



Border Observatory

Ernesto Zedillo, Mexico, and the legacies of neoliberalism and state violence

Former Mexican president Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000) is featured as the Distinguished Speaker at the 2018 U.S.-Mexico Border Summit in El Paso.

Zedillo's visit to the borderlands arises shortly after Mexican president-elect Andrés Manuel López Obrador came to Ciudad Juárez last week to inaugurate the public forum which launched Mexico's long-delayed transitional justice process. This framework of truth, justice and reconciliation seeks to respond to the demands of the victims of the worst human rights crisis in the country's history, which includes over 200,000 dead and almost 40,000 disappeared since 2006, according to official data (unofficial estimates are even higher)¹.

The origins of this crisis lie deep in the complex legacy of 70 years of authoritarian rule by the regime that Zedillo once headed, as a powerful leader of its most neoliberal, technocratic wing. Zedillo was a key player in fashioning Mexico's version of globalized development prescribed by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank under U.S. leadership (the so-called Washington Consensus). He also presided over the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in its crucial initial stages.²

Zedillo's presidency was characterized by a repressive response to the January 1994 Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, which had targeted NAFTA as a "death sentence" for Mexico's indigenous peoples³. There were four major massacres in Chiapas and Guerrero, states with large number of indigenous peoples and high poverty rates, during Zedillo's term in office. These massacres

¹ <https://fronteralist.org/2018/07/30/new-inegi-data-31174-homicides-in-2017-highest-in-30-years/>;
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/26/mexico-maelstrom-how-the-drug-violence-got-so-bad>;
<https://www.ncronline.org/news/world/counting-mexicos-drug-victims-murky-business>;
<http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-mexican-undead-toward-a-new-history-of-the-%E2%80%9Cdrug-war%E2%80%9D-killing-fields>

² http://www.scielo.br/pdf/ea/v26n75/en_05.pdf;
<https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/seminar/1999/reforms/Naim.HTM>

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<https://www.citizenstrade.org/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/NAFTA-A-Death-Sentence-for-the-Indigeno-us-People-of-Mexico.pdf>; <http://cepr.net/documents/nafta-20-years-2014-02.pdf>;
http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0187-69612008000100003;
<https://www.economist.com/the-americas/1998/01/01/massacre-in-mexico>;
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/dec/27/mexico-zedillo-acteal-massacre>;
<https://nacla.org/article/lessons-acteal>

took place in Chiapas in December 1997 at Acteal and El Bosque in June 1998, and in Guerrero at Aguas Blancas in June 1995 and El Charco in June 1998. These incidents reflected Zedillo's emphasis on militarization and support of paramilitary forces⁴. The victims of the Acteal Massacre, the bloodiest of all of these, included 45 members of *La Sociedad Civil de Las Abejas*, 36 of them women and children, from the poorest Mayan communities in the highlands of Chiapas.

The dead were unarmed civilians who had been displaced from their communities due to paramilitary violence. They were killed while praying at a makeshift outdoor chapel. Amnesty International's investigation of the case concluded that "compelling evidence ... shows that the authorities facilitated the arming of paramilitaries who carried out the killings and failed to intervene as the savage attack continued for hours."⁵

Las Abejas is one of Latin America's most vibrant examples of the convergence between marginalized indigenous communities and grassroots struggles for alternative models of development, grounded in a human rights perspective inspired by Catholic social teaching⁶. *Las Abejas* emerged as a key voice for indigenous communities which mobilized to position their demands for social justice during the observances of the 500 years of the Spanish conquest of the Americas in 1992.

