

The Zapatistas in the Fox Era

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Antonio Nava/AVN

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The media war that the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) and the federal government have been fighting since Vicente Fox came into office notwithstanding, the Zapatista conflict in the state of Chiapas has other roots. Although perhaps not so visible today, they were the basis for the January 1994 armed uprising and should be remembered in this new

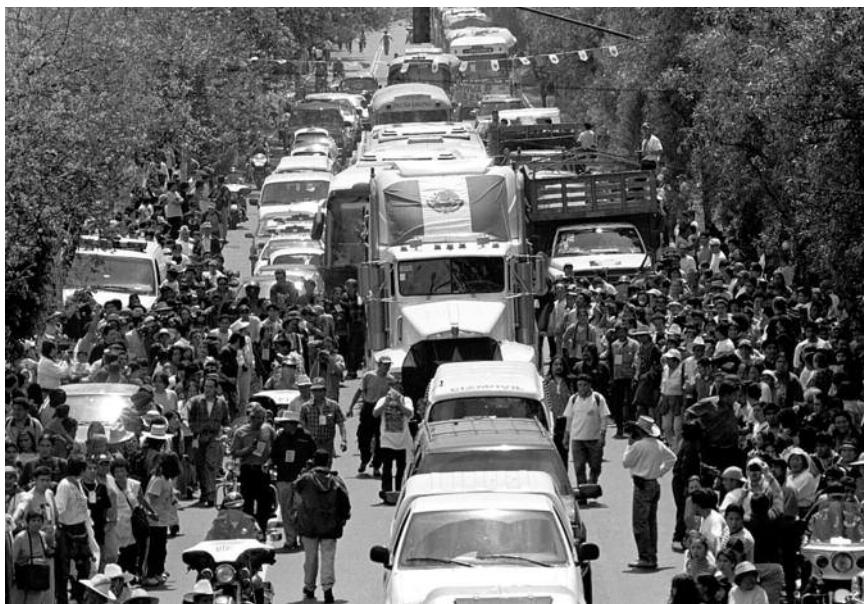
stage when dialogue may be once again in the offing.

Chiapas is one of the states with the highest levels of marginalization and poverty, directly linked with its high indigenous population. Of the six states in Mexico with very high marginalization, Chiapas has the highest: it has one doctor for every 1,132 inhabitants; one nurse for every 1,315 inhabitants; and one hospital bed for every 1,400 inhabitants. It ranks first nationwide in mortality rates for reported cases of chol-

era, tuberculosis and gastrointestinal diseases. Of its 111 municipalities, 37 have very high indices of marginalization; 57 can be categorized as high; 12 have medium levels; and 5, low levels. In no municipality can it be said that marginalization is very low.¹

Chiapas is home to nine of Mexico's 52 ethnic groups. Since the conquest, these groups have never sought exceptional treatment for themselves, but simply the recognition of their rights, customs and traditions, their way of life

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Carlos Aranda/ImagenLatina

The Zapatista caravan moving toward Mexico City's central Zócalo Plaza, March 11.

and form of organization: in brief, the recognition of their culture. In 1984, when Subcommander Marcos arrived in the heart of the Lacandon Jungle as a researcher-philosopher-Quixote, in addition to the repugnant conditions of inequality and marginalization of the indigenous peoples, he found fertile terrain for continuing the work of consciousness raising, creating dignity in the indigenous peoples' situation and the quest for hope for them. This task had already been begun and almost consolidated two decades before by the catechists and Christian base communities of the San Cristóbal de las Casas diocese, headed for 40 years by Bishop Samuel Ruiz García. Otherwise, it would not have been easy for anyone to go into the indigenous communities, win their trust, achieve important changes in their social behavior (such as ending alcohol consumption and creating respect for the social role and dignity of women) and some almost theological ideas and then create an army that remained secret for more than 10 years.

The armed conflict in Chiapas took a new turn when Vicente Fox Quesada from the National Action Party was democratically elected president thanks to a *de facto* citizens' alliance against the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) that had governed Mexico for 71 years.

The strategic and military head of the EZLN, Insurgent Subcommander Marcos, gave the new administration the benefit of the doubt in a press conference held in the jungle community of La Realidad, Chiapas, the day after Fox's inauguration. In his message, Marcos said, "[Even] if we add to our understandable mistrust of the word of those in power, the accumulated contradictions and frivolous statements that you and those around you have carelessly thrown around, it is still my duty to say that among the Zapatistas (and I think not only among the Zapatistas), you have a clean slate in terms of credibility and trust...That means you don't have to overcome anything negative as of yet since it is only fair to say that you have not attacked us."

On many occasions during his campaign, President Fox said that one of his priorities in the beginning of his term would be to make peace in Chiapas. He was even so bold as to say in early 1998 that he would solve the problem of Chiapas in 15 minutes and send the bill that President Ernesto Zedillo had frozen since 1995 to Congress right away. (This bill on indigenous rights and culture, written by the Peace Commission made up of legislators from all parties in Congress, was originally developed as a result of the first accords signed between the Zedillo administration and the EZLN.)

The seven-year-old war—in which the different parties have substituted declarations for bullets—has already survived three administrations, each of which has dealt with it differently.

Carlos Salinas de Gortari tried to belittle its importance; his main objective in the last year of his term was to catapult himself into the World Trade Organization as the statesman who had led Mexico to put one foot into the First World. Ernesto Zedillo tried to come to secret agreements with Marcos, but on receiving no answer in the first months of his term, he decided to solve the problem by force and set a trap for the EZLN: he issued arrest warrants for the people he considered the main Zapatista commanders and "unmasked" the real identity of Marcos (who is said to be Rafael Sebastián Guillén Vicente, a social activist and former professor at the Autonomous Metropolitan University in Mexico City). This manoeuvre did not have the effect the administration expected, however, since, instead of losing popularity, Marcos and the Zapatista movement gained even more sympathies among the public.

