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Latin American Perspectives 2001; 28; 7

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Democratization in Mexico

The Zapatista Uprising and Civil Society

by

Chris Gilbreth and Gerardo Otero

January 1, 1994, will enter the history books as a date that marks a notable paradox in contemporary Mexico. Just when the country was being inaugurated into the “First World” by joining its northern neighbors in an economic association represented by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), an armed rebellion broke out in the southeastern state of Chiapas. In the wake of a cease-fire following 12 days of fighting, a new social movement emerged that contested the direction of the nation’s future as envisioned by the state and its ruling electoral machine, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party—PRI). The adherents of the new movement are primarily Mayan peasants, both members and sympathizers of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista National Liberation Army—EZLN), and their national and international supporters.

By focusing on the Zapatista uprising and its emergence as a social movement, we examine the relationship between civil society activity and political democratization. We argue that the social movement set in motion by the

invigorated civil society. As one of us had anticipated elsewhere (Otero, 1996a), one possible outcome in 2000 was that the PRI would continue to harden its policies of social control; yet this direction was hardly compatible with the image Mexico had been promoting as a member of NAFTA. It was argued instead that the historically most likely scenario for the electoral process of 2000 was a liberal-democratic outcome in which the Partido Acción Nacional (National Action party—PAN) would win the presidential elections. This would come about as the result of combining the continuation of a market-led economic model with an electoral democratization from below (Otero, 1996a: 239-242). On July 2, 2000, this prediction turned out to be accurate: a clear majority of Mexicans elected Vicente Fox of the PAN, thus ousting the PRI after 71 years of continuous rule. In this article we argue that continued citizen activity and popular mobilization have been able to redirect Mexico's political transition toward a more inclusive democracy in which the government must respond to a broad range of societal interests. In the first section we describe some of the post-1994 reforms that accelerated Mexico's process of democratization. In the second section we outline the range of ways in which civil society responded to the uprising. The third section addresses the state's response to the uprising and the repressive practices used to disable the Zapatista movement. The fourth describes the EZLN's efforts to mobilize the groups and individuals that rose in support of its demands and the strategy it employed to build new ties of solidarity. The concluding section discusses the Zapatista movement's contribution to Mexico's democratization in the context of the challenges that remain.

political spaces in which new actors in civil society could press for democracy and social justice from below. This view was consistent with that of the new Latin American left, which conceptualized power as a practice situated both within and beyond the state and exercised through what Gramsci referred to as “hegemony,” the dissemination of beliefs and values that systematically favored the ruling class (Dagnino, 1998). In expressing this view the EZLN established a cultural strategy that called into question the PRI’s hegemony by reinterpreting national symbols and discourses in favor of an alternative transformative project.

Throughout the PRI’s 71-year rule, presidential candidates were hand-picked by the incumbent president and ensured victory by use of electoral fraud when necessary. The presidency dominated the judicial and legislative branches, while civil society was co-opted by mass organizations controlled by the state (Hellman, 1983; Camp, 1995; Cornelius, 1996; Davis, 1994). Opposition parties were rather insignificant until 1978, when there were only four legally recognized political parties. Of these, two had proposed the same presidential candidate as the PRI in various previous elections; they were seen as minor appendages of the ruling party. Only the right-of-center PAN represented a serious opposition (Loeza, 1997), and in 1976 it had undergone an internal crisis that prevented it from naming a presidential candidate. This had led the state to initiate an electoral reform to prevent a crisis of legitimacy, allowing for the legal registration of several other political parties. The most relevant of these newly legalized parties was the Partido Comunista Mexicano (Mexican Communist party—PCM). After a series of fusions with other parties, the PCM’s heirs eventually formed the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (Party of the Democratic Revolution—PRD) by joining a nationalist faction of the PRI and other leftist political parties in 1989 (Bruhn, 1996; Woldenberg, 1997).

Before the 1994 uprising, the party system had not been able to provide incentives for a major reform of the state. It was only when the EZLN appeared as an external challenge to the system of political representation that political parties were prompted to cooperate among themselves and effect some meaningful changes (Prud’homme, 1998). Immediately after the uprising, the interior minister and former governor of Chiapas, Patrocinio González, was forced to resign, and electoral reforms were announced that permitted international and civic observers to monitor the August 1994 presidential elections. Moreover, by 1996 the Instituto Federal Electoral (Federal Electoral Institute—IFE) was transformed into an independent body run by nonpartisan citizens rather than the government. In addition, the government

appointed a peace commissioner, Manuel Camacho Solís, to initiate negotiations with the EZLN within a month of the 1994 uprising. This represented one of the quickest transitions from guerrilla uprising to peace process in Latin American history (Harvey, 1996; 1998). During the 1997 mid-term elections, the opposition gained control of the Lower House of Congress for the first time in history, and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, a member of the left-of-center PRD, became Mexico City's first elected mayor. In 1999, the PRI held primary elections to choose its presidential candidate, breaking with the tradition by which the outgoing president chose his successor. Although critics have questioned the true competitiveness of the primary election, it represented a considerable contribution to Mexico's protracted process of democratization.

