Zapatistas break silence to slam Mexico elite

New statements from the indigenous movement put rebels seeking "land, liberty, work and peace" back in the public eye.

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After years of silence, secluded in their base communities in Mexico's impoverished south, indigenous Zapatista rebels have re-emerged with a series of public statements in recent weeks, attempting to reignite passions for their demands of "land, liberty, work and peace".

In December, 40,000 Zapatista supporters marched through villages in Chiapas, re-asserting their presence. In January and February, Subcomandate Marcos - the Zapatistas' pipe-smoking, non-indigenous spokesman and an international media darling - issued a series of communiques slamming the government of Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto, a member of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) which assumed power in December.

"Our pains won't be lessened by opening ourselves up to those that hurt all over the world," Marcos wrote in late January, rallying supporters. "We will resist. We will struggle. Maybe we'll die. But one, ten, one hundred times, we'll always win."

The group first made international headlines on January 1, 1994, when they captured six towns in Chiapas, Mexico's southernmost state and one of the country's poorest regions.

The Rand Corporation, a research group with links to the US military, [said](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/01/%20http%3A//www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1382/MR1382.ch6.pdf%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)Chiapas is "characterised by tremendous age-old gaps between the wealthy and impoverished - kept wide by privileged landowners who ran feudal fiefdoms with private armies".

For nearly two decades, the Zapatistas have attempted to build a system of autonomous governance, emphasising indigenous dignity and collective agriculture. Indigenous members of the group could not be reached by Al Jazeera for comment, due in part to a lack of easy phone access.

**'Community building'**

The group had been quiet in recent years before the December rally and subsequent communiques. "They have been busy, building up their base as a social movement at the community level, even if they hadn't been in the media," Mark Berger, visiting professor of defence analysis at the US Naval Postgraduate School, told Al Jazeera. There are between 100,000 and 200,000 people living in communities which support the Zapatistas, he said.

In recent communiques, Marcos [has described](http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/901623.html%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) Mexico's government as a "zombie state" controlled by the elite, a statement which likely resonates among some sectors of the population in a country plagued by pervasive inequality and corruption.  Previous attempts to unify Mexico's social movements, from independent trade unionists, to feminists, students, punks and other indigenous people, have been met with mixed results. The "Other Campaign", the last major outreach drive launched by the Zapatistas in 2006, was largely unsuccessful in building a national movement.

"The Other Campaign was very critical of electoral politics and it marked a fracture among the Mexican left," Alán Arias Marín, a political scientist at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, told Al Jazeera. "Locally [in Chiapas] the movement still has support."

**Return of the PRI**

Meanwhile, though, Mexico has been consumed with other problems, especially drug-related violence. For the last 12 years, Mexico had been governed by the conservative National Action Party (PAN), led by Vicente Fox and later Felipe Calderon. The PAN had little interest in dealing with the Zapatistas or the broader issues faced by indigenous Mexicans. Today, the PAN is out of office in a development that could change dynamics for the Zapatistas.

The PRI, which ruled Mexico for 71 uninterrupted years before 2000, was in power when the Zapatistas first rebelled. The return of what Peruvian author Mario Vargas Llosa called the "perfect dictatorship" in an election last year marred by allegations of fraud could benefit the Zapatistas as they seek to rebuild alliances with social movements outside of Chiapas and reinvigorate their national presence.

"The same people who poured into the Zocalo [Mexico City's main square] to stop the government from imposing a strict military response to the rebellion [in 1994] are still there," Richard Stahler-Sholk, an author of the book *Latin American Social Movements in the Twenty-First Century*, told Al Jazeera. "The Mexican government has unleashed militarisation on the country, with the encouragement of the US government, in response to drug violence."

More than 70,000 people have died in drug-related mayhem since 2006 and the US has pledged more than $1.4bn in military aid to Mexico under the auspicies of fighting criminal cartels.

With carnage raging in parts of Mexico, activists calling for a new approach to the "War on Drugs", and an increasingly powerful student movement confronting the PRI, the Zapatistas have plenty of possible allies.

"I think there is a possibility that the Zapatistas and the student movement could well gain a lot more traction under a PRI-dominated political system," Berger said.

Pena Nieto could become a lightning rod for protests, reacquainting the Zapatistas with their historic foe, the PRI. During his tenure as governor of Mexico State, Nieto oversaw the violent police crackdown against demonstrators in the city of San Salvador Atenco in 2006. Two demonstrators were killed and a group of women say they were sexually terrorised by security forces as they protested the extension of an airport.

The student movement #yosoy132 formed after a group of undergraduates questioned Nieto about the attacks during his presidential campaign in 2012. Angered by reports of electoral fraud and the PRI's history of corruption, many students have been challenging the government.

**'Net war'**

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Mexico's youth are not alone in opposing the status quo.

"What began as a violent insurgency in an isolated region mutated into a nonviolent though no less disruptive social netwar that engaged the attention of activists from far and wide," the Rand Corporation noted in an[analysis of the Zapatistas](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR994.html%20%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) and the internet.

In mid-January, Anonymous, the diffuse internet activist movement, apparently [launched](http://www.globalpost.com/dispatches/globalpost-blogs/the-grid/anonymous-mexico-targets-defense-department-support-zapatistas%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)a cyber-attack crashing the website of Mexico's defence ministry, claiming to be in solidarity with the Zapatistas.

According to some analysts, the Zapatistas - and their early use of the internet to draw support - were the precursor of a new type of diffuse social movement such as Occupy Wall Street, #yosoy132, and anti-globalisation protests.

But the tangible benefits of internet activism and the outside support it garners can be fleeting. "The Zapatistas were trendy, and numerous international initiatives supported them," Marín, the professor in Mexico City, said. But with the onset of the US-led war in Iraq, most NGOs started to have different concerns, he said, describing non-government organisations as "very fussy".

In recent communiques, Marcos said the Zapatistas would reappraise their relationships with various foreign and domestic partners. Aid groups, particularly some charities, have been criticised by the masked revolutionaries.

**Revolutionary ideas**

If the drug war and the thousands of corpses left in its wake helped push the Zapatistas off the international agenda, the return of the PRI might make it easier for them to reclaim a place in national debates.

In the past, the PRI was widely believed to broker deals between the cartels to ensure stability. "The government will stop trying to go to war with organised crime so much," Berger predicted of the new PRI administration. "That will allow more attention to other forms of politics."

It remains unclear if the Zapatistas will be able to capitalise on these potential changes, but their re-emergence in the public eye is being met with interest across Mexico and beyond.

"Recent communications are specifically directed at re-activating their national and international base," said one long-time supporter, who spoke on the condition of anonymity from Chiapas due to security concerns. "The Zapatistas are hoping, I think, that people will create the conditions of autonomy and self-sufficiency in their local areas; they want supporters to bring the ideas of the revolution home."