

The Zapatistas begin another stage and, as usual, make us think

“Did you hear that? It’s the sound of their world tumbling down. The sound of ours resurging. The day that was the day was night and night will be the day that will be day.” With this message Subcomandante Marcos, accompanied by thousands of indigenous people who symbolically took over five Chiapas cities, set the stage for Zapatismo’s resurgence on the Mexican scene. It wasn’t a day like any other; it was December 21, 2012, the day a new cycle of Mayan time began.*

Jorge Alonso

**See the January 2011 issue of envío for Guatemalan anthropologist Ricardo Falla’s analysis of the Mayan steles that refer to the end of a significant cycle in Mayan cosmology, in which there is a world return or reversal. As one Mayan put it, “It is our supreme ideology. What will fall will rise; what will rise, will fall. But it will not end. There have been plagues, wars, famines, droughts and conquests but everything eventually gives way to light and hope, newer beginnings and fresher eras.” Marcos gave it a twist by saying that what previously was day in fact had been night for them and what had previously been night will be a real day.*

On December 21, 2012, the start of a new Mayan era, thousands of indigenous Zapatistas marching in silence symbolically took over five Chiapan cities. *Subcomandante* Marcos issued a brief statement that said: “Did you hear that? It’s the sound of their world tumbling down. The sound of ours resurging. The day that was the day was night and night will be the day that will be day.” Analyst Armando Bartra commented that with this powerful staged performance, the EZLN did a roll-call of those present in the socio-political alignments of the new Mexican President’s term. In May 2011, 20,000 Zapatistas had come out to support the peace march. Now that number had more than doubled. Bartra’s interpretation was that the message was addressed to the new power. And he wondered out loud what other implications this terse message might hold. The questions started getting clearer a few days later.

Not absent, persistent

The EZLN ended 2012 with three press releases, issued during the inauguration of a seminar of reflection and analysis at the CIDECI-University of the Earth in San Cristóbal de Las Casas. In the media there was talk of a return, a Zapatista resurgence; that they had returned to talk. It was an erroneous perception because the Zapatistas have never been absent; their Good Government Juntas and Zapatista municipalities have published a large number of messages over the past two years. Rather than absence, persistence.

The first statement referred to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) elite and the second to Luis H. Alvarez, the National Action Party (PAN) candidate for President in the late 1950s then president of his party, and the official responsible for indigenous peoples in Calderón Sol’s government. The third was dedicated to announcing how Zapatismo will behave.

The interior secretary of Enrique Peña Nieto’s new government had boasted that the Zapatistas weren’t familiar with the members of the new government and would be surprised by what the government would do with the original peoples. *Subcomandante* Marcos began the first press release commenting that the Zapatistas had thought the statement was a joke for December 28, Day of the Innocents, then

proceeded to summarize the trajectories of the government's main members. Peña Nieto was a relative of Arturo Montiel, accused of lining his pockets when he ran the government of the state of Mexico. Peña himself was responsible for the repression at Atenco in which people died, women were sexually assaulted and other grave human rights violations were committed. He was also responsible, along with the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) government of the Federal District, for suppressing the #YoSoy132 (#Iam132) movement and was the electoral beneficiary of the media coup on July 1, 2012.

Who are these PRI politicians?

As for Emilio Chuayffet, the new education secretary, Marcos pointed out that when he headed domestic policy in the Zedillo government, he had at first accepted the San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture signed in February 1996 as the result of the government-Zapatista talks, only to recant later on, claiming he was drunk when he did it. Those agreements were never honored by the government. Chuayffet was also one of the intellectual authors of the Acteal massacre in 1997.

Regarding the energy secretary, Pedro Joaquín Coldwell, it should not be forgotten that he was the peace commissioner in Chiapas when the Acteal massacre took place, and remained silent about it. Next Marcos accused Secretary of Social Development Rosario Robles, previously head of the Federal District government and PRD president, of selling out the PRD and suppressing UNAM students at the end of last century. Of Labor Secretary Alfredo Navarrete, Marcos said he covered up the murder of Carlos Salinas' brother and exonerated Montiel, governor of the state of Mexico, from accusations of responsibility for the police beating one man from Atenco so badly he died. And Marcos accused Miguel Angel Osorio, Secretary of the Interior, of diverting government funds to the PRI and having links with the Zetas.

