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Guest Author

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Mid-Term Elections Fail to Convince Zapatistas to Return to Peace Talks

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.]

As tensions between political factions in Chiapas threatened to explode into violence just days after the much-heralded July 6 mid-term elections, several hundred Chiapas state police were rushed to San Andres Larrainzar, the site of long-suspended peace talks between President Ernesto Zedillo's government and the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN). When local officials of the long-ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) sought to house the police in the large white building on the public square where the peace talks had once been held, villagers loyal to the EZLN surrounded the structure and drove off the would-be occupiers with fists and sticks. The melee graphically illustrated the state of negotiations between the Zapatistas and President Zedillo's government in the wake of what is being lauded as the most open election in modern Mexican history.

Although the Zapatistas continue to bridle at Zedillo's veto of last year's accords, which focused on Indian autonomy and culture, the prospect of peace with an element of justice is still a goal that the largely Mayan EZLN and its supporters stubbornly refuse to abandon. On the other hand, the government and its backers, while lending lip service to the resumption of negotiations, seem to be already working on a post-Zapatista agenda. For Zedillo, the July 6 elections impressed the right people. International praise was lavished on the president for guaranteeing conditions that led to important opposition victories and impressed investors.

Both the stock market and the peso have been booming ever since. The US showered Zedillo with compliments, while the European Union (EU) dropped objections to starting up talks with Mexico on a free-trade agreement. In Mexico, the elections set off a wave self-congratulations among politicians of all stripes, the business community, and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church.

EZLN wants government to comply with autonomy accords

Nonetheless, the elections did not much impress some recalcitrant Mexicans closer to the bottom of the social and economic ladder, most notably, the Zapatistas. "The Zapatistas were not awaiting the results of the election," said Julio Moguel, an ex-EZLN advisor at the broken-off peace talks. "They were waiting for Zedillo to comply with the San Andres accords on indigenous autonomy signed by his own negotiators 18 months ago." For months, the Zedillo government has banked on a post-July 6 clearing of the air between the rebels and the government that would pave the way to new talks.

Even before the vote count had been finalized, newly appointed chief negotiator Pedro Joaquin Coldwell called a press conference to postulate that "the elections establish the conditions under

which the EZLN can transform itself into an organized, institutionalized political force." "The EZLN's participation will enrich the spectrum of Mexican democracy," said Coldwell, implying that this "transformation" was already a done deal. The Zapatistas' response to Coldwell's exaggerated leap of faith was the same stony silence the rebels have maintained for months now. During the lengthy electoral campaigns, the EZLN only addressed the July 6 balloting once, on the eve of the vote, condemning the party system and urging its supporters to stay away from the polls. "Silence is an Indian weapon," wrote the EZLN's charismatic spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos. For his part, Bishop Samuel Ruiz of San Cristobal de las Casas warned that the democratic aspirations of many Mexicans, buoyed by the July 6 vote, will be "just the flower of one day unless the Chiapas crisis is peacefully resolved." Ruiz was instrumental in creating the Comision Nacional de Intermedicion (CONAI), which for months has been trying to convince the two sides to return to the bargaining table.

The government's miscalculation that opposition gains in the July 6 balloting would jump-start new talks with the EZLN is compounded by what turned into an election day fiasco in Chiapas, the most glaring stain on the electoral map and one which Zedillo has a hard time sweeping under democracy's rug. Prior to the elections, Subcomandante Marcos called for a boycott of the balloting, which stimulated EZLN mobilizations that shut down enough polling places to nullify elections in three Chiapas congressional districts. The governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) claims victory in all three districts.

Moreover, the threat of violence and the presence of at least 30,000 military troops in the region kept Chiapas residents away from the polls. According to state electoral officials, only 35% of registered voters in Chiapas participated in the elections. The high absenteeism in the state was accompanied by charges of vote-buying, tampering with ballot boxes, and even computer fraud. "This was no way to convince the EZLN to return to the negotiating table," said former gubernatorial candidate Amado Avendano of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). Avendano received strong support from the EZLN in his 1994 campaign for governor. Even if the elections in the three disputed districts claimed by the PRI are voided and new elections called, Avendano said he is not hopeful that the rebels will resume negotiations.

Indeed, the Zapatistas have never found the electoral process very user-friendly. During the 1994 race for governor, Avendano's candidacy was neutralized by a combination of heavy spending by the PRI, low-intensity fraud, and a suspicious auto accident which limited campaigning by the PRD candidate in the final weeks leading to the election. The EZLN has opposed the party system because partisan politics have tended to divide indigenous communities. One clause of the San Andres accords calls for election by consensus in majority Indian municipalities, rather than the government's paper ballots. The Zapatistas have prohibited their members from running for elected political office, although they have endorsed the principle of independent nonparty candidates.

