

From here to autonomy: Mexico's Zapatistas combine local administration and national politics

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In January of 1994, the ski-masked Maya rebels of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) rocked Mexico by rising up in arms in Mexico's southernmost state, Chiapas. Twelve years later, the Zapatista movement is still at work amidst a long-standing but uneasy truce, and continues to attract the attention of much of Mexico, if not the outside world. Movement spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos, now calling himself Delegate Zero, is touring the country to campaign against *all* of the candidates in this Mexican election year, and in favor of a grassroots left movement to transform the country. Perhaps of more interest to progressive planners is the unfolding of autonomous local government. Zapatistas in dozens of Chiapas *municipios* (the main unit of local government in Mexico, typically the size of a US county) are carrying out an intriguing experiment: without unseating the official governments, they have created parallel "autonomous" governments that deliver services, administer justice, and attempt to model an ideal of good government—all based on traditional Mayan forms of governance. Whatever the final outcome, this new demonstration of Zapatista audacity is definitely worth understanding.

Mexico since 1994: The more things change...

Since 1994 the national government has sporadically negotiated with the Zapatistas, but has simultaneously built up troop strength—at this point, thousands of troops are posted in Chiapas (estimates range from 18,000-70,000), with added backup from paramilitaries. Nonetheless, the Zapatistas have continued to demand autonomy for Mexico's 62 indigenous groups, who make up seven percent of the population, and has long been poor, dispossessed, and despised. With participation from organizations representing 50 of the indigenous groups, they succeeded in negotiating the San Andrés autonomy accords, signed by the government in 1996.

Implementing the accords, however, required an act of Mexico's Congress. Hope for such legislation ran high when the 2000 elections, for the first time in 71 years, broke the Institutional Revolutionary Party's (PRI's) control of the presidency. President-elect Vicente Fox, who ran on the ticket of the conservative National Action Party (PAN) but garnered support from across the political spectrum as the candidate of "change", vowed to resolve the problem in Chiapas "in 15 minutes." He endorsed a version of the San Andrés accords, but in Mexico's Congress, where no party held a majority, leaders of his own PAN, the PRI, and the left-leaning Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) cut a deal to pass a watered-down, ineffectual autonomy law instead. After a prolonged silence, in August 2003 the EZLN announced that they would implement the San Andrés accords directly, through five newly created "Good Government Councils," each grouping a number of autonomous municipalities.

As of 2006, Fox's six-year term is ticking to an end. The current front-runner for president is the PRD's Andrés Manuel López Obrador, a populist in tailored suits who governed Mexico City before throwing his hat into the national ring. López Obrador is the hope of some on the left, and the despair of others. He pledges to prioritize job creation (Mexico's job growth has lagged far behind the expansion of the workforce, swelling the informal sector), and to

rebuild the welfare state that sweetened the PRI's pill of one-party rule until debt crisis and market-friendly reformers dismantled it. But he also promises the economic powers-that-be in Mexico to maintain financial stability and fiscal restraint—avowals at odds with the increases in spending that would be needed to carry out the populist planks of his program. Moreover, most Mexicans view the PRD, like the other major parties, as corrupt.

What is autonomy?

There's a lot more to autonomy than simply declaring it. In the early years of the Chiapas stalemate, being an autonomous municipality meant in some cases that the Zapatistas maintained roadblocks, charged tolls, and posted signs ("You are entering autonomous territory"); in other communities autonomy was primarily a state of mind. Over time, however, the military wing of the Zapatista movement ceded more authority to the civil wing, and the civil wing built up local communities' abilities to consult, plan, and decide. As Gloria Benavides (a former member and prominent civilian supporter of the EZLN, known to many, including the government, as Comandante Elisa) wryly commented, "The political discussion on the civil side often results in good ideas; when the military decides, things usually go badly."

