

From Armed Struggle to Symbolic Politics: Left-Populist Repertoire in the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional

Lalu Ary Kurniawan Hardi ^{1,2*}, Fitri Jayitri Iti Saibah ², Aveny Raisa Maarif ², Ahmad Idris Al-Hammad ², Ryanta Septario Yudhananta ²

¹ Northern Illinois University, United States

² Universitas Airlangga, Indonesia

Abstract

The Zapatista movement (EZLN) is a radical leftist populist movement that frames the struggle of poor peasants and indigenous communities in Chiapas against state domination and neoliberal economic forces as a fight between "the people" and elites. Rejecting hierarchical power, the Zapatistas advocate for collective leadership, direct democracy, and self-government as alternatives to elitist structures. Their movement champions social justice, land rights, cultural identity, and local sovereignty as the core of their political struggle. This article examines how the EZLN mobilizes its constituents through the framework of Political Process Theory (PPT) and explores its relevance to populist discourse. The Zapatista movement faced intense repression, militarisation, and state-led stigmatisation that portrayed them as violent, limiting their growth and support. Neoliberal policies like NAFTA worsened local poverty and harmed indigenous communities, fuelling the Zapatistas' resistance against economic and social injustice. In response, they built grassroots support through community engagement and gained solidarity from civil society. International networks of NGOs, activists, and human rights groups amplified their cause, pressuring the Mexican government to halt repression and revise harmful policies.

Keywords: Left-Populism, EZLN, Social Movement, Political Process Theory

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* Corresponding author email: Z2064610@students.niu.edu

Introduction

The Zapatista movement, known as the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), is a radical leftist populist movement in which the rhetoric of 'people vs elites' is embodied in the context of the struggle of ordinary people against the domination of the state and neoliberal economic forces. As a leftist populist movement, the Zapatistas positioned "the people", in this case poor peasants and indigenous communities in Chiapas as collective subjects oppressed by economic elites, political oligarchs, and a marginalising global system. The uprising on 1 January 1994, which marked the entry into force of NAFTA, marked a decisive rejection of neoliberal globalisation, which was seen as exacerbating social inequality and creating major problems that hindered the recognition of indigenous peoples' traditional rights. As a form of left populism, the movement rejects hierarchical power structures and espouses a narrative of power redistribution and political independence through the establishment of community-based self-government. However, what is different about the Zapatistas is their emphasis on collective leadership and direct democracy as a way of avoiding the replication of elitist power. In this way, the Zapatistas, as a leftist populist social movement, not only challenge national and international elites, but also offer an alternative vision from below, which champions social justice, land rights, cultural identity, and local sovereignty as the core of collective political struggle.

Populism is a political approach that emphasises the moral dichotomy between "pure people" and "corrupt elites". Theorists provide various definitions of populism. Cas

Mudde (2017) describes populism as a thin-centred ideology, which does not stand alone, but is also attached to other ideologies such as nationalism or socialism. He emphasises that populism consists of three main elements in which the people as a moral entity, the elite as the enemy, and the general will as the only principle of political legitimacy. Meanwhile, Ernesto Laclau sees populism as a logic of political articulation, which is a way of uniting various social demands in a collective discourse that opposes the existing power. Laclau sees populism not as a fixed ideology, but as a method of political mobilisation. Jan-Warner Müller (2016) explains that populism tends to be anti-pluralistic, because populists claim that only they legitimately represent the voice of the people, so it tends to weaken liberal democracy and its institutions.

Left populism is rooted in progressive ideologies that focus on economic inequality and the rejection of neoliberalism (Mouffe, 2018). The main enemies of the populist left are economic elites, large corporations and the global capitalist system. They demand redistribution of wealth and a greater role for the state in ensuring social welfare. Examples of left populist figures are Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and the Podemos movement in Spain.

