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Zapatistas Gamble on "Consulta" to Save San Andres Accords

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[The author is a free-lance journalist who has written on Mexican political and economic affairs for many years.]

The large house on the muddy plaza in San Andres Larrainzar, Chiapas, is locked and forlorn. The interior of the house has been gutted and its back patio converted into a town toilet, an appropriate metaphor for what has happened to the 40 pages of agreements signed on the premises Feb 16, 1996, by representatives of President Ernesto Zedillo's administration and 17 leaders of the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN).

The San Andres accords, as they have come to be called, would have guaranteed limited constitutional autonomy to Mexico's 56 indigenous peoples. But the agreements had a short life span. Zedillo vetoed the accords seven months after they were signed, arguing that their conversion into law would have encouraged the secession of Mexico's Indians from the national union.

Furthermore, Zedillo said, the accords paved the path to a Bosnia-type dilemma in Chiapas. The principal effect of the government's rejection of the accords has been the breakdown of peace talks with the EZLN, which dashed all hopes of an early settlement to the long-simmering conflict.

Since the masked rebels and Zedillo's representatives last met in August 1996, 138 Indians have been killed in the conflict zone, including 46 Tzotzil supporters of the Zapatistas in the much publicized Acteal massacre in December 1997 ([SourceMex, Jan 14, 1998](#)). Another 15,000 Indians have been displaced from their land, and 300 foreign human-rights observers have been expelled from the country. For the past three years, the focal point of the EZLN's cause has been to press the government to live up to the accords.

The San Andres agreements, which were reached after many months of arduous negotiation, would have granted 800 majority-Indian municipalities or counties local control of their own territory, their natural resources, administration of finances, and their justice and educational systems. The accords would have also legitimized the selection of officials by traditional assembly rather than party politics. But on the third anniversary of the signing of the San Andres agreements, the accords are far from becoming a reality. To promote popular support for the accords, the EZLN has organized a national and international plebiscite.

The Zapatistas are describing the plebiscite as a "consultation for the recognition of the rights of indigenous people and the end of the war of extermination." The plebiscite, more commonly promoted as the consulta, will ask participants four questions: 1) Should the Indians be included

in Mexico's national project and take an active part in building the new nation? 2) Should peace be achieved through dialogue and the Mexican military be returned to barracks? [This refers to the 60,000 soldiers stationed in the conflict zone]. 3) Should the government obey the will of the people and abide by the results of the consultation? ["Mandar obediciendo," or governing by the will of the people, is an EZLN leadership principle]. 4) Should the rights of indigenous people be recognized in the Mexican Constitution in accordance with the interpretation of the San Andres accords?

A fifth question has been added for those who will cast a ballot outside Mexico: Should Mexicans living outside Mexico have the right to participate and vote in Mexican elections? Obtaining a vote in time for the 2000 presidential election here is a galvanizing issue for Mexicans living in the US ([SourceMex, Nov. 18, 1998](#)).

EZLN set precedent for plebiscite with 1995 referendum

Organizing a plebiscite is not a new EZLN tactic. In 1995, the EZLN carried out an even more complicated "consulta," in which 1.3 million votes were tabulated. A majority of those votes supported transforming the EZLN into a political organization not affiliated with any political party. But the presence of the Mexican military in the jungles and the highlands of Chiapas has prevented the EZLN from abandoning its military stance.

The EZLN laid the groundwork for the latest plebiscite through the Fifth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle in July 1998. The declaration called on supporters to promote a popular referendum on indigenous rights throughout the land. Organizers say the response to the call has been enthusiastic. Some 3,000 members of civil society met with EZLN leaders in San Cristobal de las Casas in November 1998 to draft plans for the balloting. As of late February, more than 800 get-out-the-vote brigades had been registered in 30 of Mexico's 32 states.

The brigades will also take responsibility for supervising the consulta and tabulating the votes. In addition, they will welcome, protect, feed, and house visiting representatives from Zapatista villages. To promote the consulta, the Zapatistas will set out on March 12 from five EZLN communities collectively known as Aguascalientes to 2,500 municipalities in Mexico to spread the news of the plebiscite.

