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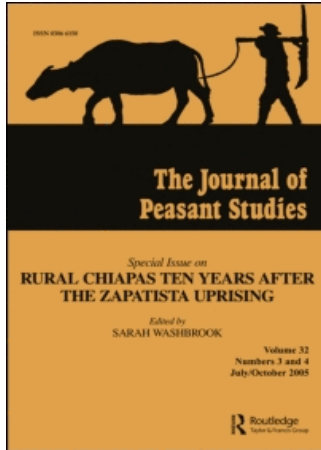
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# Rural Democratization and Decentralization at the State/Society Interface: What Counts as 'Local' Government in the Mexican Countryside?

JONATHAN FOX

*Rural local government in Mexico is contested terrain, sometimes representing the state to society, sometimes representing society to the state. In Mexico's federal system, the municipality is widely considered to be the 'most local' level of government, but authoritarian centralization is often reproduced within municipalities, subordinating smaller, outlying villages politically, economically and socially. Grassroots civic movements throughout rural Mexico have mobilized for community self-governance, leading to a widespread, largely invisible and ongoing 'regime transition' at the sub-municipal level. This study analyzes this unresolved process of political contestation in the largely rural, low-income states of Guerrero, Hidalgo, Oaxaca and Chiapas.*

## INTRODUCTION

Where does the state leave off and society begin? To be more precise, when one looks at forms of representation and participation that bridge state and society, at what point do they represent the state to society, versus representing society to the state? This question is especially important for debates over the significance and impact of grassroots involvement in rural

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local government or in officially participatory government rural development institutions. Such channels for official 'incorporation' could be a partial concession to previous waves of protest, or could be a direct grassroots demand. At other times and places, official venues for grassroots representation reflect instead a preemptive governmental response, intended to contain potential protest. In the context of this variation in the political character of official channels for grassroots representation, empirically valid generalizations are challenging, since the same nation-state may include top-down 'invited spaces' in some regions, or with some organizations, while 'shared governance' may reflect actual empowerment and contestation in others.<sup>1</sup> Cutting across this variation is a feature shared by both reformist and revolutionary states: there is little room for sustained, autonomous peasant self-representation that is scaled up beyond the village level.

For many national governments and international development agencies, whether to permit or how to channel participation is more a matter of political and bureaucratic discretion than of rights. At the same time, with the widespread rise of decentralization, sometimes coinciding with partisan electoral competition, territorially-based governments have increasingly become the target of local demands. Decentralization of resource allocation to local governments changes the political opportunity structure for rural citizens. Local governments have more resources than they once did, they are more within reach, and they are sometimes permeable. As a result, with more political space and fewer reprisals involved, contestation over services and public goods now either complements or supercedes explicitly class-based forms of organization and redistribution.

In both urban and rural areas, processes of democratization have led to widespread civic and political demands for the right to participate in decision-making and oversight of local government. Notably, in many of Latin America's cities, participatory budgeting has been widely praised as a means for under-represented citizens to exercise direct democratic influence over resource allocation. Yet the determinants of the horizontal diffusion of these institutional innovations remain poorly understood, and participatory budgeting has yet to sink deep roots in rural areas. More generally, it is safe to say that even after many years of elected civilian rule in many countries, rural democratization remains very much contested terrain. The 'right to have rights' has spread very unevenly across space, class, gender and race.<sup>2</sup>

This study focuses on one of the territorial dimensions of rural democratization by problematizing the question of 'what counts' as local government. As decentralization marches on and resources are increasingly devolved to 'lower' levels of government, the incentives for contesting control over local government increase.<sup>3</sup> To frame this issue in terms of a question about state-society relations, is village government a form of

societal expression, or does it represent the penetration of the state into the locality?<sup>4</sup> How local is local, anyway? Rural districts, counties, *panchayats* and municipalities are often treated by policy analysts and political scientists as the 'most local' level of government, yet these levels of government may in turn encompass many distinct communities which may or may not have rights to self-representation.

Even if village government were representative of the majority of the community, in some sense, by what criteria would it be considered the most local expression of the state, vs. an expression of society? Uphoff and Krishna [2004: 361], for example, in their discussion of state-society relations as a potentially non-zero-sum relationship, locate local government at the state-society interface, but explicitly put it in the societal box. Any effort to draw a boundary between state and society at this 'most local' level of rural government would be artificial, given the high degree of interpenetration between these two arenas. Yet two key indicators are relevant for considering village government to be in some sense a branch of the state. First, are local leaders named from above, by higher-level officials? Second, does village government administer funds that come from higher levels of government? If the answer to at least one of these questions is yes, then it is fair to say that such bodies have a significant degree of 'stateness'.

#### MEXICO'S SUB-MUNICIPAL RURAL GOVERNANCE REGIMES

Mexico's federal system of governance is based on three constitutionally recognized levels of government. This federal system delegates the regulation of municipal governance to the states, which leads grassroots democratic movements to target state level authorities when their struggles involve demands for local democratization. At the same time, most rural development funds and large-scale infrastructure projects remain under the control of federal agencies.

The conventional wisdom holds that the municipality is the most local level of government in Mexico's official three-tier system. Yet much of rural Mexico is also governed by a 'fourth level,' which administers villages *within* municipalities.<sup>5</sup> This layer of sub-municipal governance has been largely invisible to all but the occasional anthropologist – and the literally millions of citizens who live in villages. As a result, both journalistic and scholarly coverage of 'local' power struggles involving a given municipality often creates the impression that such conflicts unfold within a single community. For example, the resistance to the expropriation of community agrarian reform lands (known as *ejidos*) to build a new Mexico City airport in 2001 was widely described in the terms of the implicitly homogeneous community of San Salvador Atenco – the name of the municipal center. Yet the

expropriation was to affect not one, but 13 *ejidos*, and the movement involved a regional convergence of 13 ‘*pueblos*’ – distinct villages within the municipality. The organization that led the campaign is called the ‘The Coalition of Communities in Defense of the Land’ (*Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra*), ‘a movement that brought together regional struggles that were not limited to land’ [*PRODH*, 2006]. To refer to the name of the municipal center is certainly convenient shorthand, but from an analytical point of view this practice renders invisible the question of how these different communities came together. Yet the process of ‘scaling up’ collective identities and action from village to regional levels is at the center of the question of how the rural poor can change the balance of power *vis-à-vis* the state (in this case the state’s municipal branch).

This study focuses on the contestation of power over Mexico’s ‘sub-municipal’ governments, concentrating on rural and specifically indigenous regions. The main argument is that the struggle over local rural democracy and village autonomy constitutes an unresolved, ongoing form of ‘regime change.’ Legally, Mexico’s states determine sub-municipal governance structures, and they are remarkably evenly divided between elected and appointed regimes. Based on a review of state municipal laws as of 2006, thirteen states had elected systems, in thirteen states sub-municipal officials were named by the municipal authorities, and four states had mixed systems, in which different layers of sub-municipal leaders were chosen through different means [*Fox*, 2007]. Notably, during the 1996–2006 decade, only four states passed laws that involved changes in ‘sub-municipal regime.’ The focus here, however, will be on the patterns of actual practices of local autonomy.