Furthermore, understanding this strategic shift also required us to look at the highly militarized and repressive environment in Chiapas. Therefore, non-violent resistance made the most strategic sense. In fact, the core of the EZLN's struggle is non-violent. Their primary mobilizing structures now rely on weaponizing public narratives, utilizing political satire, and materializing their autonomy through the

establishment of self-governing Caracoles (Khasnabish, 2010). Through these non-violent methods, EZLN can maintain its resistance and build independence without engaging in continuous warfare.

It is also necessary to redefine the boundaries of violence and non-violence related to EZLN's contention. Violence should not only be understood as physical armed conflict. Also, EZLN is not strictly pacifist movement. Their initial 1994 uprising actively employed an armed insurrection. As demonstrated in civil resistance studies, non-violent campaigns are significantly more likely to generate better political outcomes against military superior regimes (Kalin et al., 2022). By shifting to symbolic politics, the EZLN make themselves gain international civil society support and leverage political opportunities rather than relying on brute force to survive (Bose & Nott, 2025). However, within social movement theory, this brief militaristic phase is best understood through the dynamics of the Radical Flank Effect (RFE). As Fortier (2025) explains, while violent radical flanks can disrupt the status quo, they also risk alienating broader public support and triggering indiscriminate state repression. To mitigate these reputational costs and maintain legitimacy, movements must strategically distance themselves from continuous violence.

This paper examines the transformation of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) from an armed insurgency into a movement centered on symbolic politics and non-violent resistance, emphasizing the strategic evolution of its left-populist repertoire through the framework of Political Process Theory (PPT). Although discussions

surrounding the EZLN generally highlight its anti-neoliberal stance, indigenous resistance, and autonomous governance, this study focuses on how broader political opportunities, organizational restructuring, and collective framing processes have influenced the shift in its methods of struggle. By situating the EZLN within the PPT framework, this analysis underscores how the movement has adapted to an ever-changing domestic and global political environment in shifting from direct military confrontation to symbolic resistance through discourse, community-based governance, and transnational solidarity. Consequently, this perspective allows for a deeper understanding of how left-populism movements can maintain their political relevance by realigning their strategies in response to structural issues, thereby illustrating a lasting capacity for anti-elite mobilization beyond conventional armed resistance.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to examine the relationship between populism and contemporary social movements through the case of the EZLN. Political Process Theory (PPT), developed by McAdam, is used as the primary analytical framework to examine the factors contributing to the movement's emergence, challenges, and sustainability. In addition, populism is also mentioned to understand how the EZLN mobilized as a left-populist movement. Data are collected through purposive sampling from multiple relevant sources, including academic literature, primary communiqués, documentaries, digital archives, and credible online materials (documents, videos, posts,

websites, etc.) that capture the historical emergence, escalation, and institutional transformation of the movement. The data are then systematically reviewed and organized into thematic categories (Cresswell, 2023). The analysis is conducted in three stages: first, gathering and organizing historical-contextual data; second, interpreting the interaction of these elements over time to explain the EZLN's development, sustainability, and strategic transformation. And last, analyzing strategically according to the core components of PPT, including political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing processes. Through this systematic and structured approach, Political Process Theory is not merely used as descriptive reference but actively operationalized as an analytical framework, enabling a more rigorous and coherent explanation of the movement's development as a left-populist movement.

Results and Discussion

Agrarian inequality in Mexico emerged from a long historical process rooted in Spanish colonialism since the 16th century, which systematically dispossessed indigenous peoples of their communal lands and transformed them into *encomiendas* and *haciendas* controlled by colonial and later capitalist elites. Although after the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), the state promised land reform using Article 27 of the 1917 constitution through the *ejido* system, which is communal land managed together, this redistribution largely failed to dismantle structural inequality (Alix-Garcia, 2013). Rather than ensuring genuine indigenous autonomy, land access in the *ejido* system was reduced to a political asset exploited and prioritized solely

for loyal actors within the corporatist system established by the PRI regime through mass organizations the peasant and labour unions (CNC) (Torres-Mazuera, 2015). Subsequent programs, such as PROCEDE (1992), also further accelerated land fragmentation and privatization, turning the legal status of the *ejido* into an instrument of land subordination designed to strengthen local elite dominance (Wijayanti, 2014).

