

Lessons In Organization And Dignity From The Zapatistas

By [Marta Molina](#)

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January 1 was the anniversary of the public appearance of the EZLN, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, in 1994. From early in the morning on December 31, 2012, thousands of families arrived carrying food, blankets and supplies in the town of “Caracol” de Oventic, located about 40 miles from San Cristóbal de las Casas, in the Mexican state of Chiapas. In Oventic, where the Zapatista Council of Good Governance is located, thousands celebrated 19 years of struggle and resistance during a political-cultural festival that lasted until dawn. Two days before, the EZLN published a [communiqué explaining its next steps](#), following the recent massive mobilization on December 21.

What the Zapatistas achieved in Chiapas could only have been achieved with dignity, organization and discipline. On the day that the Mayans predicted the end of one calendar cycle and the beginning of another, at least 50,000 Mayan Zapatistas came out of their autonomous zones to march in silence in five Chiapas cities: Ocosingo, Palenque, Altamirano, Las Margaritas and San Cristóbal de las Casas.

This action was the largest nonviolent mobilization in the history of the Zapatista movement, even larger than the march last May when 45,000 members came out in support of the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity, led by poet Javier Sicilia, which demands an end to the drug war. The December 21 march demonstrated a level of discipline and coordination not seen since the initial Zapatista uprising on January 1, 1994, when tens of thousands of armed Zapatistas seized cities across Chiapas, declaring war on the government of then-president Carlos Salinas de Gortari and rejecting the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

This past December’s march came less than a month after the inauguration of President Enrique Peña Nieto, whose controversial election [heralded massive demonstrations](#) by various social movements, who see the new president as part of a corrupt media-government oligarchy. In this context, the action — the largest Zapatista mobilization in nearly two decades — carried a clear message: The other world we need to build can only be achieved by organization, discipline and daily coordinated efforts.

The tens of thousands of indigenous Mayans marched in absolute silence. Was this the resurgence of the Zapatistas? A reappearance? No. They came to tell the people of Mexico and the world that they had never gone away. They had prepared for more than 19 years to come “out of the darkness” on January 1, 2013. Since then, they have not stopped working, organizing and struggling. We saw this on December 21 in the eyes of the marching youth who were born and raised in the Zapatista struggle and are now 18 years old. We saw it in the women who marched with their babies — the future of struggle, their reason to keep fighting.

Waiting for a word

Throughout the day, observers anticipated a communiqué in each of the towns where the Zapatistas marched. Yet, they walked — orderly, unarmed and in absolute silence — without any accompanying message. Subcomandante Marcos, the spokesperson of the EZLN, was not present. Those who marched covered their faces with ski masks and carried the Zapatista flag: a black rectangle with a red star in the center and the letters EZLN.

Never before had a Zapatista action generated so much anticipation for a communiqué, the standard

way the movement communicates with the outside world. On the night of November 17, the day that marked 29 years since the founding of the EZLN in 1983, an advisory appeared in Spanish on the Zapatista webpage: “Coming soon, words from the Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee.” Within a week, it disappeared. The message was republished on December 17, only to disappear that evening. Two days before the action, it reappeared. Given the back and forth, observers anxiously awaited word from the Zapatistas. What no one expected was that the first paragraph of the communiqué would come in the form of a silent march.

Finally, at the close of December 21, Marcos issued a written communiqué, which took the form of a question, a protest and an expectation:

Did you hear it?

It is the sound of your world crumbling.

It is the sound of our world resurging.

The day that was day, was night.

And night shall be the day that will be day.

Democracy!

Liberty!

Justice!

From the Mountains of Southeastern Mexico

For the Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee — General Command of the EZLN

Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, Mexico, December 2012

Online, the communiqué appeared with an audio clip of the song “Like the Cicada.” Composed by María Elena Walsh in 1978 during Argentina’s brutal military dictatorship, the lyrics symbolize the struggle for democracy in Argentina and served as a parallel message to Marcos’s concise and poetic communiqué.

So many times they killed me, so many times I died. Regardless here I am, resurrected. I give thanks to disgrace, and to the fisted hand because it killed me so cruelly, and yet I kept singing.

Singing to the sun like a cicada, after a year underground, just like a survivor who returns home from war.

So many times they erased me, so many times I disappeared, to my own burial I went, alone and crying. I made a knot in the handkerchief but I forgot afterwards that it wasn’t the only time, and I kept singing.

So many times they killed you, so many times you’ll be resurrected, so many nights you’ll spend in desperation. At the moment of failure and darkness, someone will rescue you to go on singing.

