# Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ *Zapatista Articles Events Level 2.5*

# **Zapatista’s New “Good Government”: What is Looks Like and Why it Works**

<http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/226> by Solidarity Magazine, 2006

While the future of the movement will be on a bigger scale, the present Zapatista challenge is making the Good Government, or Caracoles. Caracol translates to "snail" or "conch," and is used as a symbol for communication. Autonomy means being independent, i.e. being able to do things on your own. The Zapatistas are building autonomous municipalities (independent towns), towns that can run without help from the Mexican government.

In the early years, being an autonomous town meant in some cases that the Zapatistas maintained roadblocks, charged tolls, and posted signs ("You are entering autonomous territory"); in other communities autonomy was primarily a state of mind. Over time, however, the military wing of the Zapatista movement gave over authority to the other leaders, and those leaders built up local communities' abilities to consult, plan, and decide.

In one town we were treated to the unusual display of two parallel and competing sets of government. There are two primary schools, two clinics and two city halls. On one side of the central plaza is a large, windowless shed of rough boards with a metal roof, where we were met by men and women wearing traditional Mayan garb - beribboned hats set off by short white tunics or woolly ponchos for the men, multicolored blouses and skirts with distinctive weaves identifying the community of origin for the women. Across the plaza stands the home of what Zapatista authorities call the "bad government," a standard-issue brick and stucco office building. We didn't go inside, but in front stood a group of men (only) wearing the cowboy hats and jeans typical of Chiapas mestizos (assimilated mixed-race people).

### Good Government Pays

Given the strict rules of the Zapatistas - including no alcohol for anyone - how do they convince people to join? They certainly can’t do it by having more money. Instead, the key seems to be good government. As the town authorities told us, "The idea is to demonstrate that we can do this work. We are resolving all our problems on our own, with our own words, in our own way, without the involvement of the [official] government."

According to CIEPAC's Pickard, it's working. "The most impressive thing I hear about," he said, "is the justice system. For the first time in over 500 years, indigenous people are getting justice! They're getting it in their own language, they can be heard, it's not corrupt, the authorities can't be bought off." The result, he added, is that Zapatista, non-Zapatista and even anti-Zapatista community members seek out the autonomous judges, even for complex and difficult issues.

Zapatista government also teach people how democracy really works, with participation. The police and justice systems lean heavily on discussion and negotiation rather than force. Towns choose their leaders in assemblies. At the next level up, in the Caracoles and the Good Government Councils, the movement rotates people through for short stints, trying to spread around the experience of governing.

Another advantage of the autonomous councils is that they build on long-standing Maya traditions. Language and costume are the most visible signs, of course. Enrique, a young Zapatista activist, noted that collective work and taking up community collections are part of the Maya culture (we use pseudonyms to identify Enrique and all Zapatista activists). Alberto, an anthropologist who studies the Maya, added that Mayan peoples value simplicity and humility, and view costly possessions with suspicion - perhaps rendering the unfinished boards of Magdalena's "other" city hall more appealing than the polished surfaces of the official one.

Zapatista local authorities, however, are seeking to break with some age-old traditions. Mayan society before 1994 was, like most pre-modern cultures, oppressively sexist. Arranged marriages, male authority in the home and the village, and widespread domestic violence kept women socially and physically oppressed. But during the rise of the Zapatistas, Maya women threw themselves into organizing and came to make up one-third of the rebel army's ranks. They created the Revolutionary Women's Law, proclaiming equal rights, including the right to choose whom and when to marry, and whether and when to have children. The existence of the law does not mean that gender equality has been achieved in Zapatista communities - "It's not easy to change this in just a few years," as Paciencia, a young activist, stated - but the fact that the communities endorsed it at all is a milestone.

In the long term, Zapatismo wants all of society to have freedom, democracy and justice, not just a few towns. But this is a good place to start.