

# Zapatismo

<http://mexicosolidarity.org/programs/alternativeeconomy/zapatismo/en>

The Zapatistas presented themselves to the world on January 1, 1994, though the roots of the rebellion can be traced back 500 years to the European invasion of the Americas. During those five centuries, indigenous communities lost control of historic lands and were often forced into various forms of slavery and/or virtual slavery. Many rebellions occurred during this period, making the Zapatista uprising part of a long history of struggle and resistance. By the late 20th century, indigenous communities in Chiapas lived on the most marginal and isolated lands in the state. High levels of poverty, and lack of health care and education plagued the communities. The Zapatista uprising was a direct result of these conditions.

The Zapatista movement finds its modern roots in the historical context of the last half of the 20th century. Mexico's "dirty war" turned many young people away from establishment politics and toward open rebellion. This was particularly true of the Fuerzas de Liberacion Nacional (FLN) and several Maoist groups that sent cadre to work in indigenous communities in southern Mexico. Simultaneously, the Catholic church was involved in a social awakening inspired by the "preferential option for the poor" of the Vatican II conference. Indigenous deacons under the direction of Bishop Samuel Ruiz spread a gospel rooted in a combination of Catholicism and indigenous beliefs. But most of all, the rebellion came out of the indigenous communities themselves. Tired of generations of abuse, mired in a crisis that combined land shortages with lack of economic opportunities, and seeing no political resolution, indigenous communities organized the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) in the mid 1980s. In 1992, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari modified Article 27 of the constitution, ending Mexico's historic commitment to land reform. Article 27 was the legal foundation for distribution of community-owned lands called ejidos. Land distribution was one of the major accomplishments of the 1917 revolution, and by 1992 about half of the farmland in Mexico was in the form of ejidos. Ejido land titles are held in perpetuity by the community. While families may control plots of land for generations, the land cannot be sold and is legally held by the community, not the individual. Most ejidos also include large tracts of land dedicated for community use. At the time of the constitutional reform, thousands of ejido petitions were pending with the agrarian reform commission, with some dating back generations. With the abolishment of land reform, these communities lost all hope of receiving ejido status.

Reform of Article 27 was the most important of several hundred changes in constitutional and civil law made by Mexico at the insistence of the United States in anticipation of the signing of NAFTA. The reform represented an important element in the "de-territorialization" of the campesino class, part of a process that began in the 1970s when the Mexican ruling class began to abandon support programs for rural areas in favor of maquiladora-led industrialization. The process of "de-territorialization" forced millions of campesinos to enter the industrial workforce, providing cheap labor for the rapidly growing maquiladora sector. With strong ties to the land, campesinos were only marginally attached to international capitalist markets, but by breaking those ties, the capitalist class unleashed new profit-making opportunities involving the exploitation of millions of former campesinos as wage laborers.

The modification of Article 27 was a collective slap in the face to indigenous communities throughout Mexico. The following year, Zapatista communities in Chiapas began a series of popular consultations with one principal question - should the EZLN launch an armed uprising? The answer was a resounding yes, though the armed uprising was vehemently opposed by the Catholic church.

The results are now history. On January 1, 1994, the same day NAFTA took effect, thousands of armed Zapatistas took over major population centers and perhaps 500 ranches in Chiapas - to the surprise of the army, the ruling class and the international community. The New York Times called the Zapatista rebellion the first "post-modern" revolution. The fact that the uprising coincided with the signing of NAFTA was not casual. In many ways, the Zapatistas were rebelling against the neoliberal model enshrined in NAFTA, the IMF's Structural Adjustment Programs and federal policies that threatened the very survival of 25 million campesinos.

Fighting lasted less than two weeks, and under pressure from civil society, the government agreed to a ceasefire on January 12. This began a series of on-again, off-again talks that ultimately culminated in the signing of the San Andres Accords in 1996. These historic accords, which dealt with autonomy and indigenous rights, were envisioned as the first element in a series of agreements that would eventually lead to a just and comprehensive peace. Unfortunately, the political will of the federal government failed badly.

While federal officials ultimately signed the San Andres Accords, their commitment to the negotiation process was always doubtful. In February 1995, the army invaded the furthest reaches of Chiapas, eventually sending about 70,000 troops (one-third of the entire army) into the state. This began a strategy widely known as "low intensity warfare," though it is more accurately called "civilian targeted warfare." Checkpoints, army patrols, military invasions, and alliances with local paramilitary groups were all efforts to wear down the resistance. Today there are over 100 military encampments distributed throughout areas of Zapatista influence. The paramilitary strategy culminated in the assassination of 45 campesinos in the highland community of Acteal in December 1997. Today paramilitary activity guided by army personnel still represents a constant threat.

Meanwhile, despite signing the San Andres Accords, the federal government refused to implement the agreement via the necessary constitutional changes. Tired of waiting for unfulfilled promises, the Zapatistas began to self-implement the accords through the establishment of Aguascalientes, centers of resistance that combined cultural and economic development with autonomous self-government. In 2001 the newly elected Fox administration passed a severely watered-down version of the San Andres Accords that was immediately rejected by every indigenous group in Mexico.

In 2003 the five Aguascalientes were replaced by Juntas of Good Government - extra-constitutional governing structures that carry out all the functions of local and regional constitutional governments. Members of the Juntas are selected in community assemblies for terms of one year. The make-up of the juntas rotates every week, with representatives from different communities filling the role.

The Juntas carry out all of the functions of the parallel constitutional governments, including economic decisions, law enforcement and an effective judiciary. An oversight committee watches for abuse of power. The Juntas govern under the mandate "mandar obedeciendo" (lead by obeying). They represent an experiment in devolution of power to the community level, and they are rapidly gaining the reputation among Zapatista and non-Zapatista communities alike for honest and transparent government. In September 2004 the Zapatista movement published a one-year summary that included a complete accounting of every penny received by the Juntas during the year. The detailed accounts are available for anyone to see at the five Juntas.

The concept of autonomy is central to Zapatismo. Autonomy is understood as building a world in which all worlds have a place. It means respect for traditions and customs (usos y costumbres) with decentralization of power to the community level. A central element in the Zapatista concept of autonomy is the rejection of the "mal gobierno" (bad government), and this includes rejecting financial assistance from the government. However, the Zapatistas are adamant and patriotic about being Mexican, and have no desire to form an independent state.

The Zapatista project is constructed on three foundations: education, health care and collective development. The education system centers around the training of indigenous education promoters who teach primary school in their native languages as well as Spanish. Some of these promoters run an international language school that offers classes in Spanish and Tzotzil. They charge students the equivalent of three days minimum wage for a week of classes plus room and board, with the funds used to support the teacher training program. Information on the school is available through the Mexico Solidarity Network, which accredits US-based students who wish to attend. Nearly every Zapatista community currently has its own primary school.

Likewise, the health care system is centered around the training of indigenous health care promoters who practice a combination of western medicine and traditional healing. Regional clinics are situated in the Juntas of Good Government, while local clinics provide preventive and emergency care.

Economic development is built collectively using the cooperative model. Today the most important coops are found in coffee production and artisanry. ... The Mexico Solidarity Network works with a women's artisan cooperatives in the highlands region - Mujeres por la Dignidad. Decisions in the coops are made by the members and income is distributed equitably.

Zapatismo does not pretend to be a model for anyone, but it has been an inspiration for millions of people around the world. While the concrete implementation of autonomy, collective organizing, self-government, and mandar obedeciendo are grounded in local cultures unique to Chiapas, the Zapatista movement offers inspiration for millions of people around the world who are building their own local alternatives to neoliberalism.