

Comment

Institutionalizing Revolution, Rioting For Reform - Mexican Politics from Zapata to the Zapatistas

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Here we are, the dead of all times, dying once again,
but now with the objective of living.

The Zapatistas¹

On the first of January 1994, the EZLN (for Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional or Zapatista National Liberation Army) occupied five cities in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, demanding land, water, credits, freedom and justice — in other words, the right to life with dignity. In the rural area of Chiapas, where coffee is the main export crop and 60 percent of the coffee growers are Indians, the constitution's legal stipulations on land reform have been the subject of endless petitions. Having been less than successful through this means, the peasants are now claiming their rights against the Mexican state with arms, insisting that "the EZLN be recognized as a political

force and that issues concerning indigenous people be the object of a national debate from which they must not be marginalized.”²

The government, for its part, insists on minimizing the Zapatistas demands. Basic disagreement persists over the political implications of the conflict. While the Zapatistas continue to evoke publicity for their cause as a problem with national implications, peace negotiator Camacho maintains that “[t]he key is to respond to social needs and to not mix a general political discussion with the pressure of a localized armed rebellion.”

According to the EZLN's sub-*comandante* Marcos, the EZLN has been training for armed conflict for about 10 years. The mass media reports that it now comprises about 2,000 trained people; informal sources speak of up to 6,000 members. Three days after the riots, the government sent troops into Chiapas, who were later found to have tortured and shot Indians in the region regardless of whether they were identified as Zapatistas or not. Despite its unwillingness to acknowledge this conflict as a national problem, the national government then decided to send in a “national negotiator for peace,” the former mayor of Mexico City, Manuel Camacho Solis, who had just been passed over by the governing party, the Institutional Revolution Party (PRI for Partido de la Revolución Institucional), as candidate for president in the upcoming August 1994 elections. Camacho was the person President Salinas trusted most in this situation; but Salinas did not foresee the extent of the quarrels which the nomination would evoke within the PRI — quarrels between Camacho, Salinas's successor-designate, Colosio, and Salinas himself, which may be reflected in a weakened showing for the PRI in the August elections. Six weeks into the conflict, polls indicated that 78 percent of the Mexican population supported the Zapatistas,³ and huge demonstrations brought together people of the left-wing opposition, including popular movements, the middle class, intellectuals, and the leading opposition party, PRD (for Partido Revolucionario Democrático, or Revolutionary Democratic Party).

Given the central significance of the land issue for the Zapatistas, it is important to start out with a clear understanding of the legal position. The provisions of the 1857 constitution positively prohibited collective property-holding and thus undermined the economic basis of the peasant communities. A key demand of the peasants in the 1910-17 revolution was the repeal of this prohibition. Article 27 of the Mexican constitution of 1917, stipulating that rural communities could ask for land (*ejidos*)⁴ and work this land collectively, emerged from Emiliano Zapata's 1911 "Plan of Ayala." The Plan demanded the return of land that had either been stolen from peasant communities or "bought" by hacienda owners in the course of hacienda expansion.

In spite of President Lazaro Cardenas's land reforms in the late 1930s, many rural communities, including those of the Mayan peasants in Chiapas, failed to get *ejido* land. In 1992, however, the constitution was amended to permit the privatization of existing *ejidos*. *Ejido* land can now be sold. To those who have not even got the land they had a right to in the first place, this latest amendment must seem like bitter mockery. The fact that the central demand in 1994 is so similar to that of 1910 — namely, the peasants' right to cultivate their own land in their own (collective) way — poses the obvious question of just what the revolution of 1910-17 accomplished for the peasants.

While Mexican elites were able to play their game of national power relatively undisturbed by external influences until 1982, the pressure of global restructuring contributed to the first of a series of visible cracks in this system. I argue that IMF dependency, which came with the debt crisis and the subsequent opening of the previously highly-protected, Mexican market to foreign imports, threatened the survival of the economically marginalized, while at the same time it jeopardized the control of the politically powerful. The impact of economic pressure on political mobilization was then twofold. As the elite discourse and strategies turned technocratic, economically-driven decisions not only led to popular mobilization on a large scale, but also to the crumbling of the very fabric of PRI politics, a tightly-knit system

of bonding expressed through the channels of corporatism, *compadrazgo* (clientelism), *caciquismo* (regional bossism) and *machismo*. The article attempts to show how this worked, and to suggest why it gradually began to break down following the debt crisis of the 1980s. It concludes with a very brief account of the state of both the governing party and the left opposition forces confronting it in the run-up to the 1994 presidential elections.

