

# Basic Introduction to Mexico and the Zapatistas

*A simple reading primer for first-timers*

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## 1. Mexico: History of Struggle

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The struggle of the masses in Mexico dates back to the early 16th century when Spanish forces invaded the Yucatan and Mexican coasts.

Henandez de Corboda and Herman Cortes were the Spanish officers in charge of the expedition to conquer the vast Aztec and Mayon civilisations. In 1521, after two years of vicious fighting, Tenochtitlan (now Mexico City) fell to Cortes, and by 1525 Francisco Montejo had conquered the Mayon people. By 1540 most of northern Mexico was under Spanish rule.

Years of oppression followed as the Spanish conquerors tried to pacify the indigenous population. For the next three hundred years Mexico was ruled as a Spanish colony. The native population revolted in 1541, but the uprising was crushed. The Spanish rulers proceeded to rob Mexico of all its natural resources, mainly silver, and created vast plantations for the export of wheat, sugar cane, etc. By the 17th century the economy of 'New Spain' collapsed. Disease and overwork cut the native population from 12 million in 1520 to one million by 1720, but it was not until the early 19th century that major threats to Spanish rule began.

The first revolt occurred in 1810. It was led by Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, a parish priest who issued 'Grito de Delores', calling for an end to Spanish rule, redistribution of land, and empowerment of the masses. Costilla and his followers were captured and executed. A following uprising by Jose Maria Moreles y Pavon in 1814 was also crushed, and the disintegrating independence movement turned to guerilla warfare.

Vicente Guerrero led this new struggle and in 1821 he negotiated a treaty with the ruling Spanish elite to gain self determination for the colony. A congress was elected, and after a military rebellion in 1823 Mexico became a republic.

In 1845 the U.S. Congress voted to annex Texas and war with Mexico ensued. By 1848 North American superiority overwhelmed the Mexican Army, and Utah, Texas, Nevada, California, New Mexico, and most of Colorado came under American control.

In 1857 Benito Juarez issued a new constitution in an effort to abolish the remnants of colonialism. Land reforms did nothing however to improve the lives of the majority of the population who lived in poverty. To make matters worse, civil war broke out in 1858 between the liberals led by Juarez and the conservatives. Juarez was victorious and some of his later reforms helped to lessen the excessive power of the church and the army. His liberal successors were not as successful.



In 1876 Porfio Diaz seized power and his monopoly on political power over the next thirty years was a major cause of the revolution in 1910.

The 1910 revolt was led by Francisco i Madero, who advocated neither social reforms nor drastic change. With conservative support, another general, Victoriano Huerta, overthrew Madero. The peasants continued the revolt begun in 1910 and Pancho Villa and Emile Zapata became the two key figures in the struggle against Huerta. Huerta was defeated and control fell into the hands of Venustiano Carranza, a rich landowner who had supported Madero. Civil war broke out between his forces and those of Villa in the north and Zapata in the south. By 1920 the popular uprising had been crushed.

A new party, the PNR, then consolidated power, and depression in the 1930's caused a reversal of land reforms and an increase in the rich/poor divide. The PNR (now PRI) has ruled Mexico ever since with a peculiar one party system.

In 1968 a major student uprising was crushed and the PRI party became more indifferent towards the oppressed masses On 1 January 1994 the EZLN, an unheard-of revolutionary organisation, seized power in parts of Chiapas, southern Mexico, calling for the reforms Zapata had fought and died for. Forty thousand federal troops now surround the revolutionaries, and the Mexican government is again under extreme pressure to reform. The struggle of the indigenous and oppressed people of Mexico has never ceased and the EZLN have captured the imagination and won the support of many.

## 2. The Truth About the Economy

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*The government has tried to portray Mexico as a First World country...But behind this picture is the real Mexico, the Mexico of the millions of Indians who live in extreme poverty. We have helped peel of the mask to reveal the real Mexico.*

(Subcomandante Marcos)

On 1 January 1994 Mexico entered the First World. They entered N.A.F.T.A. with a flurry of excitement from both American and Mexican big business. Within a year the grand illusion of the 'Mexican Miracle' had been laid to rest and the economy fell to its knees as close to \$11 billion was taken out of the economy by investors. Clinton stepped in with a \$40 million aid deal to save the Mexican economy and his face at home. Mexico's foreign debt increased and controls and burdens shackled the economy.

Mexico is a land divided into the extremely rich and the extremely poor. The economy run by large business and corrupt officials has consistently ignored and spat on a massive proportion of the population. Rural areas are worst hit. The indigenous people were without a voice for decades.

This 'First World economy', when studied, shows a lot of contradictions. 41% of the population have no running water; 34% are without electricity; 63% of the people live in accomodation of only one room; 19% of the workforce has no possible income, and 67% live on or below the minimum wage. The National Consumers Attorneys Office threw light on these statistics when a study they released showed that twenty of the most essential products that make up the basket of goods consumed by families in Mexico cost the equivalent of between 7 and 10 minimum wages. A litre of cooking oil and a kilo of rice costs roughly one day's pay. The economy for years has benefitted big business, foreign and national, and the divide between rich and poor is widening every day. Since 1988 the difference between the rich and the poor has become very severe. Fifty million people live in poverty, while twenty four billionaires top Forbes list of the wealthiest people in the world.

