The Implementation of the San Ándes Accords

The Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) is a Mexican political-military organization that was founded on November 17, 1983 in Chiapas, Mexico. The original organization was named the National Liberation Forces (FLN) whose purpose was to create a national uprising and movement towards a socialist government in Mexico. Their initial struggle began in 1969, but the FLN was not fully established until they had achieved a strong base. Their members consisted of mostly Mayan workers and peasants in the Altos Highlands and region of the Lacandon Jungle. When the EZLN emerged in 1983 it was a protection group for the Mayan peasants and landless wage workers who were facing repression from federal and state governments. At this same time in history there was a growing movement for Indigenous rights and land rights taking place in Chiapas, Mexico and the EZLN began to gain support.

The Mexican government had then abolished article 27 of their constitution, which had guaranteed the right to collective land tenure in 1992 and removed the possibility of land reform which allowed for privatization and enclosure of land (Vittorio, 2009). This paired with the government’s movement towards neoliberalist ideas caused the EZLN to establish war with the government. The EZLN declared war on the federal government and army on January 1, 1994, the same day Mexico signed the NAFTA agreement. The mission of the EZLN was to create a national uprising against the authoritarian government of Mexico and its neo-capitalist systems. The EZLN’s main concerns were surrounding the basic needs of people with emphasis on the values of democracy, freedom, and justice. They asked for the people of Mexico to support their efforts to achieve, “…work, land, housing, food, healthcare, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice, and peace” (Vittorio, 2009).

The rebellion lasted twelve days before the President Carlos Salinas de Gortari called for a unilateral ceasefire. The rebellion received significant international and national coverage and support. Many NGO’s accused the Mexican federal army of human rights violation and there were many demonstrations of support for the insurgents. March 1994 was the first time the EZLN and the federal government engaged in discussion. In August of 1994 the EZLN met with
5,000 delegates from home and abroad, mostly leftist and autonomist groups including the Mexican Opposition Party of the Democratic Revolution. In this open forum, they also addressed civil society in discussion and dialogue. The EZLN emerged as a political and symbolic point of reference for a wide number of political subjects from the left at the global level.

The Second Declaration of La Realidad (the closing words of the EZLN at this gathering) was the marking of an anti-capitalist movement, which started at the end of the 1990s, also described by scholars as the neo-Zapatista movement (Vittorio, 2009). The EZLN have called for reform and continue to receive support from NGO’s and members of the national and international society. One of their main concerns was to gain civil society’s support for indigenous rights. Like many other Indigenous movements they attempt to expand definitions of democracy by emphasizing economic equality and social justice.

They offer attractive, culture-based alternatives to neoliberalism that is woven into a traditional socialist critique (Cott, 2007). They have provided access to land and basic service for indigenous peasants in Chiapas, respected indigenous culture, and stressed political autonomy from the state. In March of 1994, The EZLN, comprised of native and indigenous populations from the Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Tojolabal, Chol, Mam Mayan population, and the government began in peace talks. The main focus of the ELZN was their indigenous claims for autonomy and respect for cultural and political ways of organizing (Vittorio, 2009). After two years of dialogue between the EZLN, Mexico’s federal government, and advisors for both parties an agreement was made on February 16, 1996 called the San Ándres Accords.

The Accords are made up of four different documents: The first is a joint pronouncement of the need to establish a new pact between indigenous peoples and the government, and what the fundamental characteristics should be; the second contains a series of joint proposals with national implications that the federal government and the EZLN are required to send to Congress; the third establishes a package of special reforms for Chiapas; and the fourth is a text signed by both parties that adds some points that were not originally incorporated. The points negotiated with the government do not resolve all indigenous demands, but they do commit to
resolve some of the most relevant demands. The documents in full text can be found in appendix 1 of this paper.

The San Ándres Accords created collective rights for indigenous people such as the right to local and regional self-government and the right to collective ownership of land. The peace talks lasted for four rounds before the government refused to continue in dialogue and stopped putting forth the necessary effort needed in order to start the legal process that would make the San Ándres Accords effective. With both parties at a standstill the Comisión por la Concordia y la Pacificación (COCOPA), a group who attended the peace talks created a proposal, known as the ‘COCOPA Proposal’. When the proposal was presented, the EZLN decided to accept the proposal while the government refused to accept the proposal without modification (Haar, 2004). The government’s continual attempts to void any proposal of its meaning have left the situation at an impasse. The Mexican Federal Government should put forth the necessary legal action needed in order to implement the San Ándres Accords without change, and continue the dialogue and discussions about rights and cultures of indigenous people in Mexico in hope that there can be improvements lives and general welfare of indigenous populations. The Accords will guarantee the preservation of the jungle, lakes, rivers, and the environment in general, specifically pertaining to indigenous resources. It will allow for indigenous people to maintain their culture, traditions, and values and can be an avenue for those who do not wish to partake in capitalistic culture. A key reason the Mexican government should implement the San Ándres Accords specifically, as their document of choice, is because so much time, resource, and effort has already been put into it from both the government and the indigenous people. Through rounds of peace talks this Accord was created and addresses the specific needs and desires of the indigenous people of Mexico.

The Zapatista movement is a clear example of the resistance against the capitalist movements of the Mexican government and international community. Karl Polanyi would see the Zapatista movement as a double movement. Karl Polanyi’s focuses on the social implications of the market economy. His criticisms of the impacts of markets on society are that they have
fundamentally altered humankind's economic mentalities to the more modernist economic thoughts of today. Mexico’s signing of NAFTA would be an example of their shift towards the more modernist economic thought often seen in many capitalist countries of today. He argued that the market changed both human institutions and human nature by reducing man to labor and nature to land in order to make them commodities that are a part of the economic system. The indigenous people of Mexico are refusing to be reduced to labor, refusing to have their nature reduced to land, and are refusing to assimilate into the capitalist ideologies of today.

