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### **The Zapatista Movement: The Fight for Indigenous Rights in Mexico**

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On 1 January 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), an indigenous armed organisation, declared war on the Mexican Government, demanding “work, land, housing, food, health, education, independence, liberty, democracy, justice and peace.”<sup>1</sup> This article explains the factors that encouraged this indigenous uprising that began in Chiapas, Mexico, by highlighting the interests and demands of the indigenous peoples as well as the Mexican Government’s responses to them. It also addresses the limitations that both sides experienced during the struggle, and the consequences and effects this conflict brought to indigenous rights and living standards in Mexico. The EZLN movement was an eye-opening event for both the Mexican government and the non-indigenous population to realise the alarming situation of indigenous people in Chiapas. The indigenous conflict in Chiapas not only provoked a domestic awareness of indigenous rights, recognition and self-determination, but also an international awakening on these issues.

#### **Understanding the Chiapas Indigenous Issue**

Mexico has the largest indigenous population in Latin America.<sup>2</sup> According to the UN Human Rights Commission, 15 per cent of the total Mexican population identifies as indigenous,<sup>3</sup> with the majority living in the southern states. Mexico’s indigenous population accounts for 12.7 million people who speak 62 different languages.<sup>4</sup> Among the 31 states that constitute Mexico, together with the Federal District, Chiapas has the most multicultural and multi-ethnic population of the country. According to the Mexican Institute of Statistics and Geographical Information (INEGI) 2010 census, Chiapas has 1.1 million indigenous people, representing 27.2 per cent of the state’s total population. Chiapas is one of the wealthiest states in Mexico in natural resources (with 30 per cent of Mexico’s fresh water supply), yet ranks as the second most marginalised state in the country.<sup>5</sup> According to International Service for Peace (SIPAZ), half of Chiapas’ indigenous population “reports no income at all and another 42 per cent make less than US\$5 a day.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, 70 per cent of Chiapas’s indigenous population suffer from high levels of malnutrition. Throughout Mexican history, Chiapas’s indigenous people have been excluded from the governmental decision-making process as well as from enjoying basic human rights and services such as education and healthcare. Consequently, the EZLN was formed, to represent the rights and aspirations of Chiapas’s indigenous peoples. EZLN demanded that the Mexican Government put an end to indigenous segregation and oppression.<sup>7</sup> This oppression was exacerbated by the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which was viewed as a threat to indigenous interests. The EZLN considered this as a governmental betrayal by opening opportunities for US and Canadian big agrarian businesses to buy or rent their land.<sup>8</sup> Indigenous agricultural workers in Chiapas feared that international competition would wipe them out of the local markets. According to the Mexican Commission for Indigenous Development, 67 per cent of Mexico’s indigenous population work in the agricultural sector.<sup>9</sup> The historical marginalisation and abuse of indigenous people in Chiapas together with the NAFTA implementation were the two key factors that sparking the Zapatista uprising.

The EZLN or ‘Zapatistas’ are comprised mainly of Chiapas’s indigenous peoples, together with some non-indigenous political leadership. The Zapatistas recognise themselves as an ‘indigenous peasant movement’ constituted by the diverse indigenous communities of Chiapas. The predominant communities that form the EZLN are the Tzeltal, Tzozil, Chol, Tjolobal, Zoque, Kanjobal and Mame.<sup>10</sup> These represent one-quarter of Chiapas’s inhabitants and most of them live in extreme poverty.<sup>11</sup> However, other indigenous groups from different states of Mexico have also shown support for the movement.<sup>12</sup> The main ideological leader of the Zapatista insurgency is Sub-commandant Marcos. He has acted as the spokesperson for the EZLN since the insurgency’s creation. The group is founded on “traditional indigenous forms of organisation and governance.”<sup>13</sup>

