Indigenous Rights and Internal Wars: The Chiapas Conflict at 15 Years

Stephen D. Collins
Kennesaw State University, scoll30@kennesaw.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/facpubs

Part of the Latin American Studies Commons, Military and Veterans Studies Commons, Peace and Conflict Studies Commons, and the Political Science Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.
Indigenous Rights and Internal Wars: The Chiapas Conflict at Fifteen Years

Stephen D. Collins
Department of Political Science and International Affairs
Kennesaw State University
Kennesaw, GA 30144
e-mail: scolli30@kennesaw.edu

Abstract

This article examines the origins and outcomes of the indigenous-based Zapatista rebellion launched fifteen years ago in Chiapas, Mexico. The precursors responsible for the resistance movement are assessed, as well as the proximate events which convinced the indigenous communities to embrace a militarized approach. International relations conflict theory is plumbed for explanations of the conflict and for conflict resolution strategies relevant to this particular event. This study finds that the conflict in Chiapas was the consequence of two antecedent conditions – systematic human rights abuses and extreme material deprivation; and two proximate factors – NAFTA ratification and pending revisions to communal land laws. The article also explains how violence mitigation was subsequently achieved as a result of the behavior of state and non-state actors.

Introduction

On January 1, 1994, a rebellion erupted in Mexico just hours into the New Year, in the rural southern state of Chiapas. The rebel Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) forces captured four towns, and demanded political and social reforms aimed at improving the lives of Chiapas’ indigenous population. The heaviest fighting lasted just eleven days before a cease fire was enacted, at which time the Mexican government
extended an offer to negotiate with the rebels. Still, as many as three-hundred individuals died in the conflict, and scores more were killed in subsequent years in Chiapas.

This study evaluates the factors which engendered the conflict in Chiapas, and, employing internal war theory and process-tracing methodology, posits that the Zapatista rebellion resulted from a set of oppressive antecedent conditions and threatening proximate variables. The antecedent variables are represented by the generations of abuse and oppression suffered by Chiapan indigenous communities, and the failure of the Mexican government in providing for adequate living standards in the region. These fundamental issues created an atmosphere of hostility and mistrust, motivating Chiapan peasants to organize an armed opposition group -- the Zapatistas. The direct, proximate factors which brought the Zapatistas out of the jungle to openly confront the Mexican government are twofold: the enactment of NAFTA, and the government’s decision to alter communal land laws. Both of these proximate events were perceived as colossal threats to the survival of Chiapas’ indigenous communities.

This study turns now to a more comprehensive examination of the antecedent conditions which fostered the conflict, before exploring the proximate causes of the insurrection. The article will then consider the utility of international relations conflict theory in providing explanations for the Zapatista rebellion and for useful resolution strategies for the conflict. Finally, this work will examine the factors which have led to the mitigation of violence in Chiapas.

**Antecedents to Rebellion**

Sentiments of alienation, abuse, and marginalization have been present in the indigenous communities of Chiapas for centuries - extending back to the sixteenth century when the Spanish conquistadors imposed a feudalistic socio-political system in rural Mexico. Under the system of *encomienda*, the indigenous population was forced
into slavery under the rule of the landowning finqueros who operated massive plantations (Ross 1995:68). This system was common in Spanish America before the wave of nineteenth century independence movements destroyed it. However, Chiapan peasants never witnessed the massive changes that other Mexicans benefited from, especially the process of land redistribution. After the Mexican revolution of 1910-1919, a program of land distribution was enacted, as the Reparto provided Mexican peasants with those lands upon which they labored. However, the Reparto was never implemented in Chiapas, as local power brokers convinced Mexican federal authorities to exempt Chiapan estates from distribution (Ross 1995:69).

The reformist elements of the 1917 Constitution were never enacted by local leaders in Chiapas. Article 27 of the constitution represented a pivotal reform, as it provided for the dissolution and distribution of large estates, and also mandated an “equitable distribution of the public wealth.” Neither of these elements had been achieved by 1994 (Reding 1994:13). Some land was provided to Chiapan peasants, yet the property granted to the indigenous was the poorest available, including mountainside lots so steep the peasants needed to tie themselves to trees just to plow their land (Ross 1995:70). Thus, the machinations of the local land barons, aimed at denying the Chiapan peasant community the land which had been legally granted to them, left behind a legacy of resentment and hostility in regard to this central issue of land.

Land distribution is hardly the only material issue in which the Mexican government exhibited a pattern of neglect. Although Chiapas is a region rich in natural resources, its people live in conditions that are, by many accounts, the most dire in Mexico. The following chart depicts the desperate living conditions in Chiapas.
Table 1. Living Conditions in Chiapas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Human Development Measure</th>
<th>% of Population</th>
<th>State Ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illiteracy (over 15 years)</td>
<td>30.12</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population over 15 not having finished primary education</td>
<td>62.08</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population without electricity</td>
<td>34.92</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population without running water</td>
<td>42.09</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population living in overcrowded housing</td>
<td>74.07</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population making less than twice the minimum wage</td>
<td>80.08</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Russell (1995:17)

These figures detail the striking levels of relative deprivation present in Chiapas. The remarkably high percentage of residents without electricity and running water are quite ironic indices, as Chiapas produces more than half of Mexico’s *electric production*, mainly from hydroelectric plants operating off of Chiapas’ *abundant water supply* (Ross
In addition, tiny Chiapas supplies nearly a third of the nation’s meat supply, yet nine out of ten Chiapan farmers eat meat only rarely. Furthermore, nearly half of all Chiapan farmers earn less than two dollars per day (Ross 1995:71; Wager and Schultz 1995:3).

