



Political Culture and Representations of the Sociopolitical Conflict in Indigenous Community of Mexico: Case Study Oxchuc, Chiapas

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Abstract: *The purpose of this text is to analyze the characteristics of municipal governance in Oxchuc, Chiapas, during the 2015–2021 period, based on the representations of its citizens, the sociopolitical conflicts that have emerged and their implications for the local population. The underlying assumption of the study is that the municipality of Oxchuc faces serious social and political problems stemming from municipal administrations that have not addressed the most sensitive or priority issues affecting its communities. This has generated sociopolitical conflicts due to the municipal government's failure to meet its obligations, the lack of support, and alleged acts of corruption involving the municipal president from 2015 to 2021. These issues have affected both the residents of this municipality and those of neighboring municipalities, ultimately contributing to conflict and the breakdown of civic harmony. Through the representations of Oxchuc citizens, information about the municipality's political conflicts from 2015 to 2021, as well as recent events in 2022, was collected, showing how these situations have evolved in the study area. This has been largely due to the change in the political system to Usos y Costumbres. In this regard, constant corruption in municipal management constitutes the main factor generating social conflicts in Oxchuc. Furthermore, the way Usos y Costumbres was implemented in the municipality implied a setback for democracy in the municipality and led to the discrimination and exclusion of women from electoral political processes—a regression in their political rights, including the possibility of voting and being elected to exercise political power. The study was conducted using a qualitative methodological approach that enabled the recovery of citizens' representations and experiences regarding the conflicts arising from political problems in the municipality of Oxchuc. This was accomplished through in-depth interviews to key voluntary participants, including political and social leaders, as well as young, adult, and elderly residents of Oxchuc familiar with the current sociopolitical conflicts. The information was collected between march and april of 2022.*

Keywords: *Political culture, sociopolitical conflict, representations.*

1. Introduction

Various social and political conflicts have been recorded in the municipality of Oxchuc from 2015 to 2021, altering governance and the well-being of its inhabitants. These conflicts have generated confrontations both within the municipality and at the regional level, frequently affecting safety and mobility along the highway that connects municipalities such as San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Ocosingo, and Palenque. Beginning in 2015, these circumstances became the catalyst for all of the situation that continues to be observed today in the municipality of Oxchuc stems from the fact that in that year María Gloria Sánchez Gómez held office as Municipal President. Only a few months after assuming her position, conflicts emerged that led her to request a leave of absence, indicating that she would resign from her post, although it was rumored that this request had been made under pressure and through acts of violence.

One of the factors that has caused these conflicts over the past five years is the failure to fulfill social and economic commitments, as well as alleged acts of corruption in the municipal administration led by Professor Alfredo Sántiz Gómez, who was elected by a show of hands under traditional customs in 2019. These conflicts arose when people realized that during María Gloria Sánchez Gómez's term as Municipal President, she included only her own family and that of her husband, Norberto Sántiz, in municipal affairs. However, she was holding the office for a second time and no longer belonged to the same political party—the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Instead, she ran as a candidate of the Ecologist Green Party of Mexico (PVEM). As a result, beginning with the first conflicts that emerged

in 2015, the communities organized to carry out acts of protest in response to deficiencies in municipal administration.

In recent years, these grievances have caused widespread public discontent, generating social conflict in Oxchuc that has manifested in recurrent road blockades, the burning of houses and vehicles, and other acts that have affected the municipality itself as well as neighboring municipalities, businesses, and citizens. Because of this situation, people have been forced to take alternative routes, which are not always safe, in order to travel. Citizens risk their safety to reach the cities located between San Cristóbal and Ocosingo, Chiapas. It is also worth noting that it is very common for residents of Oxchuc to disrupt telecommunications signals in the region, affecting primarily the inhabitants of the city of Ocosingo. These actions are carried out by various organized groups in Oxchuc as a means of exerting political pressure on different levels of government, especially the municipal president of Oxchuc, which has caused further discomfort among the population. Given this situation, it is evident that society feels a degree of insecurity when traveling through this municipality due to the recurring acts of violence.

The municipality of Oxchuc is made up of 107 localities, and during episodes of conflict, the municipal seat and most of the localities generally participate. However, some communities choose not to take part because they prefer to act without generating significant conflict. Such is the case of the locality of *Tzontalja*, which decided to act autonomously in response to the Municipal President's failure to meet commitments, with the aim of reaching agreements without harming any counterpart. It is important to highlight that at the beginning of 2021, the residents of *Tzontalja* independently expressed their discontent to the current Municipal President due to the failure to deliver agreed-upon support on a mutually established date; the community acted on its own and organized according to its own rules without affecting anyone else. Another relevant point of analysis regarding the political forms of organization in Oxchuc concerns the method of electing the Municipal President through *Usos y Costumbres* (traditional customary practices). This form of election had not been carried out until 2019, when it was reinstated under these rules, replacing political parties. The intention behind this shift was to exercise their right to self-determination and autonomy, demonstrating that they can no longer be discriminated against or manipulated.

