

Zapatistas – 11 years on, a retreat and a consolidation

What has been happening in Chiapas in recent years

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The Zapatistas were one of the major influences on the development of the libertarian wing of globalization movement. What happens to them is significant not just for Mexico but also for the direction that movement takes. In recent years the direction of the Zapatistas has shifted from trying to spark off similar movements elsewhere to consolidating what they have in Chiapas. If not a physical defeat for the Zapatistas this certainly represents a significant scaling down of their hopes.

I've already written at length about the positive aspects of the way the Zapatistas organize and I don't intend to repeat the detail of that argument here. To summarise — the non-military side of the organization is organized in a libertarian fashion through elected mandated and recallable delegates who are rotated at regular intervals. Regionally these delegates form 32 Autonomous Councils. The military side (EZLN) is hierarchical but the EZLN command is however answerable to the system of delegate councils. It doesn't make decisions on behalf of the people like most clandestine armies.

In any history of the left defeats and retreats and the often unspoken side of the victories and advances. The heroic early days of the Russian or Spanish revolutions are far more attractive than the later months and years which were not only complex but also ended in betrayal of many of the ideals of those revolutions. Everyone on the left knows of the student and worker uprising of 1968, few consider why it vanished or how it ended within months with De Gaulles re-election. On a recent more minor level the left has not yet come to terms with the retreat of the anti-war movement after its peak in terms of numbers on February 15th 2003.

The simple fact is that most of the time we will fail in what we try to achieve because the forces that we are fighting are so strong. While the numbers we can typically mobilize will sometimes have the effect of being enough of a nuisance to force a change in direction by ruling class we can only defeat them in a revolution that unites the vast bulk of society, the working class, against them. And that is unlikely to happen tomorrow. Until then we need to be able to deal with defeats and partial victories, most importantly we need to be able to argue when there is a clear need to retreat because to continue trying to advance would mean needless losses for no benefit.

The Zapatistas have not yet been defeated but Mexican capital has managed to stabilize and indeed modernise itself in the period since 1994. The possibilities of sparking a more general insurrection appear to have receded. A de facto 70 year dictatorship was replaced with a 'democracy' that was able to use the carrot of eliminating the worst of the repression and corruption to modernize and stabilize capital.

This has left the Zapatistas in a very exposed position. At the time of the 1994 uprising they expected that either they would spark a general rising in what was then a very unstable Mexico or that the army would rapidly crush them. What was not expected was that there would be a huge mobilization of civil society demanding an end to military action against them. In the decade that followed they attempted to turn this mobilization in defence of their right to exist into a mobilization to transform Mexico (and indeed the world) with them.

At the same time the Zapatistas were constructing in Chiapas a self management project for their communities of some 32 regional councils each of which brought together delegates from a few dozen villages. The government recognized that attempts to militarily crush the Zapatistas destabilized Mexico in general so they opted to ignoring the Zapatistas while pumping limited funds into anti-Zapatista communities. This had the desired effect of confusing the situation for outsiders as the military and police were less and less involved and instead conflicts between such communities came to the fore.

What is happening is interesting in another way than what I have already talked about. It also should cause us to re-think some of what we understand by dual power. Dual power is where side by side you have a state and revolutionary structures designed to replace the state.

Traditionally it is understood that you cannot have a long running situation of dual power. That fairly fast either the state must crush these new structures or be replaced by them. The key moments of revolutions are often those moments when the state moves against such structures be it Petrograd in October 1917, Kronstadt in March 1921 or Barcelona in May 1937. There are even examples from Ireland as in the 7 day period when the workers unions ran the city of Limerick in 1919 during the 'Limerick soviet'. The success or failures of such a move determine the outcome of the months of constructive self management that preceded them.

The crushing may not need to be physical. A massive two year wave of workers self management and factory occupations was resolved in favour of the state in Portugal in 1974. In Argentina today the factories are being taken back into the capitalist economy as much by compromise and the offering of reforms as by open conflict.