Despite these abhorrent material conditions, the principle grievance of the Chiapan indigenous communities and the Zapatista rebels has not been the abject standard of living, but the inequitable political and social structure that dominates Chiapan life. This socio-political system, ruled by minority elite landowners and cattlemen, known as caciques, has been a fixture in Chiapas since the time of the Conquistadors. The same cadre which prevented the distribution of land to peasants, as mandated in Mexican law, monopolized economic and political power in Chiapas throughout the twentieth century. These cacique overlords worked assiduously to not only eliminate and adulterate the land distribution laws, but also to forcibly usurp lands already in the possession of the indigenous peasants. In particular, the caciques have been effective in appropriating (often illegally) the communal lands - known as ejidos - on which many indigenous communities rely for crop production (Wager and Schultz 1995:4). The cacique barons use a wide array of tactics to deny the indigenous of land that lawfully belongs to them. These tactics include armed force, legal manipulation, and political exploitation and corruption.

The first of these tactics, armed force, is illustrated by the violence committed between 1965 and 1983 in Venustiano Carranza, as twenty-five Tzotzil Mexicans were killed by the paramilitary forces of cacique land barons. The dispute involved the turnover of 3,000 acres of rich farmland that had been granted to the indigenous community by the Mexican government in 1965. The second tactic, legal manipulation, has been effectively employed to illegitimately appropriate land from tens of thousands of indigenous residents of Chiapas. A prime example is represented by the case of the ejido Belisario Dominguez. This communal property was granted 1,568 hectares of land in 1940, but legal maneuvers by the initial cacique owners ensured that until 1959, the
indigenous who had been provided the grant only received a mere 312 hectares. In 1959, they finally received another 816 hectares, but the remaining 440 hectares had been parceled out to another group. Of course, the indigenous peasants do not have the financial wherewithal to protect their legal rights, while the land barons can quite easily do so (Russell 1995:5,6).

The final factor - political exploitation - represents the most compelling explanation for why the Chiapan indigenous community resorted to military force. The perception within the Indian community that the political system was bankrupt of legitimacy, a perception fueled by the massive levels of corruption and exploitation that existed in Chiapas, destroyed all confidence that issues and grievances could be resolved through appeals to the political system. Indeed, the political system was not perceived as a dispassionate arbiter of conflict, but rather (and accurately) as system designed to advance the interest of the non-indigenous caciques, as these elites’ ties to the ruling PRI party gained them control of political offices, government agencies, the police, and the courts.

The symbiotic relationship between the leaders of the Chiapan social and business communities and the leaders of the political system - from the governor of Chiapas to the local police chiefs – has constituted an oligarchic system bordering on feudal rule (Wager and Schultz 1995:4). The federal Department of Indigenous Affairs under the Cardenas administration in the 1930s, admitted that “conditions of virtual slavery exist in Chiapas” (Russell 1995:5). Even as late as the 1950s, a system simulating apartheid reigned in Chiapas. Indigenous peasants traveling to market their goods in San Cristobal were stopped at the city limits, barred from entering the city, and forced to sell their goods to an intermediary at far below market value. Although indigenous Chiapans are no longer prohibited from entering the city, this exploitative intermediary practice has continued (Russell 1995:5). The indigenous are, indeed, commonly perceived as third class citizens by the cacique elite in Chiapas. An illustration of this sentiment could be found hanging
on the wall of the Ocósingo Lion’s Club as late as in 1971. A sign in the club read “In the Law of the Jungle it is willed that Indians and blackbirds must be killed” (Wager and Schultz 1995:4).

At times, the most powerful caciques control power directly as government officials or political officeholders. Absalon Castellanos Dominguez, whose family owns 14 estates holding 20,000 hectares, served as Chiapas’ governor in the 1980s. As a general in the Mexican army, Dominguez ordered attacks on indigenous communities, and as governor, as many as 153 political killings and 327 peasant disappearances occurred under his watch (Russell: 1995:11) Yet, the caciques do not actually need to hold elected office, as the authorities work in conjunction with the caciques to advance the interests of these elites. Amnesty International documented that in June 1993, attacks on five separate Indian villages were launched by 1,000 state police teamed with cacique landowners (Russell 1995:12). Indeed the human rights group, the Miguel Agustín Pro Human Rights Center, alleged in 1993 (Russell 1995:12):

The state of Chiapas is, as it was in 1992, the state with the most violations of rights of individuals and organizations...The sector most affected was the Indian peasant. The most frequent violations were assaults and injuries, followed by arbitrary arrest, threats, torture, and murder.

