

Roderic Ai Camp,
Mexico: What Everyone Needs to Know

What was the Zapatista uprising of 1994 and what were its political consequences?

On January 1, 1994, a small guerrilla band of indigenous Mexicans in the poor southern state of Chiapas attacked several army posts in what became known as the Zapatista uprising. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the United States and Canada formally went into effect on that date, and they used it as a symbol, in opposition to the neo-liberal economic policies of the Salinas administration. The brief and militarily ineffective uprising was put down violently by the Mexican armed forces, which committed human rights abuses in defeating the poorly armed guerrillas. Formally known as the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), the peasants who made up the members of the guerrillas, and their active supporters, had a long list of complaints against local, state, and federal authorities. They advocated agrarian reforms and opposed Salinas' revisions of the agrarian provisions in Article 27 of the Constitution. They also believed they had been effectively excluded from the political process, and they viewed their economic situation as continuing to deteriorate compared with most other Mexicans.

Militarily, the Zapatistas proved to be unsuccessful. Politically, however, most Mexicans were favorably predisposed to their

goals, although they were opposed to their initial use of violence. The Zapatistas used the Internet effectively, both in Mexico and the United States, to gain support, and they were equally effective in finding allies in the domestic and international media. They exercised a long-term political impact in two ways. First, and most influential, they served as a catalyst for the establishment and activity of dozens of nongovernmental organizations that pressed their own social and economic demands on the government. These groups, along with the EZLN, which transformed itself into a vociferous political organization, contributed to the growth of civic organizations and to widespread support for the democratic transition of the Mexican political system. Second, although the Zapatistas never formally achieved an agreement with the Mexican government, and they have exercised little influence on the political arena in recent years, they did initiate a broader movement, found elsewhere in the region, in favor of indigenous rights and municipal autonomy in Mexico.

What were the consequences of the Zapatistas for civil-military relations?

When the Zapatista National Liberation Army attacked several army installations on the morning of January 1, 1994, in part to symbolize their objection to the North American Free Trade Agreement and what it implied for Mexican peasants, it produced numerous consequences for the Mexican armed forces, for the relationship between civil and military authorities, and for the military's role in determining national security policy. The uprising caught the Mexican public and the international community completely by surprise. (See the immediately preceding question.) As was the case some twenty-five years earlier when troops surrounded the student demonstrators in Tlatelolco Plaza in 1968, the army was asked to react to a difficult political problem created by civilian leaders' incompetence. The events of January 1994, however,

were even more consequential for the civil-military relationship because military intelligence for more than a year previous to these events had warned civilian agencies of the disenchantment of these groups and their future actions against local authorities.

The armed forces' immediate suppression of the small guerrilla bands was brutal and involved widely reported human rights violations, presenting the military in a negative light in the domestic and international media. Officers within the armed forces became disgruntled with civilian security leadership and decision-making, ultimately pressuring national leadership to include the secretariats of national defense and navy in the decision-making process, thus allowing the military to have a voice in those policies they would be asked to enforce or implement. As a consequence, they became an effective voice in the national security sub-cabinet. Equally important, military dissatisfaction with their role in controlling the Zapatistas led to a unique, highly critical self-appraisal within the military in a 1995 internal memorandum that was leaked to the Mexican media. This report identified numerous institutional weaknesses and outlined concrete strategies for improvement. Many could be traced to their role in suppressing the Zapatista uprising. For example, the report recommended a complete overhaul of the military's electronic capabilities, including advanced training in computer technology and the acquisition of superior computer equipment. This recommendation, in part, was a response to the Zapatistas' successful use of the Internet in presenting their case to the public and to the international media and scholarly community. The report also recommended that the armed forces improve their intelligence gathering efforts and establish links with counterpart civilian agencies, such as the attorney general of Mexico. Finally, the report recommended the expansion of mobile units that could be flown into difficult security situations, giving the army increased logistical flexibility.