Neo-Liberal economic reform in the past decade in Mexico has to a large extent worsened conditions

for the country's poor. The need for Mexico to preserve its market credibility for investors is driving towards what economist John Eatwell calls *a low growth, high unemployment equilibrium*. This provides huge profits for a few and misery and increased poverty for the majority of the population. In the past ten years the number of people living in extreme poverty in rural areas has increased by almost a third. Mexico's recent peso devaluation cut wages to an average of 34 cents per hour. The Mexican Secretary of Commerce hailed this fall as *an inducement to foreign investment*, aiding the privileged minority. The N.A.F.T.A. agreement will push people off their land and increase the unemployed labourforce, adding to problems in rural areas. Reforms have achieved nothing, but add to the debt the economy owes to private and foreign investors. The people of Mexico say *ENOUGH*.

In order to keep up with the demands of its labour force Mexico needs to create 19.2 million jobs. However N.A.F.T.A. turns a blind eye to the country's workers. The New York Times, the greatest ally of American Foreign Policy, predicts that *several million Mexicans will lose their jobs in the first five years after the accord takes effect*. Far from becoming the model for economic reform, the Mexican economy is plunging into a cesspool of economic debt, poverty, ruin of the manufacturing industry and death and impoverishment of millions. Since January 1995 foreign investment has declined by \$2.5 billion a month (Banco de Mexico)

Analysis of the Mexican economy proves that far from being the bastion of economic reform, it is fragile and weak without foreign aid and investment. The majority of people gain nothing from a system that panders to the New World Order. For every day that the system continues children starve, families grow poorer and workers' grievances rise. Change must come. We support the indigenous people and all the downtrodden of Mexico. Viva la Revolucion!

### 3. Mexican Politics in the 20th Century

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The political history of Mexico after the Revolution is dominated by the evolution of what novelist Vargas Llosa called *the perfect dictatorship* - control of all areas of public life by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (the Institutional Revolutionary Party). Founded in 1929 as the Party of National Revolution, it has governed without interruption for nearly 70 years.

Few women and indigenous people rise to senior positions. This reflects discrimination typical of Mexican society. As well as gender-based prejudice, Mexican society still discriminates between mestizos ('mixed race' people with European and indigenous ancestors) and indígenas (the original Americans). The latter are regarded by many mestizos as racially inferior.

The massive party apparatus and the nationalisation of certain industries and of land may appear similar to the situation in the Soviet Union, but private ownership of property never disappeared in Mexico. The land reforms (in particular in the 1930s under Pres. Cárdenas), which returned much land to the peasants working it - in the form of ejidos (collectives) - did not break the power of local landlords (caciques). Recent 'reform' of the Constitution has allowed for further privatisation of land. The fortunes of trade unions have varied under different presidents, but a double policy of restrictive labour law and selective inclusion of labour organisations in the political establishment has been constant.

The United Mexican States, as Mexico is officially called, is a federal republic consisting of 31 states and the Federal District of Mexico City. Executive power is in the hands of the President, who is elected every six years by adult citizens, and the Cabinet s/he appoints. The National Congress (parliament) consists of a Chamber of Deputies and the Senate.

The 500 deputies of the Chamber are elected for 3 year term; the 128 Senators for a 6 year term. Each state has its own constitution, and is administered by a governor elected for 6 years and Chamber of Deputies.

Elections are, however, anything but free and fair. The power of local PRI officials in all aspects of economic activity ensures a certain degree of support from voters 'repaying debts'. Fraud is also widespread. In 1988, the government's presidential candidate looked set to lose to opposition candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (PRD) ... until the computers 'broke down' in the middle of the count. International human rights groups such as Amnesty International have documented many cases of intimidation of voters and opposition activists.

Violence as a political tool ...

Political assassinations are frequent, torture and detention without trial commonplace. Difficult opposition at home, such as the students in 1968, has been - literally - murdered. The use of violence as a political tool also occurs within the ruling elite: the murder of PRI presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio in 1994 is generally attributed to others in the tension-ridden party.

Despite this political climate, there are two main opposition parties: the centre-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), which is at present in decline, and the right-wing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN - National Action Party, based in the richer North), which is gaining ground. While both oppose the government, they do so from different perspectives, and it is the local activists of the PRD who are more likely to be targeted by the army, police or private para-military groups.

## 4. Indigenous People

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Mexico is a complex society: we often hear or read of the peoples of Mexico, and this page can only give a very brief impression of the diversity.

When the Spanish invader Hernán Cortes arrived in 1519, Mesoamerica - the region stretching from present day Nicaragua to what is now the southern U.S. - was home to 25 million people. To talk of Columbus, Cortes or others 'discovering' the continent is ridiculous. Some 4000 years ago the Olmec people were founding a civilisation which, like the Mayan, Zapotec, Mixtec, Toltec and Aztec societies, became a highly sophisticated culture. The advances made in mathematics, astronomy and other sciences, particularly by the Mayans and Aztecs, and their art and architecture, are still recognised today.



