

IN DEPTH

## Indigenous peoples and communities, violence and alternatives of peace

**Francisco López Bárcenas**

Professor, researcher and adviser to indigenous communities

The continuous stream of violent social events shortens the people's memory. Of important things that occurred, only a blurred image remains, if that, because their place in the popular memory is occupied by other more recent events. Seeing the Dantesque scenes that death has left across the whole territory of Mexico, turning the country into an involuntary cemetery, there are few, very few, who understand what is happening and even less those who think that the violence is not the will of God, that the situation that Mexicans are going through is a product of the decomposition of society and that if we want to escape from it we have to retrace our steps, undo much of the route we've followed, in order to find a way forward.

This is very important among the indigenous peoples and communities of the country. Exclusion due to discrimination and racism has established asymmetric relations between them and the mestizo population, a difference so profound that the result is internal colonialism, where outside groups decide the important aspects of their lives, letting them decide only those matters that do not clash with these outside interests. Thus, the historical violence suffered by indigenous peoples and communities takes on a structural character. Through this, they are excluded from everything important in national life and their internal life is controlled. At a national level, they only count as votes in elections while at a local level they can do whatever they want as long as they do not disturb the order of exploitation and colonial control that have been imposed on them.

But indigenous peoples have always resisted this violence against them. They have always sought and found a peaceful way of adapting themselves to it, pressurising and negotiating with their oppressors according to their own capabilities and the alliances they manage to create. And when that is not possible, they have not hesitated to resort to arms, as an extreme measure, to defend their existence and their rights; they use violence to achieve peace. This was the case in the second part of the 19th century, when the consolidation of capital put in danger their existence as peoples, their territories and their own governments. They lost that war, but the defeat was not complete and they took up arms again in the 1917 revolution. They recovered something of what had been taken from them in the previous century –above all, their land– but they continued to be under attack and being made invisible, which is another subtle form of violence.

**“ The historical violence suffered by indigenous peoples and communities acquires a structural character; they are excluded from everything important in national life and their internal life is controlled ”**

One dramatic fact of the official violence against the indigenous peoples is that in all its existence, the Mexican air force has only ever used its bomber planes against the indigenous peoples: in 1927 against the Yaqui people of Sonora who refused to lay down their arms against the government until they had been returned the land that the politicians and businessmen had taken from them; in 1957 against the Triqui peoples of Oaxaca who had executed the commander of the military zone based in San Juan Copala, their political and ceremonial centre, because he stole their coffee and trafficked in weapons that he himself later confiscated; in 1994 against the Mayan peoples of the state of Chiapas organised in the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) that rose up in arms against the government because of the inhuman situation in which they were living.

Of all this, almost nobody remembers anything. In the same way, there are very few who remember the recent repressive actions against indigenous peoples, despite the fact that these left dozens dead, wounded or disappeared and people deprived of their freedom, which at the time provoked popular outrage. The Aguas Blancas massacre in the state of Guerrero in June 1995; that of Acteal, in the state of Chiapas, in December 1997; that in Agua Fría, in Oaxaca, in May 2002; and the disappearance of students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers' College (escuela Normal Rural Isidro Burgos), Guerrero, in September 2014, are only the best known cases. Even so, over time, memory gives way to oblivion and the demand for justice for the victims and the punishment of those responsible gradually fades away because other equally serious events demand people's attention.

### **Violence against peoples and communities**

Last year, when Andrés Manuel López Obrador launched, for the third time, his candidacy for the Presidency of the Republic, many indigenous peoples, communities and organisations supported him because they saw in his candidacy the opportunity to change the situation of violence that they had been living through since the introduction of neoliberal policies, back in the last decade of the 20th century; others stayed on the sidelines but ended up supporting his candidacy, convinced that it was the least bad option of government. In other words, they cast their vote for him, not because he was the best option but because there was no other. Also because in his campaign he promoted a discourse sympathetic to indigenous peoples' struggles against extractivism and in defence of their territory and their natural resources. As we will see later, their assessment was not completely correct because the violence against them has not ceased one year into the new government.