Key to understanding the context of the Zapatistas' challenge, then are: (1) the institutionalization of the governing party PRI from 1917 to 1940; (2) Mexico's economic development from 1940 to 1981; and (3) the increasing oppositional mobilization of social movements and the restructuring of the global economy in the 1980s and 90s.

1. The Institutionalization of the Revolution The institutionalization of the revolution can be divided into two periods. The first, from 1917 to 1934, comprises the development of the governing party. Its architect was President Plutarco Elias Calles, "el jefe maximo," the most powerful of Mexican politicians. The second period, 1934-1940, was characterized by the so-called "politics of social peace." President Lazaro Cardenas carried out the nationalization of the oil industry, and finally realized the institutionalization of the party first conceived by Calles.

The Formula of the Governing Party In the aftermath of the revolution of 1910 and the passage of the Constitution of 1917, political power lay in the hands of the generals, drawing on their charisma as *caudillos* (leaders) of the revolution. The new constitution contained a number of progressive provisions, particularly Article 27, which, as noted, dealt with agrarian reform, and Article 123 dealing with conditions of labour and setting out extremely advanced principles of workers' rights. Politics, however, were dictated much less by the constitution than by the interests of individuals in power. The governments of this period had little real legitimacy: their control relied on informal negotiations between powerful interests, and electoral fraud. The president's

authority was supported by the military, and by nationalist rhetoric, which claimed that the government was "continuing the revolution."

Neglect of the constitution, however, and of Articles 27 and 123 specifically, led to growing oppositional mobilization, as peasants and workers felt cheated of their revolutionary achievements. Because of their lack of organizational unity, presidential power was initially not seriously challenged. The situation changed, however, when the military failed to agree on a presidential candidate to follow Calles (1924-1928). In light of these conflicts, Calles decided at the end of his period in office that it was necessary to stabilize the president's position with new institutional arrangements. Consequently, in his last presidential speech he proposed a new party project. Ideologically this project contained elements of both Italian fascism and Soviet communism, proposing to unite peasant organizations, the trade unions, and the political bureaucracy as a "revolutionary family" within a single party. It was also aimed at controlling regional and local leaders, the *caciques*, and at weakening the influence of the military.

In 1929, the National Revolutionary Party (PNR for Partido Nacional Revolucionario) was founded following Calles's proposals. In the short term, it helped Calles to maintain effective control over Mexican politics until 1935, i.e., for seven years beyond his formal term of office as president. Over the longer term, despite the constitutional ban on anyone serving a second term as president, it made it possible for a president to influence the choice of the next presidential candidate in a way that guaranteed political continuity. Neither the *latifundistas* (big landowners) nor the entrepreneurs (nor the US government) were particularly keen on this idea. Still, concerned by the economic and political instability caused by the depression, they gave it their support, and the Mexican industrial, agrarian, and public sector⁵ interests constituted themselves as the "revolutionary family," forming the basis of the new party. The *técnicos* (technocrats) including the financial oligarchy, business interests, and the military, however, remained formally outside the PRN.

The "Politics of Social Peace" The Great Depression and the urgent need for social reform contributed to increasing unrest among both peasants and workers, leading to the PRN's reluctant nomination of Lázaro Cárdenas for the presidency in 1934. Cárdenas, elected largely by workers and peasants, was the first president to attempt to give effect to the reforms provided for in the constitution of 1917. During his tenure large amounts of farmland were distributed to peasant communities as *ejido* land and two huge workers' and peasants' federations, the CTM (Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos/Confederation of Mexican Workers) and the CNC (Confederación Nacional de Campesinos/National Confederation of Peasants) were founded. As membership in these confederations was coupled with membership in the state party, the party's political legitimacy was reinforced in consequence of their creation. The church's influence was also restricted and subordinated to that of the government, and in 1938 the oil industry was nationalized.

Both the nationalization of the oil industry and the agrarian reforms were supported by Article 27 of the Mexican constitution, which stipulated that the nation had the right to decide the disposition of its resources, including oil. As well, Article 27 gave rural communities the right to demand land from the government, or, if no government-owned land was available, from hacienda owners. (It also meant a blunt challenge to the power of the church which owned about 50 percent of Mexican productive soil at that time.) Peasant communities also had the right to work this land collectively or individually according to their own choice. This *ejido* land could not be rented or mortgaged, had to be worked continuously, and taxes had to be paid on it. Thus, Article 27 of the Constitution of 1917 reinstated the Indian tradition of collective rural production. There was, however, one major difference from pre-Revolutionary collective land ownership, namely that the new *ejidos* were not owned by the communities who worked the land but were the property of the Mexican state, managed by the Ministry of Agriculture.

It is politically important to note that the right to work on the *ejidos* was also coupled with a *de facto*-obligation

to become a member of the state party (which in 1938 was renamed the PRM — Partido de la Revolución Mexicana or Party of the Mexican Revolution — and in 1946, the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI). In this way the government gained considerable influence and control over rural communities. At the same time, the distribution of *ejidos* was also destined to sow the seeds of political conflict among the villagers, as some peasants still owned their land privately (i.e. outside the *ejidos*), while others were now tied to the state party. Cardenas's politics thus maintained the pre-existing corporatist-authoritarian structure while shifting the emphasis towards the needs of the people.

This also brought about a definite shift in the inner structure of party power, however. Former President Plutarco Elias Calles was exiled in 1935 for criticizing Cardenas's politics as biased towards workers and contrary to the interests of capital. This signalled not only the end of the era of the revolutionary leaders, the *caudillos*, but also the commencement of a new era, that of the "politicos."

2. The "Mexican Miracle" and the Era of the Politicos
Strong opposition to Cardenas' politics of "social peace" was launched by business groups, landowners, the recently-nationalized oil industry, and the church. In 1939, PAN (Partido de Acción Nacional/National Action Party), a party supported by business groups and the church, emerged from this opposition to challenge the PRI's claim to include all sectors of Mexican society. The PRI reacted by selecting Avila Camacho to serve as president (1940-1946). Camacho, who was pro-business, was able to co-opt potential PAN members into the PRI, and the PRI thus successfully survived the challenge. The continuity of the PRI system was sustained, albeit with recurring challenges,⁶ until the early 1980s.

Although the average annual growth rate of the GDP was 6.7 percent between 1930 and 1981, modernization of the private agrarian sector and the manufacturing sector could not absorb the expanding workforce; instead, industrialization was accompanied by an expansion of the "informal"

sector. With the virtual cessation of agrarian reform after 1940,⁷ the agrarian sector's capacity to sustain the rural population declined, especially with the increasing neglect of state subsidized programs to improve the rural infrastructure, such as irrigation and transportation systems. This led to an agrarian crisis and growing, mostly female, migration to the three urban centres of Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey.

Until about 1965, economic growth had relied on small farming production, which met the domestic demand for food supplies, and on agricultural and oil exports. But the decline of agricultural capacity meant that by the early 60s food had to be imported, using foreign credits. This crisis coincided with the end of the *bracero* program. Since 1942, this program had allowed Mexican peasants to cross the border into the US to work in the southern states. With its expiry in 1964, about 200,000 (mostly male) Mexican workers were left jobless.

In order to counter the resulting skyrocketing unemployment rates in the north, a new program, the "border industrialization program," was developed. This involved the creation of "free (export) production zones" on the model of Japan or Hongkong, designed to give employment to unemployed men. It was soon apparent, however, that this program led almost exclusively to the employment of women. Men continued to cross the border as "wetbacks"; that is, they crossed the Rio Grande, entering the US illegally to continue the work they had done before, only now for much lower wages.

Further problems were encountered in the 70s, and by 1976 the model of import-substituting industrialization seemed to have reached its limit. Mexico had to negotiate with the IMF for the first time. A year later, however, the situation changed dramatically when new oil reserves were discovered in the south. This initiated a short boom of industrial development which relied on massive foreign borrowing.

