

The eternal conflict: Land, peasants, and the military in Mexico

Land has always been an important site of struggle in Mexico, often bringing peasant movements and peasant communities into conflicts with the Mexican military. This CMI Insight focuses on the key conflict dimensions since the Mexican revolution (1910-1917) and up till today. The analysis highlights how the relationship between peasants and the army has changed from one of tentative mutual understanding in the post-revolution period to one in which the army increasingly acts as an oppressive agent; on behalf of powerful interests within its own ranks at first, and then on behalf of the Mexican state and private economic interests.

Early land disputes

According to the Mexican Constitution of 1917, soil and subsoil constitute the original property of the Mexican nation. Throughout history, land disputes, often between peasants and other actors, have been a highly conflictive site of struggle. The Mexican armed forces have frequently been a key player either in executing the state's decisions over land, or in pursuing their own interests with regards to land. As this CMI Insight will show, these conflicts are not only related to agrarian activities, but also to energy, mining, and territorial control.

For the sake of brevity, we will here take the Mexican revolution (1910-1917) as a point of analytical departure. However, it is worth mentioning that ever since the conquest of Mexico in 1521, land has been a prime source of conflict in Mexican society. For instance, in the nineteenth century, the so-called War of Reform (Guerra de Reforma) erupted due to the implementation of liberal reforms that dispossessed the Catholic Church from extensive land properties over which it had claimed ownership since the conquest.

The same reforms also dispossessed indigenous communities from their communal land, a pre-Hispanic heritage, (Andrés and Staples 2010) leading to the creation of a mass of non-proprietary peasants ready to be exploited by the agro-business that would be promoted in the following years. Between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1910) continued the dispossession of these indigenous communities and peasants through authorizing international private companies to determine which lands were available for privatization and exploitation of oil, minerals, and agricultural products (Kuntz Ficker and Speckman Guerra 2010). The Diaz dictatorship used the Ejército Federal (the federal army) to oppress peasants and force them into semi-slavery. Indeed, the brutality of this kind of actions contributed to trigger the Mexican Revolution; a revolution which in essence was carried out by an army of peasants, with land reforms as one of its primary goals. Among the most emblematic mottos of the Liberation Army of the South (Ejército Libertador del Sur), the faction commanded by the notorious peasant leader Emiliano Zapata,

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were “Land and Liberty” and “The land is of those who work it.” However, albeit these goals were sought pursued in the immediate post-revolutionary period, they were subsequently gradually undermined; leaving the peasants at the losing end of evolving political, economic and military arrangements.

Post-revolution reforms

The nation’s original ownership over land was established in the new constitution of 1917. This formed the basis for the post-revolution agrarian reform, which returned land to the peasants and re-established communal proprietorship and exploitation of land. The latter is a form of communal ownership called ejidos, which is practiced in many peasant communities in Mexico also today. Porfirio Díaz’s feared army, the Ejército Federal (Camp 1992), was replaced by a new army composed by the victorious revolutionary forces. This army, often backed by local groups of peasants organized by the military, became a key institutional tool to guarantee the execution of the agrarian reform.

This does not mean that it was a process free from conflict. Indeed, many conservatives pushed back. However, the revolutionary forces remained the most powerful at the time. Hence, in its very beginning, agrarian reform was the result of the combined force of political and armed power, allowing land reforms to be part of the new social pact underwritten by the 1917 constitution.

The Cárdenas administration

Article 27 in the constitution, which attributed land ownership to the Mexican state, was crafted with the main purpose of enabling the new revolutionary regime to return land to the peasants. However, this article also had direct implications for other industries, especially oil and mining. The first post-revolutionary governments were alternatively incapable of or reluctant to carry out the nationalization of the oil sector, which had also been in major public demand following the revolution. However, nationalization was finally implemented in 1938, during the administration of General Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940). His was an administration with a clear determination to pursue the key social goals expressed in the Mexican Revolution. During Cárdenas’s time in power, land distribution among peasants reached its historical peak (Aboites and Loyo 2010). He also actively promoted the so-called Agrarian Leagues (Ligas Agrarias), an armed peasant organization that not only organized peasants for land distribution, but also constituted an element of armed support to Cárdenas’s policies in the face of the landed oligarchy and of the conservative generals reluctant to support social reforms.

Regrouping of forces

At the time, national and international conservative forces were struggling to block and revert Cárdenas’s reforms and to regain control—above all of the subsoil energetic resources

(Aboites and Loyo 2010). Towards the 1930s it was already clear that some revolutionary generals had become themselves the “new capitalists,” now holding conservative interests that were incompatible with those of the still impoverished peasant masses. Cárdenas’s agrarian policy even clashed with the interests of some of the revolutionary veterans attached to his regime, namely the generals who after the revolution had granted themselves the haciendas (large estates) of old porfistas or communal lands as the unofficial payment for the services rendered to their homeland (Niblo 1999; Meyer 2000; Lerner 1986).

