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# THE CHALLENGE OF DEMOCRACY

## REBELLION AS CATALYST

Jonathan Fox

January 1, 1994 was to be celebrated in Mexican history as the opening day of the North American Free Trade Agreement. The rebellion in Chiapas changed all that. According to José Juárez, leader of the Chiapas Union of Ejidos of the Jungle: "When President Salinas went to bed on New Year's Eve, he thought he was going to wake up a North American. Instead, he woke up a Guatemalan."

The Zapatistas, however, are not the Central American revolutionaries of a dozen years ago. They do not propose to impose their alternative project on Mexican society as a whole, their official statements do not mention socialism, and their main political demand is for a government of transition to hold free and fair elections at all levels of government.

More fundamentally, Chiapas is part of a national political system quite different from any in Central America: the ruling party is much broader, and civil society much stronger. The decisive political importance of these national differences was sharply underscored when, after less than two weeks of fighting, Mexico's President Salinas declared a unilateral cease-fire and sat down to negotiate. He agreed at least partially to the Zapatistas' conditions, and a political solution became possible. Mexican civil society and important factions within the regime were, for the time being, strong enough to hold off the initial military response.

### WHY CHIAPAS?

Chiapas is a region of large cattle ranches and coffee plantations alongside tiny family plots; its notoriously unequal distribution of land remains largely untouched by agrarian reform. Indeed, Chiapas accounts for fully a third of the agrarian reform department's backlog of unresolved conflicts and land distribution decrees that were never carried out on the ground. For the *campesinos*, it is a backlog of broken promises. Recently, their hope to see those promises fulfilled within the system was dashed

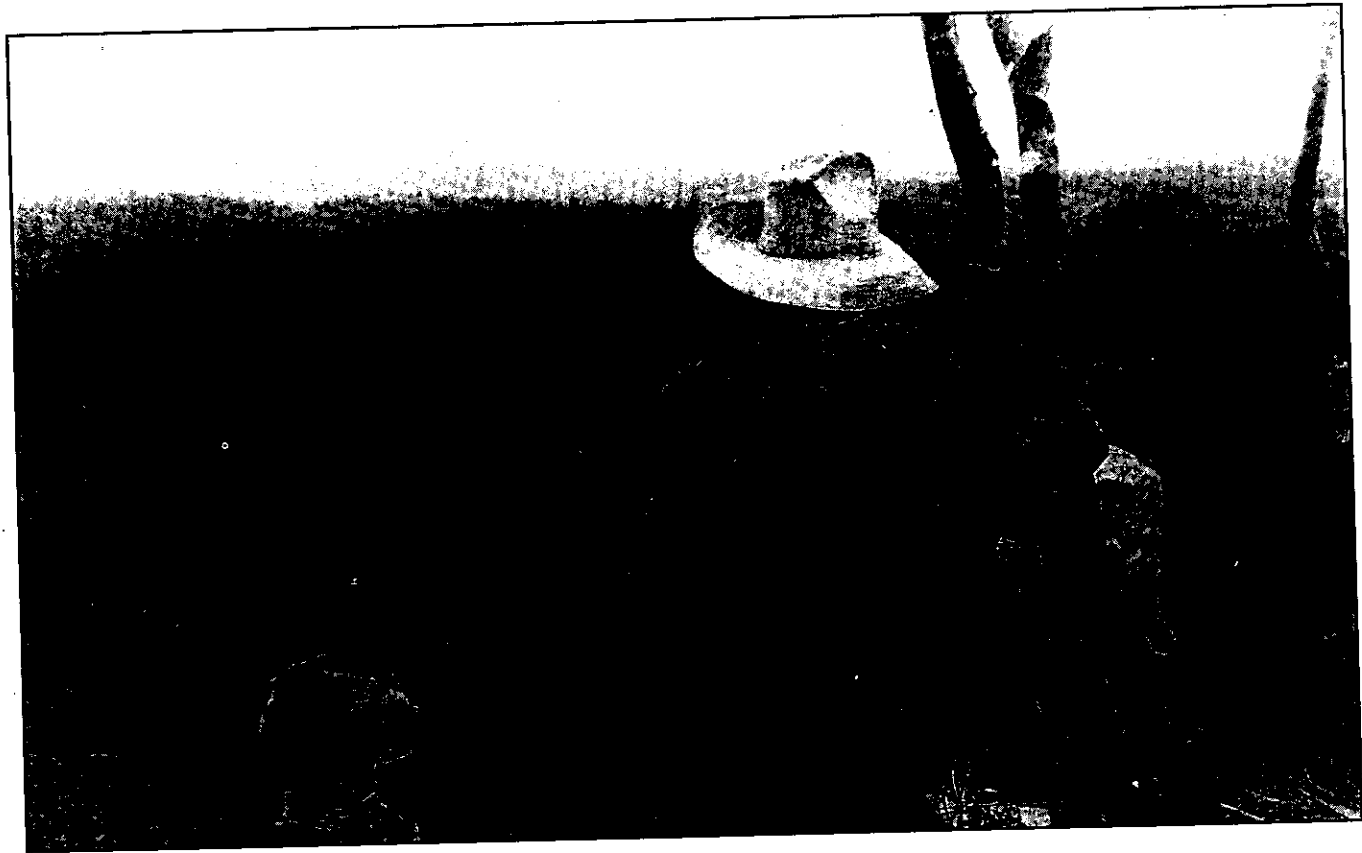
by new changes to the Mexican Constitution. The government, moreover, for years unwilling to redistribute land in Chiapas, encouraged landless families to move to the Lacandon jungle, cut down the forest, and raise subsistence crops, coffee, and cattle. This policy produced a long and bloody history of land conflicts; uncounted dozens, perhaps hundreds, of community leaders have been murdered with impunity over the last two decades.

