

In the following section we present a review of the Indian movement's experiences with electoral processes over the last year. Members of the movement provide analyses intended both to expose the problems and dangers of the nation-state's existing political processes, and to evaluate the Indian movement's political weaknesses, and thereby strengthen future political participation. Opinions in these articles belong to their authors, and are not necessarily those of SAIC.

Elections in Mexico: Indigenous Suffrage Under Protest

By Araceli Burguete Cal y Mayor

The Mexican Constitution was modified in 1992 to include certain new Indigenous rights. Unfortunately, this reform has never been implemented, and Indigenous forms of social organization and democratic representation still lack legal recognition. Despite many efforts to pass legislation guaranteeing Indian representation in congress over the past three years, none have been adopted because Indigenous organizations still lack allies to support these proposals. Thus, Mexico's Indigenous peoples have access to the nation's congress only through participation in the political parties.

At the same time, there is ample consensus among the nation's Indigenous organizations that the political parties are not adequate mechanisms for bringing Indigenous representatives to congress. This conclusion has been reinforced by the marginal placement of Indigenous demands in the political parties' agendas, in addition to the absence of Indigenous representation in their leadership struc-

tures. Faced with this situation, Indigenous people have become increasingly doubtful about working through the political parties. Consequently, the traditional parties have gradually lost political control within the country's Indigenous regions.

Thus, despite the high turnout of Indigenous voters for the Aug. 21 presidential elections nationally, several Indigenous regions refused to vote in their entirety. A significant number of community assemblies, like that of San Juan Comalapa in Oaxaca, rejected the establishment of polling places in their communities and decided to remain outside the electoral process. Not just this town, but practically the entire Triqui region in Oaxaca boycotted the election. Of those Indigenous people who voted nationwide, many did so under protest: unhappy with the partisan system, but conscious of the need to contribute with their vote to the country's political future.

National Indigenous Electoral Convention

For the first time in contemporary Mexican history, delegates representing

nearly 100 politically diverse Indigenous organizations met in Mexico City on March 4 and 5 to develop a common national electoral strategy. The Convention presented presidential candidates attending the meeting with a consensus program with universal Indigenous demands. At the same time, the Convention demanded candidates to specify their policies on the right to self-determination, as well as representation in congress. The Assembly's program demanded that political parties agree to the creation of a Sixth Electoral District, exclusively for Indigenous peoples, and that they reserve a quota of 10% of their candidacies for Indigenous representatives.

Although the candidates reiterated their commitment to the Indigenous people—especially due to the pressure caused by events in Chiapas—they did not adopt the demand for a new districting as their own. Only the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) responded by reserving three candidacies in the lower house and two in the senate for Indian leaders. Though not insignificant, this gesture is certainly limited—especial-

Araceli Burguete is a Chiapas native as well as Technical and Research Coordinator for the Independent Indian Peoples Front.



Photo: Carlos Contreras

Pre-election protestors denouncing the ruling party's role in past atrocities against civilians carried out by the military.

ly if it is taken into account that Mexico's Indigenous people constitute more than 15% of the population. The governing Institutional Revolutionary Party will have no more than two Indigenous deputies and one Indigenous senator.

National Democratic Convention in Chiapas

On June 13, based on the overwhelming majority of the vote within their supporter communities the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) refused the Mexican government's peace proposal. At the same time the EZLN announced a strategy to seek unity the civilian movement pushing for a transition to national democracy. To this end, they summoned a diverse group of orga-

nizations and individuals from throughout the country to a National Democratic Convention (CND) from Aug. 8 to 10, within Zapatista territory in the Lacandon Jungle. Astonishingly, over 6,000 delegates from throughout Mexico made the long journey to attend this event in the isolated and previously obscure community of Aguascalientes.