These long-standing agrarian injustices were significantly intensified during the neoliberal restructuring of the 1980s-1990s under President Carlos Salinas, whose reforms eliminated agrarian subsidies, dismantled rural support institutions, amended Article 27, and opened indigenous lands to privatization in preparation for NAFTA. For indigenous communities in Chiapas, NAFTA was symbolized as a "death sentence" as it represented the culmination of state abandonment and neoliberal exclusion, which threatened their land, livelihoods, and sovereignty while exposing them to unequal global market competition (Mora, 2007; Davis & Eakin, 2013). At the same time, political repression, including the fraudulent 1988 election and the broader legacy of state violence dating back to the Tlatelolco massacre, further eroded public trust in the Mexican state and created fertile conditions for insurgent mobilization (Larmer, 1988). However, long before this tragedy, young intellectuals and activists had already developed profound skepticism toward the state, particularly following the military's violent repression against students engaged in peaceful demonstrations at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas. Within this context, the accumulated

traumatic experiences of indigenous marginalization by the state, manifested through violence and land dispossession, sparked the formation of activist networks that began building an underground organization that would later become the foundation of EZLN.

Basis of The EZLN Movement

Consequently, the Zapatistas categorically refuse integration into the formal nation-state structure, viewing it as a system that is closely connected to colonialism and capitalism that is fundamentally incapable of providing inclusive democratic mechanisms (Khasnabish, 2010). Their rejection extends deeply into anti-capitalism, that is not merely a free-market regime, but as a totalizing way of life that is economically oppressive and socially, ecologically, and spiritually destructive, shaping all aspects of existence, including material production and social relations (Saenz, 2023)

As a direct response to this neoliberal marginalization, the EZLN operationalizes its resistance through the practical implementation of indigenous autonomy and interdependence. This Zapatista praxis redefines autonomy not as isolation, but as the egalitarian management of power and social resilience (Vergara-Camus, 2014). Institutionalized through Caracoles rooted in Mayan cosmology (Saenz, 2023), the Juntas de Buen Gobierno (JBG) function as the primary administrative bodies, autonomously managing education, healthcare, and justice systems outside the state apparatus. Operating through a federative-horizontal structure described as functional inter-communality (Shirzad, 2021), this collaborative model sustainably applies indigenous cosmological

wisdom, occasionally forcing the formal state government into negotiations regarding local infrastructure and proving how political systems can successfully depart from Western models (Stahler-Sholk, 2007; Saenz, 2023).

Maintaining this autonomous structure requires the absolute rejection of “power over,” understood as dominative, hierarchical, and exclusionary authority. Instead, the EZLN implements a collaborative social order grounded in an ethic of service without aiming to seize state power itself, which is identified as “anti-vanguardist”. This anti-vanguardist stance is embodied by Subcomandante Marcos, who rejects the title of a centralized leader, nor does he claim to represent the masses (Khasnabish, 2010). Beyond institutional frameworks, this rejection permeates social and relational practices, such as the introduction of *promotores de educación* and the *Ley Revolucionaria de las Mujeres*, which grant women political access without reproducing structural male domination, thereby continuously nourishing a collective life built on participatory relations, independence, and mutual responsibility (Saenz, 2023).