This research is based on the assumption that the municipality of Oxchuc faces severe social and political problems stemming from municipal administrations that have not addressed the most sensitive or priority issues affecting their communities. This has generated sociopolitical conflicts due to the municipal government's failure to meet its obligations, the lack of support, and alleged acts of corruption involving the municipal president from 2015 to 2021. These issues have affected the residents of this municipality as well as those of neighboring municipalities, ultimately provoking conflict and disrupting civic harmony.

2. Theoretical Approaches

Political culture has been the subject of reflection by various authors. From the perspective of Almond and Verba (as cited in Palacios and Fonseca, 2011), it refers to the subjective orientations and perceptions of a population or a segment of it. They argue that the elements that shape political culture are cognitive (knowledge and beliefs), affective (feelings), and evaluative (commitments to values) in relation to the political reality of society.

According to Almond and Verba, certain attitudes are formed through the process of socialization, and the same occurs with political culture, as specific orientations help individuals position themselves within the political system and play the role of citizens both in politics and in society. One of the main functions of the socialization process is to introduce individuals into the cultural universe so that they become participants in a set of norms, values, symbols, beliefs, and forms of knowledge. This refers to the culture to which they belong and with which they identify, through the various practices of political socialization they experience throughout their lives. Although this is not achieved independently, but rather through the influence of political and institutional factors, individuals come into contact with the core of a group or community in which they can develop a greater or lesser degree of shared perception. In this regard, Benedicto and Morán (1995) explain that individuals come to learn "a series of basic beliefs that give meaning to their relationships with political power" (p. 19). Thus, it is important to recognize that individuals become embedded in particular political cultures that enable the political system to function, generating relationships and knowledge associated with political power.

From Pye's perspective (1977, as cited in Benedicto and Morán, 1995), political culture can also be defined as an "entity through which the necessary relationship is established between the individual and the political system, between the collective history of a political system and the biographies of its members" (p. 20). Its origins are found in both public events and individual experiences. Therefore, for the political system to operate effectively, it is understood that a relationship with the individual must exist—one shaped by the events of previous generations, as well as lived processes and experiences.

Political culture refers to the prevailing political beliefs and values held by members of a community, which guide their interactions with the political system. According to Almond and Verba (1963, p. 180), the political system includes "feelings such as patriotism or disdain for one's own country, the knowledge and evaluations of a nation—whether large or small, strong or weak—and of a political system, whether democratic, constitutional, or socialist." For it to function democratically, the opinions of individuals must be valued.

For Almond and Verba, the components of a political system fall into three broad categories:

1. Specific roles or structures, such as legislative, executive, or bureaucratic bodies;
2. The holders of these roles, such as monarchs, legislators, and officials;
3. Principles of governance, decisions, or the imposition of specific public decisions. What matters most, Almond and Verba note, is identifying the political objects toward which individuals orient themselves, how they orient themselves toward them, and the way these objects are embedded either in the "higher" current of political action or in the "lower" current of political imposition.

Every political culture is composed of values and perceptions which, as such, do not encompass orientations of a single type; rather, they generally combine democratic and/or modern perceptions and convictions with more or less authoritarian and/or traditional behavioral patterns (Peschard, 2016, p. 25). Thus, analyzing the diversity of political orientations and attitudes within a population allows for a better understanding of the political problems they face. In this regard, Peschard (2016, p. 26) identifies three major types of political orientations:

- a) **Cognitive orientation:** refers to the information and knowledge individuals possess about the political system as a whole, as well as its specific roles and actors.
- b) **Affective orientation:** comprises the feelings individuals have toward the political system.
- c) **Evaluative orientation:** refers to the judgments and opinions the population holds about the political system.

The democratic quality of a political culture depends on the degree to which these cognitive components take precedence over evaluative ones and, especially, over affective ones. In this way, it becomes clear that a democratic political population not only interacts with institutions that respond to citizens' demands—formulating decrees, regulations, or policies that affect them—but also with those that express or convey these demands through social organization (Peschard, 2016). Therefore, when individuals are immersed in a democratic culture, they strive not only to belong as ordinary members of society but also to participate in everything that involves them in political decision-making. This allows them to express themselves and organize more effectively, aligned with the shared goals and aims of the population. Peschard (2016) states that the cultures mentioned above form a "mixed culture" or "civic culture," which combines modern and traditional aspects and conceives of the citizen as capable of expressing their preferences before the government without this hindering governmental performance (p. 29). The goal of this mixed culture is for citizens to feel empowered to influence the government without fear, demonstrating both interest and responsibility on the part of the individual.

According to Almond and Verba (1963), three types of political culture can be considered:

1. **Parochial political culture:** occurs when there are barely any specifically political orientations among the population, as seen in tribal societies and in those with very little role differentiation.
2. **Subject political culture:** characterized by a high frequency of orientations toward the political system and its "products" or administrative aspects, but with little awareness of the institutions that channel social demands and of personal efficacy; in this case, the subject maintains an essentially passive relationship as a recipient of the system's actions.

3. Participant political culture: members of society tend to be explicitly oriented toward the system, its political and administrative structures and processes, and an active political role, although their feelings and evaluations may be favorable or unfavorable.

