

## **MEXICO'S UNFINISHED SYMPHONY: THE ZAPATISTA MOVEMENT**

Rodolfo Stavenhagen, El Colegio de México<sup>1</sup>

The administration of President Ernesto Zedillo, which took office in December 1994, inherited from its predecessor Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the unresolved issue of an armed anti-government uprising in the state of Chiapas. After the shock-waves of the political transition—including a serious financial crisis and the severe devaluation of the Mexican peso—had more or less dissipated, public opinion expected the new administration to address this conflict responsibly and competently, as had been promised during the presidential campaign. Indeed, shortly after the handing-over of power contacts between the federal government and the rebels were renewed, leading eventually to the initiation of a formal “peace dialogue” which in turn resulted in a signed “Accord” between the parties in 1996. But thereafter further negotiations stalled, new tensions arose, and the dialogue between the Zapatista National Liberation Army (*Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional* -- EZLN) and the federal government broke off. The Zedillo administration came to its end six years later without having accomplished its aim of solving the armed conflict in Chiapas nor, for that matter, any of the major issues which originated the uprising. In a larger perspective, this omission must be chalked up as a major failing of the Zedillo presidency.

During the waning years of the administration, officials used to state frequently that in contrast to the civil wars in Colombia, El Salvador and Guatemala, the violent conflict in Mexico was quite short-lived, while the peace process was dragging on. It is not clear whether this assessment gives more credit to the government than to the Zapatistas, but in my opinion the emphasis is misplaced. The Chiapas uprising is essentially an expression of a deeply-rooted social and political conflict, and the violent or military aspect of the rebellion is not its most essential feature, much less the cause of it. The failure of the Zedillo administration to solve this confrontation during his *sexenio* results from the fact that the government was mainly concerned with the overtly military aspect of the encounter --a group of (poorly) armed Indian peasants declaring war on the powerful centralized Mexican state—and was much less interested in dealing with the underlying roots of the rebellion. It is likely that if these social causes are not addressed by the new administration of Vicente Fox in a sensible and coherent manner, the conflict will simmer on for a time and its outcome is by no means predetermined.

The origins and background of the Zapatista rebellion are well known (Collier, Diaz, Harvey, LeBot, Tello, Womack). In a nutshell, a highly stratified and hierarchical political and social structure of colonial vintage succeeded in keeping the Indian peasantry in Chiapas marginalized and socially excluded well into the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> (Zebadúa) Demographic pressure and soil erosion pushed a growing population out of the traditional Indian highlands who

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<sup>1</sup> Paper to be published by the Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington D.C. (Refers to events prior to October 2000)

joined an increasing flow of poor peasants to claim land in the tropical lowlands – the Lacandon jungle area next to the Guatemalan border. Here they encountered other settlers seeking subsistence and struggled against the interests of non-Indian cattle-ranchers and *latifundistas* (large landholders) who were logging the tropical forest and appropriating what used to be considered nationally-owned lands. Land conflicts, peasant organization and periodic violence marked the opening-up of Mexico's last "frontier" for several decades during the second half of the twentieth century. The development of infra-structure, the construction of several multi-purpose dams and the opening up of vast new oil fields, offered seasonal non-agricultural employment to Indian peasants, and also contributed to the weakening of communal bonds and solidarity. Government agrarian and social policies were unable to provide adequate solutions to these growing problems, even as the traditional corporate patron-client relationship supported by the official ruling PRI (Party of the Institutional Revolution), which was often exercised in autocratic manner by the local governors, was challenged increasingly by radical political organizations. Whereas Samuel Ruiz, the Catholic Bishop of San Cristobal de las Casas (the regional hub city in the Indian highlands) promoted his version of Indian Theology (a variant of the Theology of Liberation) to which numerous highland communities adhered, on the other hand a number of Protestant denominations made spectacular inroads among the traditionally Catholic population, particularly in the smaller urban centers and the shanty-towns growing up around the larger cities (Tuxtla Gutierrez, the state capital, San Cristobal, Ocosingo, Comitán).<sup>2</sup> In the early eighties, another ingredient was added to this bubbling cauldron of rival and often conflicting interests: the arrival of a group of radical left-wing militants from northern Mexico who intended to organize revolutionary activity along the lines of similar movements which in the sixties and seventies had taken hold in other Latin American countries. Simultaneously, during the eighties the border region was to become a haven for tens of thousands of Maya peasant refugees fleeing repression and counter-insurgency in Guatemala. The stage was set for the Zapatista uprising in 1994, though public opinion in Mexico was generally unaware of the rising tensions and unrest among the Indian peasantry of Chiapas. The federal government, however, being better informed, nevertheless chose to ignore them at a time when Mexico was negotiating the NAFTA with the United States.