The ties between the elites and the political authorities have been maintained through a symbiotic relationship. The caciques provide officials with bribes and votes (Wager and Schulz 1995:4,8; Reding 1994:13). President Carlos Salinas (1994-2000), though a reform-minded leader, was unwilling to disrupt the political machine in Chiapas, for it had delivered nearly 90 percent of the vote to the PRI and Salinas himself in the 1988 elections (Wager and Schulz 1995:8). Those elections were rife with reports of fraud, as Cardenas, the PAN candidate, was leading in several key districts before the system “crashed” for a week. Once the ballots were counted Salinas was declared the victor with just over 50% of the vote. Yet, tens of thousands of ballots cast for Cardenas were found
in garbage dumps and floating down waterways (Ross 1995:336). Election fraud was a systematic practice in Chiapas. Residents of the town of Oxchuc, for example, complained of being prevented from voting by threat of physical harm. Yet, when the votes were counted, authorities reported a 100% turnout in Oxchuc, with the PRI capturing a completely implausible 100 percent of votes. When Zapatista rebels raided the local PRI office, they discovered a stockpile of marked ballots from an earlier election (Reding 1994: 17).

The cacique-authority partnership has labored to deter even non-violent forms of dissent from the Chiapan indigenous community. Articles 129-35 of the state penal code declares participation in a non-violent, mass protest a “threat to the public order” punishable by a prison sentence up to four years. Furthermore, offenses against “historical, national, and state values” have been criminalized (Russell 1995:10). The de-facto absence of nonviolent channels for Chiapan peasants, with respect to seeking justice, expressing dissent, and advocating change, is effectively conveyed by Chiapan Nicolas Gomez Chavez, who maintains (Russell 1995: 10):

> When we try to organize and fight back, they call us agitators and throw us in jail. Who can we complain to? The cattle ranchers are the mayors, the judges, and the PRI officials. We have no place to turn.

In addition to the root causes, there were two important proximate catalysts for the Zapatista revolt. The two factors, the revision of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, and the NAFTA treaty, are interconnected (LaBotz 1995: 25). Article 27, adopted in 1917, mandated a process of land reform, which distributed millions of hectares of land, providing that today four out of five agricultural workers in Mexico own their own land (LaBotz 1995:24). Much of this land however was distributed in communal ejido plots. The Salinas-era revisions to Article 27 allowed for individuals to sell or rent their interest in the ejido to big-business agro corporations. The reason for the change was to bring...
Mexican property laws in line with U.S. and Canadian laws, before the implementation of NAFTA. Many indigenous Chiapans viewed this as a threat to their community, as it threatened to divide communal land, and viewed the change as a sign that the Mexican government had turned its back on the peasant farmer (LaBotz 1995:24, 25). NAFTA, thus, represented a threat, as it necessitated the alteration of Article 27. Chiapan farmers also feared that NAFTA would flood the market with cheap, machine-harvested corn from U.S. and Canadian agro-corporations, making it impossible for the Chiapan peasant farmers to compete, and thus, destroying a way of life that has existed for hundreds of years (LaBotz 1995:25). The Zapatista leader, Subcomandante Marcos, lamenting what NAFTA would do the indigenous of Chiapas, postulated that it will be complicit in “eliminating them, forgetting them, wiping them from the face of the earth” (Landau 1996:3).

**War in Chiapas**

The Zapatista revolt, therefore, emerged as a consequence of the antecedent conditions of desperate poverty, government neglect, abuse, and absence of due process; and the trigger events of NAFTA and the adulteration of land reform. However, the EZLN force did not form spontaneously overnight. It was a product of native movements starting in earnest in the 1960s. Maoist organizers visited Chiapas in the late 1960s, working diligently, but maintaining a low profile, communicating directly with peasants. In the 1970s, the Catholic Church, spreading the message of liberation theology, played an important role in providing Chiapan peasants with a forum to address pressing social and political issues. The Church was instrumental in organizing the First Indigenous Congress in San Cristobal in October 1974, where hundreds of Chiapan Indians addressed these critical issues (Russell 1995: 32, 33). The 1980s witnessed the rise of labor groups and other peasant organizations.
The precursor to the EZLN, the Emiliano Zapata National Independent Peasant Alliance (ANCIEZ), made its official debut at a 1992 rally in San Cristobal, where, in protest of local rule, its members toppled a statute of Spanish conquistador Diego de Mazariegos. ANCIEZ subsequently went underground in 1993 (Russell 1995:35, 36). The local government became aware of a guerrilla organization operating in Chiapas after two deadly ambushes killed four soldiers, and with the discovery of a military training camp in the jungle. However, Interior Minister, and former Chiapan governor Gonzalez Garrido, dismissed the report as a fabrication. Some have speculated that the Mexican government minimized the issue, out of fear that it might jeopardize NAFTA negotiations (Russell 1995:36, 37).