This struggle has generated social instability and, in many cases, violence against opponents. According to the Commission for Dialogue with the Indigenous Peoples of Mexico, an instance of the federal government, in the past six years there were 312 conflicts that involved indigenous peoples and communities, where the triggers were mining exploitation projects, ownership and possession of land, infrastructure projects (roads, gas pipelines, hydrocarbon exploitation), hydraulic projects (construction of dams and aqueducts for the transfer of water from one water basin to another) and

security and justice (organisation of community police). To these must be added those conflicts derived from the use of water and biodiversity, natural elements which commercial companies value highly with the aim of taking them to the market.

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Another non-exhaustive report prepared by the National Indigenous Congress (CNI) –a space bringing together organisations that fight for the autonomy and rights of indigenous peoples that was created on 12 October 1996 to support compliance with the Agreements on Rights and Indigenous Culture between the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) and the federal government<sup>1</sup>– affirms that since then, the organisations that make up the CNI had suffered 117 murders and 11 disappearances of their members. However, according to this organisation, “The real figure is higher because this tentative list generally includes only those who had political and/or operational responsibilities. The names of those who were killed and resisted from their fields, their ceremonies, their daily tasks are absent.” And also absent are those affected by violence who belonged to organisations that do not participate in the CNI.

The CNI’s preliminary list of murdered activists who were members of its organisations includes 51 Tsotsiles from three communities in Chiapas; 33 Nahuas –22 from Michoacán, five from Jalisco, four from Guerrero, one from Morelos and one from Colima–; six Binnizá from two communities in Oaxaca; six Choles from three communities in Chiapas; five Purépechas from two communities in Michoacán; five Chontales from two communities in Oaxaca; three Triquis from two communities in Oaxaca; three Tseltals from two communities in Chiapas; two Chinantecos from Oaxaca; one Nu’saavi from Oaxaca, one Me’phaa and one Mixe from Oaxaca. The eleven

disappeared indigenous people that are members of the CNI are 10 Nahuas –from Michoacán, Jalisco, Veracruz and Puebla– and a Oaxacan indigenous person disappeared in Mexico City.

To these murders and political disappearances, we must add those killed during the current six-year mandate of Andrés Manuel López Obrador: Noé Jiménez Pablo, Santiago Gómez Álvarez, Samir Flores Soberanes, Julián Cortés Flores, Ignacio Pérez Girón, José Lucio Bartolo Faustino, Modesto Verales Sebastián, Bartolo Hilario Morales, Isaías Xanteco Ahuejote and a young Nahuatl from Colima. These are people who believed in the policies of change promised by the current government, but, as they hadn't seen this change, they continued to struggle to defend their rights. Another group is that of indigenous people deprived of their freedom, persecuted or threatened for defending their land and looking for a decent life for themselves, their families, their communities and their peoples.

### **Proposals for peace and a new life**

Given this scenario, many leaders of the organisations of indigenous peoples and communities believe that there is a permanent war against them and that this will not stop unless pacifist alternatives are proposed. It is a war in which many factors and actors converge. On the one hand, we find the extractivist model of economic development, the relationship of capitalist companies with organised crime and the policies of subjection by the State. On the other, the defence of their territories put up by populations and communities through collective mobilisation. Furthermore, as time goes by, the people fighting back gradually transform their forms of struggle, distancing themselves from vertical methods of organisation, returning to their own models. Rather than in organisations, they come together in their own politico-religious structures, which are very varied. There it is possible to find everything from democratic practices, where the assemblies make the decisions that are then carried out by their representatives, through to military models, where what carries most weight is the leaders' experience of armed conflict. Another organisational aspect to be considered is that which gives civil bodies a pre-eminence over religious structures, although in many cases what we see is the opposite.