## **The EZLN and the Mexican Government: Interests and Limitations**

The EZLN's war declaration took place on 1 January 1994, the same day as NAFTA's implementation. The EZLN started the war by taking over 4 towns of Chiapas, including the touristic town of San Cristobal de las Casas. After 11 days of violence (where more than 300 died), the Mexican Government and the indigenous rebels began negotiations and ceased fire.<sup>14</sup> The Zapatista's interests and limitations were comprised and formally listed in the San Andres Peace Accords, two years after the Zapatista uprising. The Accords declared that the Mexican Government give fair treatment to the indigenous peoples of Chiapas. The Zapatistas interests were completely opposite to those of the Mexican Government regarding NAFTA. According to the New York Times, Sub-commandant Marcos categorised NAFTA as a "death certificate for the Indian peoples in Mexico, who are disposable for the Government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari."<sup>15</sup> The EZLN wanted the Mexican Government to provide a better quality of life for the indigenous peoples of Chiapas by incorporating their political, economical and social rights to the Mexican constitution.<sup>16</sup> The San Andres Accords sought constitutional ability for indigenous peoples to exercise the right to self-determination.<sup>17</sup> They claimed for autonomy as a "collective right to have diversity respected, control over native territories and recourse with them."<sup>18</sup> The Zapatistas fought for Emiliano Zapata's ideology during the Mexican Revolution of 1910: "the lands should be owned by those who work on them."<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the interests and limitations of the indigenous peoples of Chiapas, represented in the San Andres Accords, not only regarded cultural autonomy and political participation, but also the recognition of self-determination rights within the Mexican constitution.

On the other hand, the Mexican Government had different interests to those of the Zapatistas. With NAFTA's implementation, the government was forced to align the laws regarding agriculture with those of Canada and the US. Mexican interests were in favour of big transitional companies and privatisation. Moreover, the government did not want to give autonomy to the indigenous populations because it feared that by providing them autonomy, the country was going to 'Balkanise', or fragment itself. Additionally, the Zapatista insurgency brought social instability to Mexico and a lack of confidence to international investors, provoking a Mexican peso devaluation of 50 per cent.<sup>20</sup> The Mexican Government intended to obstruct the EZLN uprising to reestablish foreign investor's confidence, and stability of the Mexican economy. It sent a high military presence to Chiapas to overcome the EZLN and take back control of the region. Though, the government interests were limited in intimidating and oppressing the EZLN and in not accomplishing their requests. It wasn't until 2001 that the Mexican Congress passed an indigenous law recognising the multi-cultural nature of the Mexican state, reiterating that "indigenous peoples could practice autonomy as well as self-determination within the framework of a united nation."<sup>21</sup> Consequently, autonomy was granted to indigenous communities, as well as political participation. The EZLN insurgency functioned for indigenous peoples as a catalytic converter of indigenous rights in Mexico and as an effective example for other indigenous communities around the world on how to pursue indigenous interests and how to overcome the limitations of indigenous rights.

## **Implications and Consequences of the Zapatista Movement**

As a consequence of the Zapatista insurgency in Chiapas, the indigenous peoples in Mexico were granted the constitutional right of self-determination, with the exception of not attempting to destroy Mexico's sovereignty.<sup>22</sup> The incorporation of this right into the Mexican constitution was essential for the development of Mexican indigenous communities as well as for the Mexican democracy as a whole, because it encouraged the respect of indigenous traditions and practices within the country.

The Zapatista Movement was a consequential actor of indigenous political participation in Mexico. After 2001, indigenous people were able to "determine freely their political status and consequently to pursue their economic, social and cultural development."<sup>23</sup> Indigenous peoples' representation in local legislatures was reinforced with this insurgency, while the Mexican Government also ensured the legitimacy of cultural ways of indigenous government. <sup>24</sup> The Mexican Government guaranteed indigenous peoples' right to participate in the policymaking of their communities, and to conserve their languages, as well as their lands.

Another consequence of the Zapatista insurgency was that a new political, economic, social and cultural relationship between the Mexican Government and indigenous peoples was formed.<sup>25</sup> One can argue that the Chiapas struggle established opportunities for indigenous peoples to administrate their own territories in relation

to their traditional ways of governance.<sup>26</sup> For example, before colonisation, the elementary component of the indigenous government in Chiapas was the “calpulli”, better understood as small territories where indigenous peoples cultivated corn crops or “milpas”.<sup>27</sup> The “calpiulec” was the authority of the “calpulli” since he was the one that administrated the lands by dictating the rules and conditions to the indigenous families that worked the crops within the lands.<sup>28</sup> With the Mexican Congress’ approval of the self-determination right, indigenous peoples maintained their own traditions because they were able to keep in a certain way their “calpulli” lifestyle. The Mexican Congress’s approval of the indigenous law of 2001 was a mainstream event in the history of Mexican indigenous peoples, as it allowed them to preserve their ancient ways of living and their identity.

