

# Mexico: At 30, the Zapatistas' Future is in Question

Wednesday 21 February 2024, by [LA BOTZ Dan](#) (Date first published: 21 February 2024).

**Last month the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, leaders of an armed rebellion in Chiapas on January 1, 1994, celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the uprising (40 years since the Zapatista's founding in 1983). Those of us who are old enough remember the tremendous sense of surprise, wonder, and hope that the EZLN's Chiapas Rebellion inspired. The poorest and most oppressed people of Mexico, the indigenous, had risen up in the name of Mexican patriotism to challenge the Mexican government and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), involving Canada, Mexico, and the United States, scheduled to take effect on that day. Just as Mexican presidents Carlos Salinas and Ernesto Zedillo were proclaiming that Mexico had entered the first world of capitalist prosperity and democracy, the Mayan peasants threw back the curtain revealing the country's inequality, poverty, and authoritarianism.**

When the Mexican government sent in troops to suppress the rebellion, hundreds of thousands in cities throughout Mexico demonstrated in sympathy with the Mayan rebels, forcing the government to stop its attack. The EZLN used the internet to make contacts around the world and supporters assembled a global solidarity movement made up of young activists to wear over their faces the balaclavas or red bandanas worn by the Mayan rebels, as some young people today wear the kafiya at Palestinian solidarity marches. The Zapatistas inspired the anti-globalization movement with its slogan, "Another world is possible," as it organized protests from European cities to the Battle of Seattle in 1999. Then in 2001, the EZLN established a network of autonomous communities—called *caracoles* (snails) or *Juntas de Buen Gobierno*—that involved tens of thousands of the indigenous inhabitants, providing a model for the anti-capitalist and anarchist movements, as on a smaller scale, Rojava later did for others.

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The anniversary of the Chiapas Rebellion has led to the publication of various sorts of articles: many simple news reports, [activists' romantic accounts of travelling to](#) and [joining the thirtieth anniversary celebration](#), and [nostalgic reminiscences of the EZLN's first few years](#). Some usefully examine one or another issue such as the situation of [women in the Zapatista movement](#). And there

are more than a dozen videos of a similar character. Yet few have asked the central questions one asks of any political movement or party: What is the EZLN today and what are its politics? What are the prospects for the EZLN? And what is its future?

I have been interested in the EZLN since it first appeared on the scene back in 1994. Like so many others, I was thrilled and inspired by it. For months I spoke on university campuses in support of the movement, wrote pamphlets, and a few years later a book [Democracy in Mexico](#) (1999) attempting to put the Chiapas Rebellion in the context of other contemporaneous struggles for democracy in Mexico by political reform movements, by the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), by women's and feminist groups, and by workers. Ten years ago, I wrote a comprehensive appreciation and criticism of the EZLN, ["Twenty Years Since the Chiapas Rebellion: The Zapatistas, Their Politics, and Their Impact,"](#) as well as a discussion of contemporary research on the Zapatistas titled ["Zapatistas: The Costs of Autonomy,"](#) both of which, I believe, are still worth reading. At that time, the Zapatistas, two decades since their uprising, were still a factor in Mexican politics, even if primarily as a regional political group. Today, however, they are marginalized and imperiled as never before. I fear for the group and for the people for whom it has fought.



*Territory fully or partially controlled by the Zapatistas in Chiapas (Map: Hxlttdq, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons)*

Today the Zapatistas claim to represent a large proportion of the territory in the state of Chiapas and perhaps 300,000 people. (See map.) These are rural communities predominantly made up of Mayan subsistence farmers and agricultural laborers and they are quite poor. They face constant pressure from the Mexican government, the military, ranchers, and more recently drug cartels, which they organize to resist socially and politically. They are sometimes victims of violent attacks, but they dare not resist militarily because they would be badly outgunned.

The Zapatistas' precarious situation at present results from many complicated and manifold factors: environmental issues and climate change, the Mexican government's developmental policies, the drug cartels, the ubiquity of firearms, the pervasiveness of violence, emigration, changes in both the regional and national political scene as well as in the left, and the Zapatistas own policies. Taken together, these diverse forces have shaken the social structures of the region, undermined the Zapatistas autonomous communities, and now threaten the entire society that provides the EZLN with both its *raison d'être* and its social base. Though the EZLN has thousands of fighters, tens of thousands of active supporters, and influences the lives of a few hundred thousand, the movement clearly is not only menaced but perhaps in mortal danger.

