
AN INSURGENCY BECOMES A SOCIAL NETWAR

Mexico's Zapatista movement exemplifies a new approach to social conflict that we call *social netwar*. Mexico, the nation that gave the world a prototype of social revolution early in the 20th century, has generated an information-age prototype of militant social netwar on the eve of the 21st century. This study examines the nature of this netwar and its implications, not only for Mexico but also for our understanding of the prospects for similar conflicts elsewhere.¹

The insurrection by the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) erupted on New Year's Day 1994, when one to two thousand² variously armed insurgents occupied five towns and a city, San Cristóbal de las Casas, in the highlands of Mexico's southernmost state, Chiapas. Over the next few days, the EZLN declared war on the Mexican government, vowed to march on Mexico City, proclaimed a revolutionary agenda, began an international media campaign for sympathy and support, and invited foreign observers and monitors to come to Chiapas.

The Mexican government's initial reaction was quite traditional. It ordered army and police forces to suppress the insurrection and downplayed its size, scope, and causes, in keeping with official as-

¹Although this report reflects new research, it should be noted that some of the text about Mexico and the Zapatista netwar is drawn, often verbatim, from writing that also appears in an earlier version (Ronfeldt and Martinez, 1996).

²The figures range from 500 to 4,000, depending on the source. The total number of troops plus support people available to the EZLN is sometimes said to run much higher, up to 12,000.

sertions a year earlier that no guerrillas existed in Chiapas. The rebels were characterized as “just 200 individuals with vague demands,” and foreign influences from Guatemala and other parts of Central America were blamed. The government tried to project a picture of stability to the world, claiming this was an isolated, local outburst.

But during the few days that the EZLN held ground, it upstaged the government. Through star-quality spokesman “Subcomandante Marcos” in particular, the EZLN called a press conference and issued communiqués to disavow Marxist and other old ideological leanings. It denied it was tied to Central American guerrillas. It insisted its roots were indigenous, and that its demands were national in scope. It appealed for nationwide support for its agenda: respect for indigenous peoples; creation of a true democracy; and socioeconomic reforms, including, by implication, the abrogation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). At the same time, the EZLN denied it had a utopian blueprint or had figured out exactly how to resolve Mexico’s problems. It also denied that it wanted to seize power. Meanwhile, the EZLN called on Mexican civil society—not other armed guerrillas, but peaceful activists—to join with it in a nationwide struggle for social, economic, and political change, without necessarily taking up arms. The EZLN also called on international organizations (notably, the Red Cross) and civil-society actors (notably, human-rights groups) to come to Chiapas to monitor the conflict. This was not at all a conventional way to mount an insurrection.

Against this background, the government mobilized the army, police, and other security forces. Within days, the number of army troops in Chiapas expanded from 2,000 to about 12,000. Air and ground attacks were conducted in rebel-held areas. Reports of casualties grew into the low hundreds. Reports also spread of human-rights abuses (including by EZLN forces).

As the EZLN withdrew into nearby rain forests and mountains, and ultimately into the lowlands of the Lacandón jungle up against the Mexico-Guatemala border, army and police units retook the towns and detained and interrogated people suspected of ties to the EZLN. Reports of tortures, executions, and disappearances at the hands of army and police units spread in the media. Meanwhile, government

agents tried to prevent, or at least delay, some journalists and human-rights activists from entering the conflict zone; some were accused of meddling in Mexico's internal affairs. This heavy-handed response was not unusual; it reflected traditional practices in Mexico—as seen in the suppression of the student-led protest movement in 1968, in operations against urban terrorist and rural guerrilla movements in the 1970s, and in the occasional, less severe policing of violent electoral protests in the 1980s.³

The EZLN's media-savvy behavior and the Mexican government's heavy-handed response quickly aroused a multitude of foreign activists associated with human-rights, indigenous-rights, and other types of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to swarm—electronically as well as physically—out of the United States, Canada, and Europe into Mexico City and Chiapas. There, they linked with Mexican NGOs to voice sympathy and support for the EZLN's demands. They began to clamor nonviolently for the government to agree to a cease-fire, a military withdrawal, and negotiations with the EZLN. They also clamored for access to gather information and monitor conditions in the conflict zone. In the process, they made sure that the EZLN's agenda could not be kept local, and that global media held a focus on Chiapas. Furthermore, they added to calls for the Mexican government to undertake major democratic reforms. And then, on January 12, to everyone's surprise, Mexico's president agreed to enter negotiations and called a halt to combat operations.