Moreover, many military chiefs started to use the troops to serve their own interests through illegal evictions of peasants from their lands. Often the communities had documents proving that they held legal possession of land.¹ The escalation of these practices marked the end of the initial revolutionary alliance between peasants and the army. In the decades that followed, the armed forces would increasingly pursue a conservative agenda in opposition to peasant interests. Some of their practices related to the execution of orders on behalf of the federal government, often with the purpose of guaranteeing stability for private rural properties (agroindustry) by stopping the invasions of land-seeking peasants. However, such actions were also often related to local strongmen (caciques) and politicians holding favorable connections with federal power, a relationship that de facto linked armed coercion of peasants to narrow private interests rather than to broad national and public objectives.

Peasant rebellions

Thus, as General Cárdenas’s government ended in 1940, the following administrations clearly took a rightist turn in terms of economic policy. Land distribution was strongly halted and some of the previous distributive decisions were even reverted or left unaccomplished. The military increasingly played a role in repressing peasant groups that demanded land. Peasants were well aware of the contrast between their own abject poverty and the wealth of government officials and their business associates. Therefore, peasants were also often reluctant to accept the government’s attempt to buy them off with low quality lands in arid and unproductive zones. Instead, peasant organizations turned to the strategy of invading the properties of the regime’s new rich men.

This led to renewed agrarian conflicts, which increasingly involved unconstitutional repression carried out by the army in order to back up the conservative interests of the regime and its business cronies. One of the most emblematic cases took place in the central state of Morelos, where a group of peasants headed by peasant leader Rubén Jaramillo demanded the full implementation of constitutional articles and laws that provided for agrarian reform. The group was ideologically nurtured by the Cárdenas regime as well as by the thought and actions of Emiliano Zapata from the Mexican

Revolution—Jaramillo himself was a veteran of the Ejército Libertador del Sur. However, in order to fight for reforms within institutional parameters, the group organized itself as a political force with the aim of running for local elections (Padilla 2008).

As a peasant leader, Jaramillo played a key role in organizing land invasions demanding their distribution to peasants and their families as ejidos. A conflict in a parastatal sugar-producing plant generated a confrontation between Jaramillo and the plant manager—allegedly a despotic public official. The manager's bodyguards threatened Jaramillo, who opted for armed rebellion joined by 85 peasants (Padilla 2008). On 23 May 1962, in Xochicalco, Morelos, army troops broke into Jaramillo's house. Jaramillo (62), his wife (47)—who was far along in her pregnancy—and his sons were murdered. Investigations show that, according to witnesses, they were massacred by the army. All of them in fact received a lethal shot to the head (Camacho 2009).

Rural Defence Corps

Demands for land and justice articulated by dispossessed peasants were key issues in many rural radicalized movements across the world in the second half of the twentieth century. In Mexico, land concentration in the hands of caudillos and local politicians reflected an irregular, authoritarian and predatory redistribution of local economic resources. These local patterns were in turn backed by a state that was unable and unwilling to find institutional responses to the peasants' claims. Often, they were rather brutally coerced, and, invariably, the armed forces played the role of dismantling such movements with the use of violence (National Security Archive 2006).²

Paradoxically, among the institutional instruments to conduct such repression were the Rural Defense Corps (Estrada García 2015). This force came into being in February 1936, when President Cárdenas decreed the creation of the Army's Department of Reservists, organized under the Ministry of Defense (Ministry of War and Navy 1936). Its members were peasants of the agrarian leagues and ejido communities, and the purpose was to have an administrative and operative control of armed peasants supporting the regime. The participants were non-salaried, but trained and armed allies of the army designed to help with maintaining order and public security in the countryside (Ministry of National Defense 1964). Its legal regulations also stipulated that in case of international war or serious domestic conflict, the Rural Defense Corps could be called to serve within regular troops. However, in those years it was already clear that their most relevant use was not within the regular forces, but as auxiliary forces in counterinsurgency operations. These groups are still operational today, having what appears to be a rather opaque role in occasional counterinsurgency operations and information gathering.

Military headquarters and land conflicts

Several rural guerilla groups arose during the 1960s and 1970s, inspired both by local long-term struggles as well as by the broader international context such as that of the Cuban revolution. The counterinsurgent strategy of the army entailed building military facilities closer to the zones where guerrilla movements were operating; a strategy that led to additional conflicts with peasants as the government nationalized ejido (communal) lands and gave them to the military.