Until July 2000, though, significant obstacles remained on the path to democracy. Mexico continued to be described as a semidemocratic political system, since electoral fraud was still practiced (Semo, 1999). Moreover, the

THE CIVIL-SOCIETY RESPONSE TO THE ZAPATISTA UPRISING

The Zapatista uprising inspired a flourishing of organization and support at the national and international levels. Civil society responded in many forms: protesting for the government to stop the war; organizing human rights security lines to encircle the dialogue site when peace talks were in session; bringing supplies to jungle communities surrounded by federal army units; establishing “peace camps” and observing human rights conditions in communities threatened by the military presence; organizing health, education, and alternative production projects; forming nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to monitor respect for human rights; building civilian-based Zapatista support groups; and participating in forums and encounters convoked by the EZLN to discuss democracy and indigenous rights (EZLN, 1996). A great deal of mobilization has taken place outside traditional political channels, motivated by the EZLN’s call for democracy.

The first movement by civil society was a spontaneous reaction as thousands of protestors rallied against the government for ordering the Mexican air force to strafe and rocket the retreating rebels and for its summary execution of rebels captured by federal soldiers (verified in human rights reports). President Carlos Salinas found himself in the midst of a crisis as the Mexican stock exchange dropped 6.32 percent—the largest fall since 1987 (La Botz, 1995: 8). He initially denounced the Zapatista insurgents as “professionals of

Salinas administration promised to bring Mexico into the First World and undertook profound reforms to lay the groundwork for NAFTA, reversing decades of statist and nationalistic policies in just a few years (Otero, 1996b). The privatization of 252 state-run companies, including national banks and Telmex (Mexican Telephone Company), netted about U.S.\$23 billion in state reserves and massively reduced government subsidies to hundreds of money-losing firms (Oppenheimer, 1996: 9). One journalist wrote: "Salinas has worked hard to convert Mexico's socialist, nationalist economy into a capitalist, pro-American economy open to international trade" (Thomas, 1993: 10). *Forbes* magazine remarked: "You can't any longer think of Mexico as the Third World" (cited in Oppenheimer, 1996: 8).

The signing of NAFTA was meant to provide the PRI with renewed support for the 1994 elections. After the uprising, however, a harsh reinterpretation of Mexico's socioeconomic reality began. One Mexican writer remarked: "Just when we were telling the world and ourselves that we were looking like the U.S., we turn out to be Guatemala." Heberto Castillo, a left-nationalist politician, declared: "Those who applauded our growing economy . . . olympically ignored that while the rich got richer, the nation got even poorer" (quoted in Cooper, 1994: 2).

On the local level, the Zapatista uprising represented the culmination of more than 20 years of independent peasant struggle, the manifestation of a long history of regional indigenous resistance, and an open demonstration of a guerrilla struggle that had operated in Chiapas since the early 1970s (Montemayor, 1997). One of the fundamental issues for EZLN fighters was the government's modification of Article 27 of the Federal Constitution, which had ended land reform (Cornelius and Myhre, 1998; Otero, 1999), meaning that new petitions and outstanding claims would no longer be administered (Barry, 1995; Harvey, 1996; 1998). The threat to land and the prospect of importing cheaper corn from the United States through NAFTA posed a serious threat to Mayan farmers' traditional way of life and their capacity to maintain subsistence production (Collier, 1994; Otero, Scott, and Gilbreth, 1997).

The uprising was carried out by actors whose collective identity was constructed around the Mayans' historical experience of racism and socioeconomic subordination. Even after the end of Spanish colonial rule in the early nineteenth century, indigenous people continued to suffer exploitation through slavery and debt peonage. Into the twentieth century, Mayans continued to serve as maids, farm hands, and laborers for the local ladino (non-indigenous) population of Chiapas. The slogan of the uprising was "Enough Is Enough." When asked why she had joined the EZLN, Comandante Hortencia, a Tzotzil woman, declared: "I became a Zapatista to struggle for

my people, so that one day there will be justice and peace in Mexico” (interview, San Andrés Larráinzar, March 1996). Zapatista members expressed the strong conviction that their historical condition would change only through their own efforts.