The political subordination of sub-municipal rural communities to municipal centers directly mirrors underlying class and ethnic inequalities. Local elites based in municipal centers – landowners, merchants, transport owners, agro-industrialists and professionals – use the machinery of local government to reinforce their economic, social and political domination of outlying villages. The concentration of economic and political power, most notably in regional centers, indicates that the process of class domination cannot be understood without taking into account the mechanisms of political control, since authoritarian and corrupt political elites are able to use the levers of the local state to both create and perpetuate economic domination. Only those municipalities that are too small, remote and poor to be worth trying to control directly escape this pattern.<sup>6</sup>

Formally, Mexico’s sub-municipal leaders are considered to be ‘municipal auxiliaries’ and they usually lack much in the way of formal authority – except when government social investment funds are supposed to be invested outside the town center. Beyond the issues of official powers and who

controls the public 'micro' finances, however, is the question of who will represent the interests of rural people who live outside of municipal seats? Until recently, most rural areas were governed by an official dual power system of local territorial governance, combining civil rule by municipalities with agrarian governance by those elected to *ejido* leadership.<sup>7</sup> *Ejido* powers mattered a great deal when they were empowered with sufficient government funding to be economic actors, but after the Salinas era reforms of the early 1990s, the role of many *ejidos* was limited to administering new individual land titles.<sup>8</sup> While few agrarian reform communities were actually dismantled, they lost their economic development role.

Just as *ejidos* became less relevant, relatively large injections of social investment funds made municipal authorities more significant. As a result, many rural citizens shifted the focus of their micro-democratic concerns from agrarian to municipal governance. Where these dual structures of territorial governance overlapped and were both democratic, these local institutions proved capable of sustained resistance – as in the case of the Atenco airport campaign, when The Coalition of Communities in Defense of the Land had the support of both the sub-municipal leaders and the leaders of the affected *ejidos*.<sup>9</sup> In this context, these 'most local' institutions of sub-municipal governance, small and weak as they may be, matter for at least three main reasons: they can ground broader resistance struggles with grassroots political legitimacy and social cohesion, they are entitled to receive federal social investment funds channeled through municipalities, and grassroots democratic struggles have targeted sub-municipal authorities throughout rural Mexico.

The question of how communities outside the municipal centers should be represented cuts across the conventional ideological spectrum – as does the issue of decentralization more generally. For example, Subcomandante Marcos [cited in *Bellinghausen*, 2006c] recently stated his case to an indigenous community in the state of Mexico:

It's the people who should be in charge.<sup>10</sup> Why do we want some f\*\*\*\*\* lawyer, who comes from somewhere else, who doesn't even know the folks here, if the folks themselves can organize and put one of their own in, and take turns [governing]. That's the way we do it in the Zapatista communities in Chiapas. There it's not the government of the Republic that's in charge, not the state, and not the municipal [government], it's the communities themselves that name their authorities. That's they way it should be here, because who better knows the problems of La Marquesa? The very same folks of La Marquesa. That way, if the person in charge begins to take the wrong path, we're watching him, and if he's getting rich, we can kick him out.

While the Zapatista rejection of federal authority gives this argument a revolutionary edge, the self-governance-from-below discourse has also been echoed for years by one notable voice from deep within the state. As Raúl Olmedo [1999: 1–2], founding director of the Interior Ministry's Center for Municipal Studies put it:

The Mexican municipality in its current form, though it is said to be the level of government closest to the community, continues to be an abstraction and is not really the direct government of the community. . . . The current municipality is the legacy of the . . . Conquest and the Colonial period and was designed to impede community organization, and even to intentionally disorganize society, to weaken it to be able to dominate it. . . . [Since the 1980s,] electoral democratization [of the municipality] has not changed its centralized and colonialist structure: power continues to be concentrated in the municipal center and the actual communities – rural and urban, continue to lack the right to govern themselves. . . . The demand for autonomous [local] government has been taken up by the indigenous peoples, but also by neighborhood citizens' organizations in large cities.

In rural areas, these sub-municipal jurisdictions are called municipal 'agencies,' 'commissions' or 'delegations.' These territories are in turn divided into smaller jurisdictions, sub-delegations or police agencies [this last term because of their role in keeping order]. Those who govern the agencies are known as 'municipal agents,' but whose agents are they? From the point of view of democratic governance, the key question is do they represent the village to the municipality, or do they represent the municipality to the village? The federal constitution allows the state governments to determine how municipalities should govern their outlying villages.

Mexico currently has 2,438 municipalities (as of 2006), and 85% of them are rural.<sup>11</sup> While national and state policy-makers often favor the fusion of the small municipalities, Mexican municipal advocates contend that Mexico does not have enough to represent rural citizens effectively. Carlos Rodríguez, director of one of Mexico's leading municipal development NGOs, points to Spain, with more than 8,000 and France with more than 36,000, noting that each country has a smaller territory and population than Mexico [*Rodríguez, 2004: 1*].<sup>12</sup>

Most rural municipalities are more comparable to counties or districts than to towns; they include at least several, sometimes dozens of distinct communities. Almost 25 million Mexicans still live in 'localities' of fewer than 2,500 inhabitants, which legally are too small to constitute municipalities (data for the year 2000, cited in CONAPO [2001]). While many of



Mexico's almost 200,000 officially designated 'localities' are small hamlets, most of this population lives in larger villages. Because these villages cannot constitute their own 'free municipalities,' to use the classic pre-revolutionary Mexican phrase, millions of rural people live in communities that are 'unfree' – that is, they are politically subordinate to town centers. Many state and municipal governments reproduce Mexico's traditional centralism in their respective domains, and their authorities continue to resist the loss of power inherent in decentralizing decentralization. This dynamic leads both to persistent efforts by subordinate communities to constitute their own municipalities (sometimes known as 'remunicipalization') and to ongoing tensions between town centers and outlying villages.<sup>13</sup>

The review here of the scholarly, official, journalistic and NGO literatures suggests that these tensions between municipal centers and outlying communities are exacerbated by at least three factors: persistent authoritarian rule at the municipal level, increased funding flows to municipal governments, and mutually reinforcing class and ethnic tensions. In Mexico's indigenous regions, municipal governments are often headquartered in market towns with centuries of colonial and neocolonial history as centers of racial domination and economic exploitation of the surrounding villages. In addition, inter-municipal boundaries in these regions were often drawn to reflect the area of influence of the town centers, which ended up politically dividing communities with shared ethnic identities and ancestral land claims.

The colonial legacy of many municipal centers in Mexico's indigenous regions came to world-wide attention with the Chiapas rebellion. For example, in the regional center of non-indigenous political-economic power, San Cristóbal de las Casas, indigenous people were forbidden from walking on the sidewalk until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. During the first days of the Chiapas rebellion, while in command of seven municipal centers, the rebels destroyed the police stations and trashed the files of town halls, but remarkably little else. Images of masked Indians whacking away at a 'municipal palace' shocked Mexico City newspaper readers.<sup>14</sup>

In Chiapas, where non-indigenous ranchers and farmers had monopolized local political power, the municipality was far from the level of government 'closest to the people.' Instead, 'local government' had long been the embodiment of racial and economic exclusion. Yet many indigenous communities had retained their own customary institutions of self-governance, some of which managed to govern the smaller highland municipalities through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1921, however, a new state constitution simply eliminated 59 of the state's 116 municipalities, subordinating them to non-indigenous regional elites [*Burguete*, 2004: 148]. By mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the post-revolutionary regime also developed means of indirect rule through government-designated bilingual indigenous

intermediaries, often teachers or other professionals, who ruled with impunity in exchange for delivering votes and stability [Rus, 1994].

Long before national democratization, municipal government was often the most-contested public office in Mexico [e.g., *Cornelius, Eisenstadt and Hindley*, 1999; *Fox and Hernández*, 1992; *Fox and Moguel*, 1995; *López Monjardin*, 1986; *Paré*, 1990; *Rubin*, 1997; *Rodríguez and Ward*, 1995]. However, while a few rural municipalities were among the first to break the PRI's electoral monopoly, in general rural democratization lagged behind urban political change.<sup>15</sup> After the 1988 presidential election, hundreds of left opposition activists were killed as they campaigned for municipal democratization, notably in rural areas of the states of Michoacán, Guerrero and Chiapas [e.g., *Gutiérrez*, 1997]. Now that even most rural municipalities in Mexico are experiencing electoral competition, many outlying villages are still in the midst of a contested democratic transition.