Marcos noted that none of them had governed the country in their time, rather it was former President Salinas (PRI) who plundered the nation's wealth like no other, devastated the Mexican countryside and ordered the assassination of the PRI candidate in March 1994. The PRI members, said Marcos, were those who chose violence over dialog, resorted to force when they didn't have right on their side, refused to comply with the San Andrés Accords, made a school out of corruption and baseness in all political parties and lacked any credibility. He reiterated that the Zapatistas were not the only ones who weren't scared of them and gave clues to how a true Zapatista could be recognized: they aren't afraid, don't ask for money from the three levels of government, don't seek positions, don't take themselves very seriously, don't give the feeling of saying more than what they keep quiet and don't sell themselves, surrender, or falter.

Calderón's bad government

Marcos reminded Luis H. Álvarez that the multitudinous silence of December 21 must have made it clear to him and Calderón's government that they were a bunch of losers. And he warned him: other governments had tried to put an end to the Zapatistas and others still will, always with the same results: a big failure. He threw it in Álvarez's face that he had let himself be deceived by people masquerading as Zapatistas, because true Zapatistas wouldn't go to a government of criminals to seek any kind of help. Marcos reproached him for having written in a book the lie that the Zapatistas had been in contact with the PAN. Marcos told him that the only proximity Calderón's government had ever had with any representatives of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) was through their armies, police officers, judges and paramilitaries. He blamed Álvarez for having been an accomplice of Calderon's government, the most criminal one endured by Mexico since the dictator Díaz. In response to all this,

Zapatistas were punishing his disdain with their “silent and extended walk.”

Marcos made it clear that Álvarez had failed in his attempt to buy the Zapatistas and force them to surrender. He said that in the history books of Zapatista schools they will read that Calderón’s government is the one that carried absurd death to all corners of Mexico, offered injustice to victims and victimizers then left the Estela de Luz (Pillar of Light) monument as a bloody self-tribute to crime turned co-government.

Álvarez should learn that despite all the criminal activity of the government he served, the Zapatistas had not disappeared and if he had an interest in recovering some moments of the dignity he had when he was part of the Harmony and Peace Commission, he should walk away from his party and political class, “an insatiable parasite,” and spend time with the Rarámuri indigenous people of Chihuahua to learn the basics of the indigenous heart, where dignity “combines in the present for the last half a millennium.”

“We never left”

The third communiqué of the EZLN Indigenous Clandestine Revolutionary Committee’s General Command is addressed to the Mexican people and the peoples and governments of the world. It starts by noting that on December 21 thousands of indigenous Zapatistas mobilized and took five municipal towns of Chiapas peacefully and in silence, and their message was not one of resignation, nor of war, death and destruction, but of struggle and resistance. It explains that after the media coup that extolled the “both poorly disguised and even more poorly made up ignorance” in the Executive Branch, the Zapatistas came out to let them know that if the PRI hasn’t in fact left, neither have the Zapatistas.

The statement describes how six years ago a sector of the political and intellectual class (the PRD) wanted to blame the Zapatistas for its defeat, but what they were fighting for was justice for Atenco. This sector first slandered them then wanted to silence them. Because of its incapacity and dishonesty, this sector didn’t want to see that it held the seed of ruin within itself. Six years later, two things have become obvious: this sector doesn’t need the Zapatistas in order to fail, and the Zapatistas don’t need this sector in order to survive.

“We live better now”

The entire media spectrum dedicated itself to making people believe the Zapatistas had gone. But it wasn’t true. The indigenous Zapatistas are now reemerging on the public stage, having significantly improved their living conditions in the past few years. The text emphasizes that the standard of living in Zapatista communities is higher than that of the indigenous communities allied to the governments, which receive handouts they squander on alcohol and useless goods. The Zapatistas’ homes improve without hurting Nature. In their villages, land that was previously used to fatten the cattle of rich farmers and landowners is now sown with corn, beans and vegetables. Zapatistas’ work is doubly satisfying because it both provides them all that’s necessary to live with dignity and contributes to the collective growth of their communities. Zapatista children go to schools where they are taught their own history, Mexico’s and the world’s, as well as the science and techniques needed to grow in stature without ceasing to be indigenous. Indigenous women are not sold as a commodity and indigenous people allied to the PRI go to Zapatista hospitals, clinics and laboratories because the government-run ones have no drugs, equipment or doctors.