For some of the ladinos in Chiapas, the uprising embodied their fear of the “*indiada*,” the rebellion of the “savage Indians” who would come to rob, rape, and pillage (de Vos, 1997). San Cristóbal, Ocosingo, Altamirano, and Las Margaritas are ladino-controlled towns in the midst of rural communities of Mayan subsistence farmers. Throughout history, a discourse has persisted that views the ladino population as naturally superior to the Indians. One government representative, a ladino woman from San Cristóbal, told an international delegation: “Before the uprising, there was a harmonious relationship between the indigenous people and the Ladinos. They worked in our homes, and we treated them as we would our children” (interview, San Cristóbal de Las Casas, November 1996). Comandante Susana, a highland Tzotzil-speaker and EZLN spokesperson, said: “When we go into big cities they see us as nothing more than *indios* . . . they curse us for being indigenous people as if we were animals . . . we are not seen as equal to the mestizo women” (interview, San Andrés Larráinzar, March 1996).

The uprising also raised the issue of socioeconomic disparities, particularly with regard to land distribution. In much of the conflict zone (the eastern municipalities of Ocosingo, Altamirano, and Las Margaritas), Mayan peasants had taken over and occupied land after 1994, seeking to improve their living conditions. A land reform movement had been in motion since the 1970s, but the uprising further politicized Mayan farmers and increased their militancy. In many cases, landlords abandoned their property during the uprising, fearing for their personal security. A great deal of this land remained unoccupied for several years, having been stripped of its livestock and work implements. In other cases, land was taken over, or “recovered,” and new communities were formed. A representative from the New Population Moisés-Gandhi, Ocosingo, explained why community members came to occupy the land (interview, Ocosingo, October 1996):

This property belonged to our grandparents, who spoke Tzeltal but could not communicate in Spanish. Because of this, they were

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The Zapatista uprising and subsequent land takeovers inflamed ethnic relations. Ladinos expressed resistance to the idea of indigenous people's declaring their right to be equal members of Mexican society. A cattle

face-to-face in San Cristóbal. The first round of negotiations broke down in June 1994 as national elections approached, but the process was reestablished in spring 1995 in response to a military action by Ernesto Zedillo's government aimed at arresting the EZLN leadership. The 1995-1996 negotiations in San Andrés Larráinzar established a framework for discussion and a process for achieving signed accords.

The restart of negotiations took place as part of an agreement that required the government to limit the number of troops in the eastern lowlands as a measure of security for civilian communities threatened by their presence. Despite the agreement, soldiers continued to pour into regions with known support for the EZLN as the peace talks continued through 1996. The policy of pursuing peace on one hand and using repression on the other was interpreted by human rights organizations as a form of low-intensity warfare, with parallels to counterinsurgency strategies used during the wars in Vietnam and Central America (López Astráin, 1996; Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, 1996; *La Jornada*,

weapons and training to civilians who would violently oppose the EZLN (CONPAZ, 1996). The most notorious example was the transformation of a rural development organization, Paz y Justicia, into a front for paramilitary violence supported by the PRI state government. Paz y Justicia's violent actions resulted in the displacement of thousands of non-PRI-supporting families from their homes and a string of confrontations and assassinations by both sides in the conflict. At one point it was impossible for human rights observers to enter the northern zone after two shooting incidents by Paz y Justicia militiamen, targeting a human rights observer mission and a material-aid caravan (Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, 1996).

By 1997, the same pattern of violence began to appear in Chiapas's central highlands as a rash of local skirmishes between government and EZLN supporters resulted in several deaths and the displacement of hundreds of families. The situation culminated in the massacre of 45 indigenous women, children, and men while they were praying in a small chapel in the hamlet of Acteal, Chenalhó, on December 22, 1997. The subsequent investigation exposed direct links between the paramilitary militia responsible for the killing and the municipal PRI government and state public security forces (Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, 1998).

The government had agreed not to increase its troops in the conflict zone as part of the 1995 Law for Peace and Reconciliation under which the peace process was regulated. In addition, Article 129 of the Mexican Constitution prohibited soldiers from patrolling outside their bases in times of peace. Yet, the military justified its roadblocks, patrols, and new encampments as part of a mission to combat drug trafficking and control the flow of arms. Moreover, the military claimed that its growing presence, following outbreaks of violence in the highlands and northern zone, was required to maintain security, even though opposition groups complained that the military presence repressed their right to political expression and their capacity to seek political change through peaceful means. Given these conditions, it would be easy to infer that political activity throughout Chiapas had been constrained. On the contrary, however, a remarkable groundswell of civil society mobilization has taken place in response to the uprising, and this activity has contributed significantly to Mexico's difficult process of democratization.

