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Zapatistas Launch The Other Campaign Ahead of 2006 Presidential Election

by Guest
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[John Ross has written three books on the Zapatista movement, including the award-winning Rebellion From the Roots, The War Against Oblivion, and Zapatista Chronicles 1994-2000. He was on location in Chiapas during the launching of The Other Campaign, the new political initiative of the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional]

On Jan. 1, 2006, the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) officially launched The Other Campaign to coincide with presidential campaigns in Mexico. The Other Campaign represents a new strategy for the Zapatistas. In contrast to the EZLN's military-like uprising in San Cristobal de las Casas on Jan. 1, 1994, and the symbolic takeover of the same city in 2003, the latest event had all the traits of a political campaign.

Subcomandante Marcos, the EZLN's chief spokesperson, is the main catalyst behind the new campaign. He has, however, discarded his military credentials and now prefers to be called Subdelegado Zero.

Campaign criticizes business elite, capitalism

Even though the initial campaign will be held in Chiapas state, Marcos intends to deliver his message throughout Mexico in advance of the July 2 presidential election. His principal point is that there is no real difference among the three candidates from the major parties because all are going to cater to a business elite that dominates Mexico.

Marcos maintains that neoliberalism and "savage capitalism" are responsible for many of the economic and social ills affecting Mexico. Marcos contends the plot by the business class to retain power in Mexico is typified by the Acuerdo Nacional para la Unidad, el Estado de Derecho, el Desarrollo, la Inversion y el Empleo, signed in September 2005 in Mexico City. The accord, known as the Pacto de Chapultepec because it was signed at Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City, is a declaration promoted by entrepreneur Carlos Slim asking for government reforms, better public services, and more investment opportunities.

"[This accord is backed by] those who have asked us to forget about our needs, our struggles, and who are now asking us to put ourselves at their mercy so that they can continue to make decisions on our behalf," Marcos said during one of his speeches.

To launch the campaign, Marcos mounted a shiny motorcycle and roared out of the La Garrucha Caracol (regional political and cultural center) in the autonomous municipality of Francisco Gomez, racing uphill to hook up with cadre in the mountain city of San Cristobal de las Casas for the campaign opener.
Marcos' choice of transport triggered the inevitable comparisons to young Che Guevara's Motorcycle Diaries tour of Latin America a half-century ago. Now at age 50, and displaying a spreading paunch, Marcos bears little resemblance either to the young Che or Gael Garcia, the Mexican heartthrob who plays him in the movie The Motorcycle Diaries.

Awaiting Subdelegado Zero at the Coca Cola plant outside San Cristobal were 15,000 ski-masked Zapatistas from the highlands. As the number of participants grew, a sense of collective anticipation edged the afternoon. Tensions flared briefly when members of the Partido Comunista Mexicano-Marxista Leninista tried to drape a brilliant red banner featuring many hammers and sickles at the front of the line of the march.

At the main plaza in San Cristobal, the EZLN erected a stage, draped with a great prayer wheel. EZLN comandantes spoke on a variety of topics, ranging from the negative impact of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on Mexican campesinos to the independent status of Zapatista women.

Subdelegado Zero then declared The Other Campaign officially underway with a scathing attack on Mexico’s moribund political class.

**Campaign thrives on individual contacts**

The rally was followed the next day with a series of activities at the Universidad de la Tierra, an Indian vocational school near the community of La Hormiga, just outside San Cristobal de las Casas. La Hormiga is inhabited by 25,000 Tzotzil-speaking evangelicals forcibly expelled from the traditional Catholic municipality of San Juan Chamula. La Hormiga has gained the reputation of a sort of weapons bazaar.

Both the Zapatistas and the paramilitary groups who massacred 46 Zapatista sympathizers at Acteal in 1997 bought their weapons there (see SourceMex, 1998-01-14). On a campaign stroll through the colony, Subdelegado Zero pressed the flesh like a veteran campaigner, pumping hands with Domingo Lopez Angel, a pistol-packing preacher and former state deputy, who is now a convert to Islam. The gathering at the roundhouse at Universidad de la Tierra was focused on making The Other Campaign function locally in San Cristobal and was a good indicator of how similar sessions will proceed as Marcos moves around the country.

Dozens of San Cristobal residents brought their thoughts to the table and Marcos listened hard, and offered counsel, citing the need for coherence between personal and political lives. "You can't pass a resolution in defense of women here and then go home and beat your wife," Marcos said.

