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The Challenge of Ethnic Conflict to National and International Order in the 1990s: Geographic Perspectives

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projects perceived to be of benefit to the government. Mexico's Indians are, at best, little better off economically than Indians in other Latin American countries, and they also encounter policies that promote adoption of mestizo culture. Government-sponsored development projects, expansion of the oil industry, relocation of mestizo settlers in Indian territories, and government ignorance of or attempts to suppress Indian culture are all factors that contribute to conflict between Indians and the state.

Other sources of potential conflict include land disputes between Indian communities and the presence of Guatemalan refugees. Most conflicts over land are highly localized and involve differences between neighboring towns over the boundaries of communal land holdings. Many of these disputes originated during the colonial period. The migration of refugees from the Guatemalan civil war into the Mexican state of Chiapas and their relocation to settlements in Yucatán is also problematic. Although some of these refugees have returned to Guatemala in response to government repatriation programs, several thousand others will probably remain in Mexico. It remains to be seen what sort of long-term relationships these people will work out with the Mexican Government and with neighboring Mexican Indian and mestizo communities.

The rebellion of the Zapatista National Liberation Army in January 1994 is an example of the influence of the factors noted above. Despite its rhetoric, the Mexican Government has done little to incorporate the Indians of Chiapas into the national economy. Land the Indians had traditionally considered to be theirs was claimed by mestizo farmers and ranchers and, in some cases, incorporated into large landholdings. Resettlement of Guatemalan refugees contributed to conflict, as did the Salinas de Gortari government's decision to eliminate the constitutional protections of *ejido* land. The final straw for the rebels was approval of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which was seen by the Indians as setting the stage for further concentration of economic resources in the more developed northern regions of the country at the expense of Indian and peasant farmers in the south.

Nonindigenous Flash Points: Afro-Americans/ East Indians

In the African-influenced areas, especially parts of Brazil and the Caribbean, there is also potential for racial or ethnic conflict, especially if a black consciousness movement should develop. The root causes of friction among members of African- and Asian-origin groups are quite different from those that involve American Indians and representatives of the Hispanic states.

Brazil, the Guianas, and the West Indies have large Afro-American populations. In Brazil, African minorities are not normally separated spatially from the main culture as are Indians. Rather, they live in the same cities and towns, and they usually share, to a greater or lesser extent, most elements of the common national culture. However, despite disclaimers about the absence of racial prejudice, clear differences exist in the social and economic attainment of blacks and whites in Brazil. So far, these differences have not resulted in racially based conflicts. Nevertheless, given the myth of racial equality, if a black consciousness movement should emerge in Brazil, it could provide a base for development of racial friction—although the potential for this to occur does not seem very great.

In some islands Afro-Americans are a single, dominant ethnic group; these areas have little potential for ethnic conflict. Suriname, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago have mixed populations comprised of Afro-Americans, East Indians, and—in Suriname—Javanese.⁶ Creoles—Afro-Americans and Mulattoes—and East Indians tend to belong to different political parties, to live in distinct areas, and to interact largely within their own communities. In Trinidad and the Guianas, where Afro-Americans and East Indians share national territories, conflict reflects, to a

⁶ Despite their location on the mainland, Guyana and Suriname are culturally and historically much more closely linked to the Caribbean than they are to their culturally Iberian South American neighbors.

certain extent, differences in urban settlement patterns, although a more fundamental cause of conflict is over which group will control the national government and gain the benefits that come from such control. East Indians and Afro-Americans are roughly equally represented in Trinidad—43 percent Afro-American, 40 percent East Indian. In Guyana the East Indians comprise 51 percent of the population and Creoles account for 44 percent; but, in Suriname, Creoles make up only 31 percent of the population while East Indians, Javanese, and Bush Negro account for 37 percent, 15 percent, and 10 percent, respectively.

Relations among East Indians and Creoles have been particularly tense in Guyana, where politics has been characterized by violence and conflict between members of political parties that are strongly linked to ethnic groups. Cheddi Jagan was elected President of Guyana in October 1992, ending more than 25 years of Creole domination of the government. The election was accompanied by riots and violent conflict among members of the two dominant political parties, but the situation seems to have stabilized since then. As long as Jagan remains in power, he may be able to limit ethnic conflict, especially if he is able to improve the country's depressed economic conditions and bring better lives to both Creoles and East Indians. However, unless he is able to establish institutions that break down longstanding ethnic differences, hostilities may accompany the next election.

Other areas that might bear watching include Suriname and the longstanding international dispute between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. In the latter, racial and cultural differences and a history of conflict, combined with Dominican concerns about migration of land-hungry Haitians, has led to repeated expulsions of Haitian migrants. However, Haitians have been welcomed at times when Dominican workers were unable

to meet the need for agricultural labor in the country. If large numbers of Haitians try to settle in Dominican territory, there is always the possibility of another violent response on the part of the Dominicans.

Conclusion

Probably the most common source of ethnic conflict between Indians and the state, whether located in the lowlands or highlands, is the dispute over control of territory and mineral or biotic resources. Ethnic group autonomy and greater participation in the political system are often secondary factors in ethnic conflict. The principal areas of current ethnic conflict are in the Amazon Basin and other lowland areas where native Indian populations confront expanding national states. These conflicts involve small numbers of people, but they are locally important and may have international implications when they occur in border areas or if they involve international environmental or cultural protection organizations or political or lending organizations such as agencies of the UN, the World Bank, and the Interamerican Development Bank. Such local conflicts may cause problems for governments in the affected countries, and they will undoubtedly affect the course of natural resources development.

Indian political action organizations are likely to become increasingly more powerful in national politics. They will receive help from international organizations with whom they share common interests. To the extent that national governments accommodate the demands of these organizations, they may reduce ethnic tensions. If ethnic interests are ignored, conflicts are likely to develop, as in Mexico in 1994.