9-19-2022

Indian Tribal Governments: Problems and Challenges on the People's Road to Sovereignty

Americans for Indian Opportunity (AIO)

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PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES ON THE PEOPLES ROAD TO SOVEREIGNTY

1. Introduction.

American Indian tribes constitute unique governmental entities within the structure of the American political system. An understanding of the unique political status of tribes in today's governmental dynamics must take into consideration both the historical relationship between tribes and the U.S., and the renewed efforts of Indian peoples to assert their natural and legal right to self-determination. Given the complexity of the issues relating to Indian (tribal) soveriegnty, only a general treatment of the subject of tribal governance has been attempted here. This article hopes to provide basic information for a better understanding of the problems and challenges facing tribes today in their efforts to gain more control over their destiny as sovereign peoples.

Today, Indian tribal governments face many obstacles, both of an internal and external nature, which prevent them from adequately addressing the needs of their people. While progress has been made in the past decade to strengthen Indian self-determination by giving tribal governments greater control of programs and services on reservations, new problems have also emerged.

Moreover, the changed political climate of the 80's requires that tribes make soon difficult decisions concerning the future of their people. Tribal governments realize that the issues are

not only political, but also economic and cultural, and that only a dedicated and informed leadership will be able to overcome present and future difficulties.

Within such a context, Americans for Indian Opportunity (AIO) a Washington based national Indian organization, is making important contributions to Indian tribal governments, offering its assistance to tribes and promoting seminars on the central questions of self-determination, tribal governance, and the relationship between tribes and the federal government. The historical background to the principles of tribal soveriegnty, the status of tribal governments today, and the work of AIO in furthering Indian self-governance and self-sufficiency are discussed in the sections below.

2. Natural and Historical Basis of Tribal Sovereignty.

Long before the coming of the white man, American Indians had developed their own principles of political administration, which found expression in a variety of socio-political organizations, or tribal polities. Diversity characterized the political structure of tribes, and the types of governing bodies administering both internal and external affairs varied from tribe to tribe. General patterns, however, were present.

In the Southeast, among the later so-called Five Civilized Tribes, tribal governments were made up of two complementary councils, known as White and Red hierarchies, which exercised alternate political control during times of peace and war respectively (see Swanton 1946).

The Pueblos of the Southwest had another type of dual organization, a so-called moiety system. Each pueblo constituted an independent socio-political entity. The pueblo's government consisted of a council of priests and a council of secular officers; a town chief, later called cacique by the Spaniards, presided over the government of the pueblo (Dozier 1970:187-199). The Plains tribes too, as we know them historically, had structures governing bodies. Bands, the socio-political units of a tribe, followed the leadership of a headman aided by a council of village elders. When a tribe gathered as a whole, according to prescribed rules of order, a tribal council of headmen (band's leaders) and elders exercised governmental powers (see Lowie 1954).

To these limited examples of traditional tribal governments we must add another complex form a native governmental structure, which was typical of inter-tribal confederations, or leagues. The so-called national government of a confederation usually consisted of a grand council of inter-tribal representatives, or chiefs. A council of hereditary chiefs representing the confederated tribes constituted the governing body of the famous League of the Iroquois (Hau de no sau ne; see Toker 1978:418-44]). The political principles of representation and governance guiding inter-tribal confederations were so advanced that they captured the (racist) admiration of the founding fathers. In 1754, Benjamin Franklin

had to say of the Iroquois Confederacy that

> "It would be a strange thing if Six Nations of ignorant savages should be capable of forming a scheme for such a union, and be able to execute it in such a manner as that it has subsisted ages and appears indissoluble; and yet that a like union should be impracticable for ten or a dozen English colonies...." (Josephy 1973:34-35).

This ambivalence, that is, recognizing on the one hand the political maturity of tribes, while on the other hand regarding them culturally inferior, characterized most of the past two hundred years of Indian-white relations in the U.S.

