

The Rise of the Police State and the Absence of Mass Opposition

By [Prof. James Petras](#) and [Robin Eastman-Abaya](#)

Global Research, July 25, 2012

25 July 2012

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Introduction

One of the most significant political developments in recent US history has been the virtually unchallenged rise of the police state. Despite the vast expansion of the police powers of the Executive Branch of government, the extraordinary growth of an entire panoply of repressive agencies, with hundreds of thousands of personnel, and enormous public and secret budgets and the vast scope of police state surveillance, including the acknowledged monitoring of over 40 million US citizens and residents, no mass pro-democracy movement has emerged to confront the powers and prerogatives or even protest the investigations of the police state.

In the early fifties, when the McCarthyite purges were accompanied by restrictions on free speech, compulsory loyalty oaths and congressional 'witch hunt' investigations of public officials, cultural figures, intellectuals, academics and trade unionists, such police state measures provoked widespread public debate and protests and even institutional resistance. By the end of the 1950's mass demonstrations were held at the sites of the public hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in San Francisco (1960) and elsewhere and major civil rights movements arose to challenge the racially segregated South, the compliant Federal government and the terrorist racist death squads of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). The Free Speech Movement in Berkeley (1964) ignited nationwide mass demonstrations against the authoritarian-style university governance.

The police state incubated during the first years of the Cold War was challenged by mass movements pledged to retain or regain democratic freedoms and civil rights.

Key to understanding the rise of mass movements for democratic freedoms was their fusion with broader social and cultural movements: democratic freedoms were linked to the struggle for racial equality; free speech was necessary in order to organize a mass movement against the imperial US Indo-Chinese wars and widespread racial segregation; the shutting down of Congressional 'witch hunts' and purges opened up the cultural sphere to new and critical voices and revitalized the trade unions and professional associations. All were seen as critical to protecting hard-won workers' rights and social advances.

In the face of mass opposition, many of the overt police state tactics of the 1950's went 'underground' and were replaced by covert operations; selective state violence against individuals replaced mass purges. The popular pro-democracy movements strengthened civil society and public hearings exposed and weakened the police state apparatus, but it did not go away. However, from the early 1980's to the present, especially over the past 20

years, the police state has expanded dramatically, penetrating all aspects of civil society while arousing no sustained or even sporadic mass opposition.

The question is why has the police state grown and even exceeded the boundaries of previous periods of repression and yet not provoked any sustained mass opposition? This is in contrast to the broad-based pro-democracy movements of the mid to late 20th century. That a massive and growing police state apparatus exists is beyond doubt: one simply has to look up the published records of personnel (both public agents and private contractors), the huge budgets and scores of agencies involved in internal spying on tens of millions of American citizens and residents. The scope and depth of arbitrary police state measures taken include arbitrary detention and interrogations, entrapment and the blacklisting of hundreds of thousands of US citizens. Presidential fiats have established the framework for the assassination of US citizens and residents, military tribunals, detention camps and the seizure of private property.

Yet as these gross violations of the constitutional order have taken place and as each police state agency has further eroded our democratic freedoms, there have been no massive “anti-Homeland Security” movements, no campus ‘Free Speech movements’. There are only the isolated and courageous voices of specialized ‘civil liberties’ and constitutional freedoms activists and organizations, which speak out and raise legal challenges to the abuse, but have virtually no mass base and no objective coverage in the mass media.

To address this issue of mass inactivity before the rise of the police state, we will approach the topic from two angles.

We will describe how the organizers and operatives have structured the police state and how that has neutralized mass responses.

We will then discuss the ‘meaning’ of non-activity, setting out several hypotheses about the underlying motives and behavior of the ‘passive mass’ of citizens.

The Concentric Circles of the Police State

While the potential reach of the police state agencies covers the entire US population, in fact, it operates on the basis of ‘concentric circles’. The police state is perceived and experienced by the US population according to the degree of their involvement in critical opposition to state policies. While the police state theoretically affects ‘everyone’, in practice it operates through a series of concentric circles. The ‘inner core’, of approximately several million citizens, is the sector of the population experiencing the brunt of the police state persecution. They include the most critical, active citizens, especially those identified by the police state as sharing religious and ethnic identities with declared foreign enemies, critics or alleged ‘terrorists’. These include immigrants and citizens of Arab, Persian, Pakistani, Afghan and Somali descent, as well as American converts to Islam.

Ethnic and religious “profiling” is rife in all transport centers (airports, bus and train stations and on the highways). Mosques, Islamic charities and foundations are under constant surveillance and subject to raids, entrapment, arrests, and even Israeli-style ‘targeted’ assassinations.

The second core group, targeted by the police state, includes African Americans, Hispanics and immigration rights activists (numbering in the millions). They are subject to massive

arbitrary sweeps, round-ups and unlimited detention without trial as well as mass indiscriminate deportations.

