

9-13-1995

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LADB Staff. "Zedillo Government, Zapatistas Agree on Terms for Formal Negotiations." (1995). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/3498>

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Zedillo Government, Zapatistas Agree on Terms for Formal Negotiations

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 1995-09-13

In early September, representatives of President Ernesto Zedillo's administration and the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) reached a series of agreements that could eventually pave the way for substantive negotiations between the two sides. The agreements were reached after 18 hours of intense negotiations in the town of San Andres Larrainzar, Chiapas, Sept. 10-11. According to sources close to the negotiations, the modest accords basically establish ground rules for negotiations and set the agenda for discussion of a number of crucial themes when the two sides meet again on Oct. 17. The sources said a breakthrough development was an agreement by government negotiators to include in negotiations the rights of indigenous communities in Chiapas and to address concrete measures to alleviate extreme poverty in the state.

Representatives of the Comision de Concordia y Pacificacion (Cocopa) a special commission of legislators from all four parties represented in the federal Chamber of Deputies said another incentive that drew the EZLN to agree to more serious negotiations was an offer by government representatives to include the Zapatistas in upcoming discussions on electoral and political reform in Mexico. The talks on reform, which will include representatives of all major political parties in Mexico, have yet to be scheduled.

According to a communique released by the two sides, the agenda will include discussions on:
*Political, social, cultural, and economic themes. These include the cultural and human rights of indigenous communities, development, democracy, justice, and the rights of women. *Reconciliation among the different sectors of society in Chiapas.

*Political and social participation of the EZLN.

In a joint statement read to reporters, the two sides described the agreement as a major breakthrough. "This marks the start of a new phase in the process of building a just and dignified peace by moving on to the problems that gave rise to the conflict," said the statement. In a separate interview with reporters from the daily newspaper La Jornada, EZLN negotiators hailed the results of the talks as a "marvelous development for our Mexican compatriots who desire peace."

The EZLN negotiators, however, cautioned that the agreements with the government represented only the beginning of the process to resolve "the injustices, hunger, and illnesses faced by our people." Said EZLN spokesman Comandante David: "These accords are a first step, but there is no reason to throw a party." According to representatives of two groups of mediators who helped bring the two sides together, the EZLN and the government are scheduled to begin formal negotiations on Oct. 17. They said a special committee will meet on Oct. 1 to begin preliminary discussions on the rights for indigenous communities. Since April, representatives of the Zedillo administration and the EZLN have met in San Andres Larrainzar five times.

Until the latest meeting, the negotiations appeared to be going nowhere, since the two sides frequently became involved in arguments over protocol instead of beginning discussions on substantive issues. In fact, only days before the breakthrough agreement, the EZLN in a public statement hinted that negotiations with the government were in jeopardy, since all avenues for negotiation with the government had been "exhausted." For its part, the Zedillo administration worked hard to dispel the notion that negotiations with the Zapatistas had totally collapsed. "The federal government wants to inform public opinion that the dialogue...has not been exhausted," the Interior Secretariat (Secretaria de Gobernacion) said in a statement. Another major obstacle to the talks both for the Zedillo government and former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari's administration has been the insistence by the Zapatistas that the government negotiate political and economic matters, rather than just issues related to indigenous communities in Chiapas.

As a compromise, Zedillo's chief negotiator, Marco Antonio Bernal, agreed to discuss, but not negotiate, national and political matters with the EZLN. "The EZLN is only one actor," said Bernal. "National issues affect many others at the national level." In the end, the two sides returned to the negotiating table, partly through the intervention of Cocopa and the National Intermediation Commission (Comision Nacional de Intermediacion, Conai), an organization headed by Bishop Samuel Ruiz of the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas. According to the daily newspaper *La Jornada*, Cocopa's invitation to the EZLN to participate in the upcoming dialogue on electoral and political reforms represented one mechanism for the EZLN to become a player in national issues. Indeed, according to the wording in the final communique announced by the two sides, the EZLN and the government agreed to reach "real compromises" on themes of regional character, and leave matters with nationwide implications to be "discussed and debated at the national level."

In an interview with the *New York Times*, Conai spokesman Monsignor Gonzalo Ituarte said the EZLN decision to proceed with negotiations may have also been influenced by a recent nationwide referendum of 1.88 million Zapatista supporters. In the referendum, most participants urged the EZLN to seek a negotiated solution to the conflict in Chiapas, which has remained unresolved since the Zapatista uprising on Jan. 1, 1994. The independent citizens organization *Alianza Civica*, which has gained a prominent role as a monitor of elections in Mexico, also helped organize the EZLN referendum. According to *Alianza Civica*, the referendum clearly urged the Zapatistas to become a political force. However, *Alianza Civica* said: "The results in no way should be viewed as a call to surrender." As of early September, the EZLN had not made public response to the results of the referendum. (Sources: *Reuter*, 08/30/95, 09/03/95; *El Norte*, 09/05/95; *Agence France- Presse*, 08/29/95, 09/11/95; *La Jornada*, 09/06/95, 09/07/95, 09/11/95; *Excelsior*, 08/24/95, 09/06/95, 09/11/95; *Associated Press*, 09/10/95, 09/11/95; *Reforma*, 09/11/95; *New York Times*, 09/11/95, 09/12/95)

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