As with practically all events organized by the "civil society"—that is, mestizo society—Indigenous participation was marginal and the number of delegates was scarcely significant. Despite the limited number of participants, Indigenous organizations came to a consensus proposal for use in the discussion table. Thus, half of the resolutions at the round table for a Constitutional Congress and a New

Constitution related to Indigenous peoples rights, gathering in a synthesis of the proposals presented by the Independent Indian Peoples Front (FIPI), along with those of other delegations. The final text of the Convention read as follows:

As concerns the Indigenous peoples, the National Democratic Convention resolves that their autonomy, self-determination and territorial rights be recognized; that the customary right of Indigenous people be elevated to a constitutional right; that a new chapter on Indigenous people, elaborated by the Indigenous peoples themselves, be integrated in the New Constitution. The policy will be elaborated on seven axes: land, employment, justice, economy, freedom, health and education. That articles 115 through 122 be

revised to strengthen municipalities and establish the Indigenous regions. That the Fourth article be modified to conform a Sixth Plurinomial Districting for Indigenous representation, that the right to education be made effective and that this education respects and integrates the diversity of all Indigenous peoples, their traditions, customs, and languages. Education should be free at all levels, democratic, lay, scientific, humanistic, national and critical. Education for Indigenous people must be bilingual at all levels.

In spite of the importance of this paragraph, it is important to acknowledge that Indigenous perspectives and the aspirations of the Indigenous people in Mexico were not the central theme of the CND—this despite the convention's location in the heart of the conflict zone, within territory held by an army, nearly all of whom are Indian.

Fragile Coalition Divides in Chiapas

A political watershed leading up to the National Democratic Convention was the fragmentation into two halves of the Indigenous and Campesino State Council of Chiapas (CEOIC). It was evident that the Convention would express

opposition to the government and the official (PRI) party. Predictably, the government tried to forestall CEOIC's participation in the CND by trying to create divisions within the coalition. Unfortunately, these prospered. Half of CEOIC—made up of organizations largely financed by the government or the PRI—stood against participation in the Convention. The other half—the self-proclaimed Independent CEOIC—endorsed, and then joined the CND. The independent CEOIC maintains a line of civilian support for the Zapatista proposals and negotiations, and continues to contribute significantly to the extension of “civilian bridges” into the conflict zone.

Elections in Chiapas

August 21, election day, was particularly significant for Chiapas. The state's elections contrasted sharply with those in the rest of the country. For the first time in the highland and jungle regions of Chiapas, Indigenous people exercised their citizen's right to vote in massive fashion. For the first time they voted of their own free will, without impositions, and without being coerced. For the first time the Indigenous vote in Chiapas was not for the PRI.

At the national level, the PRI once

again appropriated—through fraud and multiple electoral transgressions that have not been investigated—over 90% of the seats for in the House of Deputies and almost 100% of those for the Senate. Nonetheless, the disappointment felt by Indigenous peoples did not coalesce into a post-electoral struggle. When the elections were over, Indigenous organizations returned to their previous struggles and tactics. The PRD vote cast by the majority of Chiapas' Indigenous peoples was not a truly partisan vote. The PRD was perceived as the best party at hand, but not necessarily as their own party, or as one that identifies wholly with their interests.

Votes garnered by the PRD in Chiapas awarded two seats in the lower house to Indian leaders. These are: Antonio Hernandez (see interview in Vol. 8:1&2), Maya-Tojolabal, state leader of the Independent Central of Agricultural Workers and Campesinos (CIOAC), and Mario Landeros, candidate for the Xi'nich organization of Palenque. Elsewhere, Martin Equihua representing the Guerrero 500 Years of Indigenous Resistance State Council also won a seat in the lower house through the PRD vote. Euldarico Hernandez, Chontal writer and leader from the state of Tabasco, secured a seat in the senate, along with Hector Sanchez, leader of the Worker-Campesino Student Coalition of the Isthmus.

The present political balance is certainly not what Indigenous organizations demand, nor what justly corresponds to their peoples. Nevertheless, the Indigenous movement will have at least three authentic advocates in the next legislature. These delegates are committed to constitutional reforms elaborated by the Indigenous National Electoral Convention including: the right to govern their territories according to norms established by their customs and usage, and the right to Indigenous representation in congress through special districting without dependence upon the political parties. 🐾

Photo: Jilian Black



Maya residents of Altamirano, Chiapas line up to vote; observers at polling places in the town reported significant irregularities.