



Dissolution of *Ecuador's* teachers union a well-coordinated government strategy to silence dissent



CIVICUS speaks to Rosana Palacios Barriga (pictured), President of Ecuador's National Teachers' Union (UNE). The biggest teachers' organisation in the country, UNE was dissolved by a resolution issued by the Ministry of Education in August 2016 for allegedly disregarding its own statutes and violating current legislation that regulates the operations of social organisations.

1. What were the circumstances leading to the dissolution of the National Teachers' Union, the biggest trade union in the country?

The National Teachers' Union of Ecuador (UNE) has two lines of action. On the one hand, it is an organisation that defends human rights, education and the teaching profession in various aspects including labour, health and professional, economic and social advancement. On the other hand, it carries out research on the situation of the country and of the teaching profession more specifically; it presents public policy proposals; and puts together pedagogical proposals such as "Education for Emancipation" and strategies for implementing information and communication technologies in the classroom. In so doing, it rejects corruption, arrogance and authoritarianism.

At the beginning of his administration, in 2006, President Rafael Correa had the support of the left, trade unions, social movements and the popular sectors. In that year, the Ecuadorian people approved through referendum a [Ten-Year Plan](#) that included eight policies for education. The proposal that was submitted to popular consultation had been presented by the UNE to Rafael Correa, then presidential candidate, to be elevated to the category of state policy. UNE supported President Correa's candidacy precisely because he supported our proposal.

The conflict between the government and UNE began when UNE demanded compliance with the Ten-Year Plan. As early as 2008, UNE clashed with the Minister of Education, Raúl Vallejo, who sought to implement a punitive evaluation system aimed at removing teachers without providing them with an alternative path to resume the exercise of their profession, while freeing the state of its labour obligations in case of dismissal. In that context, UNE demanded that labour rights be respected and defended [bilingual education](#), which was at risk as some 6 000 teaching establishments were about to be closed.

In the context of the drafting of a new [Organic Law on Intercultural Education](#) (LOEI), UNE urged for the recognition of the labour rights gained by teachers and for the incorporation of every sector of the teaching body to the teaching career path in such a way that they be protected by social security and by the LOEI. We denounced the increasing job insecurity and

labour flexibility - 40,000 teachers are currently working under contract -, instability, wage freezes, blackmail and dismissals. It should be noted that a requirement of compliance with administrative duties has been added on top of teaching obligations, which changed the role of teachers and caused fear, since it created an environment of total helplessness.

2. What do you think were the government's motivations behind the decision to dissolve UNE?

President Rafael Correa's policy of disintegrating social organisations is part of a strategy to concentrate power. When UNE maintained its demands, Correa made the decision to destroy this grassroots trade union organisation.

The process began with a two-fold demonstration of power on the part of the president: on the one hand, he sought to weaken the union's standing before public opinion, by means of defamation campaigns in which it condemned its unionist actions on national radio, press and TV; on the other hand, in 2009 he moved forward with the implementation of the already mentioned punitive evaluation for teachers in the national system.

In order to fulfil the objectives of the Ten-Year Plan, UNE provided the government with a counter-proposal for evaluation based on scientific and pedagogical arguments. In the face of the government's refusal to enter dialogue, the organisation declared a national strike that ran from 15 September to 7 October 2009. The strike ended with an agreement between UNE and the Executive, the articles of which were later incorporated into the new Education Act. In short: what the Correa administration never forgave UNE was that it defied its power and won.

In its eagerness to eliminate our organisation, and more generally all organisations that did not follow their mandate, as well as to dominate the remaining ones, the government issued [Executive Decree No. 16](#) of 4 June 2013 (Regulation for the Operation of the Unified Information System of Social and Citizen Organisations). This decree was unanimously rejected by independent civil society, since it blatantly violated the freedom of association. The decree established new procedures and requirements for the legal recognition of civil society organisations and introduced an evaluation process to authorise international NGOs to operate in the country. It also forced Ecuadorian NGOs to re-register, imposed excessive information requirements that could be used against the organisations themselves, and granted the government wide discretion to reject requests for legal recognition or to dissolve organisations on the basis of vague arguments related to diversion from their stated aims, involvement in partisan activity, interference with public policies or disturbance of state security or public peace.

Thanks to the support of civil society, trade union organisations, civil servant organisations and international organisations such as the World Federation of Trade Unions and Education International, we managed to get to the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations to denounce Executive Decree No. 16. Furthermore, a claim of unconstitutionality was filed before the Court of Justice in Ecuador. The first victim of dissolution as a result of the application of Decree No. 16 was the environmental organisation [Pachamama Foundation](#) that was shut down in late 2013.

Meanwhile, the government used a wear tactic through criminalisation against UNE leaders. Mery Zamora, the president of UNE between 2007 and 2010, was accused of sabotage and terrorism for allegedly inciting a school's students to take to the streets during the 2010 police revolt. Criminal procedures against her were initiated and she was found guilty on the basis of fake evidence and eventually convicted and sentenced to 8 years in prison. She was later declared not guilty on appeal and did not have to serve her sentence; however, the Office of the Public Prosecutor subsequently filed new charges against her for allegedly violating the rights of the state.

