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## Zapatistas Celebrate One-year Anniversary of New Governing Structure

*by Guest*

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In August 2004, the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) celebrated the first anniversary of the "caracol," an innovative structure of governance intended to create greater equity among Zapatista communities while strengthening the autonomous structure the rebels have built in the jungle and highlands of southeastern Chiapas (see SourceMex, 2003-09-17).

The EZLN inaugurated the new system of governance on Aug. 8, 2003, the birthday of Zapatista namesake and revolutionary martyr Emiliano Zapata. The Zapatistas organized a colorful celebration to mark the one-year anniversary of the new structure in the community of Oventic, located above San Cristobal in the Tzotzil-speaking highlands. Tzotzil Indian musicians clad in ceremonial hats strummed harps and guitars in front of the small wooden house with a vivid mural glowing on its facade depicting a giant ear of corn on which all the kernels were ski-masked Zapatistas. Balloons and glistening tinsel dangled from the roof beams to mark the occasion.

Some 400 such murals now illuminate the Zapatista geography in the highlands and jungle of southeastern Chiapas state, where 1,100 base communities grouped into 29 autonomous municipalities and five caracoles have taken firm root. Caracoles replace community centers. The caracol replaced community centers, each previously known as an "Aguascalientes."

The centers had drawn 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. As part of the restructuring, the EZLN organized a Junta de Buen Gobierno (committee of good government) at each of the five caracoles, consisting of two representatives from each of the autonomous municipalities in the region.

The word caracol has taken many meanings in the Zapatista tradition. Caracoles are literally snails or conch shells, traditionally utilized by Mexico's indigenous peoples to summon the community together, which is precisely the function of these political-cultural centers. Caracol also refers to a spiral, an appropriate metaphor for a vision espoused by the rebels' charismatic spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos, who conceives of the centers as spirals that open to the outside world and through which the outside world can know the Zapatistas.

The juntas de buen gobierno, also known as JBGs, advertise that they are open for business 24 hours a day. We are always ready to receive our comrades," said junta member Moises. "You can come

here at any hour." These committees were established to coordinate regional autonomy, resolve disputes between autonomous municipalities, and ensure an equitable distribution of resources between Zapatista populations such as Oventic, which are adjacent to the road, and those in the outback. Additionally, the juntas oversee the work of health, education, housing, agriculture, and justice commissions that serve the region. "We are not like the federal government," said Moises. "We rescue the traditions, the culture, the old ways of governing. We serve only at the will of the people."

The JBGs also pass on all proposals from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to ensure that they serve the rebel development agenda, and they seek to spread the resources around by assigning a part of the seed money to more threadbare autonomous communities. In a year-end accounting, Subcomandante Marcos records that the JBGs received delegations from 43 nations and every state in the Mexican union last year, offering material-aid projects.

A fair-trade delegation from Minnesota has come to ask the JBGs for permission to meet with two coffee cooperatives that fall under the jurisdiction of Oventic. After due consideration, the three members of the Oventic JBG granted the fair traders permission for the visit.

### *Income from organic coffee*

Organic coffee provides income to communities Organic-coffee sales play an increasingly pivotal role in Zapatista fortunes. In 2003, the Muk Vitz cooperative, which incorporates parts of six autonomous municipalities and 29 Zapatista communities, sold 20 huge containers on the European and US fair-trade market, and this year the Y'achil cooperative will certify nearly a thousand Zapatista farmers as organic producers.

Coffee beans carry the Zapatista message of resistance. Much of the coffee grown in the rebels' zones is distributed through informal networks in the US, Mexico, and Europe. The coffee is sold through outlets like the White Dog in Philadelphia, the Human Bean Company in Denver, Rincon Zapatista in Mexico City, and Caracol Maya in Barcelona, among others.

In addition to selling the coffee, these foreign retailers offer the rebels' perspectives and promote solidarity and material aid. Revenues from organic-coffee sales are helping the EZLN build its infrastructure in the highlands and the jungle. The coffee sales have helped the Zapatistas construct 50 new schools in recent years, Marcos said recently.

The first-year anniversary of the caracoles was a time for the JBGs to appraise their work. "We are learning here how to govern ourselves, to walk alone without help from the federal government," said Moises.

