

The Zapatista Triumph: the Strength of Weakness

by Jorge Alonso, Envio

When the leadership of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) left its confinement in the mountains of southeast Mexico, a new political scenario was created for the movement. To understand this scenario, one must systematically follow the actions of everyone involved in the events that took place around the Zapatista march. Each day had its own special weight on a game board where even hours counted. A chronological run-through will show us the constants, the changes and the correlation of forces, both those that foster the Zapatista movement's goals and those that oppose it. Any summary, however sketchy, is necessarily long because of the great number of variations and counterpoints. In this case, the process is to analyze an intense period involving a new kind of class conflict and ending in an impressive grassroots triumph.

The strategic decision to march to Mexico City

At the end of January of this year, the Zapatistas summed up the situation and their position in response to it. They had taken up arms on January 1, 1994, to demand, among other things, respect for and recognition of Mexico's indigenous peoples. On January 12 of that year, heeding the call of international and national civil society, they suspended armed actions and began talks. In February 1996, the EZLN and the government signed the first San Andrés accords on indigenous rights and culture. The government pledged to recognize those rights through constitutional reforms, but did not keep its word. In December of that same year, the legislature's pluralist Harmony and Pacification Commission (COCOPA) drafted a bill to resolve the problem. Then-President Ernesto Zedillo rejected it and broke off the talks. On taking office some months ago after breaking the Institutional Revolutionary Party's seventy-year political domination, President Vicente Fox promised to fulfill the pending agreements and find a negotiated solution to the conflict. The EZLN responded by expressing its willingness to take the peaceful route and demanding a serious, respectful and true dialogue. It asked Fox for three signs that would demonstrate his commitment to dialogue and negotiation and, in the process, provide the answers to three basic questions: Was Fox really in charge of the army and ready to abandon the military route to solve the conflict? Did the government recognize that the Zapatistas were committed to a social struggle and were not common criminals? Would the humiliation, disdain and racism suffered by Mexico's indigenous people be struck down for good? Until the end of January, Fox's answers seemed to be yes and no, more or less. He withdrew the army from only four of its seven military positions in Chiapas and freed only a handful of prisoners, leaving over 100 in the country's jails, as "hostages" so the government could keep the military option open.

To win approval of COCOPA's bill, the EZLN decided to send a delegation to Mexico City to talk with the federal legislators. Fox's government resorted to a publicity campaign to cast itself as peacemaker and the Zapatistas as intransigent. In response to the government's fear that the EZLN would ask for more concessions and draw out the conflict, the Zapatistas reiterated that they would keep their word: they had asked for only three signs and would ask for no more.

After the Zapatistas announced their march to Mexico City, the Church hierarchy, the ruling political class, a sector of the business class and the army focused the discussion around the fact that the Zapatistas would march with their faces covered by masks. The EZLN explained that the masks formed

part of their identity and that they would travel masked but unarmed, in accord with the law. On their way to the capital, the EZLN would talk with civil society, especially with indigenous communities and the National Indigenous Congress, but would make no contact with the government until it had fulfilled the three signs. The Zapatistas wanted talks to end the war and the causes that had led to it so they could act politically like any other Mexican citizen.

Subcomandante Marcos asked for civil society's economic support in financing the march to Mexico City, which Noam Chomsky, in a conference in Guadalajara, described as an "example of resistance to neoliberalism."

Support and confidence grow

According to surveys published by the newspaper *El Universal*, in 1998, 42.8% of Mexicans felt that the Zapatista movement was just. By January 2001, this number had increased to 57.3%. A survey published on March 5 revealed that Marcos' popularity in the capital had increased from 26% in 1998 to 34% in 2001. On March 7, the TV company Multivisión released a survey showing that 62% of Mexicans believed that the Zapatistas wanted peace. Some 44% felt that Marcos was winning the battle while 25% felt that Fox was ahead.

Before the march, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Rigoberta Menchú praised the signs of peace made by President Fox and called on the government and the Zapatistas to talk. On January 25, at the Davos Forum, Fox told the world's investors that the Zapatista march should not make them nervous and that as long as a single Mexican was excluded, the Mexican government's obligation was to change that situation. From Milan, Fox called on the EZLN to sign a peace agreement now.

In response to the Zapatistas' refusal to talk with Fox's government until the three signs had been given—the freeing of Zapatista prisoners, the army's withdrawal from the remaining three points in the conflict zone and constitutional recognition of indigenous rights and culture—Fox also began to express reticence. He said that the question of whether the Zapatistas really wanted peace was being put to the test, and questioned whether they truly represented the indigenous communities. He explained that the army would remain in Chiapas because its presence was necessary to ensure security at the border and fight drug trafficking. Nonetheless, he gave one positive sign by announcing that his government would guarantee the Zapatistas' security on the march to Mexico City. He asked that agreements be made ahead of time to define the march logistics. He also asked the foreigners who would be coming to Mexico to participate in the march to press for peace. His foreign relations secretary said that the foreigners were welcome in Chiapas because the government had nothing to hide; many of them had on earlier occasions been expelled from the country by Zedillo's government. Fox said that he recognized that Marcos was working in favor of Mexico, but didn't know Marcos and so wanted to meet with him.

"We want to be part of the future"

Meanwhile, sentiments were building against the Zapatista march in ruling political and business circles. Some insisted that the Zapatistas should be imprisoned if they left Chiapas. The governor of Querétaro, from the National Action Party (PAN), declared that the Zapatistas were traitors who deserved the death penalty. The presidential spokesperson clarified that the statements of some prominent PAN members were only their opinions and that Fox wanted peace, inclusion and democracy. Since the President had already fulfilled some of their requests, he expected a sign from the

Zapatistas that they too were willing to sit down to talk. In response to their silence, which he interpreted as intolerant intransigence, Fox hardened his line: in Germany he called not on Marcos but on Sebastián Guillén to sign a peace agreement, explaining that he referred to this EZLN member by name because he was already participating in politics. But he also said that the Mexican people looked to the Zapatistas' visit to the capital with hope. The President's ambivalence was obvious.