The “double movement” described by Polanyi is the extension of the market organization in respect to genuine commodities which was accompanied by its restriction in respect to fictitious ones (Polanyi, 2001). Meaning that as the markets are increasing and growing globally and production of goods are increasing there is also a movement to resist the negative effects of a market-controlled/self-regulating economy. There will be a continual conflict and struggle between the Mexican government and the indigenous people of Mexico if they do not engage in dialogue with each other.

Mexico is a signatory on the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous people. The Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous people is a universal human rights instrument created as a symbol of triumph and hope. Though it is not legally binding it carries moral force. The 46 articles within the text highlight a wide range of basic human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous peoples. Such as the right to unrestricted self-determination, an inalienable collective right to the ownership, use and control of lands, territories and other natural resources, their rights in terms of maintaining and developing their own political, religious, cultural and educational institutions along with the protection of their cultural and intellectual property.

The Declaration highlights the requirement for prior and informed consultation, participation and consent in activities of any kind that have an impact on indigenous peoples, their property or territories. It establishes the requirement for fair and adequate compensation for violation of the rights recognized in the Declaration and establishes guarantees against ethnocide and genocide. It also provides mutually acceptable procedures to resolve conflicts between
indigenous peoples and States, including procedures such as negotiations, mediation, arbitration, national courts and international and regional mechanisms for denouncing and examining human rights violations (Errico, 2007). As a signatory of the Declaration, they should recognize the importance of the San Ándres Accords and the necessity to constantly engage in dialogue with indigenous people. Avoidance of this Declarations will only continue to create further resistance from the EZLN and the indigenous people they are working with and representing.

As stated earlier, the rebellion received massive amounts of national and international media coverage. This was made possible by the electronic networks that exist in the world today. The internet has changed social conflict and social movements of today. People are able to communicate instantaneously with people from all over the globe. Within days NGOs, media reports, anti-globalization activists, and civil society in Mexico had seen what was happening during the rebellion, and the EZLN capitalized on this aspect of communication (Martinez-Torres, 2001). There was a high level of international protest and loss of investor confidence that hurt the Federal government and expedited the cease fire. Mexico has an opportunity to gain international recognition for effective and peaceful implementation of the San Ándres Accords without revisions and establishment of continual dialogue in regards to the rights and cultures of indigenous people. Not only will they receive global recognition but they will also be setting precedent for how other countries should engage in positive interactions with indigenous populations.

By implementing the San Ándres Accords and continuing in peace talks with the indigenous populations of Mexico there will also be a preservation of the jungle, lakes, rivers, and the environment in general, specifically pertaining to indigenous resources. Examples of neo-capitalist threats to ecosystems can be seen in forms such as damming rivers, mineral extraction, contamination, GMO seeds, etc. Not only do these actions negatively impact the ecosystems but they are also detrimental to indigenous communities. The relationship indigenous people have with their lands and territories create a large part of their identity, culture, and spirituality. “The gradual deterioration of indigenous societies can be traced to the non-
recognition of the profound relation that indigenous peoples have to their lands, territories, and resources” (United Nations, 2007). Indigenous peoples’ connection and relationship with their land have allowed them to manage their environments sustainably for generations. The preservation of precious bio-diversity of indigenous people will be obtained through the legal recognition of their right to the protection and control of their lands, territories, and natural resources, which are addressed in the San Ándres Accords.

“While indigenous peoples constitute some five per cent of the world’s population, they make up 15 per cent of those in poverty and about one-third of the world’s extremely poor rural people. In 2006, a World Bank study found that even though programs have been launched to improve access to health care and education, indigenous peoples consistently account for the highest poverty rates in Latin America” (United Nations, 2010). If the San Ándres Accords are not implemented as legitimate law and the peace talks between the Mexican government, indigenous people, and the EZLN are not fulfilled there will continue to be inequalities and imbalances within Mexican society. These discrepancies will continue to further the socio-economic disparities that already exist in Mexico. Inequalities within Mexico have caused many internal conflicts and social unrest, which is related to development and the extraction of natural resources. The costs associated with these disparities undermine the overall development and progress of the state. By recognizing and addressing these inequalities states should be able to work in tandem with indigenous people in order to achieve positive state growth.

The preservation of indigenous people should be of great importance to Mexico because indigenous populations contribute to the cultural diversity and history of Mexico. By recognizing indigenous populations they will be able to maintain autonomy. Neglecting to recognize indigenous peoples’ distinct identity and existence will continue to result in loss of language, diversity, and culture heritage, which many states pride themselves on (“UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples”).

In summation, the EZLN and indigenous movements taking place in Mexico highlight the need for the Mexican government to implement the San Ándres Accords, which will create a
new pact between indigenous people and the government based on the recognition of indigenous people’s right, culture, and importance. Mexico should set precedent for how other nation states should interact with their indigenous populations and can finally adhere to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. They will maintain their cultural diversity and heritage. They will see the preservation of their ecosystems and environment and they will also see increased nation state development and growth by coordinating with indigenous peoples. There will be additional decreases to poverty and increases to health by working to eliminate inequalities and disparities that afflict the indigenous populations of Mexico. The legal implementation of the San Ándres Accords and continual peace talks is a clear example of how anti-capitalists and pro-capitalists can work together in our ever more interconnected world.

Appendix 1:


Works Cited:


