ecclesia of the Demos) were only a few with relation to the whole population. In addition, protesters believe that they are fighting for a common set of objectives. However, says Stavrou (2011),

the individuals who all together comprise this movement have different backgrounds, different motives and different desires, which are now hidden under the prevalence of frustration, but will at some point be brought to the surface, when the sentiments subside, only to show that the 'common cause' was a delusion and the 'common identity' was a coincidence.

The fact that many of the indignant movements disperse as spontaneously as they emerged, is perhaps an indicator of the pulsating nature of these movements.

Fourth Myth

Stavrou's fourth myth '...is that social media are in fact helping the movement to grow in strength, influence and numbers. The author, although committed to this idea at the beginning of the movement, eventually became convinced that the end result of the proliferation of the use of the social media is 'confusion and chaos. Indeed, statements, comments, and speeches loaded to the Internet do not lead to a convergence of ideas but to a dispersion of opinions that do not contribute toward consolidating a strong social/political position. While social networks may constitute excellent tools for communication, they contribute very little to the creation of a 'common ground.

Conclusions

The unexpected origin of the movement

It is commonly accepted that in Latin America social movements of protest are inceptioned in public universities. A superficial analysis of the origin of #YoSoy132 would consider totally off place that it sprang from a private university. In Mexico, private higher education institutions are dedicated to the attention of the upper-middle and higher social classes. Students belonging to that stratum are considered as usually little concerned with the enormous social inequalities, widespread corruption, and total disarrangement of our political system. As a professor of the University where the protest erupted, *Universidad Iberoamericana*, puts it:

Absolutely nobody can tell that (the movement) was not authentic, spontaneous and totally free. And it took us as a surprise since we thought this was a generation spectacle-prone, non-political and concentrated in its current "screen". Who could imagine that what took place in Atenco, or the ABC children daycare institution hurt them. Who could think that the return of a (corrupt) political party (to the presidency) of which they didn't have actual experience, is of their concern. (Santos Campa, 2013: 41)

However, the *Universidad Iberoamericana* is a Jesuit University, grounded in the tradition of humanism, truth and charity. Santos Campa refers to it in the following terms:

The point is that it was this one, the private university par excellence, the one that started the revolt. It has also been said to the exhaustion that this must not surprise anybody. Those who tear their robes we invite to read any history of the Jesuits' Company, to do the Ignatian Exercises or to minimally approach the Ignatian charisma. I still don't know very well how the Jesuits do it, but a good number of alumni boast of the humanitarian sense of the institution. Many of the freshmen tutored by me declare, accordingly, that they picked up Ibero for reasons like freedom, plurality and humanism. (Santos Campa, 2013: 42)

The future of indignant movements and of #YoSoy132

What is the future of the indignant movements and in particular #YoSoy132? The common belief is that

it is uncertain, especially if, as Galindo and González-Acosta (2013: 72) assert in the case of Mexico, the group's coming together tended to be of a more circumstantial (the presidential candidate's speech) nature than what more traditional movements, with clearer objectives, exhibit. Some observers believe they will endure and have an influence on the decision-making of people in power. Others conclude that, as long as its structure remains as it currently is, they will not have any influence. On the optimistic side, to the question on the future of the movements, sociologist Monique Dagnaud (quoted above, (Allemandou, 2011)) seems to have no doubts. If Galindo and González-Acosta (2013: 72-73) are right, they will in fact continue to protest, albeit assembling at the spur of the moment, and disbanding and dispersing just as quickly, when the `moment loses momentum.

In conclusion, the Indignant movements, and in particular #YoSoy132, will have a societal/political/structural impact as long as they develop a program that includes the creation of a formal organisation with well-defined membership, clearly defined objectives, and means of influencing decision-making in the high spheres of power. They do not necessarily have to become another formal political party, but they must have the organisation and the strength to really have an impact in society and in the way politics is conducted. They must understand their *systemic nature* and realise they have to act continuously adding more social systems to their cause, with clearly defined objectives that would attract more adepts. #YoSoy132 is working along these lines and, if successful, will become a political force with strength capable of influencing the political decision-making in Mexico.

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Appendix

Abbreviations

- PRI: Revolutionary Institutional Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional).
- IFE: Federal Electoral Institute (Instituto Federal Electoral).
- CNTE: National Coordination of Education Workers (Coordinación Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación).
- CEND-SNTE: National Democratic Executive Committee of Teachers (Comité Ejecutivo Nacional Democrático del Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación).
- FPDT-Atenco: People's Movement in Defense of the Land (Frente de Pueblos para la Defensa de la Tierra – Atenco).

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