The Chiapas issue also motivated the creation of the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Towns (in Spanish, Comision Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indigenas (CDI)). The CDI’s mission is to make public policies to develop and preserve indigenous peoples and communities by guaranteeing “respect for their cultures, enforcement of their rights and the achievement of a full life.”<sup>29</sup> This Commission prepares legal opinions in order to support legislative work in regards to indigenous peoples.<sup>30</sup> It also has the task to encourage the respect and defense of human rights of the indigenous population. However, according to the World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous People, the actions of this agency have “been criticised for failing to take cases of grievous rights violations, leading many indigenous leaders and rights activists to question its credibility.”<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the current status of marginalisation that indigenous peoples experience in Chiapas daily demonstrates the CDI’s failure in providing them satisfactory living standards.

### **Evaluation of the Zapatista Insurgency outcomes**

The theoretical progress to advance indigenous rights and living standards by the Mexican Government was a good step for achieving indigenous demands, reflected in the Zapatista revolt. However, in practice one can argue that the EZLN demands to the Mexican government were unsuccessful when examining the current conditions of the indigenous peoples in Chiapas.

Presently, indigenous peoples in Chiapas lack basic services such as education and healthcare. According to the INEGI, almost 20% of Chiapas’s population is illiterate and most of them report having attended school a scarce number of years.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the majority of indigenous peoples in Chiapas don’t have access to quality health services because the state accounts for “less than one doctor per 1000 inhabitants.”<sup>33</sup> Chiapas provides more than “half of Mexico’s hydroelectricity”<sup>34</sup> and 30 per cent of Mexico’s total water supply, but despite this, 90 per cent of its indigenous communities do not have energy or plumbing in their homes.<sup>35</sup> Chiapas’s present-day lack of healthcare and deprived sanitation are evidence of the ineffectiveness of the Zapatistas movement, as well as of the Mexican Government’s actions in response to it.

Alternatively, the Chiapas issue can be examined as a positive approach for indigenous populations. The EZLN created a national and international awareness of the indigenous peoples’ situation in Chiapas. This rebellion generated a general consciousness among Mexico’s entire population in accepting its status as a multicultural and multiethnic nation and in recognising the existence of rich indigenous cultures and traditions within its territory.

Finally, according to Xochitl Leyva, a contributor of *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, the Chiapas issue generated a united indigenous ideology, which refers to an “internal reaffirmation of cultural self-esteem (pride in existing selfhood).” Arguably, as a consequence of this revolt, indigenous peoples learned that by uniting among themselves and by fighting together common causes, their voice would become stronger within negotiations with the Mexican Government.

### **Conclusion**

The Zapatista rebellion played a significant role in the expansion of indigenous rights and recognition in Mexico. As a consequence of the insurgency, together with its international implications – such as the loss of confidence of foreign investors – the Mexican Government was obligated to make constitutional reforms that granted indigenous peoples local political autonomy and greater political participation at a national level. Indigenous peoples not only gained from this rebellion the expansion of political rights, but also guaranteed greater preservation of traditions, languages and ways of living.

The Mexican Government has failed to reduce poverty levels and improve the quality of life standards in Chiapas: violence, social inequality and human rights violations to indigenous peoples still remain. However, as a consequence of the Zapatista revolt, the government has made efforts to overcome these problems by creating Federal agencies specialised in indigenous issues. The creation of the CDI can be seen as an example of these efforts. Regardless of the shortcomings of these government agencies, their creation is a big step towards accelerating the development of indigenous communities.

Mexico is a multicultural and multiethnic country. The EZLN movement played a fundamental role in representing the interests of these indigenous peoples by achieving protection of the rich Mexican indigenous heritage within the constitution. The Zapatista struggle was effective as indigenous communities were given greater autonomy, challenging their previous subordinate position as seen by the Mexican Government.

The Zapatistas had a positive impact on the expansion of indigenous rights and recognition in Mexico. It can serve as an example of how indigenous solidarity can put an end to indigenous exclusion and oppression. Although the Mexican Government has been unsuccessful in granting a better quality of life to those indigenous peoples in Chiapas, the EZLN was effective in displaying (nationally and internationally) the alarming situation that indigenous peoples are living in Mexico.

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