This class conflict is deepened and intensified by the racism of the Chiapas ruling elite. Discrimination in Chiapas is much more overt than in most Indigenous regions of Mexico—until the mid-1950s, San Cristóbal was essentially an apartheid city.

Furthermore, the mainstays of the peasant economy were in deep trouble in the period leading up to the rebellion. Prices for coffee, cattle, and corn were down and logging was banned (at least for peasants). These problems aggravated long-term crises of the regional peasant economy, including a shortage of land and erosion in the highlands, and poor soils in previously forested lowlands. Meanwhile, the national government slashed farm support programs—agricultural credit and technical assistance—deepening the regional economy's downward spiral.

The insertion of NAFTA into these already uncompromising conditions signified a deepening of rural problems—the end of land reform, increased polarization within Mexico between North and South, and the exclusion of Indigenous peoples from the national debate. The trade opening especially threatened corn, a crop with great symbolic as well as economic significance. The intense debate about NAFTA in the United States also may have prompted the Mexican government—more worried about international embarrassment than local turmoil—to pretend that nothing was happening in Chiapas. In fact, some analysts suggest that Salinas appointed the hardline governor of Chiapas, Patrocinio González, to

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become a Minister of the Interior precisely to keep the lid on during the NAFTA debate. González would have run the 1994 presidential elections, had he not been removed as part of Salinas's turn to a political solution. By launching the revolt on the first day of NAFTA, the Zapatistas guaranteed international press attention to the political and economic crisis in Chiapas. And Subcomandante Marcos's charge that NAFTA is a "death sentence" for Mexico's Indigenous peoples became the emblem for the rebellion. Some U.S. specialists on Mexico were puzzled by this emphasis on NAFTA. One said that it couldn't be an Indigenous rebellion because how could Indian peasants know about NAFTA? Another suggested that the timing was just a coincidence. The experts ought to have known that the pro-government media have been trumpeting the onset of NAFTA throughout Mexico for a long time.

But there is a puzzle here: if the rebels' main goal was to attack NAFTA, they would have launched the uprising the week before the U.S. congressional vote instead of waiting for the treaty to take effect. Still more fundamentally, the grievances that led to the rebellion cannot be understood exclusively by reference to the rural economic crisis and NAFTA. For although their effects were felt throughout rural Mexico, only Chiapas rebelled. What, then, is different about Chiapas?

