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Mexico

Political challenges

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On Sunday, March 10, 2001 after having covered 3,500 kilometres, the Zapatista march ended with a rally of several hundred thousand people in Mexico City. It amounted to a veritable transformation of the political situation.

Thousands of Mexicans - indigenous peoples, young activists, those disillusioned with the traditional left, former guerrillas, trades unionists - came to support the march as it wound its way across the country have pronounced a second sentence of death on the PRI. On July 2, 2000, the party-state had already lost presidential power to Vicente Fox, candidate of the PAN (Party of National Action) and a former chief executive of Coca-Cola Mexico. A hundred days after assuming power he finds himself in a media-political face off with Marcos. Fox's skill in taking into his government people of left origins (in the Mexican tradition), will only grant him a very short "state of grace". He has to govern with the perspective of a sharp slowing up of an economy intimately linked with that of the United States.

Three demands

What is striking is the speed with which Fox has retreated politically before Zapatism. The PRI, after having negotiated the San Andrés agreements with the EZLN, had broken them and started a "low intensity war" based on the army and the paramilitary groups. While taking a fairly evasive stance on Chiapas, Fox saw fit to distance himself from this policy. But Zapatista pressure led to him retreating more quickly.

The programme that the EZLN has come to defend in the capital has three points: withdrawal of the army from Chiapas, liberation of Zapatista political prisoners, and introduction of the legislation on indigenous culture and rights negotiated in the framework of the San Andrés accords. On the two first points, Fox has partly conceded. On the third, he has left the doors open. The PAN parliamentary group wishes to vote legislation through, but not that negotiated with the Zapatistas in the framework of the Commission of Reconciliation and Pacification. The PRD is for, while the PRI is hesitating. The most probable outcome is that Marcos will return to Chiapas, while a delegation of the EZLN remains in Mexico city to negotiate, undoubtedly under the leadership of commandant German. More or less ridiculous obstacles, like the question of whether he must take off his balaclava mask inside Parliament, have been lifted, with the obvious approval of Fox. In a televised interview, Fox practically took as his own the slogans of the demonstrators: "welcome subcommandante Marcos, welcome Zapatistas to the political arena and the discussion of ideas". Marcos even had the opportunity to turn down an invitation to visit the president at his residence.

The big question is knowing what the Zapatistas will do with this relationship of forces. Use it for the defence of the demands advanced on the rights of the indigenous peoples, that much is obvious. But will it go further, towards a refoundation of the left on a nation-wide scale? That is very much less sure: from the precedent attempt of the FZLN not much remains and Marcos' whole philosophy is to oppose the party form and the seizure of power. In an interview published by "Proceso" on the day of his arrival in Mexico City, Marcos defines himself as a rebel, not a revolutionary: "if Marcos and Zapatism were to be transformed into a revolutionary project, in other words something which gives birth to a political actor inside the political class, then this would be the immediate defeat of Zapatism as alternative project".

What left alternative?

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The Zapatista march creates then a new relationship of forces, but also a vacuum, in stressing the absence of an independent left capable both of supporting the struggle of the Zapatistas and proposing a left alternative to a profoundly neoliberal government. In the absence of the emergence of such an actor, which can no longer be the PRD of Cardenas, there is even the possibility that the PRI will be reborn from the ashes, a little like the former Communist parties in some eastern European countries.

All these questions are posed or will be posed, but in a framework profoundly modified by the superb initiative of the Zapatistas.