Rather than face the basic issues raised by the rebellion directly –the various demands put forth by peasant and Indian organizations as well as the EZLN--, the government adopted the position that the underlying cause of the rebellion was the "poverty" of the Indians and that development aid and investments would easily turn the situation around. To be sure, Chiapas occupied one of the lowest rungs of all Mexican states on any economic or social development scale. The 1993 United Nations Human Development Report mentions Chiapas as an extreme case of deprivation on the Human Development Index. Less than 40% of the population of Chiapas is classified as Indian, but the indigenous are placed systematically lower on any development

scale than the non-Indian population, as elsewhere in Latin America. (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos)

During the Zedillo years, the government was able to mobilize international resources for projects in Chiapas; in one of his reports to the nation, President Zedillo stated that during his administration 76 million US dollars were destined for Chiapas. It is not clear whether this includes the expenditures of the regular state budget or refers to fresh resources specifically negotiated for development in the state, or to public and private investment. At any rate, no independent objective evaluation of the impact of investments and development aid in Chiapas during the period 1994-2000 is available; nor is it known where these funds end up and who benefits from them, if they have been disbursed at all. Scholars and specialists agree, however, that “throwing money” at Chiapas does not provide a solution to the conflict nor will it make it go away; certainly increased spending in the region if not accompanied by a democratic consensus will probably lead to greater inequities and social tensions.

But before looking at the possibility of a lasting solution, let us recall the main highlights in the process of war and peace in Chiapas.

The country was taken by surprise on the first of January 1994 when a group of armed and masked guerrillas briefly occupied several towns in central Chiapas and their spokesman, identified as *subcomandante* Marcos, stated that the EZLN, by declaring “war” on the Salinas government was fighting against 500 years of oppression and injustice. *Basta!* (Enough!) they cried, and set out in their first public document the objectives of their armed struggle: work, land, housing, food, education, independence, liberty, democracy, justice and peace.<sup>3</sup>

These demands were formulated the same day that NAFTA entered into force, and at the beginning of that fateful year in which presidential elections were to be held. No doubt the significance of the timing of the uprising was not lost on the Zapatistas, and it certainly spoiled the triumphalism with which the Salinas administration was entering its final year in office.<sup>4</sup>

Over the next few days a number of small battles were fought. The federal army overcame its initial surprise and retook the initiative. The Zapatistas withdrew their forces and retreated to the rural municipios in the region known as Las Cañadas (the canyons) whence they had emerged. Informed estimates place the number of victims killed in the fighting at around one hundred and fifty, not many by current genocidal standards of mass killings and ethnic cleansings, but enough to alert Mexican public opinion to the seriousness of the situation and the intentions of the revolutionaries.

The Salinas administration was split between hawks and doves. The former demanded massive and quick military action to liquidate the Zapatista movement at once, arguing that their very presence even if not threatening the stability of the country militarily (no other expression of Zapatista military activity occurred in the rest of the country), was nevertheless destabilizing it in political terms. The doves, however, recognized the social background of the uprising and advised prudence and negotiations. It is to the credit of the Salinas

administration that it decided to listen to the doves and within twelve days proposed a cease-fire and the beginning of a dialogue with the EZLN. President Salinas named one of his cabinet ministers (Manuel Camacho Solis, an outspoken “dove” and a frustrated aspirant to succeed Salinas in the presidency) as his personal envoy and negotiator.<sup>5</sup> The Zapatistas accepted the truce and conditions were ripe for a first encounter between the two sides.

The next six and a half years consisted of a series of false starts, mutual misunderstandings, betrayals and disappointments. The full and detailed history of “what really happened” remains to be written (but will probably never be completely disentangled.)<sup>6</sup> Let me briefly recount what I feel to be the major milestones in this process.

