

# THE HERITAGE LECTURES

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Profiling Southern  
Mexico

*By David Asman*



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# PROFILING SOUTHERN MEXICO

by David Asman

**M**exico can be divided into three regions, each with its own distinct character. The largest, with about one-half of the land mass and half of Mexico's 80 million inhabitants, is the north. Here the people are highly independent of federal authorities. Because of their proximity to the United States, they stay very well informed about the economic liberties available in the U.S. They also participate directly in U.S. commerce through the *maquiladora* assembly factories. In general, the history and the practice today of private ownership and entrepreneurship is strongest in the north.

Then there is the middle section, the focus of which, of course, is Mexico City with its 20 million inhabitants. As the seat of the federal government, it is the bureaucratic heart of the nation and subsists to a large extent on taxation from the rest of the nation. Mexico City is generally looked down upon by the northerners, and the feeling is mutual.

Finally, there is the south, about one-fourth of the land mass and less than one-fifth of the population. Isolated from the rest of Mexico, the area often seems more similar to Central America than to the rest of Mexico. In fact, the Indians of southern Mexico and those of Central America comprised *Mesoamerica*, a single unit, prior to the European invasions. Surprisingly, there are some very wealthy regions in the south. The state of Tabasco, albeit tiny (only 2 percent of the Mexican land mass), produces 40 percent of the country's beef, and it is the production headquarters for Mexico's state-owned oil company. But the rest of the southern region — including the states of Campeche, Chiapas, Oaxaca, Quintana, and the Yucatan — is desperately poor. The isolation, the inhospitable terrain, and a history of oppression all contribute to a virtually inescapable trap that has kept southern Mexico from needed development.

## Standard of Living

The southern region is overwhelmingly poor, and its population suffers accordingly. It is a self-reinforcing condition with a long history. Example: 41 percent of the deaths of children between one and four in the state of Chiapas are caused by chronic diarrhea; 51 percent of the deaths in adults older than 65 are caused by dysentery or chronic diarrhea. While 61 percent of Mexicans in general have electricity, only 41 percent of the population of Chiapas has electricity. This, even though Chiapas, with its hydroelectric dams, ranks number one in Mexico for producing electricity. What is more, it is second in the production of oil in Mexico, and as such, it typifies the plight of the southern region as rich in natural resources and potential, but never able to take advantage of its richness. In fact, it is left with very little after the federal government takes its customary, huge bite.

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The federal government blames geography for the region's poverty. Indeed, it is a very mountainous region. It is very hard to develop a road network that will foster trade, that will permit not only the extraction of resources but the transportation of these resources to other areas. It is often easier to transport goods, minerals, and resources to the Gulf of Mexico than to ship directly to the north toward Mexico City, or even to other areas of the state from which the resources are extracted.

The reasons, however, are much more diverse and complex than the government claims. Often, the people of the south have had little control over their political, economic, or social destiny. The land, the people, and their political fortunes have for centuries been passed around as a commodity by various power brokers.

Historically the region was set up under *caciques* — the ancient word for the Indian chiefs who held these social/economic structures similar to feudal fiefdoms. Powerful landowners often known as *patrones* controlled these fiefdoms according to their own private policies, administered their own justice, and up until ten years ago, were actually able to decide whether and with whom the people working on their land could marry. The *patrones* even were known to take the liberty of sleeping with a woman before giving her intended husband permission to marry her.

### **The PRI Role in the South**

Today, many of the mechanisms that were used historically by the *patrones* to concentrate their power under the *cacique* system have been coopted or at least utilized by Mexico's principal political party, the PRI (the Institutional Revolutionary Party), as a way of obtaining information and maintaining its power over the region. This is an important factor in the economic dilemma of southern Mexico, for it has bureaucratized the region more than ever but brought no economic benefits.