Meanwhile, in a press conference in Mexico, Marcos said that peace was near. Since the PRI's electoral defeat last year, Mexican society had undergone a profound change. The defeat had made it possible for the country to begin make its decisions in new ways. He also emphasized that the Zapatistas had reason to be distrustful, that out in the forest, people wondered if the new government's attitudes were not merely tactics to gain time before striking a military blow. Marcos understood the contradictions in Fox's government. Important PAN members like Senator Diego Fernández de Cevallos did not want peace. Many Zapatistas wondered if Fox really wanted to abandon the military option, and Marcos believed that part of Fox did while another part gave signs that he didn't. He criticized the way Fox stage-managed the army's withdrawal as a media show, and said he had no interest in being more popular than Fox. Finally, he explained that the Zapatistas wanted to be part of the future and did not want to wear masks in the future.

In another interview in *The New York Times*—the first he has given to the foreign press in the past four years—Marcos was optimistic. "We are a group of people who have covered our faces and taken up arms to fight for what we believe in," he said. "We would like to show our faces, put down our arms and continue to fight for our beliefs the way people do in other parts of the world." He once again expressed his concern that Fox would not fulfill his promises and that the conflict in Chiapas would not be resolved. He insisted that if the government represented a change and wanted to show it, it was essential that it analyze all the problems that had led to the war and refrain from repeating the mistakes of the past.

The government supports the march

Congress called on the Zapatistas to meet with COCOPA to set the terms for direct talks with the legislative branch, declaring that it was willing to meet with the EZLN. But many Congress members, especially several PAN leaders, rejected the notion of talking to people in masks. The Senate president, PRI Representative Enrique Jackson, said that the legislature should receive the Zapatistas with or without their masks, recognizing that the masks were part of their identity. The president of COCOPA, PAN Representative Felipe de Jesús Vicencio, urged Congress to rise to the occasion and not get lost in irrelevant debates. COCOPA threw itself into the task of preparing the meeting between the Zapatistas and Congress.

At the beginning of February, the government's Commissioner for Peace in Chiapas, Luis H. Álvarez, established the government's position on the Zapatista march, thus responding to the belligerent political and business sectors. He said the government celebrated and welcomed the Zapatista march and was pleased that they would march without weapons, but he also laid down its conditions. Before the army would withdraw from the remaining three positions, a discreet meeting should be held—which, he explained, was not the beginning of talks—to discuss the conditions in which the march would take place because the possibility of sabotage could not be dismissed. He clarified the executive branch's functions, explaining that it was up to Congress to approve the law, but that the executive would promote the bill and hold all meetings necessary with the Congress members to reach consensus. He emphasized that the executive branch could not impose its position on the legislature. With respect

to the Zapatista prisoners, he said that 19 had already been freed and the government of Chiapas had announced that it would soon free others. The federal government and authorities in other states were still analyzing the specific situation of each prisoner to ensure that criminals would not be freed in place of Zapatistas. Fox reiterated his willingness to free all of those imprisoned for causes related to the conflict and called on the various authorities involved to conduct an exhaustive review of each case.

A multiethnic, multicultural nation

After lengthy debates, PAN agreed to support the position of the executive branch and COCOPA and thus to negotiate with the EZLN. It asked the EZLN for clear signs of its willingness to talk by establishing direct contact with COCOPA. The government of Chiapas urged the federal government and the EZLN not to fall into a vicious circle by putting down conditions, pointing out that patience is necessary so as not to frustrate peace.

Through the media, COCOPA invited the EZLN to meet with it in order to define the format for possible direct talks between the Zapatistas and the members of Congress. On February 7, Fox predicted that a peace agreement would be signed within a few weeks' time. Through a contact of COCOPA's, the Commissioner for Peace sent the EZLN a card expressing his desire for a discreet, informal meeting. The head of the Office for the Development of Indigenous People called those who criticized the Zapatistas "racist." On the other hand, the commentaries of some PAN members, bishops and governors reflected their profound lack of knowledge of the country, as many people expressed opinions without being adequately informed.

Despite the progress made, COCOPA was not optimistic at the beginning of February, and said that it did not see the conditions for a peace agreement anytime soon. In mid-February, the Mexican Bishops Conference issued a document recognizing that Mexico is a multiethnic and multicultural nation. It emphasized that the EZLN had decided not to resort to arms but rather sought to make them unnecessary by resuming talks instead. It called on Congress to listen carefully to the EZLN, since this opportunity to consolidate peace could not be wasted. It also asked the EZLN to respect diversity and once it had had their say, to accept the law as approved. With respect to the march, the bishops called on everyone to avoid discriminatory, racist attitudes and any kind of provocation or aggression.

An incident with the International Red Cross

On February 14, Fox promised that after the Zapatista march would come peace. In addition to asking people to support the Zapatista caravan, he also asked them to demand that he and Marcos agree to peace. On February 18, Marcos informed COCOPA that he would meet with it on March 12 in Mexico City, and invited members of Congress to join the march. He also announced that he had requested the International Red Cross' intervention to transport the EZLN representatives. A few days earlier, ranchers in Chiapas had threatened to block the march if the government did not return lands. The International Red Cross responded by explaining that the conditions were not suitable for their collaboration in the march: the Zapatista request was not based on international humanitarian law and the institution would violate its historical neutrality if it agreed to participate. Marcos said that Fox would be responsible for any harm that might come to members of the Zapatista delegation and accused him of putting obstacles in the way of peace, charging that the International Red Cross had told the Zapatistas that the federal government had blocked its participation. What Fox wanted, Marcos said, was for the EZLN to negotiate the march's security in exchange for contact with the government, to use this contact as another piece in its publicity campaign. Fox expressed surprise at Marcos'

statement and called on the EZLN to avoid any action that would disturb the climate of peace, insisting that the government had nothing to do with the discussions between the International Red Cross and the EZLN. The government's official position was that it would do whatever necessary to ensure the march's security.