**FORCE AND FRAUD**

Part of the answer is politics. Consider the Zapatistas' two main targets. While in command of the region's power centers, they destroyed the town halls and the police stations, but touched little else. In Altamirano they whacked away at the "municipal palace" with sledgehammers for two days. Before the

army began sweeping through the region last spring, the main sources of repression in Chiapas were the local and state authorities—police under the control of “elected” officials. Since the mid-1980s, Amnesty International, Americas’ Watch, and Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights have documented a systematic use of torture and political violence by the state and local police.

The problem of repression in Chiapas came briefly to national attention in 1992 because of an Indigenous march from Palenque to Mexico City (a distance of 1,000 kilometers). The protest was called Xi’Nich—the “Ant March”—and with support from the progressive church the marchers made it to the gates of the capital, prompting national authorities to negotiate. The government promised to meet many of the demands, but after the marchers returned home, few agreements (they charge) were ever carried out.

The underlying political problem in Chiapas is the lack of free and fair elections for all levels of government: basic freedoms are not respected and election numbers are regularly cooked. According to a study of the 1988 presidential elections by the nonpartisan Fundación Arturo Rosenbleuth, the remote rural Ocosingo federal election district—one of the centers of the uprising—reported one of the highest rates of voter turnout in the country. Of those on the rolls, 81.5% reportedly voted, a figure well above the reported national turnout of 50.3%. When compared with the population figures, this meant that 99.5% of the voting age population of the district voted, giving Salinas 95.6% of their votes. Borrowing from Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, the official 1988 rolls included more than 105% of the voting age population in another thirty-five rural election districts around the country, including 125% of the adult population of the Comitán district, also one of the areas in revolt.

As the turnout numbers suggest, these authoritarian enclaves are not simply remote rural backwaters, cut off from national politics and as yet untouched by the government’s modernization project. As national elections becoming more and more contested, the winning margins narrow. So the national leaders of Mexico’s ruling party need these controlled districts more than ever. Authoritarian enclaves made the difference in the 1988 presidential race and could swing the vote in 1994 as well. That is why Chiapas is so important: the struggle for political democracy at the national level depends on the fight for local democracy.

But politics in Chiapas is not simply a matter of electoral fraud; force, too, plays a central role. The political class in the Chiapas state government is especially authoritarian, and recent governors have been particularly brutal—which led the Zapatistas to take one as a prisoner of war. This general-turned-rancher was later released unharmed, to facilitate the negotiations.

The governor at the time of the rebellion (a political appointee, now also fallen) was especially irritating to the citizens of Chiapas because he was considered an imposed foreigner—Elmar Setzer Marseille, from a plantation family of German descent. His charges that the rebellion was “foreign-inspired” were not well-received.

More immediately, political conflict last fall convinced many that prospects for peaceful change within the system had closed up, contributing to the popularity of the Zapatistas among the Indigenous peoples of Chiapas. Right-wing forces in the Mexican government, together with the Papal Nuncio and his allies in the Catholic church, openly tried to have Bishop Samuel Ruíz removed from the diocese of San Cristóbal. Don Samuel is the “Archbishop Romero of Chiapas,” a towering figure whose defense of the rights of Indigenous people is legendary. He organized the first state-wide Indigenous congress in 1974, in honor of Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, the chronicler of the conquest and first European defender of Indigenous rights. Much of the rich web of social organizations built by the Indigenous peoples of Chiapas traces its origins to this first taste of freedom of expression and assembly. The public attacks on Don Samuel brought over 15,000 Indigenous people down from the mountains to march in his defense through the streets of San Cristóbal last fall—the largest protest in the history of Chiapas, even larger than the 1992 protest against the 500th anniversary of the Spanish conquest.

#### THE ZAPATISTAS

If poverty and authoritarianism explain what makes rebellion possible, they do not explain why rebels choose to take the extraordinary risk of directly confronting state power. Who, then, are the Zapatistas? What mix of history, interest, and conviction brought them together?