It is important to emphasize that democratic political culture is based on the notion of citizenship, which refers to “a group of rational, free, and equal individuals before the law who constitute the quintessential subject of the public realm and the legitimation of power” (Peschard, 2016, p. 32). The primary and ultimate source of power is the will of the people—i.e., the citizenry—which is composed of members who, upon reaching adulthood, exercise their rights and responsibilities within society and commit themselves to it. According to Monsiváis (2002), citizenship can be defined as “a category that requires reconsidering the ethical-political positioning of the subject of rights and responsibilities in a society, aiming to propose a reevaluation of commitment to the public and the collective” (p. 159).

3. Sociopolitical Organization and the System of Offices: Usos Y Costumbres in Indigenous Communities

In Mexico’s indigenous communities—dispersed throughout the country—forms of self-governance continue to be practiced, guided by normative systems that have evolved since pre-colonial times, known as “*usos y costumbres*” (Gómez, 2005, p. 121). These self-governance practices, maintained by some communities in Chiapas, consist of a purely collective and conscious decision-making process by the members of indigenous peoples, who primarily aim to preserve their own norms and to create and defend their identity. While many community members accept this change in the political system, others do not accept this form of government because traditions can be experienced as an imposition. Regarding the forms of self-governance in a community, these can be conceived as constantly evolving practices. Although communities seek to preserve *Usos y Costumbres* as a heritage, they may undergo transformations, which can sometimes be counterproductive, for instance by limiting women’s participation simply because tradition dictated it in previous generations.

In many indigenous communities, the system of offices organizes and integrates municipal life, so its norms and duties are important factors in building autonomy and reconstructing indigenous communities (Carlsen, 1999, p. 5). The system consists of a set number of offices, or community responsibilities, in which those who assume them are respected by the community. Officeholders carry a staff, symbolizing the distinction and authority granted to them. These offices rotate among the adult members of the community, usually men, typically for a one-year term, although in some cases they may last up to three years. After serving their term, individuals return to their normal activities and are not required to assume another office for a relatively long period. The offices are unpaid and can consume between half and the entirety of working hours. In fact, holding an office often entails personal expenses; community members serving as stewards or in other roles are expected to sponsor part of religious festivities and cover other community expenses, in addition to temporarily stepping away from their economic and agricultural activities during their term (Carlsen, 1999, p. 7). It is worth noting that when a person successfully assumes all offices—generally over a thirty- to thirty-five-year process—a community member reaches a level of . . . trainee or *principal*, the pinnacle of the community hierarchy. Elders are no longer assigned offices, but they are respected and consulted as local authorities. Traditional offices are generally divided into the following categories (Carlsen, 1999, p. 8):

- **Alguacil or Topil:** This is the first level where a young man begins his service to the community, performing duties as a messenger, police officer, or custodian of public properties. These responsibilities do not require personal expenses and are carried out in groups.
- **Mayordomo:** After marriage and establishing a family, a man may be appointed to this office, which is exclusively religious and involves significant personal expenses, such as sponsoring festivals. The community’s patron saint may be brought to the Mayordomo’s home, where its altar is maintained until the end of the office term.
- **Regidor:** This office represents a higher level and combines religious and political tasks. A Regidor is responsible for administrative duties, such as tax collection, conflict resolution, and supervision of *tequio* (community labor). They also participate in appointing individuals to minor offices.
- **Alcalde (Mayor):** The Alcalde is the head of local administration. They represent the community in dealings with other communities, government offices, and so on. The Alcalde (rarely a woman)

is responsible for resolving conflicts not settled at lower levels and for appointing, often together with Regidores and Principales, individuals to various offices. This person also performs religious functions. The Alcalde must have honorably served in previous offices and possess qualities such as respect for tradition and a relatively comfortable economic situation.

- **Principal:** This office commands the highest respect in the community, as the individual has served in all offices and reached a position of prestige due to a history of community service. In some communities, Principales are organized into a council of elders composed of all or some of the Principales. In others, all Principales serve as recognized authorities. They may appoint offices either together with or in place of the Alcalde.

Thus, the aspects of the system of offices and indigenous normative systems serve as a safeguard for indigenous peoples against the assimilation of their cultures and allow the development of community mechanisms of solidarity; this system can also strengthen bonds among families and neighbors (Carlsen, 1999).

4. The Organization of Political Offices Under Usos Y Costumbres in an Indigenous Community: the Case of the Municipality of Oxchuc, Chiapas

The municipality of Oxchuc is located in the state of Chiapas and is inhabited by the Maya Tzeltal ethnic group. Its sociopolitical organization, according to Albores (1978, cited in Sánchez, 1998, p. 63), “constitutes a fundamental core in the indigenous social structure because, by participating in the various offices, individuals perform greater service for the society on behalf of the community.” This organization brings together the most important community officials, who hold and exercise the same moral authority over the group.