Verbal confrontation on a tense eve

Mexico's Red Cross offered ambulances and medicines in case they were needed. Marcos again blamed the government, specifically the foreign relations secretary, for having blocked the International Red Cross's participation, but it in turn said that no one had pressured it and that it had decided not to participate based on its statutes, since the march would not be traveling through conflict zones. Marcos replied that the International Red Cross was being dishonest, which demonstrated that the Zapatistas could trust neither the government nor international organizations, but only civil society.

In an address to the armed forces on Army Day, Fox defended his policy towards the EZLN, explaining that although some felt it had made the EZLN stronger, it would have been worse to close himself off in the unfortunate conspiracy of silence. He insisted that the Zapatista march must be respected.

COCOPA sent a second letter to the EZLN requesting a meeting to discuss measures to guarantee the march's security. COCOPA asked the government secretary to intervene since it saw three "hot spots" for the march: the ranchers in Chiapas, threats by a PAN representative in Morelos and the position of the governor of Querétaro. In the House of Representatives, PAN representatives insisted that the EZLN should meet with COCOPA before the march.

The Zapatistas accused Fox of raising false expectations that they were marching to Mexico to sign a peace agreement. Marcos warned that Fox was trying to appropriate the Zapatista march and present it as his own. Nonetheless, he insisted that he was open to talks. COCOPA agreed to the meeting offered by the EZLN, and abstained from throwing any more fuel on the fire of the verbal conflict between the Zapatistas and the government. Speaking to ministers from the European Union, the foreign relations secretary revealed that Mexico's elite had asked the government to block the Zapatista march and sweep the problem "under the rug," continuing Zedillo's policy. Fox, the secretary assured, had taken on the task of convincing them of his strategy. The European Union called on the EZLN not to ignore the Mexican government's efforts aimed at resuming talks in Chiapas.

The "Zapatour" begins

On February 24, Mexico's Flag Day, the Zapatista caravan left their camp at La Realidad and headed toward San Cristóbal de las Casas. Marcos designated a veteran guerrilla leader, Comandante Germán, who had been the main promoter of the guerrilla forces in Chiapas, to be their spokesperson before Congress. The police detained Germán in 1995, but he was freed after the Pacification Law was approved and had not been seen since. As his face was already known, he appeared without a mask.

Contradictions within the government continued. Fox declared that not even 10% of Mexico's indigenous people supported Marcos. On the contrary, said the governor of Chiapas, the march was mobilizing the whole country from the President on down, and had also mobilized the international community.

Some 20,000 Zapatistas joined the first leg of the march, to San Cristóbal de las Casas. Marcos

described it as the march of those who are "the color of the earth." In Chiapas, more Zapatista prisoners were freed, bringing the total to 59 out of the 103 reported. The government assigned the task of ensuring the march's safety to the federal police.

"We don't want to return to the past"

The march crossed twelve states as planned. In most of them, it was given a massive and warm welcome. The National Indigenous Congress took up the march as its own. In many of the indigenous towns the marchers passed through, the authorities gave the Zapatistas the staff of command, thus demonstrating their agreement with the EZLN's proposals. Marcos explained that the indigenous people wanted to live in the present and work together to build the future. They didn't want to stop being indigenous; they were proud of their race, their language, their culture, their clothing, the struggle of their women, their form of government, their work. They did not want to return to the past, to exchange their tractors for primitive hoes, knowledge for magic, free work for slavery, freedom for obedience to a *cacique*. The indigenous women wanted to fight for their rights, and everyone demanded that governing should be seen as a responsibility and a task on behalf of the collective and not a means to enrich oneself at the expense of the governed. The goal of the march was to ensure that it would no longer be a crime to live, think, dress, speak and love as indigenous people.

When he launched a National Health and Nutrition Program for Indigenous People during the first days of the march, Fox welcomed the Zapatista caravan with open arms and an open heart and said that he was not accustomed to deceiving anyone. In government, however, there was concern over Marcos' negative comments toward the President, and because of them the PAN described Marcos as a "provocateur."

On March 1, in front of 4,000 people in Mexico City's main plaza where he was presenting his most recent book, Nobel Prize laureate in literature José Saramago insisted that human beings must be the absolute priority of rulers and citizens alike. He said that the Zapatistas were stirring up waves of enthusiasm, love, affection and respect. He warned that, although people spoke of democracy every day, the real power was not democratic since the multinational companies acted above everyone. And he called on people not to resign themselves.

COCOPA's bill: Without changing a comma

On March 3, the third National Indigenous Congress got underway in Michoacán. At this event, Marcos said it was time to hold back the machete and sharpen hope. That same day, a concert for peace was held in the Azteca Stadium in Mexico City, organized by the two main television channels after collecting 22 million signatures for peace. Naturally, the "peace" envisioned by the TV elite had no substance or content, and was reduced to a desire for the Zapatista demands to disappear and the Zapatistas themselves to return to Chiapas.

Fox praised the meeting in Michoacán, but said that the National Indigenous Congress did not represent the whole of the country's indigenous people. Indeed, some indigenous communities, among them the Yaquis, do not participate in the organization. The indigenous representatives in the congress called for working together to defend COCOPA's bill, while Fox said—as though he had not yet embraced the initiative—that the EZLN should accept modifications to the text because some of the issues it discussed were unclear, like what was understood by the terms indigenous people or indigenous territory. The National Indigenous Congress replied that the law was not open to negotiation and should be approved without changing so much as a comma.

Among the most important agreements that came out of the Third National Indigenous Congress were a demand for constitutional recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples, along with respect for indigenous autonomy, territories, ancestral lands and normative systems. The representatives to the congress demanded the demilitarization of all indigenous territories and freeing of all indigenous people detained for having fought in defense of autonomy. They insisted that the defense of autonomy was fundamental and that, by defending it, they were acting in favor of all those who wanted to live with dignity in their difference, their color, their song, their own vision of life and freedom. They said they could not accept the development plans promoted by the federal and state governments if they did not allow for indigenous peoples' effective participation. Finally, they decided to send a delegation from the congress to accompany the Zapatistas' talk with the legislature.

