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How will Canada handle Vancouver 2010 protests?

Some Canadians condemned Beijing, but our own human-rights record for hosting the Olympic Games is nothing to brag about

Dominique Clément
Freelance

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One of the major themes of the 2008 Beijing Olympics was China's abysmal human rights record.

China was accused repeatedly of mass arrests and suppressing protests preceding and during the Olympics.

But Canada's own record as an Olympic host is far from perfect, and with the Vancouver Olympics just around the corner we will have to prepare for possible human rights abuses at home.

In the aftermath of terrorist attacks in 1970 in Quebec and the 1972 Munich Olympics, security during the 1976 Montreal Olympics was tight.

Special immigration policies were in place for the Games; highly restrictive criteria were imposed on nationals of certain countries, who were arbitrarily denied entry for the Games.

The RCMP prepared a secret list of individuals who posed potential threats, including political activists, and refused them entry during the Games.

Many tourists found it harder to enter the country and were being turned away at the border for not having enough money or having too much to be considered a tourist.

Local prisons denied day passes to convicts who had been waiting for months to see their family and friends.

RACIAL PROFILING USED

Racial profiling led the local police to harass neighbourhoods dominated by minorities.

Several individuals who belonged to the Revolutionary Marxist Group, Comité Homosexuel Anti-Répression and the Young Socialists were fired from the Olympic organizing committee because of their political affiliations.

Downtown Montreal was flooded with police officers (Montreal reported a 20-per-cent reduction in crime during the Games), and homeless people were systematically rounded up and evicted from areas near the Olympic venues.

The police were also selective in their arrests during the Games.

A group of Iranian students legally distributing tracts to people near the Olympic venues condemning the Shah of Iran were arrested and detained, while demonstrators in front of the Soviet embassy who burned a Soviet flag were left untouched.

Individuals and families with low incomes were kicked out of their homes by ambitious landlords who sought to profit from the Games, creating a minor housing crisis in the city.

The Ligue des droits de l'homme (Quebec Civil Liberties Union) estimated there was a shortage of 25,000 living units during the Olympics. Working in conjunction with the Minister of

Justice and the United Way, the Ligue established a call centre during the Olympics to respond to human rights complaints.

RIGHTS VIOLATED IN CALGARY, TOO

Many Canadians, particularly Albertans, may recall that similar violations occurred during the 1988 Calgary Olympics.

Immigration restrictions, tight border controls, large-scale evictions, extensive security screening and a powerful police presence have become the norm for the Olympics.

According to the American Civil Liberties Union, homeless sweeps, racial profiling and limits on free speech were among several civil liberties abuses that characterized recent Olympic games in Atlanta and Salt Lake City.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks have created a new era of national security concerns that will undoubtedly have an important impact on the 2010 Olympics.

The security budget for the Olympics will be the largest in the country's history.

Moreover, the 2001 Anti-terrorism Act provides the RCMP with far greater powers for investigating threats and detaining suspects than were available in 1976 and 1988.

Canada is obviously not China.

There will be no mass arrests or jailing of political dissents.

Still, with thousands of people descending on Vancouver amidst concerns about national security, the Olympics will test the limits of our human-rights regime.

It is an opportunity to assert Canada's place on the world stage and celebrate the achievements of our athletes, but we should remember that it is also a forum for legitimate protest.

Human rights are ultimately best realized by a vigilant democratic society.

Let's make sure the legacy for the Vancouver Olympics is the right one.

Dominique Clément is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Alberta and the author of Canada's Rights Revolution: Social

Movements and Social Change, 1937-1982 (UBC Press, 2008)

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