- 1) The Zapatista uprising immediately received broad media coverage both nationally and at the international level—in stark contrast to guerrilla exploits in Mexico during the seventies and in other countries—and within days a host of human rights non-governmental organizations and assorted associations had descended upon San Cristóbal las Casas to establish a “peace cordon” around the Zapatista strongholds and monitor possible human rights abuses by the federal army and other authorities. The Mexican National Commission of Human Rights sent observers into the area. Press and live TV coverage was widely disseminated, and during the first few days of the rebellion *subcomandante* Marcos, a literate and articulate spokesman, gave interviews, made statements and established contacts with what was to become a vast world network of sympathizers and solidarity with the Zapatista movement. The skillful use of the mass media became a landmark of the Zapatistas –again in contrast to other similar movements—to such an extent that people began to talk about an “internet war”<sup>7</sup>. The Mexican government was increasingly irked by the attention given the Zapatista movement worldwide and willingly adopted the idea of a “virtual” war rather than a real one. This cavalier attitude was to guide its involvement in the peace dialogue which followed, and probably contributed to its failure, at least so far.
- 2) Though having withdrawn from the urban centers they occupied for a few days, the Zapatistas continued to build up contacts and reach out to civil society in Mexico and abroad, and this vision has certainly been one of their strengths. While official public media at first labeled the Zapatista movement as manipulated by foreign and anti-national interests, made up of “subversives” and “bandits” and continued to brand the EZLN as a band of spoilers at a time when Mexico had become a “first world” country,<sup>8</sup> in general the mass media painted a favorable picture of the movement, underlining its indigenous membership –despite the fact that Marcos was not an Indian—and the legitimate grievances and demands that fueled the uprising. Opinion polls in Mexico during the first few months after the uprising showed a generally favorable attitude towards the Zapatistas among the Mexican people. The EZLN, in turn, has continued to court public opinion in

various ways and still counts six years later with significant, though fragmented and diminished support among key sectors of the population.<sup>9</sup>

- 3) How indigenous was this Indian uprising in southeast Mexico? Critics pointed to the fact that Marcos was not an Indian to disqualify the movement as a whole. But it soon became apparent that the Zapatista army was indeed made up essentially of Maya Indians, and so were its other leaders. Another debatable issue were the Zapatistas' first public proclamations. They dealt with social and economic issues in general but not specifically with issues that mainly concern Indian peoples. Marcos later explained to French anthropologist Yvon LeBot that in order to gain recognition the Zapatistas wanted to be seen as a force for change at the national level and therefore had to deal with larger issues. He also noticed that he had learned much from the Indian peoples with whom he identified and was now conscious of the fact that indigenous issues were indeed of primary importance. This change of heart –or tactics—became apparent in later developments of the Zapatista movement, but it is clear that worldwide support for the movement continued –and continues— precisely because of its indigenous nature.
- 4) Peace conversations began in the following months of 1994, but despite the mediation efforts of Bishop Samuel Ruiz, they did not prosper. Tensions increased when in February 1995 the federal army suddenly advanced from its cease fire line and, without firing a shot, occupied positions that had formerly been tacitly accorded the Zapatistas. Simultaneously, the government announced it had discovered the “true” identity of Marcos and issued orders for his arrest and of some of his putative co-conspirators. It was widely believed that the February offensive was a failed attempt by the army to capture Marcos, but the government stated that it was no more than an effort to bring the Zapatistas back to the negotiating table.
- 5) The deteriorating situation finally shook the national Congress into action. Responding to a proposal submitted by the Executive, the Congress enacted a Law for Dialogue and Peace in Chiapas in which it recognized the EZLN as an armed party to the conflict and established the mechanisms to be implemented for the peace dialogue. With the active participation of the now formally established National Mediation Commission (CONAI) headed by Bishop Samuel Ruiz, serious talks between the two parties began in September 1995. Five months later, in February 1996, they signed the Accord of San Andrés on Indigenous Culture and Rights, the only negotiated agreement so far between the federal government and the EZLN.
- 6) The San Andrés process was tumultuous and complex. The Zapatistas invited a host of “advisers” from all sectors of Mexican society, whereas the government had difficulty in even putting together a small group of independent experts, who as it turned out, were more

sympathetic to the Zapatista positions. The agreement on Indigenous Culture and Rights was to be the first of seven topics that the parties had earlier agreed to put on the agenda. The second topic on “Democracy and Justice” never got off the ground, and the rest were not even broached.