The Mexican media have not been very earnest in covering these kinds of controversies. However, it is for example known that in the 1970s the military took 21 hectares of communal lands in Tlaltenango, Morelos, in order to build facilities of the local garrison post (the 24 Military Zone). The community wasn't compensated until almost 20 years later (Gómez 2011). The state of Morelos was the cradle of "Zapatismo" and of Rubén Jaramillo's movement.

When the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) rebellion³ started in 1994, the Ministry of Defense also responded by militarizing the area through setting up military posts in the community of El Limar, in the municipality of Tila, near San Cristóbal de las Casas. This was one of the epicenters of the conflict during the mid-1990s. The eight hectares of land these posts were built on belonged to Paz y Justicia (Peace and Justice), a community that the same army had secretly organized as paramilitary militias in their counterinsurgent strategy against EZLN. In April 2007, the community came forward with complaints about a string of abuses from the military bases in the area, ranging from continuous shootings to sexual harassment against underage women. The former supporters of the army now demanded the devolution of their lands in a judicial case (Flores 2007). According to a renowned Mexican human rights NGO, these events remain unpunished (Instituto Bartolomé de las Casas 2014).

Land controversies for permits and authorizations

A new axis of conflict has emerged in recent years, indirectly derived from the national government's designation of the Ministry of Defense (Ministerio de la Defensa) as the authority responsible for granting extractive industries necessary permission to transport and use explosives.⁴ This faculty was granted in January 1972, during the administration of Luis Echeverría (1970-1976). In those years, the exploitation of subsoil resources was carried out by parastatal (national and public) companies. However, after the privatization reforms starting in the 1990s, private businesses were allowed to participate in such endeavors.

Such novel interaction between extractive industries and the military generated an array of new conflict dimensions. One is related to industrial interests bent on expanding or strengthening their control over land—often land that is in the hands of peasants or which has recently been taken from peasants through irregular means. However, cases have also surfaced that indicate private and irregular arrangements between private companies and networks of military high-ranking commanders.

The rules and regulations of the Federal Law of Firearms and Explosives (Ley Federal de Armas de Fuego y Explosivos) are broad enough to give considerable discretionary capacities to the military authorities (Congress of the Union; Sedena 2014).⁵ Furthermore, permissions are granted by the general in charge of any garrison post (Military Zone); a fact that increases the opportunities for corruption in states where such extractive industries might be thriving (Congress of the Union; Sedena 2014).⁶ Renewal of such authorizations may be required over a very short period of time, even yearly.

The Mexican media is reluctant to report in detail about these conflicts. However, it is well known that disputes frequently emerge because peasant communities are protesting the legitimacy of land take-overs transferring land usage to extractive industries. There have been a number of cases where the Ministry of Defense, using either its own troops or the Rural Defense Corps, has carried out the eviction—irregular or not—of the peasants from their lands.

Conflicts have also surged because peasants have denounced or tried to revert the permissions granted for the use of explosives on the land in question. As the company needs to have the permissions cleared in order to be operational, communities often struggle to show that these permissions were granted to benefit military private interests, or in other words that corruption was involved.

For example, a recent conflict that can illustrate these dynamics is the case of Minera Peñasquito in Zacatecas, the most significant gold and silver mine in the state. The mine is owned by the Canadian company Gold Corp. On 11 January 2015, army troops from the 52nd Infantry Battalion and federal police officers descended on the company facilities in order to dismantle a blockade of 300 peasants. The protestors were demanding compensation for the company's exploitation of communal lands of ejidos in Cedros and Cerro Gordo (Last Noticias Ya 2015).

The peasants declared that the company for the past nine years had violated the judicial document legitimizing the community's possession of land and their right to have access to clean drinking water (Las Noticias Ya 2015). According to the peasants, the company was refusing to pay compensations and to give back the lands, while at the same time pushing the authorities to turn a blind eye to the peasants' demands. The demonstration

was pacific, and the participation of the army—and not only the Federal Police—to dismantle the crowd thus seemed rather unjustified. The army's participation seemed to stem from a personal decision made by the garrison post commander in the area, who is also the public officer in charge of granting the permits for the use of explosives in the mine.

A year prior to this incident, the state governor Miguel Alonso Raya, had declared to the media that the mining company would not be ceasing its activities in the state, and that his administration was very interested in making sure that the mine's working conditions be well taken care of. He also declared that the protesting peasants did not belong to the ejido communities that claimed rights over the disputed lands (Grupo Informador 2014), thereby delegitimizing the protestors.⁷ In March 2015, the company and the ejidatarios reportedly reached an agreement. The company will occupy the lands for a period of 30 years, with an option for renewal. The benefits for the peasants are not clear though (El Economista 2015).