While the Mexican government was denying their very existence, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) was training for a massive assault. Timed to coincide with the inauguration of the NAFTA treaty, on January 1, 1994, one-thousand Zapatista rebels stormed the Chiapan towns of San Cristobal de las Casas, Las Margaritas, Ocosingo, and Altamirano, and seized control (New York Times 1994; Economist 1994; Wager and Schultz 1995:1). In San Cristobal, the EZLN’s primary target, the timing of the raid proved fortuitous, as rebels marched into the highland capital completely unimpeded. The Zapatistas seized and destroyed land records, and released 230 prisoners, many of whom were indigenous peasants jailed over land disputes (Russell 1995: 20). The EZLN quickly released a statement, intended for an international audience, outlining the group’s grievances and articulating the Zapatista message, which argued (Russell 1995:38):

For many years, dictators have engaged in an undeclared genocidal war against our people. For this reason, we ask for your participation and support in our struggle for jobs, land, housing, food, health, education, independence, liberty, democracy, and justice, and peace. We will not stop fighting until these basic demands are met and a free and democratic
government rules in Mexico.

Subcomandante Marcos also emphasized the role of the North American Free Trade Agreement as a main *casus belli* for the revolt, labeling NAFTA, “a death certificate for the Indian peoples of Mexico, who are disposable for the Government of Carlos Salinas de Gotari” (New York Times 1994).

While the Zapatistas secured complete control over San Cristobal, in other areas the group encountered serious resistance. In Ocosingo, 400 rebel troops encountered some 20 to 30 police during their successful attack on the city hall. However, government soldiers soon arrived and battled with the EZLN, killing 59 Zapatistas; seven soldiers and 27 civilians also died in the battle (New York Times 1994). The EZLN vacated San Cristobal and launched an attack on the army installation at Rancho Nuevo. The army repelled the rebel advance, and by the end of the week government forces had expelled the Zapatistas from all of the towns they had previously occupied. The EZLN force was forced to seek harbor in the Lancandon jungle (Wager and Schultz 1995:14, 15). Sporadic fighting would last another five days until the Salinas government called a cease-fire on January 12 (Wager and Schultz 1995:14, 15).

Estimates of the death toll after eleven days of warfare vary between 159 and 300 fatalities (Russell 1995: 23). Human rights violations were committed by both sides of the conflict. However, the Mexican army was widely portrayed as the principle transgressor (Conger 1994: 121; Economist 1994). Human Rights Watch documented summary executions carried out by the Mexican army forces, as well as arbitrary detentions, and cited many complaints of torture at the hands of authorities (Conger 1994: 121, 122). The excessive and indiscriminate use of force by the Mexican Army (at least in the early phases of the conflict) received considerable press, including reports of aerial bombing and machine gun strafing of villages, attacks on journalists, and an allegedly unprovoked attack on a minibus with four civilians, including a six year old girl (Economist 1994; Conger 1994:122; Ross 1995: 97). The Zapatistas committed crimes of
their own including hostage taking, destruction of property, and the murder of a non-combatant in Ocósingo. In addition there were reports of the EZLN forcing locals into combat (Conger 1994:123).

Despite the fact that the Mexican army, with 14,000 troops in the combat zone, had the overwhelmed Zapatistas on the run, Salinas ordered a unilateral cease-fire. The Mexican government moved quickly to pacify the situation. Salinas fired negotiator Patrocinio Gonzalez, who was viewed as inept, and, as a former governor of Chiapas, complicit in the indemnities listed by the Zapatistas. The moderate Manuel Camacho Solis was appointed as chief negotiator, the Chiapan governor Elmer Setzer resigned, and the Mexican Congress passed on January 19, an amnesty decree (Wager and Schultz 1994:15; Russell 1994:61). The post bellum magnanimity of the government was widely perceived as a result of intense international condemnation (Wager and Schulz 1994: 15, 16; Economist 1994).

Negotiations began in earnest on February 22 at the Cathedral of San Cristobal. Within ten days, an accord had been reached, with the government addressing a comprehensive range of issues (Russell 1994: 63-68). The accord was structured in a grievance and response form, with the government response following the Zapatista demand:

- **Demand 1**: Free and democratic elections

  - **Government Response**: This demand will be fulfilled by legislative changes enacted by the national congress.

- **Demand 2**: The resignation of President Salinas and of governors who were fraudulently elected.

  - **Government Response**: This demand will not be granted, although problems of election fraud will be addressed in a special congressional session on political reform.
- **Demand 6**: Redirection of the electricity generated in Chiapas to communities in the state, and local investment of income from the sale of Chiapan oil.

- **Government Response**: The government will double the rate of electrification in rural areas.

- **Demand 11**: Rural Housing

- **Government Response**: Solidarity will draft a rural-housing program within 90 days, and construction will begin in the second half of 1994.

- **Demand 16**: Indian Autonomy

- **Government Response**: New municipalities will be created and new laws passed to provide autonomy.

