

Mexico Overview

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Environment

Mexico is bordered by the United States to the north and Guatemala and Belize to the south. Although it is the largest and northernmost country of the Central American isthmus, it is today widely considered part of North America. The geography of Mexico is diverse, with a tropical southern region and coastal lowlands, more temperate central highlands, and an arid desert of the north and west. Mexico City is the largest metropolitan area in the world and has increasingly been the site of migration for many indigenous and rural workers in search of better opportunities.

Peoples

Main languages: Spanish (official), 62 indigenous languages

Main religions: Roman Catholicism, indigenous religions

Minority groups include 62 indigenous peoples totalling some 12 million (13%) and Afro-Mexicans 0.5–4.7 million (2000 Census, Mexican Statistics Bureau)

The overwhelming majority of the Mexican population is of mixed ancestry, with most people identifying as mestizo (mixed with indigenous and Spanish blood), and 13 per cent as indigenous. Official statistics had traditionally defined the indigenous population using criteria based on language, which many have argued greatly underestimates this increasingly urban population. However, indigenous peoples' organizations were successful in pressuring the Mexican Statistics Bureau to include a broader set of criteria in the 2000 Census, including a question based on self-identification. The indigenous population is now estimated as over 12 million, about half of whom speak an indigenous language. The official data still does not recognize the presence of Mexico's African descendant population, which is estimated between 474,000 and 4.7 million. The majority of Afro-Mexicans live in the state of Veracruz or along the Pacific coastal region of the southern states of Oaxaca and Guerrero, otherwise known as the Costa Chica.

History

Mexico has been inhabited for at least 11,000 years. Beginning centuries before the European conquest, a sequence of major indigenous civilizations flourished in the region, culminating with the militarily powerful Aztec empire, which arose in the early fifteenth century. Spanish colonization began in 1519

with the explorations and campaigns of Hernán Cortés. The Spanish conquerors quickly ascertained that the Aztec empire was not a monolithic entity and that some subjugated nations could be turned to the Spanish side. Large numbers of indigenous troops supported his decisive attack on the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán. Cortés brought a number of enslaved Africans among his servants and military. They became the first of approximately 200,000 slaves from Africa to arrive in Mexico during the colonial period. Veracruz was arguably the most important slave port in the Americas throughout sixteenth century.

Spanish colonialism had many different impacts on the pre-existing societies after the conquest. Forcible conversion to Christianity was the rule. Diseases previously unknown in the Americas, against which the indigenous population had no immunity, resulted in millions of deaths. The Spanish colonial authorities relocated indigenous communities into fewer, larger towns where they could be more effectively controlled, and on to the least fertile lands. The Europeans themselves took possession of the rich soils that had provided bountiful and reliable harvests of maize, beans and squash for the indigenous communities.

With the participation of creolized Africans and indigenous people, Mexico achieved independence from Spain in 1821. The establishment of a republic in 1824 was followed by a period of political instability, and war with Britain, France and the US. Mexico ceded much of its territory to the US after the war of 1846. Stability was regained in 1876 under the dictator Porfirio Díaz. The following decades witnessed significant growth in Mexico's economy and the consolidation of landownership in the form of huge haciendas (estates) in the hands of a small and wealthy Spanish-descended elite. Tricked into debt-bondage, large numbers of indigenous Mexicans worked on the haciendas as virtual slaves. Severe poverty was rampant among the indigenous peoples, African descendants and the majority of the mestizo population.

Governance

The exploitation and impoverishment of the rural and urban masses, combined with a lack of democracy, led to the revolution of 1910–20. Among other reforms, the subsequent constitution of 1917 revised landownership and drafted a labour code. Indigenous rights were ignored. Established in the wake of these events, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) maintained until very recently a monopoly on political power, despite accusations of electoral irregularities.

A concerted effort to industrialize and modernize Mexico's infrastructure took place from the later 1940s onwards. The establishment of ejidos – communal peasant farms on state-owned land – through the expropriation of large capitalist farms was a central project of the government of President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40). However, subsequent administrations favoured capital-intensive export agriculture and neglected the ejido sector, where most of the country's corn producers, including the majority of indigenous farmers, were concentrated. This led to a loss of self-sufficiency in basic grains and greater reliance on imports in the 1970s.

