Mexico Is Spinning Horrors Into Reforms

By Andrew Reding

If there is one thing the Mexican presidency is good at, it’s spin control. Never mind the recurrent economic crises, unsolved assassinations, drug cartels out of control, soaring crime rates, corrupt governors, and multiplying rural insurgencies. It’s never Mexico City’s fault, and certainly not the president’s. The president is the one true reformer, constantly betrayed by his own political appointees and partisans, who think he’s going too far.

The massacre of 45 Tzotzil Indians—most of them women and children—in the southern state of Chiapas is the latest case in point. President Ernesto Zedillo, we are told, was outraged by the event. He fired his interior minister and ordered his attorney general to investigate and prosecute those responsible. The attorney general promptly arrested the local municipal president, a member of the president’s Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and dozens of members of the PRI paramilitary group that carried out the butchery.

Now comes stage two in the damage control—to compare what is going on in Mexico now with the struggle for civil rights in the United States in the early and mid-1960s. “It would be a fair comparison to say this is like the Old South, and Chiapas is Alabama or Mississippi,” political scientist Federico Estevez recently told the New York Times. He pointed out that presidents Kennedy and Johnson were Democrats, as were governors and nearly all local officials in the South. But when a church burned down or a civil rights worker was murdered, “you didn’t accuse the Democratic Party of leading an attempt at genocide.”

In other words, Zedillo is Mexico’s Kennedy or Johnson, a reformer bent on solving Mexico’s unacknowledged race problem, its treatment of the millions of native peoples who do not speak Spanish, and who make up a large proportion of the population in such southern states as Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Guerrero. To do that, however, he has to confront racist members of his own party, mostly southerners.

The only problem with this analogy is that it breaks down completely when looked at more closely, and in so doing reveals the very cynical game being played by Los Pinos, the Mexican White House.

The litmus test is in the very divergent ways in which the U.S. presidents and the Mexican president have used military force to address their respective southern problems. Dwight Eisenhower sent the National Guard to Little Rock, Arkansas, to escort black children as they integrated the public schools. Similarly, John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson used the Justice Department and the National Guard to enforce desegregation decisions in Alabama and Georgia in defiance of Democratic governors like George Wallace and Lester Maddox.
President Zedillo, on the other hand, has deployed the army throughout Mexico’s southern states to reinforce the region’s embattled governors, most of whom owe their office either to electoral fraud or to appointment by the president himself. Zedillo betrayed his hand within months of taking office. In February 1995, he directed the army to seize the leaders of the indigenous-based zapatista insurgency as common criminals, even though a truce was in effect and peace negotiations were underway. Failing to seize the Indian insurgents, his administration turned instead to a policy of encouraging the formation of paramilitary groups to sow fear among the insurgents’ civilian supporters.

It was one of those groups—Red Mask—that carried out the systematic slaughter of women and children in the small hamlet of Acteal while state police stood by. The only thing unusual about the massacre was the number of persons killed at one time. There have been more than 1,500 political murders in the state of Chiapas alone since Zedillo broke the truce with the zapatistas, most carried out by paramilitary bands linked to the PRI and the security forces. In November, one of these groups tried to assassinate Bishop Samuel Ruiz, who has championed the rights of the region’s indigenous peoples. Though three church workers were wounded, there have so far been no arrests.

Even as he has made the public relations move of arresting a low-ranking party member as scapegoat, President Zedillo again revealed his hand by ordering the army to make yet another sweep of zapatista territory, in an ill-disguised attempt to seize the rebel leadership now that the paramilitary strategy is becoming too costly from a public relations standpoint.

Were the attorney general to take literally his charge to identify and prosecute those responsible for the Acteal massacre, he would have to come knocking on his boss’ office door. By cutting off negotiations with insurgents, breaking the truce, and fomenting a strategy of counterinsurgency that relies on paramilitary groups, it is Zedillo himself who set the policy that led to the massacre, and who is ultimately responsible.

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