THE ZAPATISTA APPEAL TO CIVIL SOCIETY

From the moment that the Zapatistas' first communiqué was faxed to the national press, the indigenous rebels entered history, becoming cultural icons

in Mexico. Subcomandante Marcos's writings in the name of the Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena-Comandancia General (Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee-General Command—CCRI-CG) were published worldwide, along with personal letters, poetry, and short sto-

18, 1994, in response to President Salinas's initial offer to "pardon" Zapatista rebels who accepted the cease-fire (SIPRO, 1994):

For what must we ask pardon? For what will they "pardon" us? For not dying of hunger? For not accepting our misery in silence? For not humbly accepting the huge historic burden of disdain and abandonment? For having risen up in arms when we found all other paths closed? For not heeding Chiapas's penal code, the most absurd and repressive in history? For having shown the country and the whole world that human dignity still exists and is in the hearts of the most impoverished inhabitants? For what must we ask pardon, and who can grant it?

These communiqués, representing the CCRI-CG, were published in national newspapers, translated and posted on the Internet, and debated in electronic mail, helping to build an international network to support the Zapatistas' right to use peaceful means to attain their political goals. When the army unleashed an offensive in Zapatista-held territory in February 1995, international solidarity groups and human rights activists from around the globe protested at Mexican consulates and embassies. NGOs and human rights organizations sent representatives to Chiapas to accompany the return of hundreds of families displaced by the military's violence. Citizen lobbies of national parliaments and congresses in Canada, the United States, Denmark, Italy, Spain, and Germany resulted in formal petitions encouraging the Mexican government to comply with the 1996 San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture (*La Jornada*, March 4, 1997).

After just 12 days of fighting, the EZLN sought to advance its agenda in various arenas, from negotiations with the government to the establishment

of

return

the media attention to present its discourse of inclusion as Comandante David introduced himself to government negotiators as “David, Tzotzil, one-hundred percent Chiapanecan, one-hundred percent Mexican” (Monsiváis, 1995: 470). The point was further emphasized when Zapatista delegates unrolled and displayed the Mexican flag. The government commissioner, Manuel Camacho Solís, felt obliged to join them by holding up a corner. The Zapatistas conveyed to the public that their fight was not against the nation but for a new form of nationhood in which Mexico’s diverse cultures would be recognized equally (Monsiváis, 1995).

The Zapatistas have made political use of culture to communicate with civil society. For example, they have restored the symbolism of Aguascalientes, the city where the original followers of Emiliano Zapata and other revolutionaries convened in 1914 for a constitutional assembly (“La Convención”) to define the future of the Mexican revolution (Gilly, 1971; Womack, 1969). The first new Aguascalientes was constructed in Guadalupe Tepeyac in 1994. Following failed peace talks in June, the EZLN issued a Second Declaration from the Lacandón Jungle, calling on civil society to participate in a national democratic convention, based on the 1914 assembly, to take place just weeks before the August 1994 presidential elections. The construction of Aguascalientes was a large-scale collective undertaking, involving the labor of hundreds of local indigenous Zapatista supporters who carved an amphitheater and lodgings from the jungle to host more than 6,000 participants from throughout Mexico. The meeting served to establish new citizen networks and resulted in the creation of a permanent forum for discussion of a democratic transition.

The convention represented a significant advance for the EZLN. In less than a year the Zapatistas had progressed from being “professionals of violence” and “transgressors of the law” to a new social movement capable of calling upon some of the nation’s most important progressive intellectuals and grassroots leaders. The fact that the government saw the symbolism of Aguascalientes as a threat was made clear when, after the February 9, 1995, government offensive, the soldiers demolished it. This aggression forced the abandonment of Guadalupe Tepeyac and the displacement of thousands of indigenous families (Pérez Enríquez, 1998). A large military base was established there, closing the local population’s access to the best medical structure in the region.

The cultural significance attached by the EZLN to its Aguascalientes site was made evident during restarted peace talks in San Andrés Larráinzar. As discussions took place about the possible withdrawal of federal troops, the government let it be understood that the removal of troops from Guadalupe Tepeyac was not negotiable. Comandante Tacho responded by declaring that

the government could keep its Aguascalientes because the EZLN had plans to build many more. Several months later, shortly before the second anniversary of the uprising, national and international civil society was invited to attend celebrations on January 1, 1996, at one of four New Aguascalientes sites—three in eastern jungle communities and one in the highlands, just a 40-minute drive from San Cristóbal. A fifth Aguascalientes was inaugurated

representatives from 35 indigenous ethnic groups from across Mexico took part. These encounters followed the EZLN principle of “rule by obeying,” calling for Zapatista delegates to derive their position at the negotiating table democratically from the concerns expressed by representatives of civil society. The document produced by the National Indigenous Forum provided the basis for the San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture, signed by the government and the EZLN in February 1996.