Let's look at these many issues. In terms of climate, Chiapas is part of Central America and shares with that region a series of environmental and climate threats. For a long time, deforestation in Chiapas—the loss in recent decades of half of its forests—together with an increase in cattle and sheep raising, has caused serious soil erosion and affected water supplies. Now with climate change, Chiapas is experiencing more and longer periods of droughts and more tropical cyclones that

endanger both farming and economic survival. Remarkably, because of technological improvements, coffee production, which provides work for farm laborers, has not been affected. However, many small farmers, who produce the traditional crops of corn, squash, and beans, can no longer always grow enough for their families and for the market.

The Mexican government of Andres Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), with economic development plans and deployment of the Army, the National Guard, and various police and immigration officials, remains one of the principal problems that the Zapatistas face. The Mexican government's two major regional development projects—the Maya Train and the Interoceanic Corridor, including the Tehuantepec Isthmus Railway—threaten the culture and the livelihoods of the Mayan population more than they will enhance its life. The construction of the nearly 1,000-mile, \$28 billion Maya Train route entails the clear cutting of tropical forests and destroying animal habitats in order to lay the tracks. Both the Zapatistas and the National Indigenous Congress have opposed the train.

And as the LSE Latin America and Caribbean blog, writes concerning the Interoceanic Corridor and railway and ports along the isthmus, "[Critics](#) of the project fear, however, that the Interoceanic Corridor will benefit merely international trade, as well as boost the expansion of extractivist and predatory megaprojects in the region, such as mining, wind farms, hydroelectric dams, and commercial forestry and agroindustrial plantations." The critics are right. These two projects taken together will have a profound impact on Chiapas, fundamentally changing its economic, social, and cultural life.

The Mexican military is deeply involved in all aspects of these economic programs. [As I wrote in a recent article on AMLO](#) and his supposed Fourth Transformation of Mexico, "The army, the navy, the marines, and the national guard deal with crime, handle immigration, own banks that distribute social welfare payments, and run the airports and the new Maya Train." The military, the National Guard and the police supposedly maintain order, but they [often protect business interests and criminalize those working to protect their land and the environment](#).

Government social welfare programs such as *Sembrando Vida* (sowing life) that encourage farmers to grow fruit trees or timber are viewed by the Zapatistas as a way to separate them from their land and their control over the regional economy.

In *Jacobin*, [Kurt Hackbarth recently conducted a fascinating interview with anthropologist Leonardo Toledo](#) who laid out a number of other important pieces of the Chiapas puzzle. He explains how changes in both government and Zapatista policies have affected the rebel communities. The Zapatistas led an armed struggle to assert the rights and dignity of the Mayan peasants; arms came to be seen as both "cool" and necessary, and so they became pervasive. This "created solid ground for organized crime to establish itself because everyone had weapons, and then — also due to the absence of the state — many community conflicts began to be resolved through the force of arms....And then people linked to organized crime settled in those areas and with them, the drug trade, human trafficking, the control of alcohol and prostitution." So, the level of violence increased.

A Zapatista spokesperson said that in Chiapas there is now "complete chaos. The municipal presidencies are occupied by what we call 'legal assassins' or 'disorganized crime.' There are blockades, assaults, kidnappings, extortion, forced recruitment, shootings. This is the effect of the patronage of the state government, and the dispute for political positions currently underway. They are not political proposals facing off against each other, but criminal societies."

Also, back in the 1990s, government welfare funds, often corruptly distributed, helped to maintain some sort of social order. Individuals and social groups could engage in lobbying, social pressure, and protest to get some of those funds. When AMLO abolished this system and went to direct-

transfer programs, the brokers were cut out. The intermediaries retaliated, says Toledo: "So in many places, they decided to retaliate by blocking the federal benefits census so that people couldn't access those resources: no pension, no scholarships, nothing." The inability of leaders to provide for their people led to a social crisis, so that now they turned to guns or to selling protection. Beginning in 2012, the Chiapas state administrators had allowed the Zapatista communities to participate in official government activities, which the EZLN groups did, becoming involved with municipal government and political parties. The Covid pandemic, which affected the important tourist industry, led to unemployment and a rise in poverty that exacerbated these problems. All of this naturally changed their character and made these communities and their impoverished inhabitants ripe for picking by the drug cartels.

