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Community Organization And Participation The Future of U.S. And Mexican First Peoples

Despite the very broad cultural diversity of the first peoples of the Americas, they all share some characteristics: they are ruled by communitarian principles and they have a ceremonial conception of life, which links both the wisdom and knowledge of their ancestors to aspects of the territories where they live. Several things differentiate theirs from European languages. They are also descendants of the survivors who faced the ominous fifteenth-century conquest and pillage. Even today, they inhabit the areas that are lagging the most socially and economically and are the lowest on social development indices.¹ This is why determination, resilience, and resistance have become inherent to their day-to-day lives, indispensable for protecting their existence as human beings, maintaining the sovereignty of their peoples, and guaranteeing their rights and those of future generations.

The struggle these peoples have undertaken to ensure their survival and economic and political self-determination has had different overtones and remains in constant flux. The preservation of territory, of the language, and of cultural identity is, among other things, the common thread running through this unending battle. Land ownership guarantees them the possibility of living a specific



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kind of life, of practicing and watching over their respective customs, but also of access to natural resources, just like before the establishment of nation-states and colonization. At the same time, the preservation of their cultural identity and their communities and the revitalization of their languages have become tools used generally for cohesion, empowerment, and self-determination. However, the geopolitical specificities of the places they inhabit means that their struggle includes a broad gamut of goals.

The Struggle of U.S. American Indians At the Start of the Biden Administration

Today, the U.S. indigenous population, made up of both what are known as U.S. American Indians and the first peoples of Alaska, comes to almost six million. In 2020, the government recognized 574 tribal bodies. While the native nations have sovereignty and the government must consult them about everything involving their territories, the fact is that the situation is contradictory, and since the state has full powers over the indigenous nations, they exist under its tutelage and depend on it.² They also occupy a marginal place in relation to the rest of U.S. citizens. They have a more unfavorable economic situation,

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the highest unemployment levels, and the lowest levels of schooling.

Indigenous territories have always been the object of big business interests that want to exploit their resources, and Donald Trump's presidency (2017-2021) was no exception. Multiple permits were issued for extraction of natural resources, frequently with huge environmental implications and health risks due to the potential contamination of the soil and water. The Keystone XL pipeline, for example, crosses rivers and negatively affects biodiversity; the Dakota Access pipeline was approved before the environmental reviews for it even concluded; the Enbridge Line 3 also crosses rivers and indigenous territories; in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a concession was granted for drilling oil; the mining project undertaken by Resolution Copper Arizona implies damage to sacred indigenous sites; in South Dakota, the Dewey Burdock uranium mine seriously affects several areas of enormous spiritual value for the Lakota Nation, etc., etc.

Each of these companies has faced fierce opposition and mobilization by indigenous communities, whether through bringing legal suit for stopping the projects or by holding public demonstrations to increase pressure and media visibility. However, at the beginning of Joe Biden's presidential term, the U.S. American and Alaskan native peoples find themselves in a special moment. In the context of the rejection of cultural diversity and disregard for climate change that characterized the Trump administration, the current Democratic president held high the banner of creating the most inclusive cabinet in history and situating the United States once again as a world leader in the fight against climate change.

As part of this strategy, Biden proposed Deb Haaland as the head of the Department of the Interior, a Democratic congresswoman from the Laguna Pueblo Native U.S. American community. In addition to being the first native U.S. American to hold such a high post in the history of the country, her appointment is also important because it creates unprecedented visibility for these peoples and because the Department of the Interior is in charge of managing the nation's natural resources, including oil and gas, the national parks, and indigenous territories. In fact, Haaland has stated that one of her objectives will be to contribute to heal the link between the government and first peoples. Among other things, she has created a working group to deal with the climate change emergency, with

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the stipulation that this team will have to take into account the tribal consultations about the issue. In this sense, the native, first peoples are expected to take an active part in decisions on these issues, as well as in the revocation of a large number of rules that imply environmental set-backs. Fundamentally, the idea is to halt the opening of protected territories to the exploitation of their natural resources.

