The Pope visits Mexico

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Pope Francis on Thursday ended a five-day visit to Mexico. The papal tour was paid for by the government and a group of wealthy Mexican businessmen, who clearly saw it as a means of defusing mounting popular anger towards President Enrique Peña Nieto's government, its corruption and increasing authoritarianism, by parading around a medieval obscurantist offering only the mildest critique of the country's social decay.

While the country has the second largest number of Catholics after Brazil, relations between its government and the Vatican had been tense for most of the 20th century following the Mexican Revolution. A 1917 constitution severely restricted the powers of the church, which had always been identified with colonial oppression and political reaction.

Diplomatic relations were restored only in 1992, and while the church has steadily increased its influence over the last quarter century, the tradition of separation of church and state was still widely observed by Mexico's political leaders.

Peña Nieto, who is deeply unpopular with the vast majority of the Mexican population (recent polls put his approval rating at just 35 percent), sought to make the most of the papal visit, providing a state welcome at the National Palace where he saluted the Vatican flag. He later took communion on live television.

The Pope's visit provides an opportunity for an examination of the conditions prevailing in Mexico, the historical evolution of the ruling PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) and Mexico's turbulent relations with the Church.

Ever broader layers of the Mexican population find themselves in precarious social conditions. Over the past two and a half decades, the purchasing power of a Mexican salary has declined a staggering 78.7 percent. Life becomes increasingly unlivable in a country where a paltry minimum daily wage of 70 pesos can hardly cover more than a third of a basket of basic necessities valued at 201 pesos—a situation endured by 41 percent of the population. Added to this is mounting inflation which erodes workers' wages and pensions as the value of the peso lurches towards 20 pesos to the dollar from 13 in 2013.

Forty-two percent of the population live below the poverty line, while an additional 37.8 percent are at the risk of falling into poverty. This includes 21 million children living in conditions of poverty and 4.7 million in extreme poverty. The country continues to rank as the most socially polarized within the OECD. According to a recent Oxfam report, the top 1 percent of Mexico accounts for 21 percent of total income, and the total assets of the four wealthiest individuals in Mexico equals 9.5 percent of GDP.

Upon taking office in 2012, the Peña Nieto administration immediately pushed for a series of deeply unpopular "reforms," collectively known as the Pact for Mexico, that helped contribute to the sharp deterioration in social conditions. Most notable are the reforms affecting education and Mexico's energy sector. The former has sparked outrage from teachers, whose demonstrations have often met with heavy-handed police repression.

Indeed, police violence towards any manifestation of social anger is becoming something of a hallmark of the current administration. Notable examples include many of the protests over the massacre of the 43 student teachers of Ayotzinapa (which exposed the extent of cartel influence over all the main political parties and penetration into the Mexican state apparatus), and farm workers in Baja California striking for higher wages.

But it is the energy reform, which effectively privatizes the state-owned oil company PEMEX and opens up Mexican oil fields to exploration and exploitation by imperialist energy firms, that is arguably of greatest historical significance. The PRI came to power a decade after the Mexican Revolution, effectively staking its political legitimacy on a program of land reform and expropriation of the country's oil industry, which at the time was dominated by British imperialism. Significantly, in the cultural sphere this meant a continued commitment to a secular state, a legacy of the anti-clericalism of the Revolution, which included expropriations of Church property.

In its short-lived radical phase under President Lazaro Cardenas, the PRI, whatever the anxieties of the Mexican bourgeoisie, was obliged to direct Mexican national policy through a series of expropriations and corporatist concessions to the working class and peasantry, even going so far as to formulate six-year plans loosely modeled on those of the Soviet Union.

Of course, there were historical limits to just how far the PRI could bend the stick in the direction of "socialistic" planning on the basis of underdeveloped Mexican capitalist property relations. Over subsequent decades, *cardenismo* ossified into a conservative bourgeois party which could not tolerate any locus

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of independent political power. The post-war period was not lacking in political instability and chafing at corporatist single-party rule, but the PRI managed to cling to power through repression and censorship.

It is significant that Pope John Paul II first visited Mexico in 1979, precisely at a historical turning point in Mexico's history, when the PRI found itself obliged to accelerate the tempo of its shift to the right. This first visit and the subsequent restoration of diplomatic ties with the Vatican reflected broader objective processes within Mexico and globally.

Buffeted by escalating debt and diminished oil revenues as a result of the 1980 oil glut, the modest social gains secured first by the Mexican Revolution and then by the post-war stabilization of the capitalist social order were increasingly undermined. Particularly with the presidency of Miguel de la Madrid, Mexico began its "neoliberal turn" in earnest.

The railroads, nationalized in 1937, were privatized in 1995. In 1991, the government began selling off land that had been expropriated by the state, albeit haltingly and unevenly. Now the oil industry, snatched back from British imperialism in 1938, is being offered up for exploitation to the energy conglomerates of the imperialist countries. Meanwhile, the PRI and the pro-clerical PAN colluded in the Mexican Senate to undermine the Constitution's commitment to the provision of free and secular public education in 2012, amending it to allow greater latitude to the proliferation of religious schools.

This is the social and political context of the papal visit. Its purpose is to reaffirm the role of the Church as a pillar of social control, albeit mediated by the political circumstances of the twenty-first century. The very election of Pope Francis, the first pope from the Americas, was itself something of a ploy to maintain the church's weakening grip over its membership, which is increasingly concentrated in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Indeed, North America and Europe account for less than a third of the world's Catholic population.

The bourgeois media, by and large, has avoiding probing too deeply into the content of Pope Francis' remarks and takes for granted their "critical" character. On any serious examination, they are nothing of the sort.

For instance, the Pope's statements on inequality and poverty were sufficiently vague as to leave the Peña Nieto administration off the hook, and never rose above the level of reducing complex social problems to matters of individual moral choices, divorced from harsh material realities. Before a mass audience in the blighted city of Ecatepec in the State of Mexico, he spoke with utter social tone-deafness on being "seduced by fame, power and money." This in a city where 49.6 percent of its 1.6 million inhabitants live in poverty, over 100,000 of them in extreme poverty.

Tellingly, the parents of the 43 victims of the Ayotzinapa massacre were unable to attend a mass given by the Pope in Ciudad Juarez on Wednesday, citing a lack of means. This, after the Pope refused to meet with them individually during his visit.

There is a long history to these sorts of empty platitudes directed to the oppressed and vulnerable layers of society. The church's social criticism is necessarily superficial and takes capitalist exploitation as a given. In the nineteenth century, the Vatican would issue an encyclical on "the rights and duties of capital and labor," with Pope Leo XIII in 1891 declaring that "remedy must be found quickly for the misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class," all the while idiotically condemning socialism as mere "envy of the rich."

In the Mexican context, this pious fakery took the form of a mild critique of the institution of debt peonage and compelling agricultural workers to work on Sundays during the authoritarian regime of Porfirio Diaz, even as the Church pursued a comeback based on its cozy relations with the Mexican dictator.

Pope Francis also visited the state of Chiapas, which along with having a large indigenous population, is Mexico's poorest state with 76.2 percent of the population living in poverty. The hope was clearly to pander to the image of a "pope of struggle" with patronizing and exoticizing remarks on indigenous communities' supposedly intrinsic capacity to "relate harmoniously to nature." Of the genocide and colonial plunder suffered by the indigenous population, often at the hands of the church itself, the Pope could speak only in cowardly euphemisms: "On many occasions, in a systematic and structural manner, your people have been misunderstood and excluded from society," he said.

Karl Marx searingly characterized these historical experiences: "The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalised the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production."

For the Pope, it is enough to leave it as a mere "misunderstanding."

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