Clues to the message

What did the Zapatistas want to express with the question, “Did you hear it?,” which became an oxymoron embodied by the 50,000 people who marched without uttering a word. Five marches in complete silence, a statement in the form of a question and Walsh’s lyrics that hope for the resurgence of a new world — each provide clues that help us understand the events that occurred on December 21. That day, the men and women’s silent presence was a reminder and a challenge: We are doing our due

work — are you? While the world we know crumbles, the group continues building another reality “in which many worlds can fit,” as Marcos has written. These Mayan Zapatistas, like the song describes, are reborn every day and continue singing despite efforts to kill or erase them. They continue singing “to the sun, like a cicada after a year underground, just like a survivor returning home from war.”

A lesson in organization and discipline

Compared to the sometimes-chaotic mobilizations that occurred on the streets of Mexico City on December 1, the day that the controversial President Enrique Peña Nieto was inaugurated, the EZLN’s silent marches stand out as examples of organization and dignity. Although it rarely rains in Chiapas during the winter season, December 21 began and ended with an incessant downpour, and the sound of the raindrops became the only noise accompanying the march. Despite the weather, in the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas alone at least 20,000 Zapatistas marched that morning — disciplined and orderly — from the town of San Juan Chamula to the plaza at the center of the city.

Around 7:30 a.m., trucks loaded with Mayan Zapatistas arrived in San Juan Chamula. With their faces covered, they carried a piece of white cloth with a number sewn into the fabric and wore red bandanas tied around their necks. Men, women, and children arrived. Some women wore traditional indigenous outfits, whose patterns along the borders of the cloth identified their native communities.

“How many are you?” one observer asked an organizer who was carrying a radio transceiver.

“I don’t know, but more are coming,” he replied.

“What time did you all head out?” the crowd pressed.

“Our community, we left at 3 a.m.” he said.

The Zapatistas began walking toward the center of the city in columns of four. Like the snail they identify with, they moved slowly, awaiting the contingents of Zapatistas that continued to arrive. Demonstrating the event’s organization, they grouped themselves according to the numbers — 1 through 29 — that were sewn into their ski masks. A few Zapatistas walked alongside the columns, acting as marshals in case anyone stepped out of line. They charted a straight path down the streets until they broke the columns to create the pattern of a snail shell as they walked.

By noon, a massive group of Zapatistas had reached Diego de Mazariegos Street, a main avenue in downtown San Cristóbal de las Casas. There were so many people marching that observers could not see the horizon beyond them. Thousands of women and men, grandmothers and grandfathers, teenagers, children and babies flooded into the plaza. They formed a U shape, quickly falling into position like a tidal wave of black dots or the rows of worker ants whose route is unchangeable. They appeared infinite: thousands cloaked in black ski masks who had come to show the world that the rest of us, too, must do our work. In perfect coordination, the Zapatistas climbed onto a wooden platform that had been installed during the action and, still in complete silence, raised their fists.

Without words, the symbolism was nevertheless clear. The Zapatistas were saying: We are here, and we are fighting. They were continuing the struggle, despite the end of calendar cycles — whether it be a six-year presidential cycle or a 394-year Mayan calendar period.

After descending from the platform in the central plaza, the Zapatistas re-grouped behind the city government offices. Nearby was the cathedral where, in 1994, Subcomandante Marcos met with Manuel Camacho Solís, a government official sent by former President Salinas de Gortari, after armed Zapatistas seized the city, freed the prisoners inside the jail and set fire to a handful of police precincts. In perfect order the Zapatistas once again formed columns and began marching to the outskirts of the city, where they departed hours later in hundreds of trucks.

In the other cities where they marched — Palenque, Ocosingo, Las Margaritas and Altamirano — they arrived and departed in the same fashion. By the end of the day when Marcos issued the communiqué, all had returned to their communities to continue building the solutions to their 13 demands: shelter, land, work, food, health, education, information, culture, independence, democracy, justice, liberty and peace. They returned to their communities, in short, to continue building autonomy.

Many in mainstream media later reported that the march represented the Zapatista “resurgence.” In reality, the public appearance was designed to remind the world that the movement had never gone away. The children who marched on December 21 had been born in Zapatista communities; they are already living in this other world as the dominant one crumbles. The dignified silence of the Zapatistas resounded as they spoke with their feet and charted a path that showed onlookers the distance that is left to travel. For the rest of the world — struck by their dignified presence and the vigilance of the “Enough!” that they have been proclaiming since 1994 — December 21 was a lesson in dignity, organizing and discipline.