Contrary to early claims by the government about foreign involvement, the Zapatistas are Mexican, mostly Indigenous. Some Mexican participants may well have had combat experience in Central America, but no evidence of foreign participation has been presented. Starting with their “Declaration of War,” the official Zapatista communiqués are written in the tradition of the Mexican Revolution, citing Article 39 of the Constitution which vests national sovereignty in the people.

The Zapatistas’ early origins are quite murky, but for at least a decade they have sunk roots in rural Chiapas and possibly elsewhere in Mexico. They organized in total isolation from the rest of the Mexican left, and reliable information about them is very limited. Politically, they may have begun as a convergence of splits from an influential neo-Maoist political group called *Política Popular* with more Central American-style revolutionary ideas. Recent reports suggest that since the end of the Cold War their ideology has shifted much closer to the mainstream of Mexico’s broad democratic



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movement. Since the rebellion, all their official public statements call for constitutional democracy and social reform. Their initial "Declaration of War" called for the "Powers of the Nation" (the legislature and judiciary) to "restore the legality and stability of the Nation by removing the dictator [meaning Salinas] from office." In Subcomandante Marcos's words, "we demand the formation of a new government of transition that would convene free and democratic elections for August 1994." They deny that they are trying to impose their project on Mexican society by force.

More radical demands have been heard from fragments of interviews with militants on the ground. This may reflect differences between leadership and base, or political differences within the Zapatista Army (EZLN). Given the alphabet soup of Chiapas rural politics, it would not be surprising to discover that several distinct groups came together in recent years to form the EZLN.

Whatever their ideological roots, the Zapatistas gradually won over many activists who had long tried organizing for change within the system. Chiapas is full of independent peasant organizations, many with two decades of tough organizing behind them. Some are spiritually inspired while others are more secular. Some focus on community economic development projects while others are more culturally and ethnically identified. Some are affiliated with national groups, like the National Network of Coffee Organizations, the National Union of Autonomous Regional Peasant Organizations, the Independent Center of Farm Workers and Campesinos, The National *Plan de Ayala* Network, and the Independent Front of Indian Peoples, while others prefer to stick to local and regional alliances. Some fight for land rights and against human rights abuses, while others steer clear of such dangerous issues.

The Zapatistas come out of this world—a dense network of associations seeking to change the system but consistently encountering more repression than reform—and they have already helped to transform it. Until the January uprising, the community-based Indigenous and peasant organizations of Chiapas had operated largely independently of one another. But in the wake of the January uprising and the political space it opened up, they have come together in a state-wide network of unprecedented political breadth and diversity.

In spite of the Zapatistas' clearly local roots, government spokespeople have sought to discredit the movement by claiming that it cannot be truly

Ramona reportedly speaks only Tzotzil. They affirmed that their Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee is the highest political authority, although Marcos is the main military strategist. They said that Marcos is their spokesperson because "he has such a facility with Spanish. We still have a helluva lot of trouble with it. That's why we need him to do lots of things for us...but we make the political decisions." No one seems to know who Subcomandante Marcos is, other than those who have pointed out that his name stands for Margaritas, Altamirano, Rancho Nuevo, Comitán, Ocosingo and San Cristóbal, the main towns in the zones of conflict.

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*"Almost all of us, to a greater or lesser extent, are guilty of the iniquitous situation of the Indians of Mexico, since we have allowed, with our passivity or our indifference, the extortions and abuses of the plantation owners, the ranchers, the caciques and corrupt politicians."*

—Octavio Paz

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Indigenous. Indigenous revolts are supposed to be "spontaneous," but the January events were well-planned in advance. The government alleges that the many Indigenous people who participated were actually duped by non-Indigenous professional revolutionaries. Indigenous peoples are supposed to have only local, immediate demands; the official view is that they are not concerned with national politics. For this reason, the Zapatista emphasis on political democracy is offered as conclusive evidence that this is not an authentic Indigenous movement.

