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Guest Author

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## Indigenous Communities Throughout Mexico Create Autonomous Municipalities

*by Guest*

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[John Ross is a free-lance journalist who has written on Mexican political and economic affairs for many years.]

The movement toward local autonomy, which gained notoriety because of recent conflicts in Chiapas state, has also started to take root in many indigenous communities throughout Mexico. While the trend toward autonomy is strongest in southern states like Chiapas, Guerrero, Oaxaca, Michoacan, and Tabasco, communities as far north as Mexico and Hidalgo states have also taken steps to declare themselves independent of local authorities.

On April 10, the 79th anniversary of the assassination of revolutionary martyr Emiliano Zapata, the Congreso Nacional Indigenista (CNI), a broad front of representatives from most of Mexico's 56 native peoples, called for the establishment of autonomous municipalities throughout Indian Mexico.

On the same day, Chiapas Gov. Roberto Albores Guillen sent 800 police and military troops into the Lacandon Jungle to dismantle the newly declared autonomous municipality of Ricardo Flores Magon, near the town of Taniperlas, and arrest the new municipal leaders (see SourceMex, 05/13/98). "Autonomy is like a grain of corn," lawyer Adelfo Regino recently told residents of the indigenous community of Paracho in Michoacan state. "We must make it grow from down below just like the Zapatistas are doing in Chiapas."

Although land ownership, cultural and political traditions, and topography in Paracho are distinct from the Zapatistas' home in the Lacandon Jungle, the notion of autonomy touches home in Paracho, a Purepecha Indian mountain town famed for its fine guitar makers. As a sign of its autonomy, the Nacion Purepecha has developed its own political structures and has even created its own multicolored flag. "We didn't always know what to call it, but we have always been autonomous here," said local campesino leader Efren Capiz. In neighboring Guerrero state, the Consejo de 500 Anos de Resistencia, which groups together the state's four distinct indigenous peoples, has declared nine autonomous municipalities.

In the aftermath of conflictive local elections in 1995, the Amuzgos, Tlapanecos, and Mixtecos of Rancho Nuevo Democracia declared themselves an autonomous municipality. Rancho Nuevo Democracia, an impoverished village near the remote Guerrero-Oaxaca border, has been systematically harassed by state security forces and the Mexican military. Oaxaca state legislature approves limited autonomy Indigenous autonomy has taken stronger root in Oaxaca, home to 16 separate Indian peoples. On June 4, legislators amended the state constitution to guarantee the right of autonomy and free association for the state's 400 majority- indigenous municipalities. "There is

still much to be done. We have to remunicipalize, and we need congressional representation," said attorney Adelfo Regino. "But the new law is an advance for municipal autonomy and shows the federal government that it can be done."

The Nahua community of San Nicolas Coatepec, 70 km west of Mexico City, won instant celebrity in April when local carrot farmers jumped on the autonomy bandwagon and declared themselves independent from the town of Santiago Tianguistenco. The villagers complained that authorities in Tianguistenco provide few services, a meager water allotment, and object to Coatepec's Sunday Indian bazaar or "tianguis" because it challenges the municipal seat's commercial domination. The most prominent citizen of Tianguistenco is politician and billionaire Carlos Hank Gonzalez, a member of the old-guard of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Local Indians have been embroiled in several land disputes with Hank Gonzalez. "We don't wear ski masks or carry guns like the Zapatistas," said school teacher Diego Miranda. "But we want our autonomy."

Mexico state governor Cesar Quiroz reacted quickly to the rebellion, at first threatening to use "the full force of the state" to crush it, and then suggesting that Coatepec could be legalized as a new municipality within the state's constitutional framework. Indigenous communities in other parts of the country have also declared their intentions to develop some sort of self-rule: \*In the Huasteca mountains of Hidalgo, Indian farming communities around Huautla, under the gun by police and military since an arms cache was found in the area two years ago, have vowed to declare themselves autonomous unless the attacks desist. \*In Tabasco state, Chontal Maya leader and federal Sen. Auldarico Hernandez speaks of the creation of three autonomous municipalities in the oil-rich ancestral zone of the Chontales. \*In Nezahualcoyotl, a sprawling slum on the eastern border of Mexico City, multiple banners dangling from pedestrian overpasses read, "Welcome to the Autonomous Municipality of Nezahualcoyotl."

### *Autonomous communities at heart of Chiapas conflict*

The creation of new municipalities has been a Zapatista demand since the first peace talks were held four years ago, but government response has been limited to declarations of political intent whenever election time rolls around. In December 1994, the EZLN declared 38 autonomous municipalities in the jungle, highlands, and northern Chiapas after hotly contested state elections were awarded to the PRI. Two months later, President Ernesto Zedillo sent 30,000 troops to the Lacandon Jungle to arrest EZLN leaders and dismantle the first Zapatista autonomous municipality of San Pedro de Michoacan, formed in the town of Guadalupe Tepeyac (see SourceMex, 02/15/95).

Many new municipalities were constituted in October of that year after local elections triggered sharp inter-community conflicts. In those elections, Zapatista base communities voted according to traditional practices and customs, eschewing the paper ballot, while PRI sympathizers voted as the law prescribes. As a result, dual governments exist in many municipalities. After the Zedillo government failed to follow through on the San Andres Larrainzar accords in 1996, new autonomous municipalities were consolidated and town councils elected. One of the new municipalities was Polho, where 46 Tzotzil Indians were massacred by paramilitary forces on Dec. 22, 1997.

The current campaign to extinguish the autonomous municipalities began soon after the massacre. The Zapatista concept of autonomy has been proposed within the current political structure of the municipality. Under Article 115 of the Mexican Constitution, the municipality is theoretically free

to make its own decisions within the limits of the federal system. In reality, municipalities (roughly comparable to US counties) are the most battered form of government within a heavily top-down structure, always at the mercy of federal and state powers, and too often exploited by the PRI as a kind of local branch office.

Some 800 of Mexico's 2,400 municipalities are considered demographically Indian, and it is upon those municipal structures that the Zapatistas propose to build workable autonomies that control their own finances, natural resources, and administrative functions, and which can associate together as a regional authority. EZLN autonomous municipalities elect their own councils and health and education promoters, work collectively under principles of communitarian democracy to create infrastructure, keep their own civil registries to record births and deaths, and even issue marriage licenses.

Throughout the conflict with the EZLN, the Zedillo administration has opposed meaningful indigenous autonomy, which was guaranteed by the accords signed by his representatives and the EZLN at San Andres Larrainzar (see SourceMex, 02/21/96). Zedillo's latest efforts to legislate limitations to indigenous autonomy are currently stalled in the Mexican Congress. The federal government's opposition to autonomy is supported by Zedillo-appointed Albores. "Autonomous communities are unconstitutional, destabilize our state, and are offensive to the dignity of us Chiapas residents," Albores recently told reporters after dispatching security forces and Mexican army units to dismantle four of the 38 Zapatista-declared autonomous municipalities.

On May 28, Albores announced the creation of 33 new municipalities, all of them in the conflict zone. The 33 proposed new municipalities would cover an area now occupied by 26 existing Zapatista autonomous municipalities, including the four ordered destroyed by Albores. Thirteen of the new municipalities would be in Ocosingo, supplanting 10 EZLN autonomous governments. Albores told reporters he was only complying with the San Andres accords in ordering the remunicipalization and invited the EZLN to participate in the process, offering them eight working days in which to respond. In the eight working days following this offer, Albores sent security forces to dismantle two more Zapatista autonomous municipalities.

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