Comandante Germán met with COCOPA and asked it to help guarantee the march's security. In Zitácuaro, Marcos hardened his language even further. He said that the PRI and Fox were essentially the same because both sought to govern not with the people but rather in place of the people, while the Zapatistas were demanding representation, not someone to act in their stead. In Toluca, Marcos responded to the criticisms made by some businesspeople and Bishop Cepeda by asking them why they feared a peaceful march of marginalized people.

Marcos' message in Morelos and Guerrero

Marcos continued to emphasize his distance from the President while the President insisted on presenting himself as close to the Zapatista march. Fox said that the EZLN was contributing to the country's development, and that the support people gave Marcos was conditioned by their desire for peace. He urged Mexico's ethnic groups and peoples to achieve peace and prosperity together. He offered them work to achieve sustainable development, so they would no longer be marginalized or left behind, and asked them to trust him because he was being consistent and honest. He stressed that the government was totally committed to implementing development plans and had a renewed commitment to put an end to their marginalization.

In Morelos, Marcos warned of the danger of focussing the struggle around a single person—himself. He said he was like a window frame through which people could see the comandantes and behind them, the indigenous people and all of the injustice, poverty and misery in which they lived. He said that the ruling class hoped the Zapatistas would tire of listening to people's complaints in the towns they passed through and that the whole issue would be concentrated in a single person. He compared Fox to Madero, who was elected President in 1911 by an overwhelming majority after helping lead the fight to topple the dictatorship but then broke his promises to the poor and changed virtually nothing.

In Guerrero, Marcos recognized the support that the guerrilla organizations ERPI, EPR and FARP had provided in their areas of influence. He called on the legislature to understand their historic role. He said that only with the vision of a statesman—something not learned in management courses—could Fox satisfy the Zapatista demands. He said it was time for Fox's government to understand that it was not dealing with a problem of popularity, and accused the President of having no interest in anything not related to his media image. He added that it was necessary to challenge the government to achieve peace with justice and dignity.

Fox later countered that he was willing to meet all conditions laid down by the EZLN to resume talks as long as the EZLN promised to move from the military to the political arena, and said there should be

no winners or losers in the process. With respect to Marcos' attacks, Fox said that they appeared to be the words of someone on the campaign trail.

After a lengthy debate and many objections from PAN representatives, Congress decided to hold direct talks with the EZLN and directed COCOPA to negotiate the format for the meeting.

The continent's most important social movement

In an article published on March 8 in the newspaper *La Jornada*, titled "Meeting with the Nation," Alain Touraine spoke of the march's repercussions. He noted that the Zapatistas had won the respect and admiration of many people around the world. He described their movement as the most important in Latin America, one transformed into a vast action to extend democracy in Mexico, where half the population remained outside the game economically, politically and culturally. He also recognized Fox's personal commitment to opening up the political system. He believed that the Zapatistas would commit political suicide if they joined a political party, but had the potential to become a movement aimed at integrating the excluded into national life. He pointed out that the EZLN has to overcome the archaic positions of a certain Left. In the same issue of the paper, Noam Chomsky warned of political leaders who sought to prevent the global influence of the Zapatista movement, which has become one of the most important in the world against neoliberalism. He suggested that if the EZLN managed to connect itself to other social international movements, it could help change the course of history.

In the second week of March, another group of Zapatistas was freed in Chiapas, raising the number to 84. The governor said that the files had been carefully examined and there were no more Zapatista prisoners in the state. On March 9, Fox sent Marcos an invitation through the media to meet with him at the presidential residence at Los Pinos on a day of his own choosing. He again compared the situation of the two men: if either of them did not keep their word, they would fall in society's estimation. He also made some unfortunate comparisons, pointing out that he had brought out more people than Marcos in his campaign. He said that one proof that his government was democratic was the Zapatista march itself, since it would have clearly been unthinkable under Zedillo's government.

Marcos: A rebel, not a revolutionary

On March 10, Televisa transmitted an interview between Marcos and the respected journalist Julio Scherer. Marcos defined himself not as a revolutionary but rather as a rebel, and explained why. While the revolutionary sought to take power in order to transform society, the rebel did so from below. When asked why Zapatistas had elected Comandante Germán as their representative to Congress, despite accusations still hanging over him related to his responsibility for executions within guerrilla groups in the 1970s, Marcos said the choice was made to emphasize the Zapatistas' desire to integrate into civilian life. He also spoke out once more against the cult of the image: people shouldn't become fixated on Marcos, what was important were the indigenous people. He explained that he didn't accept Fox's invitation to meet because it would be nothing but an ephemeral event, a photo op. He couldn't meet with the President until the three signs, which were not negotiable, had been given.

Marcos recognized that Fox's government was legitimate, a product of democratic elections, but pointed out that there are no more politicians in today's world; just political marketers with no vision of the future. On other national issues, Marcos expressed the opinion that the National Autonomous University's General Strike Council had closed in on itself and thus had failed as a movement, and accused businesspeople of trying to erase Mexico's indigenous people, since the march of people who

are "the color of the earth" was making money tremble.

In an interview with the publication *Milenio*, Fox reiterated that the Zapatista march could take place precisely because his government was democratic, and noted that in the first hundred days of his government, several surveys gave him approval ratings of above 70%.

The Zócalo: Sunday March 11, 2001

On Sunday March 11, while people in the Zapatistas' area of influence in Chiapas were praying for the security and safe return of their leaders, the EZLN entered Mexico City's main square, the Zócalo. The plaza was full. *Comandante* David addressed the crowd, calling on Fox and Congress to stop putting "locks" on COCOPA's bill and to give the three signs they had been asked to give. People chanted their support for the Zapatistas, shouting out that they are not alone. The main television channels, however, chose not to transmit this historic event live. Marcos said that it was time for Fox and "whoever he gets his orders from" to listen to the indigenous people and announced that the Zapatistas would stay in Mexico City until the law on indigenous rights and culture was approved.

The day after the demonstration in the Zócalo, the newspaper *Reforma* published a survey revealing that 52% of the population felt that Marcos should remain in the capital. An overwhelming 86% thought that Marcos should meet with Fox. Some 33% felt that he was willing to talk with Fox, while 44% believed Fox was willing to talk with Marcos.