The visit to La Hormiga was typical of the events that Marcos and the Zapatistas would like to characterize The Other Campaign. "We will listen to people in the places where they work, in the places where they are exploited, where they suffer racism," said Marcos.

The next day, Subdelegado Zero took The Other Campaign on the road to a rally in Palenque just north of the Lacandon Jungle, where ownership of the magnificent Mayan ruins is a bone of contention between the descendants of that millennial civilization and the transnational tourism
trade. Subdelegado Zero and his entourage of eight ski-masked bodyguards were met in Palenque by 5,000 rebels from the embattled north of Chiapas who swarmed into the tropical city en masse, apparently oblivious of a banner advertising Lopez Obrador-Our Next President, in reference to Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, the presidential candidate for the leftist alliance Por El Bien de Todos, led by the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD).

In the plaza at Palenque, Subdelegado Zero, surrounded by thousands of supporters, spoke briefly about how the wealthy consider Mayan civilization to be a dead issue and the ruins a free-market commodity to be converted into a mall or theme park.

Then Marcos disappeared behind locked doors to negotiate with local farm and union leaders. Judging by its first week of activities, The Other Campaign will be an improvised, day-to-day adventure fraught with possible pitfalls and downsides, with the personal safety of Marcos not at all assured.

The Zapatista leader has promised a nonviolent campaign, and President Vicente Fox has guaranteed safe passage for the Zapatista delegation during its tour of all 31 states. The swing through Chiapas is considered one of the more dangerous drives the Zapatistas will take in the next six months.

The rebellion began in the state, and it is still a provocative issue to many critics of the Zapatistas, including violent paramilitary groups that had in the past been linked to the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). These groups are said to have been behind the attempts on the lives of Roman Catholic Bishops Samuel Ruiz and Raul Vera in 1997, both of whom strongly supported indigenous rights (see SourceMex, 1997-11-12). Favorable public response is not guaranteed either.

The EZLN has failed to build national alliances through its the Convencion Nacional Democratica (CND) in 1994, the Congreso Nacional Indigenista (CNI) in 2001, and the Frente Zapatista Nacional de Liberacion (FZLN). The EZLN conceived The Other Campaign in late 2005 to replace the FZLN (see SourceMex, 2005-11-30).

### Marcos criticizes three major parties

Still, The Other Campaign does not shy away from attacking all three major political parties for failing to represent indigenous peoples. The EZLN is especially angry at the Mexican Congress for weakening an indigenous-rights bill in 2001 (see SourceMex, 2001-05-02, 2001-07-18 and 2001-08-22).

"In the coming days we are going to hear a ton of promises, lies, trying to give us hope that, yes, things are now going to get better if we change one government for another," he said at a rally in Palenque. "Time and time again, every year, every three years, every six years, they sell us this lie." In one of his campaign speeches, Marcos described the PRI as a corrupt party that is full of "liars, murderers, and thieves."

During a rally in La Hormiga, Marcos said, "We're going to send this party to hell." In commenting on the governing center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), Marcos directed his criticisms
primarily at President Vicente Fox. "We will not see any change coming from the top, where the right continues to spread lies while pocketing millions and millions of pesos," said Marcos. He also criticized first lady Marta Sahagun for involving herself in important government decisions without having been elected. "Isn't it criminal that Sra. Sahagun de Fox, wife of Sr. Fox, ...says she is or acts like she has a public office when no one elected her?" Marcos said.

Marcos has especially relished his attacks on the PRD's Lopez Obrador, who is also representing the Partido del Trabajo (PT) and Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD). The EZLN has branded Lopez Obrador a fraud. The former Mexico City mayor, who led most polls in 2005, is considered the front-runner in the presidential election, scheduled for July 2. "[Lopez Obrador] is not from the left and he has said so repeatedly," Marcos said during one of his stops, referring to the PRD candidate's close relationship with business leaders like Carlos Slim Helu, the chief architect of the Pacto de Chapultepec.

The PRD, which stands to lose the most from the EZLN's campaign, has not taken kindly to Marcos' attacks. The party charges that Marcos' negativity could promote abstentionism and hand the presidency to the hated PRI, which governed Mexico for 71 years until its loss in 2000 to Fox and the PAN. The conflict between The Other Campaign and the PRD is sure to continue for the next six months and threatens to explode into physical violence as election day approaches.