Thirty-four demands were addressed, providing for political reform, public welfare, and designs for indigenous autonomy (Russell: 1994: 64-68). Most observers concluded that the compromises offered by the government were generous, especially in light of the relative weakness of the EZLN. Therefore it was widely expected that the ruling Zapatista counsel, the CCRI, would accept the accord (Russell: 1994: 64-68). The EZLN decision, announced on April 22, surprised many. The Zapatistas rejected the accord, stating it had taken the accord to their people, and that 98 percent of the community had voted to reject the offer. The reason provided for repudiating the offer was that it could not guarantee all Mexicans, democracy, and justice (Russell: 1994: 64-68). Thus, the Zapatistas, a small, poorly armed, and overpowered local rebel group - and the clear military losers in the conflict - had been offered considerable government concessions and had rejected the offer, citing the failure of the government to offer a sweeping overhaul of the national political system. This response - quite uncharacteristic of typical regional rebel groups, which are usually concerned with more parochial interests - is illustrative of the *sui generis* nature of the Zapatistas themselves.

The Zapatistas are indeed unique as a rebel army in several ways. First, the ostensible
accountability of the group to local communities is atypical of insurgent groups. Many rebel army champion populist causes, yet most eschew public accountability. The Zapatistas claim to subordinate themselves to a community council, the Clandestine Indian Revolutionary Committee (CCRI), comprised of representatives from four different Indian groups: the Chol, the Tojolabal, the Tzeltal, and the Tzotzil. While it has become clear that Subcomandante Marcos is not indigenous, the majority of Zapatista troops are indigenous Chiapanchi (Russell 1995:42, 43). It was the CCRI, in fact, that sat at the negotiating table with the government (Marcos attended as a member of the CCRI General Counsel), and the CCRI then translated the agreement into the four member languages, and distributed the accord to more than 1,000 Indian communities (Russell 1994: 62, 70; Wager and Schultz 1994:12).

Additionally, the goals of the Zapatistas are unique in that the military goals of the group are quite modest, yet their political demands are highly ambitious. The Zapatistas possess no delusions about capturing Mexico City. In fact, they insist on autonomy, not on an independent homeland. Marcos emphasized to a reporter, “Don’t think we were fantasizing about seizing power and then becoming a great president or emulating Castro or a Lenin or whatever. We were thinking that at least we were going to help the indigenous people transform their lives in a radical and irreversible way so that the past would not return” (Landau 1996). The Zapatistas do not present their armed force as a threat to the Mexican government, yet, their political demands have included the resignation of President Zedillo and other elected officials, the revision of NAFTA, and significant changes to the system of centralized power in Mexico.

The political sophistication of the Zapatistas constitutes another unique element of the group. Without advanced training or weaponry, the EZLN employed stealth, technology, and rhetoric to counterbalance the military superiority of the Mexican army. The New Year’s assault was launched with such surprise, that the Zapatistas were able to capture San Cristobal, their prime target, without firing a bullet. They understood that their thin
ranks (some 3,000 to 4,000 troops) and modest weaponry would be insufficient to hold San Cristobal, thus they quickly released a statement to the press articulating their grievances and their cause (Rochlin 1997:64; Russell 1995:38). This communication was written in both Spanish and in English, and released by facsimile to several media sources (Russell 1995:38). The savvy of the Zapatistas has enabled them to achieve recognition of their grievances, and support for their objectives, in far greater relation to their actual size or power.

While the Zapatistas have expressed outsized demands, and display certain radical characteristics, they are guided by rational leadership demonstrating a desire for individual and group preservation. Although the rebels rejected the government offer, they announced that they would adhere to the cease-fire. It was quite evident that the rebel force was badly damaged and was in no position to pose a serious challenge to the Mexican army at the time.

The government’s chief negotiator, Camacho Solis, noted that while the accords failed to resolve the conflict, their principle goal, stopping the violence, had been achieved, and that organizational bodies were already being formed to address the issues raised by the rebels (Russell 1995:76, 77). This stalemated state of affairs has endured in Chiapas, more or less, for the last fifteen years. And while there is reason to believe that material conditions in Chiapas may improve, violence and tension have yet to completely dissipate from this southern Mexican state. The hopeful signs of economic progress are manifest in an apparent increased resolve of the Mexican government to address the abhorrent living conditions in Chiapas. In a six-month period after the negotiations in San Cristobal, the Mexican government provided over $220 million in construction and social spending; 44 percent more than had been budgeted (Wager and Schultz 1995: 29).

Yet, despite attempts to redress the material deficiencies, the credibility gap remained, as the Zedillo administration, which replaced Salinas, vacillated between upholding the cease fire and flooding Zapatista strongholds with troops, and as political and human
rights abuses continue to be ignored by the political establishment (LA Times 1998; Time 1998; Wager and Schultz 1995:34, 35). Zedillo’s policy shifts with respect to the Chiapan rebels appeared to be highly influenced by his perception of the prevailing public opinion on the issue. After PRI supporters rioted over government concessions to peasants in the state of Tabasco, and as the Mexican economy continued to slump, on February 10, 1995, Zedillo ordered a military offensive against the Zapatistas. Yet he did an about face just four days later, and ordered a halt to the military operation, after the PRI suffered major defeats in local elections in Guadalajara and Jalisco, and as internal and international criticism of the offensive mounted (Wager and Schulz 1995: 34, 35).

