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Dramatic Changes in Zapatista Structure Bolster Rebels' Regional Autonomy

by Guest

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As the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) approaches the tenth anniversary of its historic uprising on Jan. 1, 1994, the largely Mayan Indian rebels have announced dramatic changes in the internal and external organization of their civil forces. In a series of nine communiques published between July 22 and Aug. 1, the Zapatistas' charismatic if elusive spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos laid out innovations designed to strengthen the autonomous structure the EZLN is building in the jungle and highlands of southeastern Chiapas. This is in direct defiance of the Mexican Congress' mutilation of an Indian Rights law signed in 1996 by the rebels and representatives of then President Ernesto Zedillo. This initiative would have granted limited autonomy to the nation's 57 distinct Indian peoples (see SourceMex, 1996-02-21).

In addition to details of the restructuring of the autonomous territories, now grouped together in the Municipios Autonomos Rebeldes Zapatistas (MAREZ), the subjects of Marcos' communiques ranged from the recent national midterm election, which he called "the most comical in Mexican history," to his imminent debut as a short-wave disc jockey. Marcos' statements represent a rare talkative moment for the rebels, who broke off all communication with President Vicente Fox's government in April 2001 following the cancellation of the indigenous-rights law and who have been mostly silent since that time (see SourceMex, 2001-05-02).

Although largely displaced from public attention by international events like the US "war on terror" and the subsequent invasion of Iraq, the EZLN continues to galvanize interest, particularly among young people who were in their early teens when the rebellion exploded in the first hour of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) 10 years ago. To this effect, several thousand members of what the EZLN terms "civil society" braved the mountain rains and mud to journey to the Oventic communal farm, near San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, on Aug. 8-10, near the birth date of the EZLN's namesake Emiliano Zapata. They came to celebrate what Marcos described as a "funeral" for the system of cultural centers (each known as Aguascalientes), which had been the rebels' most public outposts.

Aguascalientes drew their name from the state in central Mexico where revolutionary martyrs Francisco Villa and Emiliano Zapata coalesced forces at the Convencion Nacional Democratica in 1914. Paradoxically for the calendar-conscious Zapatistas, the event also marked the ninth anniversary of the establishment of the first cultural center deep in the Lacandon Jungle at Guadalupe Tepeyac during a gathering that was named the Convencion Nacional Democratica after the 1914 gathering.
The Aguascalientes center at Guadalupe Tepeyac was destroyed by Mexican military forces in 1995 during an invasion ordered by Zedillo to capture the Zapatista leadership and take back liberated territory (see SourceMex, 1995-02-15).

Five new cultural centers promptly blossomed in each of the Zapatista zones of influence at La Realidad, the Ejido Morelia, Roberto Barrios, La Garrucha, and Oventic. The latter, site of the August meeting, is perhaps the most prosperous of the centers and now features a clinic, a secondary school, a library, a tortilla factory, a well-stocked general store, and even a new church.

Many of the public works have been built with seed grants and the sweat labor of national and international nongovernment organizations (NGOs). The EZLN refuses to accept money from what it describes as the "mal gobierno" or bad government.

Now, explains Subcomandante Marcos, waxing metaphoric, the Aguascalientes will be transformed into caracoles or spirals. The change is not just in name. In MesoAmerica, the caracol is a powerful symbol of the renewal of life. Caracoles are also conch shells utilized for millennia in indigenous communities to call the villagers together. In one recent communique, Old Antonio, the wise, grizzled farmer who sometimes shows up in Marcos' narratives, spins a creation myth in which the first Mayan gods, "the sustainers of the world," carried caracoles in their hearts.

The caracol is "what enters the heart from the outside and what leaves the heart to travel in the world." EZLN seeks to minimize influence of outsiders Marcos also contends that the former Aguascalientes cultural centers have become "doors for those from outside to enter the communities and for the communities to enter the outside world."

The changes in the EZLN structure have been the focus of intense discussions in the five Zapatista zones since Jan. 1, 2003, when 20,000 rebels marched on San Cristobal to signal a renewal of their struggle after months of silence. Marcos described many midnight meetings in humble huts throughout the Zapatista geography to thrash out consensus.

The reorganization is as practical as it is conceptual. In a real sense, the success of the Aguascalientes centers spelled their demise. The five centers were closer to the roads and more accessible to the NGOs and civil-society volunteers, allowing them to flourish at the expense of the autonomous Zapatista communities in the back country.