Along these same lines, on his first day in office, Joe Biden stopped construction on the Keystone XL project, just as he had promised during his campaign. After a decade of organizing and mobilizations, this was seen as a victory, an act of restorative justice, and a message of hope to the native communities, since it represented an unprecedented alignment of governmental interests and native knowledge and customs. Now, for these communities, the struggle does not end there; rather, they hope to put a stop to other similar projects (Dakota Access Pipeline and the Enbridge Line 3) that threaten their territories and cause serious environmental damage. Pressure on President Biden has already begun, since it is not yet clear if he will leave behind the domestic policy of energy production launched by Barack Obama: "No more broken promises, no more broken Treaties ... We urge you to fulfill the United States promise of sovereign relations with Tribes, and your commitment to robust climate action," reads a letter to the current president signed by seventy-five women indigenous leaders.³ This shows that the first peoples' organizations are alert and vigilantly watching the new administration's activities.

Mexican Indigenous Communities, Belligerent in the Face of Outside Visions of Development

Mexico's 2020 census reported 7,364,645 people who spoke an indigenous language.⁴ In contrast with the United States, our country did sign International Labor Organization

Convention 169, which established that first peoples must enjoy full human and fundamental rights without any obstacles or discrimination. And therefore, in 1992, Mexico's Constitution stated that it is a pluricultural nation. Despite this, Mexican indigenous continue to be marginalized from economic and political development.

For decades, Mexico's first peoples have shown themselves to be deeply distrustful of the state, which is based on the persistent non-fulfillment of their rights. They lack basic health and housing services; they have the highest illiteracy levels and the worst working conditions, which force them to take on risky migration in hostile circumstances. They are victims of violence, land-grabbing, and discrimination and live in conditions of poverty or extreme poverty. Whether by omission or deliberately, the different administrations have continued with the logic of exclusion and discrimination against indigenous groups instead of creating a decent life for them.

As if all that were not enough, in the last five presidential terms (1988-2018), 117,300,000 hectares of land, more than half the nation's territory, have been licensed out for exploitation of natural and energy resources. This has had very high costs for both indigenous communities and the environment: basically, multiple socio-environmental conflicts have erupted, bringing with them the murder of indigenous leaders who were defending their territory and fighting increased water scarcity. Today, a considerable part of the country's indigenous groups, outstanding among which is the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), do not view what the government calls its Fourth Transformation in a favorable light. Both its social programs and its mega-projects, like the Trans-isthmus Corridor and the Maya Train, are met with hostility by these communities because they are based on a national view of development that does not jibe with the communities' needs; they disregard completely their world view, their knowledge about the land, and their cultural specificities, and do not take into account their forms of organization and therefore, their community structures.

However, it should also be underlined that for decades, the first peoples have given many examples of organization, resistance, and mobilization to safeguard their territories and ways of life. In Chiapas, the EZLN has worked to ensure community autonomy and the construction of their own organizational models. The Yaquis in Sonora began a struggle for water rights; in Chihuahua, the Rará-

muri people have faced the destruction of their forests and the invasion of their territories by criminal groups; in Michoacán, the Purépechas from Cherán have battled illegal logging and organized crime; in Guerrero, Canadian mining companies have been confronted by indigenous mobilization; in the northern mountains of Puebla, groups of Nahua have created collectives, held demonstrations, forums, and conferences to fight open-pit mining; in Oaxaca, the Zoque, Chontal, Zapotec, and Ikoot have severely questioned the windfarm projects; in San Luis Potosí, the Wixárika have carried out a long fight to defend their sacred lands from mining companies, and a long etcetera.

First Peoples, Political Actors Reconfiguring Their Surroundings

By defending their territories, cultural identities, and right to self-determination in their own terms, the first peoples of Mexico position themselves as political actors, actively participating in reconfiguring their surroundings. At the same time, they underline the value of a way of life not based on destroying the environment or deepening economic inequality. These experiences remind us that government efforts to include first peoples in national policy, infrastructure projects or development projects must be carried out with their participation, recognizing the authority of traditional knowledge and wisdom in soil and resource management, and incorporating the complexity of their needs. Above all, it is clear that the future of indigenous communities is not to be found in governmental projects, but in their defense of their own existence as sovereign peoples. ■■■

Notes

1 International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), *The Indigenous World 2021* (Copenhagen: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2021).

2 *Ibid.*, p. 588.

3 *The Guardian*, "No More Broken Treaties: Indigenous Leaders Urge Biden to Shut Down Dakota Access Pipeline," <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/21/dakota-access-pipeline-joe-biden-indigenous-environment>, accessed May 11, 2021.

4 Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), *Censo de Población y Vivienda 2020*, https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/programas/ccpv/2020/doc/Censo2020_Principales_resultados_EUM.pdf, accessed May 13, 2021.