

Tijuana's Future: Rebellion (Mini-Chiapas) in the Hills?

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Contributing Voice

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When asked about the future of Tijuana, Mexican promoters or politicians usually point to the same symbols -- high tech *maquilas* (global factories), or sleek, glass high-rise office buildings in the *Zona del Rio* (River Zone), where executives in three-piece suits talk with their brokers on cell phones. "Tijuana is the new global city," they say. "Tijuana is the next Hong Kong."

Maybe.

But the future of this border city may also lie in a remote "*colonia*" called Maclovio Rojas, a collection of semi-rural, self-built homes in the eastern hills of the city, along the Tijuana-Tecate highway. At first glance, this modest neighborhood of the poor, with its spontaneous homes built from scrap wood, concrete, or recycled metal sheets, looks like any of hundreds of similar *colonias* that sprawl over the hills and canyons of Tijuana.

But look again. This little community may be the next "mini-Chiapas" of Mexico, the next locale for an explosive citizen rebellion against the government. Maclovio Rojas is perched to net a global audience; it could end up exposing the dark side of a nation that wants the world to believe it is modernizing its politics.

In the realm of community rights and urban planning, this *colonia's* story suggests a government that is still willing to bend the rules to appease corporate powers, even at the risk of jeopardizing the well-being of nearly 10,000 people.

Formed in 1988

Maclovio Rojas was formed in 1988 by 25 families, mostly farmers from the rural Mexico state of Oaxaca. They say they paid former *ejido* (rural land cooperative) officials for the land. But today, nearly 17 years later, they are witnessing their dream of ownership fade away into a twilight zone of government bureaucratic double-speak, and political posturing masking the not-so-hidden hand of corporate manipulation.

Most poor *colonias* in Tijuana eventually morph into working class and then middle class communities. But Maclovio Rojas has the misfortune of being located on prime real estate along the Tijuana-Tecate highway. It lies in the path of industrial development, between the highway and the rail line to Mexicali. Just 10 miles down the road is the huge new Toyota plant. Hyundai owns adjacent land it uses for giant container storage. There are new sprawling suburban housing subdivisions nearby, and plans for more.

2,000 Families

Some 2,000 families now reside in this *colonia*, which they have transformed into a viable community. Two new buildings anchor the neighborhood -- a school and community social services center. On their own, residents have constructed water lines that feed off official water piped systems run by the state and federal government. They are willing to pay for their water.

The community has, in fact, petitioned the government to permanently certify its public school, officially install water meters in all the homes, and recognize land ownership. The government response has been mute. While some initial efforts were made to send water technicians into the community, that effort was mysteriously aborted. Meanwhile, the school has not been able to receive permanent status by State education officials.

What's holding back the government?

This zone is suddenly sizzling -- the hottest industrial and residential real estate in town.

Government Promises Broken

Meanwhile, public officials have waffled and back-pedaled on promises made to the *colonia*. Worse still, police came into the neighborhood at night to arrest and jail the three main community leaders. The charge was: illegal theft of water, a strange charge, since the community openly offered to pay for its water services, and the municipal water agency never came back to install meters.

One woman was arrested; she has been in jail for over a year. The other two leaders managed to escape. They remain in hiding.

This is a social time bomb waiting to explode.

Protests

Popular protests are part of Mexican culture. Sometimes they can get violent, as in the case of San Salvador Atenco where *campesinos* armed with Molotov cocktails and machetes fought police and the army for three days in the summer of 2004. Eventually, they won the battle to oppose an airport the government wanted to build in their small town, 20 miles from Mexico City.

Just like Atenco, the spirit of the Zapatistas' fight in Chiapas looms in Tijuana. The residents are fed up.

Maclovio Rojas may have the misfortune of being in the middle of a corporate land deal that wants to make thousands of residents disappear. But, it has another more fortunate legacy -- its location on the border. Its plight will not go unnoticed.

For example, San Diego filmmaker Beth Bird directed and produced "Everyone Their Grain of Sand" which narrates the story of Maclovio Rojas. This powerful documentary has been shown in Europe, the United States, and Mexico. In December, it attracted a standing room only crowd at the Tijuana Cultural Center, CECUT.

The future of Tijuana?

Beth Bird may have put it best: "There is a real potential in Mexico for resistance and for winning. I feel optimistic that there is still so much vitality in this community"

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