To operationalize this non-hierarchical vision, the principle of *Mandar Obedeciendo* (governing by obeying) serves as the institutional backbone of Zapatista participatory democracy, ensuring leadership relies entirely on the collective will rather than the imbalanced representation typical of liberal democracies. Zapatista delegates operate under a fully revocable *mandato imperativo* with no political specialization, dismantling hierarchies through strict rotational cycles across three integrated levels: the community, MAREZ, and the regional Caracoles (Mora, 2017). This explicit rejection of

state legitimacy also extends to their conception of human rights through independent institutions like the Red de Defensores Comunitarios de Derechos Humanos (RDDH). By doing so, the EZLN counters the liberal paradigm of rights as benevolent state grants, asserting instead that rights are a form of collective praxis that must be actively reproduced and defended from below (Speed, 2008).

Moments of Resistance: The January 1994 Uprising and the Declaration of Lacandon Jungle

On 1 January 1994, coinciding with the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the EZLN declared war on the Mexican federal government as a direct rejection of neoliberal economic restructuring, which it viewed as a profound “death sentence” to the survival, autonomy, and rights of indigenous communities in Chiapas (Santos Cid, 2024). Through the first declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, via small newspaper *El Despertador Mexicano*, the EZLN articulated eleven core demands representing the basic needs and values of the republic, such as work, land, shelter, food, health, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice, and peace (Radio Zapatista, n.d.). The EZLN framed its rebellion not merely as an armed insurgency, but as a broader political struggle against centuries of structural inequality, state neglect, and marginalization (Washbrook, 2007).

In its initial uprising, the EZLN launched coordinated occupations across seven strategic municipalities in the southern part of Chiapas, mobilizing predominantly indigenous Mayan communities to challenge federal authority through direct military and symbolic action. However, the Mexican government responded

with military offensives, low-intensity warfare, and paramilitary repression aimed not only at insurgents but also at dismantling the civilian social structures that sustained resistance (Sergi, 2009; Khasnabish, 2010). Although a ceasefire was declared after twelve days due to mounting public pressure, state violence and paramilitary aggression persisted, particularly affecting both indigenous and EZLN forces, especially women, who were the most vulnerable group in the dynamics of the armed conflict (Ross, 2018). Under such repressive conditions, it is difficult to ascertain the number of victims killed, injured, and missing during the uprising.

The uprising in early January 1994 or the first declaration from the Lacandon Jungle, marked a significant milestone in a series of subsequent declarations that also accompanied the dynamics of the Zapatistas’ struggle to advance their demands. During this process, the EZLN issued five additional declarations reflecting the movement’s political response and strategies. The following is a description of each of these declarations, traced through an analysis presented by Alex Khasnabish (2010) in his work on the political trajectory and transformation of the Zapatista movement from its inception to becoming part of the global resistance network:

At the first declaration, the EZLN began to shift the focus of its struggle from armed insurrection to expanding its political influence through civil society (Gadea, 2013). In this regard, the EZLN no longer positioned itself as an electoral actor, but rather as a driving force for substantive democratic transformation through collective participation to challenge the dominance of the PRI regime. This step was

subsequently institutionalized in the National Democratic Convention (CND) as a forum for articulating an alternative political agenda. Unfortunately, the failure of the opposition (PRD) under Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in the 1994 elections indirectly limited the effectiveness of this mobilization strategy in driving institutionalized change.

In response to the failure of previous mobilizations, in this declaration the EZLN expanded its agenda toward structural transformation through the establishment of a transitional government, a new constitution, and the dismantling of the state-party system. Through the National Liberation Movement (MLN), the EZLN proposed steps to narrow the scope of “civil society” to more strategic social groups, as it (Womack in Khasnabish, 2010) assessed that this narrowing was a step toward addressing the slow pace of mobilization by (civil society) in generating effective political pressure in previous declarations. Although ultimately, the unstoppable fragmentation following the 1994 National Democratic Convention (CND), followed by the failure to formulate the MLN, concretely underscored the continuing limitations in building a solid and sustainable consolidation.