- 7) Among other points, the San Andrés Accord underlines the need for a new legislative framework to regulate the relations between indigenous peoples and the state; the right to self-determination of indigenous peoples as expressed through territorial autonomy within the national state; and the recognition of indigenous customary law. It was agreed that a proposal to this effect was to be presented jointly by the signatories (federal government and EZLN) to the national Congress.
- 8) But this was not to be. Once the Accord had been signed, and further dialogue on the other topics did not prosper, not much happened in the way of implementation, even as local conditions in Chiapas deteriorated with the appearance of paramilitary groups, factional strife within indigenous communities and sporadic violence. The government did not appear to be over-eager to act on its agreement and the Zapatistas lost faith in the process. In September 1996, a Commission of the National Congress, made up of delegates of every represented political party and known as COCOPA, decided to embark on a “parallel track” to rescue the peace dialogue. It negotiated discreetly and separately with both parties and in December came up with a draft proposal of a document to be submitted jointly to the Congress itself, which included the essential points of the San Andrés Accord. Whereas the Zapatistas agreed to the draft, the government after a few weeks of procrastination decided to propose amendments, which were then rejected by the Zapatistas in January 1997. COCOPA’s efforts to bring the sides together had failed and the peace dialogue had been brusquely interrupted.
- 9) The government’s rejection of a proposal to which it had earlier affixed its signature surprised many observers and exposed the internal contradictions among the country’s governing elite. Official statements now argued that the autonomy and the recognition of the customary law of the indigenous peoples was unacceptable and represented a grave danger to national sovereignty. As these were obviously points of some importance to the Zapatistas (as they were, indeed, to numerous indigenous organizations and their advocates), the EZLN felt betrayed once more and withdrew from any further open dialogue with the government, which in turn accused the former of “intransigence” and unwilling to negotiate. The year 1997 was heavy with foreboding because it now became clear that the peace dialogue was going nowhere, and that neither the government nor the Zapatistas were willing to retreat from their positions. One side accused the government of not wanting to comply with the San Andrés Accord it had signed; whereas the other implied that the Zapatistas

never really wanted to reach an agreement anyway. The storm broke dramatically in December 1997, when a paramilitary group of local Indians in the highlands, massacred 47 unarmed pro-Zapatista internal refugees at a prayer meeting—including men, women and children. This was no military encounter between the federal army and the forces of the EZLN, who were holed-up several hundred miles away, but rather a settling of scores between political factions in the highland communities, which had become involved in the struggles over resources and power that was splitting up many of these formerly well integrated Indian societies. The massacre, which drew international condemnation by human rights groups, also exposed another darker side of the conflict: the arming of paramilitary groups by government authorities to divide Indian communities and weaken support for the Zapatistas in the region, and the murkier power politics of local political bosses and *caciques*. Human rights organizations spoke of the government's low intensity warfare and time-tested counterinsurgency action against the Zapatistas, who in turn denounced the government's "genocidal" intentions. A war of reciprocal accusations now supplemented the "netwar", but there was no denying the violence, the fear, the atmosphere of repression that hung in the air around the Indian communities.

- 10) By 1998 the peace process was moribund, at least as far as the Zedillo administration was concerned. Though the president shuffled around his cabinet ministers and "peace negotiators" and publicly invited the Zapatistas at least twice to "come back to the negotiating table" (in early 1998 and in mid-1999), observers did not see any significant change in the federal government's position on the San Andrés Accords. The Zapatistas, in turn, insisted that they would only resume the dialogue if certain previous conditions were met, including a partial withdrawal of the federal army to positions held before the February 1995 offensive, the dismantling of the flourishing paramilitary groups (the attorney general's office had identified at least eighteen such groups), and strict adherence to the signed Accord of San Andrés. To make matters worse, in 1998 Bishop Ruiz's National Mediation Commission (CONAI) dissolved itself because it felt it had no longer a constructive role to play and the legislative Commission COCOPA was internally divided along political party lines thus effectively neutralized. This is the legacy that president Vicente Fox is now obliged to pick up.

