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Zapatista Uprising 20 Years Ago Left Lasting Impression on Mexico

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The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) share one important date, Jan. 1, 1994. That is the date when both the agreement and the Zapatista movement officially became part of the Mexican reality. NAFTA and other efforts to open Mexico to foreign investment were part of the neoliberal economic policies promoted by ex-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, which critics said would increase the gap between the wealthy and the poor. The EZLN used the launch of the agreement to push for greater economic and cultural rights for indigenous communities and to bring attention to the economic disparities in Mexico (SourceMex, Jan. 5, 1994, and Jan. 12, 1994).

Opinions are mixed on whether NAFTA has been good for Mexico (SourceMex, Jan. 8, 2014), but most observers suggest that the Zapatista uprising had positive consequences for Mexico. Carlos Tello Díaz, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio, said the uprising opened the eyes of most Mexicans to the dire living conditions of indigenous communities, not only in Chiapas but elsewhere in Mexico. "The nation became aware of the tragedy caused by marginalization and poverty for millions of Mexicans, and many joined in solidarity with the indigenous communities," said Tello, whose book La rebelión de las Cañadas examines the uprising in Chiapas.

Tello pointed out, however, that the trade-off for bringing awareness of the problems of indigenous communities to the rest of Mexico was a violent conflict in Chiapas between factions that supported the EZLN and groups that sided with the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). "The cost was the violence that the communities in Chiapas had to suffer for a decade," said Tello. The clearest example of this conflict was the massacre at Acteal in December 1997, where paramilitary groups aligned with the PRI massacred 45 Tzotzil Indians (SourceMex, Jan. 14, 1998).

EZLN, NAFTA share history

Some analysts argue the Zapatista rebellion should be viewed in the context of NAFTA and not as a separate occurrence. "The most important effect of NAFTA has been the total subjugation of economic policy to the dictates of Washington and to the all-powerful global capital," political analyst and columnist John Ackermann wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada. "While all the studies show that the agreement has resulted in an increase in foreign direct investment, particularly from the US, the flow of resources has not produced growth that can be sustained in the long term."

"In the last 20 years, economic growth has stagnated, inequality has deepened, the environment has deteriorated, and poverty remains at a level that is totally unacceptable," said Ackermann. "Even under these circumstances, the dignified indigenous rebels of Chiapas have managed to avoid extermination by the neoliberal destruction machine."

Ackermann credited the EZLN uprising for pushing the PRI to sit down with the opposition parties to enact a comprehensive electoral and political reform in 1996. The reforms limited the power of the
presidency and contained mechanisms to ensure greater diversity in Congress (SourceMex, July 31, 1996, and August 7, 1996).

According to Ackermann, the EZLN uprising set the stage for a series of protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle in 1999 and in Cancún, Mexico, in 2003 (SourceMex, Sept. 24, 2003).

The EZLN’s uprising also pressured the government to grant several concessions to indigenous communities, including the right to multicultural education, greater legal representation, and increased political autonomy (SourceMex, Feb. 21, 1996, and March 12, 1997). The concession followed a peace agreement negotiated in 1996, but the pact lacked one of the key demands of the Zapatistas, that indigenous communities be granted autonomy. Rather than providing the communities a measure of sovereignty, the government moved to quash any effort by Zapatista sympathizers to create autonomous communities in Chiapas (SourceMex, May 13, 1998). The government also failed to meet the Zapatista demands for land rights, housing, employment, and education.

In an attempt to meet the Zapatistas halfway, the Congress and the federal government negotiated indigenous-rights legislation, but that law was also relatively weak (SourceMex, Aug. 22, 2001, and Oct. 24, 2001).

**Zapatistas commemorate uprising in five autonomous communities**

Rather than wait for the government to grant them autonomy, the Zapatistas created their own autonomous justice, health, and education systems in five municipalities (SourceMex, Sept. 15, 2004). This system of governance prevails in Zapatista territory, which comprises about one-third of Chiapas state. Each of those regions has a capital town or seat of administrative government called a caracol, which means "snail" in Spanish."

On the 20th anniversary of the uprising, the Zapatistas also issued a communiqué pointing out that autonomous communities in Chiapas are practicing democracy "in the same manner as our parents and grandparents."

A message read by EZLN leader Comandante Hortensia also pointed to the ongoing struggle against "bad governments" at the municipal, state, and federal levels that allowed themselves to become "puppets of the neoliberal forces that consider themselves owners of the world."

"In each of the five caracoles on New Year’s Eve, they had a 20th anniversary celebration with thousands of people from Zapatista communities, often wearing ski masks or bandannas covering their faces, dancing all night to live music, with thousands of people who came from all over Mexico and all over the world … to participate in this celebration," said agricultural economist Peter Rosset of the Center for the Study of Rural Change in Mexico.