This general and essential characteristic of Oxchuc’s political and religious organization represents fundamental aspects of the municipality’s structure. Individuals who complete a term in office are called “pasados” and gain prestige, becoming more respected in their communities and, through this recognition, playing a very important and sometimes decisive role in municipal governance (Sánchez, 1998, p. 64). The offices held by residents of Oxchuc in the municipal council (*Cabildo*) are hierarchically organized from lower to higher rank. Those holding positions of authority are responsible for reporting and gathering information from both the church and the municipal government. These offices include (Sánchez, 1998, p. 95):

- **Extul (Regidor):** This person is responsible for “errands,” carrying and collecting messages and information related to assemblies and tasks to be carried out by the municipal council. They also serve as assistants in the absence of municipal authorities. This office fulfills duties for both the church and the municipal government.
- **Siniko (Síndico):** This office is held by those who have previously served as Regidor and automatically advance to Síndico. Their role functions as a secretary or assistant to a *Kornal*, eventually becoming Principal or member of the municipal justice council (*Cabildo de justicia*) in their respective locality. They are identified by the staff of authority they carry, which serves as a symbol of respect.
- **Kornal:** This person is responsible for organizing and ensuring that community activities are carried out. They maintain public order, resolving cases of theft, disputes, and other issues.
- **Alkal:** The Alkal is the most important religious-moral authority in the *Cabildo*, responsible for safeguarding the *Kajwaltik* (the sacred writing book). This role is held for one year. The Alkal is also in charge of collecting funds for the repair or construction of public buildings.

In these offices, there is never noncompliance because those elected to hold them have previously served as authorities; that is, only individuals with experience in ecclesiastical offices or *Cabildo* positions are eligible to occupy these roles (Sánchez, 1998, p. 98).

4.1. Representations of Sociopolitical Conflicts in the Municipality of Oxchuc, Chiapas

The data presented here derive from a qualitative study conducted in the municipality of Oxchuc, Chiapas. The research techniques employed were in-depth interviews and observation. The interview guide was structured around four analytical categories: participants’ personal information, opinions on

the municipal government’s management, citizen participation regarding issues arising in the municipality, and perspectives on the political conflict in Oxchuc, including the functioning of *Usos y Costumbres*, political parties, and the primary sources of conflict in Oxchuc.

The sample included 12 participants of different age groups: youth, adults, and older adults; all were native to Oxchuc. The research instrument was applied with equal representation of men and women. The study was conducted in 2022.

Table 1. *Characteristics of the Participants*

N/P	Nombre/Código ¹	Edad	Sexo	Lugar de origen
1	Participant 1FJ	26	Female	Municipality of Oxchuc
2	Participant 2FJ	21	Female	Municipality of Oxchuc
3	Participant 3MJ	20	Male	Municipality of Oxchuc
4	Participant 4MJ	28	Male	Municipality of Oxchuc
5	Participant 5 ^a	34	Female	Municipality of Oxchuc
6	Participant 6FA	38	Female	Municipality of Oxchuc

¹ *Participant FJ: Female Youth, Participant MJ: Male Youth, Participant FA: Adult Female, Participant MA: Adult Male, Participant FAM: Older Adult Femal, Participant MAM: Older Adult Male.*

According to the information provided by the participants in this study, despite the municipality’s conditions of high marginalization and poverty, only a minority consider these aspects to be the most pressing problems they face. For the majority, the main issues confronting the population of Oxchuc are municipal government corruption, such as nepotism, embezzlement of public funds, and the hiring of criminal groups to enforce decisions in electoral processes—particularly the struggle for power to control the Municipal Presidency, the government system, and corruption as perceived by the citizens. This situation emerged when the municipality was still governed under the political party system, and people became aware of nepotism within the family of the Municipal President, as Participant 4 MJ explains:

The family [...] Norberto and María Gloria were the most frequently mentioned recently, especially María Gloria [...] And not only them, but also their cabinet, were the same people—for example, the secretary, treasurer, and others included in the municipal presidency. (Interview conducted in March 2022).

Regarding the participant’s statement, it can be noted that beginning in 2006, Norberto Sántiz started governing the municipality of Oxchuc, and afterward, his wife, María Gloria Sánchez Gómez, assumed the position of Municipal President, at a time when the municipality was still governed by political parties. After her three-year term, her husband returned to office, “and so they kept taking turns,” according to Participant 7 MA, who referred to this as a mockery toward the population of the municipality. It is important to note that during the terms of these two municipal administrations, infrastructure projects, equipment, and other support for the citizens were carried out, including the construction of domes, schools, paved roads, and a market in the municipal seat, among other developments in the various communities of the municipality; however, according to the interviews conducted, people felt frustrated primarily because the family of the aforementioned Municipal President had taken control of the municipal presidency and the political parties. Regarding this, Participant 8 MA stated:

No, there is an ideological current [...] at the level of political parties that has been maintained between families, meaning that basically what prevailed here was that they would take over a political party and alienate it. (Interview conducted in March 2022). In this context, corruption was carried out through manipulation of the population, through vote buying and by granting external support in addition to what they received from the municipality. These practices were primarily intended to allow them to continue running as municipal presidents, and people succumbed to them out of necessity or loyalty to both politicians, as Participant 4 MJ explains:

They would tell people, ‘Give me your vote and I’ll give you either groceries or financial support of 500 pesos,’ and people, out of ignorance and economic need, began to accept that money and cast their votes. We couldn’t progress because the same population was part of the corrupt system. (Interview conducted in March 2022).

