

Indigenous peoples

Profile

Mexico has one of the largest and most diverse indigenous populations in Latin America. Although the country had recognized the existence of and contributions made by indigenous peoples in the construction of the country, it was only with the 1992 Constitution that the nation was deemed pluricultural. Mexico's indigenous population numbers 12.7 million people representing 13 per cent of the national population, speaking 62 languages between them. Official statistics had traditionally defined the indigenous population using criteria based on language, which many have argued largely underestimated this increasingly urban population. However, indigenous peoples' organizations were successful in pressuring the government to include a question based on self-identification in the 2000 Census. In that year, only half of those who identified as indigenous actually spoke an indigenous language and of those who did, 84 per cent also spoke Spanish. Data from 2005 show that a small fraction of indigenous peoples remains monolingual.

The majority of the indigenous population is concentrated in the southern and south-central region of Mexico. Almost 80 per cent of those who speak an indigenous language live in eight of Mexico's 31 states; in rank order these are Oaxaca, Chiapas, Veracruz, Puebla, Yucatán, Guerrero, Hidalgo and Mexico City. The five predominant languages spoken by indigenous people are Náhuatl, followed by Maya, Zapotec, Mixtec and Otomí (Mexican Statistics Bureau).

Historical context

Indigenous culture is considered to be at the heart of Mexican society. Mexico is proud of its ancient Maya and Aztec monuments, and its indigenous dances, crafts and markets, which contribute significantly to the country's appeal to tourists. Since the revolution of 1910–20, successive governments have professed a desire to integrate indigenous people into Mexican society. The Independent Department of Native Affairs, set up in 1946 under the Ministry of Education, began a programme of teaching Spanish to indigenous children. However, the negative result of such programmes has been a promotion of an assimilatory model for indigenous peoples, which has devalued indigenous languages, cultures and autonomy.

Officially, Mexico's indigenous communities are protected by human rights legislation. The government's National Indigenous Institute has offices throughout the country to facilitate consultation with indigenous communities, and government statements are careful to recognize the principle of cultural diversity. However, there have been complaints that the institute is patronizing in its attitude to indigenous people and simply a token effort of the government, although its personnel have at times been energetic defenders of indigenous communities and have even been persecuted as a result.

In an effort to protect citizens against human rights abuses, in 1990 the Mexican government established the National Commission of Human Rights, which receives complaints of abuses at the federal and state levels. However, this agency has been criticized for failing to take on cases of grievous rights violations,

leading many indigenous leaders and rights activists to question its credibility. Nevertheless, the Commission produces reports and publications drawing attention to Mexico's human rights record. The government has also ratified International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 169 of 1989 on the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples, although it is argued that constitutional reforms have undermined land rights guaranteed under the Convention.

Many indigenous organizations, ranging from small community-based groups to national bodies, have arisen to fight for better living conditions for this population. They have campaigned for access to education, health services, potable water, credits, fair wages, political representation, consultation, the protection of local environments, and official recognition of their languages and traditional skills as healers. Some of these groups work in collaboration with other local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and human rights bodies and others have partnered with local governments.

The situation of Mexico's indigenous communities gained worldwide attention in January 1994 when indigenous peasants representing a number of different ethnic groups, taking the name of Emiliano Zapata, a popular leader murdered by the military in 1919, launched an armed uprising on the day that the North American Free Trade Agreement came into effect. Occupying four towns in Chiapas – where the situation of indigenous people has long been worse than in other states – the National Zapatista Liberation Army (EZLN) stated its opposition to indignities faced by indigenous people and others in Mexico. They called for better conditions for indigenous peoples, protection of communal land and an end to government corruption and human rights abuses. After the initial fighting, the government declared a ceasefire, promised to address rebel concerns and released prisoners. Negotiations were started between a government-appointed mediator and the rebels but broke down when the government proved unwilling to accept most of the rebel demands.

At the height of the uprising government forces shot, execution-style, eight suspected members of the EZLN; and, according to human rights observers, dozens of critics of the regime have been killed or have 'disappeared', reportedly at the hands of death squads organized by government forces working in collusion with private interests. The brutal torture and rape of indigenous women in Chiapas is also documented; perpetrators are rarely brought to trial.

In the elections of August 1994 the PRI candidate, Eduardo Robledo Rincón, officially won the governor's race in Chiapas, but the EZLN and opposition leaders insisted that progressive candidate Amado Avendado was the rightful winner. They created a parallel government, seized government offices, took over radio stations, mounted roadblocks and the EZLN eventually took over 38 towns in the state. The parallel authority permitted peasants to expropriate large estates, liquidated existing state structures and instituted new laws favouring indigenous people and the poor. Large demonstrations were held in cities across Mexico in support of the rebels.

The Mexican government was forced to devalue the peso by 50 per cent in the last two weeks of December 1994, precipitating a loss of business confidence in the new administration of President Ernesto Zedillo. In an attempt to regain investors' support, Zedillo implemented harsh austerity measures designed to control government spending and inflation. In February 1995 he also ordered a military offensive against the EZLN bases, forcing the rebels to retreat into the mountains.

The EZLN and indigenous organizations represented by the National Plural Indigenous Assembly for Autonomy had been demanding constitutional reforms to allow for the creation of pluri-ethnic autonomous regions in areas of significant indigenous population. In effect, this would have established a fourth level of government at a regional level, which would coexist with the existing municipal, state and federal government authorities. Regional autonomy would also have allowed indigenous peoples greater control over their land and resources in accordance with ILO Convention No. 169. In 1996 the

EZLN and Mexican government officials negotiated and signed the San Andres Accords, which guarantee land rights, regional autonomy and cultural rights for indigenous peoples. The Mexican government later refused to implement these agreements.