During their stay in Mexico City, the Zapatistas met with intellectuals from Mexico and abroad. Saramago said that the indigenous condition was one of the hardest in the world today because it had to bear the whole weight of a global machinery that was built not only on natural wealth but also on the exploitation of human beings. Pablo González Casanova exhorted those with money and power to explain how they planned ensure the rights of the indigenous people. Vázquez Montalbán said that the Zapatista movement had launched the 21st century's culture of resistance. Monsiváis described what had happened in the Zócalo as a grand ceremony celebrating inclusion and as a political and cultural victory. Marcos criticized Fox's position that all progressive struggles had come to an end when those who were struggling came to power, and insisted that the Zapatistas are fighting for dignity.

A time for peace? Contradictions at the top

On March 12, the EZLN and COCOPA met for the first time in five years. The EZLN reiterated its commitment to resolve the conflict through peaceful means. In an interview that came out the following day, Fox said that a fruitful meeting between the EZLN and COCOPA and Congress would be key to determining the military withdrawal from Chiapas. In saying this, the President was clearly putting down conditions. Fox emphasized that if the meeting took place, it would be a great incentive for him to take this important step forward. He reiterated that this was a situation in which there should be no losers, and said he felt that Marcos was gaining ground, because he was becoming increasingly popular and making his message better understood.

Fox and Marcos sent messages back and forth through the media. The President emphasized that Marcos should understand that they weren't preparing any traps for the Zapatistas, and that his government spoke the truth. He said he had faith in the EZLN because it constantly reiterated its desire for peace, but explained that he had to talk with other sectors to temper their positions and make the politicians and businesspeople understand that this was a great opportunity to settle Mexico's enormous

debt with the indigenous people. He promised to hold more frequent meetings with the legislature to push forward the bill he had sent it in December, and said that according to surveys carried out by his office, 75% of Mexicans were in favor of resolving the conflict and signing peace accords, and that a majority felt the President was promoting peace.

The business community stubbornly continued to reject the Zapatistas. On March 9, the business organization COPARMEX described the Zapatistas as violent, irresponsible blackmailers. Four days later, the Business Council argued that approving COCOPA's bill would violate the terms of the Puebla-Panama plan. In a thousand different ways, businesspeople kept insisting that the march made people nervous in the national and international markets. And although they claimed to support the President in his decision to resolve the conflict, they accused Fox of having revived the Zapatista movement. The group known as "Private Initiative" stated its position in no uncertain terms when it said that the legislators who supported COCOPA's bill had "something wrong in the head." The right also began to criticize the foreigners who accompanied the Zapatista march. The Spanish writer Vázquez Montalbán explained why: they were annoyed that people watching from outside had prevented them from crushing the Zapatistas, although they were not concerned about the progressive sale of Mexico's economic patrimony to global capitalism.

A humiliating, unworthy proposal

COCOPA presented the Zapatistas with the proposal made by the leaders of the PAN and PRI benches in the Senate. The proposal was that the EZLN meet with the members of the commissions on indigenous affairs, which included ten representatives from the House and ten senators. The leader of the PAN bench in the Senate let it be known that his bench would not support COCOPA's bill as written. The next day, the EZLN and the National Indigenous Council rejected the idea of meeting with ten representatives and ten senators and said they expected a new proposal from Congress to discuss COCOPA's initiative. Marcos accused Congress of trying to reduce the historic dimension of the national and international mobilization that had developed around their demand.

The EZLN warned COCOPA not to get involved in these proposals because it was clear that hard-line sectors within Congress and the government were trying to use COCOPA to carry its insulting messages, instead of recognizing its place as a collaborator in the peace process, as the EZLN did. Marcos said that Congress's official position coincided with Fox's ultimatum, making the decision on whether or not to continue the aggressive policy dependent on the EZLN's behavior with Congress. He described Congress's proposal as humiliating and unworthy, since it relegated their historic demand to the level of an appearance by a minor official. The EZLN would not accept a dialogue on such shameful terms, but rather insisted on speaking with all the legislators, including those who had openly expressed their opposition, and so asked to speak to the full Congress. The Zapatistas clarified that they would be speaking with Congress, and would speak with the executive branch only after it had fulfilled the three conditions.

Congress shuts its doors

On March 14, PAN's national director and the coordinators of the PAN benches in the two houses of Congress rejected the EZLN's request to speak to the full Congress. They argued that the tribunal was for the exclusive use of the legislators, the executive in special cases, and foreign dignitaries at exceptional moments, and insisted that the EZLN's appearance before the full Congress was not negotiable.

The PAN director complained that the Government Secretary had called those who opposed COCOPA's bill "short-sighted." In Televisa's news program, when viewers were asked if the EZLN should be allowed to speak to the full Congress, 58% said yes. Xóchitl Gálvez, an indigenous member of Fox's Cabinet, said that the EZLN should be allowed to speak. The government became increasingly concerned that dialogue was getting bogged down.

COCOPA held a heated meeting. Some were offended that the EZLN had dismissed them, but others explained that the EZLN was only protecting them. Finally, COCOPA agreed to act in accord with the recognition that the Zapatistas had won. On March 15, the EZLN announced that it planned to send delegates to the European parliament. If the Mexican Congress refused to listen to them, perhaps the Europeans would feel differently. Mexican and European NGOs announced that they were negotiating an invitation for the EZLN to go to Geneva. Sami Nair, a member of the European Parliament, said he regretted the obstacles to talks and didn't understand the reasons behind them. He described what was happening in Mexico as extraordinary and innovative on a national, continental and global scale: a guerrilla movement had laid down its arms and asked to talk to Congress, and Congress should be honored to listen to them. Nair felt that the EZLN's appearance before Congress would strengthen democracy, and that if this dialogue were blocked by bureaucratic trifles and haggling, the result would be to radicalize armed movements around the world. In Madrid, the Mexican researcher Miguel León Portilla used the occasion of being awarded the Bartolomé de las Casas prize to call on the Mexican Congress to open its doors so that Mexico's indigenous people could freely express their demands.