After the 'core groups' is the 'inner circle' which includes millions of US citizens and residents, who have written or spoken critically of US and Israeli policy in the Middle East, expressed solidarity with the suffering of the Palestinian people, opposed US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan or have visited countries or regions opposed to US empire building (Venezuela, Iran, South Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank and Gaza, etc.). Hundreds of thousands of these citizens have their telephone, e-mail and internet communications under surveillance; they have been targeted in airports, denied passports, subject to 'visits' and to covert and overt blacklisting at their schools and workplaces.

Activists engaged in civil liberties groups, lawyers, and professionals, leftists engaged in anti-Imperialist, pro-democracy and anti-police state activities and their publications are on 'file' in the massive police state labyrinth of data collecting on 'political terrorists'. Environmental movements and their activists have been treated as potential terrorists - with their own family members subjected to police harassment and ominous 'visits'.

The 'outer circle' includes, community, civic, religious and trade union leaders and activists who, in the course of their activity interact with or even express support for core and inner circle critics and victims of police state violations of due process. The 'outer circle' numbering a few million citizens are 'on file' as 'persons of interest', which may involve monitoring their e-mail and periodic 'checks' on their petition signing and defense appeals. These 'three circles' are the central targets of the police state, numbering upward of 40 million US citizens and immigrants - who have not committed any crime. For having exercised their constitutional rights, they have been subjected to various degrees of police state repression and harassment.

The police state, however, has 'fluid boundaries' about whom to spy on, whom to arrest and when - depending on whatever arouses the apparatchiks 'suspicion' or desire to exercise power or please their superiors at any given moment.

The key to the police state operations of the US in the 21st century is to repress pro-democracy citizens and pre-empt any mass movement without undermining the electoral system, which provides political theater and legitimacy. A police state 'boundary' is constructed to ensure that citizens will have little option but to vote for the two pro-police state parties, legislatures and executives without reference to the conduct, conditions and demands of the core, inner and outer circle of victims, critics and activists. Frequent raids, harsh public 'exemplary' punishment and mass media stigmatization transmit a message to the passive mass of voters and non-voters that the victims of repression 'must have been doing something wrong' or else they would not be under police state repression.

The key to the police state strategy is to not allow its critics to gain a mass base, popular legitimacy or public acceptance. The state and the media constantly drum the message that the activists' 'causes' are not our (American, patriotic) 'causes'; that 'their' pro-democracy activities impede 'our' electoral activities; their lives, wisdom and experiences do not touch our workplaces, neighborhoods, sports, religious and civic associations. To the degree that the police-state has 'fenced in' the inner circles of the pro-democracy activists, they have attained a free hand and uncontested reach in deepening and extending the boundaries of the authoritarian state. To the degree that the police state rationale or presence has penetrated the consciousness of the mass of the US population, it has created

a mighty barrier to the linking of private discontent with public action.

Hypothesis on Mass Complicity and Acquiescence with the Police State

If the police-state is now the dominant reality of US political life, why isn't it at the center of citizen concern? Why are there no pro-democracy popular movements? How has the police state been so successful in 'fencing off' the activists from the vast majority of US citizens? After all, other countries at other times have faced even more repressive regimes and yet the citizens rebelled. In the past, despite the so-called 'Soviet threat', pro-democracy movements emerged in the US and even rolled back a burgeoning police state. Why does the evocation of an outside 'Islamic terrorist threat' seem to incapacitate our citizens today? Or does it?

There is no simple, single explanation for the passivity of the US citizens faced with a rising omnipotent police state. Their motives are complex and changing and it is best to examine them in some detail.

One explanation for passivity is that precisely the power and pervasiveness of the police state has created deep fear, especially among people with family obligations, vulnerable employment and with moderate commitments to democratic freedoms. This group of citizens is aware of cases where police powers have affected other citizens who were involved in critical activities, causing job loss and broad suffering and are not willing to sacrifice their security and the welfare of their families for what they believe is a 'losing cause' - a movement lacking a strong popular base and with little institutional support. Only when the protest against the Wall Street bailout and the 'Occupy Wall Street' movements against the '1%' gained momentum, did this sector express transitory support. But as the Office of the President consummated the bailout and the police-state crushed the 'Occupy' encampments, fear and caution led many sympathizers to withdraw timidly back into passivity.