As a result, divisions began to emerge among citizens for the same reasons, and people started removing municipal presidents who governed poorly. Consequently, they decided to establish a new political norm based on *Usos y Costumbres*, allowing them to elect their Municipal President through a Municipal Assembly by a show of hands, with the goal of preventing the previously mentioned acts of corruption.

However, the municipality's problems did not end with the adoption of this new system, as conflicts over power and economic ambition soon arose, with individuals seeking to gain control of the municipal presidency. The residents' goal following this change was for the municipal government to manage the municipality according to the needs of the communities, based on each community's deficiencies. Hence, one of the most pressing issues faced by the population of Oxchuc is the struggle for control of the municipal government, to the extent that armed groups disguised as politicians emerged to contest municipal power, as Participant 6 FA states: At this point, people no longer enter politics out of a sense of belonging to their roots, but because it is the easiest way to steal money—more brazenly and without fear of any repercussions (Interview conducted in March 2022). In this way, during the electoral processes for the Municipal Presidency, candidates, according to the information obtained, sometimes hired criminal groups to enforce the population's decisions, creating highly violent scenarios within the municipality. According to interview data, this practice was introduced by the first Municipal President (Oscar Gómez), who was still operating under the political party system. Regarding this, Participant 7 MA stated:

When Oscar Gómez (Oscar Pul) became very well-known under the political party system, confrontations began in the municipality, including road blockades, burning of houses, and division within the communities, affecting main routes to other municipalities and also other cities. (Interview conducted in March 2022). These processes of violence over control of the Municipal Government not only affected the citizens of Oxchuc but also caused insecurity regarding their physical and psychological integrity, as well as distrust in free movement through the area, negatively impacting transporters, passengers, and merchants from different locations who used the highway passing through the municipality.

4.2. assessment of the municipal government's performance

According to the data obtained from the research participants, the population considers that those who have held the office of Municipal President—even those elected through assemblies under *Usos y Costumbres*—have not performed well. They have failed to fulfill the commitments made while in office, negatively affecting residents of the municipal seat and, primarily, the other communities. This has led the population to engage in frequent protests, generating social and political instability. Regarding this, Participant 5 FA expressed: There is no support for the communities because it is distributed among those who work at the municipal government and those in the municipal seat. Each Municipal President who has held office under *Usos y Costumbres* since it has been implemented, they do not know how to govern, and we do not see support for the entire population. (Interview conducted in March 2022). In this regard, a negative assessment is expressed regarding municipal governments elected through the *Usos y Costumbres* system. It did not foster unity among the population; rather, citizens perceive increased division within the community.

The functioning of these recent municipal administrations has been very precarious, establishing a clear contrast with previous administrations elected through political parties, which carried out more infrastructure and equipment projects in the municipality. Participant 4 MJ mentioned: We did not see paved streets, we did not see new street lighting, we did not see renovations of key areas such as the DIF [National System for Integral Family Development], the Municipal Presidency; at least I did not see any of that, which was done under previous governments despite corruption. (Interview conducted in March 2022).

The informants noted that not all communities in Oxchuc agreed to be governed under *Usos y Costumbres*. For this reason, communities that wanted to continue with the political party system began to be ignored by the Municipal Presidents, particularly by the most recent outgoing president, Alfredo Sántiz Gómez, who was perceived as being manipulated or acting under the influence of others, exacerbating the conditions of marginalization and poverty in these communities. According to Participant 7 MA, since the change from political parties to the *Usos y Costumbres* system, the

municipality has been led by those who had previously served as Municipal Presidents, such as Oscar Gómez, Juan Encinos, Miguel Ka'al, Miguel Sántiz, and others.

From the perspective of some research participants, the only advantage brought by the implementation of the *Usos y Costumbres* system in Oxchuc has been the direct political participation of citizens. Those elected as municipal authorities are chosen in a community assembly. It is important to note that, in this system, women do not have the right to vote or be elected in any political process, a point that has been largely overlooked by the research participants. Nevertheless, they consider that the only real change has been in the method of electing the Municipal President, as the administration itself remains just as corrupt for the citizens of Oxchuc. Participant 8 MA stated the following: The social programs that reach the communities have been the same; the benefits have been the same; there are no changes. Regardless of whether the Municipal Government steals more or less, it remains the same issue. (Interview conducted in March 2022).

4.3. Political organization in the municipality

According to information provided by the research participants, there are currently two political groups in the municipality, divided in their views regarding the political system that governs the municipality: one group supports the implementation of the *Usos y Costumbres* system, while the other group wants to maintain the political party system. It is important to note that the majority of the communities in the municipality follow the *Usos y Costumbres* system, under which voting is conducted by a show of hands.

Regarding the group that supports the *Usos y Costumbres* system in the municipality, its members have agreed with this normative system from the beginning. Notably, they have received more benefits and social support within the municipality. On the other hand, the political group that wants the return of the political party system, according to information obtained from the interviews, chose to distance themselves and refused to receive any governmental support. They also reported that they preferred to join the organization of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN). However, after a few years, they decided to request support from the Municipal President, Alfredo Sántiz, but claim that the President ignored them. This has contributed to a continued significant division between the two political groups in Oxchuc.

