

# The EZLN and Indigenous Autonomous Municipalities

by Mariana Mora - April 1998

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**During the first 2 weeks of 1998 the Mexican army, under the pretext of disarming supposedly "dangerous" organized groups, stormed into several Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) support base communities in the state of Chiapas, ransacked the inhabitants' homes, stole their cattle, killed farm animals, terrified children, and even tortured a handful of men. After the military's first act of hostility, un-armed indigenous women refused to allow them to pillage their homes again, took the initiative and fought back with rage.**

For over a week, relatively non-violent confrontations between Mexican soldiers and furious indigenous women demonstrated the powerful resistance deeply ingrained in the hearts of the Mayan people. Petite Tzotzil women in their colorful embroidered blouses, armed only with sticks and stones and carrying babies on their backs, shoved heavily armed Mexican soldiers until they reluctantly withdrew from the fog covered highland community of Xo'yep. In the canyon of Ocosingo, several hundred women, children, and men, from the village of Galeana hurled sticks and insults at 200 soldiers as they chased them back down the steep mountain path and away from their homes.

On January 3rd, 70 soldiers entered into the community of Morelia and, at gun point, threatened to search people's homes. A human wall of women and children detained them. In order to prevent the soldiers from invading their village again, the women for a week constructed a 24 hour checkpoint blocking the nearby dirt road and monitoring all passing vehicles. When several hundred soldiers appeared on January 8th, an 60 women rushed towards them, flinging stones at the armored trucks and slamming sticks down onto the helmets of the few soldiers unfortunate enough to have tried to step down. The shocked men, unsure how to react, retreated as the women ran after their vehicles for over 2km.

"We held a meeting and decided that we were going to throw out the army if they came," explained Roselia, a middle-aged women from Morelia. " We are not scared of the military, we think that if they are going to shoot, well then they are going to shoot. But we have decided that we are going to defend our communities, we are going to protect our men, because if they take our husbands away they will torture, even kill them. That is what we no longer want, we don't want anymore death....We want the government to stop lying and comply with the [San Andres Peace Accords](#) [on indigenous right and culture, signed by the EZLN and government representatives on February 16, 1996]. We want everything for the pueblo and not just for a few people or for one community," she declared with penetrating brown eyes.

Unlike the February 9, 1995 offensive by the Mexican military, when the support base

communities fled their homes and hid in the mountains, the inhabitants of the so called "conflict zone" decided to take a stronger stance and, without the use of weapons, defend the new societies they have so carefully been constructing since they showed their masked faces to the world on January 1st, 1994.

### **Constructing Local Indigenous Power**

The re-newed hostilities by the Mexican federal army during the first weeks of the year, the massacre by paramilitary death squads of 45 innocent Tzotziles from the community of Acteal on December 22, 1997, and the continuous lies on the part of the Mexican government as it fails to comply with the San Andres Accords all share one goal: to destroy at all costs the EZLN initiated autonomous municipalities which geographically re-configure over a third of the southeastern state's territory and serve as a model of self-determination for Mexico's 52 indigenous groups.

On December 19, 1995, the EZLN, in a political-military action, broke the Mexican army's encirclement of the Lacandon jungle and took over towns far beyond the conflict zone. The show of force shattered the government's assumption of the movement as an isolated struggle of only 4 regions. The rebel army demonstrated that it politically and militarily partially controls 38 municipalities and, as part of this presence, has redefined the territory in the form of rebel autonomous municipalities.

EZLN Comandante Samuel explained the reason's for why the EZLN decided to create these liberated zones, "It was an idea that surfaced in 1994 as a way of not having to interact with government institutions. We said 'Enough!' to them controlling all aspects of our community for us. By creating autonomous municipalities we are defining our own spaces where we can carry out our social and political customs as we see fit, without a government that never takes us into account, interfering for its self- benefit."

Rebel municipalities no longer recognize government imposed authorities. Instead the villages democratically install new community and municipal representatives and present them with the "baston de mando," the traditional wooden stick with which the communities grant chosen local leaders the right to represent them. The new spaces for constructing local power not only permit villages to create political and social structures firmly rooted in their Mayan past, but they also signal a new way in which indigenous communities relate to each other and to the Mexican nation.

A local authority in the recently inaugurated autonomous municipality "Ernesto Che Guevara", located in the rebel territory "Tzotz Choj," officially known as the municipality of Ocosingo explained, "We are and want to be part of Mexico and not a stranger to the lands that gave birth to us. We are and want to be part of the great Mayan nation that many suns and moons ago saw these valleys flower. We are and want to take part in the construction of the nation we desire, where democracy, liberty, and justice exist. We only want to be equal to others, not more nor less, and to be respected as indigenous people."

Within the newly created municipal structures, the communities name their authorities, community teachers, local health promoters, indigenous parliaments, and elaborate their own laws based on social, economic, political and gender equality among the inhabitants of diverse ethnic communities.

In the autonomous municipality 17 de Noviembre, located in the region of Altamirano, educational promoters from the region's 75 communities meet regularly through workshops and meetings in order to create the municipality's new educational system. Those responsible for carrying out this monumental task, firmly rooted in Tzeltal history, attempt to write the municipality's own educational materials, create a bilingual teaching system, train local teachers, and eventually provide non-governmental schools for the region's 20,000 inhabitants. The educational promoters are accountable to the rebel municipality's Education Commission, a body of community representatives democratically chosen to carry out the tasks related to education, and must periodically inform the autonomous parliament of the work's progress.

The fact that the rebel municipalities define their own educational system, along with all other social, political, and economic aspects of the indigenous autonomous regions, does not remove the state from its responsibilities. If and when the Mexican government complies with the peace accords, it would still be required to channel funds, as it is obligated to do so under the constitution. However, the communities forming the municipalities would have the right to choose how these funds would be administered.