Current issues

Generally, indigenous peoples have retained local forms of organization to defend their culture and livelihoods. Others have witnessed the collapse of their traditions under the burden of poverty, and believe that they must reject their ethnic identity and integrate into mestizo society if they are to improve their living conditions.

Despite legislative reforms and the signing of treaties and accords, the indigenous people in Mexico experience a double form of discrimination – both because of their low economic standing and poor levels of formal education, and also on grounds of language, dress and other cultural manifestations. What little land they own is generally insufficient to support them, so many seek waged work from mestizo employers, who generally treat them disrespectfully.

Although the EZLN by no means represents Mexico's diverse indigenous population, this pan-indigenous movement has been considered the voice of indigenous peoples since the uprisings of 1994.

The tenth anniversary of the Zapatista uprising highlighted some of the gains of the movement, including the effective governing of a number of autonomous indigenous communities. Throughout the late 1990s the EZLN mobilized large numbers of indigenous peoples and sympathizers in a series of marches and other actions that were met by hostility and sometimes violent repression by Mexican authorities. In an attack in Chiapas by the Peace and Justice paramilitary group, 45 people were killed. Although the Zedillo administration denied the existence of such paramilitary groups, these massacres led to an increase in the number of foreign human rights observers in Chiapas. Many of these observers were later expelled by the Zedillo government.

In 1990, an estimated two-thirds of the indigenous population lived in small peasant communities where they were the majority population, mostly located in the poorest, least developed parts of the country. Although conditions vary considerably, about half of indigenous people lack electricity and running water. Housing is often substandard and overcrowded. Many indigenous communities regularly experience shortages of medicines and food. Child malnutrition is rife in many communities; child mortality is as high as 20 per cent, and illiteracy is considerably higher than the Mexican average.

After the 2000 election, the dismantling the 71-year reign of the PRI presented a political opportunity in which EZLN leaders demanded that the new Fox administration implement the San Andres Accords and withdraw troops from Chiapas. On 11 March 2000, over 250,000 people gathered in Mexico City in what was the largest ever march of indigenous people in Mexico, to pressure the Fox administration to comply with the San Andres Accords. Although Fox did dismantle a number of military encampments in Chiapas, the government's 2001 constitutional reforms fell short of what the EZLN and other indigenous groups wanted. The demands for autonomy, the right to territory, access to natural resources and the election of municipal authorities were all ignored, leading the EZLN and other important indigenous groups to refuse to recognize the new constitution.

Indigenous farmers have been harassed or attacked by paramilitary groups as they work their land. Police brutality and mistreatment by the justice system are commonly reported. Some indigenous communities have been prevented from electing their customary representatives. Attempts by communities to defend their lands against illegal loggers or to campaign for their rights have met with

violence on the part of armed groups who appear to operate with impunity. Leaders who speak out for political change are singled out for persecution by powerful landowners who wield inordinate influence over the local police, political and judicial systems. The repression can range from incarceration and expulsion from communities to torture and murder. 'Disappearances' and massacres of unarmed peasants have been reported.

Indigenous people are also over-represented in the country's prison system, languishing in jail as proceedings stagnate and often spending more time behind bars than a sentence would require were they actually convicted and sentenced. In many cases, they are not provided with interpreters, even though a considerable percentage of indigenous people do not speak Spanish and despite guarantees of such basic protection under the law. Courts often accept confessions extracted under duress as the main evidence for sentencing.

Indigenous women are particularly marginalized in many communities. About one-third of people who speak an indigenous language are illiterate, which is three times the national average. Still, the illiteracy rates for women are 20 per cent higher than for their male counterparts. This pattern can be seen across a broad range of socio-economic indicators, including education, employment, earnings and income. In addition to persistent poverty and lack of access to health services, which more markedly affects indigenous women, they also suffer domestic violence. Although indigenous women are increasingly migrating themselves, males who migrate to cities in search of work sometimes leave women abandoned and with increased economic hardship. Alcoholism, child abuse and incest are also reported as significant problems affecting indigenous families. Women are also more vulnerable to exploitation by their employers, government officials and the judicial system. According to the 2005 National Household Survey, indigenous women had about half as much education and were less likely to speak Spanish than indigenous men.

Conditions have been exacerbated by a structural economic crisis that has left indigenous people, who had traditionally sustained themselves mainly in the agricultural sector, subject to increasing privation. The government has moved to erode the rights of indigenous peoples to communal lands, which was further exacerbated by the implementation of NAFTA. This has also contributed to increased migration by indigenous peoples to Mexico's urban centres.

In light of these new challenges, there are signs that indigenous people are reorganizing themselves. Possible fraud in the 2006 presidential election may be causing a resurgence of the Zapatistas as well as other indigenous and rural movements in Mexico. Despite immense support by the indigenous population, leftist candidate Andrés López Obrador lost to conservative candidate Felipe Calderón by less than 1 per cent of the vote. The day after the election, Sub-Commandant Marcos, leader of the EZLN, gave an interview on a community-based radio station denouncing the election results as fraudulent; however, the interview was censored by the Mexican government. Following the election, the Popular Assembly of Oaxacan Communities invited Obrador and Sub-Commandant Marcos to join an alternative government symbolized by the creation of the Popular Assembly of Mexican Communities (APPOM). Since the controversial election of Calderón, the EZLN has issued public statements asserting that the government is on the offensive and that paramilitary groups have been encroaching on Zapatista territory.