The EZLN representatives will hold public meetings in schools and union halls for about 10 days. Demographics will determine the distribution. With more than one-fifth of the electorate concentrated in Mexico City, the capital will play host to hundreds of the insurgents.

As in 1995, the EZLN consulta will reach out beyond Mexico's borders to an international constituency that has become a pillar of the rebels' support base. A communique from EZLN leader Subcomandante Marcos in late February said the consulta will be carried out in 30 countries on five continents, stretching from Norway to Argentina. Irish supporters plan to set up a polling place in Dublin so that even Mexico's former president, and EZLN nemesis, Carlos Salinas de Gortari can vote if he so chooses. Emilo Rabasa, the government's chief Chiapas peace negotiator, has warned the EZLN's international supporters in Mexico not to become involved in any aspect of organizing the consulta or they will risk expulsion from the country. In February, two Italian citizens were

deported for teaching in EZLN-run schools, which the government considered interference in Mexico's domestic politics.

But the consulta and the mobilization of their representatives are huge gambles for the rebels. The simple process of having the Zapatistas travel outside the Lacandon Jungle is a risk. Although a recently enacted government initiative protects EZLN members from detention, four Zapatistas traveling through the Lacandon in February were stopped at military roadblocks, beaten, and jailed.

When EZLN supporters have ventured into neutral villages to spread notice of the consulta, they have been met by Mexican troops operating in the name of preventing rebel attacks. At least one paramilitary-run anti-consulta brigade has been formed in the conflict zone, reports the daily newspaper *La Jornada*.

While the Zapatistas are on the road, trouble is brewing in Chiapas, where Gov. Roberto Albores Guillen is pushing for an initiative to create eight new municipalities that infringe territorially on Zapatista "autonomous" municipalities. This could exacerbate tensions in the conflict zone. Albores dismantled four EZLN autonomous communities in 1998, during which 10 EZLN supporters were killed and hundreds more were arrested.

The autonomous municipality is at the heart of the Zapatistas' interpretation of the San Andres accords ([SourceMex, July 8, 1998](#)).

Consulta coincides with important political year in Mexico

In a real sense, the consulta is the Zapatista response to a highly energized political year, when attentions are focused on the nomination of the presidential candidates for the three major political parties for the 2000 election.

The EZLN, which distrusts the party system and is committed to the empowerment of civil society, is betting that the consulta will prove an attractive alternative to Mexican politics as usual. The Zapatistas' campaign for the consulta and the rebels' willingness to barnstorm the nation to debate the fine points of the San Andres accords is evidence of a deep commitment to words rather than guns.

This consulta fulfills the expectations the EZLN raised through their 1995 plebiscite: the transformation of this idiosyncratic guerrilla group into a political organization. By turning out millions of voters, the EZLN could pressure Zedillo and Mexican legislators to consider a proposal by the legislative commission on Chiapas (Comision de Concordia y Pacificacion, COCOPA) to amend the Mexican Constitution to incorporate indigenous rights and autonomy.

The EZLN position could be enhanced by the recent increase in popularity of referendums. Mexicans have been utilizing consultas, referendums, and public plebiscites since 1993, when the independent political organization Alianza Civica held a consultation in Mexico City's Zocalo plaza to ask citizens whether the capital city should become the nation's 32nd state. Another important referendum occurred in mid-1998, when the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD)

organized a successful plebiscite asking citizens whether to accept the Zedillo administration's proposal to use taxpayer funds to bail out failed banks through the Fondo Bancario de Proteccion al Ahorro (FOBAPROA).

Roughly 97% of the 3.1 million Mexicans who participated in the PRD referendum voted against the Zedillo proposal ([SourceMex, Aug. 26, 1998](#) and [Sept. 2, 1998](#)). Still, the EZLN's political fortunes could be bruised if participation does not significantly surpass the 1 million- plus votes tabulated in the 1995 Zapatista consulta. The San Andres accords are little understood and are not a primary concern for many Mexicans, which could result in an apathetic lack of turnout in many regions.

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