Yet the Zapatistas structures have survived for over 11 years and their current strategy seems to be based around an indefinite consolidation of these structures — perhaps until a point is reached where changes in the general situation in put revolution back on the agenda. This process seems to have started in the wake of the march on Mexico city in March 2001. After the usual long period of silence which indicates a lot of internal discussion the Zapatistas announced that the Auguscalantes (where big external meetings were once held) were becoming Caracols or the centres of Zapatista internal organization. These were to be the centres of the 'juntas of good government' (although in English junta is assumed to mean dictatorship in fact it just means council). The Caracols would also serve as contact points between the Zapatistas and the outside world.

What exactly this meant was not all that clear until on the 15th of August 2004 when Marcos released a set of 8 communiques most of which fleshed out in a fair amount of detail just what the Zapatistas were up to. In many ways these are among the most important documents of the rebellion and it is worth taking the time to read them in detail.

From these documents we learn that the 'good government juntas' follow the libertarian structures established by the other layers of Zapatista self-management. That is they are composed of mandated delegates answerable to those that delegate them. The individual delegates who make up each junta are rotated in an incredibly rapid fashion. According to Marcos these rotations vary from every "eight to 15 days (according to the region)". The delegates are themselves drawn from the members of the Autonomous Councils. Because these are rotated in turn (over a longer period which seems to be a year) this means that by the time every one an AC has been on the junta a new AC is created.

As might be imagined this is driving outsiders who need to have regular contact with the Zapatistas (eg NGO's) nuts because it means every time you go to a 'good government junta' you are dealing with a different set of people from your last visit. This is by design as Marcos explained

"If this is analyzed in depth, it will be seen that it is a process where entire villages are learning to govern.

The advantages? Fine, one of them is that it's more difficult for an authority to go too far and, by arguing how "complicated" the task of governing is, to not keep the

communities informed about the use of resources or decision making. The more people who know what it's all about, the more difficult it will be to deceive and to lie. And the governed will exercise more vigilance over those who govern.

It also makes corruption more difficult. If you manage to corrupt one member of the JBG, you will have to corrupt all the autonomous authorities, or all the rotations, because doing a "deal" with just one of them won't guarantee anything (corruption also requires "continuity"). Just when you have corrupted all the councils, you'll have to start over again, because by then there will have been a change in the authorities, and the one you "arranged" won't work any longer. And so you'll have to corrupt virtually all the adult residents of the zapatista communities. Although, obviously, it's likely that once you've achieved that, the children will have already grown up and then, once again"

One organisational issue libertarians have always struggled with arises out of the recognition that even people with no formal power can gain power if they occupy a post and so become the only person with the skills and contacts required for that post. The solution advocated for this problem has always been to limit the amount of time anyone can serve in such a post. The Zapatistas have taken this concept to a whole new level which is intended to also provide a direct experience in such administration and the decision making that goes with it to a large percentage of the population.

However the formation of the Juntas is also a recognition of the need to consolidate the gains of the last few years. Or to put that another way the new strategy is a retreat from a position of helping to transform Mexico and the world to one of building indigenous autonomy locally.

The Zapatistas calculate they will be allowed the space for this construction because they have heard that the government expects them to fail and so is content to wait for failure. As Marcos claims "Someone else recommended letting them do it, waiting for the failure and preparing the "I told you so" along with the military advance by the federal Army on zapatista positions...What I'm recounting actually took place at the meetings of Vicente Fox' cabinet"

The Zapatista experience of the previous decade however also shows that small local conflicts can escalate into excuses for state involvement. So in terms of the decisions made by these councils they have sought to eliminate as far as possible areas where conflict with the state or excuses for stated intervention might arrive.

Law and order

Up to 2004 the Zapatistas had refused any contact with the Mexican courts or police. However serious crimes like rape and murder could create the circumstances where the police would be ordered to intervene and this in turn could escalate as their intervention was resisted. So now with some serious anti-social crimes the Zapatistas intend to investigate them and then hand the evidence and possibly the suspect over to the state to be dealt with.