These stresses and changes in the Mexican economy were reflected in changes at the centre of the PRI. In the immediate

aftermath of the revolution, first the military, then peasants and workers were central to the PRI's political success. During the period of import-substituting industrialization the industrial sector was the major focus of PRI policy. With the oil boom, the emphasis of PRI politics increasingly shifted to the service sector. This stress on the service sector once again fuelled corporatist policy making. The businesses that were most centrally involved in this process acquired a special kind of ancillary status in policy making and came to be called *paraestatales* (para-state organizations). Executive positions in these enterprises usually led to positions in the government, that is, in the governing PRI. This type of linkage and bonding between government and business representatives not only tied the business sector informally to the state party; it also provided a framework for settling labour conflicts, and it formed a bulwark against the representation of anyone except male *mestizos* in the industrial sector, the labour unions, and the state. That is, women and Indians were excluded from certain channels of political representation — a problem that has subsequently become increasingly central to political debate, as the following section indicates.

3. The Mobilization of Oppositional Social Movements and the Restructuring of the Global Economy With the economic crisis of the early 1980s and the subsequent restructuring of the global economy, the influence of business groups on Mexican policy making grew. To remain competitive on an international scale, they needed greater freedom of action, and decisions on restructuring of the Mexican economy were called for. The year 1982 marked the beginning of a major debt crisis as the Mexican government was no longer able to meet its enormous foreign debt obligations. In this situation Miguel de la Madrid, a technocrat, was chosen as president. For the first time the dominance of the hitherto powerful "politicos" was broken. De la Madrid's appointment signalled the fact that the limits of the corporatist capacity of the PRI had nearly been reached. Policy veered more and more towards the interests of business and

the PRI increasingly depended on business support. The essence of economic strategy now became "industrial conversion." Critics labelled this project "the Chileanization of the Mexican economy" because "[i]t consist[ed] mainly in closing outdated enterprises and leaving a few profit-making ones."⁸

During De la Madrid's presidency (1982-1988), external threats to the PRI surfaced, as several well-organized popular movements emerged after the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City. Among these were the seamstresses movement, which succeeded in establishing an independent and nationally organized trade union called "19th of September," the organization of women in coordinating committees of earthquake victims (CUD), and neighbourhood organizations. Internal struggles among the governing elites also became particularly apparent on two occasions: in the midst of the electoral reform surrounding the mayoral elections of Mexico City; and when a group of politicians around Cuauthemoc Cardenas, known as the "Democratic Current," split from the PRI in 1987. The mayoral election campaign in Mexico-City was picked up as a major theme by the new movements and by groups that had for decades been struggling for democracy, including left-wing parties, various popular movements, and feminists. The charisma of Cuauthemoc Cardenas was decisive for building this collection of forces into the strongest left-wing opposition in the history of Mexican presidential elections. As well as being the son of Mexico's most popular president, Lazaro Cardenas, he also bore the name of the Aztec king Cuauthemoc, who, unlike his antagonist Moctezuma, fought against the Spanish conquerors and is, hence, remembered as a national hero. The opposition movement was organized under an umbrella organization called the National Democratic Front (FDN for Frente Democrática Nacional), which eventually became today's PRD.

To make matters worse for the PRI, many domestic business groups were highly critical of the new strategy of export orientation and economic restructuring. Businesses which had been central to the "economic miracle" during the period of import-substitution policies, and which had often provided

faced bankruptcy and closure. Industrial reconstruction also led to huge lay-offs, particularly in the manufacturing sector, and the growing number of unemployed meant decreasing membership in the PRI union, the CTM. The "employ yourself" campaign for homework, and for small businesses in the repair sector, was supposed to address the problems of the unemployed, but it was inadequate to stabilize PRI politics. Quite the contrary, workers who were pushed below the poverty line were very likely to join the popular movements. In the 1988 presidential elections Cardenas, with 31 percent of the officially-declared votes, achieved a hitherto unheard-of success. In spite of electoral fraud, the PRI candidate, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, was credited with only 50 percent.