Along with their methods of struggle, their goals have also changed. They have gone from directly confronting the government, demanding it recognise their rights, to strengthening their local structures and, from that basis, resisting attacks from outside. And here find the most important point, because in doing this they resort to their historical experience and their cultural values, maintained and recreated for centuries. It is in the new methods of struggle and in the change of objectives that alternatives can be found for the pacification, not only of the indigenous peoples and communities, but also of the country; if, that is, attention is paid to the message they are transmitting and to what they can teach us. Many people consider that there is now no indigenous movement because they no longer occupy public squares or offices, nor can they be seen marching through the broad avenues of the big cities. If they visited the different communities, they would be astonished by people's constant debates about their future, their rituals to beg forgiveness of Mother Earth for not having taken care of her and allowing her to come to harm; their calls on their deities to enlighten them. Everything in their own way, in their own time and using their own mechanisms.

The peoples and communities call these processes the reconstitution and creation of autonomies. There are all kinds of these, depending on the needs of the indigenous peoples and communities, on the possibilities of achieving the objectives that are proposed, the resources they have to achieve that and, often, the support they can obtain from the alliances that they establish. In this, without a doubt, the experience in Zapatista territory is important, but there are also others across the whole territory of Mexico. In the north, the peoples fight for the defence of their territories under attack by capital; in the centre as well, although here the processes are diversified, since there are processes of creation of self governments and community police for security, based on their own resources, a long way away from the mandate of the state.

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## **in the western world, offering in return the best of their world ”**

In other cases, the indigenous peoples and communities create projects, planned and designed by the people themselves. Among these we can find projects of reforestation or water capture, where society is reconciled with nature; food cultivation projects, where they plant what they themselves consume, making rational use of the land and putting into practice their ancestral knowledge; or education projects disconnected from official models and prioritising local knowledge. And flourishing alongside them we find cultural projects of local poets, historians and philosophers that would considerably enrich official cultural and educational policies, if they were taken into account.

The important thing about these processes is that instead of demanding state recognition for their autonomy, they exercise it as a genuine way of life. In an environment of daily violence, the rebuilding of villages and the creation of autonomies becomes an organisational and political resource with which the peoples face up to multiple forms of violence: against (structural) domination and dispossession, against the (political) violence of the state, against stigma (discrimination), against organised crime. The new indigenous movements not only want to end violence, but also to bring an end to what causes it. They want to transform what is noxious in the western world, offering in return the best of their world. At the centre of these complex processes is the construction of autonomies, with their own resources, showing that one can live in peace if the common good is given priority over private interests.

### **Conclusion**

As can be seen, indigenous peoples' alternatives for ending the violence that is engulfing the country aren't focussed on fixing the things in the system that don't work, because they know that this is not possible, and even if it were, it would only solve the problem of the direct, immediate violence of the mestizo society, while the structural, colonial, racist and discriminatory violence that has been directed against them historically would continue to persist and, after a few years, would reappear. That is why

they insist on changing the rules of the game, attacking the root causes of the problem that, according to their understanding, are found in the very design of the state that Mexicans have built over time, from which they and their rights were excluded.

According to the indigenous peoples and communities, for there to be peace, the state must be transformed from its very roots, so that we can all have the chance to live in dignity.

To achieve this, they offer their experience of resistance but, above all, their cultural values, which include prioritising the collective over the individual; solidarity with those who have less; the gift of offering what nature has given, a different relationship between society and nature; governments that can be more horizontal and assembly led or more vertical, but must always attend to the preservation of the common good for the well-being of all. In a time of crisis, where the existence of life itself is at stake, this should be valued with all the seriousness it requires. It is very likely that the solutions to the problems caused by globalisation can be found at the local level. Indigenous peoples and communities offer us a way to build a better future for all. Whether or not we are able to listen to them depends on us.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Originally from the community of Santa Rosa Caxtlahuaca, in the Oaxacan part of the Mixtec region, Francisco López Bárcenas has postgraduate studies in Law and Rural Development. Teacher, researcher and adviser to indigenous communities, he has also held community positions in his home town and has documented the history of the Mixtec peoples, contemporary indigenous movements and the transformations of the State and its legislation.

1. López Bárcenas, Francisco, “Los movimientos indígenas en México: rostros y caminos”, *El Cotidiano*, no. 200, Journal of the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana – Azcapotzalco Unit, Mexico, November-December 2016.

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