

Mexico's Hidden Face

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with ANDRE SOUROUJON

ON SEPTEMBER 19, 1985, MEXICO CITY SUFFERED A devastating earthquake, registering 8.3 on the Richter scale. Mexican sources estimated that the tremor's energy force was 6,000 times greater than the impact of the Hiroshima bomb. The Mexican government claimed that casualties totalled approximately 6,000, other sources pegged the death total as high as 35,000 to 42,000. In



Housing which the government built was literally demolished by the earthquake, killing thousands of Mexicans due to the structures' poor construction.

PHOTOS BY
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addition, more than a thousand buildings, mostly within the range of six to 10 stories high, were destroyed. The Mexican government's contribution and response to the devastating disaster reflected its corruption and insensitivity to the social dilemmas confronting that society.

The structures built by the Spanish colonial regime, interestingly, were unaffected by the quake. In contrast, recently constructed government buildings, due to poor construction standards, were destroyed by the tremor. Public hospitals were included among the building casualty lists. Following the disaster, it was alleged that construction shortcuts, apparently as a cost-cutting device, caused the destruction of these buildings. Other buildings collapsed because they were used for storage when they were originally intended for a lighter capacity such as office use. Considering Mexico City's acknowledged history of earthquakes, the regime demonstrated a startling level of social irresponsibility when it backed the development of these public structures.

The earthquake left 30,000 to 50,000 people homeless. Demonstrating remarkable resiliency the Mexican people, without state initiative or assistance, organized search and rescue brigades for the victims trapped among the wreckage. The government, threatened by the uncommon solidarity and independence of the Mexican people, dispatched the military to prevent social unrest and looting. Mexico's corrupt army, however, responded by looting, and hampering the rescue operations.

The regime's inept and indifferent response to the social challenges of the earthquake are typical of its approach. Since the late 1920s, Mexico has been a one-party state dominated by the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional); the institutional revolutionary party. The President heads the PRI, the national government, in addition to enjoying a large degree of control over the legislative and judicial branches of government. Dominating the political landscape is the informal "revolutionary family"; a collection of elites who, depending on their position and the particular policy in question, may constrain the President's range of decision-making. The legislative Chamber of Deputies has been confined to a rubber-stamp function.

The hegemony of the PRI has been traditionally legitimized by the facade of democracy. Historically, the opposition parties were primarily a "kept" opposition. Their function was to maintain the fiction of democracy by providing token opposition at election time. In some instances, these organizations (PPS—the popular socialist party, and the right wing PAN—national action party) were financed by the government. Many opposition figures exploited election opposition to gain subsequent patronage positions, loans, and contracts from the PRI. Not surprisingly, ballot stealing, coercive pressure at the polls, and blatant electoral fraud, has perpetuated the electoral pre-eminence of the PRI.

THE ELECTION OF 1976, WHICH SAW THE ASCENSION of Jose Lopez Portillo to the Presidency, diminished Mexico's superficial democratic system as the opposition parties failed to run token candidates. The PRI, in defence of their privileged position, enacted a programme of limited political reform. The law opened up the regulations governing the official incor-

poration of opposition parties. Minority parties were suddenly allowed to sit on the supervisory committees at the polls. Moreover, the opposition groups were eligible to receive grants from the electoral commission toward the payment of campaign expenses.

The effects of these reforms have been mixed at best. Some leftist organizations feel that the changes, such as their enhanced participation in the Chamber of Deputies, may eventually focus the national agenda on social issues. The reforms, however, have safeguarded the superiority of the PRI in the Chamber of Deputies. In addition, the provision of \$20 million to be shared among all opposition parties is minuscule in relation to the PRI's budget of \$200 million. The PRI's thorough domination of Mexican society, in addition to continuing electoral fraud, has maintained the ruling party's control.

Political reform also did not affect the PRI's domination of the main peasant and labour organizations. These groups (the CTM—Mexican workers confederation and the CNC—national peasant confederation) are official party sectors that ensure the regime's domination over potential sources of unrest. The centralization of all effective power in Mexico city prevents the establishment of independent labour organizations, as these groups cannot win the government concessions needed to maintain their rank and file support. Since the regime reserves concessions for the official organizations, peasants and workers must cooperate with the PRI to gain avenues of social and economic mobility. The regime represses the militant peasant and labour movements that resist its intricate system of co-optation. Various degrees of co-optation and repression have allowed the regime to maintain its grip on power despite staggering social inequality.

