# The Crisis in Chiapas
## Challenges For
# The State Government[1]

Emilio Zebadúa*



Marcos and commanders during the Zapatista march to Mexico City in April 2001.

The conflict in Chiapas is federal in origin; it has gone beyond strictly local, regional and state boundaries. It is not only a geographical or cultural phenomenon. Politics has been and continues to be what has defined the conflict since the 1994 Zapatista uprising.

A new state government was elected in Chiapas in mid-2000. For the first time in the history of the state the elections were sufficiently legal, trans-

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parent and certain and carried out with a relative degree of competitiveness. It was the first time in Chiapas' modern history that a candidate for governor won who had campaigned with the support of a broad coalition of political and social organizations, some from outside the state, but with interest

in what happened inside. This election made for a real change in the balance of political forces in the state.

The current administration, headed up by Pablo Salazar Mendiguchía, has other origins and is politically different from those that governed Chiapas for many decades and from the time of the beginning of the Zapatista conflict until 2000.[2]

Until very recently, Chiapas was dominated by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which received —no joke intended— more than 100

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* Chiapas state minister of the interior.

percent of the votes of registered voters in state, local and federal elections. The PRI controlled all positions of power, from the highest to those closest to the communities: municipal agents, city councilmen, mayors, local deputies, judges and the owners of the communications media and all means of production in the state. They all formed part of the same, practically monolithic power structure, which was a complete electoral monopoly.

The current state administration has maintained stability in an extremely complex political and social context. Government action is not limited to the area of conflict, the Zapatista conflict or the northern part of the state, where brutally violent clashes have arisen in recent years. It must govern the complex state as a whole, which includes many other regions that are not involved in the Zapatista conflict and have their own problems to solve. We should keep in mind that Chiapas is the country's poorest state, located on the southern border with Guatemala, and that some of its municipalities rank among the country's most marginalized.

With regard specifically to the Zapatista conflict, despite the relative disenchantment of an important sector of civil society and the left and despite the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) silence for a good part of these last two years, the state government has not been passive. With great budget limitations, lacking material resources and even given the political contradictions that exist because of the heterogeneity of its electoral and social base, it has taken unprecedented steps. Based on the premise that the conflict is federal —because the

EZLN defined it as such— the state government has respected the EZLN's dynamic, rhythm and positionings, whether open or implicit, for this entire period. When the International Red Cross decided not to accompany the Zapatistas on their march to Mexico City in early 2001, making them vulnerable, putting the march itself in jeopardy and putting the Zapatista leadership at risk, the state government, on the governor's initiative, unilaterally provided protection to the Zapatista contingent and Subcommander Marcos from the time they left La Realidad all the way to the border with Oaxaca state, as a way of contributing to the process.

When the EZLN fell silent, the state government politically accepted that

silence both explicitly and in practice. When conflicts arose about the Law of Indigenous Rights and Culture in 2001, the state government exerted its influence so that the state Congress voted against the constitutional amendment. The governor himself expressed his disagreement with the constitutional amendment and sponsored the presentation of briefs questioning it by four of the state's indigenous municipalities. When the Supreme Court finally declared the amendment constitutional, the state government expressed its disagreement since the legislation did not satisfy the needs

and demands of a broad sector of society and of the state's indigenous population —not only of the EZLN, but of most of the independent social, peasant and indigenous organizations that are part of the government's social and political base which oppose the law.

During this period of silence, the Zapatistas in Chiapas have not been immobilized. The autonomous municipalities have an intense community life; and in communities with Zapatista sympathizers where politically viable autonomous municipalities have not been established, there is, however, intense civil resistance in very precarious economic circumstances. The state government, within its limitations, has tried not to impose anything the communities

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and Zapatista autonomous municipalities resist.

Nevertheless, the government cannot stay on the sidelines when violent clashes among members of different social and political organizations occur, as has been the case. This violence has different origins: the struggle over scarce resources, mainly the land, and conflicts derived from Zapatistas and other kinds of organizations co-existing in the same area. Even in these cases, we have constantly sought to ensure that prudence prevailed and to find ways of reaching conciliation and agreements in the communities themselves, in the autonomous

municipalities, respecting the silence, respecting civil resistance, respecting the independence of these different groups.

There is nothing to show that the state government has fostered or tolerated a concerted policy of attacks against the Zapatistas, as occurred before 2000. The attitude has been one of "allowing people to do and live as they see fit," and the intention has been to seek agreements in all instances when actions have affected third parties or the Zapatistas themselves in their daily lives, no matter how fragile these agreements might be, no matter how isolated they might seem, no matter how inconsequential in the general scheme of the politics of this conflict. It is government's obligation to carry these agreements forward.

recognize that there are limitations in the administration of justice and the ability to prosecute crime in the state: they are Chiapas' material, geographical and social difficulties. But undoubtedly the political will to prosecute these crimes exists. Today, unlike the past, the government is not sponsoring or financing organized, armed groups to enable them to act or to arm themselves. Today I can categorically say that there is no such sponsorship on the part of the state government. Neither is there any area in the state where organized groups can act or train. As soon as such places become known, the police and justice system clamp down on them.

To resolve serious conflicts in the communities, agreements have been

ful. A security force was deployed to aid in this return, within the confines of the geographical and material limitations that the case implied.

All this shows that political conditions have changed in Chiapas. Not recognizing the nature of this political change means missing the opportunity of making a diagnostic analysis that will make it possible to find a lasting peace and establish the basis for social and economic development for some of the country's poorest inhabitants. Politics has changed in Chiapas. It has not turned from black into white. It has not changed completely, but there are notable advances.

With these real political conditions, more favorable conditions for reestablishing dialogue must be created. As a government, as a political force, in the state we face enormous limitations for carrying out transformations of a conflict of federal dimensions, where the most powerful elements are national. Nevertheless, that is the challenge. **VM**

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The government has determined that for paramilitary groups to exist, they must have certain conditions to be able to act. One of those conditions is to be able to act with impunity. If, despite acting in an organized, concerted, armed and violent way, a paramilitary group were not prosecuted or punished, if it enjoyed immunity, there would be reason to say that paramilitary organizations exist. Today, that impunity does not exist. Every act of violence in the state, especially if it is organized and collective, is always prosecuted by state security forces and the justice system. However, we must

reached and put in written form, signed by the different parties, witnessed in some cases by the government and in other cases by civic organizations. This is neither the beginning nor the end of the process of reconciliation, but they have real value and as such are recognized by those involved. About a year ago an important number of displaced persons, members of "The Bees" group,[3] returned to their places of origin, some of the communities with the saddest reputations in the history of violent conflict in Chiapas, like Los Choros. They returned in fear, and those who accompanied them were also fear-

NOTES

[1] Shortened version of a presentation made at the seminar "Chiapas: Current Dilemmas of the Conflict and the Negotiations," organized by the CISAN and the Woodrow Wilson Center Latin American Program, Mexico City, October 30, 2002.

[2] Salazar Mendiguchía headed a ticket supported by parties of the left and the right that aimed at defeating the official party, in power for decades. [Editor's Note.]

[3] "The Bees" was the name given to a group of Zapatista sympthizers who became displaced persons in the state. [Editor's Note.]