As federal policies encouraged decentralization in the 1990s, substantial amounts of funds for social investments began to flow through rural municipal governments for the first time [*Fox and Aranda*, 1996]. This created new incentives for rural communities to contest local governance – and raised the stakes involved in the balance of power between town centers and outlying villages. Yet at the municipal level this process has been far from homogeneous, and Mexico's municipal 'regime change' has rarely been framed in those terms.

Electoral democratization of municipalities appears to be insufficient for improving the representation of the rural poor who live outside the town centers. As elsewhere in Mexico, the rural poor and indigenous peoples in particular are often deeply skeptical of all political parties. For villagers, partisan competition has rarely created opportunities to participate and to hold local government accountable. Instead, the key issue may be whether or not villages have the right and capacity to govern themselves, rather than be governed by outsiders, from the town center.

The rest of this article explores institutions of rural territorial governance by analyzing the changing power relations between municipal centers and outlying villages. The discussion compares the contested balance of power between town centers and villages across four of Mexico's most low-income, rural states – Chiapas, Hidalgo, Guerrero and Oaxaca.

#### COMPARING SUB-MUNICIPAL REGIME DYNAMICS ACROSS FOUR STATES

Which comes first, grassroots civic claims for municipal democratization and decentralizing decentralization, or institutional change that allows for village self-governance? In other words, what drives sub-municipal regime change?

The following discussions of four state-wide patterns suggests that a process of reciprocal interaction between citizen action and institutional change drives this decentralization of decentralization.<sup>16</sup> On the one hand, the breadth and density of grassroots civic organizations and practices will shape rural citizens' capacity to hold municipal governments accountable. On the other hand, by creating incentives and disincentives for participation, the institutions of local governance in turn influence the capacity of grassroots communities to influence local authorities. This section explores trends in sub-municipal regime change in indigenous communities in the Mexico's four poorest states. The assessments synthesize the results of field research, press reports and interviews with rural development policy-makers, community leaders and NGO activists.

### *Oaxaca*

Oaxaca stands out as the Mexican state whose laws have gone the furthest towards recognizing indigenous rights to self-governance. Municipalities are allowed to decide whether to govern themselves through partisan balloting or through diverse forms of customary law. For more than a decade, 418 of Oaxaca's 570 municipalities have been governed by non-Western community decision-making and do not require the intermediation of political parties.<sup>17</sup> Local autonomy in Oaxaca holds both for municipalities and for most sub-municipal jurisdictions.

In some regions, indigenous municipalities have come together to form regional coalitions, to increase their bargaining power with the state and federal government, as in the cases of the United Front of Municipal Presidents of the Sierra Mazateca, and the coalition of local village leaders within the vast municipality of Miahuatlán. Yet few such regional coalitions have sustained autonomy over multiple mayoral terms (recall that Mexico's electoral system does not permit reelection). One of the most long-lasting regional experiences is in the Zoogocho Sector of the northern highlands, whose municipal and agrarian authorities sustained a regional coalition for more than a decade. In this autonomous indigenous civic bloc, sub-municipal authorities are fully represented, and have at times led the regional coalition.<sup>18</sup>

The social foundations of rural governance in Oaxaca, as in much of rural Mexico, are also influenced by the diverse web of relations between local governments and agrarian reform communities. Both are forms of territorial governance. In some cases, municipal boundaries coincide with agrarian reform communities. Elsewhere single municipalities include several agrarian reform communities, which may or may not overlap with sub-municipal agencies. In a few cases, agrarian communities include more than one municipality.<sup>19</sup> Inter-community conflicts raise cross-cutting issues for rural municipal and sub-municipal governance.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, in spite of Oaxaca's generally high levels of both intra-community cohesion and village self-governance, it is important to keep in mind several different forms of persistent social and political exclusion. The first involves authoritarian boss rule, which persists in a significant minority of Oaxacan municipalities (under both the customary law and political party regimes). In one notable example, an outgoing mayor in the Pinotepa region felt sufficiently secure to gun down a leading opposition candidate. The challenger was an Afro-Mexican community leader, and she had promised, if elected, to audit his administration. He is reported to have declared 'I'm tired of you and I'm going to kill you,' while shooting her in the back in the local medical clinic [Ruíz and Habana, 2004]. State authorities facilitated the murderer's escape by waiting before beginning to search. In addition, local bosses can often count on state government authorities to intervene in their favor in conflicts with communities that attempt to exercise their autonomy – as in the case of arrest of villager leaders in the Mixe region [Regino, 2006, Ruíz Arrazola, 2006b].

Second, gender continues to be a major axis of exclusion from local political representation. Women continue to be treated as less than full citizens by many – though not all – indigenous village governance systems, as in much of rural Mexico. Yet recent studies indicate a significant shift towards broader female civic participation. According to the most comprehensive survey, in 10% of the Oaxacan municipalities governed by the non-partisan customary system, women are completely excluded, both from the right to vote and speak in assemblies and the right to be elected. In 9% of the cases they cannot vote but can hold community leadership positions. In 21% they can vote but their level of participation is low. In 60% women can vote, participate in public life and hold leadership positions [Velásquez, 2004]. In some villages women can exercise an indirect right to vote, but only in representation of migrant husbands. In others, married women lose the right to vote [Cuellar, 2002]. For those women who do exercise leadership, reprisals are common [Dalton, 2005].<sup>21</sup> In one case of a gendered transition to sub-municipal democracy in Oaxaca's Mixteca region, women found allies among male migrants who returned to comply with their local civic leadership duties. The returning men had formal clout but lacked information about local politics, while the women had the information but lacked voting rights, so they found common ground to unseat local bosses [Maldonado and Artia, 2004].<sup>22</sup> Overall, Oaxaca's gendered regime of citizenship rights is in transition, and quite different from the pattern of complete exclusion one would have found just two decades ago.

A third persistent pattern of exclusion in Oaxaca's rural local governance system is much more subtle. While many Oaxacan villages are indeed self-governing vis-à-vis the municipal center, only some are represented in the

process of selecting municipal authorities. In other states where sub-municipal governments are chosen from below, citizens also vote for the municipal authorities, but this is not necessarily the case in Oaxaca, especially if the town center is also governed by community assembly rather than balloting. In other words, in Oaxaca's non-partisan customary law governance system, villages often retain their local self-governance at the cost of being excluded from the right to participate in the selection of the municipal authorities – who are the gatekeepers for federal investment funds.

In this sense, there appears to be a significant tradeoff between autonomy and scale, with village self-governance accepted as long as they remain de facto disenfranchised from decision-making at the municipal center. When sub-municipal agencies do manage to participate in municipal center affairs, the losers do not always quietly withdraw. For example, in the case of San Martín Intuyoso, after the winning mayoral candidate won thanks to a majority of votes from outlying villages, at least four people were shot to death at the new mayor's first town council meeting. Shortly before the shots were fired, the mayor-elect, Antonio López Martínez said 'if something happens to me or to other comrades, [the Governor's regional subdelegate] will be responsible.' In his view, the state government backed the local bosses 'who have always controlled the town hall' [Ruíz and Rojas, 2005].

Such conflicts over local autonomy for outlying villages were not limited to municipalities where the town centers were controlled by the longtime ruling party. In the case of Ejido Zapata, villagers attempted to force their way into the town hall of Juchitán, long under the control of the opposition Coalition of Workers, Students and Peasants of the Isthmus (COCEI). They were protesting the COCEI mayor's 'unwillingness to call a new assembly to elect a new municipal agent, after the majority of villagers voted to impeach [the current agent], who is accused of mishandling community funds.' In spite of the COCEI's long history as a paradigm case of local, independent, indigenous-led democratization, local police beat twenty of the protesters [Ruíz Arrazola, 2006a].