The Spanish invasion brought incredible destruction to these people. War and disease killed vast numbers, and both the military colonists and the Catholic missionaries sought to smash their societies. Great change has taken place, but even now, 504 years after Columbus first landed on the continent, Mexico is still home to 56 different indigenous peoples, each speaking their own language.

The most significant groups are the Tarahumaras, Nahuas, Huicholes, Purépechas, Mixtecos, Zapotecas, Otomís, Totonacas and Mayas. They still form the major population group in some regions of the country, but as in other parts of the world, indigenous peoples in Mexico are treated as worth-less, second class citizens by 'pure European' Mexicans and mixed race mestizos (like Travellers in Ireland). High levels of migration to the cities - where they often end up as the cheapest of the cheap labour - and to the U.S. has been one consequence of the loss of traditional lands.

The attacks, spearheaded by recent governments, on the ejido system (common lands administered by the community), for example, is a big threat to indigenous culture. As Tom Barry writes in his Mexico, a Country Guide , *In many areas, caciques or rural bosses not only control land but also monopolise the marketing of nearly all regional production and the local food supply. In Chiapas, for example, the Tzeltales, Tzoltiles, Tojolabales, Chamulas and others have been pushed off their land and are now forced to provide cheap labor on large cotton and coffee plantations.*

The 504 years of colonisation have also, however, been five hundred and four years of resistance. Indigenous peoples' organisations are now beginning to make a big impact, at least on the consciousness of Mexican society. Resistance to the destruction of the environment, defence of indigenous peoples' livelihoods and cultures, demands for development programmes and the protesting of human rights abuses are making the news. But, as the EZLN argued in their Declaration of War on the government, the mestizo establishment has not wanted to listen until it was forced to. Racism is a fact of life in Mexico (too): one that costs lives. But the struggle goes on, for the dead are only dead if they are forgotten.

*I break this egg and the woman is born and the man is born. And they will live and die together. But they will be born again. They will be born and they will die once more and be born another time. And they will never stop being born, because death is a lie.* Eduardo Galeano, 'Myths of the Makiritare Indians'

*No morirá la flor de la palabra. Podrá morir el rostro oculto de quien la nombra hoy, pero la palabra que vino desde el fondo de la historia y de la tierra ya no podría ser arrancada por la soberbia del poder.* (The flower of the word will not die. The hidden face of whoever names it today may die, but the word which came from the depths of history and of the land cannot now be torn out by the contempt of the power.) Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena - Comandancia General del EZLN, México, 1996.

## 5. Who was Zapata?

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Emiliano Zapata was born in the village of San Miguel Anencuilco in the state of Morelos on the 8th of August 1879

The son of a 'strong farmer', Zapata grew up to become the most famous leader of the Mexican Revolution. Like Connolly or the Ladies' Land League in Ireland, Zapata is paid much lip service by the Mexican establishment, but his revolutionary ideas are ignored by those who inherited the power won in the Revolution. A gifted organiser, Zapata also spoke Náhuatl, his local indigenous language.

Elected leader of his village in 1909, Zapata began recruiting an insurgent army even before the Revolution beginning in 1910 which overthrew the dictator Porfirio Díaz. The links between the dictatorship and the U.S.A., combined with Mexico's colonial past, gave rise to much 'revolutionary nationalism' - revolution as defence of the nation - which is still a vibrant force today.



Zapata's Liberation Army of the South did not accept the new reformist government under Francisco Madero. The Zapatistas fought on against government troops lead by Victoriano Huerta, the general who overthrew Madero in February, 1913, and was then deposed in 1914. At the following Convention in

Aguascalientes, called to decide the future of Mexico, the Zapatistas demanded 'tierra y libertad' - land and freedom - for their people.

This was the core of Zapata's 'Plan de Ayala', produced in November 1911. Clearly influenced by anarchist ideas spread in Mexico by people like Ricardo Flores Magón, Zapata demands the socialisation of land:

*The lands, forests and water that have been usurped ... will be immediately restored to the villages or citizens who have title to them ... Because the great majority of Mexicans own nothing more than the land they walk on ... one third of these properties will be expropriated ... so that the villages and citizens of Mexico may obtain ejidos , sites for towns, and fields.*

Zapata remained in opposition, fighting against terrible repression, until 1919. Lured to a meeting with government troops apparently mutinying against President Carranza, he was gunned down on April the 10th, 1919. Although the insurgents fought on, and Zapata's ghost was seen to ride the hills of his native state, Morelos, the conservatives won out, and Zapata's ideas of fair distribution of land remained ignored until the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas in the late 1930's.

Zapata's memory, like his ghost, rides on in Mexico. His name has been invoked by the indigenous rebel army in Chiapas, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), in their struggle against exactly the same social ills that Zapata fought against: large landlords and (often foreign-owned) big business running a corrupt and repressive régime that leaves the peasants, particularly indigenous peoples, landless and exploited. Throughout this century, people all over the world have risen up against oppression, taking heart from Zapata's cry:

***It is better to die on your feet than to live on your knees!***