The second motive for 'acquiescence' among a substantial public is because they tend to support the police state, based on their acceptance of the anti-terror ideology and its virulent anti-Muslim-anti-Arab racism, driven in large part by influential sectors of pro-Israel opinion makers. The fear and loathing of Muslims, cultivated by the police state and mass media, was central to the post-9/11 build-up of Homeland Security and the serial wars against Israel's adversaries, including Iraq, Lebanon, Libya and now Syria with plans for Iran. Active support for the police state peaked during the first 5 years post-9/11 and subsequently ebbed as the Wall Street-induced economic crisis, loss of employment and the failures of government policy propelled concerns about the economy far ahead of support for the police state. Nevertheless, at least one-third of the electorate still supports the police state, 'right or wrong'. They firmly believe that the police state protects their 'security'; that suspects, arrestees, and others under watch 'must have been doing something illegal'. The most ardent backers of the police state are found among the rabid anti-immigrant groups who support arbitrary round-ups, mass deportations and the expansion of police powers at the expense of constitutional guarantees.

The third possible motive for acquiescence in the police state is ignorance: those millions of US citizens who are not aware of the size, scope and activities of the police state. Their practical behavior speaks to the notion that 'since I am not directly affected it must not exist'. Embedded in everyday life, making a living, enjoying leisure time, entertainment, sports, family, neighborhoods and concerned only about household budgets ... This mass is

so embedded in their personal 'micro-world' that it considers the macro-economic and political issues raised by the police state as 'distant', outside of their experience or interest: 'I don't have time', 'I don't know enough', 'It's all 'politics' ... The widespread apoliticism of the US public plays into its ignoring the monster that has grown in its midst.

Paradoxically as some peoples' concerns and passive discontent over the economy has grown, it has lessened support for the police state as well as having lessened opposition to it. In other words the police state flourishes while public discontent is focused more on the economic institutions of the state and society. Few, if any, contemporary political leaders educate their constituency by connecting the rise of the police state, imperial wars and Wall Street to the everyday economic issues concerning most US citizens. The fragmentation of issues, the separation of the economic from the political and the divorce of political concerns from individual ones, allow the police state to stand 'above and outside' of the popular consciousness, concerns and activities.

State-sponsored fear mongering on behalf of the police state is amplified and popularized by the mass media on a daily basis via propagandistic-'news', 'anti-terrorist' detective programs, Hollywood's decades of crass anti-Arab, Islamophobic films. The mass media portrayal of the police state's naked violations of democratic rights as normal and necessary in a milieu infiltrated by 'Muslim terrorists', where feckless 'liberals'(defenders of due process and the Bill of Rights) threaten national security, has been effective.

Ideologically, the police state depends on identifying the expansion of police powers with 'national security' of the passive 'silent' majority, even as it creates profound insecurity for an active, critical minority. The self-serving identification of the 'nation' and the 'flag' with the police state apparatus is especially prominent during 'mass spectacles' where 'rock', schlock and 'sports' infuse mass entertainment with solemn Pledges of Allegiance to uphold and respect the police state and busty be-wigged young women wail nasally versions of the national anthem to thunderous applause. Wounded 'warriors' are trotted out and soldiers rigid in their dress uniforms salute enormous flags, while the message transmitted is that police state at home works hand in hand with our 'men and women in uniform' abroad. The police state is presented as a patriotic extension of the wars abroad and as such both impose 'necessary' constraints on citizen opposition, public criticism and any real forthright defense of freedom.

Conclusion: What is to be done?

The ascendancy of the police state has benefited enormously from the phony bi-partisan de-politicization of repressive legislation, and the fragmentation of socio-economic struggles from democratic dissent. The mass anti-war movements of the early 1990's and 2001-2003 were undermined (sold-out) by the defection of its leaders to the Democratic Party machine and its electoral agenda. The massive popular immigration movement was taken over by Mexican-American political opportunists from the Democratic Party and decimated while the same Democratic Party, under President Barack Obama, has escalated police state repression against immigrants, expelling millions of Latino immigrant workers and their families.

Historical experience teaches us that a successful struggle against an emerging police state depends on the linking of the socio-economic struggles that engage the attention of the masses of citizens with the pro-democracy, pro-civil liberty, 'free speech' movements of the middle classes. The deepening economic crisis, the savage cuts in living standards and

working conditions and the fight to save 'sacred' social programs (like Social Security and Medicare) have to be tied in with the expansion of the police state. A mass social justice movement, which brings together thousands of anti-Wall Streeters, millions of pro-Medicare, Social Security and Medicaid recipients with hundreds of thousands of immigrant workers will inevitably clash with the bloated police-state apparatus. Freedom is essential to the struggle for social justice and the mass struggle for social justice is the only basis for rolling back the police state. The hope is that mass economic pain will ignite mass activity, which, in turn, will make people aware of the dangerous growth of the police state. A mass understanding of this link will be essential to any advance in the movement for democracy and people's welfare at home and peace abroad.

The original source of this article is Global Research
Copyright © [Prof. James Petras](#) and [Robin Eastman-Abaya](#), Global Research, 2012

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Prof. James Petras](#)
and [Robin Eastman-Abaya](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca
www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca