

THE ZAPATISTA NATIONAL LIBERATION FRONT IN CHIAPAS, MEXICO

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Latin America's turbulent politics can be examined through a survey of *Caudillos* [chieftains] and revolutionaries, thereby telling the history of several nations of the region. However, the end of the Cold War has finally placed Latin America on an irreversible and post-modern path toward democracy, capitalism, modernization and economic integration. Nonetheless, while the day of the Caudillo has passed in Latin America, the revolutionary has still not abandoned the armed struggle. The persistence of revolutionaries is exemplified by the uprising that took place on New Year's Day 1994, in the southeastern Mexican state of Chiapas by the indigenous rebel army, the Zapatista National Liberation Front (EZLN). This recently formed guerrilla group has elicited the sympathy of Indians and peasants throughout Mexico and Central America, and has captured the imagination of scholars and journalists around the world. Though the Zapatistas portray themselves as the leaders of a unique, post-Cold War era *Fourth World Revolution* of indigenous peoples, reality paints a different picture, one reminiscent of the traditional socialist revolution of the Cold War period. An examination of the history of Chiapas, as well as a careful analysis of the EZLN reveals that the origins, motives and tactics of this Mayan-based rebel group are not much different from other Latin American revolutionary groups of the past and present.

To understand the Chiapas uprising and the formation of the EZLN, it is important to begin with a brief historical overview. The actions of the Zapatistas, characterized by the Mexican government as *terrorist* deeds, and their continuing struggle against the Mexican state, are not unprecedented in Mexico nor in other predominantly indigenous regions of other Latin American nations. In central-southern Mexico, there is a legacy of armed indigenous and peasant uprisings--from the days of Emiliano Zapata and Rubeen Jaramillo in Morelos, and Genero Vazquez in Chilpancingo, to Lucio Cabana in Atoyac.¹ Elements among the native peoples of Colombia, Venezuela, Guatemala, Bolivia and Peru, at one time or another, have been members of revolutionary-type groups, fighting state governments which they perceived to be repressive.²

Since Spanish colonial days, the Mayan Indians of Chiapas have had a tumultuous relationship with state authorities. Beginning in the late 1500's, the Spanish introduced *Encomenderos* (feudal landowners) and *Caciques* (powerful mayors) to the region, and instituted the cultivation of new crops like sugar and cotton.³

This new political and economic system upset the traditional Mayan way of life. Many Indians were forced to relocate their milpas (cornfields) onto unproductive mountain slopes. Others were forced to labor for lately arrived Spanish colonists. Although a few Indians retained nominal ownership of land as well as animals, the markets were controlled by the Spaniards.

In addition, the establishment of Catholic missions directly challenged the religious beliefs and lifestyle of the Mayans. Mayan civilization (which dates from around 500 BC, according to historical records), was forever disrupted by the Spanish conquest.⁴

Organized resistance and political leadership have not been in the nature of the Mayan people of Chiapas.⁵ Despite the glorious history of the Mayan civilization, the *Choles*, *Zoques*, *Tzotziles* and *Tojolabales* (who constitute the Mayans of Chiapas), lived on the fringe of the Mayan empire and were subjected to the central rule of a nobility and priesthood based in the Yucatan.⁶

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1 Jorge Castaneda, *Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left After the Cold War* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

2 Martin Edwin Anderson, "Chiapas, Indigenous Rights and the Coming Fourth World Revolution." *SAIS Review* Summer-Fall (1994): 141-145.

3 Robert Wasserstrom, *Class and Society in Central Chiapas* (Berkeley, CA: U.C. Press, 1983).

4 John Reed, *Insurgent Mexico* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1969).

5 Sylvanus Morely, *The Ancient Maya* (Stanford, CA: Stanford U.P., 1946).

However, the Mayans of Chiapas are not entirely passive individuals, according to John L. Stephens, an American whose celebrated diary documented his extensive travels throughout the region in the 1830's:

The Indians submitted to the dominion of the Spaniards until the year 1700, when the whole province, in Chillon, Tumbala and Palenque, apostatized from Christianity, murdered the priests, profaned the churches, massacred the white men and took their wives.⁷

Even after achieving independence from Spain in 1821, the Indian defiance against the state did not subside. While the rest of Mexico was enjoying post-colonial tranquility, Chiapas was full of turbulence sparked by violence between the Indians and Mexican troops. Stephens' experiences provide a vivid picture of an unpredictable and dangerous region constantly on the brink of turmoil.⁸

Nevertheless, though they have exhibited resistance on many occasions, at no time during the Mayans of Chiapas' history have they formed and led a well-organized, wholly indigenous movement against the state. Yet, the Mayans of Chiapas are regarded as quite rebellious indeed.

The largest concentration of Indians in Mexico is in the province of Chiapas (30% of the 2.7 million population of the state), most living in terrible poverty even by Mexican standards.⁹

While the *Mestizo* [people of mixed race] may represent the common Mexican, they are alien to the Mayan in Chiapas. Unlike some other enclaves of Indians throughout Mexico, the Mayans of Chiapas have always held a deep-seated resentment against the Mexican government and have generally viewed themselves as a distinct group. This may explain some of the anger and anguish behind their violent actions of the past, as well as of the present under the EZLN banner.

When placed within a regional context, the Mayans of Chiapas are no different from other native peoples throughout Latin America. Their historical defiance against the state follows a well-known pattern of indigenous and peasant agitation and violence against Latin American states (e.g. the Guatemalan Revolutionary Movement, the Sendero Luminoso of Peru, the Quintin Lame of Colombia).¹⁰ There is no Fourth World Revolution bubbling in Chiapas.

The socio-economic conditions which supposedly provoke these types of indigenous anti-government incidents and inspire guerrilla activity have long existed in Chiapas, as well as other countries in Latin America. However, they cannot serve as an explanation for the roots of organized social rebellion. These so-called preconditions for revolution have also existed in countries where there has been no indigenous-based revolutionary movement (e.g. Ecuador, Costa Rica, Panama, to name a few).¹¹ Like most indigenous and peasant revolutionary movements throughout Latin America, the Zapatistas are a creation of disenfranchised, non-indigenous leftists searching for a cause. This is where Subcommandante Marcos, the infamous leader of the EZLN, plays a role.

Some Chiapas observers have portrayed Marcos as a subordinate within the supposedly clandestine indigenous hierarchy of the EZLN. However, with the rare exception of Subcommandante David, a Tzotzil Indian leading the current negotiating team for the EZLN, the non-indigenous Marcos is still the most prominent and most favored leader of the Mayan guerrillas.

It is evident that the young, green-eyed Marcos is one of the keys to understanding the origins and formation of the EZLN. The mysterious 37-year-old (whose real name is Rafael

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ John L. Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan, 1841* (New York: Dover, 1969).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Todd Robberson, "Non-Indians Lead Mexico's Uprising," *The Washington Post*, 7 January 1994: A12.

¹⁰ Martin Edwin Andersen, "Chiapas, Indigenous Rights and the Coming Fourth World Revolution." *SAIS Review*, Summer-Fall 1994: 143.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 145.

Sebastian Guillen Vicente) is, in some respects, typical of the traditional Latin American revolutionary leader.¹²

He shares a prosperous, middle-class background and a good education with other revolutionary leaders, such as Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Abimael Guzman and even Emiliano Zapata.

Zapata, the famous revolutionary who led a peasant revolt in the state of Morelos during the Mexican Revolution of 1910-20, and whose name the Zapatistas appropriated, deserves special mention. Though some Mexican historians like to portray Zapata as a genuine peasant leader, he grew up in a middle-class environment, never worked as a common laborer, and derived his wealth from the inheritance of substantial land and livestock upon the death of his parents.¹³ Marcos is no different. He comes from a well-to-do family that owns a chain of furniture stores in northern Mexico.¹⁴ In the early 1980's, attracted by the Marxist ideals of the Sandinistas, he abandoned his comfortable lifestyle and went to Nicaragua to work as a union organizer for farm workers.¹⁵

Also common among Latin American revolutionary leaders is the phenomenon of the *cult of personality*. Che Guevara, who led a band of rebels in Bolivia in the 1960's, and Abimael Guzman, who was the supreme leader of the Sendero Luminoso in Peru in the 1970's and 1980's, are two examples of the cult mystique in action. Marcos is a 1990's product of the same type. Like Guevara and Guzman, Marcos has attempted to portray himself as a national folk hero, and a messianic savior of impoverished Indians. While his trademark ski mask may be a publicity gimmick, it has not caused a falloff in support. The Mexican government has protested, "If he wears a mask...he's a delinquent."¹⁶ Marcos has responded: "Why such a fuss over the ski mask? Is Mexican political culture not the culture of the veiled? I am willing to take off my mask if Mexican society will take off its mask."¹⁷

While Marcos is the central figure of the Zapatista movement, the influence of Bishop Samuel Ruiz cannot be overlooked. Though it is not clear to what extent Ruiz has been involved with the rebels, it is well known where his sympathies lie. During his thirty-four years as a bishop in Chiapas, he has learned four indigenous languages and has gained the respect of many Indians.

Viewed by many as a renegade liberation theologian, he has long spoken out about the plight of the Mayan Indians. Since the uprising, he has berated the government for the "great injustice that has been done to our indigenous communities."¹⁸ His public statements have helped to encourage sympathy for the guerrillas and to foment discontent about the central government. Liberation Theology, which Ruiz subscribes to, has played a role in other revolutionary movements like the FMLN in El Salvador, the Lavalas movement in Haiti and the Sandinista Front in Nicaragua. In Chiapas, the influence of Liberation Theology is also evident among the Zapatistas and their supporters.

The EZLN's stated goals are quite similar to other social-revolutionary groups in Latin America: land reform, social justice, democracy and human rights. These goals are vague, the EZLN is simply echoing demands heard from nearly every revolutionary group in Latin America. Though the Zapatistas have called for semi-autonomy for Chiapas, they are not separatists. Their demands have always focused on redressing socio-economic conditions, improving the electoral system and restoring land to native owners.¹⁹

12 Enrique Krauze, "New Zapatistas Sully Memory of Their Namesake," *Wall Street Journal*, 21 January 1994: A15.

13 John Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1969).

14 Rodolfo Garcia, "Nicaraguans Recall Help of 'The Mexican,'" *The Washington Times*, 12 February 1995: A7.

15 *Ibid.*

16 David Clark Scott, "Charming Rebel Shares Mexican Imagination," *Christian Science Monitor*, 16 February 1944: A3.

17 Lucy Conger, "Mexico: Zapatista Thunder," *Current History*, March 1944: 120.

18 Patrick J. McDonnell, "The Roots of Rebellion," *The Los Angeles Times Magazine*, 6 March 1994: 33.

19 *Ibid.* 44.

Unfortunately, whether out of sympathy for the rebels or through a lack of knowledge, a pervasive *Groupthink* in academia and the media has clouded the real motives behind the EZLN. It has been generally accepted that the "EZLN is the first post-modern rebellion in Latin America," which has explicitly renounced the standard leftist goals of leading a revolution and taking over the state.²⁰ It is also the case that the EZLN does not invoke traditional Marxist rhetoric, and seems more than willing to engage in peace talks. All this seems to place the EZLN in a realm apart from other Latin American revolutionary groups. However, this commonly held view should not be allowed to obscure reality.

Some of the scholars, foreign policy analysts and journalists who have been fooled into believing (or perhaps hoping), that the Zapatistas are somehow different from other Marxist-based revolutionary groups in Latin America, have been duped by Marcos' witty and direct communiques. However, a careful examination of the guerrilla leader's words reveals Marxist thought cloaked in humor and poetry. Marcos realizes that in the post-Cold War era, traditional Marxist jargon no longer appeals to a wide audience--particularly not beyond the borders of Mexico. The anti-American rhetoric prevalent among revolutionaries of the Cold War period is now passe.

The current appeal of the Zapatista cause grows out of the relentless attacks on the reputedly corrupt government in Mexico City, and what are termed as the imperialist consequences of NAFTA.²¹

An essay entitled "A Storm and a Prophecy," was publicly released on January 27, 1994. In it, Marcos takes the reader on an exhaustive tour of Chiapas, describing points of interest as well as the poverty and economic exploitation of the region. Marcos is a humorous tour guide. He opens with: "Welcome to Chiapas! You have arrived in the poorest state in the country: Chiapas!"²² Beneath the satirical style one may uncover the real Marcos and the EZLN agenda. He bluntly asserts:

Chiapas loses blood through many veins through oil and gas ducts, electric lines, railways, through bank accounts, trucks, vans, boats and planes, through clandestine paths, gaps and forest trails. This land continues to pay tribute to imperialists...the fee that capitalism imposes on the southeastern part of this country oozes, as it has since the beginning, blood and mud.²³

The so called capitalist and imperialist enemies of Marcos and the EZLN are not only in Mexico City, but also in Washington, London, Amsterdam, Rome and Tokyo.²⁴ His rhetoric may not be filled with the Marxist-laden terminology of the Cold War days, but the targets of his attacks and his stated goals have been heard before from the hills of Cuba, El Salvador and Peru.