The Zapatistas are happy that their culture is flourishing, not in isolation but enriched by contact with the cultures of other peoples of Mexico and the world. They govern and are governed by themselves, seeking consensus over confrontation. They have achieved all this not only without the government and its “sidekicks,” the political class and the media, but also resisting their attacks of every kind.

They announce six points

With their silence they made themselves present. And now, with their words, they were announcing six points in their third communiqué.

The National Indigenous Congress. The first point reaffirms their membership in this gathering space for the original peoples of Mexico.

The Lacandona Jungle Declaration. The second is that they will resume contact with those in Mexico and the world who observe this sixth declaration issued by the EZLN seven years ago.

Building bridges. The third lays out their intention to build the necessary bridges with social movements that have emerged and will emerge, not to direct or supplant, but rather to learn from them, their history, paths and destinations. In further explaining this point, they recount that they have gained support from individuals and groups in different parts of the country, formed as support teams for the Sixth (for that declaration) and “Internazional” (Z for Zapatista) Commissions so they can act as transmission belts between Zapatista support bases and individuals, groups and collectives belonging to the Sixth Commission, who retain their conviction and commitment to build an alternative, non-institutional Left.

Maintaining critical distance. The fourth point reaffirms the Zapatistas’ critical distance from Mexico’s political class, which has done nothing but prosper at the expense of the needs and hopes of humble, ordinary people.

The bad governments’ dilemma. The fifth point is directed to the executive, legislative and judicial branches of the bad federal, state and municipal governments and to the media that accompany them. The Zapatistas argue that, without exception, the bad governments from all across the political spectrum have done everything they can to destroy the Zapatistas, buy them off and force them to surrender. All registered parties and all that aspire to register have attacked them militarily, politically, socially and ideologically. The mass media have tried to make them disappear, first with “servile and opportunist slander” and then “through sly and complicit silence.” The Zapatistas warn that those politicians they served and whose money fed them are no longer there, and those who have now taken over the mantle will last no longer than their predecessors, and made it clear that all these powers had failed.

They warned that the three constitutional powers (federal, state and municipal) need to make their minds up whether to venture once more into counterinsurgency policy, which only managed a weak simulation clumsily sustained by media management, or recognize and fulfill their commitments by raising indigenous rights and culture to a constitutional level as was set out in the San Andrés Accords, signed in 1996 but then not honored by the federal government, then led by the same party now returning to government.

They specifically turned their attention to the Chiapas state government and the dilemma it faces. On

the one side the new administration could continue the corrupt, dishonest and vicious strategy of its predecessor: spending the taxes of the state's population to enrich itself and its accomplices, barefacedly buying media voices and pens while plunging the people of Chiapas into misery, and using both police and paramilitaries to try to curb organizational progress in Zapatista villages. On the other, opting for truth and justice, it could accept and respect the Zapatistas' existence, getting used to the idea that a new form of society is in full bloom in Zapatista territory and is attracting attention from honest people all over the planet.

Lastly, the Zapatistas addressed Chiapas' municipal governments. These too are faced with the dilemma of continuing with the big lie that anti-Zapatista or supposedly Zapatista organizations are extorting money from them, or use their municipalities' public resources better so as to improve the living conditions of those they govern.

In this same point the Zapatistas also addressed the Mexican people who only organize for electoral struggle, pointing out that they too are at a crossroads: either they see the Zapatistas as enemies or rivals on whom to take out their frustration for the frauds or they recognize another way of doing politics, with the Zapatistas.

From below and on the left. The sixth point states that in the coming days the EZLN, through its Sixth and "Internazional" Commissions, will be announcing a series of peaceful civic initiatives to continue walking together with the other original peoples of Mexico and the rest of the continent and also with those who, in Mexico and the world, resist and fight "from below and on the left."