Various indices document the proportions of Mexico's social cleavages. The wealthiest 10% enjoy incomes some 52 times greater than the poorest 10%. Two hundred Mexicans possess fortunes of at least \$100 million. Half the food purchased in Mexico is consumed by the wealthiest 15%, as the poorest one-third consume a paltry 10%.

Mexico's alarming poverty and the regimes indifference to it is quite apparent in the condition of the rural areas. Two thirds of Mexican illiteracy is located in the rural zones. Fewer than 15% of adult males in the poor south and central Mexican states have attended even four years of primary school. Further, Mexico's rural areas suffer from inadequate nutritional supplies. According to standards established by the World Health Organization, some 50-75% of the rural peasantry does not consume the minimum nutritional standard. Shortages of meat, fish, milk, and eggs abound in rural Mexico.

In rural states like Chiapas, Guerrero, and Oaxaca up to 90% of the people are underemployed or unemployed. Many of these people are either landless or the tiny plot they own is too small to absorb the families' labour. These "underemployed" people rely on work offered by large landowners for their survival. Unfortunately, agricultural day labourers work on average only 135 days of the year. Rural unemployment and underemployment has been augmented by Mexico's traditionally skewed land distribution.

During the PRI's tenure in power, only the Cardenas administration in the 1930s has made legitimate land reform a priority. In contrast to the 19 million acres of marginal land distributed in the revolution's first 20 years, Cardenas boldly gave the peasantry 45 million acres of prime farmland. To prevent high concentrations of land, Cardenas imposed a ceiling on the total acreage a person could possess.

THE COLLECTIVE FARMS, CALLED EJIDOS THAT were formed during the Cardenas administration, encountered difficulties following his departure. Large landowners exploited loopholes in the land reform law to their advantage. Also, the succeeding administrations concentrated state funds on the development of an industrial infrastructure. Indeed, state assistance to agriculture exclusively helped the private farming interests. The collective farms, deprived of much needed low interest state credit, became dependant on credit sources dominated by former Hacienda owners. The communal farms, unable to cut labour costs, were at a disadvantage against capitalist competitors. Moreover, the government ignored illegal ownership of land in excess of the maximum acreage designated by the land reform legislation.

The policies of the Lopez Portillo administration in the late '70s completed the downgrading of the peasant collective farms. The promotion of agro-business placed every stage of food production in the hands of the giant multinational corporations. Limitations against the size of holdings were removed. These acts combined to accelerate the takeover of collective farms by private commercial farmers and multinational agribusiness conglomerates. As a result, a large proportion of Mexican agriculture came to employ capital intensive technology that depresses the rural job market. Moreover, Mexico has suddenly become a net exporter of food, most of it profit yielding commercial produce; strawberries being a good example. This has occurred simultaneously with the rapid decline of traditional subsistence crops. State policies have undeniably contributed to this sad situation.

In response to awful living conditions, the Mexican people have reacted in their customary resilient and innovative manner. The pictures that accompany this feature were taken by *Excalibur* photographer Andre Souroujon while he visited the town of Valle de Bravo. The photos document the variety of petty occupations that rural Mexicans have taken up in their battle for survival. Although not indicated by the pictures, Valle de Bravo is notable in another respect. In contrast to the town's poverty, the upper class haven of Avandaro, located a mere six kilometres away, is used as a weekend retreat for Mexico City's elite. In this respect, the town serves as a microcosm for the dreadful social cleavages that persist in Mexico.



Clockwise from above: A Valle de Bravo villager sits with her child by the side of the road, attempting to sell her weaving to occasional tourists; Jesus walks around his village peddling homemade pudding; an aged Valle de Bravo man watches workers repair a roof; and in stark contrast, Pepsi bottles from the city are piled up behind women selling their fare in the marketplace.



PRI posters promoting the new leader hang over the centre of 'zocalo' of Valle de Bravo, a town 170 km from the capital.

