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Guest Author

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Mexican Guerrillas Maintain Low Profile During Electoral Season

by Guest

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[By John Ross, a free-lance journalist who has written on Mexican political and economic affairs for many years.]

The Ejercito Popular Revolucionario (EPR) and the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) are currently taking part in critical federal and local elections by trying to stay out of sight. In the elections, scheduled for July 6, voters will select all 500 members of the Chamber of Deputies, 32 Senate seats, the mayor of Mexico City, and the governors of several states. Both the EPR and the EZLN have fallen uncharacteristically silent during the election season. Except for one incident that left four persons dead on May 24, EPR fighters have not attacked government troops in months.

The Zapatistas have been even more muted, issuing occasional communiqués from their headquarters in southeastern Chiapas, where they took up defensive positions in January, after Zedillo reneged on an agreement that would have granted limited autonomy to Mexico's 56 Indian groups. Even demonstrators in Mexico City have virtually abandoned the practice of chanting Marcos's name as they march into the great central plaza known as the Zocalo. Indeed, with a few weeks left until crucial mid-term balloting, activists in Mexico City and in the provinces are much more focused on the electoral option for change than on the armed option. The guerrillas appear to understand that this is not their moment and are lying low.

In March, the EPR declared a unilateral cease-fire in its undeclared war against the Zedillo government, until after the July 6 elections. The EPR had decreed similar short-term cease-fires last October and November prior to local elections in Guerrero, Hidalgo, and Mexico states. Since late August, following an offensive that cost the lives of at least 20 rebels and security forces, the EPR has concentrated its efforts on conducting "armed propaganda" meetings in dozens of Guerrero and Oaxaca communities, but has avoided contact with the military. The recent shootout on May 24 appears to have been ignited when an army brigade inadvertently walked into an "armed propaganda" meeting in Chilapa, Guerrero, an EPR stronghold not far from the state capital of Chilpancingo. "The validity of the electoral form of struggle has not yet been exhausted," said EPR leader Comandante Jose Arturo in an interview with La Jornada reporter Pepe Olmos.

Speaking from his remote hideaway in the Huasteca mountains, the EPR leader said Mexico's much-questioned electoral process has actually aided the guerrillas. According to Jose Arturo, "hundreds of fighters came to the armed movement" after massive fraud kept opposition candidate Cuauhtemoc Cardenas from assuming the presidency in 1988. EPR seeks to counter PRI's "fear-vote" strategy. By declaring an election-time cease-fire, the EPR also seeks to counter the "fear vote," which was the most potent weapon of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in the 1994 presidential elections. In that campaign, which followed months of instability, marked by the Zapatista uprising and the assassination of PRI presidential hopeful Luis Donaldo Colosio, the

PRI used public fears to give a landslide victory to Ernesto Zedillo, who at that time represented the "stability" option. In 1997, the PRI -which has governed Mexico for 68 years appears to be using the same tactics. With the mayoral election in Mexico City strongly favoring Cardenas of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), the PRI is flooding the airwaves with desperate warnings of doom if the opposition wins Mexico City and a majority in Congress. "You could lose everything overnight: your job, your home, your family," says a radio advertisement promoting the PRI.

To stimulate the scare vote, the PRI has attacked the PRD as the "party of violence," holding Cardenas's party responsible for daily protests by disgruntled workers and farmers that tie up Mexico City traffic and irritate motorists. However, the PRD has lost 500 of its members to political conflict since Carlos Salinas de Gortari won the presidential election in 1988. "The PRD exchanges blood for votes it wants martyrs," said the PRI's internal publication *La Republica*. EZLN remains skeptical about electoral option Meantime, the EZLN the original target of the PRI's scare tactics in the 1988 campaign has also stayed out of the electoral limelight. The EZLN rebels remain pinned down by as many as 40,000 Mexican army troops, and efforts to revive peace talks with the government broken off in September 1996 are thwarted by intransigence on both sides and by the impending election.

