Civil Society in a Globalizing World: The Case of Mexico

An Overview of Mexican Politics
Conflict in Chiapas and the Peace Process
2000 Presidential Elections
Fox’s Policies toward the Zapatistas

A Brief History of Mexico

• 1810 Achieved independence from Spain in 1810 and established itself as a republic in 1821.
• 1855-1876 Reform Period with a new, relatively liberal constitution.
• 1876 Porfirio Diaz seizes power and establishes power monopoly, Porfiriato.
• 1910 Mexican revolution started by middle class under leadership of Francisco Madero, later joined by peasants under popular leadership of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata.
• 1920 Demobilization of the masses by the new regime with crush of Villa and Zapata forces.
• 1929 “Revolutionary Party” (now PRI) is established as outcome of revolutionary nationalism and rules Mexico for 71 years!

Regime Stability

• Until the late 1980s, Mexico’s official party-government system was the most “stable” regime in Latin America.
• Regime Stability has always been the top priority! Maintained through---patron-client relationships: particularistic material rewards to individuals or target groups to build and keep popular support for the party---state corporatism: incorporation and cooptation of mass organizations within the “official” party PRI.

State Corporatism

• PRI used state corporatism to maintain regime stability:
  ---mass organizations were tied so closely to the regime that they did not have any opportunity for autonomous action.
  ---state has had control over strike behavior and restrain wage demands.
State Corporatism has been very effective in hindering emergence of an independent labor movement and emergence of civil society.

No Meaningful Opposition

• PRI asked for some opposition parties to run against, just legitimize the regime not to share power with opposition parties:
  Not until 1989, did the PRI lose a gubernatorial election, not until 1997, did the PRI lose the majority in Congress, and not until 2000 did PRI lose a presidential election.
• As confronted with un-cooptable opposition, the regime responded harshly.
Emergence of Civil Society

- Independent mass organizations have emerged in 1980s as a result of
  ---declining responsiveness of existing government-sponsored mass organizations (economic crisis of 1980s, earthquake of 1985, union sacrifices)
  ---general societal modernization (urbanization, mass communications, education)

Political Situation in 1994

- Presidential candidates were hand-picked by the incumbent president and ensured victory by use of electoral fraud. Presidency dominated judiciary and legislature.
- Civil society was co-opted by mass organizations controlled by the state. Some independent mass organizations, but civil society still remained rather thin compared with advanced industrial democracies.
- Opposition parties were still insignificant, never had majority in opposition, Never controlled presidency…
- No real driving force for democratization in Mexico!

New Year’s Day, 1994
As Mexico was being inaugurated into the “First World” by joining its northern neighbors in NAFTA, an armed rebellion broke out in Chiapas, Mexico’s most underdeveloped and politically backward state.

The Zapatista Movement

- Represented a break from traditional strategies associated with guerilla movements in Latin America. The EZLN (Zapatista National Liberation Army) advocated
  ---bottom-up democratization rather than seizing the state power
  ---nonviolence rather than guerilla warfare (only 12 days of clash with army)
  ---emphasized the potential of “civil society” for bringing about democratic change

The Zapatista Movement

- Initiated a new emphasis on indigenous cultural empowerment.
- As the image of rebel indigenous figures swept across Mexico, local artisans reacted by sewing ski masks on their folk dolls and carving small wooden rifles to place in their hands.

Subcomandante Marcos: “Today is the beginning of NAFTA, which is nothing more than a death sentence for the indigenous ethnicities of Mexico…”

The Zapatista dolls were an instant commercial success!
### The Zapatista Movement
- Emerged as a new social movement to contest the direction of nation’s future as envisioned by the PRI.
- Has been a driving force in Mexico’s democratization, even more significant than opposition parties…
- Key difference is that political parties have focused on reforming the political society from within while the Zapatistas have focused on reforming the civil society to push for democratization from the bottom up…

### Major changes in Political System
- It was only when the Zapatistas appeared as an external challenge to the system that---political parties were prompted to cooperate among themselves and affect some important changes.
---electoral reforms permitted international and civilian observers to monitor the August 1994 presidential elections and transformed Federal Electoral Commission into an independent body run by nonpartisan citizens rather than the government.