In the south, the PRI is divided into at least two factions: the traditional party functionaries and the "progressive" faction from the Echeverria wing of the party, which identifies itself with former Mexican President Luis Echeverria (1970-1976). The outgoing governor of Chiapas, Absalon Castellanos, is an example of the traditional PRI leader. He is a military man, a very large landowner (he comes from a family of *patrones*), and he is very tough. Crackdowns on dissidents in Chiapas have been brutal, sometimes leading to assassination, as happened to a member of the PMS (Socialist Parties of Mexico, formerly called PSUM) in Comitán several years ago. Since very little happens in Chiapas without the governor's tacit approval, his authoritarian style is viewed as responsible for this repression.

**"Perks" for Leaders.** The more moderate "progressive" faction of the PRI in the south is perhaps best exemplified by the governor of Oaxaca, Heladio Ramirez, whose mother was actually a cook for leftist President Echeverria. He is described by Mexican political analysts as a "limousine liberal," one who talks a lot about egalitarianism, but takes generous advantage of all the perquisites received by those who work for the federal government: the cars, the houses, and the servants. He is recognized by the left as the type of PRI leader they would like to see multiply.

Nevertheless, the PRI works to balance the various political trends. The Oaxacan lieutenant governor, Bollandos Gaucho, for example, is from the traditionalist camp. It is Bollandos Gaucho who actually makes the significant policy decisions with regard to economic policy. So on the one hand you have the image of an enlightened, Echeverria-style PRI man as governor, but the man who is actually making the day-to-day decisions about how the state runs, is a traditionalist, no-nonsense PRI man. This is not an accident; the PRI leaders in Mexico City promote this kind of balance — always trying to make sure that no one faction becomes too powerful within the PRI, thereby stifling any movement toward change.

The eyes, ears, and arms of the PRI on the local, community level are the unions. Specifically, the CTM (Confederation of Mexican Workers), headquartered in Mexico City and directly connected to the PRI, is the union that controls "city hall" in the south. The PRI has managed to use this umbrella organization for unions as an octopus network, whose arms extend into virtually every little town in Mexico. There is always a CTM leader who knows exactly who the rabble rousers are, who the people are who can be relied upon, and just how much repression would be tolerated without losing the PRI's preeminence.

The PRI also relies on support from the wealthy. One rarely meets a large southern landowner who is not supportive of the PRI. By constitutional prerogative, the PRI controls all natural resources in Mexico. Therefore, if you want a lot of land, there is no way you can secure it without associating with the PRI, or at the very least, without complaining whenever the PRI does what it wants with your property.

### **The South's Private Sector**

The PRI's chief political opposition is the PAN (National Action Party). And somewhat perversely, the business community of the south is divided strongly, and sometimes violently, between the supporters of the PAN and of the PRI. Unlike the north, where large, small, and medium-sized businessmen have overlooked differences to work with the PAN in opposition to the PRI and the bureaucracy it represents, the private sector of the south is terribly factional. Jose Isaac Jimenez, the PAN candidate for governor in Oaxaca, for example, commented in a 1987 interview that, if the PRI wanted to put up a curtain of barbed wire as in Eastern Europe, the private sector would eagerly line up to sell barbed wire to the government. Indeed, there are those in the private sector in the south who generally rely on government contracts for the bulk of their business. Their operations are not efficient, and they generally accept the notion of protectionism as the only way that they can continue in business. They are willing to sacrifice most political beliefs in order to continue to receive protectionist favors.

Then there is a more independent group. When these business people are asked, on the record, whether they support the government, they say "yes." But off the record, they will tell you all the dirty details about PRI officials they know who traffic in drugs, or who share responsibility for the death of political activists. These independents say that, if the PAN were an effective political catalyst in the south, they would work with the PAN against the PRI. However, they are very much afraid of speaking publicly against the government because the PRI has ways of effecting retribution against dissidents.

One soft drink distributor and bottler in the south said that, since the government controlled the price of soft drinks, if he were not allowed to raise the price of soft drinks in times of high inflation, he would be out of business. In the past, the government has arbitrarily taken such actions as slapping price controls on individual business people whom it felt were not cooperating politically.

