

From Fire to Autonomy: Zapatistas, 20 Years of Walking Slowly

25 January 2014

By [Andalusia Knoll](#) and [Itandehui Reyes](#), [Truthout](#) | News Analysis

Photos - Andalusia Knoll

Speaking in the mountains of Chiapas, Mexico, on a cold drizzly New Year's Eve, the Zapatista Comandante Hortensia addressed the crowd: "Twenty-five or 30 years ago we were completely deceived, manipulated, subjugated, forgotten, drowned in ignorance and misery." She was communicating the official words of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) on the 20th anniversary of their rebellion, when thousands of indigenous people rose up in arms, took over dozens of major towns and villages in this southern state, and [declared "enough is enough"](#), never again will there be a homeland that doesn't include us."

Comandante Hortensia went on to explain how over the past two decades, they have constructed their own autonomous government, complete with their own health and education system, based in the indigenous traditions of their ancestors. Despite the continual efforts of the "neoliberal bad government" to displace them from their land, the Zapatistas have successfully recuperated thousands of acres of land on which they have constructed communities that are governed "from the bottom up." Community members participate in rotating government positions that operate under the democratic principle of "*mandar obedeciendo*" (commanding by obeying).



The Mexican government has attempted to introduce social programs with the goal of co-opting and dividing the indigenous population in Zapatista areas. However, the indigenous rebels, who reject all forms of government handouts, have successfully resisted co-optation. If you ask a Zapatista how many are in the ranks, they will just respond "*somos un chingo*," which loosely translates into "there are a whole lot of us." Official estimates put their numbers at [250,000 people](#) or roughly 10 percent of the population of the state of Chiapas.

Zapatista communities are spread throughout the large southern Mexican state of Chiapas, which includes coastal, mountainous and jungle regions. They have created five Caracoles, which are the centers of "good government" and points of coordination for the Zapatista health clinics, schools, community banks and independent media projects.

Resistance to NAFTA, the Death of the Mexican Farmer



On January 1, 1994, the NAFTA free trade agreement entered Mexico with vigor, promising foreign investment and economic prosperity at the expense of the plunder of natural resources. NAFTA is largely credited for flooding the Mexican market with subsidized corn from the United States, which decimated farmers' livelihoods and provoked massive migration to the United States. Two years prior to NAFTA's implementation, former President Carlos Salinas opened the floodgates to land privatization by reforming Article 27, which had protected communally owned land known as *ejidos*, created during the Mexican revolution. Thus, the introduction of NAFTA provided the perfect context for the uprising of the indigenous guerillas who formed the EZLN.

However, the 1994 uprising was not a spontaneous endeavor. Twenty years before, Marxist-inspired guerillas arrived in the Lacandon jungle in Chiapas to unite with members of marginalized indigenous communities. In 1983, they formally created the EZLN. They drew inspiration from Emiliano Zapata, who fought in the Mexican revolution in the early 20th century, declaring that the land belonged to

those who worked it. Continuing his revolutionary tradition, the EZLN rebelled to demand work, land, shelter, food, health, education, independence, democracy, freedom, justice and peace for all the Mexican people. Their ideas rapidly gained traction as a confluence of indigenous cosmo-vision, Marxist philosophy and progressive theological thought to counter dispossession and poverty. The EZLN germinated the seed of "*Ya Basta* - Enough Already!"

Chiapas, is rich in flora and fauna, containing between 50 and 80 percent of Mexico's biodiversity, water reserves and mineral resources. However, the richness of natural resources has never translated into prosperity for the population, especially the indigenous people who often live in extreme poverty in [marginalized communities](#). It is estimated that 40 percent of the state's population speak an indigenous language, and the EZLN is composed of Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Chol and Tojolabal communities. The Zapatistas denounced their marginalization in the first declaration of the Lacandon Jungle: "We have been denied the most elemental preparation so they can use us as cannon fodder and pillage the wealth of our country. They don't care that we have nothing, absolutely nothing, not even a roof over our heads, no land, no work, no health care, [no food nor education](#)."

In the communiqué released by the Zapatistas to celebrate the 20th anniversary, Subcomandante Marcos described the motivations that prompted their rebellion: "It was not the struggle to survive, but a sense of duty that put us here, for better or for worse. It was the necessity to do something in the face of millennial injustice, the indignation we felt was the most overwhelming [characteristic of humanity](#)."

