People's revolt: Political repression in Oaxaca

by Maureen Kelleher in the April 3, 2007 issue

For the past 10 months, the people of the Mexican state of Oaxaca have been waging a campaign to remove their governor, Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, who was narrowly elected in 2004 amid allegations of fraud. A member of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI), he has been accused of corruption and political repression since taking office. After Ruiz's heavy-handed attempt to quell a teachers strike last spring, the teachers and their allies ran his government out of town and created the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO).

The APPO movement, which brought together teachers, other unions, indigenous groups, students and many others, made a strong showing in the summer and early fall, even pursuing a political strategy to oust Ruiz. But the coalition's efforts proved unsuccessful, and eventually the Ruiz regime was reinstated with the help of federal troops. That was followed by a wave of arrests and arbitrary detentions. International observers report that at least 23 people have been killed in the conflict. But despite the crackdown, APPO continues to press for Ruiz's resignation and for radical changes in the state's political and economic power structures.

APPO leaders are well aware that the political reality they are fighting is intimately linked with long-standing economic injustices. Oaxaca is perhaps best known outside its borders for its spectacular mountain scenery, southern beaches, and archaeological ruins like Monte Alban, a pre-Columbian city once inhabited by Zapotec and, later, Mixtec peoples. But the realities of poverty within the state are daunting: about three-quarters of its residents live in poverty. For isolated Afro-descendant communities along Oaxaca's southern coast, that poverty can reach extremes comparable to those of some places in Africa.

In Oaxaca, the birthplace of corn, privatization and free trade agreements have decimated the small-farming economy on which indigenous people have relied for

centuries. Crony capitalism on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border has raised the price and lowered the quality of the base staple of the Oaxacan diet, corn tortillas. APPO views its struggle to instill transparency in local government as a first step toward dismantling this larger system. “We don’t believe globalization and capitalism should be forces of repression,” says Orlando Sosa, an APPO spokesperson.

In early December, in a small town on the southern outskirts of Oaxaca City, about 30 people gathered in front of the alcaldia (city hall) to meet with a human rights delegation of which I was a member. Economics took equal place with politics in that discussion, which ranged from privatization of water rights to political corruption. When we asked locals what message they would like us to bring back to U.S. leaders, one man let us know his answer succinctly: “No more GMO corn” (corn that is genetically modified).

“For nothing more than being a citizen and going to a march, I have a warrant for my arrest,” a petite 70-year-old woman with gray braids plaited on top of her head told us. Asked if she was afraid, she said, “I have no fear. The cause is just.”

The events that led to her arrest warrant began to unfold last May, when the state teachers union took over the zócalo (main square) and surrounding blocks in its annual strike for better wages. In the predawn hours of June 14, Ruiz tried to force the teachers off the zócalo. Helicopters dropped tear gas canisters on sleeping teachers, and riot police wielded clubs against women and children. This was the last straw for much of Oaxacan civil society, which responded by mobilizing in the hundreds of thousands, retaking the plaza, and forcing the police and the state government out of the capital. Three days later, APPO was created.

Oaxaca has always been a PRI stronghold, but APPO is weakening the party’s grip. In late June, APPO began to organize a *voto de castigo* (punishment vote), urging Oaxacans to vote for anyone but the PRI. Most flocked to the leftist PRD (Partido de la Revolucion Democratica), which won the popular vote for president and forced turnover in a number of federal Senate seats. While the 2000 election of President Vicente Fox marked the end of the PRI’s one-party rule in northern Mexico, last summer’s punishment vote in Oaxaca cracked the party’s control of the south for the first time since it was formed in 1929.

Through the summer and fall, APPO held a series of spectacular marches, again drawing hundreds of thousands of people into the streets. On August 1, thousands of women marched, banging on pots and pans, and took over the state's public television station. For three weeks they controlled its programming. More than two dozen municipalities around the state, including a town we visited, set up popular governments as PRI mayors fled. When unknown assailants suspected of ties to the PRI began nighttime shooting sprees through their neighborhoods, residents created barricaded checkpoints and set up night vigils to protect themselves and their neighbors.

Unfortunately, APPO's political efforts to dislodge Governor Ruiz were less successful. Despite an earlier admission that Oaxaca state had become ungovernable, in mid-October the Mexican Senate voted 74-31 to let Ruiz stay in power. About the same time, the teachers agreed to go back to the classroom, which led observers to believe the conflict might be drawing to a close. But on October 27, U.S. video journalist Brad Will was shot and killed while filming a confrontation between APPO supporters and armed assailants—some of whom are alleged to be local police—at a barricade in the town of Santa Lucia del Camino in southern Oaxaca state. The next day, then-president Fox ordered federal troops into Oaxaca. This heightened tensions and led to a pitched battle between police and demonstrators during a November 25 march.

Although the federal troops left Oaxaca's capital before Christmas, arbitrary arrests and police torture have now become commonplace. "We've never lived in a situation like this before," said Sara Mendez of the Oaxacan Network for Human Rights. "It could have a great cost." The Archdiocese of Oaxaca has gone on record comparing the current human rights situation to that of Guatemala during the 1980s civil war.

There are small signs of hope. In early January of this year, Mexico's federal judges put a check on resistance by the Oaxacan state legislature. Last September, after seeing the voters' rage writ large in the federal election results, Oaxacan legislators had tried to preserve their power by voting to postpone their own next round of elections, set for this summer, until 2008. When I first learned of this move, I wondered: Can they do that? As it turns out, they couldn't. On January 9, the Mexican Supreme Court ruled that the legislature had overstepped its bounds, and elections will be held in early August, as originally scheduled. Some observers predict that the PRD could win the state legislature—a serious blow to Ruiz's power.

Yet Ruiz's own term does not end until 2010. More than 60 Oaxacans remain jailed in connection with last fall's protests. Some were arbitrarily detained and had never participated in any political activity. All are being held without charges, legal representation or visits from families.

The economic situation seems more intractable. Oaxaca is Mexico's second-poorest state and, like the rest of southern Mexico, has seen little of the promised benefits of free trade. APPO says it is fighting neoliberal economic policies as much as it is fighting political corruption, but fighting NAFTA will be even tougher than taking on the PRI.

Interestingly, a handful of Oaxacan business leaders understand the need to remake trade agreements with the United States and to push their colleagues to think more equitably about local economics. Our delegation spoke with two Oaxacan businesspeople who envision a second NAFTA modeled on the agreements admitting Spain and Portugal to the European Union. They understand that it is difficult but necessary to engage the business community in a radical reexamination of its role in creating a just society.

"We have to change, to see social problems. If we don't, this is going to happen again. People are very desperate out there, and nothing is happening," said Luis Ugartechea, who owns a restaurant in the capital, on the zócalo itself. "I probably won't see the solution for Oaxaca, but I want to start now. Maybe my children will see a different Oaxaca."