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Venezuela. Preventing the State's infiltration of social movements

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This article was originally published in *El Libertario* #58, March-April 2010. Although originally based on the actual experiences of Venezuela's social struggles, it deals with situations and facts of interest to activists anywhere.

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For some time now the Venezuelan government has made systematic advances in the reorganization of the national police intelligence system, with the intention of discovering and neutralizing autonomous social movements that appear in the country. The Intelligence and Counterintelligence Law (temporarily suspended) and the new Bolivarian Intelligence Service (SEBIN) in Spanish) are but two examples of this.

In order to promote the necessary knowledge on this issue among activists, we give an informative recap of the different tactics used by the State to break up the antagonistic social fabric and criminalize its followers.

The State's intelligence tactics

These tricks were developed and/or systematized by the COINTELPRO program of espionage, provocation and information the FBI used to destroy dissident political groups in the United States. They have been used by most of the world's States and Venezuela is no exception. Here are some examples:

Surveillance: Intelligence and security organizations use the existing technologies to conduct exhaustive surveillance of activists to prepare the corresponding judicial files. To that end they use the existing surveillance technologies. Photographing, filming, following in vehicles, reading email and correspondence are some of the many tactics used against social militants.

In general, cell phones and frequently visited places are infiltrated by the police to eavesdrop in conversations and do what's called "information sharing" to combine different pieces of information. Let's not forget that in Venezuela CANTV (State enterprise that monopolizes telephone land lines) and most private communications enterprises lend themselves to such manipulation by the State.

Infiltration: The State usually places undercover agents in popular demonstrations or inside the assemblies with a dual intent: first, to take note of the persons gathered and the information discussed in the assemblies, second, to promote discord among the attendants in order to trivialize the issues. Not many people go to a gathering without previous interest in the conflict or knowledge of some of the people involved. Since the intelligence services normally use dumb or rookie police for this task, a simple conversation with them usually uncovers who is a plant and who isn't.

A usual trick is the use of informers. These are people close to the group who, for money, favors or the resolution of judicial problems give information about the group to the intelligence agencies. They are hard to detect and more than once activists have been falsely accused of being

informants. This has been used successfully against armed groups particularly in the previous century. Because of this, action groups today tend to be smaller and based on extreme affinity and even family ties.

Another form of infiltration is people who attend a reunion or assembly for the first time and push for extreme or violent acts regardless of the issue being discussed. They stand out because of their subversive rants and their proposals for crazy ideas or plans rarely in tune with reality.

Rumors: The use of informers and infiltrators contributes to the spread of rumors that tend to divide a social front or collective. These baseless rumors seek to discredit the organization and its activists.

False communiqués: Intelligence organizations usually write misleading stuff to create confusion among activists and their kindred organizations. The idea is to find a contradiction within the group that will cause its implosion. For example, in Chile the District Attorney created a group named Frente Anarquista Revolucionario (FAR) [Revolutionary Anarchist Front] that in a provocative fashion claimed responsibility for false actions and stirred polemics with the informal Chilean groups in order to destroy them.

Media disinformation: Certain media work in tight cooperation with intelligence organizations. In general they try to create a preconceived opinion about demonstrators and activists, accusing them of sabotage, of being “enemy agents”, “out of control”, or “maladjusted”. An example is the Venezuelan TV program “La Hojilla” whose anchor –a well known and decorated police informant- plays prosecutor, judge and executioner of dissidents against the current government. The media also serves to broadcast wrong information about groups and initiatives or to publish manipulated information about some activist, attempting to discredit his/her commitment with whatever causes he or she upholds.

For this reason the use of counter information is a fundamental tool. In Venezuela – a country where the majority of the radio-electronic media is in the hands of the current government- the use of blogs, Myspace, Twitter or other communication networks is a necessary tool today and will become even more so in the future.

