

MEXICOISSUE

Mexico is making significant progress in terms of political and judicial reform and democratization, an important benchmark being the historic July 1997 mid-term elections. However, the incidence of human rights violations continues to be of concern, and in some respects appears to have deteriorated over the past two years.

BACKGROUND

Although President Zedillo has called for a society characterized by the rule of law, impunity remains a fundamental problem. Only a handful of convictions have been registered for serious human rights violations in the last six years. Hundreds of people have died in conflicts of a political or socio-economic nature, often in more remote areas of Mexico, with the local police often taking the side of interests associated with the local Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which still governs most of Mexico's states. NGO activists periodically receive threats and harassment, and the authorities seem disinclined to take decisive action. There have been further developments in 1997-98 that give rise to concern, including the expulsions of a number of international human rights observers, and the outright refusal of Mexico to accept a ruling by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission to release General Gallardo, who many believe has been imprisoned for his support of military reforms. It should be underlined that human rights violations are not generally government-led or the result of any policy. They are rather the result of weak rule of law in some areas, and generally weak judicial and police institutions. As the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights observed in its recent country report on Mexico, the dynamic of this rapidly changing society and the elimination or attempt to eliminate privileges are causing reactions and practices from certain sectors of civil society and state agents that lead violations of human rights, such as violence and attacks.

The governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which historically mediated all conflicts and distributed all benefits, must now - and is - reinventing itself as a competing political party, but the subsequent vacuum which has been created needs to be filled with the rule of law. Particularly in the poorer southern states with large indigenous populations, political and social conflict has resulted in increased violence and an upswing in violations since mid-1996. As a result not only of small but violent insurgency movements, as well as a policy decision by the authorities to use the Army for anti-narcotrafficking and some policing functions (as opposed to the federal police, a body which the government is now attempting to reform), there is now an increased military presence in parts of Southern Mexico, in particular the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca and Guerrero.

Although historically the Army has a better record on human rights abuses than the Mexican police, the presence of the Army in so many roles formerly held by the police has led to concerns about the long-term implications of the phenomenon. The human rights dynamic also varies considerably from region to region: in Guerrero aggressive military tactics to combat insurgency may be to blame; while in Sonora or Chihuahua the source of increased violence is related to drug interests. Violence rooted in struggles over land rights, political and religious differences, and serious socio-economic inequities, continues in areas such as northern Chiapas, painfully underscored by a massacre of 45 villagers in Acteal, Chiapas, on December 22, 1997.