This swarming by a large multitude of militant NGOs in response to a distant upheaval—the first major case anywhere—was no anomaly. It drew on two to three decades of relatively unnoticed organizational and technological changes around the world that meant the information revolution was altering the context and conduct of social conflict. Because of this, the NGOs were able to form into highly networked, loosely coordinated, cross-border coalitions to wage an information-age social netwar that would constrain the Mexican government and assist the EZLN's cause.

What began as a violent insurgency by a small indigenous force in an isolated region was thus transformed and expanded, within weeks,

³For background, see Wager and Schulz (1995) and Hellman (1988).

into a nonviolent, less overtly destructive, but still highly disruptive movement that engaged the involvement of activists from far and wide and had both foreign and national repercussions for Mexico. For the next two years, the activities of the Zapatista movement—especially the course of the EZLN’s negotiations with the Mexican government—would dominate news headlines and stir wide-ranging debates about Mexico’s future. Indeed, in April 1995, after “information operations” had proved more significant than military combat operations for all sides, Foreign Minister Jose Angel Gurria would observe that

Chiapas . . . is a place where there has not been a shot fired in the last fifteen months. . . . The shots lasted ten days, and ever since the war has been a war of ink, of written word, a war on the Internet.⁴

The netwar had its heyday in Mexico in 1994 and 1995. During 1996, negotiations between the government and the EZLN ground to a halt, the army confined the EZLN to a small zone in Chiapas, many social activists turned to focus on other issues, and the Zapatista movement receded as a matter of daily significance in Mexico, though it still aroused international attention by staging events like the First Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism. During 1997, the EZLN and its NGO allies had to make a major effort to remobilize as a movement and garner public attention to press the cause—as occurred with a march from Chiapas to Mexico City in September. Or else it took a dramatic resurgence of old-style violence in Chiapas—as happened when local pro-government paramilitary forces murdered numerous people, some of them Zapatista sympathizers, in the village of Acteal in December 1997—to remobilize the netwar’s partisans and sympathizers in Mexico and abroad.

As of this writing (April 1998), the Zapatista social netwar (not to mention the EZLN’s capacity for insurgency) is seemingly past its peak, though it has not ended or lost all prospect for reactivation. Whatever comes next—possibly a peaceful settlement if the govern-

⁴From a speech by Gurria before businessmen from 37 countries, as reported by Rodolfo Montes, “Chiapas Is a War of Ink and Internet,” *Reforma*, April 26, 1995, translation, as circulated on the Internet.

ment demonstrates renewed interest in negotiations, or, at the other extreme, possibly a violent return to insurgency involving more than the EZLN on the eve of the year 2000 elections—the Zapatista netwar has already had profound effects, and not just in Mexico. It has shaken the foundations of the Mexican political system, by creating extraordinary pressure for democratic reforms and raising the specter of instability in America's next-door neighbor. More to the point, it is inspiring radical activists around the world to begin thinking that old models of struggle—ones that call for building “parties” and “fronts” and “*focos*” to “crush the state” and “seize power”—are not the way to go in the information age. A new concept, akin to the Zapatista movement, is emerging that aims to draw on the power of “networks” and strengthen “global civil society” in order to counterbalance state and market actors.

The next chapter provides an overview of the concept and practice of netwar. We discuss the rise of network forms of organization and the implications for conflict in the information age. We also identify some propositions about networks-versus-hierarchies that apply to the development of *counternetwar*.

In the subsequent chapters, the Zapatista movement is analyzed from this netwar perspective. We inquire into the causes of the conflict, the nature of the protagonists and their allies, and the conduct of the netwar, with an emphasis on the Zapatistas' information operations.

The final chapters discuss this social netwar's effects in Mexico, including the diffusion of unrest to other parts of the country, as exemplified by the appearance of the Popular Revolutionary Army (EPR). We also identify some implications for anticipating new social netwars beyond the Mexican case.