The building blocks of autonomy are, in order of increasing geographic scale, communities, *municipios*, and regional organisms. At the regional level, the Good Government Councils, which are decision-making bodies, coexist with the *Caracoles*, complexes of regional services. (*Caracol* translates to "snail" or "conch," and is used as a symbol for communication.) The *Caracol* based in the village of Oventik, in the centrally located Chiapas highlands, provides the space for the Good Government Council that serves the seven neighboring *municipios*. In that *Caracol* we noted primary and secondary schools, a large clinic, and a cluster of "productive projects": cooperatives for crafts, cultivation of coffee and mushrooms, and beekeeping; an agroecology group that consults with local farmers, a shoemaking shop, a language school for international visitors. Importantly, the *Caracoles* also serve as contact points for supporters from Mexico and around the world. As the Political Commission of the Oventik *Caracol* expressed it to us, the *Caracol* is "a window, a door so that all can enter into the communities, so that they can see and be seen. Through the people who enter from all parts of the world, we travel to all parts of the world."

But the rubber really hits the road at the *municipio* level. In Magdalena de la Paz, the seat of the autonomous *municipio* of the same name, we were treated to the unusual spectacle of two parallel and competing sets of government institutions. There are two primary schools, two clinics, and two city halls. On one side of the central plaza is a large, windowless shed of rough boards with a metal roof, where we were met by men and women wearing traditional Mayan garb—beribboned hats set off by short white tunics or woolly ponchos for the men, multicolored blouses and skirts with distinctive weaves identifying the community of origin for the women. Across the plaza stands the home of what the autonomous authorities call the "bad government," a standard-issue brick and stucco office building. We didn't go inside, but in front stood a group of men (only) wearing the cowboy hats, plain-colored shirts, and jeans typical of Chiapas *mestizos* (assimilated mixed-race people). To complete the picture, the official government calls the municipality "Magdalena Aldama," substituting the name of a *mestizo* hero of Mexico's independence movement for the suffix "of peace."

Such local dual power is typical of the Zapatista *municipios*. As Miguel Pickard of the Center for Economic and Political Research on Community Action (CIEPAC) explained, "The

Zapatista presence in the communities ranges from a tiny minority to an overwhelming majority.” The Zapatista organization itself has very exacting requirements: in addition to adhering to its ideological principles, members must follow a set of standards that include rejecting any aid from the official government and abstaining from alcohol. So it is not surprising that at least some in each community decline to join. “The issue,” Pickard said, “is how to convince people to give you legitimacy, if not through an election” (given that the Zapatistas reject the current electoral system).

How do they do it? It’s certainly not through access to greater resources. Unlike the official government, the autonomous authorities do not charge taxes (the Zapatista highway tolls were dropped in 2003). Instead, they discuss needs with the community and take up voluntary collections based on the ability to pay, as well as soliciting voluntary community labor. Coffee and craft coops bring in additional revenues. International solidarity does supplement these internally generated funds—the clinic at Magdalena, for instance, has been supplied by Médecins du Monde for a number of years—but doesn’t provide a dependable resource base.

Good government pays

Instead, the key seems to be, in the words of the Maya communities themselves, good government. As the municipal authorities of Magdalena told us through their spokesperson, “The idea is to demonstrate that we can do this work. We’re trying to end the government’s power to use the people just to build the strength of the parties. We are resolving all our problems on our own, with our own words, in our own way, without the involvement of the [official] government.” According to CIEPAC’s Pickard, it’s working. “The most impressive thing I hear about,” he said, “is the justice system. For the first time in over 500 years, indigenous people are getting justice! They’re getting it in their own language, they can be heard, it’s not corrupt, the authorities can’t be bought off.” The result, he added, is that Zapatista, non-Zapatista, and even anti-Zapatista community members seek out the autonomous judicial authorities, even for complex and contentious issues such as conflicting land claims. Eastern Michigan University political scientist Richard Stahler-Sholk writes that in one Zapatista region he studied, the officials reported that they hear more complaints brought by *non-Zapatistas* than Zapatistas! The Magdalena officials confirmed that people often come to them after failing to get satisfaction from the official side of the plaza. They displayed a refreshingly pragmatic attitude, saying that when a case proves especially difficult they consult with the “bad government” to resolve it. Many non-Zapatistas also sign up for “good government” driver’s licenses, according to Pickard, even though the official police do not recognize them.

Zapatista governing structures are also, quite explicitly, schools of participatory democracy. Policing and jurisprudence lean heavily on discussion and negotiation rather than coercion. *Municipios* choose their leaders in assemblies. At the next level up, in the *Caracoles* and the Good Government Councils, the movement rotates people through for short stints, trying to spread around the experience of governing.

Another advantage the autonomous councils bring to the table is that they build on long-standing Maya traditions. Bernardo, a young Mayan taxi driver who swore he would never join the Zapatistas because “They want to run the country like Fidel Castro—you know their slogan, ‘Everything for everybody,’” nonetheless told us he likes the fact that they are preserving Mayan ways. Language and costume are the most visible signs, of course. Enrique, a young Zapatista activist, noted that collective work and taking up community collections are part of the Maya

culture as well. (One powerful Maya custom is that communities only speak through designated spokespersons; thus, although we had individual conversations with several members of Zapatista communities, we were told in no uncertain terms that it would be inappropriate to identify them, and are using pseudonyms.) Alberto, an anthropologist who studies the Maya, added that Mayan peoples value simplicity and humility, and view costly possessions with suspicion—perhaps rendering the unfinished boards of Magdalena’s “other” city hall more appealing than the polished surfaces of the official one.

A final element of modern-day Maya culture is the community church. Alberto declared that worship consists of “a Catholic façade on top of traditional Maya religion.” The typical Maya church, with walls lined by a dozen or more saints wrapped in layers of cloth and decked with mirrors, and pine-needle strewn floors (no pews) where families come to burn rows of candles and traditional healers make offerings of incense and live chickens, would appear to confirm his view. Enrique commented that in divided communities like Magdalena, the church and its associated saint’s day fiestas are the one space where everybody gets together—and that lay preaching within the church is the most important forum for Zapatistas to address the rest of the community.

However, the Zapatista local authorities are seeking to break with *some* age-old traditions, in the name of...tradition. Current-day Mayan society before 1994 was, like most surviving pre-modern cultures, oppressively sexist. Arranged marriages, codified male authority in the home and the village, and widespread domestic violence kept women socially and physically subordinated. But during the EZLN’s 1983-93 underground phase, Maya women threw themselves into organizing and came to make up one-third of the rebel army’s ranks. Their payoff was a Revolutionary Women’s Law, promulgated by the Zapatistas during the 1994 uprising, proclaiming equal rights, including the right to choose whom and when to marry, and whether and when to have children. The existence of the law does not mean that gender equality has been achieved in Zapatista communities—“It’s not easy to change this in just a few years,” as Paciencia, a young activist, stated—but the fact that the communities endorsed it at all is a milestone.

In the case of Magdalena, the municipal council consisted of five men and six women. They proudly told us that including women was a new policy, but claimed that it was also a return to ancient Maya custom: “Before the arrival of the Spanish, women were so important that they performed all offices. It was the Spanish who put an end to this when they came, so now it is necessary to reclaim this practice.” This amazing declaration was blunted somewhat by the fact that the other two arms of government, the judges and the police, were all male, and that although all the male councilors were present, only two of the six women were (presumably because the others had household duties). As they admitted, “We still have a long way to go.”

It would be a mistake to view Zapatista autonomy as simply a process separating a few communities from the rest of Mexico. Although local administration is the most concrete aspect of autonomy today, Zapatismo envisions autonomy as *all* of society governing itself, replacing the state and neoliberal capitalism with “freedom, democracy, and justice.” In short, autonomy in its full realization amounts to revolution.

Missed connections

Stubborn independence, intensive consultation with the community, and deep roots in Mayan culture have helped the “good governments” to win local support. But the same three

factors have in some cases estranged the Zapatistas from potential allies, both Maya and otherwise. According to a 2004 report by the Network for Peace-Chiapas, a broad coalition of groups working for peace and indigenous rights, many grassroots Chiapas organizations formerly allied with the Zapatistas have distanced themselves over the issue of whether to accept government aid—especially once a new state administration elected in 2000 showed itself more disposed to dole out aid to community-based groups. Political scientist Stahler-Sholk commented that government aid programs have been “clearly tailored and administered in Chiapas for the political purpose of dividing communities and attracting supporters away from the Zapatista cause.”

Does this mean that Zapatismo is shrinking? “We know of thousands who were Zapatista and left, who couldn’t take the hardships,” says Ernesto Ledesma of the Center for Political Analysis and Social and Economic Research (CAPISE). “We also know of thousands who have joined. If you ask, twelve years after 1994, are there more or fewer Zapatistas, the answer is we don’t know, nobody knows.”

