

Carlos Gonzales: The National Indigenous Congress, a space of encounter and unity

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Thirty years have passed since the creation of the National Council of Indigenous Peoples (*Consejo Nacional de Pueblos Indígenas*) in 1975. Of course, that organization and the supreme councils that constituted it were President Echeverría's idea; their purpose was never to ensure the recognition of any indigenous rights. But once Echeverría's term was over, the inevitable decomposition of that organization followed, as did the formation of critical strands from within it. These critical strands can be considered one of the origins of the new Mexican indigenous movement that over the past fifteen years has struggled for the long-denied constitutional recognition of indigenous peoples.

Around the edges of the aforementioned supreme councils, several very combative nuclei, especially with regard to the defense of indigenous territories, encountered and recognized each other. The National Coordinator of Indian Peoples (*Coordinadora Nacional de Pueblos Indios*) also came out of this process. Important leaders such as Pedro de Haro Sánchez, Aquiles Vargas, and Juan Chávez Alonso, the first two already deceased, experienced that period of rupture.

Some strands of thinking, joined together in the National Coordinator of the Ayala Plan (*Coordinadora Nacional Plan de Ayala*), were able to pioneer a way to distance themselves from the stiff discourse on the Left which diluted the properly indigenous struggle within the peasant struggle. In the 1980s, this growing indigenous movement was invigorated by peasant organizations made up primarily of indigenous people and movements that disputed the municipal power of local strong-man governments, as well as by the serious consideration being given to communality [*comunalidad*] in Oaxaca and the clearly autonomist revindications of the Independent Front of Indian Peoples [*Frente Independiente de Pueblos Indios*].

It was during the 1992 events around the fifth centennial of the so-called "discovery" of

America that the indigenous movement reached a greater degree of unity and began constructing its own program of struggle that put autonomy at the center of its demands.

The indigenous uprising by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in January of 1994 shook national society and made the oppression lived by the indigenous peoples of Chiapas and all of Mexico visible to the eyes of the world.

That uprising also allowed indigenous peoples to re-encounter each other and civil society as they never had before, seeking to build a shared resistance that would make possible the long-denied constitutional recognition of their collective rights.

The strength that the EZLN lent to the indigenous movement is multi-faceted. On one hand, the government was forced in February 1996 to sign the San Andrés Accords, committing to national reforms that would constitutionally recognize and grant autonomy to indigenous peoples. On the other hand, following two National Permanent Indigenous Forums in January and July of 1996, the indigenous movement succeeded in founding the National Indigenous Congress (*Congreso Nacional Indígena*) (CNI) in October of that year.

Between 1994 and 1996, the indigenous movement confronted two positions: on one side was the position that defended regional autonomies as one more tier of government; on the other side was the formulation agreed upon in San Andrés regarding the articulation of municipal and community autonomies at whatever level and sphere they could be asserted and exercised. The former position was taken up by those who founded the National Indigenous Plural Assembly for Autonomy (ANIPA) in April of 1995; the latter joined the program of the National Indigenous Congress in October 1996.

The CNI, conceived from its origins as the “house of the indigenous peoples of Mexico,” represents the greatest achievement of the national indigenous movement in terms of building its own space. It is this space from which the EZLN and other indigenous organizations carried out multiple actions whose purpose was to demand the incorporation of the San Andrés Accords into the Federal Constitution and which culminated in the “March of the Color of the Earth” between March and April of 2001.

In the end the San Andrés Accords were betrayed by the political parties, which defrauded the movement with the indigenous counter-reform passed on April 28, 2001, as well as by the powers of the Mexican State which did not hesitate to approve and ratify said counter-reform.

Starting with that reform, which not only did not recognize the proposed rights but diminished others already in existence, the perspective taken up by the CNI and the indigenous movement was to refuse to recognize the counter-reform and to exercise via

their actions the rights agreed upon at San Andrés.

That is what was agreed upon in the first meetings of the CNI in the Central Pacific Region (RCP) of the country and ratified in the Eighth National Assembly of the CNI. With the autonomous Zapatista experience as a reference point, an important current of thought has taken shape inside the indigenous movement over the last four years which puts forth for the first time the novel proposal of no longer seeking recognition of indigenous peoples in national legislation, but rather making that recognition and the associated rights real in fact and deed.

ANIPA followed a very different path, deciding to become a participant in official politics which tend towards the destruction of indigenous peoples, and their “struggle” for regional autonomy did not go beyond obtaining a few candidacies and government posts.

We should not be surprised, then, by the federal government-sponsored indigenous assembly held in Chilpancingo in September of 2002 which aimed to reduce the influence of Zapatismo in the national indigenous movement and “replace” the CNI, according to a pact made a few months prior in Tlaxcala. Nor should we be surprised by the early incorporation of several of its leaders into the neoliberal PAN government in 2001, nor by its combativeness against the EZLN and the autonomous municipality of Suljaa’.

More than four years after the “March of the Color of the Earth,” and beyond the divisions that exist in the indigenous movement and the incongruousness of a few leaders, today the CNI as a national space of unity is demobilized, with the exception of the Central Pacific Region which has held 16 sessions over four years of continuous work, always in rural communities embroiled in conflict in order to give visibility to their processes.

But from below, the indigenous movement exists, speaks, and reflects. In the sphere of what has been created in the CNI’s Central Pacific Region, the self-recognized communities there along with many other communities from Chihuahua, Veracruz, Oaxaca, Puebla, and Hidalgo not formally located in that region are organizing workshops, seminars, and meetings in order to understand and counter the multiple privatizations, laws, decrees, and programs with which the government and transnational corporations seek to invade and prey upon indigenous territories. In a loose network of communities, ejidos, organizations, and non-clientelist NGOs, they defend their food sovereignty and the peoples’ territories, their natural and spiritual resources, and the urgency of continuing to make viable their existence as peasants.

Now more than ever it is urgent to seek the unity of the indigenous movement which is organized independently of the State and to think through the viability of a national indigenous space that brings together all the forces which, in the face of the neoliberal

disaster and its multiple policies of extermination, have decided that the struggle for the liberation of indigenous peoples is an anticapitalist struggle and one of unity with the other sectors of society, just as the Mixe thinker Floriberto Díaz already saw so long ago.

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