Beyond the details of a tortuous process which has not led anywhere, there are a number of issues at stake which need to be considered. The Zapatistas insist that their fundamental demands be addressed by concrete government actions (the implementation of the San Andrés Accords). The government, however, is more concerned with ending the "state of war" and returning to normalcy. A normalcy that the Zapatistas and many others in Mexico consider a return to the *status quo ante*, that is, to the situation which impelled the

Zapatistas to stage their rebellion in the first place. The Zapatista movement now represents more than a *foco* of guerrillas threatening the stability of a democratic state (a view derived from earlier guerrilla experiences in other Latin American countries). It challenges the international system (globalization, neoliberalism) on which the Mexican national state nowadays attempts to base its legitimacy. Thus it has been labeled an anti-systemic movement in contrast to other military-political uprisings that intend to overthrow an existing government. While Mexico's Octavio Paz at first decried the Zapatista movement as a return to a "pre-modern" form of struggle, Carlos Fuentes has greeted it as the first "post-modern" conflict. In fact, however, it is neither, and can best be described as a fully "modern" type of social movement because the demands it raises are based on the modern –and eternal—principles of justice, equality, dignity, liberty and human rights. By wishing to deny the Zapatistas any kind of political legitimation (which explains the *de facto* rejection of the San Andrés Accord) the Mexican government not only deprives the movement as such of a role in national politics, but it effectively denies the indigenous peoples of the country participation in national affairs – notwithstanding official rhetoric to the contrary.<sup>10</sup>

The EZLN evidently craves a national role beyond institutionalized political party and electoral mechanisms. Numerous indigenous organizations have acknowledged that the position of the EZLN has strengthened their own hand in negotiating an effective space for political action on the national scene, even if they do not support the EZLN's choice of violent action to achieve their ends. There is no doubt that thanks to the Zapatistas, indigenous peoples now command more respect in the country than they have ever enjoyed before. Therefore they reject the government's efforts to reduce the Zapatista movement to mere local significance (not national import), to reduce the various expressions of violence (paramilitary groups, repressive measures on Indian communities by the army or government authorities) to "intra- or inter-communal rivalry" (as official documents label it), and to deal with indigenous demands as nothing that cannot be processed through traditional time-tested clientelistic channels.

As the Zedillo presidency drew to an end there was much speculation in Mexico as to why his administration had been unable (or unwilling) to solve the conflict in Chiapas. A few months before leaving office, on one of his trips abroad, president Zedillo declared that the Zapatista rebellion was a mere "incident" in Mexico's history, of no great import to the country. On other occasions he used to say that this was a "light guerrilla", presumably in contrast to the "heavy" rebellions and civil wars that decimated other Latin American countries during several decades in the twentieth century. Perhaps these outspoken words express a much deeper misunderstanding by the country's governing elites of what the Zapatista movement is all about, a misunderstanding which is likely to be shared by the incoming Fox administration.

As all social conflicts, this one has a number of underlying causes, various plots and sub-plots and a number of possible solutions. There is certainly not an easy way out because the conflict –which in reality subsumes a number of different conflicts—does not have a single cause nor does it have only one possible solution. Moreover, as in Kurozawa's famous film *Rashomon*, various



narratives have been woven about this conflict, which does not only confound public opinion but also specialists and perhaps even the contenders themselves. The conflict is constantly being redefined by the participants and the observers, according to the perspective from which it is looked at and the narratives with which the parameters of the conflict itself are constructed. It is unlikely that it will be resolved unless the quarrel over the definition of the conflict and its various narratives is decided. These issues might be looked at from three different perspectives.

- 1) Firstly we must notice the **structural conflict**. This occurs not only in Chiapas but also in other parts of the country in which there are indigenous peoples and communities. This structural conflict is as old as the social and economic system that produced the great inequalities in economic welfare, social status and political power between the Indian peasantry and the non-Indian population which usually occupies higher positions in the stratification scale. The earlier *internal colonialism* that prevailed for centuries has been replaced by a post-colonial situation which is more flexible and fluid, and in the roiling waters of modernization Indian communities have become more divided and polarized. The earlier vision of integrated, harmonious communities –as described by anthropologists—a few decades ago, no longer holds. But, conscious of this social disintegration which has many facets, indigenous organizations are pleading for strategies to “recompose” their communities, and they see the implementation of the San Andrés Accords as one way to achieve this objective. Contrary to some currently fashionable assessments, the NAFTA and neo-liberal globalization have not led to an across-the-board improvement of living conditions for Indians in Chiapas or elsewhere in the country.<sup>11</sup> Rather, these changes in so far as they affect indigenous communities directly or indirectly, generate growing socio-economic inequalities, the disappearance of solidarity networks in rural villages and townships, the weakening of social compensatory institutions and the growth not only of poverty but of pauperism. While this is not a new phenomenon in world capitalism –once labeled the “development of underdevelopment”—it is still a major cause of tension and structural conflict.

