

7 | The struggle towards rights and communitarian citizenship: the Zapatista movement in Mexico

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Mexico has a long history of social movements whose actions express the struggle for social justice. But while older movements in rural areas have centred their demands principally on acquiring land, controlling natural resources or receiving funds from government programmes, newer social movements are different in terms of their character, constituency and social composition. These more recent social formations confront social relations directly and challenge the Mexican national development model, particularly the conditions of integration into the globalization process. In recent decades national social movements that incorporate ethnic and cultural demands have grown in importance.

In 1994, a social movement emerged through a struggle demanding changes to the situation of the indigenous population at the national level. The movement was initiated by the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN),¹ and, based on it, in recent years different social actors have established an agenda focused on the recognition of the cultural and political rights of the indigenous populations, including their right to land and territory. Thus, while the EZLN is the organizational core of the movement, other organizations have also joined forces. This collective social action is referred to from this point on as the Zapatista movement. Since 1994 the movement has been mobilizing to transform socio-economic conditions at the local, national and even international levels.²

The ascent of the movement was explained initially as the result of government failures to guarantee basic services such as healthcare, education and infrastructure. The basic services situation has been particularly critical in the case of indigenous people, most of whom live in extreme poverty. While these factors were doubtless behind the emergence of the movement, in a broader perspective activism was also the result of a crisis of governance demonstrated by the failure to advance towards a society in which citizenship not only brought the right to vote, but also guaranteed a set of social, economic, political and cultural rights for the whole population.³

It is necessary to situate this movement in a perspective that takes into account the influence of the Chiapas social movement and the national experience of social organization, as well as the political and ideological influence of ethnic movements developed in the 1990s to demand indigenous rights in Mexico and other countries. At the beginning of the decade various forms of organization and mobilization were developed around a celebration of what was called '500 years of resistance', from conquest to globalization.

On 12 October 1992, in a massive demonstration, the coming indigenous rebellion was symbolically announced. Thousands of indigenous people marched with bows and arrows in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, a city that symbolized the exclusion and exploitation of indigenous people. But the march was more than symbolic: it was the culmination of a long struggle begun by a Marxist political movement known as the National Liberation Forces (FLN),⁴ initiated in 1983 by mestizo activists who arrived in the Lacandon rainforest in Chiapas to prepare for an armed struggle⁵ for revolutionary transformation. Their orthodox approach was modified through their interaction with indigenous communities and some leaders, including women, which resulted in the introduction of historical demands for land, justice and cultural rights. In 1993, after consultation with grassroots members in indigenous communities, the decision was taken to declare war on the Mexican state, and preparations began to take over several municipalities in January 1994. This action was predicated on the Mexican constitution, which states that 'national sovereignty resides essentially and originally in the people ... [who] have ... the right to change or modify the form of government'.⁶

The character of the Zapatista movement gave it an international impact that other, even much older, Mexican and Latin American social movements have never had. The success of the Zapatista movement is a result of the combination of two elements: first, the movement's composition reflects the interests of very poor indigenous people who have been demanding profound changes to the character of the national state, and second, the anti-globalization nature of the movement has ensured a common perspective with other, similar social movements around the world.

Since the EZLN became active, the movement has clearly established its normative relationship with the globalization process. The movement itself began on a symbolic date, 1 January 1994, the same day that saw the launch of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Canada, Mexico and the USA, a fundamental act in the globalization

process. In preparation for Mexico's incorporation into NAFTA, the agrarian law was modified and the possibility of acquiring land was definitively closed for many peasants. In the course of time, the movement's critical perspective on the globalization process has been broadened into a critique of capitalism and the idea of progress that it encapsulates. These political definitions and their evolution are concentrated in what are called 'Declarations of the Lacandon Rainforest', from the first one presented when the rebellion was initiated to the sixth one presented in November 2005.

Since the rebellion, the Zapatista movement has provided an impulse towards a more communitarian idea of citizenship understood as critical of the liberal perspective. The communitarian idea expressed through the movement emphasizes cultural identity and the sense of belonging to a common, even collective, purpose, including the management and/or ownership of resources. As expressed through EZLN, this view of citizenship puts limits on individualism and promotes the idea that communitarian purposes will motivate the positive integration of everybody into societal networks.⁷

Over the years the government response to this movement has taken different, sometimes contradictory, phases and forms – ranging, for instance, from accepting that the demands made by the movement are just to accusing it of being manipulated by external interests, and, similarly, from dismissing the activism as just a local movement to accepting the Zapatistas' political credentials to the extent of allowing them to present their position from the tribune of the National Congress in 2001. Yet the dominant perspective has been to put state security uppermost, using valuable resources to maintain political control of the population and to respond to what, in the government's view, is the cause of the rebellion. With the changes to the national and the state governments in 2000, the government perspective was modified and the repression of the movement substantially reduced. A number of initiatives have also been launched by the government, including some original development programmes that are ostensibly designed, at least in terms of their stated objectives, to respond to the causes of the rebellion. During this time, the movement has kept up its resistance to the government's watered-down efforts and demanded the fulfilment of all of its demands.

The movement has grown principally in the state of Chiapas in the south of Mexico, with different forms of representation at the national level, mainly among indigenous communities. In this chapter we analyse the development of the broader Zapatista movement. We consider the