"We're the same as 500 years ago"

This third communiqué concluded by recalling that the Zapatistas had once had "the blessings of honest, noble attention" from various media, for which they then thanked them, but that this has now been completely eliminated. They claim that those who wagered the Zapatistas only existed as a media phenomenon and, fenced in by lies and silence, would disappear were wrong. The Zapatistas still exist, without the cameras, microphones, pens, ears and eyes. They continue to exist despite being slandered and silenced. Their walk doesn't depend on media impact, but on the world's understanding and "the indigenous wisdom that governs their steps, [as well as] on an unshakable decision that gave dignity from below and on the left." They announced that as of the end of 2012 they would begin to address their word to selected recipients and, except very occasionally, "would only be understood" by those who had walked and were walking without surrendering to the media and situational trends. This is another resonance with Mayan beliefs as the Popol Vuh says that "only hiding his face is the reader of it."

The Zapatistas said they've proved, despite a number of errors and many difficulties, that another way of doing politics is already a reality, even though they knew that very few would have the privilege of knowing and learning directly from it. If 19 years ago they surprised the world by taking cities with blood and fire, they have now done so again without weapons, death or destruction, thus marking the difference between themselves and those who, during their governments, distribute death among those they govern. The Zapatistas know they are "the same as 500 years ago, 44 years ago, 30 years ago, 20 years ago, only a few days ago," that they are "the smallest ones, those who live, fight and die in the last corner of the homeland", but without faltering, selling out or surrendering.

If Marcos doesn't speak, does that mean the Zapatistas don't exist?

As what has been said up till now by the Zapatista movement hasn't been understood, there's a need for many more details, both to contradict those expecting the Zapatistas to join an electoral front and those who want to accuse them of being against a supposedly progressive Left and playing the PRI's game. Marcos published an irreverent cartoon as a playful but critical response to his detractors, especially those accusing him of following the logic of those in power. Later he released a long statement on the cartoon.

He recalled that on May 7, 2011, he had come out in support of the movement headed by the poet Javier Sicilia, which was covered in the media. Between then and December 21, 2012, the Good Government Juntas issued 27 public complaints, but because they were by indigenous Zapatistas without intermediaries, they were ignored. Marcos asked why the politicians and media say the EZLN doesn't exist unless he speaks. It's nothing less than racist to think that he is the only voice of Zapatismo, and when the Good Government Juntas issue statements, Zapatismo is treated as if it's silent. Marcos emphasized that the world is round, spins, changes, but no matter how many times the world imposed by those up above spins, many people are always left at the bottom. The Zapatistas want a world where no one "is up above at the expense of those down below."

"Fear is about to change sides"

The Zapatistas released 20 more communiqués between December and February. Marcos parodied those above, stating that it's dangerous for them that collectives are coming together below that are saying NO to those above and YES to building their own destiny. He used a Mapuche word that means "we will overcome a hundred times." He also released another drawing, dedicated to the thieving political class, that mocked the government for the act it put on at Las Margaritas ostensibly to end hunger in Mexico. He ridiculed the opening act of this "national crusade," and advised the political class to go offer their alms elsewhere. He also did a playful but educational critique of the senselessness of capitalism giving alms to the unemployed and desperate this same capitalist system created. But the system's raw material, "the plebeian crowd," he warned, is rebelling. Marcos suggested that the Mexican political class is only doing a foreman's bad duties for those who have the real power elsewhere. The political class is puzzled and frightened by the persistence of those below who never tire "in their task of building life."

He stressed that the government's social programs are a lie, aimed at wiping out indigenous peoples. He alluded to the surprise of the political class upon seeing thousands of Zapatistas parading in silence and climbing up onto the podium, one by one, showing that they are all chiefs. He criticized the media for lying and representing repression as necessary to continue the order of those above. Fear, he said, is "about to change sides" and, while many of those below don't yet know it, "they are part of a bigger 'us' that is about to be built."

The Zapatistas expressed gratitude for the support received for imprisoned Zapatista base comrades and members. They demanded justice for the comrade who suffered serious injury in the December 1 suppression and demanded absolute freedom for those detained that day in Mexico City and Guadalajara for nothing more than protesting Peña's imposition.

