

Over 150 days of Fox's indigenism

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Is there a traceable distance between the political rhetoric of Fox's campaign discourse and that of Fox in administration? How can one evaluate his dealings with Indian peoples over 100 days? Is there a change already noticeable?

Perhaps the most dramatic change in Vicente Fox's style of addressing indigenous issues is the recognition that the "Indian problem" is much more complicated than he ever thought. During his political proselytism he offered a formula for indigenous welfare based on consumerism: what the Indian peoples want, he once said, is "a TV, a Volkswagen and a small business." In this formulation, the discontent of Indians, after the Chiapas revolt, was due to their lack of access to urban consumerism's mass commodity products. This deficit was identified as the root of injustice and corruption. Indeed, lack of "development" has been a recurrent official view.

The creation and implementation of *indigenism*—for over 50 years a policy and theoretical ground upon which to achieve the acculturation or *mexicanization* of Indians—represents a case in point. According to traditional indigenism, Indians were backward, because they were isolated, and because they could not speak Spanish they were exploited by mestizo and ladino peoples. Acculturation offers the means to overcome this condition by receiving information via the TV, enjoying mobility and prestige by owning a modest car, plus acquiring the mentality of a small entrepreneur. Of course, views such as these made it very difficult to tackle the problem from a political and even historical perspective, making the official task of recognizing diversity, in the terms expressed by the indigenous peoples themselves, more difficult still.

REBELS AND CONSERVATIVES

Throughout March 2001, events arising in response to the Zapatista tour for

fulfillment of the San Andrés Agreements (ASA) of February 1996, motivated a presidential change in approach with regard to the unresolved conflict in Chiapas. The tour, widely covered by the media, brought to the fore centuries of conservatism and prejudice against the Indians by the ruling class and the PAN legislators. In fact, PAN legislators made evident their discomfort at having to recognize an armed group whom only seven years ago had declared war on the Mexican state. Notwithstanding Fox's decision to send this controversial initiative to Senate on the first day of his government, the move did not bring peace to the region nor did it allow him to have a close encounter with the rebel leader. The proposal as sent to the congress was renamed the COCOPA-EZLN-CNI (December 5, 2000).

On April 25, 2001, Fox's COCOPA-EZLN-CNI was turned down unanimously by the Senate. A new version of the *Law on Indigenous Rights and Culture* was finally approved by 386 deputy votes in favour and 66 against. The passing of this new legislation contravenes the agreements signed in February 1996, between the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN) and the federal executive, for two reasons. First, the historical negotiation recognized indigenous peoples as legal subjects whose cultures would be respected and enhanced. Second, with this recognition, indigenous peoples were to play a leading participatory role. This has been substantially modified with the new legislation, which resembles another development program. The new reforms were condensed into a handful of articles. The COCOPA-EZLN-CNI initiative sought to legislate, among others, articles 4 and 115, which deal with the nation's composition and the relationships between the present municipalities and the indigenous peoples.

That Fox has announced satisfaction with the results of a law that overshadows constitutional rights for indigenous peoples has to be seen as a worrying signal. Prompted by the lack of official coherence with regard to indigenous affairs, the EZLN has rejected the new law and any possibility for future negotiations. To this point, no legislative project or governmental effort has been able to reinitiate a peace agreement.

EZLN's civil arm, the National Indigenous Congress (CNI), announced mobilizations in defence of the COCOPA initiative, while the other nationwide indigenous organization, National Plural Assembly for Autonomy (ANIPA), blatantly rejected the new indigenous law with the following judgment: "Once again, Mexico without us!" It remains to be seen what kind of future awaits April's

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hurriedly passed law, as the local congresses of the 36 federal states of the republic have yet to vote in favour or against it.

Interesting debates will inevitably emerge at the Oaxaca and Quintana Roo legislatures, which have themselves been discussing normative procedures for ruling indigenous peoples within their jurisdictions since 1988. Oaxaca is the homeland of over 12 different indigenous peoples, including Mixteco and Zapoteco peoples, who have a recorded history of immigration to the United States. Quintana Roo is one of the three states—the others are Yucatán and Campeche—that have played a role in dividing the homogeneous Maya people of the Yucatán peninsula since the early 20th century.

While the *Indigenous Law* of April 2001 is still under discussion, approved in only 8 of 36 states of the federation, more worrying signals have emerged from Fox's politics. During a recent tour of Central America, while seeking resources and support for the controversial Plan-Puebla-Panamá (PPP), Fox once again asserted his unilateral view of development, stating that "the plan is considerably more than Zapatism or an indigenous community in Chiapas." He also stated that Chiapas was at peace and that no more power or political space would be given to the rebel movement.

As a government strategy to generate "qualitative development" encouraging managerial control and investment of transnational companies, the PPP poses very relevant questions concerning the control of natural resources by indigenous peoples—a core aspect of autonomy. Fox's premature triumphant attitude and underestimation of a complex, growing problem has provoked criticisms from many different sectors of society. This could bolster the EZLN position. In turn, the media have reported an increasing military presence in the conflict zone. This warrants an official explanation from peace commissioner Luis H. Alvarez. It remains to be seen

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what the response of the EZLN leadership will be after the indigenous law has been debated.

The likely scenario is an intensification of the conflict fuelled by the increased military presence in the state of Chiapas. It has been reported that, to date, the EZLN has over 30 territorial bases. In addition, numerous civil society organizations are pressing for the fulfillment of the COCOPA initiative, thus strengthening the political and moral leadership of excluded people represented by Marcos.