According to opinions expressed in the interviews, it is believed that the people who want the political party system reinstated are seeking the return of the former Municipal President María Gloria Sánchez Gómez. Additionally, at the beginning of 2022, problems emerged with two other groups led by Hugo Sántiz and Enrique Gómez. Each has its own organization and has been responsible for causing road blockages, house burnings, vandalism, and gunfire in the municipality. This situation arose because, at the end of 2021, the process to determine who would assume the Municipal Presidency under the *Usos y Costumbres* system was not resolved properly, as participants claimed that a decision had already been made regarding who would become Municipal President Enrique Gómez; however, Mr. Hugo Sántiz did not accept defeat and began involving his people to take over the Municipal Government building and to block the municipal checkpoint. Regarding this, participant 1 FJ commented:

At first, they were supposedly the ones elected by their localities, but everything turned into a mess because at the moment of the election, which was by a show of hands, Enrique apparently won. However, the other one, wanting to win, began gathering his people and committing acts of violence in the central park of Oxchuc, to the point of engaging in criminal acts days later. (Interview conducted in March 2022). In this struggle for the Municipal Presidency of Oxchuc, the leaders of both groups have instilled fear among the citizens, as each has acted violently and with impunity in the municipal center, endangering not only the people of the municipality but also outsiders traveling along the adjacent road to reach other areas of the region.

4.4. Citizen participation in specific municipal issues

The participants argued that not all people in the municipality take part in conflicts to seek peace or a common objective; rather, in most cases, they have protested and demanded solutions to their problems in inappropriate ways. This often occurs through arguments, fights, or armed confrontations, which leads to dissatisfaction because the actions not only harm the participants themselves but also affect nearby populations and travelers on the roads.

They expressed their feelings about the lack of a unified objective for the good of the community and commented that these situations have been very difficult and sad for the town. The few participations they have had in these conflicts over the struggle for power and the Municipal President's noncompliance have been unpleasant due to the absence of a shared ideology for the benefit of the town. This has negatively affected the welfare and image of the municipality of Oxchuc, especially because it is viewed poorly by society and has caused multiple deaths. Participant 4 MJ stated:

It has been somewhat worrying; it is sad to see the town fighting over a government that does not remember them. Many people died, people who participated in the confrontations that are no longer present now; many say they were martyrs of the town, but as long as there is no clear objective, I feel that those people died in vain. It is sad to see people, regardless of the political side they are on, fighting simply out of momentary anger, because there is no just reason to be fighting. So my feelings toward those actions are regretful, because we see a lot of ignorance and only a few people manipulate the minds of others to carry out violence, and in the end that person dies. What did they gain? Nothing. There was never a change; I wish there had been, but no. (Interview conducted in March 2022).

In light of these events, the research participants expressed that they felt sadness seeing citizens fighting and not resolving problems through dialogue. They also stated that they live in fear due to the high level of violence in the demonstrations carried out by political groups. Because of this, some prefer not to participate in political matters, as they do not know what could happen to them, and some choose to stay home rather than attend meetings where decisions about participating in mobilizations are made. Participant 8 MA commented: The last problem that occurred here in the municipality was... I don't remember the exact date, but it lasted an entire day and an entire night of gunfire. People came to kill, and personally... it is saddening because it is no longer just a social matter; now they come to murder, to assassinate, and as a result of these demonstrations there have been deaths, there have been injuries, so it is very regrettable. Personally, it is sad... that among us, among indigenous people, we are killing each other. This is another level of demonstration what they are doing. (Interview conducted in March 2022).

For the reasons stated above, the people of Oxchuc, according to the interviews, usually participate in political matters only when it involves fair and necessary issues without harming others. For the citizens, the situation in the municipality is very sad, because even though not everyone participates in the conflicts, the town has already received a negative image. The participants mentioned that it is difficult to unite ideas, that there is no longer security for using the road to travel to other places, and that only a small portion of citizens want to see the town improve and eliminate the problems that exist in Oxchuc.

4.5. Opinion on the Political Conflict in Oxchuc

This section of the research presents the characteristics of how the political systems of Political Parties and the system of Usos y Costumbres operate for the citizens of Oxchuc, with the latter currently governing the municipality. It also reflects the citizens' opinions on how this system has influenced the political conflicts that arise in the town, as well as the political strategies used to gain power, resolve problems, and their implications in Oxchuc.

According to the opinions expressed by the research participants, political parties in the municipality of Oxchuc operate through citizen participation by casting votes for the political candidate that best suits the municipality. They consider that this system allows them to review the work proposals of the candidates for the Municipal Presidency during their political campaigns. However, they believe that in most places governed under this regime, corruption often arises, because those involved in the municipal administration manipulate the proposed activities, which should instead be addressed collectively or communally. Nevertheless, they argued that the Political Party system is much better because it allows citizens to see each candidate's proposals and assess whether they take into account the needs of the population and the development of the municipality. Political parties function well when the person elected as President governs for the benefit of the people, rather than for personal interests.

In this sense, they opine that the advantage of political parties is that there is greater "mass control" during elections, and these are based on public interest. It is worth noting that, according to the information obtained, political discrimination against women in the municipality was not mentioned.