Rosset said the celebrations had two purposes: to commemorate 20 years of the Zapatista opposition to NAFTA and neoliberal policies and to celebrate the achievements of the EZLN.

"I think the most important thing now, 20 years later, is that in one small area, the southeast of Mexico, where they control territory, they’ve managed to create a different system—a small vision of what an alternative society would look like with collective and rotating self-government, with their own autonomous education system, autonomous health-care system, production cooperatives
and societies, the recovery of the local economy, their own system of administration of justice—in other words, their own legal system, which is much fairer than the federal Mexican legal system—tremendous promotion of young people and of women into positions of importance in the self-government process," Rosset said in an interview on the US radio show Democracy Now.

Others emphasized that the Zapatista campaign is as alive as ever. "The Zapatista movement has not weakened, but we are in the midst of a transformation," EZLN leader Nicolás told the weekly news magazine Proceso. "Even though many still want [to push for change] with bullets, this is not what we want."

In an interview with Proceso columnist José Gil Olmos, Nicolás acknowledged that the EZLN also had its share of missteps, such as becoming too authoritarian and ignoring input from other organizations and people that were also seeking a transformation for Mexico. "Of course we have made some mistakes, some of which were very serious," said the Zapatista leader.

Nevertheless, Nicolás also noted, "We are now working with the advice of a number of people."

**A model for others**

Nicolás said a clear goal for the EZLN is to strengthen its autonomous communities, which would offer a model for many organizations and social groups that feel excluded. "We are excluded entirely from the system. Whether you are blonde, dark-skinned, indigenous, a woman, a homosexual, or a student, we are not insiders," said the EZLN leader. "That’s why we have to begin from our own center."

Some analysts said a major legacy of the Zapatistas was to empower and give women a high profile within the hierarchy of indigenous communities, including the election of leaders like Ramona, Trini, and Esther. The Zapatista philosophy went beyond giving women leadership positions. The EZLN outlined women’s rights with the publication of a manifesto known as Ley Revolucionaria de las Mujeres in the official Zapatista newspaper El Desperatador Mexicano. "[The rules] affirmed the equality of all indigenous people, not only in rights and obligations under the Zapatista rules but also in relation to the basic demands of feminism," columnist Marta Lamas wrote in Proceso. "Among other things, this included the right to decide the number of children to have, to pick their own partner, and to not suffer battery or mistreatment."

"In our country, there are a majority of women who, in their communities, are excluded from decision making and suffer numerous sexist practices, in particular violence," noted Lamas.

A number of politicians also took the opportunity to praise the Zapatistas, including Chiapas Gov. Manuel Velasco Coello, who said the state and the nation "owe the Zapatista movement a debt of gratitude" for changing the political culture in Mexico, providing an example for people to push for collective changes and exercise their rights.

Velasco Coello is considered a young and forward-thinking politician. "A governor who is elected to office at his age and with a high percentage of votes has the responsibility to usher in a real change in a state that has suffered for so many years," columnist Jorge Fernández Menéndez wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Excélsior.

"In communities [throughout Chiapas], whether affiliated with the Zapatistas or not, poverty continues to be the norm, and the change that was supposed to follow a reduction in violence has
not arrived," said Fernández Menéndez. "Addressing this situation is going to be one of Manuel Velasco’s greatest challenges."

Other analysts are skeptical that much change can come from the Chiapas governor’s office, since the Velasco Coello administration lacks the financial resources to enact the needed change and must also work within a political system that allows little flexibility. "In the last two decades, there were six governors who not only have done little to ease poverty but who also dedicated themselves to isolating the Zapatista communities," Gil Olmos wrote in Proceso.

Of the 4.8 million residents of Chiapas, about three-quarters live in poverty and one-third in extreme poverty. In San Andrés Larrainzar, one of the communities most identified with the Zapatistas, the poverty rate increased to about 81% in 2010, compared with 69% in 1990, according to the federal agency Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social (CONEVAL).

Still, even government officials acknowledge that the increase in poverty in Chiapas, both inside and outside the Zapatista-controlled region, is the result of failed public policies and not the fault of the rebels. "Some individuals have wanted to blame the Zapatistas for the high level of marginalization in the region," said Jaime Martínez Veloz, the federal commissioner in charge of dialogue with indigenous peoples. "On the contrary, the poverty demonstrates that the EZLN was right 20 years ago and that [indigenous communities] are having to live under the same conditions today. They were right then, and they are right now."

Martínez Veloz said President Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration is working on an initiative for the Congress to revisit the issue of indigenous rights, which would include some of the measures left out of previous laws, such as codifying the concept of autonomy in the Constitution. The president would like the initiative to be considered sometime in 2014, said Martínez Veloz.

"The timing is right because this is not an electoral year and is the second year of this administration, said Martínez Veloz. "That would give us five years to implement the institutional reforms related to the legislation and to attain good results during this presidential term."

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