The Oaxacan experience also suggests the importance of distinguishing between sub-municipal autonomy from higher levels of government, on the one hand, and the accountability of municipal and state governments to villagers on the other – especially when it comes to resource allocation.<sup>23</sup> In other words, village authorities can be autonomous vis-à-vis the rest of the government, while having no capacity to hold those other levels of the government accountable. One revealing indicator (and determinant) of the balance of power between levels of government involves the municipal fund program's degree of public transparency. In Oaxaca, federal guidelines required the state government to make public the amounts of the annual grants allocated to each municipality. This would allow mayors to know how

much their towns and villages were due, as well as to compare their funding levels with other municipalities of similar characteristics.

The data is also highly relevant for sub-municipal leaders, to permit them to assess whether their mayors are giving them a fair share. Oaxaca's state government formally complied with this transparency requirement, insofar as its Finance Ministry published the data in the official state bulletin. Under normal circumstances, this bulletin would circulate little outside state government offices. However, in 2003, the state Finance Ministry also attempted to purchase the bulletin's entire press run. Nevertheless, at least one copy reached a Oaxacan public interest group, which published all the data as a special supplement of a local independent newspaper for distribution to municipal leaders statewide [*Transparencia*, 2003]. Local NGOs have continued to disseminate information about municipal funds to community leaders, in an effort to provide them with the tools needed to hold both municipal and state government officials accountable [*EDUCA/Transparencia*, 2005].

### *Guerrero*

Guerrero villages have widely-ranging degrees of social cohesion, but many are organized and have generated region-wide peasant advocacy and marketing organizations.<sup>24</sup> Guerrero's system of sub-municipal governance is a hybrid that includes two levels. Formally, district commissioners are elected and mandated to form a municipal advisory council of commissioners. In municipalities with over 20,000 inhabitants, the mayor has the discretionary power to create districts to be administered by appointed 'delegates,' who can simultaneously be elected town councilors.<sup>25</sup> While this provision appears to be designed primarily for urban management, at least a half dozen of Guerrero's municipalities with populations greater than 20,000 are either primarily or substantially rural.<sup>26</sup> This creates substantial ambiguity in terms of which system of sub-municipal governance will dominate, elected vs. appointed.

In practice, the state's municipal governance regime is in transition. Some municipalities have experienced notable processes of democratization, but elsewhere local communities are excluded from municipal decision-making (especially where municipal authorities are controlled by regional political bosses). The struggle for municipal democratization has been long and costly. In indigenous regions these campaigns often take the form of efforts to gain village autonomy from violent and authoritarian elites in the town centers, or to become new municipalities, as in the case of Xochistlahuaca, which experienced a long decade of repression.<sup>27</sup> The majority of the population is ethnically Amuzgo and lives in the outlying villages. In this case, persistent political exclusion by non-indigenous political bosses based in the town

center led villagers to declare their own de facto autonomous municipality, known as Suljaa'. This campaign for municipal democracy has been met with at least twenty killings and more than fifty arrest warrants against local activists. As David Valtierra, one of Suljaa's leaders put it,

Here folks put up with poverty for too long, but what they just couldn't take any more was that the municipal authorities did not respect the communities' [right] to elect their delegates. This problem isn't from yesterday or the day before. It began with the aggression against our people and our customary law [*usos y costumbres*], when they tried to impose leaders on our communities.... In spite of all of our denunciations of the beatings and deaths, those responsible are not only free, they are working in the government [*Rojas*, 2004: 20].

Sub-municipal leaders often come together to protest against corrupt mayors. In the case of the municipality of Chilapa, village commissioners together with the indigenous Council of Elders wrote to the national daily *La Jornada* to accuse the mayor of breaking prior agreements to carry out specific local public works. Their letter concludes 'we call on all the communities [*pueblos*] of the municipality of Chilapa to form a common front, to demand what by rights is due us, that they provide basic services to our communities so that we can benefit from rural programs' [*Consejo de Principales*, 2003]. When most of the village commissioners in a large rural municipality do come together, and when their petitions are ignored, they are capable of engaging in militant direct action.

In the municipality of San Luis Acatlán, 30 commissioners came together to protest the mayor's alleged corruption (he had been elected on the center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution ticket). After not getting a response, to pressure state authorities to audit the town hall and expel the mayor, they occupied the town hall and detained state officials responsible for public works [*Habana*, 2003b; *Habana and Saavedra*, 2003]. They won an audit, which found serious irregularities, leading 22 commissioners to another round of protests – blocking the federal coast road – to pressure the state government to follow up by pursuing legal charges against the mayor responsible [*Habana, Ruiz and Saavedra*, 2004]. In effect, these sub-municipal leaders broke the law in the name of promoting the rule of law.

Sub-municipal leaders have also come together in Guerrero to defend municipal presidents who have been attacked by political opponents. The mayor of Alcozauca, a very low-income rural municipality where elected left-wing governments date from 1979, was charged with corruption by a PRI-dominated state congress and removed from office. Indeed, it is not uncommon in Mexico for corruption charges to be used as a partisan political

weapon. In this case, the village leaders came together to declare in the national press: 'The works built with municipal funds are there. Anyone who would like to can see them. There is no stolen money' [Guzman del Carmen *et al.*, 2002]. When the PRI controlled the state government, opposition mayors also accused the governor of extreme partisan bias in the distribution of funds to municipalities [Saavedra and Habana de los Santos, 2004].

The most notable experience in which submunicipal leaders came together to promote good governance involves the Montaña region's Community Police. Launched by diverse social organizations in 1995, including indigenous rights advocates, coffee coops and the catholic diocese, the Community Police is governed by sub-municipal village leaders. They are represented through a regional assembly, the Regional Network of Community Authorities [CRAC, *Coordinadora Regional de Autoridades Comunitarias*] and an executive committee of six regional leaders.<sup>28</sup> This strictly volunteer and non-partisan security force includes 612 participants, reaching across six municipalities [Rojas, 2005]. The Community Police not only survived for a decade in spite of hostility from the state government, it also succeeded in substantially reducing crime.<sup>29</sup> Some municipal leaders failed to cooperate, as in the case of Marquelia, where members of five villages occupied the town hall to protest the mayor's lack of respect for the Community Police [Habana, 2004].<sup>30</sup> In terms of relations with the state government, the governor (newly elected as the candidate of the center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution, PRD) waited a full year before recognizing the existence and legitimacy of the community police [Ocampo and Habana, 2006]. Community police in other regions of the state also hold state authorities accountable, as in their recent disarming and arrest of three state police agents on robbery charges [Guerrero, 2006].

In the context of Mexico's ongoing political debate over what indigenous autonomy would mean in practice, Guerrero's community police stand out as a rare case of a consolidated alternative indigenous self-governance process that has scaled up to the regional level – and survived. Not only does it set a precedent in terms of accountable, effective public security where both municipal and state authorities had failed, it shows how often dispersed and isolated *sub*-municipal leaders can act collectively, effectively bypassing unrepresentative municipal authorities. Local leaders of economic organizations have come together to form regional organizations for decades, and they have campaigned for accountable governance of economic programs, in Guerrero as in other states [Bartra, 1996, 2000]. In general, these organizations dealt primarily with federal programs, sidestepping rather than confronting authoritarian municipal and state authorities [Fox, 1996]. In contrast, one of the most distinctive features of Guerrero's community police movement involves the transformation of territorially-based forms of



governance to form a region-wide armed civic force that serves as a direct counterweight to both municipal and state government officials.