### Major Changes in Political System
- During the 1997 mid-term elections, the opposition parties gained control of the Lower House of the Congress for the first time in history
- In 1999, the PRI held primary elections to choose its presidential candidate, breaking with the tradition by which the outgoing president hand-picked his successor.
- In 2000, a non-PRI presidential candidate, Vicente Fox won presidential elections.

### The Civil Society Response to Zapatista Uprising
- President Salinas first denounced the Zapatistas as “professionals of violence” and “transgressors of law”…
- The first movement by civil society was protesting the government to stop the war!
- And, by January 12, because of sustained protest, Salinas called for a cease-fire and negotiations.

### The Civil Society Response to the Zapatista Uprising
- A great deal of mobilization has taken place outside traditional channels of politics, motivated by the EZLN’s call for democracy:
  --- bringing supplies to jungle communities surrounded by federal army units
  --- establishing “peace camps” and observing human rights conditions in communities threatened by military presence
  --- forming NGOs to monitor respect for human rights
  --- building civilian-based Zapatista support groups
  --- participating in forums convoked by the EZLN to discuss democracy and indigenous rights

### The State Response to the Zapatista Uprising
- Dialogue began with the “Cathedral Talks”: Ended in March with presentation of a document of 34 commitments by the government’s peace commissioner.
- Presence of media in Cathedral talks made rebels to convey to public that their fight was not against the nation but for a new form of nationhood in which Mexico’s diverse cultures would be recognized equally.
- First round of negotiations broke down in mid-June as presidential elections approached…
### “National Democratic Convention”
- EZLN called for a broadening of the dialogue by inviting representatives of the civil society to attend a national Democratic Convention.
- Welcomed some 6,000 delegates, intellectuals and observers to a 3-day workshop on issues of national importance.
- Mobilization of civil society interpreted as an attempt to engender a deeper, more responsible democratic activism than that embodied by Mexico’s traditional political parties!

### The State Response to the Zapatista Uprising
- New Zedillo administration announced “infinite patience” to achieve peace in Chiapas.
- This patience was soon tested by the EZLN’s non-violent occupation of 38 local municipalities.
- Mexican military launched an offensive to capture the EZLN leadership. Establishment of dozens of new military camps in Chiapas.
- National and international condemnation of Zedillo for using the “military” option. He called off the offensive and agreed to negotiate with the rebels.

### Peace Process
- **Law for Dialogue, Reconciliation and a Dignified Peace in Chiapas:**
  - Attended to the causes of the conflict, the demands and interests of the Chiapas people. Government promised not to increase its troops in the conflict zone.
  - Rebels also used the talks as a forum to assert their cultural identity as Mayan people: Marcos’s absence, ceremonial clothes.

### Peace Process at a Dead End
- EZLN decided to suspend the talks UNTIL the government fulfilled the accords from table one already signed.
- Government failed to fulfill the signed accords from table one…Instead concentrated on the neo-liberal development projects and public spending within the state of Chiapas. They did not take “multi-cultural politics” seriously.
- Peace process came to a dead end and no more negotiations until Fox won presidential elections in 2000.

### Zapatistas, 1997-2000
- By no means inactive during this period, EZLN have sought to go on with their struggle based on their non-violent strategy: “Zapatismo”
  - **Local:** Created autonomous municipalities where local government is replaced by a community elected rebel institution.
  - **National:** Made several nonviolent protests through marches to the Mexican capital from their jungle.
  - **International:** Attracted the attention of the United Nations and various foreign leaders, invited to attend meetings on discontents of neo-liberalism in Italy, Spain.

### The Zapatista Appeal to Civil Society
- Media coverage helped public learn that the masks were not to hide themselves from the public but rather “to highlight the collectivist nature of their struggle.”
- Sub-comandante Marcos’ image was reproduced on calendars, ashtrays, key chains, pens, T-shirts, etc.
- Marcos took advantage of the media coverage, giving dozens of interviews that contributed to his transformation from a masked rebel to a freedom fighter.
The Zapatista Appeal to Civil Society

- To reach people around the world, the Zapatistas have also utilized the World Wide Web. They have formed their own website at www.ezln.org.
- This site allowed people around the world to monitor the activities of the Zapatistas and learn about their cause from their computer screens.

