

Opinion

MEXICO - Mexican Turbulence: Uprising or Civil War?

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December 15, 2006 - Subcomandante Marcos said last month that Mexico is "on the eve of a great uprising or a civil war." He is continuing "the other campaign" launched by the Zapatistas. And Andrés Manuel López Obrador, candidate of the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) in the election of June 2, 2006, has asserted very loudly, and to very great public support, that his election was stolen. He has refused to recognize Felipe Calderón who took the presidential oath on December 1, and has established his own competing structure, the "legitimate government" - with offices, a cabinet, and representatives in each region. Meanwhile, what started earlier this year as a teacher's wage strike in Oaxaca morphed into a general anti-capitalist uprising that took over the town under a structure that called itself the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO in Spanish), and demanded minimally the dismissal of the PRI provincial governor, one Ulisses Ruiz. State and federal police eventually moved in with force, put down the uprising, and the leaders of APPO have been arrested.

How did the next-door neighbor of the United States get to a point where its government is actively and vigorously challenged as illegitimate, and where people are discussing whether the legal president can actually last out his six-year term, ending an 80-year period of relative political stability? One has to put together three elements to explain the turbulence: 500 years of oppression of the indigenous peoples of Mexico; the deterioration of Mexico's twentieth-century political institutions; and the impact of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on Mexico's basic welfare.

Mexico is a White settler country in which the majority of the population is composed of indigenous Indian peoples plus peoples of so-called mixed blood. Numbers make a difference, especially when the racial/ethnic stratification has remained fairly constant for so long and the gap in living standards is so blatant. The most recent political consequence of this underlying tension has been the emergence of the Zapatistas (the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*) in Chiapas in 1994. The Zapatistas have proved themselves to be a lasting, meaningful political force whose "other campaign" that they started last year has begun to have its impact throughout the country. The "other campaign" is not a campaign for electoral power, nor to take over the present Mexican state. It seeks to empower local communities and oppressed groups of every variety (women, peasants and workers, gays) in a struggle against capitalism and imperialism - in Mexico and throughout the world.

There is a second front - the formal political arena established in the wake of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. After a shaky beginning, Mexico settled down into one-party rule under the aegis of the *Partido Revolucionaria Institucional* (PRI). PRI was at its revolutionary height in the 1930's during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, who nationalized petroleum and pursued agrarian reform by establishing government-backed communal land projects known as ejidos. Ever since 1940, the PRI has moved away from the path of Cárdenas, becoming more and more bureaucratic, conservative, and corrupt. Initially, its only opposition was a Catholic-based, pro-business rightwing party known as the *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN).

In 1989, there was a breakaway to the left from PRI with the founding of the PRD. The 1988 candidate for president of the left forces that were to become the PRD was Cárdenas's son, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas. It is generally agreed that the 1988 election was stolen by PRI, but the left did not fight this indignity. In 2000,

the candidate of PAN, Vicente Fox, won, finally ousting PRI from presidential power and sending it on a precipitate political decline. When the PRD candidate in 2006, López Obrador was said to be defeated, he did not fade away passively like Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in 1988. Instead, he has sought actively to delegitimize his opponent's supposed victory.

The Zapatistas and the López Obradistas represent two wings of Mexico's popular opposition. They represent different political strategies, and at the moment are not working in unison with each other. But APPO in Oaxaca indicates the kind of forces that might bring the two together. Both support APPO, and APPO has been totally autonomous from both of them. There may be many more APPO's in the near future.

The final element to put into the picture is NAFTA. Mexico's upper strata have done well under NAFTA. But the lower strata are worse off than ever. One of the many consequences of course has been increased trans-border migration into the United States, which has led to internal turmoil in the United States - between a new "nativist" anti-immigrant movement and an aroused Latino political constituency. If the world-economy takes a further downward turn in the coming year or two, Mexico's legal government may face a drastic fall in income and find it difficult to weather the storm. And the two turbulences - that of Mexico and the United States - may join forces.

"Bubble, bubble, toil and trouble/Fire burn and cauldron bubble," intoned the witches in *Macbeth*.

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These [commentaries](#), published twice monthly, are intended to be reflections on the contemporary world scene, as seen from the perspective not of the immediate headlines but of the long term.

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