A tribe, a people and its government, was (and is) a polity; i.e., a political entity with a governing body, a territorial base, a unique language and culture and, traditionally, a self-sufficient subsistency economy. The basis of tribes' natural right to sovereignty laid both in the people's ability to govern themselves, and in their being economically self-sufficient. Nature, commonly referred to, then and now, as Mother Earth, though limiting them in many ways, was also a source of independence to the aboriginal peoples of America. A balanced relationship with the environment was a common trait of tribal ethics throughout the land. Because of such a cultural heritage, still strong among the Indians, today's tribal governments face difficult questions about Nature and economic development.

As noted earlier, white man showed ambivalence towards Indian tribes as soveriegn nations. Yet, European powers and, most significantly, later the U.S. repeatedly engaged into politico-

territorial and commercial transactions with Indian nations. This interaction stregthened the mutual understanding that each contracting party (nation) constituted an independent, sovereign political entity. Such a reciprocal recognition provided the rationale for the negotiation and ratification of treaty agreements. From 1778 to 1871, when Congress (unilaterally) ended the so-called treaty making period, the United States signed over 380 treaties with Indian tribes (see Kapler 1972).

Treaties provided formal legal recongition of Indian tribes as governments having natural and legal right to political and territorial sovereignty. Treaties also spelled out the responsibility of the federal government to provide services to Indian tribes as a reimbursment for massive Indian territorial cessions. In addition to treaties, the nature and extent of the trust relationship between tribes and the federal government was defined by executive agreements, congressional acts and court decisions. In retrospect, the policy of treaty-making, backed by military force, eventually led to the erosion of the Indian land base, the collapse of tribal economic self-sufficiency, and the colonization of tribal governance. While tribes never surrendered their right to sovereignty, they were de facto drawn into a condition of clientage with the federal government.

3. Tribal Self-Government: Crisis and Resurgence.

The latitude of tribal self-government has vaired greatly over the past hundred and fifty years. With the institution of the reservation and rationing system, the political power of tribal governments and tribal economic self-sufficiency were greatly reduced. Agents alienated the traditional authority of tribal governments, and enforced the policy of assimilation by "subverting native leaders who were not

compliant;...(and) deprived the tribes of the economic, cultural, and political resources for building or sustaining viable independent communities" (AIPRC 1977:61).

The Allotment Act (1887) further reduced the Indian land base; of the 140 million acres owned collectively by tribes, more than 90 million acres passed into white ownership. In addition, the severalty legislation, by alloting 160 acres to each Indian head of family, broke up much of tribes' communal holdings, and created the premises for much of today's heirship problems on reservations. During the period between the Allotment Act (1887) and the New Deal (1934) tribal governance was controlled by agents; Indian relations, traditional ceremonies, and expressions of tribal identity were repressed. The lack of effective traditional leadership created a political void on reservations: factional disputes increased, and tribes remained under federal political and economic guradianship. By the turn of the century, the Indian population had fallen to about 250,000, the lowest figure ever. Indian reservations had become America's colonies (AIO 1977:4).

Of the two contracting parties, tribes and federal government, the latter failed to honor its trust obligations. Rather than safe-guarding tribal sovereignty, as agreed in treaties, federal policies pressed for detribalization and assimilation. In 1924, by unilateral decision, Congress granted citizenship to all Indians. The Citizenship Act (1924), however, did not abrogate treaties, nor it revoked Indians' right to tribal membership. Indians thus acquired dual citizenship. As citizens, they now had the rights and duties of their new status. As members of tribes, these "domestic, dependent nations" (Worchester vs. Georgia 1832), they retained the right to home rule.

Emerging from the "dark ages" of federal Indian policy, tribes began slowly to reorganize. As veterans and workers came home after WWI, they brought a new awareness of the rights of dual citizenship. Responding to growing dissatisfaction on reservations and pressure from the public opinion, in 1934 Congress passed the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA). The IRA was a turning point in federal Indian policy, and in the resurgance of tribal self-determaination (see Haas 1947). The Act reversed the allotment policy (Sec. 1); appropriated monies for the purchase of lands to be added to existing tribal holdings (Sec. 5); and again recognized tribes as governmental entities. Section 16 of the Act stated:

> Any Indian tribe ...shall have the right to organize for its common welfare, and may adopt an appropriate constitution and bylaws .... In addition to all powers vested in any Indian tribe or tribal council by existing law, the constitution adopted by said tribe shall also vest in such tribe or its tribal council the following rights and powers: To employ legal counsel...; to prevent the sale, disposition, lease... of tribal lands...; and to negotiate with the Federal, State, and local Governments. (Haas 1947:39).