The Zapatista Appeal to International Civil Society

- Marcos’ writings were published in national newspapers, translated and posted on the Internet, and debated in electronic e-mail, and helped to build an International network to support the Zapatistas’ right to use peaceful means to attain their political goals.
- When the army launched an offensive, international human rights groups and activists protested at Mexican consulates and embassies.
- Citizen lobbies of national parliaments in Canada, US, Denmark, Italy, Spain and Germany resulted in formal petitions encouraging the Mexican government to comply with the San Andres Accords.

Can 2000 Elections bring about Peace in Chiapas?

- Essential to the Mexico’s slow democratization process, BUT it does not represent democracy in itself
- Is Fox willing to carry out necessary reforms for peace in Chiapas? True to neo-liberal reforms.
- Even if he is willing to deepen democratic reforms, to what extent will he be able to do that? Fox faces opposition from both PRI and PAN in the Congress.

“March for Indigenous Dignity”

- EZLN chose Fox’s presidential inauguration in December 2000 to announce their “March for Indigenous Dignity”, a non-violent rebel initiative that would see an unarmed delegation of Zapatista leaders leave their jungle bases in the south and travel to the nation’s capital in Mexico City.
- It was an effective move that from day one placed the Chiapas problem at the top of the new administration’s agenda.

Three Non-negotiable Conditions

- A day after Fox’s inauguration, Marcos demanded the fulfillment of three non-negotiable conditions before any new dialogue could start:
  ---San Andres Accords signed by the previous administration be converted into law
  ---withdrawal of the Mexican military from seven designated positions
  ---complete liberation of Zapatista prisoners
Fox announced in the first days of his presidency that the military would return to barracks. A notable move!

Over 200,000 people showed up to greet the EZLN delegation in Mexico City.

• Fox pushed for congressional approval of the Law for Indigenous Rights and Cultures.
• PRD and PRI made allies to let the Indian member of EZLN, Comandante Esther address the Mexican National Congress about the importance of the Law for Indigenous Rights and Culture. PAN opposed this!
• BUT then PRI and PAN agreed to pass so heavily amended a version of the text that the EZLN felt unable to recognize its validity.
• Peace process came to a dead end again…

Questions about Fox Administration

• PAN-PRI legislative alliance sabotaged the vote on the Law for Indigenous Rights and Culture---Is Fox really able to command his own party?
• Fox claims to have made every effort to accommodate the rebels…BUT he is also true to neo-liberal economic policies, seeking to “open up” Mexico further to foreign investment and economic development in line of PRI ---Is Fox really willing to deliver to the indigenous communities in Chiapas?

Conflicting Views on Peace

• EZLN version of the Law for Indigenous Rights and Culture provides legal and practical conditions under which the indigenous culture might survive but also flourish: places limits on the capacity of investors and private corporations to take advantage of Mexico’s resources, both human and material.
• Having no “economic value”, indigenous culture is difficult for neo-liberal Fox administration to accommodate!

Conflicting Views on Peace: Fox

• Fox sees peace in terms of a neo-liberal view, as a result of the fulfillment of economic objectives rather than the result of a negotiation process.
• E.g. Plan Puebla Panama (PPP) is agreed to create the infrastructural and economic conditions in south of Mexico and Central America for regional growth and development.
• Fox described importance of the PPP as “thousand times more than Zapatistas or an indigenous community in Chiapas.” BUT has recognized that the new law for indigenous rights and culture is “deficient in many respects.”

Conflicting Views on Peace: EZLN

• EZLN thinks PPP represents a giant step in the process of expanding NAFTA.
  ---winners seem to be multinational corporations. They would get abundant natural resources, with no trade restrictions, low taxes, very low-wage workforce and lax environmental standards.
  ---losers seem to be small farmers, indigenous communities, and workers.
• Promised to unveil a national plan, an alternative to PPP, to be based on several agreements: respect for autonomy, promotion of fair trade and non-privatization of the country’s natural resources, especially fuels.
• EZLN said it would also call upon all NGOs independent from the state and the political parties “to discuss, and eventually approve, improve and apply” this plan.
No Sign of Return to Negotiation Table

- After July 2003 Congressional elections, Fox organized a new team to solve the problems faced by indigenous communities. Fox: “It is necessary to respect the customs, traditions and forms of organization of the indigenous communities, as well as to maintain a permanent dialogue with their authorities and representatives --- their opinions must be heard and heeded.”
- Zapatistas have shown no sign of wanting to return to the negotiating table. Also announced a reorganization of the EZLN and a complete break with Mexico's government…