The National Indigenous Forum was in many ways a watershed moment for Mexico’s indigenous cultures. The historian Jan de Vos described it as follows (interview, San Cristóbal de Las Casas, January 1996):

This is the first national forum of its type for indigenous people in Mexico. It has been an important way to demonstrate to the government that the indigenous people in Chiapas are not just making local demands. Their demands are being echoed here by a large number of indigenous cultures and organizations from across the country. . . . The forum will demonstrate the national character of indigenous demands.

The second forum, on the reform of the Mexican state, was convoked by the EZLN six months later, in July 1996. It again took place in San Cristóbal, this time bringing together intellectuals from across Mexico to discuss the themes of political democracy, social democracy, national sovereignty and democracy, citizen participation, human rights, justice reform, and communication media. Manuel López Obrador, leader of the opposition PRD, met with Marcos to discuss the possibility of a strategic alliance for the 1997 national congressional elections. The forum was meant to provide the basis for the signing of a second accord between the EZLN and government. Instead, the peace process broke down a month later because of the EZLN’s frustration with the lack of progress on the implementation of the San Andrés Accords. On September 2, 1996, the negotiations were suspended, and a wave of repression aimed at human rights activists in Chiapas followed.

Since the breakdown of the peace process, political debate has revolved around the implementation of the San Andrés Accords, particularly on the issue of autonomy. When President Zedillo rejected a proposal put forth by a multiparty commission of legislators (Comisión para la Concordia y la Pacificación—COCOPA) to translate the accord into law, indigenous communities saw this as government betrayal and initiated a movement to enact the accord in practice by establishing new autonomous municipalities and parallel governments throughout Chiapas. It is no coincidence that one of

judges the political realm, if confined to political society or the state, incapable of offering citizens sufficient access to democratic power over critical decisions that affect their everyday lives.

The Zapatista uprising contributed to an expansion of democracy in the domain of political society but also beyond it—into civil society and the cultural sphere. In addition, it has sought to expand democratization to the economic realm in order to address the social costs of neoliberal market reforms. Perhaps the most notable paradox has been that the EZLN became the first guerrilla organization to propose resolving its grievances through peaceful means. After the uprising, it sought to encourage civil society to change the correlation of forces between the state and civil society and to defeat the ruling PRI. While the PRI won the elections in 1994, the uprising inspired civil society to call into question the PRI's monopoly on power, which, in turn, accelerated the pace of political reform. The significant results it produced included the establishment of international and civic electoral observation, a reformed and independent IFE, a Lower House of Congress controlled by the opposition, and elections for Mexico City mayor. For the first time, in 2000 the PRI held primary elections to select its candidate for the presidential elections. Finally, PAN's Vicente Fox's electoral triumph in 2000 set the stage for a major overhaul of Mexico's political system.

Because of the Zapatista movement, new spaces for political participation have been opened within civil society. Through popular consultations with civic groups ranging from indigenous supporters to members of international civil society and through direct encounters with civil-society organizations, the EZLN has encouraged democratic discussion and debate. Networks of NGOs began to emerge in Mexico in the 1980s, but the Zapatista uprising inspired a tremendous proliferation of NGOs that spread both to stop the war in Chiapas and to struggle for a host of issues under the broad agenda of democratization. Some NGOs restricted their activity and linkages to the realm of civil society and were able to retain their autonomy, while others became "political associations" or established links with the state, following the path previously taken by political parties. Acción Cívica (Civic Association), for instance, received funds from the state, and the resulting commitments diminished its autonomy. Ilán Semo (1999) has pointed out that as members of NGOs join political parties, compromises are made in terms of their organizations' identity and ability to operate autonomously. For this reason, the Zapatista movement, perceiving the PRI political regime as exclusionary and authoritarian, focused on the realm of civil society.

In the sociocultural sphere, the Zapatista movement challenged racist practices in Mexico by establishing a new awareness of indigenous rights. This is perhaps one of the most direct contributions that the EZLN has made

to democratization. As Monsiváis noted: “Mexican racism has been exposed for the first time at a national level. . . . Since the 1994 Chiapas revolt . . . more books on the Indian question have been published than in the rest of the cen-

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