The threat of violence is ever-present in Chiapas, where farmers sympathetic to the PRD have threatened to set up roadblocks to protest the EZLN's claims to land recovered from big ranchers after the 1994 rebellion. Despite its anti-electoral inclinations, the EZLN runs the risk of becoming just as enmeshed in the election campaign as the political parties it reviles. The Other Campaign's itinerary is expected to eventually take Subdelegado Zero to the Pacific Coast where tens of thousands of poor families were devastated by Hurricane Stan in October 2005 (see SourceMex, 2005-10-12 and 2005-11-02).

**Campaign suspended briefly to honor Comandante Ramona**

The campaign was temporarily suspended on Jan. 6, when word reached the caravan of the death of Comandante Ramona, a longtime leader of Zapatista women who had suffered from kidney cancer for years. Instead of heading for the coast, the convoy returned to Oventic in the highlands to bury Ramona, who passed away while being rushed to a San Cristobal hospital. "The world has lost one of those women who give birth to new worlds, and we have lost a piece of our hearts," Marcos told a packed movie-theater audience in Tonala on the hurricane-devastated Chiapas coast.

Ramona was buried on Jan. 8 in the community of Sakamch'en under a cloud of white flowers, with a thousand Zapatista women in her cortege. The Zapatista leader had gained much respect outside her Zapatista community, with President Fox sending condolences and The New York Times publishing an obituary. Mexico's top television network Televisa reported that Ramona was 49 and her real name was Maria Santiz. But in the mountains and jungles of southeastern Chiapas, she will always be "La Comandanta Ramona, the smallest of the small," in reference to her petite frame.

Ramona was one of the first women to join the Comite Clandestino Revolucionario Indigena (CCRI), the EZLN's general command. She was responsible for organizing the uprising in the highlands.
on Jan. 1, 1994. On that historic night, she carried a 12-gauge shotgun down to San Cristobal de las Casas under the direction of another Zapatista comandanta, Maj. Ana Maria. There were many small, ski-masked Zapatistas on the plaza the next morning, many of them women, and the curious had not yet identified this remarkable woman.

A few days later, the still-shadowy EZLN invited sympathetic reporters down to their jungle lair near La Realidad at Guadalupe Tepeyac. Among those invited was Blanche Petrich, a reporter for the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada, who was blindfolded and transported to Zapatista headquarters on horseback. Speaking in Tzotzil, Ramona was surprisingly forthright with Petrich. "For 500 years, the Indian women could not talk," Ramona said, "but now it is our time to speak out."

Ramona spoke of the hard life of the women who had to rise in the dark to make the tortillas that sustained their families. Sometimes, if there was not enough, the women would go without to feed their husbands and their children. But the truth was that Ramona had neither husband nor children. The comandanta had never married or, more accurately, she was married to the EZLN.

In 1993, Ramona and Comandante Susana were commissioned to lead a campaign that would draft the Ley Revolucionaria de Mujeres, an initiative that promoted gender equity and "incorporated women into the revolutionary struggle."
The women traveled to Zapatista villages in the jungle and the highlands to encourage women to participate in Zapatista actions. They often faced hostility from men in the villages. "It was our most difficult battle," Marcos later recalled.

Ramona and Susana prevailed. On Jan. 1, 1994, women comprised about one-third of the EZLN's fighting force, and, 12 years later, although still not at parity, women play important roles in the CCRI and the Juntas de Buen Gobierno, which administer the Zapatista infrastructure, direct some autonomous councils, and speak their mind freely in the community assemblies.

Perhaps Ramona's most iconic moment came during negotiations with the representatives of the Mexican government in February. The talks, mediated by Bishop Samuel Ruiz, were held at the Roman Catholic cathedral in San Cristobal de las Casas. Seated next to Bishop Ruiz, her feet not even touching the floor, Ramona suddenly fished a neatly folded Mexican flag from her shoulder bag and extended one end of it to Marcos who could not quite reach it. Instead, the government's chief peace negotiator Manuel Camacho Solis reached over to grasp the flag and a thousand flashbulbs popped. Within weeks of the rebellion, Chamula women had begun to fashion ski-masked dolls from scraps of wool and sticks that they sold to the tourists as "Marcos" and "Ramona." Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of Ramona dolls now circulate in the wider world beyond Chiapas. (This piece was supplemented by the following sources: Associated Press, El Universal, La Jornada, 01/02/06; La Cronica de Hoy, 09/30/05, 01/05/06; The Herald-Mexico City, 11/30/05, 01/06/06; The New York Times, 01/06/06)

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