**Guidelines Needed for U.S. Loans.** The entire business community of the south agrees on one point, however: the need for more capital. Since the 1982 nationalization of all Mexican banks, there have been very few loan instruments available for independent businesses. Most of the U.S. money from private banking loans and international lending institutions goes directly to government expenditures, and almost no money is left over for bank capitalization. This is particularly true in the south, where fewer mechanisms for receiving loans exist than in the north. (In the north, there are private financing institutions that circumvent the nationalized banking system. While the government often turns a blind eye to them in the north and in Mexico City, such financing institutions are rarely tolerated in the south.) There simply is no capital expenditure in the south of Mexico on either traditional businesses, such as textiles, or such inventive projects as the *maquiladora* assembly plants in the north.

Because of the depletion of capital, all business people in the south agree that U.S. lenders should not send more money to the Mexican government without preconditions. More money should be sent to Mexico only if very strict guidelines are instituted concerning how that money is spent. Loans to Mexico should filter into specific, short-term, capital intensive projects rather than government-supported programs. This would have a more positive impact on the economy. But the fact that the Mexican government has so often failed to keep its promise to capitalize the private sector through this type of loan does not bode well for future U.S. loans.

In short, the debt crisis may well destroy the historic link between the business sector in the south and the PRI. That link has depended on the PRI's patronage and handouts. But with all capital going either for debt service or maintenance of the Mexico City bureaucracy, there is little left over for greasing palms.

### **Role of the Church**

In northern Mexico, the Church is generally seen as politically conservative. This became particularly clear during its protest of the July 1986 Chihuahua elections, which would most probably have been won by the conservative PAN had the PRI not engaged in vote fraud. In southern Mexico, however, the Roman Catholic Church is noted for its tendency toward liberation theology (a theocratic belief that Marxist — and occasionally revolutionary — political/economic policies are consistent with and should be advocated by Christian churches). This has gained international attention because of a town in Chiapas called San Cristobel and its Archbishop Samuel Ruiz.

The liberation theology crowd is divided into two factions: one is the traditional left-wing type of liberation theologian priest or bishop such as Archbishop Ruiz. This faction associates with the PMS or other parties that advocate Marxist economic and/or political policies. Often their distortion of reality for the sake of ideological loyalties is profound. In

a 1987 interview, Ruiz declared that there were only two examples where Indians had been well treated by governments in Latin America: "One is in Chile under Allende's years, and the other is Nicaragua under the Sandinistas."

There is also a nontraditional, or at least nonideological, liberation theology. This is articulated by priests who are genuinely interested in and working to better the conditions of the people in their parish without pursuing an ideological agenda. They are reacting to the history of brutality against the Indians who predominate in the south. The Indians' condition has been so bad for so many hundreds of years that many in the Church are trying to better their condition — not just because of ideology, but because of a Christian, humanitarian concern.

### **The Peasant Organizations**

Besides the Church, there are the peasant organizations. Like the Church workers, some peasant groups are directly associated with PMS, some with the PRI, and others are independent. A few are organized by the Indians themselves, but most were started by non-Indian intellectuals from Mexico City.

One group is CIOAC (Independent Confederation of Factory Workers, Agricultural Worker, and Peasants), an organization linked directly with the PMS. CIOAC focuses its attention on the issue of land for the peasants. It claims that all the land reform programs that have taken place since the revolution have been rigged so that the old *caciques* get good land and the peasants get the barren areas. CIOAC organizes land takeovers of private and government land. They operate in Mexico City as well as in the south, and they are highly activist and generally Marxist in orientation.

Another group is OCEZ (Emilio Zapata Peasants Organization), which is a relatively independent leftist group and is focused in the San Cristobel area. OCEZ feels that land reform has not gone far enough and that land distribution has not been equitable.

The third group is the U.U. or the *Union de Uniones*, which was started in 1973 by President Luis Echeverria's followers. It is not a political action group, so much as it is a sort of lobby organization, focusing on economic policy. It is seen as controlled by the Echeverria-oriented intellectual elite in Mexico City and as using the south as an experiment for its economic policies.