This declaration marked an escalation of state repression through the mobilization of more than 25,000 troops under Ernesto Zedillo; rather than weakening the EZLN, this move had the opposite effect, further strengthening the EZLN’s legitimacy both domestically and internationally. The San Andrés negotiations, which addressed five key issues, managed to reach an agreement on only one of them, resulting in a partial decision that simultaneously confirmed the continued

existence of limitations within the state framework, leading to deep disappointment among indigenous communities (Ross, 2019). Amid ongoing repression, through the National Indigenous Congress, the EZLN continues to consolidate its political base to expand its global solidarity networks as a strategy for an alternative struggle.

The fifth declaration emerged in response to the failure of the San Andrés, accompanied by an escalation of violence that culminated in the Acteal massacre (1997), which involved paramilitaries and suggested state complicity. This event deepened the government’s legitimacy crisis while simultaneously strengthening the EZLN’s moral standing. The commitment to the struggle was reaffirmed in this declaration through a national forum held in San Cristóbal de las Casas, resulting in key agendas that address strategic issues, including the rights of indigenous peoples, peaceful social change, democratization process, judicial reform, and the media (Gilbreth & Otero, 2001).

As the culmination of a long process, this declaration marked the EZLN’s strategic repositioning under the Vicente Fox regime. Faced with legislative changes that disregarded indigenous autonomy, the EZLN took the step of completely suspending dialogue with the state and prioritized the establishment of Caracoles and Juntas de Buen Gobierno as centers of Zapatista political, cultural, and autonomous governance (Gambardella, 2025; Kök, 2016). This declaration reaffirms a non-violent, anti-capitalist, and anti-neoliberal orientation, while expanding the base of the struggle to a national coalition of oppressed groups and transnational solidarity.

Analysis and Discussion

The historical development of the EZLN reflects a complex process in which longstanding agrarian inequality, neoliberal restructuring, indigenous marginalization, and state repression collectively shaped the foundations of one

of the most significant resistance movements in contemporary Latin America (Azhima, 2011). Emerging from centuries of structural dispossession and intensifying under pressure of NAFTA and political exclusion, the EZLN's uprising in January 1994 represented not only a direct confrontation with the Mexican state but also the beginning of a broader political project rooted in indigenous autonomy, anti-neoliberalism, and social justice. Over time, the movement evolved beyond conventional armed insurgency, developing new strategies through civil society engagement, symbolic politics, autonomous governance, and global solidarity network. This transformation illustrates that the Zapatista struggle cannot be understood solely through its initial rebellion, but rather through its broader capacity to adapt organizationally and politically in response to changing conditions. Therefore, examining both the structural mechanisms that enabled the movement's rise and the strategic evolution of its instruments and repertoires of action provides a more comprehensive understanding of how the EZLN sustained its political relevance while redefining resistance beyond militarized struggle.

Analysing the EZLN in Political Process Theory (PPT)



Developed in the 1970s through analyses of civil rights, student activism, and feminism movements, PPT emphasizes that movements arise and endure when political systems become vulnerable or delegitimized, when actors possess sufficient organizational capacity and networks to mobilize collective action, and when grievances are effectively framed into resonant political narratives (Crossman, 2025). The emergence and development of the EZLN cannot be understood solely as a reaction to structural inequality or social grievances, but rather as the result of a strategic interaction between deep-rooted discontent and evolving political opportunities. Through the lens of Political Process Theory (PPT), the Zapatistas movement is best understood as a social movement shaped by the convergence of three central elements: political opportunities whether the political conditions of a country are closed, open, weak, strong, etc; mobilization structures refers to formal and informal organisational structures that include several aspects, namely recognised leadership, incentives, networks and communication; and framing processes by which movement actors construct narratives or discourses, interpret reality, and create collective identities to attract support and build their legitimacy (McAdam et al., 2004). In addition to employing the three concepts outlined above, this analysis also utilized a tentative, dynamic, and interactive framework as presented in the book *Dynamics of Contention* to examine the origins of controversial politics and provide comprehensive understanding, as illustrated in the figure above.

