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The Reorganization of Zapatista Autonomy

Jérôme Baschet

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”The Reorganization of Zapatista Autonomy” is excerpted from Jérôme Baschet’s *The Zapatista Experience: Rebellion, Resistance, and Autonomy*, out this fall with AK Press. Although the book was first published in Mexico in 2019, the English translation contains new material not in the Spanish original, including a valuable description of the reorganization of Zapatista political structures that has been underway over the past year. As Baschet observes, this transformation, announced by the Zapatistas at the end of 2023, is an attempt to address a series of limitations and obstacles that have beset their communities for some time, both from within and without. The present text, which outlines the recent modifications to their political form, is best read as a postscript to Baschet’s powerful article, “Zapatista Autonomy: A Destituent Experiment?”, which describes in rich detail the structure of Zapatista political society prior to its recent reorganization.

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The new stage in the Zapatista struggle that was announced at the end of 2023 is characterized by a significant reorganization of autonomy. While the autonomous municipalities (MAREZ in Spanish) and the Good Government Councils disappeared, another organizational form was born — one whose “principal basis,” the new “nucleus of all autonomy,” is Local Autonomous Governments (GAL in Spanish). These are formed in each community, “coordinated by autonomous agents and commissioners, and are subject to the assembly of the town.”¹ Furthermore, the Local Autonomous Governments can coordinate at the regional level, forming “Collectives of Zapatista Autonomous Government” (CGAZ), and they can call assemblies of community authorities to reach agreements of mutual interest. In turn, the CGAZ can join together to form “Assemblies of Collectives of Zapatista Autonomous Governments” (ACGAZ) that have their headquarters in the Caracoles and — when the GAL and CGAZ deem it necessary — can convene zone-level assemblies.

This reorganization eliminates the municipal level of autonomy that was created in 1994, replacing it with coordinating bodies at the so-called “regional” level.² At the broader “zone” level, the councils of elected authorities known as the Good Government Councils have been eliminated, and we can consider the ACGAZ to be a new modality of what were previously known as zone-level assemblies. And while autonomy continues to be organized at three levels, the balance between them

¹ Subcomandante Insurgente Moisés, “Ninth Part: The new structure of Zapatista Autonomy,” *Enlace Zapatista*, November 13, 2023. <https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2023/11/13/ninth-part-the-new-structure-of-zapatista-autonomy>

² It is necessary to distinguish between “regions” and “zones.” Regions, consisting of various communities, existed before, but only as an organizational level in the EZLN’s military structure, and not as a unit within the structures of civilian autonomy. The zones are much bigger entities that—prior to this new stage—joined together various municipalities (while the municipality grouped together various “regions”).

the other is the political-military organization of EZLN. The strengthening of autonomy, especially since 2003, has entailed a partial process of redirecting the power previously concentrated in the leadership of the EZLN toward the Zapatista support bases and their civilian bodies of government. But nobody said this process was complete. Perhaps the new stage will introduce another dynamic, with a greater presence of the military aspect (bearing in mind this does not mean a return to armed struggle). In any case, maybe the EZLN’s verticality, as a political-military organization, has been a decisive factor in the construction and persistence of autonomy, while also creating difficulties that have accentuated its fragility.

Several difficulties confront Zapatista autonomy, including the constant aggressions against it, the difficulty of building an other world within such an adverse context and with such limited material resources, the errors of autonomous authorities, and the verticalism of the EZLN (something the Zapatistas themselves recognize, emphasizing that the military dimension could prevent the growth of civil autonomy and the horizontality it requires). The heavy burden of all the work that Zapatista resistance requires is another cause of fragility, increasing the instances in which people can no longer bear the exhaustion and choose to leave the organization. Other reasons might include migration and the tensions that come with any process of transformation.

We must also recognize all the aspects of resistance, why the Zapatista experience has managed to persist throughout its three decades of public life — something that defies logic, and borders on the improbable (or the impossible made possible). We should remember that they continue to be an armed force, so — even though they have done everything possible to avoid using their weapons — one aspect is their capacity for self-defense. Another is their constant political inventiveness, allowing them to weave together alliances and cultivate networks of solidarity. They have garnered a level of national and international support that — while less than that of the first years after the uprising — remains to this day, continuing to manifest its strength during the moments of greatest danger and to participate in important initiatives such as the Journey for Life to Europe. Above all, the Zapatista support bases exercise a degree of determination and tenacity that goes beyond the art of resistance rooted in Indigenous peoples' history. It is sustained by their conviction in the justice of their struggle, by the sensations of a reclaimed dignity brought about by self-governing and creating by themselves the world they deserve.