In theory, the Act recognized the variety and complexity of existing tribal governmental traditions, and gave tribes the option to reject this piece of legislation: "Section 18. This Act shall not apply to any reservation wherein a majority of adult Indians ... shall vote against it" (Haas 1947:40). In reality, strong pressure was put on tribes to accept the Act and to reorganize their tribal governments according to model constitutions drafted by the Indian Service. Between 1934 and 1935, 258 tribes voted whether to accept or reject the Act. In the ballots, 77 tribes rejected the Act; 181 tribes accepted it. Oklahoma tribes and Alaska communities did not vote, since congressional acts had put them automatically under the IRA.

In retrospect, the IRA was no panacea for the beleaugered tribal governments. In many cases, the adopted constitutions introduced principles of governance extraneous, if not antithetic, to traditional tribal methods of government. Also, the tribes' efforts in the re-organization of political leadership on reservations, whether or not under IRA, were not backed by a sound federal policy of tribal economic development, an essential aspect, then and now, of true sovereignty and self-determination. Despite progress made by tribes since the enactment of reorganization, the IRA also cuased conflict and political factionalism on many reservations. Had Indian peoples been given a more active role in deciding the nature and extent of reorganization, according to each tribe's unique situation, many of today's problems would have probably been avoided.

4. Tribal Governments Today

There are today 498 federally recognized Indian tribes and Alaskan native communities in the United States. Of these, only 30 have populations of more than 3,000, while some 400 tribal entities have less than 1,500 members. Most tribes have reservation lands (held in trust by the federal government) which vary greatly in size and natural resources. While many tribes share common political and economic problems, diversity still characterizes contemporary Indian tribal societies. Each Indian tribe, pueblo, community or group has its own governing body. Most tribal governments are organized under IRA and have written constitutions and by-laws (see Fay 1967); some do not.

Some tribes have preserved s substantially traditional governing structure. Other tribes operate as business corporations. Whatever their internal structure may be, tribal governments have repeatedly been

recognized the powers of home rule. Felix Cohen (1940) summarized the meaning of tribal sovereignty as follows:

> 1. The Indian tribe possesses, in the first instance, all the powers of any sovereign state.
>
> 2. Conquest renders the tribe subject to the legislative power of the United States ... but does not, by itself, affect the internal sovereignty of the tribe, i.e., the powers of local self-government.
>
> 3. These powers are subject to qualification by treaties and by express legislation by Congress, but, save as thus expressly qualified, full powers of internal sovereignty are vested in the Indian tribes and in their duly constituted organs of government. (Cohen 1940:123).

Moreover, it is noted that the powers which tribes exercise today are not "delegated powers granted by Congress, but rather are inherent powers of a limited dependent severeignty which had not been extinguished by Federal Action" (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1973:7).

With the Indian Self-Determination Act of 1975, Congress has reaffirmed its support of Indian internal sovereignty, and enacted legislation to strengthen tribal governments. Similarly, the present Administration has declared its determination to honor the governments's trust responsibility to Indians, and to deal with tribes on a nation-to-nation basis. Why then, if the word of the law and of the Administration is so clear, are Indian tribal governments unable to lead their people to economic wellbeing and political internal stability? The answer is complex, and goes beyond the general scope of this paper. We can, however, identify three major causes of the contemporary difficulties faced by tribal governments.

First, while in principle tribes are self-governing, in practice

they are subjected to the federal bureaucracy and its labyrinth of rules and regulation which impair the legislative, executive and judiciary functions of tribal governments. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) is often blamed for this; but, in the writer's opinion, caution should be exercised in blaming the Bureau, since the BIA implements what is being legislated at higher levels. Incidentally, American Indians today make up 75% of the about 13,000 BIA employees. The crucial fact, instead, is that tribes and the federal government do not interact as equals, on a horizontal level. Tribes do not participate in the making of Indian policy: despite the efforts of national Indian organizations (NCAI, NTCA, AIO) to advocate for more political power of tribes in the national legislature, tribes are treated as a lower level of government (vertical relationship).

