Rebellion in Mexico

By Andrew Reding

Last November, as Congress debated the North American Free Trade Agreement, the administration argued that passage would promote democratic reform in Mexico. Recent developments call into question that assessment and suggest the need for more assertive diplomacy in support of the administration’s stated policy of promoting democracy and human rights.

The uprising in the Mexican state of Chiapas is a testament to the dangers of relying on authoritarian institutions to maintain order in a time of sweeping economic reforms and dislocations. Mayan peasants there feel their centuries-old way of life under siege. President Carlos Salinas de Gortari has removed the constitutional prohibition on sale of communal landholdings; state authorities have sided with cattle barons who want to clear them from their subsistence holdings; and now NAFTA will mean lower tariffs on agricultural imports, resulting in lower prices for the commodities the peasant must sell to purchase bare necessities. But though this has provided kindling for insurrection, the spark has come from repression.

That repression is epitomized in the policies of Patrocinio González Garrido. As governor of Chiapas between 1988 and 1993, González sided with the state’s powerful cattle-ranching and timber interests, imprisoning hundreds of Mayan activists and demonstrators on trumped-up charges. That led him into a confrontation with parish priests and the diocesan human rights center in San Cristóbal, which documented and publicized the abuses nationwide and abroad. After raiding sanctuaries and jailing two priests, the governor met with Bishop Samuel Ruiz to try to strike a bargain: release of a priest in return for an end to criticism from the human rights center. The bishop refused. Though the priest was released, González began pressuring the papal nuncio to have the bishop removed.

Instead of acting to curb the abuses, Salinas appeared to endorse them last January by naming González secretary of government, the cabinet post in charge of federal-state relations. González has since used his new powers to pursue old adversaries. In this he has been distressingly successful. Last fall, just as Bishop Ruiz was being honored with the Letelier-Moffitt Human Rights Award in Washington, the Vatican initiated proceedings aimed at removing him. The past year also has seen an alarming increase in deployment of troops to Mayan regions of Chiapas.
A report by Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights has documented a pattern of violation of the rights of civilians by the military in the very region of Chiapas that became the focal point of rebellion. Following the disappearance of two officers last spring, the army occupied several villages, subjecting residents to mass detention, beatings and torture. Despite international exposure, no action has been taken to discipline the officers responsible.

On the contrary, the government has imprisoned a brigadier general who had the courage to call for enforcement of human rights in the armed forces. Citing abuses by military commanders, including those in Chiapas, Gen. Francisco Gallardo published an article in October proposing a human rights ombudsman for the armed forces. In November, the army arrested him for “injuring and defaming” the Mexican army.

Such abuses reflect the lack of accountability in a country that has been subjected to 65 years of one-party rule. This political monopoly has been made possible through control of electoral commissions and appeals tribunals by the president and his party. Despite two electoral reforms during the Salinas administration, that control remains unchecked, as illustrated by the Nov. 28 election in the Yucatan. There, under cover of a power blackout, the PRI returned to its worst ballot-tampering schemes to deny the governorship to the popular opposition mayor of the capital city of Mérida.

By foreclosing possibilities for peaceful political change through the ballot box, as well as by policies that promote repression, corruption and impunity, the Mexican government is inviting wider unrest. To head off such an eventuality, the Clinton administration should urge the Mexican government to honor its obligations under international human rights treaties and to accept United Nations observation of next August’s presidential election.

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