

Defending the Right to Defend Rights



Demonstrators protesting against Bill C-51 on Parliament Hill in Ottawa.

Promoting Canadians' Civil Liberties

For several years now, many governments in the Americas have been describing dissent or criticism of state policies as illegitimate, or worse, criminal. In Guatemala, for instance, the government has criminalized people who oppose extractive industry projects, and has even labelled them terrorists. In other cases, such as Chile, the government's criminalization tactics include the recycling of old anti-terrorism laws.

In Canada, a similar discourse has also appeared in recent years through the reports of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), and the Ministry of Public Safety. Tabled in February 2015, Bill C-51 could be

seen as enshrining this view of dissent into law, as it labels interference with the country's economic stability as a threat to national security.

Both the bill and government discourse greatly trouble the International Civil Liberties Monitoring Group (ICLMG), an Inter Pares counterpart that promotes and defends civil liberties and human rights. According to its coordinator, Roch Tassé: "The government talks about activists in the environmental movement, for example, as extremists, and theorizes they could resort to terrorism. So government documents quite categorically associate dissent with terrorism." [PAGE 4 ►](#)

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El Salvador's Shifting Social Geography



Angélica Rivas (right) stands with Veronica Zalazar of the Municipal Office Against Violence Towards Women, in the Salvadoran municipality of Suchitoto. The poster reads “Here in Suchitoto we want a life free of violence against women.”

El Salvador has the highest density of volcanoes on the American continent. Just as tectonic plates shape the small country, El Salvador's feminist movement has been transforming women's reality. In recent years, the equivalent of an earthquake has been shaking Salvadoran society, and social movements are taking advantage of new political openings. Our counterpart, the *Colectiva Feminista para el Desarrollo Local* (the Feminist Collective for Local Development) has been at the epicentre of this phenomenon.


Angélica Rivas already considered herself a feminist when the guerilla-turned-political party Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front came to power in 2009, following a twenty-year reign by the conservative ARENA party. As one of *La Colectiva's* young and energetic coordinators, she knows that Salvadoran women's organizations have never shied

away from peacefully taking to the streets on controversial issues. Angélica also recalls that, before 2009, the usual response from government authorities would come in the form of police batons. Today, police forces are still present during demonstrations, but now they are accompanying and providing security for the marchers who are exercising their right to protest. In her words, “the government finally understands that no constructive change will be achieved by repressing the public.”

Further signs of this openness came with more opportunities for dialogue between government and civil society, such as a national roundtable on security issues. In this space, *La Colectiva* and other feminist organizations are represented by the feminist coalition Prudencia Ayala, and are joined by delegates from the country's many churches and the private sector. Angélica believes that women are grossly underrepresented in these discussions. Nonetheless, such openings have led to the adoption of nationwide gender-specific programs to combat violence against women.

As state-sponsored repression drops dramatically, and spaces for dialogue with authorities open, Salvadoran civil society is rapidly catching up on stalled social progress, especially for women. Some issues, such as the right for women to have control over their own bodies, remain particularly sensitive in this socially conservative country. But *La Colectiva* and its

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allies will be at the forefront of struggles to make those changes happen, with support and solidarity from Inter Pares. 

Guinea-Bissau: Hope is in the air

Early 2015, staff member Patricia Charest Mugwaneza visited Inter Pares' counterpart Tiniguena. She shares her experience.

It was my first time in Guinea-Bissau. Before arriving, I knew that I would be blown away by the beauty of this small emerald green country on the shores of West Africa, and I looked forward to meeting Tiniguena, Inter Pares' counterpart dedicated to protecting the country's unique biodiversity.

What I hadn't expected were the astonishing winds of change I witnessed. Something special was happening in the country. After the latest of multiple military coups and two years of democratic transition, the 2014 elections finally put into power a legitimate and democratically elected government – one that is serious about listening to its

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the oldest colonial jail, used during successive authoritarian regimes to imprison and torture dissidents, into the *Casa dos Direitos* (Rights House). The building is now home to the Human Rights Defense League, of which Tiniguena is an active member. Rights House offers a space for activists to write, publish, raise awareness, and campaign for human rights in Guinea-Bissau.

In late 2013, Tiniguena co-organized a forum on food sovereignty in which 120 organizations participated. Citizens, villagers, officials of the transitional government, and non-governmental organization representatives from all over Guinea-Bissau issued concrete recommendations to improve and

people and creating social change.

Everything seems possible again, and the team at Tiniguena is buoyed by this optimism.

An illustration of this shift is the recent conversion of

defend the universal right to adequate food. Their voice was heard: as a result, the government formed a national committee, which includes Tiniguena, that now reviews land-related laws to foster nutritional self-sufficiency in Guinea-Bissau.



PATRICIA CHAREST MUGWANEZA

Organizations such as Tiniguena are seizing the political opportunity to create deep and lasting change for justice in Guinea-Bissau. But it didn't happen from one day to the next. It is a testament to the courageous work and organizing that Tiniguena carried out in the darkness of the country's repressive past. My trip came as a breath of fresh air, as we witness the stifling of dissent in many other places, at the price of social innovation and progress. ☺

Top: The food sovereignty forum report outlines thirty-five recommendations to improve food sovereignty in Guinea-Bissau.

Bottom: The *Casa dos Direitos* offers a space to raise awareness on human rights in Guinea-Bissau.



ANNE DAGEMAS GUERTIN, ICLMG

Roch Tassé, ICLMG coordinator, speaking at a press conference.

Promoting Canadians' Civil Liberties

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Dissent is permitted under Bill C-51, but how narrow is this category? “We can speculate that some protest activity might be covered by this law and could be deemed a threat to the country’s national security. Before a demonstration, if the police suspect violence, they could invoke preventative detention clauses, and detain demonstrators for up to seven days before the event even

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begins. Would the government go so far as to put people who go to demonstrations on no-fly lists? If CSIS is given the power to disrupt terrorist plots, would they be able to legally infiltrate all social movements that oppose the country’s economic policies?”

Such concerns led the ICLMG to take action. Working with other organizations and legal experts, it developed joint analyses and strategies. Through meetings with Members of Parliament and policymakers, and through presenting to a parliamentary committee tasked with studying the bill, they all shared their concerns with decision-makers. ICLMG has been raising awareness through its e-newsletter, circulating a petition, and liaising with grassroots activists who oppose the bill. Anticipating Bill C-51’s adoption, ICLMG has also been discussing legal challenges with experts who deem portions of the text to be clearly unconstitutional.

Despite the gravity of ICLMG’s concerns, Roch takes heart in the strength of opposition that has emerged to the bill from all corners of Canadian society. “This is the first time in ten years I’ve seen so many objections from all sectors in Canada – all opposition parties, law professors, four former prime ministers, former Supreme Court judges, university researchers. The media, op-eds, editorials in major Canadian newspapers have all objected to the bill. There is a consensus.” Regardless of the bill’s adoption, such unanimity signals that defending the right to dissent is still vitally important to Canadians. Inter Pares is honoured to support ICLMG in its role at the heart of this defense. ☺

ONLINE Read an abridged transcript of the interview with Roch Tassé and Nicole Filion (Ligue des droits et libertés coordinator): www.interpares.ca/dissent

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With the support of thousands of Canadians, Inter Pares works in Canada and around the world with social change organizations who share the analysis that poverty and injustice are caused by inequalities within and among nations, and who are working to promote peace, and social and economic justice in their communities and societies.

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