To provide a more thorough understanding of the Zapatista movement, in addition to referring to the previous two main works, this analysis also draws on Alex Khasnabish's *Zapatistas: Rebellion from the Grassroots to the Global*, as well as a number of other references to produce a sharper study. The first step in analysing this movement through the framework discussed earlier, using the three main concepts from Political Process Theory, is to identify who the challengers and members are. In this case, the challengers or actors demanding changes in social, political and economic aspects consist of EZLN members, Chiapas indigenous communities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), progressive Catholic churches, as well as a number of civic associations from both national and international levels. Meanwhile, members or parties that seek to maintain the existing order and hinder this movement include the Mexican government, the federal military, and economic elites.

The broader process of political change and opportunity, within which these socio-political conditions emerged, was rooted in longstanding colonial land dispossession, the failures of agrarian reform, neoliberal restructuring, and declining state legitimacy. The 1982 economic crisis, IMF-backed reforms, privatization, and the erosion of PRI corporatism significantly weakened the Mexican state's legitimacy, while electoral fraud in 1988 further undermined public trust. These crises created structural openings that indigenous communities could exploit politically. The NAFTA agreement on 1 January 1994 represented the culmination of these pressures by directly threatening indigenous land rights and livelihoods, serving

as the immediate catalyst for open rebellion (Khasnabish, 2010). In this sense, the EZLN's uprising was strategically timed to exploit a vulnerable political movement.

The January 1994 uprising represented the strategic convergence of these opportunities, structures, and framing mechanisms into coordinated collective action. Triggered by NAFTA's implementation, the EZLN mobilized indigenous communities across multiple municipalities in Chiapas, combining military operations with symbolic declarations to challenge both state authority and neoliberal globalization. Although the Mexican military and police quickly responded with force, the uprising succeeded in disrupting political normalcy and drawing national and international attention to indigenous struggles. The First Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle played a critical role in transforming this armed confrontation into a politically resonant movement by articulating a broader vision of social transformation.

The EZLN's effectiveness also depended on its sophisticated framing processes. Rather than presenting itself solely as an armed insurgency, the movement framed its struggle as a broader moral and political confrontation whose struggle extends to oppressed people in Mexico and globally, against neoliberalism, state oppression, and global capitalism. Meanwhile, in the framing or threat, the government framed the EZLN as a threat by spreading the narratives of evil armed rebels who want to divide the country. Even so, the EZLN were not beaten back and continued to carry out their actions by mobilising the movement using a variety of repertoires. In addition, the horizontal, participatory and deeply rooted organisational

structure of the local community also made them resilient in the face of state pressure and able to mobilise broad support.

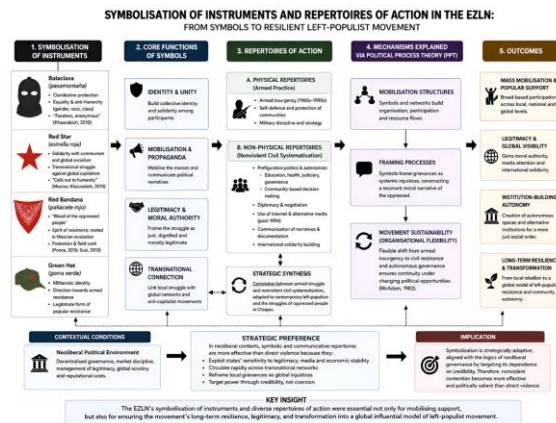
Furthermore, their strategy of well-structured and organized mobilization has also been crucial in sustaining the movement's ability. The EZLN has strong networking and communication by building networks with indigenous communities, forging alliances with urban left activists, and building innovative communicative strategies (Nugraha, 2023). Additionally, the innovative use of digital communication and alternative media enabled the EZLN to connect local struggles in Chiapas with global solidarity from activists, academics, students, and journalists (Aryani, 2015). Subcomandante Marcos served as an influential symbolic spokesperson, articulating the movement's political vision while preserving its collective leadership ethos. Thus, the incentives for participation in the movement are clearly identifiable. The struggle for social justice, equality, and involvement in the movement is not just a political choice, but an urgent need to defend the land, dignity and future of the community (Adnan, 2020). They are not motivated by money, but by a strong sense of justice and collective identity. These interconnected structures provided the organizational resilience necessary for both insurgency and long-term survival.