The EZLN speaks of autonomy, not as a separatist movement, but rather one that is inclusionary, that creates, as they describe in a popular slogan, "a world in which all worlds can fit". The construction of these autonomous municipalities signal the beginning of an alternative that allows local people to control a territory and create a new relationship to the state. It permits popular power to be created from below, reinforcing the EZLN ideal that "power is not taken, it is constructed." Most importantly, building grassroots force presents people the opportunity to define and build the future according to their own vision and with their own hands.

Javier Ruiz, ex- member of the autonomous concession for the rebel municipality of San Pedro Emiliano Zapata, officially known as the municipality of Chenalho, explained the process of community empowerment: "Before we would ask the government to give us everything, and they would only give us handouts- some housing material, a little bit of money, a few sacks of corn. But now we realize that we can solve our necessities ourselves. That is why we decided to resist, to give birth to our own ideas. The communities created the autonomous municipalities so we could be free to create what our thoughts tell us, to create what we want according our needs and our history. We are not asking the government to hand us clothes, but rather the right to the word dignity."

### **Threat to the Powers that Be**

Constructing local nucleuses of power, in this case through autonomous municipalities,

poses a potentially fatal threat to the long standing dictatorial power of the Mexican government. The autonomous municipalities and their building block of self-determination break the success of seven decades of paternalistic policies by the ruling political party, the PRI. Locally, they shatter the mechanisms by which Mexico's one party state politically, economically, and psychologically has controlled the majority of the nation's population.

A document written by the Dioceses of San Cristobal de las Casas analyzes the impact of reconstructed indigenous local forms of power: "The naming of authorities through indigenous norms and customs, signifies that the political party system is no longer the only channel to elect authorities and government representatives. At a local level municipal presidents imposed by the PRI are left governing only themselves, without being able to penetrate into the communities. Basically this means the slow destruction of the false democracy sustained by the political party system and its replacement by communities and organizations that construct their own history first as autonomous municipalities and eventually as autonomous zones."

The EZLN support base communities have successfully demonstrated that even under the constant pressure of low intensity warfare and with almost no resources, they can reconstruct local power to benefit those who create it, rather than allowing coopting vertical forms of control to maintain power in the hands of the few.

### **The Bloodshed Continues to Escalate**

Since the 1997 pre-Christmas Day massacre of 45 innocent people in the community of Acteal, the Mexican government continues to taint its hands with indigenous blood. In retaliation for the successful expulsion of federal army troops by the Tzeltal women from Morelia, the soldiers entered the next day into the community 10 de Mayo. They violently beat the women who tried to detain them by smashing the butts of their guns into the women's pelvises, including 9 that showed obvious signs of pregnancy. When one woman collapsed from the pain, a soldier fired his rifle a foot from her head as a reminder of what the future could bring. In the village of Nueva Esperanza, the army ruthlessly invaded and destroyed everything- the inhabitants homes, a year supply of corn recently harvested, collective farm animals, clothes, and all the basic necessities.

The bloodshed escalated once again on January 12th, during a peaceful march in Ocosingo demanding the end of violence and the demilitarization of Chiapas (currently one third of the Mexican army is stationed in this state). While the protesters walked with their backs turned to a truck full of special police forces, these began to fire directly into the crowd killing a woman from the community of La Garrucha, Guadalupe Mendez Lopes, and seriously injuring her baby girl.

The violence in the state of Chiapas, through all forms of government forces- the military, its paramilitary death squads, and special police units- continue to bring and maintain the southeastern corner of Mexico on the brink of war. There is only one reason

that the Mexican government under President Zedillo is willing to risk its international public image and foreign investment in order to destroy the EZLN, its support base, and spreading local forms of power: if the self-proclaimed "forever dead, the ones that had to die in order to live" can take the future into their own hands and construct history according to their needs, then others will do so as well and then Mexico's virtual dictatorship structures solidly set in place will collapse.

### **Those that Live Under the Earth Topple the Tree of Power**

Comandante Samuel told a story that his mamtik, his grandfather, used to tell him when he was a child, a story that the EZLN later retook as an example of how to struggle and create something new.

"There once lived two brothers, one who was older and the mero kosh, the younger brother. One day they were walking through the mountain and came across a huge tree with a bee hive full of honey at the very top."

"The older brother told the mero kosh that he would climb to get the honey and pass it down to him. So the younger brother waited on the ground while the older brother ate and ate and ate all the honey from the very top of the tree. The younger brother complained and told the big brother, 'Throw me down some honey. I am here waiting, have you forgotten about me?' But older brother only threw him chewed beeswax."

"The younger brother got angry and came up with a plan. He molded the beeswax into a tusa, a little animal that lives underground and lives by eating the roots of plants. To this tusa he whispered instructions and carefully placed him in a hole by the tree trunk. The little animal quickly began his task. He found the largest roots and started chewing. 'Rasp, rasp' was the chewing sound that the tusa made and so the big brother yelled from the top of the tree, 'What is that noise? What are you doing younger brother?' And the mero kosh yelled back, 'Nothing, what could I possibly be doing? Keep eating!' The big brother, not really listening to the mero kosh, continued to eat all the sweet honey. Meanwhile the tusa was busy chewing until finally the roots snapped and the tree came crashing down, killing the big brother. The mero kosh eventually left the earth to find his home in the sun, and like the ball of fire, he continuously dies and is reborn."

Comandante Samuel then explained how the story defines their struggle, "We are like the tusa, we are the invisible that live under the earth, just like the dead, but slowly, slowly we are chewing away at the roots of power until it comes crashing down. And like the mero kosh, we are born from our death so that we may die and live again."