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Zapatistas Emerge from the Shadows, Announce Plan for 2018 Presidential Race

by Carlos Navarro

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After keeping a low profile for the last few years, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) returned to the public scene with an interesting proposal for the 2018 presidential election. In a press release issued jointly with the Congreso Nacional Indígena (CNI) in San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas state, the EZLN announced a plan to nominate an indigenous and female independent candidate to run for president of Mexico.

The announcement came at the fifth gathering of the CNI in the form of a communique entitled “Que retiemble en sus centros la tierra” (Let the earth tremble at its core), a line taken from the Mexican national anthem.

An indigenous woman to run for president

The Zapatistas and the CNI do not have any particular individual in mind, with the decision to come via a democratic process espoused by the EZLN and other indigenous groups.

“We will conduct consultations in each of our geographical areas and territories, based on the agreement forged at the fifth CNI to form a governing council, which will pick an indigenous woman—a current CNI delegate—to represent us as an independent candidate in the 2018 presidential election,” said the announcement, which came on the 20th anniversary of the formation of the CNI.

The statement said the goal of participating in the presidential election was not to attain power, but to take a step to put someone in office that would place a priority on the promotion of peace and justice. “The time has come to build a new nation that takes into account all men and women, that empowers those at the bottom and supports a leftist movement in opposition to capitalism,” it said.

The statement also called for the punishment of “those who are guilty of inflicting the pain on the people of a multiethnic Mexico.”

The EZLN had not been in the news much since 2014, when its colorful leader, Subcomandante Marcos, announced that he was retiring (SourceMex, June 4, 2014).

The decision to become so directly involved in the elections was also surprising, since the EZLN’s philosophy has been to shun the traditional electoral system in favor of local autonomy (SourceMex, May 13, 1998, Sept. 17, 2003, July 19, 2006).

A pragmatic move

Pascal Beltrán del Río, a columnist with the daily newspaper Excélsior, pointed out that the move to participate in the election is a very pragmatic one on the part of the Zapatistas and the CNI.

“The recent decision breaks with the EZLN’s previous positions regarding elections and forces us to re-examine the magnitude and the impact of the vote of indigenous communities, particularly in the 28 electoral districts where they represent the majority,” he wrote.
Beltrán del Río cited recent data from the government’s statistics agency (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, INEGI) indicating there are 7.4 million inhabitants in Mexico who speak an indigenous language. Of the total, 2 million are minors. “This means that there are 5.4 million potential voters, although the definition of the indigenous population could go beyond those numbers,” he said.

Beltrán del Río said two important milestones were the agreements negotiated in 1996 between the EZLN and the government in San Andrés Larráinzar, Chiapas (SourceMex, Feb. 21, 1996), and a proposed constitutional reform that would redraw the electoral districts to allow greater participation by indigenous communities in Mexico’s electoral system (SourceMex, Dec. 18, 1996).

The two measures did not achieve the results sought by the EZLN (SourceMex, March 3, 1999, and Jan. 31, 2001), and it was not until 2001 that Congress approved a watered-down initiative sent by then-President Vicente Fox (SourceMex, May 2, 2001, and July 18, 2001).

“Even though the EZLN and the CNI rejected the reforms, this paved the way for a redistricting process in 2004 and 2005, which preserved the integrity of the indigenous territories in 11 states,” said Beltrán del Río.

Some observers suggested that the principal intent of the recent EZLN-CNI gathering in San Cristobal de las Casas might have been overshadowed by the publicity surrounding the decision of the indigenous groups to draft a woman to represent them in the next presidential election. “It is worth noting that the main focus was to emphasize the defense of land, forests, water, and everything that is threatened by the megaprojects for development and the plundering of communal properties,” Neil Harvey, a Mexico expert at New Mexico State University (NMSU), wrote in a guest piece in the daily newspaper La Jornada.

Harvey acknowledged, however, that the focus on preservation of lands and the move to nominate a woman to represent the indigenous movement in 2018 go hand in hand. “This represents a call to society to become organized to support a new political initiative, manifested in the independent candidacy of an indigenous woman in the 2018 presidential election,” said Harvey, who is director of the Center for Latin American and Border Studies at NMSU.

Others agreed that the EZLN-CNI proposal has national implications beyond the indigenous communities in Mexico. “The CNI-EZLN proposal represents a move to bring the issue of indigenous rights into the national spotlight,” columnist Marco Rascón wrote in the daily newspaper Milenio.

The proposal to consolidate the vote of indigenous citizens could cut into the support of the traditional parties in the 2018 elections, particularly the center-left Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena) and the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD). Additionally, the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM) have attracted a measure of support in some indigenous communities.

**A critic from the left**

There was no immediate public reaction from the PRI, PRD, or PVEM to the CNI-EZLN proposal, but Morena leader Andrés Manuel López Obrador criticized the decision. According to López Obrador, who is seeking to lead a coalition of leftist parties in the 2018 presidential race, the EZLN has sold out on its principles by seeking to participate so directly in the election.
In a Twitter message, he described the EZLN as “deceitful” because the Zapatistas called on supporters not to participate in the 2006 election, and are now violating that principle by announcing plans to run a candidate.

There is a history of animosity between the EZLN and López Obrador, with Subcomandante Marcos calling on supporters not to vote for the Morena candidate, whom he called a “fascist.” Rascón described the response of the López Obrador camp as divisive and “toxic for our democracy” and an early announcement of defeat. “Unity in diversity will become the principal theme in 2018,” he said. “Because of that, we welcome this proposal [from the Zapatistas].”

However, Rascón suggested that the indigenous movement would have to work in coalition with others to achieve maximum effectiveness. “For the CNI-EZLN, the consequences of this move will be the need to form alliances, and not to adopt the isolationist sectarian position of its detractors,” he said.

There are other concerns for López Obrador besides the EZLN-CNI, primarily a fractured left. Morena and the PRD have been at odds over the last few years, and the latter is likely to nominate its own candidate rather than fall in line behind López Obrador as a candidate of unity. Another center-left party, Movimiento Ciudadano (MC), which in recent years has been closely aligned with Morena, is also hinting about participating in the 2018 race on its own instead of falling in line behind a single leftist candidate.

Even though it might be a bit early for the parties to formally announce a presidential candidate, speculation has been heavy ahead of the 2018 election. Some politicians are giving strong hints of their intentions to represent their party, including former first lady and ex-federal Deputy Margarita Zavala, wife ex-President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012). Zavala, a member of the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), sent a message on Twitter announcing her desire to seek her party’s nomination for the presidency in 2018.

In comments to reporters, Zavala welcomed the EZLN-CNI proposal to nominate a woman candidate. “All the candidacies are welcome as long as they come to the process via peaceful means,” said Zavala, who supported the decision of the indigenous movements to name a female candidate. “I am very pleased with the manner [in which the EZLN] has decided to move ahead with this process.”

Others offered similar support. “This is great news,” said former foreign relations secretary Jorge Castañeda Gutman, who is expected to seek the presidency as an independent in 2018 (SourceMex, May 18, 2016). “The issues raised by the indigenous communities are exactly why independent candidacies are important.”

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