Even communities with traditional allegiances to the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) have come to the JBGs for help in solving their problems. "The 'bad government' doesn't listen to them any more than it listens to us and does not help them to resolve their difficulties. We are happy that we can help," said a Tzotzil farmer. Marcos offers criticism of JBGs

But the JBGs have also faced their share of criticism from EZLN commanders during their first year of existence. In a series of communiqués distributed to the national press, Marcos criticized the committees for being slow to make decisions and for a decided lack of women on their rosters.

The JBGs have also been painted as ineffective because the representatives from the autonomous municipalities rotate in and out every few weeks. Still, Marcos asked for patience and softened the criticism by noting that the EZLN is also building "a school of government" through the JBGs.

The EZLN leader also drew a comparison between the JBG's skeletal budgets to gargantuan stipends doled out to public officials. "The representatives bring their own pozol and tostadas," said Marcos. "We make tea from the weeds. Our only expense is for the combi (public transport), and sometimes we walk."

The Oventic JBG has also faced some difficulties in its first year of existence. Road signs demarcating Oventic as Zapatista territory have repeatedly been the target of gunshots, and some members of the community have faced violence from nearby non-Zapatista communities. One infamous incident occurred in April of this year, when residents of the town of Zinacatan, which is governed by the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), attacked members of Zapatista villages in a dispute concerning water and utilities (see SourceMex, 2004-04-28).

The violence in Zinacatan was the most serious outbreak in the highlands since military and police invaded the autonomous municipality of San Juan de la Libertad in June 1998. Only the absence of high-caliber firepower averted a massacre similar to the one that occurred in December 1997 when 46 Tzotzil Zapatista supporters were slain at Acteal, just over the mountain from Oventic (see SourceMex, 1998-01-04 and 1998-01-28).

As was the case in Acteal, the state government offered an "anthropological" explanation for the Zinacatan attack, attributing it to differing interpretations of traditional "uses and customs." In other words, when Zapatista communities refused to contribute large sums of money so traditional leaders could buy "posh" (sugar-cane alcohol) for religious celebrations, their water was cut off, and they were brutally assaulted.

Despite the bruises, the Zapatistas are optimistic about the future of the JBGs. "We are new and make many mistakes, but I am proud of the work that we have done," said Moises. Outside the JBG's hobbit-like headquarters, the Oventic Caracol was in full fiesta mode, celebrating not only the junta's first birthday but also the inauguration of a new primary school to accommodate the swelling number of children born during these past 10 years of Zapatista resistance.

The primary school is adjacent to the "January 1 Insurgent Middle School," built by US volunteer brigades and the Oventic community, the cornerstone of the Zapatistas' burgeoning educational system. Neighboring villages set up camps on the green hillsides under brilliant swatches of plastic to protect them from the August rains.

Down on the basketball court, 50 teams with names like Anarchy of Chenalho whizzed up and down the court, an island of concrete in a sea of mud, and battled for rebounds under backboards

decorated with red stars. Like the rebellion itself, the quality of rebel basketball has matured in the past decade, with players exhibiting finesse in place of wild shots and even playing a little defense without deliberately fouling an opponent. To keep the players moving, a six-keyboard Zapatista band pumped out cumbias from the crowded stage.

### *San Juan Chamula provides contrast*

In sharp contrast to the party atmosphere that reigned over Oventic, a dozen miles down the road, Chamula Tzotziles who share this rock-studded terrain with the Zapatistas were on the warpath.

Disgruntled at their mayor for having failed to deliver promised public works, they locked him and his city council inside the San Juan Chamula jail and threatened to set fire to the building and "roast" the officials alive. One city council member's home was torched. For two days, the ugly mob surrounded the jail, and the posh flowed like water. It is an election year in Chiapas, and the politicians soak the highland villages with posh to ensure a favorable vote. The distinction between the celebrations is instructive.

While Chamula culture is saturated with posh, the Zapatistas simply do not drink. Prohibitions against alcohol consumption probably averted a bloodbath after the uprising on Jan. 1, 1994, said Hermann Bellinghausen, a correspondent for the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada. Bellinghausen is considered the most knowledgeable of Zapatista chroniclers. Without a drop of the "trago" (strong drink), gala celebrations of the first-year anniversary of the caracoles and their juntas de buen gobierno were mounted at all five rebel political-cultural centers in southeastern Chiapas this past August. No comandantes were present at the events, suggesting that civil Zapatismo has a firm hand on the rudder of the rebellion. Last year, the comandantes were the featured orators.

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