Events in 1997 reinforced the credibility gap among indigenous Chiapans with respect to the government’s commitment to justice and conflict resolution. On December 22, 1997, members of the paramilitary unit, Paz y Justicia, descended upon the town of Acteal, firing their weapons indiscriminately, killing 45 people. One witness noticed that some of the gunmen were outfitted in police uniforms, with only the insignia removed. Several accounts noted that local police refused to respond to the attack, and state officials acknowledged that midway through the massacre, local police reported the town as peaceful (Jane’s Intelligence Review 1998a). Violent paramilitary units, such as Paz y Justicia, had indeed been fostered in the 1990s by PRI officials and the military. (Burke 2003).

Although President Zedillo’s government moved swiftly and aggressively to punish the perpetrators of the massacre, arresting 40 individuals, including the mayor of Acteal, the violence had yet to cease (Time 1998). Zedillo once again ordered troops to Chiapas, in June 1998, this time to reassert government authority in villages loyal to the Zapatistas, and in which local governing bodies had been established. Eight indigenous peasants and two police officers died as a result of the operation (New York Times 1998). The human rights organization, the Fray Bartolome Rights Center, maintained that at least 57 individuals perished in political violence between the Acteal massacre in December 1997
and September 1998. The group argued that those sympathetic to the Zapatistas were commonly detained and tortured by police or army personnel (Jane’s Intelligence Review 1998b).

In addition to the conflict between the peasant Zapatista forces and the Mexican army, another conflict developed between cacique landowners and the increasingly confident indigenous populace, intent on seizing land from the elites. By June 1994 peasant groups had seized 100,000 hectares of land from cattle ranchers, coffee planters, and other large landowners (Russell 1995:72). Landowners protested by blocking highways, and threatened to hire gunmen to protect their assets. The government stepped in to appease both groups by distributing more land to Indian peasants, and by compensating the elite landowners (Russell 1995:72,73). Land has actually diminished as an issue, now that more peasants own their own plots, as one-half million acres have been added - through distributions and seizures - to Chiapan peasants (Rus, Castillo, and Mattiace 2003:197; Los Angeles Times 1998).

Tension eased considerably in Chiapas between Zapatista supporters and the federal government after the historic victory of opposition candidate Vicente Fox in Mexico’s 2000 presidential election. While Fox’s promise to solve the Chiapas conflict “in 15 minutes” failed to materialize, he did advance reconciliation by enacting several of the Zapatistas demands, including the closure of numerous military bases in Chiapas, and the release of Zapatista prisoners (Burke 2003). Congress received the Zapatistas leadership in Mexico City in 2001, and soon passed an indigenous rights law (SiPaz 2009). The EZLN announced in 2001 that it will renounce violence, and subsequently dismantled checkpoints and tolls in Chiapas (Si Paz 2009). Although tension has abated and indigenous access to arable land has improved, many of the antecedent causes of the conflict remain, and thus, so do the prospects for a renewal of conflict. Chiapas remains the most impoverished state in Mexico. The Zapatistas, furthermore, never formally accepted the indigenous rights law, maintaining that it did not fulfill the promises made
in the San Andres Accords of 1996 (Burke 2003). Finally, reports of the return of government supported anti-Zapatista/anti-indigenous paramilitaries, if substantiated, could possibly lead to another armed response by the indigenous community (Cruz 2008).

The Chiapas Conflict and Internal War Theory

 Causes of Internal War

Can the academic literature on internal war be utilized to explain the Chiapas conflict? Additionally, does the internal war corpus offer useful ideas for bringing an end to such conflicts? Much of the literature on the causes of internal war concentrates on the issue of weak states as the cause of internal war. Mohammed Ayoob (1998: 38, 45-49) argues that the reason for the vast majority of internal wars having occurred in the developing states of the southern hemisphere, resides in the fact that those states are often newly constructed and thus have weak governments and political institutions which cannot control violence. As Mexico is a well established state (although not a well established democracy) with at least a moderately strong central government, Ayoob’s theory has little relevance to the situation in Chiapas. Likewise the ideas of Robert Jervis, Barry Posen, and Jack Snyder who emphasize the “security dilemma”, where a collapse of authority ignites insecurities, militarism and finally violence, is inapplicable to the Zapatista revolt, as a power vacuum is not extant in Mexico (Brown 1996:119; Snyder and Jervis 1999:1-5).

The writings of Ted Gurr and Michael Brown contain ideas which do possess a degree of explanatory power in relation to Chiapas. Ted Gurr (1994: 350) illustrates the importance of ethnicity as a factor in internal conflict, as the overwhelming percentage of internal wars today posses some ethnic component. Among the three classifications he lists for ethнопolitical conflict, “indigenous rights” accurately represents the conflict in
Chiapas. Gurr (1994: 354) argues that the common identity of these conflicts is the desire of the indigenous group for autonomy in order to protect their land and culture; objectives explicitly expressed by the Zapatistas. While Gurr (1994: 358) asserts that “material inequalities” are secondary to political transitions as causes of ethnopolitical conflict, in indigenous rights conflicts, the material inequalities variable possesses stronger significance, as indigenous peoples are more likely to be subjects of economic discrimination than ethnonationalists (e.g. the Basques in Spain, Tamils in Sri Lanka), and to express economic rights as a primary grievance. Indeed economic issues, such as land and trade agreements, are cardinal grievances of the Chiapan indigenous community. Gurr (1994:354) notes that conflicts involving indigenous rights issues are less deadly than ethnopolitical conflicts and are also becoming scarcer. He postulates that this reduction in violent conflict from indigenous groups, may be the result of material gains that indigenous groups have achieved as a result of low-intensity conflict with governments (Gurr 1994:359).