During the past decade, tribal governments have begun to administer federal programs on reservations. Some new jobs were created, but the major impact was the bureaucratization of tribal governance and the increased dependence of tribes on federal monies. The programs are part of the federal trust responsibility toward Indians, which must be maintained; but tribes initially lacked the infrastructure to adequately incorporate and control the new programs. And now, after tribes recruited the human and financial resources to improve their governmental structure and better manage the variety of programs for the good of the people, now the same programs are being cut back! It suffices to say that the Indian slogan "never trust the white man" has reappeared on reservations.

A second major cause of the tribes' difficulty in exercising their governmental prerogatives is to be found in the quasi-colonial nature of the reservation eocnomies. As AIO pointed out,

> because there has been no reservation business infrastructure to turn over dollars and create new jobs, the federal program dollars have become part of the surrounding non-Indian community's economic system. Dollars are only coming on the reservation and going off the reservation-- not circulating through the community. There is no economic system--only an economic pass through. (AIO 1977:8).

In general, the tribes' efforts toward economic development do not receive the technical and legislative support of the government. On the contrary, tribes "are not encouraged to, and are often discouraged from, making their own needs assessment for technical assistance" (AIPRC 1977:261). Why? Well, mostly because the States, private corporate interests, and the federal government compete among themselves for the exploitation of Indian natural resources. Tribes have thus to spend much of their monies and efforts not on economic development, but on litigations and law-suits against the above entities. And this, in order to reaffirm their natural and legal right to control their land, water, and natural resources. Tribes realize that self-determination cannot be fully accomplished without a sound economy to sustain it. Yet, the decisions that tribes have to make about economic development, must take into consideration the traditional relationship between Indians and the environment. Today, the exploitation of natural resources is often considered to be the only alternative tribes have to boost reservation economy. However, as AIO (1981) pointed out, while tribal economic development based only on mineral resources can offer great immediate gains, it can also create long-term environmental risks for Indian peoples. Tribal governments are thus caught between

the impossibility to replicate a past of natural self-sufficiency and the frustrations of their present economic dependnecy.

This situation impairs tribal governments' work toward more political and economic self-determination. Also, in many tribes, the question of whether or not to develop reservation natural resources has caused a "fracture" between so-called traditionalists and supporters/members of the tribal council. Years of colonization and, in part, the IRA had already fomented internal confrontation. Today, external pressures for the exploitation of Indians' new gold have aggravated the situation.

The nature and extent of internal tribal conflicts vary within Indian America. For some tribes, it constitutes a permanent problem; for others only an occasional phenomenon. Still, in other tribes, the council and traditionalists have found a modus vivendi which benefits the tribe as a whole. Generally, the opposition between the two "groups" is based on a different philisophical approach to life. So-called traditionalists take a more ideological (idealist?) position on Indian issues. They reject white man's culture, and denounce the U.S. for not honoring Indians' treaty right. The council, on the other hand, is generally concerned with the practical, day-to-day problems and needs of the tribe: head start, housing projects, CETA program, the elderly, unemployment, alcoholism, law-suits, and so on. While, traditionally, internal conflicts were resolved either with the ultimate compliance or even eviction (forced or voluntary) of one of the factions, today tribes have to develop new skills to cope with the diverse nature of internal conflict. Thus, despite the unquestionable progress made by tribes in the last decade, little or no power

within the national political structure, economic dependency on federal programs, and internal dissent, still characterize much of reservation life.

5. Americans for Indian Opportunity: Providing a Forum for Indian Ideas and Actions.

Americans for Indian Opportunity (AIO) was founded in 1970 by Indian and non-Indian Americans who were concerned about the bleak conditions of Indian reservations. Ever since its incorporation, Americans for Indian Opportunity has served as a catalyst for new ideas and actions aimed at improving the political and economic status of American Indians. As the name implies, AIO's philosophy stands for equality of opportunity for all Indians, as members of tribes and as U.S. citizens. A review of the work of this organization shows that AIO has been committed, for over a decade, to strengthening tribes' free exercise of their powers of self-determination and pursue of economic self-sufficiency. Working in close cooperation with tribes and other national Indian organizations, particularly the National Congress of American Indians and National Tribal Chairman's Association, Americans for Indian Opportunity has provided technical assistance, financial resources and information to tribal governments on issues and problems tribes themselves considered important.