The tactics the EZLN has employed in its struggle against the Mexican state, are similar to those used by other Latin American revolutionary and terrorist groups. While it may be somewhat tenuous to classify the EZLN as a terrorist movement, there is no doubt that they have engaged in terrorist acts which parallel past actions of the FMLN in El Salvador, the Sendero Luminoso in Peru, the Monteneros in Argentina and the M-19 in Colombia.

With a force estimated at nearly two thousand rebels, the EZLN began its uprising on January 1, 1994, by storming and occupying the towns of San Cristobal, Ocosingo, Altimirano and Las Marsaritas. By design, the uprising began on the inaugural day of NAFTA. In the first few days, thirty policeman and soldiers and three civilians were killed. Several public buildings and stores were ransacked and looted.²⁵ After ten days of fighting, the Mexican Army forced the rebels to retreat to their stronghold in the Lacondon highlands. The total

²⁰ Lucy Conger, "Mexico: Zapatista Thunder," *Current History*, March 1994: 117.

²¹ Essay by Subcommandante Marcos, "Aa Storm and a Prophecy," released publicly on January 27, 1994: A1.

²² *Ibid.* 5.

²³ *Ibid.* 1-2.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 2.

²⁵ Anita Snow, "Fifty-seven People Reported Dead as Rebels, Troops Clash in Mexico," *The Boston Globe*, 3 January 1994: A1.

civilian and combatant death toll after the initial uprising was estimated at 150.²⁶

Within a week of the New Year's Day uprising, Mexico was shaken by a small wave of bombings which were attributed to the EZLN. Five bombs exploded in and around the capital and in Acapulco.²⁷ Fortunately, no deaths or injuries were reported. Though it is uncertain whether the EZLN was responsible for these incidents, the coincidental timing of them does raise some serious questions. If the EZLN were responsible, did they intend to spread fear throughout Mexico and heighten tensions with the Mexican authorities? The bombings certainly did that. As a result, in Mexico City, security forces dramatically increased their street patrols.²⁸

Kidnapping has been an important tool in the Zapatista' armed struggle. During the initial uprising, the EZLN took ninety doctors and medical workers hostage in the town of Guadalupe Tepayac. In Ocosingo, they held captive several prominent citizens, including local ophthalmologist Francisco Talango, who was killed. The most notorious kidnapping was the seizing of Absalon Castellano, a retired army general and former governor of Chiapas.²⁹

Looting is another activity favored by the EZLN. While banks have been the prime targets of many terrorist and revolutionary groups, the many small shops and stores throughout Chiapas have proven to be modestly lucrative for the EZLN. Since January 1994, the rebels have periodically come down from the mountains to rob businesses in rural towns. An incident which took place in December, 1994, typifies the looting. Thirty ski-masked rebels entered the town of Simjovel at five in the morning, and took up positions in front of the City Hall and the town square. They told residents they had come in peace. The rebels had left town by 11 am, in cars stolen from around the city, having looted City Hall and stolen merchandise and \$5,000 in cash from a local store.³⁰ This incident is certainly not an isolated one; residents throughout Chiapas have reported several dozen similar raids.³¹

It remains something of a mystery as to how the EZLN is funded and armed. Looting may satisfy their immediate needs, but it does not fill their coffers and caches. There has been speculation that profits from drug smuggling and connections with former guerrillas in Guatemala and El Salvador have helped sustain the EZLN.³²

Other EZLN tactics have been aimed at landowners and ranchers. On many occasions the rebels have engaged in the theft of cattle and horses, and have instigated illegal peasant occupations of nearly 200,000 acres of private land scattered throughout Chiapas.³³ In addition, there have been reports of EZLN rebels firing upon Mexican Red Cross workers, in one case injuring two medics. They have also used civilians as shields in their battles with policemen and soldiers and have engaged in forced recruitment.³⁴

Despite the violent tactics of the EZLN, some observers have tended to try and legitimize the groups grievances by emphasizing the poor socio-economic conditions of the region. It is true that poverty is endemic to the Indians of Chiapas. Land rights are also a highly contentious issue; nearly one-fourth of all Mexican land dispute cases which are put before the land reform ministry are in regard to land in Chiapas.³⁵ Despite government claims to the contrary, real democracy does not exist in Mexico. Electoral fraud is still pervasive

26 Holger Jensen, "Hidden Motives in Chiapas Turmoil," *The Washington Times*, 21 February 1995: A17.

27 "Forces Patrol Mexico City in Wake of Bombings," *New York Times*, 10 January 1994: A3.