Michael Brown’s (1996) compilation of the preconditions of internal conflict may be helpful in explaining the antecedent causes of the conflict in Chiapas. First, deficits of equity and legitimacy become salient issues when ethnic groups perceive that they have been deprived representation in political bodies and institutions, such as the courts and the police. Second, Brown emphasizes discrimination in economic affairs and resources as a factor which can foster violence. Third, repression of cultural values can inspire violent designs (Brown 1996:16-21). Among Brown’s list are proximate factors as well, including economic insecurities and the presence of ambitious goals and contentious strategies on the part of dissident movements (Brown 1996: 18, 23, 576-578). Certainly the EZLN articulated ambitious demands such as the resignation of Mexico’s sitting president, and a sweeping reconfiguration of the local and national political system. Similarly, with respect to rising economic insecurity, the revision of Article 27 by the federal government, and the enactment of the NAFTA treaty, created considerable
anxiety among peasant Chiapans, and was listed explicitly by the Zapatistas as a primary reason for the revolt.

Theories of Conflict Resolution

As the internal war literature has been mined for causal explanations of the conflict in Chiapas, likewise we can leverage the corpus to find strategies for conflict resolution. Chaim Kaufman (1998:1, 2) suggests that separation of contentious groups and division of territory may be the only viable solution to ending certain internal wars. While Kaufmann provides a compelling argument, his remedies are not relevant to the situation in Chiapas, as the Zapatista rebels argue for autonomy, not independence. Stephen Stedman (1996:374-376) asserts that the international community should not intervene in civil wars unless the participants are willing to negotiate, and if the international community possesses the resolve to buttress their words with a robust material and military commitment. While Stedman’s central argument possesses some merit, it is not germane to Chiapas, as the cease-fire has held and the Mexican government would not otherwise accept external military intervention. Roy Licklider (1993:681-687) has analyzed the effectiveness of negotiations and, alternatively, military victories as a means to end civil war. This study, however, is less applicable to Chiapas as Licklider’s research examines large-scale civil wars; indeed, Licklider’s operationalization for internal war excludes the relatively low level violence exhibited in Chiapas (Licklider 1993:682).

While the majority of the literature on internal conflict resolution appears to have little relevance for Chiapas, two works in particular possess promise with respect to finding solutions to conflicts similar to Chiapas. Ted Gurr’s (1994) work on ethnopolitical conflict is germane and constructive to finding conflict resolution solutions in Chiapas. Gurr suggests that the key to solving communal based discord is understanding what makes these conflicts so resistant to resolution. Gurr emphasizes that material conditions are not the only, or perhaps even the most important, issue that needs to be addressed.
Cultural and status concerns are often central matters that require consideration. Gurr (1994:365-366) suggests that creative arrangements of autonomy, integration, and pluralism can help to stem violent manifestations of ethnic grievances, and have in the Western democracies produced a one-third reduction in ethnopolitical violence. Further, he argues that early intervention in ethnopolitical issues can prevent the escalation of violence and points to the eagerness of the Mexican government’s response in Chiapas as an example of the efficacy of early intervention (1994:365-366).

However, many analysts would demur with Gurr’s sanguine appraisal of the Mexican response, as signs of discontent and guerrilla activity were evident years before the Zapatista revolt, and as the Mexican government, instead of adopting a proactive approach, rather, ignored the simmering conflict. Gurr (1994) posits that the international community has a role to play in clarifying international law on the rights of minority groups, in monitoring their treatment, and, in certain cases, intervening on their behalf. Although direct external intervention in the Chiapas conflict would have been assertively countered by the Mexican government, indirect intervention in the form of international diplomatic pressure did appear to temper the actions of the Zedillo government.

I. William Zartman offers several strategies for successfully negotiating a resolution to ethnic/indigenous-based internal conflict. He discusses numerous options for dividing power, including regional autonomy, which has been demanded by the Zapatistas, and upon which the Mexican government equivocates (Zartman 1991:524-527; Los Angeles Times 1998). Zartman also posits, however, that granting autonomy is not enough; that if a primary grievance is material in nature, the government must ensure that the indigenous communities receive “their regular and equitable supply from the central storehouse” (Zartman 1991:527). Zartman also emphasizes the role mediators can play in negotiations. Noting that outside intervention is often perceived as meddling, Zartman (1991:530-532) suggests the creation of domestic agencies to act as “marriage
counselors” in ethnic disputes. Furthermore he suggests mediation strategies such as “positioning” whereby the mediator develops relationship with all pertinent ethnic contacts, fostering discussion not only at the official level, but unofficial dialogue, and the use of officieux - whereby well-connected private citizens are tapped to leverage their relationships with the parties to encourage discussion and promote understanding (Zartman 1991:530-532). In the case of the Chiapas conflict, the establishment of a mediation agency, suggested by Zartman, would require the agency to have considerable independence; otherwise, Chiapans’ confidence in the objectivity of the mediator would be jeopardized.