Danielle Mitterrand asked Congress to allow the EZLN to speak to all the legislatures. Workers from several unions organized a march to demand that the floor be given to the EZLN, while Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas also demanded that Congress listen to the EZLN.

"Our words are our arms"

The 24 Zapatista leaders established their base at the National School of Anthropology and History. On a visit to the National Polytechnic University, they were cheered on by the inhabitants of poor neighborhoods they passed on the way. Marcos asked for an end to racism and denounced the PAN's Diego Fernández de Cevallos for holding attitudes befitting a feudal lord. Many recalled that the PAN leader had been one of Salinas de Gortari's most enthusiastic allies.

The EZLN met with students, women, indigenous groups, artists, workers, intellectuals and other organizations in civil society that expressed their support.

Gabriel García Márquez came to Mexico City to interview Marcos. Marcos described the importance of the Zapatista demonstration in the Zócalo in defeating racism, a goal that should now become state policy and educational policy and be taken up by all of society. He explained that the EZLN hoped to disband as an army and use words as its weapons instead. He summed up the main points he had made in the places they passed through: the Zapatistas were not presenting themselves as the ones who would lead all struggles, but rather were asking for help; a great deal of suffering lies just under the surface; no one is going to fight in place of anyone else; new forms of organization must be developed, along with new forms of political action that would not be either those dictated by the political class or those proposed by the EZLN, but rather the product of a pluralist dialogue.

"Back to Chiapas!"

On March 19, the EZLN released a statement. It recalled that the purpose of the march to Mexico City had been first, to speak with national civil society to gain its support in the struggle for the constitutional recognition of indigenous rights and culture in accord with COCOPA's bill; and second, to speak with Congress in order to explain the bill's advantages and the urgent importance of constitutional recognition of indigenous rights. With respect to the first objective, the indigenous people of all of Mexico had joined with the EZLN and the National Indigenous Congress in the struggle for recognition of its rights and had expressed their support for COCOPA's bill. Civil society had taken up their struggle and transformed it into a national demand and had overwhelmingly called for an end to racism and discrimination, the constitutional recognition of indigenous rights and fulfillment of the three conditions necessary for a resumption of talks between the government and the EZLN.

Public opinion and international civil society also joined in with this demand. But Fox's government, the EZLN argued, was more concerned about the march's media impact than the obvious popular support from all classes in the country that it had won in its passage through 12 states and its stay in the capital. Instead of giving the three signs required to take advantage of the EZLN leadership's stay in the capital to resume talks, Fox made statements without acting to back them up.

Congress had been held hostage by those who preferred to turn a blind eye to the national and international mobilization. The most backward legislators had openly defied the consensus and support that the EZLN and the National Indigenous Congress had won. For a full week, the EZLN had waited for Congress to accept its offer to talk. Those who had sequestered Congress replied with a disrespectful, unworthy proposal, whose only goal was to protect the pride and arrogance of the legislators who rejected dialogue.

The EZLN lamented that in Congress, the struggle for power on the part of conservative groups who confused the floor of Congress with an exclusive club had won out. But the indigenous people would not keep knocking on doors begging to be listened to. Asked to choose between politicians and the people, the EZLN chose the people. They would never bow their heads before politicians or accept humiliation or deceit. For all of these reasons, the EZLN announced that its stay in Mexico City had come to an end and it would begin its return to the mountains of southwest Mexico on March 23. It also said it would continue to search for and build inclusive spaces for the participation of all those who wanted a new Mexico.

This announcement caused a true political crisis. Some legislators accused Marcos of not keeping his word, since he had apparently added a fourth condition to the original three: an appearance before Congress. The businesspeople who had demanded that the Zapatistas be imprisoned accused them of immaturity and wanting to have everything their way. Representatives in COCOPA complained of Congress' attitude towards the EZLN. The Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) said that Fox, the PAN and the PRI would pay the political costs of having hardened their positions. Cárdenas declared that it was a mistake for Congress not to open its doors to an issue of such great national importance as talks with the EZLN.

"Marcos, both you and I want peace"

On March 20, Fox asked Marcos to meet before he returned to Chiapas and called on Congress to find a way to receive the EZLN. He said he would give instructions for the remaining prisoners to be freed

once he had received the corresponding list from the EZLN; that he was proceeding to issue a decree to convert the military installations of Guadalupe Tepeyac, Río Euseba and La Garrucha into development centers for the indigenous communities; and that he was sending Subcomandante Marcos a letter to formally request the meeting before his return to Chiapas in order to establish a dialogue that would lead to approval of the bill Fox had sent Congress—that is, COCOPA's bill—and to discuss plans for an ambitious and nationwide human development program for Mexico's ten million indigenous people. The Government Secretary said the President was putting no conditions on this dialogue. As a result, all the pressure was on Congress and the PAN.

In the letter Fox sent Marcos, he reiterated his desire to meet with him, without any condition, to talk. "Both you and I want peace, a just and lasting peace, with recognition of our indigenous brothers and sisters, with laws that respect and protect them, with development opportunities for each one of them... Neither you nor I want the indigenous people who live in our country to continue to suffer from marginalization, extreme poverty, exclusion and neglect... Marcos, these are different times. This is a time to talk, a time to be willing to reach agreements, a time to make the struggle count that you have waged for so many years and that every Mexican has waged... I am entirely willing. The conditions you have set that fall within the executive branch's authority are being fulfilled."

"We're going, our words remain"

Nonetheless, other signs Fox gave stirred up greater distrust. He said he was sending Marcos a letter but it took 36 hours to reach the Zapatistas, even though they were in Mexico City. He said he was giving instructions to free prisoners, but in the following 24 hours no one was freed. He said that the army would withdraw from the three remaining positions, but 24 hours later no troops had been moved. Marcos noted that the conditions had not been met, that it had all been merely talk, and that the list of prisoners—located in Chiapas, Tabasco and Querétaro—that the President had requested was public knowledge. He also pointed out that the land occupied by the army belonged to the indigenous communities and not the government, so that the government could not make plans for the land unless it expropriated it, which would not be a propitious sign of peace.