Harassment: In many countries, intelligence organisms use pressure such as telling the boss an employee is a “radical” or inserting information among his/her acquaintances to make him/her feel uncomfortable or persecuted in their trusted milieu. Accusations such as “homosexual”, “rapist”, “drug addict” are common. Another form of harassment is when the State determines the identity of an activist and decides to arrest or interrogate him/her under any pretext. In many cases the arrest is used to “plant” drugs or other things considered illegal (Molotov cocktails, explosives etc). The goal is to make them quit their activism.

Sabotage: Police organizations (or people connected to them) do sabotage against the meeting places of activists as well as theft of materials. They try to sow fear and discouragement among the sympathizers.

Paramilitary: Intelligence organisms form paramilitary organizations which they equip with weapons and train them to perform the "dirty work" that is not convenient to do under "constitutional legality". In Venezuela this is formed by the evil "combat corps" or the diverse "popular collectives" that police the poor neighborhoods.

Lethal force: When somebody in a social movement achieves notoriety and other means of control or cooptation by the institutional powers fail, they resort to assassinate the dissident either by thugs (masquerading as common criminals) or in supposed confrontations that are usually uncovered if there is an objective investigation.

Some measures to avoid infiltration

- 1) Turn off your cell phone before a gathering: It has been proven that cell phones can transmit information even when they are off. Put them in a place removed from the discussion area or put them in the refrigerator [TN: better yet, remove the battery]. Black Berrys use GPS (Ground Position System) that gives the exact location where you are. Cell phones are use for data sharing and to establish a dissident's social network.
- 2) Before entering the gathering location, try to walk around and reconnoiter the outside area and try to identify suspicious activity that could imply undercover police, usually recognizable by their physique, their way of talking or because they look out of place. Rarely will they look you in the eye and they many times stumble with their explanations.
- 3) When doing mass email use blind carbon copy (bcc) for the addresses, in case your email falls in the wrong hands you will not expose other people.
- 4) Send your communications from a cyber café or similar service to prevent the intelligence organizations from obtaining your IP (your computer ID code)
- 5) Affinity and mutual trust among activists in any campaign are the best antidotes against infiltration and repression. Better a few but secure than many and insecure.
- 6) Do not contribute to the prevailing disinformation, don't gossip or circulate ill-intentioned information.
- 7) Be alert – without becoming paranoid- of infiltrators and provocateurs.
- 8) If you feel you're under surveillance let your comrades know about it.
- 9) Never talk to the police. The National Constitution guarantees your right to remain silent. Don't collaborate with them. Unlike in the United States, in Venezuela collaboration with the district attorney doesn't exonerate you and only symbolically diminishes your sentence.

How to secure your computer

Today computers are the place where activists keep most of their writings and communiqués. In most raids the first things the security forces confiscate are the computers so we recommend the following:

- 1) Download and update firewalls such as AVG (www.grisoft.com) or ZoneAlarm (www.zonealarm.com) which are free to download and work with Windows.
- 2) Install a spyware detector such as Ad-ware in your computer. They can

be downloaded free at www.lavasoft.de

- 3) Deleting documents from your computer doesn't mean they're no longer in the hard drive. There is a program called Clean Disk that totally erases them, download it here www.clean-disk-security.softonic.com
- 4) Encrypt all your sensitive documents. There's a program called PGP (www.pgp.com) that has been successfully used by activists in many countries.
- 5) Regularly change your email password, it is recommended to use a 16 digit code containing letters and numbers. A short password is easy to detect. Don't use birth dates, or the names of family members or pets.
- 6) There is a free internet provider, Riseup (www.riseup.net) that gives free and secure email addresses to activists.

Avoid paranoia

Some activists become paranoid, which completely immobilizes them, abandoning the struggle and becoming passive members of society. Therefore it is important to think about what was said above so we can act with prior knowledge and diminish risks and weaknesses. We must be conscious of the fact that any struggle for the collective is the potential target of police surveillance and that is part of the social dynamics. The armed organizations of control and repression have been created to counter any type of dissidence therefore by being activists we become their target; however, we have better values than they do: our convictions we uphold for a positive social change. Don't let fatigue and fear stop you!

Post-scriptum :

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