Given the increased responsibility of tribal governments in the administration of federal programs, today tribes have to work with agencies other than the BIA. Accordingly, AIO continues its involvement in advising and furthering coordination between tribes and federal agencies, and within more than 50 offices and some 16 agencies directly involved in Indian affairs. Besides dealing with the day-to-day issues

affecting contemporary Indian America, AIO has thus defined its long-terms objectives:

1. Strengthen tribal governments with information and expertise, and assist tribes in their endeavors to improve the socio-economic well-being of Indians;

2. Enhance unity among tribal members, Indian organizatons, and tribal governments on issues of common critical concern; and,

3. Foster cooperation among tribes and government policy makers to develop policies compatible with tribal goals for self-government and self-sufficiency.

Americans for Indian Opportunity also works at generating awareness among non-Indians and government officials about the unique rights and political status of tribes in American life.

As the preceeding pages have attempted to point out, the economic recovery of Indian reservations is necessary for tribes to achieve political self-determination and economic self-sufficiency.

In the early seventies, Americans for Indian Opportunity was instrumental in advancing the concept of Indian tribes as developing nations, and in the foundation of the Council of Energy Resource Tribes (CERT) which provides tribes with technical assistance for the development of Indian energy resources. The issue of Indian economic development, by which today it is generally meant exploitation of Indian mineral and water resources, is a complex one. It involves not only questions of a political and economic nature, but also it goes to the roots of Indian cultural attitudes toward the environment.

Moreover, the presence of mineral resources on Indian lands has repoened a historical legacy of Indian physical and economic disposession

still much feared by the Indian people. In order to address the historical, political and economic, and cultural implications of reservation economic development, AIO has conducted a series of seminars focusing on Indian control of Indian natural resources, and on the environmental impacts of development (see AIO 1981). Throughout this work, Americans for Indian Opportunity has stressed its official position as follows:

> AIO is neither anti-development or pro-development in regard to tribal economic resources. We are anti-exploitation. We have worked to help tribes wrest back control of their own natural resources, so that they can make their own economic decisions and, should they decide in favor of one or another kind of development of such resources, we have worked to see that they understand the trade-offs involved in those deciisons - cultural, environmental, and economic. (AIO 1983, personal communication).

Effective decision-making on economic issues cannot take place within a political vacuum. Responsive to the efforts of tribes to develop more efficient and stable methods of tribal governance, AIO has recently undertaken the Tribal Governance Project, a major study directed at: a) an assessment of the impact of self-determination policies on tribal governments; b) an evaluation of their progress toward political sovereignty and economic self-sufficiency; and c) the identification of opportunities for the enhancement of tribal self governance within the Administration's principles of new Federalism.

AIO's Tribal Governance Project comes at a time of difficult decisions for tribal governments. The implementation of the new federalism policy offers tribes a great opportunity to strengthen their governing capacity. However, sudden federal cuts in Indian programs have loaded tribal governments with colossal economic and

social problems. As it has happened before, tribes all of a sudden have to face shifts in administration policies without having had the time to prepare themselves to such changes. With the Governance Project, AIO is providing a forum for tribes, agencies, and concerned individuals where to discuss the central issue of tribal governance today, in light of past and present political, economic and cultural conditions on reservations.

The Cahirmen of Laguna Pueblo (New Mexico), Menominee (Wisconsin), Fort Peck (Montana), Comanche (Oklahoma), Winnebago (Nebraska), Mississippi Choctaw, Cherokee (Oklahoma), and Spokane (Washington), have joined AIO staff, members of the academia and federal agencies in the Project, in order to provide specific tribal cases for panel discussions. During the first half of the year, the Tribal Governance Project has held three intensive seminars, during which an informal atmosphere has been proven to be congenial to effective consultations.