Other national leaders, such as Xaver Cajilema, Paúl Jácome and Edwin Lasluisa, were imprisoned for a year. Dozens of provincial and local leaders - including Francisco Rojas, Juan Cervantes, Luis Chancay, Sisa Bacacela and Pilar Paredes - were removed from their positions. Large numbers of administrative inquiries were initiated against teachers known to belong to UNE, many of whom were dismissed from their jobs or removed from their workplaces.

The new UNE leadership, elected for the period 2013-2016 - including myself - was not officially recognised. The Ministry of Education resorted to various pretexts to do this, including claiming violations to Decree No. 16, which had in fact been issued months after the elections in UNE had taken place. On top of this, our elections had been conducted with universal and secret vote and had been upheld by the National Electoral Council. UNE's Electoral Committee argued that the government's action was illegal, but if faced complete administrative silence for almost a year, after which it was eventually told that UNE had failed to deliver the required documentation. We suppose that the documents that we delivered were deliberately misplaced.

Finally, in 2015 the Ministry of Education set up a parallel union called "Teachers' Network for Educational Revolution" which, incidentally, did not meet any of the requirements that had been imposed on UNE. Needless to say, this violated international standards, starting with ILO Convention 98 on the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining.

The Teachers' Network is no more than an instrument for the execution of the government's authoritarian policy within each and every education institution in the country. Within each school, it functions as the political arm of the government and an instrument to persecute teachers. Thus, for example, the Teachers' Network has zone coordinators who are granted the time to make institutional visits and given the education authorities' support to fulfil their assigned role.

Education authorities have taken action to force teachers, through illegal procedures, to join the new organisation. At the same time, they have prevented UNE leaders from entering learning establishments so as to accelerate our organisation's demise. In fact, circulars were issued that introduced sanctions against school authorities who permitted UNE leaders to come into their premises, allowed teachers to meet in assemblies, went to the union's premises, or allowed the dissemination of information on the situation of teachers. Lastly, the authorities took control of the Unemployment Fund for Ecuadorian Teaching Staff, UNE's financial entity, containing 405 million dollars. In order to do so, they went all out and reformed the Social Security Law.

3. What have the impacts of UNE's dissolution been? How would you describe the resulting scenario?

The dissolution of our organisation was the culmination of a harassment process that lasted ten years. During that period UNE's leadership was divided into three sectors: those who chose to resist, those who withdrew, and those (very few) who left the organisation. The same phenomenon was replicated at the grassroots level, with a prevalence of those who followed the resolutions of the national leadership, which translated into the motto "UNE lives, the struggle continues", later reformulated as "UNE lives, Correa leaves" and "UNE is an organisation, not a building".

UNE leadership resisted and dedicated itself to unmasking President Rafael Correa's policies that violated the labour rights of teachers and more generally of all workers. In order to do so, it joined forces with union federations and other social organisations.

The dissolution of UNE was necessary for the government to be able to continue dismantling public education and disrespecting teachers. Despite what government propaganda implies, education has clearly suffered a setback. The implementation of university entrance exams

and minimum scores for career selection set by the National Secretariat for Higher Education, Science and Technology has led to the privatisation of higher education.

4. Does the dissolution of the teachers' union form part of a broader pattern of civil society restrictions? If so, what are the main ways in which these have been experienced?

The dissolution of UNE is part of a formula that responds to the regime's central objective of eliminating all forms of civil society organisation and participation in policy-making, human rights advocacy and the promotion of public freedoms. In other words, it is part of its strategy to stay in power.

In fact, the government has created parallel organisations in other sectors as well, including the Ecuadorian University Students Front (FUE), the Front of Secondary Students of Ecuador (FESE) and Seguro Campesino. In 2014 it established the government-friendly Unitarian Workers' Central (CUT, [Central Unitaria de Trabajadores](#)) in order to confront traditional trade union federations. The same happened in the field of women's movements, environmental movements and land rights organisations. At the same time as these new organisations were being mobilised, anti-worker laws were put in place to criminalise social struggles, and the state repressive apparatus was used against genuinely representative organisations.

Violations of fundamental freedoms have increased in the form of judicial persecution, insults, media lynching and physical assault. 65% of the population currently reject these abuses, although fear has prevented people from mobilising in defence of organisations facing dissolution procedures. Despite this, we have been able to create debate regarding the defence of rights. And, in the specific case of teachers, there is a clear notion in our society of the need for our organisation to exist as an advocacy, information and organisational tool.

5. Has UNE received international solidarity and support? What could the international community do to support civil society in Ecuador?

I think we have an improved relationship with our peers in other parts of the world. While facing dissolution procedures and sustained assault, we received all kinds of national and international solidarity. In particular, Canadian and Spanish teachers' unions have been key players in our resistance struggle to defend our legal status and recover our patrimony. Nevertheless, we have had no help in the form of mass action. This is the result of ideological debate and strong polarisation, since outside of Ecuador Rafael Correa's leftist discourse, along with government propaganda, continues to back the erroneous belief that Ecuador is still undergoing a revolution. We need support to dispel this misunderstanding.

Civic space in Ecuador is rated as 'obstructed' in the [CIVICUS Monitor](#).

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