

Why the Zapatistas are stronger than ever

by Raheel Hayat

Marcos stepping down demonstrates the strength of this autonomous community

On May 2, 2014, José Luis Solís López, better known as Galeano was murdered in the community of La Realidad in the Mexican state of Chiapas. Galeano was murdered by three gunshots after he, unarmed, was surrounded by paramilitary troops and refused to surrender. The attack took place on the eve of a meeting that the Zapatistas had planned to hold with other indigenous organizations and indigenous people of Mexico during which spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos had planned possibly to reappear after a public absence of nearly six years. During the attack, a number of people were injured, and a Zapatista school and health clinic in La Realidad, both of which were symbols of the movement's autonomy, were destroyed.

According to the Good Government Junta, the Zapatistas' governing body, those responsible for Galeano's murder were paramilitary forces that came from two rightwing parties, the Green Ecologist Party and the National Action Party, as well as the Independent Center for Agricultural Workers and Historic Peasants. These paramilitary groups responsible for the murder of Galeano were legitimate peasant organizations that struggled for land rights against the local Chiapas Government in the 1970s. Over the years however, they have flirted with the government to try and receive funding and to get their people into government positions.

These are groups that have been coopted by the government of Chiapas in the past several years to oppose the Zapatistas in exchange for funds. This is a counter insurgency plan by the Mexican government and the Mexican Army to combat the Zapatistas outside of direct conflict. All these groups are involved in violent attacks and land occupations of the Zapatistas since the beginning of the Zapatistas movement in 1994. The lands which Zapatistas obtained and hold for the indigenous people of the region with their blood, is been invaded by these groups, that then look for the local government to legitimize their take over of the land and to undermine the Zapatista movement.

Galeano is the first Zapatista from the supportive communities, known in the movement as the "bases of support," to be killed by paramilitary government forces since 2003. He served as a teacher during the recent *escuelita*, where thousands of students from across Mexico and abroad came to learn from the movement. His murder further reveals the ongoing counterinsurgent war that is carried out by Mexican government across Zapatista territory. This counterinsurgency, which began after the uprising in 1994, seeks to erode and wear out Zapatistas' struggle to build autonomous institutions such as schools, clinics, hospitals and its own system of government. After the assassination, some of the Mexican mainstream media reported that the death came from conflict from within the community, without waiting for a statement from La Realidad's Good Government Junta or from human rights organizations that have mediated conflicts in the area. But in a [communiqué](#), the Zapatistas refuted this account of events.

The Galeano attack is especially problematic because unlike the other massacres, this occurred in a civilian space. The EZLN army was not present there at the time the brutal attack took place. It appeared afterwards, at the request of the civilians there who fear another such attack. To conduct a

premeditated attack on a defenseless civilian outpost in Chiapas is an unprecedented move even for these radical paramilitary groups. These are places for construction of life, where health care providers and teachers are trained. The fact that they felt they could attack a Caracole shows that there is a very clear agenda being pushed by the new federal government of Pena Neito, to take over the state resources of the Chiapas region.

Chiapas is the richest region of Mexico in terms of the natural resources and the federal government wants to be able to privatize these resources at the benefit of transnational corporations. The new Federal Government has been very aggressive in trying to privatize everything and to take repressive measures necessary to remove any opposition against its neoliberal agenda. So far they have not been able to do so because the Zapatistas are there and won't allow the government to exploit their lands.

Justice Not Vengeance: The Zapatista Response

The Zapatistas reacted to the brutal murder of Galeano with indignation but they did not overreact. The Zapatistas from the beginning after the brutal murder of Galeano demanded justice from the State. They understood the importance of controlling the narrative of Galeano's murder. They decided to respond with incredible indignation and controlled rage, currently conducting their own investigation into murder and demanding the people behind the brutal attack be punished under their own autonomous legal system.

In a global climate where the State commits murder and violence with impunity, for a community to not only come together and express its indignation over a single murder, but to then step away from vengeance, realizing that such symbolic superficial vengeance itself falls into the logic of the state, is truly worth noting. This was a brilliant response to the State, which with the help of mainstream media has attempted to present the violence as an inter community affair to justify its intervention. With their response, the Zapatistas have taught us how to prevent the State from legitimizing State violence on leftist movements.

Marcos Steps Down:

In 1994 Sub commander Marcos became one of the faces of autonomous struggle for the indigenous people all around world when he announced the struggle for EZLN. On May 24, 2014, in a [communiqué](#), a Zapatista gathering in Chiapas Mexico, Sub commander Marcos, the voice of the EZLN announced that his persona Sub Marcos would no longer exist. The new voice of the Zapatistas would be Sub commander Moises

The whole communiqué was in honor of Galeano. In his last speech Marcos detailed the path of the Zapatistas. The Zapatistas from the early beginning of their movement in 1994 have bet on life instead of death. They had the option to build a guerilla army and lead an insurgency against the local and federal governments. They chose to instead build an autonomous government and collective society based on egalitarian principles. This is reflected in their collective education, health care and justice systems that are completely independent from the local and federal governments.

Many from outside the movement have expressed shock at Marcos stepping down at such a critical stage, including in the liberal media. For the world, Marcos represented the Zapatistas and the Zapatistas were Marcos. However, if one studies the history of the Zapatista movement, they will find that this decision like everything else serves a strategic purpose.

When the Zapatistas were first founded, many in the outside world could not comprehend a completely indigenous community being able to direct such a movement and lead it. The only symbol they could

see was Marcos. That is why the Zapatistas chose Marcos, a brilliant communicator who resonated with the masses outside of the Zapatista Community to be their spokesperson. It was a strategic decision. The side effect of that however, was that Marcos became the Zapatistas to people around the world. He overshadowed the overall achievement of thousands of people living outside of the capitalist logic in the Zapatista movement.

After 2001, however, the Zapatista went internal after their march to Mexico City, focusing more on building an autonomous society independent of the government. At this point they realized that Marcos was unnecessary to the movement. They did not need a charismatic spokesperson to spread their message and bring the government or other leftist movements to them in a collaborative effort. They decided to work from below and create their own society. They had been thinking about how and when Marcos should cease to exist. Then came the attack on Galeano. A brutal murder of a Zapatista teacher. They decided this was the right strategic time to get rid of Marcos and bring the martyred Galeano back symbolically. In doing so, they made sure that they got the attention and support of other leftist movements from around the world regarding the attack on Galeano

One must look at the deeper collective roots of this act. This is a move of incredible strength of the Zapatista Collective. They no longer need a spokesperson of Marcos' stature to represent them on the global scale and communicate with the world. They have done such a fantastic job of solidifying their internal structure and creating partnerships with leftist movements across the world who can learn from the Zapatista Struggle and coordinate projects like Escuela Zapatistas where they learn from the Zapatista Ideals. This displays incredible organizational skills by the Zapatistas.

All those people who believed that Marcos was the Zapatista movement will no longer be able to say that. The movement is now 100% indigenous with 100% indigenous spokespersons. It will be difficult for many people to digest but it opens an opportunity for the Zapatistas to show how they are truly built from within and from the bottom up and shows the world what the movement is all about.

All signs indicate that the Zapatistas are moving more and more towards a model of building from the bottom up. From the start, the Zapatistas have been a truly ambitious movement in creating a culture opposed to the core exploitative values of capitalism. These past few weeks have reaffirmed our faith in the core values of this movement. The world should pay attention and commend the Zapatistas for once again showing us that a path towards creating an egalitarian community based on democratic principles is well within our reach.