At the municipal level, most of the state's municipalities now experience party competition, and the PRD won the majority of town halls for the first time in 2005. This outcome would have been difficult to imagine in the early 1990s, when dozens of PRD activists died in municipal electoral conflicts [Gutiérrez, 1997]. Yet whether the change in the party in power will affect sub-municipal governance remains to be seen. Grassroots indigenous rights activists often claim, as in the case of a leader of Guerrero's Independent Organization of the Mixteco and Indigenous Ma'paa People, that 'political parties have only used and divided us. When they get to power, they are all the same.'<sup>31</sup>

Frustrated efforts to democratize sub-municipal governments lead in turn to calls for state government recognition of new breakaway indigenous municipalities. One of most notable cases is the so far unsuccessful effort to launch the new municipality of 'the New Democratic Ranch' (*Rancho Nuevo de la Democracia*). Beginning in 1995, approximately thirty communities that 'belong' to three different PRI-controlled municipalities campaigned to launch their own multi-ethnic municipality (most of the villages are Mixteco, with three Nahuatl and two Amuzgo). In addition, twenty Mixteco communities have called for their right to form the Chilixtlahuaca municipality since 1996. Rodríguez goes on to cite at least six other cases in southeastern Guerrero, which – together with ongoing efforts for sub-municipal democratization – appears to constitute a trend [Rodríguez, 2001, 2004].

Indigenous civic movements to decentralize decentralization combine 'scaled up' participatory democracy with new challenges in terms of inter-village conflict resolution. The villages that come together to call for new indigenous municipalities tend to make decisions through participatory assemblies. As Hébert's study of Guerrero's Indigenous Peoples' Council (*Consejo de Pueblos Indígenas*, or CPI) documents, 'the view of one person must not be ignored, and... the *comisario* acts as a mediator between opposing views.' The regional leadership took on the task of balancing the interests of the different villages,

but the necessity of choosing a [new] municipal center clashed directly with the hitherto egalitarian nature of the regional movement, and some delegates reacted strongly to the fact that their political efforts would profit a community that was not theirs. In other words, the replication of community decision-making within the CPI was only possible as long as the interests of the emerging 'regional community' [i.e., the movement] did not clash with those of the 'real communities'. [Hébert, 2003: 76].

Democracy activists buffered inter-village rivalries by persuading delegates to choose their new proposed municipal center by consensus rather than majority vote, taking into account objective criteria such as access to communications infrastructure, and by working with regional church leaders to promote 'a symbolic redefinition of the community within which consensus has to be achieved' [Hébert, 2003: 82]. In other words, the construction of new autonomous structures of territorial political representation is easier said than done.

In spite of the many external and internal challenges, a sub-municipal 'regime change' appears to be under way throughout rural Guerrero. Communities are increasingly demanding the right to local self-governance. According to local municipal democracy activist Carlos García Jiménez, of the Program for Self-Managed Development (PADS):

Legally, the commissioners are elected and the delegates are appointed [either by the commissioner of the main locality or the municipal president]. Nevertheless, in practice, the dominant tendency is for the delegates to be elected, in assemblies, by their villages [in rural areas] and by their neighborhoods [in the cities and municipal centers]. Paradoxically, only in large neighborhoods, where it's not possible to have representative assemblies, does the municipal authority name the delegates. In rural areas, the delegates have the same status as the commissioners. [Their] elections are increasingly competitive . . . to the point that sometimes two commissioners operate in the same locality, one recognized by the municipal authorities, the other not.

Because of the geographic and political distance between the municipal and the community authorities, de facto, they exercise a certain degree of self-governance . . . In practice, they have the freedom, with community consensus, to exercise governance to face the challenges of community development: social welfare, public services, public security, fund-raising, and environmental protection. Nevertheless . . . they lack the culture and capacity that pro-municipal advocates propose for the 4<sup>th</sup> level of government. Small-town, paternalistic attitudes often lead community authorities to depend on what the municipal government proposes, they go to the town hall to 'solicit' help.

In Guerrero, the recognition of the community representation role of the commissioners and delegates has been growing, bit by bit . . . There is an incipient opening for their participation in Municipal Development Councils, town council meetings, Advisory Councils of Commissioners. The spaces for their representation are recognized

both in the law and in official discourse, though there is still a huge gap between words and deeds.<sup>32</sup>

### *Hidalgo*

Municipal democracy in Hidalgo is still incipient, and civic participation is reportedly inhibited by inhabitants' fresh memories of the high levels of agrarian conflict in the 1970s.<sup>33</sup> In practice, however, many indigenous communities in the Huasteca region retained the tradition of designating their village leaders (known as 'judges'). Sub-municipal leaders are officially known as delegates and sub-delegates.

In contrast to most other states, Hidalgo's law that regulates municipal-community power relations has been the subject of public debate. In the 1970s, sub-municipal communities were self-governing, but they lost this right as the result of 1983–84 negotiations between the governor and ranchers whose lands had been invaded by thousands of landless peasants. Though the ranchers ended up losing large amounts of land, they were able to hold on to local power in other arenas thanks to their control of the town centers. In 1998, various social and civic organizations raised the issue of sub-municipal governance again, and their campaign succeeded, passing a new law in 2001 that recovered village self-governance. Municipal delegates and subdelegates are elected by residents of the locality on an annual basis, their mandate includes advocating for community needs at the municipal level, and they can be removed by residents 'for cause.'<sup>34</sup> In general, however, Hidalgo state politics discourages municipal accountability.<sup>35</sup>

Rural governance in much of Hidalgo has yet to experience the impacts of Mexico's recent movements for democratization and indigenous rights. In the case of Acaxochitlan, the 22 Nahuatl communities account for 70% of the population, while *mestizo* caciques in the town center continue to monopolize both local government and the local branches of federal agencies. Bellinghausen's account quotes a leader of the local civic organization 'Help Indigenous Peoples' – '*Aitepe Mechual Tlapaleguani*' in the Nahuatl language: 'They have used us so that they have the best and we're left like their piglets' [Bellinghausen, 2006a].

The municipal police allow private loggers to cut timber while prohibiting indigenous people from collecting firewood on their own communal lands. The municipal police did not protect the indigenous communities from cattle rustlers, leaving them without livestock. The town center pollutes the local river, preventing downstream indigenous villages from taking advantage of the local waterfalls as a tourist attraction. Local elections mean little. As one local leader put it, 'We had elections, with hundreds of "extra" voters. We were going to protest, so that the "elected" PRI leader would not be able to take office. But that day our leader was shot to death in his house.' After a

local civic leader was killed, 'there appears to be no true criminal investigation to shed light on the secret that everyone knows: the *mestizo* [non-indigenous] and PRI bosses from the town center killed him' [Bellinghausen, 2006a].

Lack of municipal accountability sometimes provoked mass protest by villagers. In Huazalingo, Hidalgo 1500 indigenous people took over the town hall to demand that the PRI mayor deliver on promised public works, and to call on the state congress to investigate him for corruption. The mayor had even received financial contributions from villagers for projects that were not carried out, and they demanded their money back. The state official in charge of security dismissed the protesters as a small group, but an independent journalist reported that 1,500 indigenous people from 26 villages had come together, stacking bricks in the entryways of the town hall until the state government complied with its promise to negotiate [Camacho, 2005]. While this account could be seen as evidence of a growing tendency of villagers to challenge mayors over resource allocation, this case was unusual insofar as it involved not only government resources to which they were entitled, but also the villagers' own contributions.

Abuse of municipal funds is common in Hidalgo. For example, the state government's review of the 2002 accounts found irregularities in the accounts of 48 of the Hidalgo's 84 municipalities, leading the state congress to file charges in ten cases [Camacho and Chavez, 2003; Camacho, 2003]. Because state government accounting oversight is in the hands of an agency that is not autonomous from elected officials, it is difficult to determine whether such charges are political weapons. The state government's capacity to charge outgoing mayors with fraud provides them with a powerful potential tool to discipline potential dissidents, as well as the capacity to protect loyalists. In any case, accounting for municipal funds has become a major point of contention, with municipal governments under pressure both from above and from below.