Some sectors of the broader Mexican and global left have also become disillusioned with Zapatismo. To be sure, some of this boils down to straightforward ideological disagreements, in part because the Zapatista perspective has more in common with the anarchist tradition than the socialist one. But José (a pseudonym), a recent college graduate and militant in the Chiapas-based People’s Resistance Movement of the Southeast (MRPS), which has moved away from supporting the EZLN, offered meaty criticisms of Zapatista actions—and particularly inactions—as well. José lamented that on many occasions the Zapatista movement has failed to speak out against fierce repression of non-Zapatistas. Global activists have likewise been perplexed as to why Zapatismo has declined to send representatives or even messages of solidarity of like-minded global gatherings such as the World Social Forum—but continues to organize its own global conferences, to which it expects others to come.

Some of this standoffishness doubtless stems from simple left sectarianism. However, there is more to it than that. Zapatismo is very consciously accountable to the communities that support it and deeply committed to decision-making through consultation. But given the revived Maya customs of decision-making via wide-open community assemblies and the search for consensus, this is bound to imply long silences toward the outside world, and in some cases no statement at all. Perhaps this is not all bad. “The Zapatistas say little and do much,” noted Alberto, the anthropologist. “That’s the opposite of the politicians, who say a lot but do very little.” In any case, there is a very real tension between being a truly community-based movement, and serving as a touchstone for the Mexican and even world left.

A final reason for strains between Zapatismo and the broader left is simply that the Mayan languages, world-view, and style of communication are utterly foreign to most people formed in a more western way of looking at the world. As Ledesma of CAPISE put it, “Left intellectuals speak from the head; Mayas speak from the heart.” Certainly these two left intellectuals found ourselves struggling to communicate. The Maya custom of having a designated spokesperson and a required set of greetings, sometimes supplemented by the Zapatista variation of ensuring that each person says his or her piece, tended to lead to very formal and repetitive—if sometimes insightful and even poetic—presentations and responses to questions in our group’s meetings with Zapatista representatives.

The “Other Campaign” and the challenges of autonomy

This varied set of baggage accompanies the Zapatistas' still considerable political prestige as they embark on the Other Campaign (Otra Campaña, or Otra for short), their counter to the presidential campaign. Marcos, reinvented as Delegate Zero, is traversing an ambitious itinerary to visit every state of Mexico before the July elections, to listen and speak with those who want to build "democracy, liberty, and justice" from below. The Zapatistas identify this campaign as a risk equal to the initial 1994 uprising (among other things, the physical risk to Marcos himself is enormous), but essential to break through the geographic isolation of their autonomy project.

Some on the left criticize the Otra for attacking Lopez Obrador, the presidential candidate of the center-left PRD, on equal terms with the others. But Ledesma of CAPISE points out that the party's vote against the San Andrés accords which would have codified indigenous autonomy is "fundamental to understanding the Zapatistas' fury against the PRD," and added that Jesús Ortega, who coordinated the vote deal, has been named by Lopez Obrador to run his campaign. Moreover, the criticism of all the parties resonates with ordinary Mexicans' disgust for politics as usual. There is no doubt that Marcos will give the candidates some "Pepto-Bismol moments," in Ernesto Ledesma's words. The big question is whether the Other Campaign will achieve its bold goal to build a new, nationwide movement. "It's a bet on the grassroots organizations around the country," Ledesma summed up. "The Zapatistas have bet everything on this initiative—and it might not work."

For those concerned with community development, the most recent twists in the Zapatistas' path hold a mixed set of lessons. They have taken the process that is sometimes called "indigenous planning"—grounding decision-making about space and public life in the strengths, resources, and traditions of a particular community—farther than almost any other group of similar size and prominence. Their pioneering development of autonomous governments in the shadow of the official ones offers a provocative model worth emulating and adapting. At the same time, their community-rooted, Maya-inflected style of politics, the reason for their success in Chiapas, has itself thrown up barriers between them and a broader progressive movement. With the Other Campaign, the Zapatistas hope to bridge those barriers and put Mexico's political and economic elites on the defensive once again. If they can successfully mesh local grassroots autonomy with national coalition-building, all of us should be taking note.

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