The first seminar, held in February '83, served as orientation and review of the concept of governance itself. Tribal chairmen and various representatives had opportunity to contrast and compare traditional Indian concepts of governance with Western political philosophies. The discussion eventually led to an assessment of the impact of federal policies on tribal governments. The conferees concluded that, even the best intended federal policies, have led to dissatisfaction and political instability within the tribes, mostly because tribes themselves were not involved in the decision making process of policy development and implementation.

The second seminar focused on the impact of the new federalism on Indian tribal governments. It was pointed out that the stricter

fiscal policy of the federal government has resulted in tremendous difficulties for tribes. A difficult political and economic situation on reservations has also increased the incidence of internal tribal conflict. The participants openly discussed the major external and internal causes of tribal factionalism, and suggested alternatives to promote conflict resolution and enhance tribal solidarity. Throughout the seminar tribal representatives provided examples of how their tribes, as people and government, have come to grips with the Judeo-Christian ideas of authority. They also discussed the difficulties that tribal leaders face today in their efforts to relate effectively to tribal traditions, while acting as able technocrats and politicians in their interaction with the white power structure.

The third seminar of the Tribal Governance Project was held in July, and it focused on the immediate and long term future of Indian tribal governments. The participants discussed the challenges and opportunities facing tribes in the post-industrial era. It was noted that Indian tribal governments are now at the crossroads. Despite all external pressures forcing tribes to a condition of dependency, tribal representatives stressed the determination of Indian peoples to maintain and strengthen tribal sovereignty and economic self-sufficiency, and to make their own decisions affecting both present and future generations. Conferees agreed that the federal trust responsibility must be maintained and redefined according to the needs of a growing Indian population. It is also time for the federal government and its agencies to implement Congress' mandate to enhance Indian self-determination by providing tribal governments with the assistance they need in making their own political and economic decisions.

In their concluding remarks, seminar participants stressed the need for a new relationship between tribes and the government based on a so-called mirror model, in which each contracting party's position will be reflected clearly on a horizontal line. This is, in effect, a negotiating model reminiscent of the early treaty period. While the historical conditions of that time cannot be replicated, the nation-to-nation political relationship between tribes and the government remains a major goal for tribes.

During the last seminar, the participants also began to prepare for the upcoming final conference which will summarize the findings and discussions of the preceding forums. In AIO's intentions, the general conference to be held in _____ of '83, will mark a new stage in the organization's involvement with tribal governments. In fact, the concepts, findings and recommendations which emerged in the course of the Tribal Governance Project will be used to develop a handbook on Indian tribal governance. The handbook is part of a larger educational package developed by AIO in conjuction with the Governance Project. Each seminar has been videotaped to produce a video porgram on Indian self-governance, to be distributed widely among Indian and non-Indian agencies, organizations and schools.

The large participation of tribes, federal agencies, and concerned organizations in the Governance Project has rewarded the efforts of Americans for Indian Opportunity. By generating such major consultations on the problems and potentials of self-governance in Indian America, AIO has generated a much needed awareness of a very sensitive issue, which has previously been avoided becuase of a variety of political reasons.

6. CONCLUSION

Indian tribal governments are coping with enormous problems which are mostly the result of conflicting federal Indian policies (see Fig. 1). With the support of AIO and other Indian organizations tribes are trying to reverse a legacy of colonialism, and thus assert their right to political self-determination and economic self-sufficiency. The challenges of the future are great; however, as the history of the American Indian teaches us, Indians will eventually overcome all obstacles in order to preserve their rights and identity as sovereign tribal peoples.

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Cesare R. Marino

Cesare Marino studied social sciences at the University of Padus, Italy. After visiting several reservations in the West, in 1977 transferred to the American University, Washington, D.C. where he received an M.A. in Anthropology (1980). He has recently conducted his Ph.D. dissertation fieldwork among the Eastern Cherokee of North Carolina. Cesare Marino has worked on several Indian projects, and has received formal commendation from the National Congress of American Indians for his services. He is now working for the Handbook of North American Indian, at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Mr. Marino's involvement with Americans for Indian Opportunity stems from his sharing with AIO a common interest in the American Indian People.