Project Abstract

**The Effects of Indigenous Autonomy in Southern Mexico**

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In 1995, several hundred municipalities in the southern state of Oaxaca, Mexico, formally gained the right to govern themselves autonomously, according to local customs based on indigenous communal traditions. This political development may represent one of the most radical experiments with indigenous autonomy in all of Latin America, given the degree of autonomy granted, its formal-legal nature, and the sheer number of citizens involved (approximately 1.25 million Mexicans, just over 1% of the national population, now live under “traditional” local governments). No other Mexican state has ever replicated the Oaxacan reform, and even in Oaxaca autonomy was granted only selectively, to a subset of the state’s indigenous communities. This has resulted in a complex mosaic of local political institutions, in which some indigenous-majority towns are governed by local custom, while others are not.

Scholars and policy makers have divergent views about the effects of this type of political arrangement. Proponents of the Oaxacan reform, for example, argued that autonomy would help maintain strong communal attachments in indigenous communities, thus protecting their languages and cultures while reconciling local political customs with state and federal political institutions. Yet for the most part these claims have not been tested against empirical facts, and there is some reason to be skeptical that autonomy has had purely salutary effects. To give just two examples: some scholars have argued that autonomy would increase the power of local strongmen while inhibiting the federal government’s ability to protect individual rights. Others (including this author) have speculated that the Oaxacan reform might harm indigenous communities in the long run by exposing indigenous customs to greater federal scrutiny and oversight. Importantly, these specific claims about the effects of local autonomy in Mexico are also applicable to other areas in which federal governments might consider (or might have already implemented) autonomy arrangements for indigenous minorities, including in the United States and Canada.

While many countries are faced with the challenge of integrating minority groups into the larger political system in a way that is respectful and acceptable to both, the nature of the political reforms in Oaxaca has created a particularly good research setting for investigating the effects of different strategies for integration. In a narrow sense, this research will determine whether or not local autonomy in the Mexican context actually confers several of the effects that are commonly attributed to it. More broadly, this research will improve our theoretical understanding of the role that political institutions can play in protecting (or harming) the rights and cultures of ethnic minority groups. Thus I expect that the results of this research project will interest scholars and policy makers in Mexico and in many other countries that struggle with the types of political conflict common to multiethnic societies.