4. Social Forces on the Eve of the 1994 Presidential Elections The Chiapas uprising, then, came at a singularly difficult time for the PRI and has added considerably to the party's internal tensions. It appeared that the PRI candidate for the presidency, Luis Donaldo Colosio Murrieta (who was chosen in November 1993 to follow Salinas), would face two other candidates whose political formation took place within the PRI, namely Cuauthemoc Cardenas, the PRD leader, and possibly Manuel Camacho, the peace negotiator in Chiapas. This added a new measure of uncertainty to the already shaky state of PRI politics. With the Mayan peasants of Chiapas unwilling to disarm until "clean" and democratic elections had been carried out, and peace negotiator Camacho getting daily coverage in the mass media, the PRI's leadership faced a much larger backlash than they might have calculated. As the Zapatistas' foremost demand is for basic needs, it is now obvious that Colosio's masterpiece, the National Solidarity Program, PRONASOL, did not reach all those who needed solidarity in Mexico. This was not only manifested in the Zapatistas' uprising, but has been constantly reaffirmed in the ongoing "peace" negotiations which, on top of discrediting Colosio's work, have raised Camacho's public profile considerably. While Salinas chose Camacho as an experienced negotiator and one of the few

people who could be relied on for this difficult task, he clearly did not foresee the long-term implications of his choice.

As NAFTA comes into effect, and the Uruguay Round of GATT proceeds, the government has adopted a neoliberal discourse that is in growing contradiction with its old corporatist-authoritarian foundations. President Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) carried technocratic-authoritarian politics to an extreme. The peasant farmers of Chiapas are only the first of those most adversely and immediately affected by his economic strategy who have put in question any further continuation of such politics. With the Zapatista riots, Salinas's appointment of Camacho as the "national negotiator of peace" amounted to a confession of the isolation of the presidency. There seemed to be few "real friends" of Salinas left, either inside or outside the PRI. To add to the current problematic political situation, the international community, and in particular Canada and the US as Mexico's chief trade partners, will probably be keeping a close watch on the Mexican military for human rights violations, and on the demands for democracy, freedom and justice included in the ten-point Zapatista program. The government's reaction suggests that its old policies towards opposition movements — co-optation or repression — will no longer work with the new opposition.

The Zapatistas' handling of the "peace" talks reveals how little success the PRI negotiation strategy is likely to meet. Its failure was unmistakably revealed in the aftermath of what the government thought was a tentative peace agreement of March 2, 1994, when negotiator Camacho declared "[i]t is clear to us that there are not yet any agreements." As sub-*comandante* Marcos of the Zapatistas explained "[w]e demand things and they say that over a certain period of 30 to 90 days, the Government will respond with a proposal for a law to make a plan that it will put into effect later on." Marcos clearly indicated that Indians would no longer be "tricked" by Government talk.⁹ As he specified, "we do not want papers, we want schools, we want hospitals, we want land."¹⁰ If any promises made in an eventually

reached peace accord were not to be realized six months after the agreement, Marcos added, the Zapatistas would return to fighting. This comment reflects an awareness of PRI politics that is shared by countless other opposition movements.

The political rhetoric of hollow promises is not, however, the sole province of the PRI. Feminists encounter this problem as well with the opposition party, PRD, which, as yet, has not succeeded in reaching the affirmative action quota (20 percent women) it adopted in 1990. This reluctance to implement equity policy is a source of disquiet for feminists. Two currents of the feminist movement of the 1980s, namely the Benita Galeana Coordinating Committee (an umbrella organization for 33 women's groups, NGOs, networks, unions, etc.) and the association of Women Fighting for Democracy have supported the opposition PRD since its inception. Yet the relations among men and women in this new left-wing opposition have never been free from that *machismo* which thrived for such a long time under corporatist-authoritarian structures and Catholicism. Already during the electoral campaign of 1988 there were feminist voices expressing the expectation that the old corporatist structures would be confronted and changed in the process of modernization and restructuring.

With the possibilities for democratic participation and representation on the increase in 1994, feminists are likely to constitute a decisive social force in the election. The new interest of politicians in women's support was demonstrated by Cardenas (PRD) and Colosio (PRI) on the 8th of March, International Women's Day, when the former called for women's "equality against authoritarianism," and the latter promised to "open spaces in political, economic, and social life for Mexican women."¹¹ Yet, like the Zapatistas, the feminists prefer action to promises, and they may turn against the PRD and the PRI, if Camacho does decide to run.