In response to government charges, the Zapatistas claim that their top leadership is exclusively Indigenous. This message was a bit muddled since their principal spokesperson, Marcos, is not Indigenous (though he has made it clear that he is merely a *subcomandante*). When the top leadership met with the press for the first time in early February, though, the confusion began to clear up. Spanish is a foreign language for all of the leaders—indeed, Comandante

Moreover, the Zapatistas' initial de-emphasis of ethnically-specific demands may reveal more about the extreme complexity of the ethnic map of the main region in revolt than about the social origins of the EZLN. The Cañadas region is an area of relatively recent settlement, mostly by Indigenous homesteaders from other parts of Chiapas, especially from the densely-populated Altos region, but also by some *mestizos* from other Mexican states. Thus the different ethnic groups are not settled in their own geographically and culturally distinct areas. The result has been a great deal of inter-ethnic mixing, and Tzeltal has reportedly become a lingua franca, along with Spanish. This mixing may help to explain why the rebellion shows signs of a broader pan-Maya identity. It also accounts for the relative absence of ethnically-specific demands based on primordial claims to the region where they live, and for the central place of the demand to be treated as full citizens of Mexico—though the Zapatistas have recently proposed the creation of Indigenous co-governors, as counterweights to *mestizo*-dominated state authorities.

## REBELLION AND DEMOCRACY

Remarkably, even strong critics of the Zapatistas and their big city sympathizers have recognized the legitimacy of their demands. Reacting to a government offer of amnesty, Subcomandante Marcos asked: "Why should we be the ones to ask for pardon?" Acknowledging his eloquent challenge, Nobel Peace Prize-winning writer and Zapatista critic Octavio Paz said, "It really moved me—it's not the Indians of Mexico, but we who should be the ones to ask for pardon. I don't close my eyes to the responsibility of our authorities—especially those in Chiapas—nor to the no less serious responsibilities of the selfish and narrow-minded comfortable classes of that rich province. But the responsibility also extends to Mexican society as a whole. Almost all of us, to a greater or lesser extent, are guilty of the iniquitous situation of the Indians of Mexico, since we have allowed, with our passivity or our indifference, the extortions and abuses of the plantation owners, the ranchers, the *caciques* and corrupt politicians."

One of the most influential institutions in civil society, the Catholic church, has responded by closing ranks in support of Bishop Ruíz. The earlier attacks against Ruíz appeared to fit the classic Central American-style image of church hierarchy versus liberation theology. But things turn out to have been more complicated. The church's institutional interests were involved, since the Pope's Ambassador, a foreigner, had pushed the top leaders of the Mexican church aside to become President Salinas's main church ally. The Papal Nuncio also angered many bishops by agreeing to accept the government's story about the "accidental" airport murder of the Cardinal of Guadalajara (by machine gun at point blank range). Now that Ruíz has become the key link in the new peace talks, the balance of power within the Mexican church seems to have shifted to the national authorities.

Prompted by economic distress and political subordination, rooted in a rich network of regional associations, and protected by a broader Mexican civil society, the Zapatista revolt is as important as the student movement of 1968, the citizens movement after the Mexico City earthquake, or the 1988 movement for democratic presidential elections. As pro-democracy elements within the church have increasingly joined with human rights, civic, grassroots and Indigenous movements throughout Mexico, civil society seems to have gained strength in its long-term, two-steps-forward/one-step-back struggle to weaken authoritarian rule.

One sign of this progress is the government's pact with the national political parties. It promises independent oversight of the election commissions, independent auditing of the voter rolls, fairer access to the media, and lower campaign spending ceilings. Whether

the government will keep these promises is another matter, but the broad sympathy for the Zapatistas throughout urban as well as rural Mexico indicates that the government will pay a very high price if it commits fraud in the upcoming presidential elections.