State repression following the uprising significantly shaped the movement's subsequent evolution. The response and level of social control given by the Mexican government as an effort to reduce this movement, ranging from repressive policies such as limited military operations, limiting space for movement, to political negotiation efforts (Nugraha, 2023).

The level of social control exercised by the Mexican government is not constant, but changes according to national and international political dynamics, as well as perceived threats to regime stability. However, these crackdowns trigger greater solidarity and support, both domestically and internationally, thereby reinforcing the movement's legitimacy rather than eliminating it. This contentious interaction between challengers and members illustrates a central principle of PPT: social movements evolve through continuous adaptation to changing political constraints. There is a constantly changing relationship between organisational power, mobilisation, state control and public response that shapes the direction of the struggle (McAdam et al., 2004). In response, the EZLN gradually recalibrated its strategies, shifting from direct armed confrontation toward symbolic politics, autonomous governance, and non-violent resistance.

Symbolisation of Instruments and Repertoires of Action

In general, the symbolisations and repertoires they employed suggest a synthesised correlation between strategies of armed struggle and techniques of non-violent civil systematisation, relevant to the distinctive features of contemporary left populism itself. One of its most prominent implications is the use of symbolism and political narratives as a medium to mobilise the masses. Subcomandante Marcos emerges as a central symbolic figure, functioning not only as a spokesperson but a crucial mobilizer who connects decolonial narratives, Marxist thought, and critiques of global capitalism.



More deeply, the symbolisation of instruments within the EZLN became an important component in building a collective identity and political tactics that contemplated its existence as a left social movement rooted in the struggles of oppressed people in Chiapas. One of the most attention-grabbing symbols is the use of the *pasamontaña* or *balaclava* (ski mask). Not only does it serve as a protective (clandestine) identity, it also functions as a force of propaganda, a resistance to authoritarianism while also expressing the value of principles of equality including the rejection of hierarchies based on gender, race, or social status (Cortecero et al., 2019; Netpol.Org, 2015). Khasnabish (2010) in his book explains, "...by covering their faces, Zapatistas become faceless, anonymous, and unidentified...", showing the international community that they represent the most marginalized and oppressed sectors, whose voices are often rendered invisible. In addition, the red star (*estrella roja*) emphasises the EZLN's solidarity with communism and global socialism. The use of this symbol also articulates the EZLN's participation in the transnational struggle against global capitalism, as asserted by Marcos in one of his speeches "...the red star that calls out to humanity and the

world to be heard, seen, and named." (Khasnabish, 2010:193).

In addition, symbolisation in the EZLN also includes a red bandana (*paliacate rojo*) and a green hat. The red bandana in this case is interpreted as "the blood of the oppressed people" and becomes a symbol of resistance that refers to the spirit of struggle in the context of the Mexican revolution. Historically, this symbol has existed in rural Mexico and is closely related to protection against the cold of the Mayan highlands, security functions in hiding or work activities in the field, which in the process is transformed as a symbol of modernity of rebellion in the EZLN (Ponce, 2016; Susi, 2010). The green hat in this case is more closely related to the militaristic role, which indirectly emphasises the direction of the movement towards armed resistance as an implication of a legitimate form of popular resistance. In short, the symbolisation of all the above instruments illustrates a strong form of resistance, which not only creates visualisation in the resistance movement but also strengthens the mass movement and communication between participants both at the regional and international levels. Furthermore, this repertoire is applied as part of a tactic of resistance and self-protection with the long-term goal of realising a more inclusive social system transformation based on distributive justice and community autonomy.