Conclusion The 1994 Zapatista uprising is, in fact, one of a larger series of relatively recent disturbances in the previously "smooth" functioning of Mexican politics. The Zapatistas'

struggle sheds light on the contradiction between the traditions of the Mexican political system and current economic developments. It makes visible the ever growing tension between the PRI's inclusive, populist, political discourse, and its exclusionary economic policies. Mexico was able to produce an economic "miracle" based on import-substituting industrialization during the 1950s and 60s; it developed a significant export capacity in its agricultural and industrial sectors, and even became qualified, according to the OECD's definition, as a Newly Industrializing Country. This model of development was, however, based on the neglect of vast segments of the economy, including both agricultural production for the domestic market, and manufacturing industries oriented to domestic consumption. As a result, more and more peasants have fallen back on mainly subsistence farming, and more and more manufacturing takes place in the so-called "informal" sector. For those engaged in such activity, however, living conditions have sunk to new depths, stimulating new waves of resistance in which Indian peasants and women factory workers play increasingly crucial roles.

Of course, the mere fact that an opposition group has challenged the PRI government is not new. Peasants, students, urban squatters, and feminists have been organizing for change throughout the 20th century. Previously, however, the government was always able either to co-opt opposition groups, or to destroy them without deviating much from its political strategies. The government's reaction to the Zapatistas strongly suggests that under conditions of global restructuring and the NAFTA, this is no longer possible.

Mexican politics seem to have come full circle, with Zapata's institutionalized revolution at the beginning of the century and the Zapatistas' riots for reforms at the end of the century. Yet it is unlikely that the same cycle will be repeated again. The Zapatistas of the 1990s are more likely to stand firm and use their arms if the political elites return once again to their old habit of electoral fraud in the presidential elections. In the light of this disturbing possibility (and not just because Mexico's NAFTA partners are watching), Mexican government and opposition leaders have decided to

implement a series of electoral reforms. Among others, the PRI will give away one of its most treasured "privileges," placing the Federal Electoral Institute, which was the focus of strong criticism after the 1988 presidential elections, under the control of nonpartisan citizens.

Epilogue (March 25, 1994) After the mortal attack on the PRI's presidential candidate, Donaldo Colosio, on 23 March 1994, President Salinas has two options. He can either choose a successor to Colosio among leading PRI members or he can, for the first time in PRI history, decide in favour of a democratic election of the presidential candidate. A nomination of peace negotiator Camacho is, according to Mexican observers, highly unlikely given his open announcement that he eventually intends to campaign for the presidency outside the PRI.

Notes

I am very grateful to Enrique Dussel Peters for providing daily news from Mexico, and to Colin Leys for invaluable editing. The responsibility for the argument is of course mine.

1. *Zapatista Pamphlet*, February 25, 1994.
2. Cf. "Responses," *Chiapas Digest* 2 (January 24, 1994).
3. These data were provided by Mexican political scientist Denise Dresser in an interview with Pamela Wallin on "CBC Primetime News," February 16, 1994.
4. From the Latin verb *exire*. *Ejido* was the Spanish institution of collective ownership of land at the exit (in Latin, *exitus*) of the village. It is now synonymous with the Indian *atepetlalli* which stands for the collective properties of a village.
5. The public sector's inclusion in the party project was initiated with the foundation of the Confederación Nacional de Obreros Publicos (National Confederation of Public Workers) in 1943.
6. Such as for instance the "massacre of Tlatelolco" on October 2, 1968, when the military intervened and about 400 students were killed in Mexico City.
7. Most of the *ejido* land that was distributed was given to the peasants during the Cardenas presidency, from 1934-1940. During his first three years in office Cardenas distributed more land than during the previous 17 years. At the end of Cardenas's presidency 1,594,487 peasants worked on 47 percent of Mexico's productive soils.

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8. Jose Casar, Director of ILET made this comment in an interview which I conducted in Mexico City, October 11, 1988.
9. For both comments see *New York Times* March 18, 1994, p. 3.
10. Sub-comandante Marcos on March 5, 1994; c.f. *El Financiero* March 14, 1994, p. 79.
11. *El Financiero* March 14, 1994, p. 80.