Although the EZLN has regularly dismissed the viability of political parties, the Zapatistas unofficially endorsed Cardenas in his failed 1994 presidential bid, even inviting him into their encampment to campaign. In that election, the EZLN allowed voting booths to be installed in jungle communities under their influence and encouraged their sympathizers to vote for the PRD, particularly for gubernatorial candidate Amado Avendano. After a questionable victory by PRI candidate Eduardo Robledo, the EZLN mobilized civic protests and momentarily seized 38 municipal offices. Zedillo eventually removed Robledo from his post, a gesture that brought the EZLN to the bargaining table.

On the other hand, the 1994 electoral campaign soured the Zapatistas on the electoral option. During Chiapas municipal elections in 1995, the EZLN instructed its supporters at the last minute to stay away from the polls, a ploy that pulled the rug out from under PRD candidates, destroying the party's chances to win many municipalities. This infuriated many PRD leaders. In fact, the fourth Declaration from the Lacandon Jungle, issued in January 1996, forbade Zapatistas from running for public office. EZLN autonomy demands would bar political parties from running candidates in elections in indigenous communities. Instead, the mechanism of "Uses and Customs" empowers a community to select its own leaders by consensus, at a public assembly.

Zedillo's rejection of this principle was a precipitating factor in the EZLN's suspension of peace talks. The government's refusal to comply with the terms of the agreement on indigenous rights and culture, signed in February 1996, has further hardened the Zapatistas' attitude toward the voting process. "Why should we participate in elections for a Congress that only does what the president tells it to do?" asked Subcomandante Marcos in a communique issued last March. The question was posed especially to the Comision de Concordia y Pacificacion (COCOPA), the legislative commission that oversees the long-suspended talks. Juan Guerra, one of the PRD representatives on COCOPA, said the government will have a difficult task convincing the EZLN to return to the negotiating table.

"They have lost all confidence in the government's word," said Guerra. In addition, the death of PRD Sen. Heberto Castillo, long-time leftist leader and COCOPA's bridge to the Zapatistas, seems to have shipwrecked prospects for new talks any time soon. "The talks were buried with Heberto," said COCOPA member Jose Narro Cespedes of the Partido del Trabajo (PT).

The fate of COCOPA remains uncertain, since its members were appointed by the current Congress. The new Congress that emerges in July must decide whether COCOPA will continue to exist. Despite the bleak outlook for a resolution to the conflict in Chiapas, Zedillo has tried to persuade the EZLN that he is prepared to resume talks when the Zapatistas are ready. As a concession, the president met one of the EZLN's demands for returning to the peace talks by removing Marco Antonio Bernal as chief negotiator. Bernal, a former guerrilla member, is now the PRI candidate for senator from Tamaulipas state.

On the other hand, Bernal's replacement, Pedro Joaquin Coldwell, does not inspire much confidence on the part of the Zapatistas. Coldwell, an ex-PRI governor of Quintana Roo, has also served as tourism secretary and helped develop the resort of Cancun. EZLN-government talks on hold until after election But no matter who is heading the government negotiating team, all bets for resolution of the Chiapas conflict are off until well after the July 6 election. At that time, the power balance in Mexico could be dramatically altered if the PRI loses its absolute majority in Congress to the PRD and to the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). If the PRI fails to gain 42% of the 500 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, Zedillo will no longer have an automatic pass for his legislative initiatives, an unprecedented dynamic in modern Mexican political life.

In such a political atmosphere, settlement with the Zapatistas could be brokered by the PRD, depending on the percentage of seats the party wins in the Congress. The PRD's victory appears particularly likely in the mayoral election in Mexico City, where Cardenas holds comfortable leads over his rivals from the PRI and the PAN. If the PRD candidate wins the mayoral election in the capital, some visionaries have even suggested the possibility of a Cardenas-Subcomandante Marcos summit meeting in Mexico City. Even the EPR which has repeatedly discounted negotiations with the PRI government and criticized the EZLN for participating in such talks indicated in a recent communique that it might reconsider its intransigence should the PRD increase its influence in government.

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