The Zapatistas met with 60,000 university students from the National Autonomous University. A Nahua Indian from Guerrero who spoke at the event sent a message to the PAN's Diego Fernández de Cevallos warning him not to be mistaken, since the people would not surrender or sell out but would resist instead. If a national indigenous uprising were necessary to respond to "that Diego's" sabotage, it would take place. Another Zapatista commented that they were going, but that the words they had spoken would remain. Marcos denounced that it was a "crime" in Mexico to be a child, a poor person, an indigenous person, or a Zapatista. He insisted that respecting others meant "respecting oneself." "There are more than a few pains that unite us, but also many hopes that we recognize in one another," he said.

Congress deliberated for eight hours without reaching an agreement. They transferred their disagreement to the Zapatistas, and invited them to join in the search for a format for the talks. The PRD asked that the Zapatistas be allowed to speak. Some in the PRI also agreed, but wanted them to appear without masks. The PAN opposed it overwhelmingly, however, with 200 of its 207 legislators insisting that they not speak. The position taken by the PRI and the PAN, especially the PAN, blocked any agreement, which is why Marcos accused the PAN and PRI representatives of having aborted the dialogue.

In the afternoon of March 21, the army withdrew from the Río Euseba encampment. There was no movement at the other two points. Fox denied that the government was seeking the EZLN's surrender. He saw the PAN Congress members as the main obstacle, and warned that if public institutions refused to listen and respond to people's demands, the whole country would receive the very bad signal that dialogue was not the way.

The House opens its doors

In the afternoon of March 22, the EZLN representatives, with the support of thousands of groups and individuals, presented themselves before the doors of the House of Representatives. There were boos for the leaders of the PAN benches in the two chambers, and a figure representing Diego Fernández de Cevallos was burned.

Meanwhile, the Senate was discussing whether to allow the Zapatistas to speak to it. The PAN senators along with eleven PRI senators voted no, outnumbering the PRD, Green Party and some PRI senators who voted in favor. Among the arguments put forth by the PAN senators were that the EZLN had humiliated COCOPA by using it as an errand boy, and had left a PRD senator with his words in his mouth, although the senator alluded to refused to get involved in that debate. The PRD accused those who had prevented the Zapatistas from talking to the Senate of being intolerant and opposed to dialogue and peace.

In the House of Representatives a similar discussion was taking place. The PAN argued that letting the Zapatistas take the tribunal would violate the law. The head of the PAN bench insisted that neither Marcos nor Fox ruled in the House, thus putting the two leaders on the same level. Nonetheless, with the votes of the PRD, the Labor Party, the Green Party and the majority of PRI representatives, the House decided 220 to 210 to let the Zapatistas defend the bill on indigenous rights and culture in the plenary hall. The votes against were cast by the PAN bench and some PRI representatives. In order not to violate one of Congress' internal regulations, it was decided that the meeting would be organized as a working meeting with the commissions of Government and Justice, Constitutional Affairs and Indigenous Affairs, and that all the representatives and senators who wanted to participate were invited.

The EZLN accepted the House's invitation and decided to postpone their return to Chiapas. Marcos praised the sensibility of the legislators who supported the proposal and said it appeared that the doors to dialogue were beginning to open. He also recognized that the national and international mobilization had made the agreement on the talks possible. Discussions immediately started up between representatives of the House and the Zapatistas to determine the format of the meeting.

The president keeps his promises

At a meeting with indigenous leaders in California, Fox reiterated his invitation to Marcos and said the Zapatistas should not doubt his word because he had met their demands. He said he wanted to talk with Marcos face to face, eye to eye, and work together with Congress rather than put down one condition after another. With respect to the prisoners, he said that the government of Chiapas had already freed 80 political prisoners and that the federal government would free the remaining ones in the days that followed. He said that not only Zapatista prisoners but also 200 other indigenous people from different ethnic groups and regions of the country had been freed. As for the community development centers he had promised, he said they would be formed in coordination with the communities so they could define their own development path.

The coordinator of the Citizens' Alliance in the President's Office, Rodolfo Elizondo, reiterated that the executive branch would continue to promote COCOPA's bill. He promised that the President would honor his word in fulfilling the conditions set by the Zapatistas, and emphasized that the President was willing to try any means possible to solve the conflict, unlike his two predecessors, who refused to do so.

Fox: "Marcos' PR man"

On March 23, legislators and the EZLN's liaison with Congress reached agreement on the format of the talks. That same day, when Fox stepped off the plane from California, he sent a message to the nation. He said the military was ready to withdraw. Using three legal procedures, he freed five Zapatista prisoners under the federal government's authority; another seven remained, but they were not under his immediate power. He didn't dismiss the idea of presenting Congress with an amnesty law. With respect to the three points where the army remained, he said that there were no longer any military personnel in La Garrucha, and in the other two, Guadalupe Tepeyac and Río Euseba, the withdrawal was underway. He signed a decree transforming the military installations into indigenous community development centers. With this step, the executive branch believed it had done all it needed to do to resume talks. Fox recognized, however, that racism and intolerance persisted in the country.

The head of the PAN bench in the Senate, Diego Fernández de Cevallos, accused Fox of being Marcos' PR man and promoter. He criticized the President for indulging the Zapatistas and letting them do what they wished. The PAN decided not to attend the meeting in the House where the Zapatistas would speak, although the PAN representatives on the commissions that were officially involved would be present. In the PAN convention, Fox said he governed for all Mexicans not just the PAN, that he did not want to create another state party, and that 89% of the population approved of his actions.

House of Representatives, March 28, 2001

On March 28, the EZLN and the National Indigenous Congress spoke to the legislators in the House of Representatives. The television channels transmitted this historic event live. Comandante Esther opened the Zapatistas' presentation. Marcos wasn't there, and Esther explained why: he had fulfilled his mission of bringing the Zapatista leadership to Congress. She recognized Fox's efforts to fulfill the first condition, and said that the Zapatista leadership had instructed Subcomandante Marcos, as head of the EZLN's troops, to keep them in the jungle and not occupy the sites that the army had abandoned. One did not respond to a gesture of peace with a gesture of war. She also invited civil society to verify compliance and said that Comandante Germán had instructions to get in contact with COCOPA and the government's Commissioner for Peace to guarantee that the other two conditions were also fulfilled.