The leadership of Bishop Samuel Ruiz García (widely remembered as "Don Sam", or *Tatic*, his indigenous title)⁷ of Chiapas played a key role in this process, drawing on the inspiration of the faith-based critique of the injustices of Spanish colonialism and genocide pioneered by Chiapas' first bishop, Bartolomé de Las Casas. Gustavo Gutiérrez has highlighted⁸ Las Casas'

⁴ <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB283/index.htm>;
https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/uploads/guerrero_1995_2.pdf;
https://www.huffingtonpost.com/azadeh-shahshahani/tribunal-finds-mexico-and_b_8824162.html;
<https://nacla.org/article/rural-rebellion-southern-mexico-guerrillas-guerrero>

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<https://justiceinmexico.org/former-president-of-mexico-goes-to-court-for-alleged-actions-in-the-massacre-of-acteal/>; <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/152000/amr410431998en.pdf>;
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2009/08/mexico-new-investigation-acteal-massacre-essential-20090813/>

⁶

<https://brill.com/view/book/9789004319776/B9789004319776-s008.xml>; https://www.academia.edu/2928204/Acteal_An_Open_Wound_on_Indigenous_Human_Rights?auto=download
<https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2018/03/the-woman-who-wont-let-mexico-forget-a-massacre.html>;
https://www.jstor.org/stable/25676075?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents;

⁷ <https://www.ncronline.org/news/world/mexicos-chiapas-state-bishop-ruiz-leaves-large-legacy>;
<https://www.archbalt.org/bishop-samuel-ruiz-garcia-86-champion-of-indigenous-dies-in-mexico/>;
https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20110211_1.htm;
<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/27/world/americas/27ruiz.html>;
<https://www.nytimes.com/1995/02/19/world/the-dear-father-of-mexican-indians-is-the-assassin-bishop-to-his-foes.html>

⁸ *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ* by Gustavo Gutiérrez (Orbis, 1993)

foundational role as a precursor of what became known as liberation theology throughout Latin America and migrant communities of Latin American origin.

The experiences and suffering of *Las Abejas* and their equivalents elsewhere in have deep potential resonance for the bonds of faith and solidarity that characterize communities of Mexican and Latin American origin throughout our region, which no physical borders can contain or destroy.

The Acteal Massacre was carried out by paramilitary forces financed, armed and trained by Zedillo's administration, as part of a multidimensional strategy of "low intensity warfare", with U.S. knowledge and support. This approach resulted in the forced displacement, and ultimately forced migration, of tens of thousands of people from indigenous communities which Zedillo's government stigmatized as Zapatista sympathizers⁹.

The massacre also reflected a broader policy under Zedillo's leadership of targeting faith-based sectors in Chiapas and elsewhere in Mexico which identified with the demands, if not the methods, of the Zapatista rebellion. *Las Abejas* were considered especially problematic both because of their faith-based approach, and because they reflected the broader appeal of Zapatista demands in indigenous and campesino sectors beyond the limits of the rebellion's most immediate bases of support.

The organization, which includes many of those who survived the massacre and relatives of victims, recently commemorated its 25th anniversary and the 20th anniversary of the massacre¹⁰ and continues to demand an end to the impunity which has protected officials such as Zedillo who ultimately bear responsibility for the policies which led to it. They have been joined in these demands by human rights defenders throughout the country, including Mons. Raúl Vera, the bishop of Saltillo, who previously served as coadjutor with Don Sam. Vera was named *Tatic* by *Las Abejas* at a special hearing of the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal regarding the Acteal case in April 2012.

The case of the massacre is also in process of being referred by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to its Court¹¹, and it also led to a suit brought against Zedillo in 2012 in U.S. federal court which was ultimately dismissed because he was granted immunity requested by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, during the Obama administration, upon the basis of his status as Mexico's former president¹². Several former or current heads of state have

⁹ <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB283/index.htm>;
<http://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/6624/1/04diazleal.pdf>;
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09709274.2009.11906206>;
<https://itsgoingdown.org/displacement-resistance-las-abejas-counterinsurgency-impunity/>

¹⁰ <http://acteal.blogspot.com/>

¹¹ <http://www.cidh.org/annualrep/2010eng/MXAD212-05EN.doc>

¹²

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/09/06/us-dont-recommend-immunity-mexico-ex-president-ernesto-zedillo>

been charged for similar crimes since the attempt to prosecute former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet and extradite him from London in 1998-99¹³.