At the bargaining table in Chiapas, the government preferred to deal with local and regional issues, making national concessions only on some general principles to defend Indigenous rights. That approach misses the point, and could carry dangerous implications. As Bishop Ruíz put it, "From the beginning the Zapatistas raised national issues ... Those who think they can isolate the problem of Chiapas from the national context as the way to solve this problem don't understand anything. This is a problem that is raised to the national level because Indigenous people are not only in Chiapas. Their situation is the same all over, and all of them have been identifying with the [Zapatista] cause, though not with the means."

So far the cease-fire has held, in spite of the assassination of Salinas's hand-picked candidate for president, Donaldo Colosio, on March 23. Until this unprecedented political murder, democratization, social reform, and Indigenous rights were at the top of the national agenda. Today it is not so clear. The ruling party's internal leadership crisis, aggravated by Chiapas but deepened by the murder, has pushed the rebellion off the front pages—which may have been one of the killers' goals.

The Zapatistas' declared a "red alert" in response to the assassination, blaming the murder on hard-liners within the government. Increasingly threatened by government military encirclement, they then suspended their grassroots consultations with the rank and file on the draft "peace commitments" (they didn't like to call it an "agreement," since it was not signed by the representatives in San Cristóbal). By early May, it looked like the downward spiral had halted and the government negotiator went off to a new round of negotiations "somewhere in the Lacandon Jungle...."•

This article is adapted and updated from a version, entitled "Roots of Chiapas," previously published in the *Boston Review*.

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# The First Zapatista Uprising

An Extract of a Letter from Subcomandante Marcos

...Susanna, Tzotzil, is angry. They were making fun of her a while ago. The other members of the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee (CCRI) were saying that she was to blame for the first Zapatista Army uprising, back in March 1993. "I am really angry," she tells me. "While I try to find out what's going on, I protect myself behind a rock. The *compañeros* say that it was my fault that the Zapatistas rose up last year." I come closer, cautiously. After a bit I discover what it's all about: back in March the *compañeros* were debating what would later become the "Revolutionary Laws."

Susanna had the job of making the rounds of dozens of communities, speaking with groups of women to pull their ideas together into the "Women's Law" proposal. When the CCRI met to vote on the laws, they went through them one by one, from the commissions on justice, agrarian law, war taxes, the rights and obligations of communities in struggle, and then to women. Susanna had the job of reading the proposals that brought together the thoughts of thousands of Indigenous women. As she began to read, the assembly began to get more and more restless. In Chol, Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Tojolobal, Mam, Zoque and "castilla" [Spanish] comments broke out all around. Susanna didn't flinch and charged ahead: "We don't want to be forced to marry someone we don't want. We want to have the [number of] children we want and can care for. We want the right to have leadership positions in the community. We want the right to have our say, and that it be respected. We want the right to study, and even to become drivers." So she continued, until she finished. At the end there was a heavy silence. The "Women's Laws" that Susanna had just read meant, for the Indigenous communities, a real revolution. The women leaders were still getting the translations of what Susanna had said into their own languages and dialects. The guys looked around nervously at each other. Then, almost at the same time, the translators finished and the *compañeras* began applauding and talking among themselves. Needless to say, the "Women's Laws" were approved unanimously. One Tzeltal leader said "the good thing is that my woman doesn't understand Spanish, otherwise...." But a Tzotzil officer with the rank of infantry major let him have it: "You're screwed now, because we're going to translate that into all the dialects." The *compañero* looked down. The women leaders were singing, and the guys were scratching their heads. Prudently, I called for a recess.

This is the story that came out, Susanna now tells me, when someone in the CCRI read a newspaper article that said that the proof that the EZLN wasn't authentically Indigenous is that they couldn't have gotten together to agree to launch their uprising on the first of January. Someone joked that the first uprising wasn't in January, but back in March. They teased Susanna and she left with a blunt "fuck you," plus something else in Tzotzil that nobody dared to translate. But it's true: the first uprising of the EZLN was in March of 1993, and it was led by the Zapatista women. They won, with no casualties. That's the way things are around here [Cosas de estas tierras]...."

From the mountains of Southeastern Chiapas,  
To the national newspaper *La Jornada*, Mexico City, January 26, 1994  
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