Esther said that just as each party's bench in Congress had autonomy in decision-making without breaking up Congress, the autonomy demanded by the indigenous people did not imply a multitude of states within the Mexican state. Comandantes David, Zebedeo and Tacho also spoke for the Zapatistas, as did representatives of the National Indigenous Council. The congressional representatives asked questions about autonomy and indigenous customs and traditions. The Zapatista women commented that there were good and bad customs and traditions. Among the bad were customs that discriminated against women, which also existed among the indigenous people. They argued that their situation would be better if COCOPA's bill were approved. The National Indigenous Congress emphasized that they were not asking for special privileges but rather demanding constitutional recognition of what took

place in the indigenous communities.

Although there were more indigenous people than legislators in the House, the government, the political parties, the television channels, the business sector, civil society and millions of Mexicans paid close attention to everything that happened in Congress that day when the indigenous people demanded to be heard and respected.

Fox applauded the Zapatistas' appearance before Congress, describing it as a national triumph. The Government Secretary described it as very constructive, something that would lead first to negotiations and finally to the peace accords. Xóchitl Gálvez was euphoric, saying that Mexico had entered into a new age, and that this was not a game in which some won and others lost but rather that everyone had come out a winner. Even the PAN leadership described the event as positive and recognized that the President's strategy had been risky but fruitful.

Mexico's triumph

It was clear that democratic changes in the country can no longer be envisioned without taking the country's indigenous people into account. The dialogue in Congress was constructive and respected differences. Although Marcos didn't enter Congress, he did preside over the party organized in the street to thank the indigenous people, civil society and the thousands of others who made that historic day possible.

Defending COCOPA's bill before the legislature was the just the start. Another stage would come in the struggle to respect indigenous rights and culture and ensure the rights of everyone, especially women. The path to peace talks had been once again cleared.

People were very happy. They said goodbye confident that they were not returning to Chiapas with empty hands but also fully aware that COCOPA's bill would go nowhere without social pressure. That same day, Comandante Germán contacted the government's Commissioner for Peace to accredit himself as the EZLN's messenger.

Back to Chiapas

After the appearance in Congress, the government's Commissioner for Peace, Luis H. Álvarez, went to Chiapas to verify the withdrawal of the military troops from the last three positions. To ensure that paramilitary groups did not try to invade the unoccupied bases, the installations were handed over to civil society organizations and the various churches that work in the area.

At the end of March, the Government Secretary appeared before the legislators to defend COCOPA's bill. Many in the PRI and the PAN remain convinced that the bill will have to be amended. At the beginning of April, COCOPA called for people to work in solidarity to ensure that the law on indigenous rights becomes a reality.

On the way back to Chiapas, the Zapatista caravan spent the night in Juchitán on the last day of March. On April 1, the Zapatista leaders spoke before a crowd of indigenous people in San Cristóbal de las Casas, then began a tour of the communities to let people know the results of the march to Mexico City. They carried the "staff of command" of the 28 indigenous communities that had presented them with this honor. They said they had fulfilled their mission to take the indigenous people's voices to

Congress, and also the goal of meeting with representatives of Mexico's 44 indigenous peoples. The indigenous people's voice was also heard through the media, and only a few had "twisted" their words. Marcos said that the war was a bit further away and peace with dignity a bit closer, and that a new phase was beginning. He said that a real opportunity for peace with justice and dignity had opened up, and that people would have to take care to ensure that it would come. In the cooperative of Morelia, in Aguascalientes, Marcos paid homage to the Zapatista dead: 23 Zapatista comandantes had gone on the march because that was the number of Zapatistas killed in the 1994 uprising. Marcos celebrated that fact that the delegation had fulfilled its three missions: speaking with Congress, speaking with civil society and pressuring for the three signs it had asked the government to give. On April 4, the Zapatistas finished up the first round of meetings to evaluate the march in the communities, with information and a celebration in each one.

A necessary criticism of the Zapatistas

The Zapatistas' journey of over 3,000 kilometers and their two-week stay in Mexico City revealed the movement's great qualities as well as some of its weaknesses. Among the things that stood out are the important role they play as spokespeople for all those who are marginalized in Mexico. Overcoming the formal pretexts so they could speak to Congress was another great achievement, so that the voices of the excluded could be heard. Another triumph is having gotten the peace process back on course.

Nonetheless, although the EZLN is an indigenous movement, it continues to depend heavily on a *mestizo*, Marcos, who has not found a way to correct this limitation despite his awareness of it. The indigenous comandantes say that they lead in accord with the communities' instructions and that Marcos is only a subcomandante, but it is clear that they depend on his directions. The great affection and great hatred aroused by the class conflicts in society focus on him. It also seems that Marcos himself, despite his qualities, does not fully appreciate the extent of the political changes that have taken place in the country with the fall of the PRI and the weakening of presidential power. This is evident when he demands that the executive branch of the federal government carry out actions that correspond to other powers, like approving a law or freeing prisoners under the authority of the states.

The Zapatistas have said that they welcome criticism and debate. Throughout the course of their actions, they have shown great judgment and skill, but have also made mistakes—in their relation to election processes, for example, or their perception of certain social movements, or their evaluation of the contradictions in certain situations. Thus far, most of the Left in Mexico has not dared to criticize the Zapatistas, repeating that practice held when people chose not to criticize the socialist bloc, arguing that to do so would give ammunition to the enemy.

A global symbol born in Mexico

Despite these criticisms, the balance of what the Zapatistas have achieved in this stage of the struggle is extraordinarily valuable. They have won the popular support of a broad, diverse segment of the Mexican population, who see openings in what has happened and new possibilities to build alternatives. In Mexico and from Mexico, the Zapatista movement has become a global symbol in contrast to neoliberal globalization, a symbol of the strength that can grow out of weakness and put economic and political power in check