The demands on the presidential executive are considerable. Peace could be guaranteed within the framework of the PPP by reintroducing the approved indigenous law despite the legislative costs. Vicente Fox will have to reach this conclusion. Civil support for the rebel movement is certain to increase and transnational capital does not invest in social risk. If Fox does not take into account the new relationship between industry, the environment, and society, his own ideas about progress will become nothing more than a bad dream.

RESPECT AND RECOGNITION

Autonomy and free determination for indigenous peoples are the key factors of the new pact of; nevertheless, the legislation has created an intense political and academic debate. The so-called spirit of the ASA implies the implementation of a new type of policy based on respect and recognition as well as ethnic and local rehabilitation against centuries of injustice. Employing legal terminology and techniques, the new law reduces federal responsibility and centres on the provision of rights according to the demands raised by each

individual state of the federation. The indigenous law (April 25, 2001) is at the heart of a controversial debate. The question is whether this new version satisfies or falls short of the ASA with regard to the regulation on issues such as "indigenous peoples," "control of natural resources," "territory versus habitat," and "access to media," to name but a few. Original expectations that the new legislation would eradicate official paternalism toward the Indian peoples have been frustrated.

EDUCATED INDIANS IN OFFICE

The present administration has not yet managed to arrive at an innovative policy for indigenous peoples. There is great expectation, though, that more imaginative planning of indigenous affairs will lead to better results given that, for the first time in the history of indigenism, indigenous individuals have been appointed to senior and executive roles. An indigenous educated elite has entered the domain of public decision making and from within will help to dismantle prejudices as to the so-called lack of intellectual or managerial capacity of indigenous peoples. It is expected that this new indigenous presence will be an important factor in the development of policies that promote cultural recognition and structural redistribution. This represents a sharp rejection of former policies, which promoted acculturation as a condition for progress.

A look at the careers and backgrounds of some of these educated Indians provides a closer view of the kind of public policy the nation, particularly its 10 million-plus Indians, can expect. Marcos Matias, the present head of INI

(Instituto Nacional Indigenista), combines three strategic roles: a former Náhuatl leader of his hometown, respected anthropologist, and an experienced civil servant with an international profile. Xóchilt Gálvez is an engineer who claims Nāhñu background. While unknown in academic and political circles, she is a successful businesswoman who is responsible for coordinating the interministerial policies for Indian peoples. Other influential analysts are lawyers of Oaxacan origin, the Mixteco Francisco López Bárcenas and Adelfo Regino, Mixe. Attention should

be paid to the new ideas these professionals of ethnic origin will bring to the formulation of policy for indigenous peoples. Their presence provides integral cultural and historical input to what has long been regarded as a poverty-only issue.

At present, indigenous affairs are entangled in a complicated web of interests. The legal framework is undergoing constructive debate to enhance its ability to provide rights and recognition, but this institutional effort often clashes with the long-held prejudices and suspicions of conservative and privileged

sectors of society, which cannot disguise their contempt for Mexico's indigenous inheritance. While an indigenous elite is now present to conduct their own affairs, signals of peace remain ambiguous in the southern frontier. The final word, of course, will lie with the Indian peoples themselves. Increasingly aware of their rights, they are by no means prepared to give them away. Commandant Esther has inaugurated a double discourse of recognition previously unknown in Mexico—"We are women and, on top of that, indigenous, and as such we are not recognized." ❁

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also exploited, as the joint rejection of the U.S. *Helms-Burton Act*, to unilaterally forbid trade with Cuba, witnesses.

However, quantitative development of this bilateral relation through trade transactions and traditional diplomatic instruments, even if it carries on, is not fresh news. What is new is its politicization. This traditionally non-conflictual and, ultimately, secondary bilateral relation is now part of the core international agenda for both Canada and Mexico. As a result, it is a factor to be pondered when designing other international strategies in both Ottawa and Mexico City, and a process increasingly open to public scrutiny. Besides, the bilateral relation can no longer be isolated from North American trinational dynamics. This article illustrates these points through a review of the main events that took place in the first four months of the year 2001.

THE 2000 ELECTIONS

In 2000, elections to renew the federal executives were held in the three North American countries, a coincidence that last occurred in 1988, when NAFTA was not even a project. The result seemed business as usual in Canada, where the Liberal government was ratified for a third consecutive mandate. On the contrary, in Mexico and the United States,

the elections produced important changes. In Mexico, PAN opposition candidate Vicente Fox was able to cleanly break, at the polls, the 71-year-old monopoly of power held by the PRI. In the United States, after a messy electoral process decided by a tiny proportion of votes, the Republicans were able to dislodge the Democrats from the White House after eight years of rule. At the dawn of 2001, like-minded presi-

dents are leading Mexico and the United States. Both Fox and George W. Bush are business-oriented, strong believers in free trade, and supporters of market expansion and state reduction. Both are eager to frame their political thought within the pragmatic individualistic values of the respective "cowboy cultures" that exist on both sides of the

Bush's electoral victory confirms the trend of displacement of economic and political power in his country, from the northeast to the southwest.

This means U.S. policy makers increasingly know less about Canada than their predecessors did, and tend to ignore (or take for granted) their northern neighbour when they design foreign policy strategies.

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