From approximately 2006 to 2017, the municipality of Oxchuc was governed by political parties such as the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the National Action Party (PAN), and the Ecologist Green Party (PVE), each conducting its campaigns, allowing citizens to see the most viable options for local governance. The PRI remained active and strong for several years under the control of the same family, followed later by the PVE. According to the participants, there were always people in these parties who manipulated the system to nominate themselves as a family, which caused public outrage because they were always looking for ways to secure victory. They manipulated candidacies and electoral processes, either by buying votes or providing support to people who would back their party, even when many citizens did not agree, because they sold their votes solely for personal gain.

In Oxchuc, a serious political conflict has prevailed as a result of these alleged acts of corruption and especially due to the nepotism of one family. Consequently, around 2015, the citizens decided to expel those who were disputing the party and those within that organization. After this expulsion, and under the same system but with a different party, Oscar Pul came to govern the municipality from 2015 to 2018. During his administration, the same problems arose, and people realized that the Municipal President was only seeking personal gain and was not addressing the needs of the people of Oxchuc. As a result, the citizens decided to distance themselves from political parties and switch to the system of Usos y Costumbres, with the aim of avoiding corruption, the predominance of personal interests in the Municipal Presidency, and manipulations in electoral processes.

Consequently, the political system of Usos y Costumbres is conceived as a system in which the people elect their Municipal President. The electoral process is no longer carried out through political parties but is organized from the grassroots level, that is, the communities, where community “agents” and committees take responsibility for the process, seeking the people or candidates who will become the authorities of the town. Then, the voting process is conducted by a show of hands from each citizen in front of a general assembly of the communities belonging to Oxchuc, allowing the citizens themselves to directly elect the Municipal President. It is important to mention that only men have the right to participate in the voting. Notably, in the research, only one adult elderly female participant expressed that she did not like this political system because not the entire community voted, only a few people, and they were men (Participant 9FAM).

However, this system has not worked optimally for the citizens of Oxchuc. In attempting to restore their rights and identity as a people, it has only generated problems within the municipality. It is worth mentioning that around the 1960s, the municipality functioned under the Usos y Costumbres system. Nevertheless, according to the participants, political processes at that time were carried out with much more respect for the people and for those chosen to hold authority in the municipality. The selection was also based on how many years of service the person had rendered within their community. They would be visited at their homes and offered bread, soft drinks, and posh (alcohol) so that they would respectfully accept the responsibility of serving in the municipality, as Participant 11 MAM mentions:

Well, previously, when I was a child, in those years, let’s say around 1960 and earlier, this—‘Usos y Costumbres’—was practiced [...] For those who were going to be authorities, they were chosen by a group of people, the principals of the municipality, let’s talk about former authorities and others, they would select the person who would be authority. They would even visit them according to the custom in Oxchuc and bring them their posh, which is the drink, or a soft drink, as a sign of respect. That was how the previous selection was conducted when they were approached. (Communication carried out in April 2022). It is also important to note that, in the past, the person chosen to govern the municipality did not receive any salary and had to focus solely on attending to the needs of the population. Even if the elected authority was living in poverty, what truly mattered was providing good service so that people would recognize them and future generations would use this example when calling someone to serve their community or municipality. However, over the years, people’s ideologies changed. When the Usos y Costumbres system was reintroduced in the municipality in 2018, aiming to change the methods of election and voting in Oxchuc so that the people would elect the Municipal President, it did not result in the best solution for political conflicts. Not all communities were respected in allowing agents and committees to select the candidates, who would then be voted on in a general assembly with the respective communities. Moreover, they noticed that there was corruption among those elected as Municipal Presidents, who did not act for the well-being of the people.

Additionally, they believed that the reimplementation of the Usos y Costumbres system was intended to prevent corruption and resentments in choosing a leader. However, in practice, they observed that the people presenting themselves before the general assembly sometimes belonged to the same group of leaders or former municipal presidents, as Participant 6 FA expresses:

It was assumed that by choosing a leader based on Usos y Costumbres, the possibilities of corruption or favoritism toward a person or certain group would be limited, and the tradition of the people from earlier times would be strengthened. Unfortunately, this is only a smokescreen, and the same story repeats itself as in elections based on political party votes. There was never transparency due to vote-buying, result manipulation, connections, and friendships that the political party members had with state officials. I mention this because, before the plebiscite, the supposed candidates to form the election shortlist, who were to be chosen by the people at random, were already imposed by former presidents of the town of Oxchuc. In other words, they were puppets who, in the eyes of the people, appeared to be the leaders, while others would give the orders on how to manage resources, projects, conflict resolution, etc. (Communication carried out in March 2022).