Capitalism “in extreme madness”

They announced that they have ended what was called The Other Campaign so they can continue, with some changes, what will be called the Sixth, no longer separating international aspects from Mexican ones, but rather treating them as a whole. They also announced other changes in how they are working. While they are clear about who they are, their place and what they are facing, clear about the NO, work needs to be done on the YES, on why, how, when and especially with whom they are struggling. They reiterated that their intention is not to build a big organization with a ruling center, that they aren't in favor of centralized command with an individual or collegiate chief. They remain convinced that unity of action can only be achieved if each person's way is respected. Any attempt at homogeneity is nothing more than a fascist attempt at domination.

The Zapatistas recalled the four wheels of capitalism: exploitation, dispossession, repression and contempt. They asserted that capitalism has reached a stage of extreme madness in its predatory pursuit and contempt for life and is on the way to eliminating humanity. To prevent this, those from below must destroy something else: the relationships that make it possible for someone to be above at the expense of having others below. The Zapatistas make fine distinctions: it's not enough to criticize machismo, patriarchy and misogyny, because it's very different to be a woman above than to be a woman below. By the same token, there is also one Left above and another Left below. There are a few “citizens” above and many others below.

“We want to change the world”

The Zapatistas confess that they have learned a lot since they proclaimed the Sixth Declaration. They realize that some people approached them for personal gain, so now they know with whom not to walk. What is now called simply “The Sixth” is a Zapatista summons that doesn't seek to recruit, replace, subordinate or use, but does offer and demand respect. Belonging to it doesn't involve affiliation, registration or a fee. They insist that those expecting their resurgence to produce large gatherings aren't fit to continue walking with them, because the walk of the Sixth is “a long stride” that seeks not to change just the Mexican government but the world.

They reiterated that they will not ally with any electoral movement and from now on will communicate with those they trust in a discreet and secret manner, and will reveal some of the initiatives they have been maturing over the past few years in this way. They will battle, resist and struggle, accepting that the road will be more torturous and costly. Marcos announced that there will be a celebration in the Zapatista communities in August 2013, the tenth anniversary of the Good Government Juntas.

Against all hegemony and avant-gardism

In each of these press releases the Zapatistas were breaking away from those of all persuasions and positions who are above, giving many clues about what they understand as “us.” They said that looking is a way of asking and that what is looked at and from where is important. They aren't with those who argue that the only choice is between the ballot box and arms and are distancing themselves from those who want to lead. Zapatistas accompany, listen to the few and never tell them what to do or not to do; their search is for “what can be.” They know the dictator isn't defeated by a single thought and a single force. They understand that diversity and difference for those below is no weakness. They oppose all hegemony and avant-gardism, and don't absorb or subordinate identity; instead emphasizing the

bridges between “the different pains and various rebellions.”

They emphasize that those above haven't known how to look and don't understand them. The Zapatistas don't want to recruit, direct, use or tell people what to do. They say they're in the middle of their most daring initiative since the insurrection. The act of December 21 was important for the organization, a militant effort, a demonstration of force with the presence of young people and women. It was an act of people who went up onto the podium and, without speaking, said: “Here we are, this is who we are, who we will be, all of us are commanders.” And they didn't look from above downward, but kept their gaze low, among themselves.

“We are little bits of time”

This is the profound meaning of a new way of doing politics. The Zapatistas are inviting us to recognize that something unexpected and new is in front of our eyes and we must look, listen, learn and be silent. And we must also know how to look afar, because “time comes from far away and continues on its path.” The Zapatistas are “little bits of time that make it walk, even though they don't get to the end to see where it arrives.” Others will push it to get there.

The Zapatistas confess that they rely heavily on the libertarian media, on people, groups, collectives and organizations that have their own means of communication and give space to the Zapatista's words in solidarity. Another form of issuing these latest Zapatista statements was to accompany them with a background of music and videos. In this new stage the Zapatistas wanted Marcos, their spokesman, to speak again with open texts but also with encrypted texts “for our people” exclusively. They are beginning a stage in which they are looking to those who are similar to them, knowing that doing so also exposes them to the gaze of the dictators who hate them, persecute them and want to attack them. Therefore, autonomy must be looked after and grown “well and quietly.”

Subcomandante Moisés speaks

Marcos announced that Subcomandante Moisés will also speak. While Marcos looks after the window, Moisés is in charge of the door that will be opened to those who want to learn from the Zapatistas' experiences. Moisés was the one who delivered these 19 communiqués, and who announced that he and Marcos would take turns in the following deliveries.