2018 marks a potential turning point in longstanding efforts by Mexican society to grapple with the implications of the country's history of repression and resistance. It also coincides with observances of the 50th anniversary of the 1968 student movement which posed the first concerted challenge to the one party rule of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), which culminated in the October 2, 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre of hundreds of protesters¹⁴.

In December 2012 much of the world turned to Chiapas and the Mayan world as it had done briefly in 1994 with the Zapatista rebellion and in 1997 with the Acteal Massacre, as the long count of Mayan civilization came to an end amid fears of cosmic apocalypse and upheaval. Both the Zapatistas and *Las Abejas* have taken a different approach, centered around a vision that projected their understanding of "resurrection", rather than destruction. Antonio Vásquez, one of *Las Abejas*' founders and key leaders put it this way:¹⁵

"What does resurrection mean? That the people revive their traditions, that they revive their cultures, their way of life, and that they begin to show respect again. Therefore we are looking with our friends (of costumbre, for)...ways to revive the traditions and the (traditional) way to solve problems...That's why we want to study (Indigenous) Theology, Yes, because we want to get ready so that the new earth and the new heaven may come. We are searching for the new life, but it requires that we all be engaged in this."

This was prior to Acteal, but is very close to what I heard from Don Antonio and other participants during the cycle of human rights workshops that I was honored to coordinate during fieldwork there between 2011 and 2014. The struggle for truth, memory, and justice of *Las Abejas* reflects a transcendent yet grounded hope and commitment that even the massacre could not crush, and has in fact nourished.

Throughout Latin America and elsewhere in the global south popular movements have striven to articulate alternative visions of globalization and development grounded in human rights which converge powerfully with Catholic social teaching, liberation theology and broader interfaith and secular traditions. This includes an emphasis on the inherent dignity of the human person, and on full recognition of individual and collective rights to the economic, political, social, and cultural conditions necessary for a dignified life.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/09/world/americas/us-moves-to-grant-former-mexican-president-immunity-in-suit.html>;

<https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2013/03/25/mexican-court-rules-zedillo-ineligible-for-immunity/>;

<https://amistadcw.wordpress.com/2014/10/19/monday-hold-yale-accountable-for-harboring-state-criminal-ernesto-zedillo/>

¹³ <http://www.toaep.org/pbs-pdf/20-zhong>

https://scholarship.shu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1026&context=student_scholarship;

https://epub.uni-regensburg.de/33729/1/Uerpmann_Immunities_2016_Preprint.pdf

¹⁴ <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB10/intro.htm>;

<https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/legacy-1968-continues-burn-mexico>

¹⁵ Moksnes (2012): 185

Mayan communities throughout Mesoamerica frame this approach in terms of indigenous cosmology through the concept of *lekil kuxlejal*, whose connotations include a harmonious life characterized by order and unity reflected in an integration between the individual, the community, and nature, which is in turn the only possible foundation for an authentic conception of peace.¹⁶ This is what indigenous movements and their allies grounded in the Quechua and Aymara-speaking communities of the Andean region in Ecuador and Bolivia- have defined as the vision of *sumak kawsay* or *suma qamaña*, which is usually translated into Spanish as “*el buen vivir*”¹⁷, or in English as the conditions necessary to live a life worthy of a human being.

This aspiration converges with that of marginalized border and migrant communities that seek to build alternative visions of a just society, that contrast sharply with the kind of exclusionary development models promoted by leaders such as Zedillo.

¹⁶ <https://brill.com/view/book/9789004319776/B9789004319776-s008.xml>; Mora 2017: 19

¹⁷ http://www.dhl.hegoa.ehu.es/ficheros/0000/0738/15._El_concepto_de_sumak_kawsai.pdf