Inter community conflict

In the 1990's the assumption had been that any conflict between Zapatista and non-Zapatista communities had the hand of the state behind it. This is because for a number of years, culminating in the Acteal massacre when 45 indigenous were murdered by paramilitaries, the state was indeed behind many such conflicts. It was using the classic 'low intensity conflict' strategy as taught to some 3,000 Mexico soldiers in Fort Bragg, Texas.

From 2003 the Zapatistas were no longer assuming the hidden hand of the state in all local conflicts. Instead each conflict is being investigated and a process of arbitration followed to resolve the conflict. In 2004 it was claimed this was avoiding a repeat of many of the escalations of the past.

Elections

The Zapatistas do not believe the changes they want will come through the electoral system. In the past this has resulted in conflict as the government tried to open polling stations in Zapatista areas and the Zapatistas sometimes responded by burning the ballot boxes. Now the individual JBG's have written to the commission saying they will facilitate polling stations but they want the commission to respect the fact that Zapatistas won't be voting.

As an aside to this it is worth noting that the most serious act of violence of 2003/4 was when several Zapatistas were shot and wounded by an ambush which appears to have been carried out by PRD members. The PRD is the Mexican section of the 2nd international, (ie the Labour Party) and its role in this ambush seems to be confirmed by the statement the local PRD put out saying that maybe the Zapatista will learn a lesson about boycotting elections from this!

Drug trafficking

The Zapatista communities have always not only banned illegal drugs but also alcohol because they saw it as tightly linked to domestic violence. Drugs are the favorite public excuse in the Americas for the US military to get involved in conflicts so the Zapatistas have taken the step of formalizing the drug ban. The JBGs have been given the responsibility of checking for people growing drugs and destroying any that are found.

Stolen cars

As well as requiring vehicles in their areas to register with the JBG's they have said " In order to prevent the zapatista regions from becoming sanctuaries for stolen and illegally imported automobiles, the registrations granted by the JBG will only be given to those who have their regularized, official paper".

Environment

Several of the Zapatista communities are in or on the borders of a very important nature reserve. Early in 2004 it appears they pulled all or most of the communities out of the reserve itself. Now

they are also saying trees can “only be cut for domestic needs, not for selling” and that if you cut one down you must plant and care for two saplings.

People smuggling

Chiapas is the major route for people smuggling from Central America through Mexico to the USA. There is a considerable force of ‘Migration police’ in Chiapas intended to stop the unauthorised movement of people across the border. Indeed for years the main problem for international observers in Chiapas was dodging this migration police who doubled up as an anti-observer force. If they stopped you more than a couple of times away from the tourist areas you were likely to be deported — and hundreds of international observers were in the 1990’s.

Zapatista law now forbids Zapatistas making any money from the ‘people trafficking’ trade yet the communities are also required to feed migrants (and they are not allowed to charge for this food). It also targets the people smugglers so that “All those trafficking in persons (or polleros) who are discovered and detained in zapatista territory shall be obligated to return any monies to the affected persons and, after being warned, and if they repeat their crime, they shall be turned over to the proper authorities in order to be punished according to the laws of Mexico.”

All of these compromises involve a recognition of the right of the Mexican state to impose its rule in the Zapatista areas. Indeed we are told that “the Good Government Juntas maintain respectful contact with different social organizations, with many of the official municipal governments with which the autonomies share land, and, in some cases, with the state government. Recommendations are exchanged, and they seek to resolve problems through dialogue.”

The Zapatistas remain just about the only large scale example in the modern world of libertarian organisational principles in operation. Because of this — despite these compromises — there is much that can continue to be learned from them.

Afterword

This article was for publication in Red and Black Revolution, Autumn 2005. However while being worked on in June news came through of a Zapatista communique that appears to be a preparation for a return to war. At this stage (a few hours later) it is not clear what is about to happen but I am releasing the article as I think it provides a useful background of events in the last couple of years and the sort of reasons why the Zapatistas might have decided to return to armed struggle. On the other hand it is also possible that the Zapatista communique is simply a reaction to either military provocation or paramilitary threats and that this situation will be quickly resolved. (Tue 21 June)

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