### *Chiapas*

Chiapas has diverse *de facto* municipal and sub-municipal governance regimes, dividing along four main cleavages. The first key distinction is between the official and the Zapatista municipal governance systems. Beginning in December 1994, almost one year after the rebellion, the Zapatistas launched 38 of their own autonomous municipalities. They claimed their right to do so under Article 39 of the Mexican Constitution, which states: 'the people have at all times the right to choose their own form of government.'<sup>36</sup>

Municipal democratization and sub-municipal autonomy were priority issues in the 1996 political negotiations between the government and the Zapatistas. A diverse group of independent Mexican indigenous rights leaders and advisors informed the Zapatista position, which ended up emphasizing

the transforming of municipal governance over the main alternative view, which promoted the creation of a new intermediate level of governance, the Autonomous Multi-Ethnic Regions.<sup>37</sup> In the section specific to Chiapas, the final text of what were called the San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture explicitly proposed to transform Mexico's sub-municipal regime, while also creating the possibility of autonomous regional associations between both sub-municipal and municipality authorities:

In municipalities with majority indigenous population, the right of indigenous peoples and communities to elect their traditional and municipal authorities will be recognized, according to their normative laws, and their practices and institutions will be legally validated, including their systems of community service, assembly, popular consultation and open councils. Municipal agents will be elected and removed by their respective *pueblos* and communities, and not designated by the municipal president.

Mechanisms should be encouraged to permit the participation of indigenous *pueblos* and communities in electoral processes, without requiring the participation of political parties. Municipalities with majority indigenous population will be able to impeach municipal authorities when they are responsible for practices that violate the law or their *usos y costumbres*, and the state congress should respect and approve their decision.

The communities and the municipalities with majority indigenous population, in their character as subjects with rights already expressed by law, will be able to come together and associate among themselves to carry out regional actions to optimize their efforts and resources, thereby increasing their capacity to manage, develop and coordinate their actions as indigenous *pueblos*. The appropriate authorities will carry out the orderly and gradual transfer of resources, so that they themselves can administer the public funds assigned to them, and to strengthen indigenous participation in the administration of different arenas and levels of government.<sup>38</sup>

These proposed measures addressed many of the key obstacles to accountable local self-governance cited earlier. Nevertheless, then-President Zedillo quickly backed away from the San Andrés Accords. A government counter-insurgency crackdown followed, including the infamous 1997 Acteal massacre and the dismantling of many of the autonomous Zapatista municipalities.<sup>39</sup>

The Zapatista movement then reorganized their autonomous governance institutions [*González Casanova*, 2003; *Martínez*, 2003]. In 2005 they were in turn transformed into the more institutionalized regional 'Good Government Councils,' elected by organized Zapatista communities. They overlap territorially with conventional municipalities and operate as parallel authorities. So far, it appears that Zapatista local government institutions primarily rule those who accept them as legitimate authorities, rather than attempting to impose their rule on others. Notably, in the 2003 municipal elections, according to an independent human rights organization, 'The Zapatista... [Good Government Councils] fulfilled their promise to respect the work of the electoral bodies. The council announced this in August, requesting that "in the same way that we respect those who want to vote, you must respect those who do not.'" This decision confirmed the non-confrontation option of the Zapatista movement' [*SIPAZ*, 2004].

The future of Zapatista civilian territorial governance structures became uncertain as of May 2006, when Subcomandante Marcos declared their operations suspended indefinitely, as part of an EZLN 'Red Alert' declared in response to the government repression of a community protest on the periphery of Mexico City (led by the Atenco resistance movement mentioned at the beginning of this article).<sup>40</sup> In contrast to Marcos's apparent expectation, the government did not crack down on the Zapatista communities, but their local governments remained suspended as of five months later. At least one close longtime observer interpreted this impasse as reflecting a shift in the internal balance of power from civilian to military Zapatista leaders [*Ross*, 2006].

Related to this first cleavage in Chiapas, between official and Zapatista municipalities, the second main cleavage among contending municipal regimes involves the participation of official municipal authorities in counter-insurgency activities. This was especially notable in the period after the Zapatista rebellion and before the PRI's loss of the governorship in the same 2000 elections in which it lost the presidency. During this period, the official municipal governments became battlegrounds in the government's counter-insurgency efforts. Increased federal funding in the name of poverty reduction no doubt did lead to infrastructure construction, but allocation of government services was widely seen as part of efforts to reward government supporters and to isolate pro-autonomy forces. In 1998 and 1999, the state government pursued its own 'remunicipalization' strategy, intended to strengthen local allies [*Leyva and Burguete*, forthcoming]. The fact that the Acteal massacre was carried out by pro-government municipal leaders, with support from state and federal authorities, was an extreme but far from unique example of the multiple links in the chain of authoritarian rule in Chiapas.

The third main cleavage is between the formal-legal municipal governance regime and the diverse web of actually-existing governance institutions. State law gives municipal authorities the power to designate their local agents. In practice, however, at least in the highland region, communities consistently name their own leaders.<sup>41</sup> In contrast to other regions of Chiapas, highland municipalities had come under largely indigenous control by the 1960s [e.g., *Burguete and Torres Burguete*, forthcoming]. Indigenous people first reclaimed the agencies, then the municipal centers. This pattern was repeated in the Northern region in the 1990s [*Bobrow-Strain*, 2007]. Yet the 'indianization' of local political power did not stop conflicts over abuse of municipal authority. The mass expulsion of residents of outlying villagers in the municipality of San Juan Chamula is the most well-known case, a process widely attributed to religious intolerance but driven more by local elites' political monopoly. This hold has since weakened, as evidenced by a local uprising in which thousands of citizens held the mayor hostage and burned the home of one of the town councilors to protest municipal corruption [*Henríquez*, 2004].

In contrast, in larger municipalities, such as Ocosingo, the 'indianization' of local political authority did not happen until after the Zapatista rebellion.<sup>42</sup> Leyva explains in detail the complex, multiple layers and arenas of local community self-governance in the huge Ocosingo municipality, including efforts to create space of pluralism in spite of a high degree of political polarization [*Leyva*, 2001a, 2001b, 2007]. In the municipality of Las Margaritas, what Mattiace calls a 'regional renegotiation of space' was driven by indigenous regional self-governance initiatives that dated back to the 1980s [*Mattiace*, 2001, 2003]. More recently, distinct valleys within Las Margaritas were organized into micro-regions, with their own *de facto* governing structure. After the PRI lost the governorship in the year 2000, a new PRD mayor in Las Margaritas reportedly led the transformation of a clientelistic regional development strategy into a more inclusionary and participatory institutional experiment. The large municipality was divided into pluralistic 'micro-regional' councils, which came together with social organizations to form a region-wide Coordinating Collective [*Rodríguez Castillo*, 2004].

Formally, women in Chiapas have the right to vote in local elections. But in practice husbands often have two votes, what is known as the 'family vote.' Zapatista women themselves recognize publicly that their own 'revolutionary women's law' has been implemented slowly.<sup>43</sup> Enclaves of extreme restrictions on women's rights persist, and not only in indigenous communities. In a non-indigenous community in the municipality in Frontera Comalapa, women were banned from marrying men from outside the village, under threat of expulsion [*Mariscal*, 2006].

