

Zapatistas can still change the rules of Mexico's politics

A mass silent protest in Chiapas shows the indigenous movement remains a formidable political force

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Mexico's Zapatista rebels, led by Subcomandante Marcos, have broad support among indigenous communities in the state of Chiapas. Photograph: Daniel Aguilar/Reuters

21 December 2012 was supposed to be the doomsday that ended the Mayan calendar cycle, but instead it marked the resurgence of the indigenous Zapatistas of south-east Mexico. After more than a year and a half without a public statement, the [rebel Mayans of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation \(Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, EZLN\)](#) marched in total silence along the streets of five cities in the state of Chiapas.

In this beginning of the new Mayan cycle, more than 40,000 members of Zapatista "social bases" (who support the military structure but are not directly involved in it) walked in the rain. They marched with discipline and dignity, their faces covered with masks. They came to the cities from distant mountain communities with no public transport, in the largest mobilisation since the emergence of the EZLN in 1994. When the demonstration ended, the Zapatista general command issued a brief statement signed by their spokesman Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos: "Did you hear? It is the sound of your world collapsing/it is our world coming back."

It can't be said that the Zapatistas reappeared, because they never left. The EZLN was founded 28 years ago, and for the first 10 years it grew beneath the radar; 18 years ago, it appeared in public. Since then, it has spoken at times and been silent at times, but it has never been inactive. It has repeatedly been declared dead or irrelevant, but it has always come back.

Its first public appearance was on 1 January 1994, the day that the [North American Free Trade Agreement](#) (Nafta) came into force. Zapatistas declared war on the Mexican government and took military control of five cities in Chiapas. They fought for 10 days and finally accepted a truce in order to negotiate a peace. The painstaking peace process was derailed when the federal government refused to honour [the commitment it made in February 1996](#) to acknowledge indigenous rights and culture in the national constitution.

To combat the Zapatistas, then-president Ernesto Zedillo, of the Institutional Revolutionary party ([which returned to power in 2012](#)), promoted low-intensity warfare and the formation of paramilitary groups. On [22 December 1997, one of those groups killed 45 people](#), most of them unarmed women and children who were praying for peace, in the Chiapas community of Acteal.

The magnitude of the 21 December Zapatista protest indicates that the counter-insurgency strategy followed by several governments has failed. It shows that the

Zapatista project is a genuine expression of the Mayan world and many poor [mestizo](#) peasants in Chiapas. Guided by its own political calendar, faithful to its ethical commitments, and with the might of the government against it, the EZLN has reinforced its autonomous forms of governance and kept alive its political authority among the country's indigenous peoples; its international networks of solidarity also remain active.

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Zapatistas have two levels of government, corresponding in part to the territorial settlements of the indigenous peoples. One is the regional government, the Council of Good Governance. The other is the autonomous municipality, which acts on a local level. Within these municipalities, the social bases elect their authorities and govern themselves, administering justice and solving land conflicts.

In their territories, the rebels have made their health and education systems function without the federal and state governments; they have organised production and commercialisation and maintain a standing military. They have solved the challenge of the generational replacement of military officers. As if these achievements were not enough, they have successfully tackled the menaces of drug-trafficking, public security and migration.

The EZLN has joined the new game of Mexican politics without an invitation, and now sits at the table. Its resurgence will challenge, and possibly even change, some of the rules of this often dirty game.