

4. Political Change: Evolution, Devolution or Revolution?

The preceding section highlighted the current systemic transition that Mexico is undergoing. Under a process of institutional change and ongoing redefinition of state-society relations, the cornerstones and rules of the game of the country's postwar political order are being slowly but surely altered. The political events of 1994 were signs of a longstanding system in transition. The fundamental question is the direction these profound changes are taking Mexico. What type of new political system is being constructed to take the place of the old?

The Chiapas uprising raised the possibility, albeit slim, of a social revolution on the horizon. Two years after the initiation of the conflict, however, this trajectory seems doubtful. First, while electronic communications extended the voice of the *zapatistas* across Mexico and the world, Mexican security forces successfully contained the guerrilla presence to a small, confined area of the state of Chiapas. Moreover, while solidarity marches and demonstrations for the *zapatistas* occurred with some frequency in Mexico City, their appeal did not resonate much beyond the limited membership of existing progressive interest groups in the country, despite the new depths of the economic crisis. A national plebiscite organized by them during the summer of 1995 to define their future direction yielded a disappointing turn-out of roughly one million citizens in a country of over ninety million.

Second, the *zapatistas* recently announced their decision to convert themselves into a political movement. To symbolize the change in strategy, the *Zapatista* National Liberation Army (EZLN) has been renamed the *Zapatista* National Liberation Front (FZLN). While trying to expand their influence across the country, they will now attempt to do so by peaceful means rather than through armed conflict.

Third, several factors have served to mitigate the social pressures arising from Mexico's peso crisis and painful stabilization and structural adjustment process. Illegal migration to the United States continues to be an important safety valve and the dollar remittances that these migrants send back to Mexico help households to cope. Mexico's extended family networks serve in lieu of more formal social safety nets. An extensive informal economy absorbs surplus labour that would otherwise be left unemployed by the country's formal economy. To some extent, compensatory programmes such as the National Solidarity Programme or PROCAMPO have helped to ease poverty. Finally, electoral reform permits the middle classes to vent their frustration via the ballot box.

But the biggest impediment to a revolutionary outcome to political change is the remarkable resilience of the Mexican people. They continue to search for non-