**Beatings and Imprisonment.** Another organization is Section 7 of the teachers' union. Section 7 has become perhaps the most politically active union opposed to the traditional Confederation of Mexican Workers, the CTM. While the CTM maintains an iron grip over most of the unions in Mexico, Section 7 has become a renegade outfit that does not follow along in the PRI-CTM lock-step. The members of Section 7 often participate in peasant strikes, land takeovers, and other actions opposed by the PRI. In 1981, there were 17,000 members of Section 7, but by 1986 there were 30,000 members. There have been many beatings of Section 7 members by CTM thugs and police, and a dozen members are now in prison in Tuxtla Guetierrez, the capital in Chiapas.

The last organization involved in peasant rights is the *Hospital de Comitán* in Chiapas where a group of doctors are very active in defying the authorities in support of the peasant movements. These doctors are generally associated with the PMS, although many of them are using the PMS simply because it is the only viable opposition party in Comitán.

These peasant organizations are guided primarily by individuals from outside the region. For better or for worse, there are many outside agitators.

### **The Indian Groups**

Then there are the Indian leaders themselves. The Indians usually find themselves lumped into one of three political groups: those associated with the PAN, which has influence in the south, though much more limited than in the north; those associated with the PRI; and those associated with the PMS. Those associated with the PAN, particularly in Oaxaca, are chosen by the PAN leadership council, which goes out into the countryside looking for attractive, born leaders who are brought into town, taught Spanish if they do not know it, and taught organizing skills as well. During their indoctrination, these Indians have to be taught how to compete with the PRI-dominated social service institutions.

Some Indian leaders are drawn into the PAN as independents, such as Manuel Lopez of San Cristobel. This PAN Indian leader was elected by such a wide margin that the PRI state authorities could not ignore his victory. So the PRI governor halted state subsidies to his town, locked the town hall so that none of the PAN victors could use the building — and after four years nothing worked. Eventually, they took the mayor aside for a little persuasion. Then the PRI organized a big media event at which the mayor announced that henceforth he was a member of the PRI. The doors of the city were then opened with the camera rolling, and the object lesson was lost on no one.

### **The Outlook for the South: More of the Same**

In short, while the south of Mexico is a land removed from the rest of the country historically, ethnically, and socially, the methods of social and political control used by the federal authorities are very similar to those used elsewhere. The difference is that the methods of control are usually more harsh and the government's agents are less concerned with adverse publicity because of the south's isolation. The brutality with which the government attempts to bury opposition has, however, become a propaganda point for left-wing organizations and political parties. And while the business class has grown increasingly alienated from the PRI in the south, they do not feel comfortable siding with the conservative PAN, as happens in the north.

What remains almost unchanged about the situation in the south is that the poor, but exceedingly proud indigenous population still has little to say about the events that control its welfare. There are Indian leaders who attempt to organize Indian communities, but they usually see their organizations exploited or taken over by the PRI or by a Mexico City party with purely ideological goals. The basic living conditions of the Mexican Indians in the south remain poor, despite the richness of the region. Neither the promises of the ideologues nor the iron grip control of the PRI has changed the impoverished conditions of Mexico's southerners.



**Worthwhile Extra Effort.** The Mexican government seems either unwilling for political reasons or incapable for economic reasons to change fundamentally the conditions of underdevelopment in southern Mexico. While U.S. policy makers certainly have no right to dictate what Mexican leaders should or should not do about their internal development policy, U.S. private and public lending institutions have the right (in fact, the duty) to seek the best return on their investments. And what both international lenders and Mexican business leaders from the south agree on is that big, long-term loans made directly to the Mexican government have not promoted needed, private sector development.

Southern Mexican business leaders, as well as nongovernment political leaders in the region (from the left and the right of the political spectrum) agree that long-term loans to the Mexican government have strengthened ruling party patronage at the expense of capital development. They argue for more loans directed to specific private sector enterprises — those likely to result in stable job development and competition. This would demand more work and research of bank loan officers — it is much easier merely to lend big blocks of cash to one institution, the government. But the pay-off for spending more time and energy researching solid, development enterprises might well be worth the extra effort — both for the lending institutions and, ultimately, for the people of southern Mexico.