The writings of Michael Brown and Ted Gurr help to elucidate the causes of indigenous-rights based civil conflict, and Gurr and I. William Zartman provide guidance with respect to the options available toward resolving these conflicts. This study now turns to an often overlooked causal variable, devolution. Additionally, the impact of moderation as a tactical instrument is assessed.

The Role of Devolution

Earlier, material deprivation and human rights abuses were identified as antecedent causes, and the enactment of NAFTA and revisions to communal land law were posited as proximate causes of the Chiapas conflict. Devolution, however, represents another causal variable in the Chiapas conflict; a variable which has received very little scrutiny. Mexico’s system of devolution (decentralization of power) represents an important explanation for the conflict, as malevolent and/or corrupt leaders at the state and local level have been most directly responsible for the abuses visited upon Chiapas’ indigenous population.

Most assuredly, Mexico City exhibited a pattern of negligent governance by failing to supervise and enforce federal law. The principal role of local authorities in the abuse and marginalization of the indigenous population suggests, however, that perhaps an
excessive amount of attention has been paid in the mass media to central government policy and funding. Material conditions have often been noted as an underlying cause of the rebellion. Nonetheless, Stephen Wager and Donald Schulz point out that in the five years prior to the uprising, the Salinas government increased federal spending in Chiapas by one-thousand percent (Wager and Schultz 1995:7). Chiapas received, in fact, a greater share of funds from the anti-poverty “Solidarity” program than any other state (Economist 1994). These monies, however, have often been funneled into the coffers of local power brokers (Wager and Schulz 1995:7). Furthermore, those funds that are actually directed to development ventures often have little impact as they are squandered on ill-conceived and poorly executed projects.

The violence that persisted in Chiapas after the cease-fire was attributed to the actions of paramilitary units, which were also tied to local police units and the local PRI elite. Conversely, the Zedillo administration aggressively prosecuted the paramilitaries involved in the 1997 Acteal massacre (New York Times 1998). Greater scrutiny might be applied, therefore, to local authorities and their use and abuse of power. The typical reaction of outside observers to human rights abuses in foreign states is to castigate the most visible component of the offending state - the central government. While central government officials may be directly complicit in many episodes of human rights abuses globally, in other cases local leadership may be more directly responsible for abuses. The latter may be particularly evident in federal states, such as Mexico. Indeed this dynamic was vividly exhibited in another federal state - the United States - as witnessed by the human rights abuses visited upon African-Americans by local authorities in the South, prior to and during the 1960s civil rights era. These abuses occurred despite the fact that they ran largely counter to the laws and explicit mandates of the national government.
Moderation (Jus in Bello)

Certainly, central government authorities should be held accountable for neglecting their responsibilities in supervising the actions of local officials, especially in relation to minority groups. Also, in the case of Mexico, the aggressive behavior of the federal army in 1994, and subsequent allegations of army abuse, demonstrates that the Mexican government was complicit in abuses in Chiapas - especially in the midst of the conflict (Jane’s Intelligence Review 1998b). However, it is also important to note the positive influence that a relatively reasonable central government can play in confrontations that arise out of local dynamics. In this vein, we should emphasize the relative moderation exhibited by the Mexican government. Though significant human rights violations were indeed committed, as compared to the counterinsurgency responses waged by many other governments in recent years, Mexico City exercised considerable restraint in its confrontation with armed belligerents.

Though human rights violations were also committed by the rebels, the moderation of the Zapatistas should be noted as well. Not only did the Zapatistas accept and adhere to a cease fire only weeks into their campaign, they demonstrated significant tactical restraint during the uprising. Although combatants should not receive outsized approbation simply for eschewing heinous deeds, the relative jus in bello restraint exhibited by both sides hints at a factor which may discourage internal conflicts from intensifying.

Conclusions

The Chiapas revolt was a traumatic event for Mexico. It resulted in a significant loss of life, and caused a crisis of confidence in Mexico both from within the country and from the international community. The crisis indeed threatened to derail Mexico’s ascent into the ranks of the advanced industrial economies. Mexico has, however, benefited in certain ways from the revolt. The Zapatista challenge played an important causal role in subsequent systemic reforms within Mexico’s political system, and was a catalyst for
material improvements for indigenous peasants in Chiapas, who have benefited from land grants, increased social spending, and greater autonomy. Acute poverty, absences of due process, and intermittent episodes of intimidation and violence still afflict Chiapas, and therefore, although the kinetic phase of the conflict is over, the preconditions for conflict remain. Still, the conflict in Chiapas can be viewed as a model illustrating the benefits to be gained - by rebel and government forces – from restraint, negotiation, and concession. In particular, the Zapatistas’ emphasis on a political communications strategy and their novel use of communications technology may suggest a new paradigm for waging resistance movements. Tactical moderation and skillful communication may yield greater returns for resistance movements than the indiscriminate and exclusive use of armed force.

About the Author

References


Autumn 1997.