There are several actors in this conflict: firstly, the indigenous peasantry who have always been the historical victims of this situation. But there are others: local and regional interest groups--- landowners, cattle ranchers, merchants large and small and intermediaries; also government bureaucrats and not a few indigenous power-brokers who now have a stake in the system.

Structural conflict is not only a “class struggle” in the traditional sense of the haves and the have-nots, the privileged and the deprived. In Chiapas it is also an ethnic confrontation between Indians and mestizos, which is also deeply rooted in the history of internal colonialism. Whereas some commentators on the Chiapas scene have blamed the

anthropologists for inventing ethnic differences, suggesting that if only academics would stop concerning themselves with these topics, people would easily learn to get along together, fact is that ethnic distinctions are deeply rooted in the local imagery as a result of the asymmetrical power relations in the economic and social arenas ever since colonial times. Local people distinguish clearly between Indians, *caxlanes*, *gente de razón* or *ladinos*, which are not only descriptive labels in everyday discourse but concepts used in social and cultural mapping. They refer to different social statuses, systems of interpersonal relations, types of discrimination and exclusion. This is all part of the structural conflict in Chiapas, as elsewhere in the country, and it should not be forgotten that the situation has led to persistent human rights abuses of Indians and peasants, social activists, women, children, migrant workers and settlers, and entire communities; violations that have been assiduously documented by human rights organizations and which surely may be considered as one of the triggering factors of the 1994 uprising.

The structural conflict cannot be solved in the short term; the San Andrés Accord or any other negotiated agreement will not do away with it. The social, economic and political structures of inequality will change progressively only by means of a long-term process and persistent social and economic policies that might directly benefit the indigenous peoples and communities through processes of redistribution of power and wealth. Mere legislative changes at the local state or national levels will be necessary but not sufficient to effect such transformations.

- 2) The second perspective must focus on the **political conflict** between, on one side, a political-military organization, the Zapatista National Liberation Army and its non-military members (known as *bases de apoyo*) and other supporters in specific areas of the region, as well as a wide array of peasant and popular organizations, and on the other the local power structure concentrated around the ruling élite of the state of Chiapas. This has traditionally been an autocratic, authoritarian, centralized and antidemocratic structure which at times may appear to be legal and institutional. While some observers accuse the EZLN of being authoritarian (and as all tightly-knit revolutionary organizations it may certainly have an authoritarian streak to it), the real authoritarianism is represented by those who have wielded power against the interests and well-being of the peasants and the Indians.

The main actors in this political conflict which now has also become a military or pseudo-military one, are the peasant and indigenous organizations that address their grievances and demands to the government since their emergence in the nineteen-fifties after the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI, a federal government agency) established a base of operations in San Cristóbal las Casas. These various organizations that multiply and grow during the following decades, are the principal contenders in the political conflict that erupts in the nineteen

seventies. Besides the peasant and workers' unions, mention must be made of the religious groups: the Indian theology promoted by Bishop Samuel Ruiz in the San Cristóbal Diocese since the sixties and the various Protestant denominations. An important ingredient was added by the arrival of small organizations of militant leftists, representing different tendencies and who were often at loggerheads with each other, who joined and occasionally managed to lead the struggles of the Indian peasant associations in a pattern of changing alliances. Out of one of these groups came the Frente Zapatista which decided on armed struggle.<sup>12</sup> On the opposite side we find the business and landowners associations, the *auténticos colonos* (local aristocracy) of San Cristóbal las Casas, as well as the municipal *caciques* (political bosses) who are the backbone of the national PRI at the local level. In earlier years, members of some of these sectors fostered the creation of small private armed bands in the service of certain landowners (*guardias blancas*), who used violence and the threat of violence against the leadership and members of popular organizations, often in connivance with government authorities. The picture becomes more complex in the eighties when new political parties challenge the traditional control of the PRI through electoral contests at the municipal and state levels. Inasmuch as the EZLN declared "war" on the Mexican state, which led to a massive increase of military presence in the area (some estimates place the number of federal troops in the state at 40,000), it is also necessary to take into consideration the various vested interests in the conflict that the military itself has acquired. Finally, one can only speculate about the influence—often mentioned in the media—of drug trafficking on the political balance in the state.