Two structures sustain the advances of the Zapatista experience: one is the civilian organization of autonomy, and

has shifted considerably. The local, community level has a more decisive role, while at supra-local levels the new organizing forms are simpler: the councils of elected authorities have been eliminated and replaced by coordinating structures in the form of assemblies and meetings of local authorities. Importantly, these regional and zone-level articulations only meet and act at the request of the GALs and remain under their command.

There are two reasons for this reorganization. The first is to adapt to a context with many dangers (especially the growing presence of organized crime) and to give greater attention to the need for self-defense. The second is in response to self-critiques of how autonomy has operated up until now.

Subcomandante Moisés brings these two reasons together when he writes that the prior form of autonomy “proved that it will no longer be useful for what is to come. In addition to the inherent flaws.”³ This was a critique of how autonomy had become “pyramidal.” Besides cases of “poor administration of people’s resources” (that were sanctioned), Subcomandante Moisés explains that the principal defect is that the authorities were “already falling into wanting to decide themselves, the authorities.” Furthermore, “the proposals from authorities did not go down as they were to the people, nor do the opinions of the people reach the authorities.” In short, the authorities and the communities “have distanced themselves,” they have become “separated.” Subcomandante Moisés concludes that the structure was too vertical, something that may work in the military but not in the civilian realm. The reorganization is presented as a way to “cut the pyramid,” or rather, to “turn it upside down.”

Another important aspect of the new stage is explained in the final part of the communiqué, titled “The Common and Non-Property.” Alongside the present modes of labor — indi-

³ The Captain, “Tenth Part: Regarding pyramids and their uses and customary regimes,” Enlace Zapatista, November 15, 2023. <https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2023/11/15/tenth-part-regarding-pyramids-and-their-uses-and-customary-regimes>

vidual work on *ejido* or communal land for family subsistence, and collective work (mainly on land recuperated in 1994) to finance autonomous government and projects — they propose a new way of using recuperated land: “to establish extensions of the recovered land as common. That is, without property. Neither private, nor *ejidal*, nor communal, nor federal, nor state, nor business, nor anything. A non-ownership of land.”⁴ Concretely, this land will not be permanently granted to anyone but will instead be lent in turn to those who desire to work it for a period of time, whether or not they are Zapatistas — which requires agreements among inhabitants of different organizational affiliations, based on compliance with the “rules of common use” mentioned in the communiqué. This initiative likely seeks to overcome a serious threat to recuperated land: because they were never legalized, the government incites other organizations to attack the Zapatistas living there by offering them material benefits in exchange for laying claim to the land. This proposal for shared and consensual land use among Zapatistas and non-Zapatistas may be a way to reduce the aggression and conflicts that have continued to multiply over the years.

Beyond these immediate circumstances, the proposal is based on a critique of not just private property, but on all forms of property legalized by the state, including the *ejido*, the legacy of the Mexican Revolution. Their call for non-property opens a window toward a new relationship to the land and new practices, yet to be invented. In addition, “a few hectares of this non-property will be proposed to sister nations in other geographies of the world. We are going to invite them to come and work those lands, with their own hands and knowledge.”⁵

⁴ The Captain, “Twentieth and Last Part: The Common and Non-Property,” Enlace Zapatista, December 22, 2023. <https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2023/12/22/twentieth-and-last-part-the-common-and-non-property>

⁵ The Captain, “Twentieth and Last Part.”

What does this evaluation — which led to the elimination of the autonomous municipalities and the Good Government Councils — mean for the Zapatista analysis of autonomy [I have presented previously]? At this point, it is still a difficult question to answer. First of all, what Subcomandante Moisés shared at the end of 2023 are only “conclusions from the critical analysis of MAREZ and JBG” (the autonomous municipalities and the Good Government Councils). We still await the chance to learn about these evaluations in greater detail, perhaps including the opinions of those who have participated in autonomous councils, as we did during the Little School. Second, one might wonder how the various factors leading to the elimination of the autonomous municipalities and Good Government Councils interacted with each other. How decisive were the critiques of autonomy? Remember that there were already many errors mentioned in the Little School’s notebooks, meaning that those participating in autonomy have long been aware of the risk of authorities separating from the communities. Or was the need to adapt to an extremely threatening context the more decisive factor? And should we also consider other factors? Because building autonomy is such a difficult process, it would be naive to pretend that the EZLN has the same strength and territorial presence that it had in 1994 or 2003. Furthermore, an antisystemic rebellion will inevitably suffer some degree of exhaustion after sustaining a struggle for three decades, amid nonstop counterinsurgent aggression and an ever-worsening systemic crisis.

In any case, the changes announced by the EZLN at the end of 2023 lead us to emphasize even more the difficulties of autonomy. At the same time, though, they highlight Zapatista autonomy’s exceptional ability to resist, despite all the factors that make this process a fragile one. (Recognizing that fragility arises from the very capacity to resist, and that strength can be found in fragility — meaning it is not a question of separating the good from the bad.)