

November 23, 2021

Op Ed, Daily Pennsylvanian

RE: María Paula Romo, Visiting Scholar, Center for Latin American and Latinx Studies, University of Pennsylvania.

Fall 2021 is a time of reflection as social and economic inequality has only increased in Latin America due to a global pandemic. Nearly two years ago, a wave of mobilizations against massive state cuts to social spending swept across cities in the region. From Colombia to Ecuador and the Andean Southern Cone, Latin American cities became temporary war zones as civil society mobilized to contest the devastating cuts. Police and militaries responded with severe violence and repression.

October 2019 marked a dark period in Ecuador, an Andean country with a population of 16 million, that experienced ten days of warfare in which police forces brutalized Ecuadorian citizens, including members of Indigenous pueblos and nationalities, university students, volunteers, and medical personnel.

During those deadly protests in Ecuador, one state official, the Minister of Government María Paula Romo, was in charge of the police and the security. In this position, she was the state official commanding the deadly police response to mobilizers and first responders.

Where is Ms. Romo now? **She is a Visiting Scholar for Fall 2021 at the Center for Latin American and Latinx Studies (CLALS) at the University of Pennsylvania.**

As social scientists who have collectively spent decades researching in and about Ecuador, we express our profound distress that Penn has appointed Ms. Romo as a Visiting Scholar for the 2021-22 academic year.

The evidence against Ms. Romo is vast and alarming.

- While presiding over the 2019 deadly police response, Romo permitted the use of [expired tear gas](#) (which is more likely to cause asphyxiation), the launching of tear gas at close ranges of protestors, and the [bombardment of tear gas in humanitarian zones located at universities in Quito](#) that were receiving and treating injured protestors.
- A comprehensive [Human Rights Watch report](#) also details “excessive force” and “arbitrary death and arrest” on the part of her administration. Particularly noteworthy, Human Rights Watch found that elderly, women, pregnant women, and children were all victims of police brutality. To write the final report, the ombudsman's office, furthermore, received 519 testimonies displaying the human rights violations that Romo, along with other political leaders like President Lenin Moreno, committed.
- Ultimately, hundreds of protestors received [grave](#), life lasting injuries and 11 died.

- Based on her role in the state violence against the mobilizations, Romo was [censured and removed from her position](#) as the Minister of Government.
- The Ecuadorian ombudsman's office (*Defensoria del Pueblo*) also found her, along with several other government officials, to have committed [crimes against humanity](#).

We write this Op-Ed today to draw attention to Ms. Romo's Visiting Scholar position at Penn. It is even more troubling that the Center seems to be concealing the appointment from the public while maintaining it.

The Director of the Center, Prof. Tulia Falletti, has communicated that Penn is unwilling to withdraw the position, even as pressure has mounted from many Ecuadorian citizens. If this is Penn's decision--with which we strongly disagree--we seek Penn to publicly announce its decision by returning Ms. Romo's Visiting Scholar profile to the CLALS website, responding to the Change.org petition signed by more than 10,000 people, and widely circulating any future event with Ms. Romo.

We also ask:

- (1) What is Penn's policy for awarding Visiting Scholar positions to politicians? Many universities have policies against awarding such positions to any politicians, including those who have been convicted and destituted for crimes against humanity.
- (2) Why has CLALS removed Ms. Romo's web page while maintaining the appointment? All other Visiting Scholars have them, and many events and appointments are publicized.
- (3) Why is the CLALS Director not responding to a Change.org petition against the appointment with over 10,000 signers?

In sum, we are disappointed by the decision to award the position to Ms. Romo and even more troubled by Penn and CLALS's avoidance of transparency and responsibility for their actions by erasing publicly available information about the circumstances of the appointment.

In Solidarity:

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