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President Zedillo Announces Controversial Initiative on Indigenous Rights

by LADB Staff

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In mid-March, President Ernesto Zedillo's administration announced a controversial initiative to grant broader rights to indigenous communities in Mexico. The plan, which proposes modifications to seven articles of the Mexican Constitution, is an alternative to the accords negotiated in San Andres Larrainzar by representatives of the government and the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) in February 1996 (see SourceMex, 02/21/96).

Negotiations with the EZLN fell apart after the Zedillo administration reneged on the San Andres accords. Interior Secretary Francisco Labastida Ochoa said the presidential proposal is intended to benefit all indigenous communities in Mexico by promoting their culture, reaffirming their values, and fortifying their autonomy in specific situations. "This plan widens and strengthens indigenous rights more than existing national legislation and international law," Labastida said.

Proposal criticized as exclusionary

As expected, Zedillo's proposal was strongly criticized because it was drafted without consultations with the EZLN and the two major mediation groups, the legislative-based Comision de Concordia y Pacificacion (COCOPA) and the church-affiliated Comision Nacional de Intermediacion (CONAI).

The center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) has been the strongest critic of the Zedillo plan in the legislature. PRD president Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said the decision to develop a proposal without input from the EZLN and COCOPA is a sign that the Zedillo administration may be planning to isolate and eventually eliminate the Zapatistas. "We do not agree with the government's decision to act unilaterally, said Lopez Obrador. "Nothing will be resolved that way."

In response to the accusations, Labastida said the administration "would have liked" to develop a joint plan with COCOPA, but did not want the initiative to be postponed any longer. Still, the interior secretary said the Zedillo plan takes into account several proposals offered by COCOPA in recent years. Labastida also said the government has attempted unsuccessfully to bring the EZLN into discussions on indigenous rights. But the EZLN contends the issue was already decided in the San Andres accords.

The Zapatistas have also refused to participate in further talks with the government until the Zedillo administration agrees to reduce military presence in the state and control the paramilitary groups sympathetic to the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). These groups have carried out constant attacks on EZLN supporters in Chiapas, including the massacre of 45 Tzotzil Indians in the village of Acteal in December 1997 (see SourceMex, 01/07/98). But rather than seek new avenues for understanding, the Secretaria de Gobernacion (SG) appears to have adopted a harder

line against the Zapatistas. In a recent interview, the government's Chiapas peace negotiator Emilio Rabasa Gamboa said the administration will not withdraw the army until the EZLN agrees to enter into dialogue. Similarly, Labastida said the conflict with the EZLN should be considered separate from the indigenous-rights proposal. "Attention to indigenous communities that face poverty, misery, and marginalization should be Mexico's highest priority," said Labastida. "Arriving at a solution with an armed group is something else entirely." The government has also attempted to discredit CONAI, led by Samuel Ruiz, bishop of the diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas. Labastida has accused CONAI of being "too partial" to the EZLN rather than adopting a more neutral position.

The two major opposition parties have repudiated the government's harsh criticisms of CONAI. "This effort to discredit Bishop Ruiz will complicate the dialogue with the EZLN," said Sen. Gabriel Jimenez Remus of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). "He has been working with communities in Chiapas for more than 30 years." Proposed constitutional changes require Senate approval. Because of the proposed changes in the Constitution, Zedillo's plan must be approved by two-thirds of the Senate and by each of the 31 state legislatures. As expected, a majority of PRI members in the Senate and Chamber of Deputies have endorsed the proposal. But some PRI senators affiliated with the independent Grupo Galileo have conditioned their support and have asked Zedillo to allow more discussion rather than push through legislation that lacks widespread support.

Support from PRI members in COCOPA has also been lukewarm. For example, Sen. Francisco Javier Gil Castaneda issued a statement supporting the Zedillo initiative but also urging the federal government to take more steps to renew negotiations with the EZLN. The PAN has differed with many sections of the Zedillo plan but has introduced an initiative that is similar in spirit to the government's proposal. Since mid-March, the two parties have been involved in negotiations to merge elements of the two proposals into one initiative that will be presented to the Senate for full consideration. The PRI-PAN coalition has more than enough votes to secure the two-thirds majority needed in the Senate to ratify changes to the Constitution.

The PRD has criticized the PAN's proposal as exclusionary, inflexible, and undemocratic. "Both parties are offering unilateral actions that demonstrate little respect for the dialogue process," said PRD Sen. Mario Saucedo. The EZLN's political wing, the Frente Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (FZLN), condemned the Zedillo proposal at a recent convention in Guadalajara. "This plan fails to hold the government accountable to the indigenous movement or to the San Andres accords," read a resolution passed at the convention. "This is not a bilateral measure but a unilateral plan that will only bring the two sides closer to war," said FZLN spokesman Javier Elloriaga.

Several prominent civic groups have asked the legislature to postpone consideration of the Zedillo proposal to provide "more space" to renew the peace process in Chiapas. In a letter addressed to Zedillo, the leaders in the two legislative chambers, and the EZLN, the coalition of civic groups urged the government and the Zapatistas to renew their dialogue and to reach consensus on a comprehensive proposal to expand the rights and protect the culture of indigenous communities. The 20 organizations signing the letter include such prominent groups as Alianza Civica, Causa Ciudadana, and Grupo San Angel. "The ultimate objective of legal reform should be peace," said PRD Deputy Demetrio Sodi de la Tijera, who has worked closely with the coalition. (Sources:

Los Angeles Times, 03/16/98; El Economista, 03/17/98; Reuter, 03/18/98; Siempre, The Dallas Morning News, 03/19/98; El Financiero International, 03/23/98; Spanish news service EFE, 03/16/98, 03/25/98; El Diario de Yucatan, 03/19/98, 03/20/98, 03/27/98; Notimex, 03/16/98, 03/29/98; The News, 03/16-18/98, 03/20/98, 03/30/98; Excelsior, 03/16-19/98, 03/23/98, 03/31/98; La Jornada, 03/16/98, 03/17/98, 03/19/98, 03/25/98, 03/30/98, 03/31/98; El Universal, 03/16-18/98, 03/25/98, 03/26/98, 03/30/98, 03/31/98, 04/01/98; Novedades, 03/16/98, 03/18/98, 03/19/98, 03/31/98, 04/01/98)

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