Therefore, the participants argued that it is not truly a system of Usos y Costumbres, because it still resembles the political party system. This is due to the way the votes are conducted, as the elected candidates seek their own supporters at the time of voting or buy people's votes, which they said is similar to political parties. It is also important to clarify that citizen participation has been very limited during the elections because not all citizens of Oxchuc attend the general assembly; sometimes only the auxiliary agents from the communities are present, while citizens prefer to stay home doing chores or working in their milpas. In this way, in the Usos y Costumbres system implemented in the municipality of Oxchuc, processes of exclusion of women, corrupt practices in candidate selection, in the voting process, and in the public management exercised by the winners of the Municipal President position occur. This has led to very violent political conflicts, which inhibits or weakens citizen participation in electoral processes, as not everyone expresses their opinion or agrees on decisions for the well-being of the people of Oxchuc. Recently, the main problems that have caused political conflicts in the municipality of Oxchuc are related to the election of the Municipal President for the current 2021–2023 term. The participants mentioned that on December 15, 2021, in During a general assembly of the communities in the municipality, hand-raising votes were held, in which ten candidates from different communities were presented to be elected by the representatives who attended from the communities. In this process, Enrique Gómez won by a majority of votes. However, the other candidate, Hugo Sántiz, did not agree with the voting outcome. Along with his supporters, at the conclusion of the community elections, he and his group entered the Municipal Government building, used high-caliber weapons, burned houses and cars, and carried out road blockages on the San Cristóbal–Ocosingo stretch, affecting both local residents and outsiders.

It is important to mention that the communities involved in these problems are the same ones that supported former Municipal President Oscar Pul, who also caused many conflicts in the municipality during his term. The communities involved in the conflicts include Tolbilja, a large community where the former President is from, as well as San Juan del Valle, Corralito, Mesbilja, and Tsay. As a result of these political conflicts and the problems caused by these groups, no Municipal President has been elected in Oxchuc to date. Currently, a Councilor is in charge of the Municipal Government, serving in an interim capacity. It should be noted that this arrangement has not been accepted by the rival groups, which generates unease among the citizens. The participants of the study consider that the political strategy used by the leaders fighting for municipal power has not been appropriate, as they have acted “dirtyly” and with impunity through violence. This has affected the entire population of Oxchuc in various ways, creating divisions among residents, deaths by firearms, house burnings, and road blockages. The political leaders of these groups manipulate the people to gain the power associated with the Municipal Presidency for their personal interests. Furthermore, according to the participants, the strategies implemented by the political groups competing for the Municipal Presidency have been unsuccessful, as they have prevented social order and peace in the municipality and have generated more conflicts among the Oxchuc population. These acts have caused feelings of sadness among citizens because, instead of maintaining peace in the town, families have been displaced, homes have been burned, and there have been injuries and family losses due to involvement in these political conflicts.

5. Final Reflections

The political dynamics of the municipality of Oxchuc have led to serious social conflicts because the ideas of past generations—which valued citizens’ opinions to ensure that the political system functioned democratically—did not prevail. Additionally, there is a reproduction of a “parochial” type of relationship, as there are hardly any specifically political orientations among the population regarding how the municipality should be governed. The management of public resources by former municipal presidents has been notoriously manipulated in a corrupt manner.

Oxchuc is characterized by having the vast majority of its population living in extreme poverty and experiencing a very high degree of marginalization. This context of extreme deprivation can be considered a contributing factor to the political conflicts in Oxchuc, as people resort to corrupt acts such as selling their votes or participating in violent actions by certain political groups in exchange for the possibility of obtaining income to meet their basic subsistence needs, regardless of the consequences for their lives. Furthermore, this condition of extreme marginalization and poverty makes both economic resources and municipal government positions the most important objects of dispute for some families in Oxchuc.

Through the representations of Oxchuc citizens, information about the municipality’s political conflicts from 2015 to 2021, as well as recent events in 2022, was collected, showing how these situations have evolved in the study area. This has been largely due to the change in the political system to Usos y Costumbres. In this regard, constant corruption in municipal management constitutes the main factor generating social conflicts in Oxchuc. Such corruption includes nepotism, misappropriation of public resources, and, most significantly, the hiring of criminal groups to impose decisions in electoral processes with the aim of securing power and controlling the Municipal Presidency and the City Council. The citizens of Oxchuc consider that part of the current problems in the municipality stems from the political system change, which replaced the Party system with Usos y Costumbres. This political change caused a division among the Oxchuc population because opinions were unequal; the citizens did not all agree with this change in political regime, which affected the interests of a few families that held political power in the municipality. Furthermore, the way Usos y Costumbres was implemented in the municipality implied a setback for democracy in the municipality and led to the discrimination and exclusion of women from electoral political processes—a regression in their political rights, including the possibility of voting and being elected to exercise political power.

However, the most recent conflicts in Oxchuc stem from a post-electoral problem concerning the Municipal Presidency in 2021. This was a process conducted under the Usos y Costumbres system, where a candidate was elected by a show of hands. The opposing candidate rejected the outcome, which led the State of Chiapas to appoint a councilor, who would be replaced every two months, and any arising situations would have to be resolved by the citizens of Oxchuc themselves. Nevertheless, political conflicts have continued, specifically due to the struggle for control of the Municipal Council by powerful groups, with serious social, economic, and political implications for the citizens.

The State must restore democracy in electoral processes and municipal public management; implement effective programs to improve the conditions of poverty and marginalization affecting the majority of the municipality’s population; establish and guarantee transparency mechanisms; and eliminate impunity in both the management of public resources and electoral processes. It is of utmost importance to implement strategies that guarantee the political rights of women and to strengthen dialogue and consensus-building that prioritize the collective good over personal interests.

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