Our Word is Our Weapon

The Zapatista uprising in 1994 lasted 12 days and left an estimated death toll of 100 people. On the 12th day, a demonstration of civil society of hundreds of thousands of people in Mexico City shouting "You are not alone," helped pressure the government to accept a ceasefire.

From that moment on, the Zapatistas have never apologized for rising up in arms, but they have prioritized words as their primary weapon of choice.

It's been 30 years since the birth of the EZLN, and these indigenous guerillas continue to surprise the world with their lyrical poetry and tenacity for profound social transformation. Their strength is founded in their communities' ability to weave new kinds of anticapitalist social relationships, even though they live in a world where money reigns supreme.

On the anniversary of the uprising, many mainstream Mexican media outlets sought to discredit the Zapatistas, highlighting the rampant poverty that still exists in Chiapas. Yet the Zapatistas chose to highlight their successes by opening the doors to their communities with the *Escuelita*, "The Little School: Freedom According to the Zapatistas." During three different rounds of la Escuelita, Mexican and international solidarity activists, students, mothers, teachers and many other people joined with the Zapatistas to share the joys and difficulties of the daily construction of life with dignity.

Daily Life: Dignity Triumphs over Money

During the Little School demonstration, the Zapatista uncovered their faces, so they were seen not just as romanticized guerillas covered with balaclavas, but instead as the humble, indigenous peasants that they are. Zapatistas always refer to each other as "compas" (short from *compañeros* - partner), and all express an intense pride to be part of the Zapatista resistance.



Each student was assigned a *votán*, or guardian of the same gender, who was responsible for guiding, translating, and caring for the student at all times. The students and *votanes* stayed together with a Zapatista family in their home - usually a humble structure of wood, mud and corrugated metal. The majority of Zapatista families speak an indigenous language, and Subcomandante Marcos explained in a communiqué the importance of having the *votanes* translate for the students.

"You will, of course, be left with the doubt as to whether your question was adequately translated and if the answer you got is the same as that which the teacher gave. But isn't that exactly what an indigenous person is subject to with a translator in the government courts of justice?"

Escuelita students participated in the daily activities of campesino life: collecting firewood, harvesting yucca, grinding corn to make tortillas, cleaning the cattle field and collecting water in nearby creeks or rivers. In some communities, the tasks were gender-separated, with the women mostly relegated to the houses and the men in the fields; while in other communities, students reported that the work was shared more.

When students weren't working in the fields or houses, they were expected to read the Zapatista books about self-government, autonomous resistance and the participation of women in autonomous government. They also met with various leaders in the community, who explained how their cooperatives operate and how they interact with the various levels of government.

In 2003, the Zapatistas created the five *caracoles*, which serve as centers of the "good government" and meeting points for the Rebel Zapatista Autonomous Municipalities (MAREZ). There are 27 MAREZ operating in rebel territory, which occupy approximately one-third of the total land area of the state of Chiapas. *Caracol* means snail shell, and it is a reference to the slow pace of these mollusks who advance slowly, but still advance, a bit like the Zapatista government.

At the Caracoles, the meetings of the "good government" are held with a group of 24 indigenous representatives who are elected by community assembly. The representatives rotate every three years, and they aim to have equal numbers - half men and half women. They administer justice and coordinate the work of education, health and economy for each Caracol. Each municipality has community assemblies with elected representatives, and at the micro level, there are local people responsible for ensuring justice and coordinating health, education, agro-ecology and collective work of each small town.

Their efforts in constructing autonomy could not be understood without focusing on their indigenous ethics and principles of *mandar obedeciendo*: to serve and not be served; represent and not supplant; build and not destroy; propose and not impose; and convince, not defeat, from below not above. No autonomous authority receives a salary, as it is considered an honor to serve the people. The home community of the representatives of the good government donate corn and beans to be consumed by them while they are living and working in the Caracol.

Health, Education, Media and Credit Unions



oto: Andalusia Knoll)

There have been great advances in public health in Zapatista communities. There is a hospital in each Caracol, and in the Caracol, La Garrucha, there is a dental office, clinical laboratory and ambulance - while in La Realidad, there is a surgical operating room and herbal lab. Traditional medicine drawing on ancestral knowledge is imparted in the communities with the presence of herbalists, bone healers and midwives.

The Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Education System (SERAZ) has created elementary schools in all communities and caused a boom in literacy rates. Secondary education is a little more difficult to

access, but does exist at the Caracoles. Independent media plays a crucial role in the Zapatista struggle, and there are currently 10 community radio stations. La Garrucha has its own media center, where people learn community filmmaking and radio broadcasting.

Caracoles also boast shoe workshops and textile, transportation and consumer cooperatives. They have also formed their own autonomous credit unions, prioritizing cash loans for emergencies, with low-interest rates and loans for economic projects, some with a priority given to women seeking to start cooperative businesses.



Striving to Break with Patriarchal Norms

Despite Zapatista efforts to encourage women's participation in the good government, it is still difficult for them to escape their roles of preparing food and caring for their children. While many attendees of the Escuelita criticized gender divides, it is clear that there have been many advances for women's rights. Young Zapatista women are aware of their rights, are able to choose whom they marry, and know that if their husband uses violence against them, the community assembly will intervene and defend the woman. Zapatista communities are dry, and the eradication of alcoholism and drug addiction has done much to curb domestic violence.

Itandehui, a coauthor of this article, recounted how two women in the MAREZ San Manuel asked her how it was that she didn't have children and what could they do to have fewer children. While there is basic sex education in the communities, the use of contraceptive methods is still associated with government control because, in the past decades, thousands of indigenous women had IUDs introduced without their consent, as a policy of population control.

Government Betrayal, Counter-Insurgency Efforts

In 1996, the federal government signed the San Andres Accords, pledging to recognize the rights of indigenous peoples. None of the three major political parties have complied with this promise, deepening Zapatista's mistrust of the government.

Various Zapatista communities are situated right alongside what they refer to as *partidista* communities, where the people are aligned with political parties. During the Escuelita, many Zapatistas spoke of the frequency in which the partidistas accessed their health clinics and also the local government to resolve problems.

However, often relations with partidista neighbors are not so peaceful, as many of those communities are also home to paramilitaries financed by political parties with the goal of counter-insurgency. The most famous instance of paramilitary violence occurred in December 1997 when a group massacred 45 Tzotzil indigenous people, largely women and children, while they were praying in a church in the community of Acteal. They were Zapatistas sympathizers, and there has been evidence that the guns used against them had come from the government. [This episode](#) was then known as the Massacre of Acteal.

Andalucia, also coauthor of this piece, studied in the community of Comandante Abel, which has suffered from numerous paramilitary threats, and where inhabitants were displaced from their land and river two years ago at gunpoint. When they denounced the violence online, there was an outpouring of support from local and international activists. Community members recounted how the presence of human rights observers and the online support helped curb the paramilitary threat. While students stayed in this seemingly idyllic community, they were reminded of the threat of violence when the paramilitary community across the river raised flags signaling that they were preparing to attack.

Counterinsurgency often takes the face of "development." In January 2013, right-wing Mexican President Enrique Peña-Nieto launched a "Crusade Against Hunger" and announced the introduction of the program in Las Margaritas, a community that was key during the Zapatista uprising. The program will inject 4 million pesos to combat hunger in the 400 municipalities with the lowest rates of development in Mexico, 55 of which are located in Chiapas, according to [official figures](#).

Critics have said that these government social welfare programs serve to superficially improve conditions only, for example, through the donation of concrete to construct their homes or chemical fertilizers, which make the farmers increasingly dependent on the government.

Resistance Till the Death

Many criticize the Zapatistas because they have not beaten the official government or have not ended oppression against indigenous people across the whole country or even in their own communities. In contrast, much of Mexico has been ravaged by a downward spiral of violence provoked by drug cartels - the politicians, soldiers and police working in cahoots with them and the ill-named government "War on Drugs." Zapatistas have been largely successful at keeping this kind of violence out of their communities and also have curbed migration for economic purposes to larger Mexican cities or the United States.

Itandehui asked her votán, Irene, if she ever thought she would surrender to the government and accept aid to fulfill the material needs of her nine-member family, and she responded, "The *compas* already paid for this land with their blood; we cannot give up." Irene's sister accepted government subsidies, but she still remains steadfast in her decision. "My sister tells me to stop fighting because the government now wants to build me a cement house, but those are crumbs; I am Zapatista, and I'll die

Zapatista, with dignity."