In the context of Mexican rural municipal governments in political transition, Chiapas is clearly an extreme case, insofar as large regions are governed by parallel local governments, while simultaneously experiencing the state's military occupation and low-intensity conflict strategies. Several military posts were dismantled in 2001, but the overall number of troops stationed in Chiapas has not been reduced. Though the frequency of human rights violations appears to have gone down since the PRI lost the presidency and the governorship, paramilitary forces remain armed, and two of the main paramilitary leaders claimed responsible for the Acteal massacre were freed, along with other suspects. Hernández Castillo [2006] notes that in some highland municipalities, such as San Pedro Chenalhó, 'there is one soldier for every ten residents today'.

Yet at the same time, in an increasing number of municipalities, more competitive electoral politics and the weakening of the former ruling party's capacity to back mayors may be redistributing power downwards. Power relations between municipal centers and villages remain conflictive, but only more systematic comparative research can determine whether such conflicts are resolved more through negotiation, through the rule of law, or by force. As a close observer of Chiapas municipal politics puts it, 'because here the law doesn't function, everything is *de facto*.'<sup>44</sup> In summary, municipal politics remains in flux throughout the state, and the state continues to be characterized by a diverse patchwork of sub-municipal governance regimes. Therefore it would be premature to conclude that the state's sub-municipal system of governance is clearly 'in transition,' in the sense of moving in one direction or another.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article has mapped Mexico's ongoing sub-municipal regime transition by documenting the broad trends in changing power relations between municipal centers and outlying villages. Contested state-society relations involved power struggles that cut across different levels of government, as sub-municipal bodies fought to gain autonomy from municipalities, and municipalities sought autonomy from state governments, which in turn regulated the balance of power between the first two bodies.

Lack of more systematic empirical data prevents detailed generalizations about the precise mix of continuity and change. Yet the contrast between changes in actual practices and legal frameworks appears to be significant. Based on comparing a decade of legal changes, only a handful of Mexican states increased the degree to which they formally recognize sub-municipal autonomy. Yet the experiences of the four states reviewed here show how rural citizens are contesting persistent authoritarian rule,



sometimes to the point of risking their lives for the right to govern their own communities.

The first conclusion here is that Mexico's systems of sub-municipal governance constitute a distinct, though generally invisible, regime. For a large share of the rural population, these are the institutions that determine how they are represented and governed most directly. Where they are democratic and autonomous, sub-municipal leaders represent village society to the state – and where they are not, they represent the state to society.

The second conclusion is that this regime is still undergoing a long-term transition. In some states, this process predated national regime change, unfolding alongside Mexico's uneven process of municipal and state level transitions – as in the states of Tlaxcala, Oaxaca and Hidalgo. In other states sub-municipal regime change towards local democratization lags far behind, as in Chiapas and Guerrero.

These sub-municipal transitions vary both between and within states, suggesting a third conclusion – that these transitions are driven primarily by power struggles between rural citizens, local elites and their respective allies in state governments – often far from the purview of national political elites either in the government or the opposition. Yet national elite politics still matters to these local–state level anti-democratic coalitions, insofar as governors require national level backing to remain in power when faced with widespread popular resistance – as revealed by Oaxaca's prolonged 2006 political crisis, when the governor hung on for months in spite of being challenged by a massive and unprecedented civic uprising.

Looking across the uneven landscape of rural Mexico's sub-municipal regimes, Guerrero's decade-long experience with community policing represents one of the most significant innovations. In contrast to the Zapatista parallel local governments in Chiapas, civilians have the last word. The Regional Network of Community Authorities (CRAC) combines local accountability to elected community leaders and scaled-up, region-wide impact with tangible impacts on the personal security of thousands of families. One of the CRAC's leaders, Cirino Placido, recently offered this assessment [cited in *Bermejillo*, 2006]:

Now we don't have legal recognition, but at least we have political recognition. They have not given us legal recognition because of racism against indigenous peoples. The community police have it in practice. The bureaucrats send us official documents and come to our anniversaries. . . . Our actions speak louder, I don't like to brag about what we have because that scares your political adversary. We have to work like gophers, because that animal goes making his burrows and then comes out ahead, we have to move forward without talking too

much. In my region it's even prohibited to use the word autonomy because it scares this regime. We're doing it in practice but we don't call it that. . . . In ten years we have learned, we have advanced and we are going to continue to dream about a new struggle in which we have barely taken two steps: one, community security for 60 Tlapaneco, Mixteco and *mestizo* communities, and two, we have created an institution that provides justice: CRAC. But we also have to deal with production and the internal market, it won't matter if we're really great at justice if there is hunger, because where there is hunger, there is dependence and subordination.

The fourth and final conclusion involves the puzzle of how to assess the significance of village level government. What difference does it make when communities made up primarily of landless laborers and sub-subsistence peasant farmers are able to select village leaders and hold them accountable? Sub-municipal governance is limited largely to keeping local order, carrying out modest public works projects, and perhaps holding seats in government-controlled regional agricultural development councils. The answer to the 'so what?' question is that their significance is not limited to their formal mandate or the size of their budgets. Their primary relevance is that they can be vehicles for voice. Their officially recognized, territorial base makes it very difficult for opponents to question the legitimacy of their representation – a frequent political vulnerability of more informal social movements. Sub-municipal leaders are literally the holders of the 'seal' that empowers them to sign official documents in the name of their communities. These local governance bodies can therefore provide micro-institutional foundations for broader resistance, though defensive campaigns are much more common than the alternative institution-building initiatives cited here in Guerrero, Oaxaca and Chiapas. These exceptions are notable not only because they are grounded in the legitimacy of certifiable majority rule, they also stand out because they have managed to scale up to regional levels, with or without the support of municipal authorities.

If and when the balance of power in rural areas between state and society is to shift toward majority rule, that change will be driven by these autonomous regional counterweights, whose capacity for collective action is most sustainable where they are grounded in truly local authorities. Yet the most direct answer to the question of the significance of Mexico's ongoing sub-municipal regime transition is that uncounted numbers of grassroots movements of rural workers and peasants have made local autonomy and democratization one of their priorities. By putting their lives on the line, they demonstrate the significance of local democratization.