Given this failure, Zedillo opted for dialogue and that same year signed agreements with those who months before he had called criminals. The president did end up, however, by not carrying out the agreements signed in San Andrés Larráinzar, Chiapas.

Stymied by the excessive militarization of the state, the administration's disinclination to dialogue, but above all by the non-implementation of the accords signed at San Andrés, the dialogue broke down, thus making room for other actors to take the conflict into their own hands. Clashes grew between PRI and Zapatista sympathizers, and armed clashes between civilians became a daily occurrence; 43 autonomous rebel municipalities were created outside the aegis of the state government with new local authorities, thus plunging the state into a profound crisis of governability.

Out of this situation came the killings like that of Acteal on December 22, 1997, when 45 indigenous people, the majority women and children, were massacred by one of these civilian armed groups as they prayed in a small community church.

Seven years after the uprising, this new chapter in Mexican history—that of the Zapatistas in the Fox era—began with a war of declarations in which both sides sought sufficient popular support to take with them to the negotiations table. In Mexico today, cities are taken and relinquished peacefully. The combatants no longer use bullets. Now their strength is based on their ratings.

Marcos and Fox have entered the game. The Chiapas conflict has recovered its importance to the extent that each temporarily wins the public sympathy with his performance before the cameras and the microphones.



"Welcome. Never again a Mexico without us." Zapatista commanders at their Mexico City rally.

The Zapatistas have come out of their trenches armed with speeches and communiques to make use of all the fora open to them, mainly in the media, and to counter the wave of popularity Fox enjoys as Mexico's first opposition president in modern history.

One of the EZLN's allies is the left, that amorphous, explosive mass of ideologies that as a whole managed one of the most overwhelming defeats imaginable in the 2000 elections after spending 10 years supplying the prisoners, the dead and the sacrifices so that democratic change could come about. This is the same left that goes back and forth between standing by the EZLN and concentrating on something else, returning only when, defeated, it laments its presidential campaign strategy.

The EZLN's main ally, however, has been civil society, thanks to whom the cease-fire was achieved January 12, 1994. Now, as always, the Zapatistas have deposited their renewed hopes of consolidating peace with justice and dignity in civil society, which has indi-

cated the road and method for the Zapatista insurgents' fundamental decisions. The symbiotic relationship that the rebels have created with these non-partisan groups of citizens is due mainly to the fact that the demands the EZLN presented in its first declaration of war are not exclusionary. Quite to the contrary, they clearly jibe with the demands of Mexicans —both indigenous and non-indigenous— of the most marginalized classes throughout the country.

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Both parties, for different reasons, are aware that establishing consensuses that will lead to a peace agreement is imperative. What is more, they are aware of just how close they are to



Subcommander Marcos and EZLN political liaison Fernando Yáñez receive the "key to the city" in Mexico City's Zócalo Plaza.

achieving that. This can be seen in the relaxing of the repression against the Zapatistas that has allowed them to leave Chiapas and travel through 12 different states. Fox, for his part, is certain that an agreement with the Zapatista guerrillas would consolidate his image and his government, not only in Mexico, but worldwide. The difference between the two is in how to achieve peace.

The EZLN says that peace will not come by decree. For them the war will not be over when the three demands they have made to the Fox government are satisfied: the withdrawal of troops from 7 of the 256 military positions in Chiapas, the liberation of all the Zapatista prisoners and the implementation of the San Andrés Accords. If these demands are satisfied, what ensues will be dialogue between the EZLN and the government, not automatic peace. Real peace will not be achieved until the causes of the uprising are eradicated in Chiapas and the whole country.

Fox, on the other hand, urgently needs to announce that he has consolidated a peace agreement, and it will be enough for him to sit at the negotiations table with them to announce that the war has ended, while his counterparts consider that only the beginning.

And that is because to eradicate the poverty, marginalization, hunger, unemployment and above all the grave political and religious clashes that have led to the proliferation of 18 armed civilian groups (better known as the "paramilitary groups"), much more than "15 minutes" is required. With the best of all possible good will, Fox could take his entire six-year term to grant all 13 of the demands that led the EZLN to become an army and rise up in arms.

Peace is a concept that will become fashionable during this presidential term. It will be the most mentioned, discussed and manhandled term of the entire administration. Perhaps for that reason, under the current circumstances, any eventuality other than peace talks would bring discredit and the loss

of part of its social backing to either party.

We should therefore once again arm ourselves with patience and hope that before Fox leaves office, the conditions for the indigenous peoples of Mexico will have changed radically. Only then will Marcos be able to think about what he and the EZLN as a whole will do. As a political organization, they are not very strong, and they have made it very clear that the Zapatista Army does not want to take power; as they have said, Zapatismo is not an end in itself, but a bridge to achieve their demands of democracy, freedom and justice. In the long run, the EZLN should consider its participation in the electoral arena. In any case, Marcos and Zapatismo itself will have to undergo a metamorphosis to become moral leaders and leaders of public opinion, with sufficient strength as an organization to be able to influence the nation's decisions.

In the meantime, in their December 2, 2000, communiqué to President Fox, the Zapatistas have already been clear about who has the responsibility of showing his willingness to dialogue. "You can, then, show that those who are betting on your government repeating the PRI nightmare for all Mexicans—and especially for the Zapatistas—are right. Or, you can, starting from that clean slate, begin to build in practice what all governments need to carry out their work: credibility and trust."

Now Fox has the ball. **VM**

NOTES

¹ Information from the Center for Information and Analysis of Chiapas (CIACH), the Coordinating Committee of Nongovernmental Organizations for Peace (Conpaz) and Processed Information Services (Sipro).