28 *Ibid.*

29 Juan Mendez, "Human Rights and the Chiapas Rebellion," *Current History*, 4 March 1994: 123.

30 Juanita Darling, "Army, Rebels Vie for the Hearts of People in Chiapas," *The Los Angeles Times*, 22 December 1994: A10.

31 *Ibid.*

32 Enrique Krauze, "New Zapatistas Sully Memory of Their Namesake," *Wall Street Journal*, 21 January 1994: A15.

33 David Clark Scott, "Chiapas Ranchers Vow to Take Law Into Their Own Hands," *Christian Science Monitor*, 4 March 1994: 47.

34 Juan Mendez, "Human Rights and the Chiapas Rebellion," *Current History*, 4 March 1994: 123.

35 Patrick McDonnell, "The Roots of Rebellion," *The Los Angeles Times Magazine*, 6 March 1994: 32.

throughout the country and is particularly egregious in Chiapas. And while the EZLN has been called a terrorist organization by the PRI leaders in Mexico City, the government cannot escape blame for human rights abuses committed by the army, including unwarranted detention, abuse, torture and the execution-style killings of suspected rebels.³⁶ Some human rights observers have accused the government of state-sponsored terrorism. Though the similarities of the origins, motives and tactics of the EZLN and other social-revolutionary groups in Latin America are well established, it is proper to highlight the quantitative differences. In terms of size, the number of men under arms in the EZLN is relatively small, compared to the FMLN in El Salvador and the Sendero Luminoso of Peru (when those groups were at full strength). Moreover, the number of violent incidents and casualties caused by the EZLN is rather low compared to other groups. However, the EZLN is still in its infancy; it is only a little over 2 years old. Though unlikely, the potential still exists for the EZLN to grow in strength and wreak greater havoc upon Mexican society in the near future.

In summary, the EZLN is not some kind of unique group, leading a *Fourth World Revolution* of indigenous peoples in Latin America. Though the end of the Cold War and the mystique of Subcommandante Marcos help invoke the image of a post-modern Latin American revolutionary, the reality is altogether different. The Zapatistas must be recognized as typical of the Cold War revolutionary era. Marcos is a 1990s Guzman, though with a sense of humor devoid of the usual Marxist jargon. His followers in the EZLN are the bargain basement Shining Path guerrillas of Mexico.

The likelihood of the EZLN provoking a revolution, and succeeding is remote. The Zapatistas already have a tacit alliance with the Party of Revolutionary Democracy (PRD), a socialist opposition party. They ought to lay down their arms and work with the PRD, within the system, to achieve their goals. The government, for its part, ought to guarantee free and honest elections in Chiapas, which would allow the Indians and peasants to elect their own people to the town councils and the governorship. Such a scenario would dramatically ease tensions in Chiapas.

Currently, new rounds of peace talks have failed to resolve the conflict. The burden is primarily on the Mexican government to produce change. The recent economic crisis due to the devaluation of the peso, as well as the scandal surrounding the assassination of former presidential candidate Colosio, have been devastating blows to the prestige of the new PRI led government of President Ernesto Zedillo. The continuing turmoil in Chiapas only exacerbates this national instability. The pressure is on the government to do something if it wants to see the EZLN give up their armed struggle, according to Enrique Krauze.

If Mexico makes the most of this malleable moment to launch a program of political reform as far-reaching as its economic reforms, the moral force of Mexican society will disarm the guerrillas and put them back where they belong: in an exhibition room, next to the PRI dinosaurs, in a museum of natural history.³⁷

³⁶ Holger Jensen, "Zedillo's Deepening Dilemma," *The Washington Times*, 7 March 1995: A17.

³⁷ Enrique Krauze, "New Zapatistas Sully Memory of Their Namesake," *Wall Street Journal*, 21 January 1994: A7.