Regarding the July 6 process, Marcos considered the vote worthless. "Why vote for a Congress that takes its orders from Zedillo and has refused to accept the San Andres accords?" Marcos rhetorically asked reporters. Despite Marcos's push for a boycott of the elections, the July 6 vote produced significant alterations in the Mexican power structure. PRD Candidate Cuauhtemoc Cardenas became the first-ever elected governor of Mexico City, and the PRI narrowly ceded its

automatic majority in the lower house of Congress. But even though a resurgent PRD has pledged to place peace in Chiapas at the top of its legislative agenda, the Congress will not be able to override Zedillo's veto of the autonomy agreement, the essential ingredient for resuming peace talks.

Support for peace process still unclear in new Congress

The San Andres accords contemplate constitutional changes that require a two-thirds majority, which can only be obtained through a PRD alliance with members of the PRI and/or the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). The PRI delegation in the new Chamber of Deputies includes several veterans of the Chiapas campaign who would likely oppose approval of the accords. The most prominent of the new PRI deputies is Gen. Miguel Angel Godinez, who was in charge of the armed forces during the battle with the EZLN in 1994. The PRI deputies also include the government's former chief negotiator, Marco Antonio Bernal, and former interior secretary Esteban Moctezuma.

In addition, the PRI delegation includes Roberto Guillen, a rancher with land holdings inside the conflict zone. The incoming Chamber of Deputies must decide whether to retain or eliminate the legislative commission for Chiapas (Comision Nacional de Concordia y Pacificacion, COCOPA). Given the current composition of the Chamber of Deputies, including 239 PRI and 121 PAN members, the elimination of COCOPA is feasible if President Zedillo decides to cut his losses and abandon all efforts to restart the peace talks. In public statements since the elections,

Zedillo has aggressively revived the claim that the San Andres agreement his own negotiators signed in February 1996 would replicate a sort of tropical Bosnia in southeastern Mexico, allowing indigenous peoples to secede and establish their own independent nations. At a La Raza Unida convention of US Latinos in Chicago, the Mexican president reiterated his "Balkanization" theory and urged the Zapatistas to abandon "their rhetorical rebellion." EZLN expands support in Europe
The EZLN has also attempted to shore up its support overseas.

On July 25, a second Zapatista-inspired gathering "in defense of humanity and against neoliberalism" got under way in Spain. The gathering follows a similar event in the Lacandon Jungle in 1996. Breaching the military encirclement of their jungle community of Guadalupe Tepeyac, an EZLN stronghold in the Lacandon, EZLN representatives Dalia and Felipe joined 3,000 sympathizers in Spain to spread the Zapatista credo to the Old World and strategize against the rapid globalization of economies and cultures. Dalia and Felipe, who are Tojolabal Mayans, brought with them ears of new corn to demonstrate the resistance of the Mayan "People of Maize" to the Mexican government and its neoliberal model. "We have sent these delegates because they are our best argument," Marcos wrote in a note of introduction. The gathering in Spain is evidence that the EZLN's support network is growing in Europe, with new groups of young anarchists springing up in France, Germany, Italy, and on the Iberian peninsula.

The Spain event also coincides with the Zedillo administration's efforts to negotiate a free-trade agreement with the 15-member EU. Such an agreement is a critical piece in Mexico's strategy to diversify dependency upon the US and reverse a heavy trade deficit with the EU. The EU-Mexico negotiations have been stalled by among other things the EU's insistence on including a "democracy clause" in an accord with Mexico. The clause, spelled out in the EU charter, focuses on guarantees

of fundamental human rights. In contrast, Mexico's trade pact with the US and Canada the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) contains no such provisions.

According to an EU official, the July elections showed good faith on the part of the Mexican government and could represent the needed "flexibility" for negotiations to move forward. Formal negotiations on a free-trade treaty between Mexico and the EU began on July 23 and are expected to last throughout 1998. However, the EZLN contends that Mexico is far from meeting the criteria for the "democracy" clause. Subcomandante Marcos issued a statement for participants at the rally in Spain urging them to resist any EU-Mexico accord. According to the EZLN, the government's refusal to recognize indigenous rights, widespread militarization, rampant human rights violations, and severe hunger among the nation's indigenous population, present the EU with good arguments to refuse to negotiate an agreement with Mexico.

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