Healing scars of racism: Rebellion in Mexico has forced widespread injustices into the open

By Andrew Reding

Mexican president Carlos Salinas once assured an American television audience that racism simply does not exist in his country. Racism, he suggested, was an oddity confined to the United States.

The revolt among the Mayan population of Chiapas is a wake-up call to the unacknowledged reality of racism in Mexico. True, Mexican racism was never written into law as it was in the southern United States. It is also true that racial mixing, or mestizaje, has occurred on a far greater scale in Mexico than in the U.S. Yet Mexican racism is more pervasive today than its northern counterpart because it is denied.

The ideology of the Revolution glorified the country’s Aztec heritage. Statues and schoolbooks commemorate Cuauhtémoc’s heroic effort to ward off the Spanish conquerors. The Museum of Anthropology has been turned into a showcase of national pride. From the Aztec Stadium to Aztec Television to the Aztec soccer team, Aztec has become a synonym for Mexican. Yet for all the glorification of long-dead Aztecs, none of that veneration is extended to their living descendants, or to any other native peoples.

Turn on any television program; examine the advertisements in any magazine or newspaper; look at the billboards. You would hardly know you’re in Mexico. Almost all the persons in the ads are lily-white, of pure European extraction. Very occasionally, one might encounter a mestizo. But never a Tzeltal or Tarahumara or Purépecha or Yaqui.

Ask Mexicans about their ideal of beauty and you will quickly discover Mexico’s racial hierarchy. At the top of the list is white skin, often with Nordic blue eyes and blond hair—traits almost completely alien to the population. At the other extreme are the typical native features—brown eyes and skin, black hair, broad faces—which are frequently described as feo (ugly).

For Mexico to overcome its racism will require the same sort of consciousness-raising that has spurred change in the United States and Canada. In fact, the one part of Mexican society that has been engaging in such an effort is the liberation-theology wing of the Catholic Church. Its parish priests, delegates of the word, and base communities have been building literacy and organizational skills among the most marginalized Mexicans over the past two decades. Yet until recently, that selfless labor has won them only condemnation from officialdom.

Angered that Tzotzils, Triquis and Mixtecs are beginning to demand treatment as human beings fully equal to the descendants of the conquistadors who continue to dominate southern Mexico, the state and federal governments have tried to blame the Church for undermining the established order. Hence the conspiracy between Mexico City and Rome
to remove Bishop Samuel Ruiz and silence fellow clergy who have interpreted too literally the gospel that all human beings are created equal.

Make no mistake about it—the campaign against Samuel Ruiz, Bartolomé Carrasco, Arturo Lona, and the other bishops of southern Mexico who have cast their lot with the indigenous peoples of the area is but another manifestation of the racism of Mexico’s governing elites.

If there is a silver lining in the cloud of rebellion over Chiapas, it is that it has begun to force Mexico’s unacknowledged racism into the open.

The repressed native populations of Chiapas have become the center of attention. Secretary of Government Patrocinio González Garrido, who made a career out of persecuting Chiapas’ native peasants, has been forced out of office and replaced with the former head of the government’s human rights commission.

Just as significant was a simple but symbolic gesture by former Mexico City mayor Manuel Camacho. After being named to head a government conciliation commission, Camacho met with Ruiz. Overnight, the clergyman became entrusted with mediating the conflict, because of the credibility he has earned through three decades of devotion to the peoples of the Mayan highlands.

While it is to be hoped these initiatives will lead to social reform in Chiapas, it would be a pity if they were to be confined to just one corner of the country.

The needs and injustices are every bit as pressing elsewhere in Mexico. And the racism that perpetuates marginalization is a nationwide phenomenon that demands recognition.

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