## NOTES

- 1 On 'invited spaces,' see Cornwall [2002, 2004], and Cornwall and Schattan Coelho [2007]. For comparative empirical analyses of varying degrees of autonomy and participation in such programs in rural Mexico, see, among others, Fox [1994a, 1996, 2007]. On recent debates over official participation reforms, see Cooke and Kothari [2001] and Hickey and Mohan [2004].
- 2 For background information about rural democratization, see Fox [1990].
- 3 It is safe to say that the now enormous literature on decentralization retains a distinct urban bias, with the partial exception of the body of research on India's Panchayats, whose vast experience cannot be done justice here. For broad comparative overviews, see Crook and Manor [1998] and Ribot and Larson [2005]. For recent studies that specifically focus on the democratization of a level of rural government that is closer to the village than most, the *barangay* in the Philippines, see Estella and Iszatt [2004]. On accountability dynamics in Chinese village government, see Tsai [2007]. For development studies of rural municipalities in Latin America, see Cameron [2005], Fox and Moguel [1995], Fox and Aranda [1996], Pallares [2002], Rowland [2001] and Tandler [1997]. On decentralization and participation issues in Mexico more generally, see Selee and Santin del Río [2006].
- 4 In parts of rural Africa, for example, what appear to be forms of customary rule and therefore societal representation often turn out to be legacies of colonial indirect rule, state-regulated forms of top-down governance that end up competing with territorial forms of citizenship-based representation [Ribot, 2004].
- 5 Olmedo [1999] is one of the few specialists in Mexican municipal governance to refer explicitly to the 'fourth level of the state'.
- 6 Note that the majority of rural producers in Mexico, even before the recent acceleration of social inequality, have long been *sub*-subsistence producers – that is, semi-proletarian. According to the most rigorous class analysis of rural Mexico, based on a reinterpretation of 1975 census data through Chayanovian categories, 63% of ejido members produced less than enough for subsistence. Of the total producer population, 86.6% were peasants, included 56% at sub-subsistence and another 16% at subsistence levels, accounting for 56% of the arable land in standardized rainfed hectares. For details, see CEPAL [1982: 114, 123].
- 7 *Ejid*os are government-regulated agrarian reform communities; most were created between the 1930s and 1970s, and they account for approximately one half of arable land.
- 8 Note that there was little peasant protest against the reforms of the constitution's agrarian provisions at the time, in part because national leaders were promised that their members' specific agrarian problems would be resolved [Fox, 1994b] Note also that in many *ejidos*, internally unequal land distribution and lack of leadership accountability led many members to welcome the increased certainty associated with individual land titles. For initial overviews of the impacts of the *ejido* reforms, see Cornelius and Myhre [1998] and Randall [1996].
- 9 Personal email communication, Javier Salinas, *La Jornada* correspondent, 22 May 2006.
- 10 Note that in Mexican political discourse the term 'pueblo' means both 'community' and 'people.'
- 11 For background on Mexican municipalities, see the government's Institute for Federalism and Municipal Development at [http://www.e-local.gob.mx/wb2/INAFED/INAF\\_Inicio](http://www.e-local.gob.mx/wb2/INAFED/INAF_Inicio) and the Network of Researchers on Mexican Local Government at <http://www.iglom.iteso.mx/>
- 12 On the Centro de Servicios Municipales 'Heriberto Jara,' founded in 1990, see <http://www.cesemheribertojara.org.mx/>
- 13 Only a small fraction of local demands for new municipalities are approved, hence the focus here on the issue of sub-municipal autonomy. Because the creation of new municipalities requires the approval of the state congress, approval is unlikely in cases where the town center that would 'lose' subordinate territory is ruled by the same party.
- 14 See the photo of Altamirano in *La Jornada*, 4 January 1994, as well as Burguete [1998].
- 15 The Institutional Revolutionary Party or PRI (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*) exercised political power in Mexico for much of the twentieth century.
- 16 Some of the ideas in this section were discussed in Fox [2002].

- 17 See Añaya Muñoz, [2005], Díaz Montes [2002], EDUCA [2005], Flores Cruz [2002], Hernández Navarro [1999], Recondo [2002] and Velásquez [2000a, 2000b]. For a comparison with other states, see Assies, Ramírez Sevilla and Ventura Patiño [2006].
- 18 López and Robles Camacho [2005] and personal email communication with Oaxacan municipal development specialist Fernando Melo, 15 May 2006.
- 19 Personal email communication, 10 April 2006 with Fernando Melo.
- 20 Inter-village land conflicts in Oaxaca have a long history of provoking bloody conflicts. Historians and agrarian experts stress the responsibility of federal authorities in either ignoring or exacerbating these conflicts [e.g., Dennis, 1987].
- 21 For context, however, it is worth noting that while the percentage of female mayors in Oaxaca's indigenous municipalities is very low, it is also low throughout Mexico. A recent UN study found that only 3.5% of Mexico's municipalities are governed by women, one of the lowest rates in Latin America [Anzar, 2005].
- 22 On the changing roles of migrants in indigenous community governance, see Kearney and Besserer [2004] and Robles Camacho [1994].
- 23 For further discussion of the impacts of municipal social funds on local democratization, based on a representative sample of rural municipalities in the state of Oaxaca, see Fox and Aranda [1996]. This study also addresses the role of World Bank projects in Mexico's rural municipal policy process. For broader context on the World Bank in rural Mexico during the 1990s, see Fox [1997, 2000].
- 24 On Guerrero's rural social organizations, see Bartra [1996, 2000], Dehouve [2001], Espinosa Damian [1998], Hébert [2003], Johnson [2005] and Yaworsky [2005]. For the results of a detailed study of local governance in Guerrero, see the series of articles in the journal *Autogestión*, published in the state capital by the Programa de Autogestión para el Desarrollo Social, a grassroots training NGO (Self-Management Programme for Social Development). See PADS 2004.
- 25 See 'Ley Orgánica del Municipio Libre del Estado de Guerrero,' Arts. 198, 203B. accessible at [www.pads.com.mx](http://www.pads.com.mx)
- 26 See demographic data in Tlachinollan [2004].
- 27 The municipality includes 87 villages and the population numbers over 20,000, of which 68% non-Spanish speaking and 65% is illiterate [Tlachinollan, 2004: 21]. For a gender analysis of this local democratic struggle, see Rodríguez Cabrera [2005].
- 28 For details, see Cruz Rueda [2006], Habana de los Santos [2003a], Johnson [2005, 2007], Rojas [2005], Rowland [2003] and Tlachinollan [2004], among others. For a detailed ethnography of municipal governance in part of the region, see DeHouve [2001].
- 29 The state government appeared tolerant at first, but quickly became unsupportive. For example, in one case the state police jailed community police for jailing someone who had made death threats against a relative, and only freed them in response to a mass protest [Habana, 2002].
- 30 In San Luis Acatlán, the decision of the municipal authorities to put some community police leaders on the payroll provoked others to occupy the town hall in protest, to defend the principle of unpaid community service [Habana de los Santos, 2003b].
- 31 Cited in Bellinghausen [2006b]. He also quotes local leaders who note that 'the maa'phaa do not like to be called "tlapanecos," because it means "dirty face." They also deplore that the soldiers have raped their daughters, sisters and wives 'as revenge because we are building popular power.'
- 32 Personal email communication, 6 April 2006.
- 33 For a comprehensive account, see Schryer [1990].
- 34 See the 'Ley Organica Municipal del Estado de Hidalgo,' Articles 75 and 76, at [http://www.e-local.gob.mx/wb2/ELOCAL/ELOC\\_Ley\\_Organica\\_Municipal\\_del\\_Estado\\_de\\_Hidalgo](http://www.e-local.gob.mx/wb2/ELOCAL/ELOC_Ley_Organica_Municipal_del_Estado_de_Hidalgo).
- 35 This account is from Juan Cisneros, a rural development practitioner with two decades of public sector and NGO experience in Hidalgo (interviews, Mexico City, April and August, 2001).
- 36 As one autonomous municipal leader put it: 'indigenous *pueblos* and civil society named authorities to be able to deal with the most urgent problems in the zone. . . . The main goal is to show the government that with or without resources [from the state] we can promote sustainable development [and to] demonstrate to the government how to administer justice,

- taking into account the voice of the people, and that it be the communities themselves that can make decisions on development and the mandate of their authorities' [cited in *Rodríguez Castillo*, [n.d.].
- 37 The former position was associated with indigenous rights experiences in Oaxaca, while the latter position was associated with a non-Zapatista political formation, the ANIPA, which promoted the formation of Autonomous Multi-Ethnic Regions in their areas of influence in Chiapas, such as the Tojola'bal region.
- 38 See Hernández and Vera [1998: 80–86] also cited in López Monjardin and Rebolledo Millán, [1999]. For a broad overview of post-San Andrés Accords political conflicts over indigenous rights reforms, including the beginning of the Fox administration, see Hernández Castillo, *et al.* [2004]
- 39 For detailed descriptions of government hostilities, from the point of view of Zapatista municipal leaders, see the communiqués at [www.laneta.apc.org/enlacecivil](http://www.laneta.apc.org/enlacecivil).
- 40 The EZLN is the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*).
- 41 Personal communication, Araceli Burguete, 10 April 2006. On formal elections in this region, see Viquiera and Sonnleitner [2000].
- 42 For a detailed study of this process in north-central municipalities of Chilón and Sitalá, in the context of broader racial and class conflict, see Bobrow-Strain [2007].
- 43 See Chiapas Media Project [2004].
- 44 Personal communication, Araceli Burguete, 10 April 10, 2006.

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