In the context of social movements, the EZLN built a foundation of legitimacy through non-physical (diplomacy/negotiation) and physical (armed practice) acts of struggle, long before its official emergence in the 1960s-1980s and early 1990s. This repertoire has continued to evolve in line with the massive response to the

increasingly sidelined grievances of the indigenous peoples of Chiapas. The “prefigurative politics” scheme is one of the repertoires they initiated and implemented. Autonomously, they build their own educational facilities, judiciary, health services, and even their own government according to what they are able to reflect their goals, including creating a more egalitarian and inclusive life order for all social groups (Gottesdiener, 2014; Rebri, 2020). The use of internet media post-1994 has also become a vital medium for conveying information and narratives of resistance to the global community, this is inseparable from the widespread reporting by thousands of journalists to the support of world activists who criticised the actions of the Mexican federal government, indirectly encouraging them to voice similar issues by garnering global support, creating solidarity between countries, and disrupting government authority through criticism and condemnation of various stakeholders at the local and international levels (IzzyFilm, 2021; Mohammad, 2015).

Through the lens of Political Process Theory (PPT), the EZLN’s symbolisation of instruments and evolving repertoires of action can be understood as a strategic mechanism that strengthened the main three aspects which are mobilization structures, framing processes, and movement sustainability within changing political opportunities. The use of symbols such as the balaclava, red star, red bandana, and military visual identity functioned as powerful political tools that constructed a resonant moral narrative of the oppressed people, thereby increasing the movement’s legitimacy. Furthermore, the EZLN’s transition from armed insurgency toward non-violent civil resistance

through institutionalization in its everyday governance demonstrated what McAdam’s refers as organizational flexibility which enabled the movement to preserve its mobilizing capacity even when direct political opportunities narrowed under military pressure.

The EZLN’s repertoire of actions demonstrates a combination of symbolic struggle with practical autonomous governance, making it both oppositional and institution-building. This demonstrates that the EZLN’s left-populist character lies not solely in anti-elite rhetoric, but in its capacity to institutionalize resistance through participatory autonomy and community governance. Thus, PPT also implies the symbolisation of instruments and diverse repertoires of action were essential not only for mobilizing support, but also for ensuring the movement’s long term resilience, legitimacy, and transformation into a global influential model of left-populist movement.

This strategic preference also reflects the structural logic of contention within a neoliberal political environment, where power increasingly operates through decentralised governance, market discipline, and the management of legitimacy rather than overt coercion. In such contexts, traditional armed confrontation becomes less effective, as states are more sensitive to reputational costs, global scrutiny, and disruptions to economic stability than to isolated acts of violence. Symbolic and communicative repertoires, by contrast, are better suited to exploit these vulnerabilities: they circulate rapidly across transnational networks, attract media attention, and reframe local grievances as systemic injustices tied to global capitalism.

This enables movements like the EZLN to shift the terrain of struggle from military confrontation to legitimacy contestation, where visibility, narrative control, and moral authority become central. Consequently, symbolisation is not merely expressive but strategically adaptive, it aligns with the logics of neoliberal governance by targeting its dependence on credibility, thereby making non-violent contention a more effective and politically salient repertoire than direct violence.

Conclusion

The Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) represents a form of sustained resistance against state hegemony and neoliberal restructuring rooted in the marginalization of indigenous communities in the Chiapas region of Mexico. Despite facing state repression, paramilitary violence, and stigmatization, this movement demonstrates a strong capacity for adaptation. Neoliberal policies through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) have deepened structural inequalities and form the basis of this movement's critique. Through non-violent strategies, grassroots participation, and alternative communication, the EZLN has garnered broad support both domestically and internationally. This support not only limited state repression but also indirectly facilitated the institutionalization of autonomy as a concrete, operational step toward political transformation.

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