As can be seen, there are numerous different actors with special interests in this political-military conflict, which in turn results from the structural tensions mentioned earlier. What solution(s) might there be to this problematique? The government has often suggested the need for modernization and democratization, but it has been very slow in promoting these tendencies. The traditional power structures in Chiapas are arrayed against the modernization and democratization of political life. This may finally have changed in August 2000, when an alliance of opposition parties was able to defeat the PRI government-supported candidate for governor of Chiapas. The new governor, Pablo Salazar, formerly a member of the PRI, was also a member of the COCOPA, the federal legislative commission dealing with the peace process. With two opposition candidates in the national presidency and the local governor's office, things may finally begin to change in Chiapas.

- 3) There is also a third perspective which can be brought to bear on the problem, and this is the fact that since 1994 there has been an **armed conflict** between the EZLN and the national and state governments. The former has its *bases de apoyo* and supporters and sympathizers

in the country and abroad. The government controls the resources, the military power, the public administration and the political institutions. Let us recall that in 1995 the national Congress adopted a law for dialogue and peace in Chiapas in which it legally recognized a “group of dissatisfied, mainly indigenous Mexicans”, in other words, it recognized the EZLN as a *de facto* if not *de jure* belligerent in this war. While the duration of open armed conflict was truly short, the period of negotiations has been unduly long. And whereas the number of direct casualties of the fighting was relatively small, the situation has become more complex due to the presence of a number of paramilitary outfits (which the government prefers to call “armed civilian groups”). As in other areas, the danger these units represent is that in time they may escape from the control of their masters: those who armed and financed them. However, it is not publicly known who in fact is behind these groups, and the federal army vehemently denies any involvement. Nevertheless, they are responsible for numerous instances of violence including murders, torture and abductions of Zapatista sympathizers and presumed members of the EZLN. Their existence and relative freedom of action is an additional factor which makes the resumption of peace talks difficult.

Again, the principal actors in this military conflict are the EZLN and the local army and police units; the political supporters of the Zapatistas such as the Autonomous Municipios, established in defiance of local legislation, the different levels of public administration and both COCOPA and CONAI (despite the fact that the latter has been formally disbanded). The solution to this conflict can only come through continued dialogue and negotiations, though events during the last three years hardly lead to optimism.

From the vantage point of this third perspective, it seems to me that there has been an overlap of timing and strategies between the structural conflict and its underlying causes, the political conflict due to incomplete democratization and the armed conflict since January 1994 and everything which occurred thereafter. The three perspectives are linked but must be kept separate.

The Mexican government has occasionally announced major new investments in Chiapas, provided by multilateral agencies and transnational corporations. These are intended to create jobs and improve living standards of the local population, thus helping solve the “structural” causes of the uprising, referred to above. Where are these resources and what have they accomplished? A recent study finds that between 1994 and 2000 direct foreign investment in Chiapas (on which current development policies rely heavily) amounted to 5.4 million dollars, that is to say less than a million dollars a year. Most of these enterprises are registered in the major cities so it is not known what effects they may have had on incomes in the rural areas, but probably their overall impact is slight.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, it has often been said that the EZLN does not trust the political party system and does not believe that democratic elections will alter the system, a belief held by many observers. The Zapatistas have announced repeatedly that they will submit to the larger organization of civil society. But where is this organization? Not much has resulted from the numerous conclaves which the Zapatistas have sponsored in their territory. The PRD, the party sometimes believed to be closest to the EZLN, came in third place in the 2000 presidential elections at the national level, having lost electoral support since 1988. The historical alternative for the country, which the Zapatistas have promised, has not been spelled out clearly and is not reflected in any of the major political platforms. Civil society, despite its diverse manifestations and its strong human rights commitments has not proven adept or organized enough to impose peace on the two contenders; and in the meantime social and economic conditions deteriorate in the area. The real victims of the struggle are the Indian and peasant communities whose situation has deteriorated over the last six years. The government has promised more democracy and development, while it has been unable to negotiate a solution to the armed conflict. Between 1994 and 1999 the state of Chiapas has had five governors, none of whom was elected democratically. Perhaps the election of the opposition candidate in 2000 opens a window of opportunity.