**An unequal coffee relationship**

As an example of the disparities, the healthy returns from organic-coffee sales to US and European fair traders has also deepened the gap between Zapatista haves and have-nots. Indeed, Marcos was particularly critical of NGOs that had developed "special relations" with the councils that serve the autonomous municipalities, claiming that such attentions extended privilege and lent themselves to "corruption" that is expressed in the inequality in goods, services, and infrastructure between the ex-Aguascalientes and the outlying villages.
The EZLN’s 38 self-declared "autonomias" are each served by an autonomous council with no overall authority until now to coordinate between them and avert conflict. The inequalities between the center and the periphery have long been at the core of the Zapatista struggle, both the discrepancies between an all-powerful federal government in far-off Mexico City and rural Chiapas, as well as between the larger cities in the state and the Indian countryside.

Mexican states are organized into municipalities, roughly equivalent to US counties, and the county seats or cabeceras traditionally dominate the satellite communities where the EZLN has always had strength. Significantly, the EZLN attacked five cabeceras on Jan. 1, 1994, to launch its long-lived rebellion. Within the Zapatista context, the Aguascalientes centers were at risk of becoming new cabeceras.

Under jeopardy of biting the hand that feeds the insurgency, Marcos severely chastised those NGOs and civil-society volunteers who continue to treat the Indians as objects of charity. Studiously avoiding naming names, Marcos charged "outsiders" with dictating what the Zapatista communities needed without consultations with the locals. They give us a library where we don't have drinkable water...or an herb garden before we have a school," said Marcos.

The EZLN leader complained that many communities had rooms full of broken computers and medicines whose expiration dates had elapsed. He said clothes donated to the Zapatista communities are so "extravagant" they can only be used in stage plays. "We appreciate that you risk much by visiting us, but we will not be treated like the mentally ill," said Marcos.

The EZLN's decision is expected to transform its ties with the national and international NGO community, acknowledged activist Peter Brown whose Schools for Chiapas program contributed to the construction of three educational centers in the EZLN area of influence. Brown, who was deported from Mexico by the Zedillo government, returned to Chiapas under the Fox administration. He is sponsoring bicycle-repair workshops at the former Aguascalientes centers to upgrade the mobility of Zapatista health and education workers.

**Community government structures reorganized**

As part of the plan to establish a more equitable distribution of goods and services between the caracoles and the back-country autonomias, each zone is to establish a Junta de Buen Gobierno (committee of good government), where representatives of the region's autonomous councils will meet to hash out differences. This scheme creates a mechanism for NGOs to consult with the community.

Any project proposed by an outside organization must first be approved by such a committee, and 10% of the seed money provided by the NGO must be deducted for projects in less-favored autonomias. The Juntas de Buen Gobierno are responsible only to the Comite Clandestino Revolucionario Indigena, the EZLN’s maximum decision-making body. The changes in EZLN structure represent a qualitative step forward in the consolidation of regional autonomy as contemplated in the 1996 indigenous-rights accords. And, as usual, the rebels' move is in direct defiance of the Mexican Congress, the federal government, and the political parties.
The new Zapatista project was met with the same disdain from the Fox administration as previous EZLN initiatives received during the Zedillo government. In a ploy reminiscent of Zedillo, Fox's director of Indian affairs Xochitl Galvez declared the weekend of the Zapatista conclave "Indian Rights Day" in a media-oriented effort to steal the EZLN's thunder.

Local church authorities also viewed the EZLN announcement with suspicion. Roman Catholic Bishop Felipe Arizmendi barred priests from the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas from attending the rebel celebration at Oventic because he considered the activity "too political."

Interior Secretary Santiago Creel Miranda initially warned the rebels of the legal consequences of establishing what is apparently a parallel authority. He later backed off, describing the Zapatista announcement as an opportunity to resume stalled peace negotiations. Some critics have gone as far as to describe the EZLN move as the start of Indian "secession," a pretext seized upon by Zedillo to veto the rights accords.

Jorge Melendez, a political commentator associated with both the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and Mexican security agencies, bemoans the establishment of a "liberated zone" under Zapatista control as "a grave violation of the Mexican Constitution." The EZLN project, however, also received support from influential politicians in Chiapas, namely Gov. Pablo Salazar Mendiguchea. "No way of governing that seeks to improve the lives of the indigenous peoples of the jungle and the highlands can be illegitimate," said Salazar, a former PRI member who was elected by a coalition of opposition parties and is a close ally of Fox.

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