Moisés recalled that original peoples have been used for centuries so that others might rise to power and once there, despise them, steal from them, exploit and repress them. But the Zapatistas are already in another time and are working to ensure this doesn't happen again. The original peoples want to live good and want those who govern to be those who obey. Moisés criticized those who say they're fighting for the people when what they seek is to direct them. This is simply “climbing on other people's back to get to the top.” Moisés announced they will fight alongside workers, peasants, youth, children, women and the elderly of Mexico and the world.

He explained their new way of working: those below must bring their thoughts together to learn and then work on them and organize them. We need to build something new, something that's a people's proposal, studied by the people and finally the decision of the people. He also explained what Zapatista democracy is like, how it is experienced in the autonomous municipal assemblies and assemblies that make up the Good Government Juntas. They make this democracy every workday in all the self-government bodies and together with the people, women and men who discuss, study, propose, analyze

and finally decide.

“When the poor believe in the poor...”

Moisés emphasized that the poor know what they want as the best way to live and they know that to make the change it isn't necessary to have someone else carrying out their campaign, saying that they will make the change. He called on the indigenous and non-indigenous poor to organize and join the fight by directing it themselves.

Moisés, who is in charge of the Zapatista door, described how neoliberals want to own the world and have underdeveloped capitalist governments as their foremen. This reality offers many reasons for uniting and giving birth to rebellion. The Zapatistas show how they face neoliberal capitalism day and night in their communities, with their autonomous governments. And their example demonstrates that this path is viable. The Zapatistas want to meet like-minded people, so they can get to know each other, learn from each other. They have been learning, with steps forwards and backwards, which they don't hide. Moisés turned to this verse from the Salvadoran Mass: “When the poor believe in the poor then we can sing freedom.”

“It's tiny now, but will be huge”

Moisés accepted that what the Zapatistas are doing is “tiny,” but that it will be very big for the poor of Mexico and elsewhere who need to build the world in which they want to live. The Zapatistas have always defended the principle of leading by obeying. For this reason, he pointed to the need to distinguish between people or groups that are in agreement and those that want to lead.

Moisés was encouraged by the fact that there's light on the horizon of this new world being built by the world's poor. For this reason, all those below need to look and listen to each other. He explained that what they need is organization, agreement, struggle, resistance, defense, practice, work and everything put forward by the other comrades who are getting closer to the Zapatistas. He invited people to agree on how the “little school” of struggle will be, where it won't be possible to copy the classmate, where each person raises his or her own struggle and all comrades respect each other.

Notebooks of the Zapatista schools

The last section of the group of statements explaining the Zapatistas' new stage was reserved for comrades of the Sixth. It's part of the EZLN's particular correspondence through two spokesmen: Marcos and Moisés, following the guideline of serving and not making use of or replacing; of building, not ordering or imposing; of convincing; and of going down and not climbing. They have made, are making and will continue to make freedom.

The Zapatistas also shared fragments of course notebooks from Zapatista schools, which explain freedom according to the Zapatistas. The texts have been produced by men and women of the Zapatista support bases and express not only the stages of the fight for freedom, but also critical and self-critical reflections on steps already taken. They share how they see freedom and their struggles to gain, exercise and defend it. They offered to hold these courses for comrades of the Sixth.

Is the term “democracy” of any use?

Personally, I must confess that this new Zapatista stage has awakened a new search in me. Although the Zapatistas still speak of democracy, they are creating something new, different and better. I'd been insisting on identifying the democracy of those from below. But I now see that we must question the very term democracy, because it includes the element *kratos* (the ancient Greek word for power and strength), in which it somehow manages to have some who exercise it and a majority who obey. We need to neutralize that power and look for people's freedom to discern, dialog, discuss, debate and decide among everybody, where no one subjugates and no one allows him/herself to be subjugated. Now I'll start walking to identify not democracy but *demoeleuteria* (*eleuteria* is ancient Greek for liberty). The Zapatistas not only persist and resist. With new vigor they are changing worn-out experiences. They are innovating forms of resonance, convergence and libertarian autonomy, building a *demoeleuteria* from below.

Jorge Alonso is a researcher for CIESAS Occidente and the envío correspondent in Mexico