

New Government, Old Problems for Oaxaca

While a governor with good credentials takes office, the opposition alleges fraud and takes to the streets in Juchitán.

Oaxaca, one of the country's poorest states, has great expectations for the new Governor-elect, Senator Heladio Ramírez López. In the August elections, people chose not only a new governor, but also 18 state representatives and 570 mayors. Together they must provide leadership for a region that in many ways represents a synthesis of Mexico's deepest agricultural contradictions. They inherit the old problems related to agrarian property structures, economic backwardness, the marginalization of its Indian population and misery. The challenge they face is quite overwhelming.

Oaxaca's 2.59 million inhabitants live on a subsistence economy. And while it is the country's next to last state along the southern Pacific coast, it may well be the first state when it comes to problems and needs.

Some 70% of the state is mountainous, with few roads. Every year during the rainy season, the tiny mountain villages, home to more than 300,000 Indian peasants, are cut off from the rest of the state. But their isolation has other dimensions, as well. People have very few opportunities for development, little chance to learn Spanish (which would allow them to communicate and defend themselves better) and little access to culture, in general. Just in the Huautla de Jiménez mountain range and the Cañada region, 40% of the communities have no postal service, none has a telegraph post and 70% do not have adequate transportation or roads.

Oaxaca has the highest illiteracy rate and the highest rate of peasant out-migration in the nation. Thousands of people born in Oaxaca now live in Mexico City's slums. Others work as farmhands, paid on a piece rate during the harvest season in the country's northern-most states. And others cross the border, headed for California, the richest state in the world's richest country.

More than half of Oaxaca's agricultural potential is unexploited. A quarter of its residents are ill-paid craftsmen, and about 90% have no access to social security. Potable water is scarce even in urban communities, to say nothing of the rural areas. Wholesale commerce is controlled by just 0.5% of the state's businessmen, and problems with intermediaries force up prices for basic consumer products.

The crux of Oaxaca's problems lies in the fact that its economy is much too small to be able to take advantage of its tremendous natural and human resources. According to the State Development Plan, Oaxaca cannot generate the conditions needed to assure self-sustained growth. Currently, the federal government covers 92% of the state's expenses.

Migrant workers crossing the 3,000 km long border at some point

the nation

Sixteen Indian ethnic groups continue to live in the state, struggling as it were for their very survival. A peasant without land, with no place to plant, can perhaps make hats; for a full day's work, he will earn about as much as someone in the U.S. spends to make a phone call. But despite their crushing poverty, the Zapotec, Chontal, Zoque, Mixtec and other ethnic groups have a long tradition of struggle and independent organization.

Unlike most other states, Oaxaca has conserved its communal land holdings and today about one-fourth of all such property in the entire country is found there. Land disputes between peasants may take more than 10 years to resolve in the courts, a situation that gives rise to many of the state's agrarian conflicts.

Recently, the National Peasant Confederation (CNC, the nation's largest peasant organization, linked to the PRI) acknowledged that despite the fact that "communal property and *ejidos* account for 96.3% of agricultural holdings, they only contribute 17% of production." The best lands, on the other hand, are controlled by cattle ranchers who live in Mexico City or in other states. According to researchers from the Benito Juárez Autonomous University of Oaxaca, large local landowners have imposed a reign of terror in the state in order to take over the most productive lands.

Just in the last several months, more than 200 Indians (equivalent to about two small communities) have died in clashes over boundaries to communal land holdings, according to information from the National Association of Economists. *Caciquismo*, a kind of power structure headed by local strongmen or *caciques*, still wreaks havoc in the area. In San Juan Copala, *caciques* have harassed many peasant families, forcing them to leave town and taking over their lands. The situation has been repeated in Río Metate, Paso del Aguila, Río Tejón, San Miguel Copala, Yozoyci and Río Venado.

Between 1982 and mid-1986, 592 peasants were murdered in the country; some 70% of them lived in Oaxaca or neighboring Chiapas (*La Jornada*, May 19, 1986). And Heladio Ramírez, the Governor-elect has publicly acknowledged that in many parts



Photo by Rogelio Cuéllar

Juchitec women are renowned for their fighting spirit.

voices of mexico

of the state it has been impossible to break the iron grip of the *caciques* power.

The state's economic and social instability also translates into political instability. None of the last three governors have completed their terms. Manuel Zárate Aquino resigned; Víctor Bravo Ahuja stepped down to become Minister of Public Education; and Pedro Vásquez Colmenares left office to head the National Security Office. Internal divisions have developed within the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party, in power) related to power disputes at the municipal level, and left opposition parties strengthened their political presence in 20 municipalities, especially in the Tehuantepec Isthmus area.

Traditionally in Oaxaca's Indian communities, public assemblies have chosen a representative whose name was then placed on the ballot as the PRI candidate. Nonetheless, in the past few years, and in the face of growing discontent, the official party has begun to name candidates not chosen in public assemblies in order to assure its continued domination. But the Indian rebellion was not long in the making, and it has used opposition political organizations as its major vehicle for expression. Before the elections, PRI analysts believed that organizations like COCEI (Isthmus Coalition of Workers, Peasants and Students, considered to be a left opposition party, winner of the Juchitán mayoral race in 1980) could win a significant number of votes in at least 25 municipalities.

Two months before the August 3rd elections, the country's first united platform by left political parties was formed to run joint candidates in some 50 local and state-wide elections; the new coalition ran under COCEI's name. The contrast between COCEI's electoral strategy and that of right-wing opposition groups in Chihuahua could not have been more striking. While COCEI campaigned among Indian communities in the mountains and along the isthmus and carefully watched over the entire electoral process, the PAN (National Action Party, right-wing opposition) sought out its political support from conservative sectors in the United States.

The elections proceeded as usual except in Juchitán and the isthmus region, COCEI stronghold areas; there the State Police patrolled intensively, and army units showed up in several municipalities. The PRI declared victory in the disputed mayoral races, and the opposition claimed there had been serious fraud. The region was tense, although there was no violence. The highways were blocked off, protest demonstrations were held in the State Capital, and a hunger strike was called in which strikers eventually decided to go to the National Congress in Mexico City. Nonetheless, the political maturity demonstrated by the strikers and by COCEI leaders, together with the willingness to dialogue on the part of state officials, representatives of the Interior Ministry and the Governor-elect himself, allowed for a peaceful resolution. A detailed study of the elections was promised, the hunger strike was ended and the barricades lifted from the highways. If the study shows irregularities in the proceedings, the elections will be nullified and repeated.

So this is the state that awaits the new government. It is really a cross-roads situation, with a choice to be made: either continue in misery, violence and the iron grip of old regional powers, ignoring the legitimate aspirations of increasingly impoverished Indian populations; or take steps toward economic and political democracy. Perhaps the new leaders cannot be asked to erase the problems accumulated over centuries during their six-year terms in office, but they can be asked to use all of their energies to assure that the future of Oaxaca's people be less forsaken. That is the challenge.★

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