And the cartels are, at the moment, the biggest threat to the Zapatistas, their communities, and the entire state of Chiapas. A war for control of the state and particularly the area bordering Guatemala is taking place between the Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco Cartel New Generation (CJNG). The Sinaloa cartel which long controlled the drug business in the area has now been challenged by the CJNG. Violence has been endemic to Chiapas since before the Conquest and common in modern times as rival political and religious groups, ethnic communities, and social classes battled each other. For decades the large coffee growers in the area have sponsored paramilitary groups that violently attacked the dozens of Zapatista communities, but the cartels represent an altogether different level of violence. The cartels have trucks, automatic weapons, engage in murders and kidnapping, and hundreds have disappeared while thousands have fled the most violent areas.

[Carlos Ogaz of the Fray Bartolome de las Casas Human Rights Center reports](#) that, "From 2015 to date, we have been experiencing a gradual increase in violence in the state; armed groups with great firepower, tactical equipment, and methods of terror linked to criminal groups - *Sicarios* - came to the fore," said Ogaz. "Dismemberment of people, beheadings ... More and more we witnessed elements linked to the violence of organized crime." The cartels sometimes work in [concert with local ranchers and with the military](#) which has 147 camps in the area, all collaborating in their depredations on the Zapatistas. The military has more recently been deployed in Chiapas because of a war between rival cartels, but [has been accused of human rights violations and attacks on civilians](#).

With all of the violence, Chiapas is hemorrhaging people. The state has a population of 5.5 million, about 300,000 of whom live in the area organized by the Zapatistas. But about 700,000 people leave the state each year, a good number from the Zapatista zone, most leaving to find work in larger cities in Mexico or for the United States.

What about solidarity from the left? Who in Mexico now supports the Zapatistas? [Yásnaya Elena A. Gil, in an article in the magazine of the National Autonomous University of Mexico](#), argues that the Zapatistas are increasingly isolated in the Mexican left. She writes, "Despite what neo-Zapatismo has meant in the history of this country, a part of the Mexican left has broken with the EZLN. The recent mobilization to stop the war against the Zapatista peoples had little echo on the partisan left." The problem is that over the years, as the Zapatistas became more radical, giving up on their initial idea that they could reform the Mexican government and became some sort of autonomists or anarchists, [the progressive Mexican population moved to the right with the left-nationalist populism of AMLO](#) and his party MORENA. The disdain of the EZLN for AMLO and MORENA is returned in kind.

How are the Zapatistas responding to this complicated and dangerous situation? With their typically obscure and opaque communiqués about their decision-making the Zapatistas have recently made a series of cryptic announcements. [First, the EZLN announced what has been called the "second death of subcomandante Marcos."](#) The first occurred when Marcos supposedly stepped down from

leadership in 2014, taking the name Galeano in honor of a deceased comrade. Though apparently, as many of us suspected, Marcos had not actually stepped down but continued to play a leading role. Now it is reported that Galeano “has died,” apparently meaning that Marcos is now really going to step down, but who knows? Marcos, whose real name is Rafael Sebastián GuillénVicente, was 37 years old in 1994; he is now 67. Some interpret this announcement as indicating a generational change of leadership that will bring to power new young leaders and more women among them. If there is to be a new leadership, we know nothing about it; we don’t know their names, don’t know how they were chosen, and don’t know what their plan is.

Second, the Zapatistas have announced that, after discussions with the population in their region, they are ending their communities known as Rebel Zapatista Autonomous Municipalities (MAREZ), as well as the Good Government Councils (JBG), known popularly as *caracoles* (snails). Their Nov. 5, 2023 communique says, “In following communiques, we will explain little by little the reasons and the process for which we made this decision. I can tell you that this assessment, in its final phase, began three years ago. We will also explain to you the new structure of Zapatista autonomy, and how it has been developing.”

Throughout all of the recent developments, the Zapatistas seem to have been able to keep their organization and their armed forces intact, and they have always shown a remarkable ability to find creative solutions to their problems. Whether they will be able to do so again, in response to the myriad issues facing them, remains to be seen. Many in Mexico and around the world still appreciate their attempt to build a more democratic and egalitarian society and those sentiments of sympathy and solidarity still exist, though they need to be revived.

**Dan La Botz**

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**P.S.**

- Solidarity. Posted February 21, 2024:  
<https://solidarity-us.org/at-30-the-zapatistas-future-is-in-question/>