

## Mexican Indigenous Community Boycotts Elections

Written by Ela Stapley

Tuesday, 22 November 2011 13:02

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It is Sunday morning in the main square of the indigenous town of Cherán, Mexico where the ringing of church bells clash with music from the youth community radio station. Election day has come to the Mexican state of Michoacán, but here in Cherán nobody is voting.

For the last three years this community of around 11,000 people has been caught up in Mexican President Felipe Calderón's war on drugs. As gangs of illegal loggers backed by the local drug cartel and aided by local politicians encroached further onto the community's land, with them came threats, abduction and murder.

Since April, the town has been sealed off in a bid to protect its future. Local and federal authorities are not welcome, politicians even less so. Barricades at the entrance to the town are manned 24-hours a day and members of the community keep vigil around fires in the street.

With local government no longer in charge, the town is now run by commissions, covering all aspects of town life from security to education, made up of around 60 local residents. What is missing, and what the people of Cherán now want, is to elect their own town representatives in line with indigenous tradition.

Mr. Ramírez, one of those running the Commission for Security, explains that elected residents will now do the work once done by politicians, but with one major difference, they will not represent any political party.



In boycotting the regional elections, the people of Cherán are making a statement against local politics. Sitting at his desk surrounded by papers, Father Antonio Mora, one of the town's priests, knows only too well the trouble traditional politics can bring. He moved to the community three years ago and found the town deeply divided along political lines. He explains that as political divisions worsened, organized crime took advantage of the split to drive a further wedge between members of the community.

Santiago Tapia, one of the members of the Commission of Coordination, which oversees the organization of the commissions, agrees pointing out that local politicians are often affiliated with organized crime. "Not having political parties here is a way of protecting ourselves," he states simply. In the past he explains, only two people were elected to run the town. Having so few people in charge meant not only were they vulnerable to threats from local criminal gangs, but they were also more likely to be corrupted. The town will now elect 12 people to oversee the running of Cherán. Tapia believes that by putting power into the hands of many greatly reduces the risk of corruption. "Our new system is a way of ensuring that organized crime does not find a

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way into the village,” he states.

The voting process for electing representatives began over a month ago. Forty-seven-year-old Teresa Leko Flores is preparing lunch around one of the town’s 200 street fires. She explains how her and the other members of her group took ten days to decide whom to nominate. “When we were keeping watch at night we spoke about who would be the best candidates,” she says. “When the names were decided we put forward the list to the neighborhood assembly and then as a neighborhood we elected the four representatives from our part of town.”

According to those now overseeing the running of the town, Cherán’s new electoral process, in which people take time to discuss and nominate people together, is far more democratic and transparent than the traditional way of voting anonymously for only one candidate. Juan Navarrete, another member of the Commission of Coordination, speaks with conviction about the way his ancestors used to organize. “It was a much more open process,” he states. “If the Mexican government would use this model we wouldn’t have the problems of corruption and delinquency that exist in the country today.”

Residents of Cherán were hoping to name their new representatives the same day as the elections in Michoacán, but a legal hitch has meant delaying the announcement until the end of the month.



Luz Pedrosa, a 37-year-old teacher is busy making banners for a march organized for later that day to protest the delay. She speaks passionately about her town’s right to nominate their own leaders. She explains that despite the elections being approved by the Electoral Tribunal of Judicial Power, a lack of time meant the town has not managed to collect enough signatures from residents showing that they are in favor of the new system. This has caused problems with the Michoacán Electoral Institute (IEM), which is now asking for proof that the town really wants this change. “This is what the march is about,” she states. “We are asking for the IEM to come, to observe, to see this is what the town really wants, we want to advance on what we have done so far.” According to Pedrosa, this new system will benefit everyone. “Money that previously went into the pockets of politicians will now be shared out equally, there will be more jobs and more transparency.” She is hopeful about the future prospects. “We are going to achieve this,” she states. “Ninety per cent of the town is behind this change.”

Finding an opposing voice to change in Cherán is not easy. Nobody wants to go on record about how they feel their rights are being restricted. One woman complained that, for not supporting the movement, she was not allowed to leave the town. Others grumble about how the lock-down is destroying the town’s economy. Those who support the movement brush off these complaints. “These are people who are used to politicians giving them things in return for voting,” says housewife Maria de la Luz. “We are so much safer now there is no politics,” she states. “Family members that once were divided over politics are no longer fighting.”

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Unity is important for those involved in the running of Cherán. “If the town is able to stay organized and united it will progress,” says one of the members of the Commission of Honor and Justice, who wished to remain anonymous. “We need to make people aware that we are in a process of change, a society different to what we had before,” he adds. Those marching later that afternoon certainly agree. As demonstrators of all ages set off from the five barricades on the edge of town and made their way through each of the four neighborhoods, they called on those watching to unite and join them. “Those who stand and watch are also with our fight,” they chanted. As the march of around 2,500 demonstrators entered the main square, *Upside Down World*, spoke with Juan, a 60-year-old artisan. “I’m marching because I am pleased that there were no state elections,” he states. He says the government needs to understand that the town is serious about looking after its own affairs.

Amongst a crowd of demonstrators waving the flag of their indigenous community is 21-year-old student, Victor. “This march is in defense of our forests and that we are not going to put up with anymore political parties,” he comments. Many of the banners waved at the event criticize the three main political parties in Mexico. Shouts of, “Racist parties your tombs are ready” and “Out political parties, Cherán is not your toy” echo in the streets. Shouting along with them is Maribel Jimenez. The 38-year-old mother of three says she is tired of injustice. “I am marching for my children,” she states. “I’m marching because we have asked for help from the government and there has been no response, but mostly I am marching because what I want here in Cherán is a new way of governing.”

*Photos by Nicolas Tavira.*