Conclusions

This CMI Insight provides a short, but indicative snapshot of some of the main conflictive dynamics characterizing the interaction between peasants and the military in Mexico. As this analysis has shown, agrarian reform, however incomplete, was one of the pillars for Mexican stability after the Mexican revolution. For the peasants, land has been consistently valued as a mean for preserving identity, community, and livelihood. However, as the initial social goals of the revolution were diluted, these needs came into conflict with increasingly complex commercial and predatory interests, in which the military was also deeply entangled.

During the post-revolution early years, the arbitrariness of powerful generals was notorious and their misappropriations of land often constituted the platform for the new fortunes accumulated in this period. The influence and power of these generals often allowed them to reign as feudal lords in the regions they operated in. Indeed, they dispossessed the old rural aristocracy of the ancient Porfirista regime, but they also dispossessed the new peasant communities established by the revolutionary agrarian reform. The generals' power prevailed practically uncontested until the nascent regime evolved into more centralized institutions—also including the professionalization of the armed forces.

From then onward, the military was deployed as the coercive arm of a regime whose economic and political goals—in which urbanization and industrialization played a preeminent role—often constituted the peasants' demands for land and justice as adversary to the state. The army became a key force acting as law enforcers in this conflict. Sometimes, they were sent out on behalf of the state as an institution, but just as often, private interests disguised as legitimate power pursued their own goals using the army as a coercive arm.

The liberalization of the Mexican economy since the early 1980s is particularly important in this regard, as it facilitated the privatization of ejido lands at the same time as it empowered powerful private interests, both national and international. The privatization of strategic assets, like subsoil energy or metal resources, took place at a time when the Mexican state's capacity not only to regulate the economy but also to regulate political life, was notoriously eroded. This opened the door for a watershed of "entrepreneurial activities"—not least in the countryside. The army's historical role as law enforcers in these territories, and its historical collusion with local interests, put them in a key position of mediating between local peasants as well as new and old actors bent on exploiting new economic opportunities on the Mexican countryside. Mostly—though not always—peasant communities were on the losing end of such disputes.

Today, the accumulated effects of these historical trajectories can be observed in the form of continuous social protests, grave environmental damages, high levels of violence, an increasing fragmentation and de-legitimization of the Mexican state, and more broadly as an increasing militarization of public security. In addition to conflicts over land, peasant communities are engaged in a host of struggles revolving around claims for social and political rights, as well as denunciations of human rights abuses. The relationship between peasants and the military has never been without conflict, but at the moment, it looks gloomier than ever.

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Endnotes

¹ A case in point can be found in the National General Archive President Manuel Ávila Camacho Files, File 550/35-4, and in the National General Archive President Miguel Alemán Valdés Files, File 562.11/9-4.

² The prevalence of agrarian issues as a source for violent conflict can be verified in "Draft report documents 18 years of 'Dirty War' in Mexico," in National Security Archive, February 26, 2006, Chapter 6, "Inicios de la guerra sucia en México," <http://bit.ly/1S18zWk>

³ On 1 January 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), or Zapatistas as they are more frequently called, declared itself at war with the Mexican state. The EZLN is a militant movement emerging from indigenous communities in the state of Chiapas, in southern Mexico. These communities have traditionally suffered from abject poverty as well as discrimination based on language and ethnicity. Moreover, the Zapatistas are concerned with the struggle for land and are opposed to the Mexican government's neoliberal policies. After the January 1994 declaration, on the same day that the free trade agreement NAFTA between Mexico, the United States, and Canada entered into effect, the guerrillas seized several towns and villages and attacked police stations and military barracks. However, the Mexican army soon quelled the uprising. The Zapatistas have since resorted to a defensive strategy in trying to protect their indigenous territories.

⁴ In Mexico, the Federal Law for Fire Weapons and Explosives authorizes the Ministry of Defense to grant such permits (see Article 40). Traditionally, mining operations were carried out by parastatal industries. However, after the liberalization of such economic activities in the 1990s, private investment and participation in these activities have become the norm.

⁵ See article 46 of the Ministry of Defense, "Regulations for the Federal Law of Firearms and Explosives" (Congress of the Union), <http://bit.ly/1FtzG8Q>. In regards to the permissions that Sedena grants to mining companies, see Sedena, "Industria de la minería," May 24, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1KfFRyL>

⁶ See articles 55, 56, 57, and 58 (Congress of the Union).

⁷ However, it is pertinent to underscore that the Ministry of Defense has not always had a bias in favor of business interests. In some cases, it has backed up judicial decisions that have punished companies and ruled in favor of peasant communities.

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