Chiapas is Mexico's biggest and most important "unfinished business". It expresses the deep social contradictions that national development policies have generated over the last four decades or so (aggravated enormously by neoliberal globalization). Indians (15% of the Mexican population) have been historically short-changed. Economic development has passed them by. Despite official rhetoric to the contrary, Indians are the eternally excluded in social, economic and political terms. The Zedillo administration dismissed the Chiapas conflict as a minor "historical incident", and was unable to offer a satisfactory solution. Hopefully, the Fox administration will do better.

But the Zapatistas have not provided a clear alternative political strategy that may find large-scale echo in civil society: rather, they appear to be carving out a niche for themselves (with difficulty), and to prepare for a "long march" in political terms. They have not commented publicly on Mexico's political transition, but perhaps they are willing to give the incoming government more of an opportunity to negotiate a peace agreement than the previous one, providing of course that the incoming government will do the same.

There are many points on the agenda for peace, including the definition of new legislation concerning the status of indigenous peoples, their territories, the use of natural resources, the legal recognition of customary law, the rights of the indigenous to political representation, access to the media, and of course the question of self-determination and autonomy. All of which was discussed in the San Andrés negotiations and signed into an Agreement.

Beyond the still to be debated issues of democratization, justice and economic and social development for indigenous peoples, there are deeper underlying unfinished themes: human dignity, collective identity, political recognition, social equality and human rights. Mexico's process of democratization is surely incomplete without the participation of the Zapatistas (and more inclusively, of the country's indigenous peoples). It can continue to ignore indigenous demands (as it has over the decades), but it cannot claim to be a truly democratic society until Indian peoples are included in the political and social agenda of the twenty-first century. And this means first of all making peace in Chiapas.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Marginalization and social exclusion are used here as code words to refer to a heavy-handed and persistent system of discrimination, exploitation and oppression that has characterized the world of the indigenous in Chiapas for several centuries. (Vogt, Wasserstrom)

<sup>2</sup> Evangelical protestantism has made numerous converts in Latin America in recent decades. (Stoll)

<sup>3</sup> Primera Declaración de la Selva Lacandona. Declaración de Guerra del Ejército Zapatista en Chiapas. 1 de enero de 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Salinas' hand-picked successor, PRI presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio was murdered in March. Presidential elections were held in July and in December Salinas handed over power to Ernesto Zedillo.

<sup>5</sup> Camacho Solís resigned as negotiator in March, after the murder of Colosio. He later broke with the PRI and became an independent contender for the presidency in 2000.

<sup>6</sup> As is so often the case, many people know parts of the story, and only a few people may think they know the whole story, but they probably don't.

<sup>7</sup> (Ronfeldt)

<sup>8</sup> After a strenuous public relations campaign by the Salinas government, Mexico was accepted as a member of the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), a club of industrial states, the first "developing" nation to have achieved this status.

<sup>9</sup> The EZLN organized a "Democratic Convention" in their jungle stronghold in August 1994, just after the presidential election, which was attended by several thousand participants from all over the country and abroad. In the following years they organized other similar international gatherings, maintaining a constant flow of visitors to their base communities. While the Mexican government has been accused of selectively and illegally harassing numerous "observers" from different countries --including arbitrary detentions and deportations--, in general, considering the fact that a "war" had been declared in the country, it was surprisingly willing to allow these contacts to continue and the meetings to take place in rebel territory, thinking perhaps to improve its international image and to coax the peace process along.

<sup>10</sup> Official opinion holds that the Zapatistas should lay down their arms, take off their masks and transform themselves into a political party. The Zapatistas, however, insist that they will only do this after the peace agreement has been fully implemented. In other words, they feel that only by obtaining the government's compliance to the agreement will they be able to achieve the political legitimacy needed to become an alternative political force in Mexico. For this they count on the continued support of the Mexican "civil society"--- which the government considers a useless distraction to any future peace negotiations.

<sup>11</sup> A recent FAO study reports that 40% of Mexico's population is undernourished.

<sup>12</sup> See (Harvey) (Díaz)

<sup>13</sup> Boletín "Chiapas al día" No. 216, CIEPAC, (Sept. 29, 2000). [ciepac@laneta.apc.org](mailto:ciepac@laneta.apc.org)