Economic crisis was temporarily overcome in the second half of the 1970s, when large oilfields were discovered and high world prices for oil allowed the government to increase revenue and attract massive foreign loans. The oil-debt boom came to an abrupt end in 1982 as a result of the simultaneous fall in oil prices and rising interest rates of international creditor banks. A period of austerity and economic restructuring followed, culminating in 1994 with Mexico's decision to approve the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In direct opposition to this agreement, in January 1994, the National Zapatista Liberation Army (EZLN or Zapatistas) staged an armed rebellion. This pan-indigenous and rural peoples' movement, which gained international attention and support, demanded land reform, autonomy and collective rights for indigenous peoples.

Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

In 2000, the 71-year reign of the PRI was interrupted with the election of National Action Party (PAN) presidential candidate, Vicente Fox. Although the PRI was from its early years instrumental in setting up workers' and peasant groups, economic crises and stagnation led these groups to begin to support other political parties. Economic growth promised by NAFTA was limited and did not reach Mexico's southern region, which is most densely populated by indigenous peoples and Afro-Mexicans. Since its inception, NAFTA has brought billions of dollars in investment from the US automobile industry and other capital-intensive industries to northern Mexico, leaving much of the south underdeveloped and uncompetitive. Consequently, there has been an increase in migration by indigenous peoples and Afro-Mexicans to urban centres in Mexico, and even to the US, resulting in new challenges. Moreover, the factories or maquiladores set up under NAFTA have come under fire for undermining international treaties and other labour and human rights legislation.

Although free trade in Mexico has increased investment, created jobs and benefited some farmers, it has also caused the mass importation of cheap agricultural products like corn from the US, making it hard for farmers in the south to compete. The corn industry is not only important for indigenous communities because of economics. Corn is native to the Americas and for centuries has held a symbolic importance for many indigenous groups in Mexico. Because NAFTA was implemented in stages, in 2007 and 2008 there will be a full opening of the markets in corn, bean, sugar and other sensitive industries, which many experts say will further devastate farmers in the south.

Mexico has taken some steps towards reform in recent years, including constitutional reforms and the passing of legislation designed to protect indigenous languages and to fight discrimination. However, these initiatives have remained largely symbolic and have not addressed the serious inequalities and disadvantaged status of Mexico's minority groups. In 2001, the National Congress approved a constitutional reform that ignored many of the demands made by indigenous leaders and which many say violated international treaties regarding indigenous peoples. Worse, the 2001 Constitution fails to recognize the existence of Afro-Mexicans either historically or otherwise. Indigenous peoples are frequently subjected to human rights violations, particularly in the impoverished southern states. Afro-Mexicans, many of whom inhabit the states of Oaxaca and Guerrero, experience harsh socio-economic conditions, with a lack of infrastructure such as roads, and of access to education and health services. Many Afro-Mexican villages have been abandoned by the federal and state governments.

Still, there have been some advances. In 2003, the Mexican government passed an important anti-discrimination law which outlaws any form of racial discrimination against indigenous people and, according to the authors of the legislation, was also intended to address discrimination against Afro-Mexicans and other groups. This legislation also created the National Council to Prevent Discrimination (CONAPRED). Likewise, Mexico's indigenous peoples and Afro-Mexicans have made important strides in organizing themselves to improve their living conditions and gain acceptance for their rights. Yet without more genuine representation, consultation and impartial justice, relations between Mexico's indigenous and Afro-Mexican populations and the rest of the Mexican population will remain unequal and in some cases violent.

The Zapatista uprisings of 1994 were successful in impacting reforms at the local level. Some of these gains include the partial redistribution of land in Chiapas, which has challenged the power of the mostly mestizo wealthy landowners in the region, and the development of self-sustaining, autonomous Zapatista villages. However, this success has been limited and the autonomy of these villages is constantly being infringed on by the Mexican government. Moreover, political power continues to be in the hands of a mestizo elite and indigenous peoples as well as Afro-Mexicans remain largely on the margins of a fast-changing society, struggling to keep up with economic globalization. Possible fraud in the 2006

presidential election may be causing a resurgence of the EZLN and other indigenous and rural movements in Mexico. Despite immense support from the indigenous population, leftist candidate Andrés López Obrador lost to the conservative Felipe Calderón by less than 1 per cent of the vote. This has provoked accusations of fraud, and uproar both nationally and internationally. During Obrador's campaign he promised to renegotiate NAFTA in order to rectify the precarious situation of indigenous people and farmers in southern Mexico.