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The Zapatista Good Government

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Comandanta Esther
As indigenous women, we fight against the triple oppression that we face: as women, as indigenous women, and as poor women. As women we are ignored, humiliated, and disregarded. As indigenous women, we are discriminated against because of our clothing, skin color, language, and culture. As poor women, we have no right to health and education and we have been forgotten. That's why we decided to organize and fight together to get out of this situation. We do not care about persecution, prison, abduction, or even death if it is necessary. Regardless of all of those things, we are here and we will continue to fight. We will not bow in resignation nor will we sell out for the pittance that the bad government doles out. And, even less so, do we want to take over some government office.

Coni Suarez Aguilar (Women's and human rights activist)
One of the women's most important demands, which was not

being taken into account in the Zapatista region, was to address violence against women. Take, for example, the policies of the EZLN (Zapatista National Liberation Army) that forbid the consumption, sale, and import of alcohol in the communities. That answered one of the women's demands: they accepted and introduced it as law and now it is regulated in the communities. No one can sell, buy, or consume alcohol there. That was the policy, or the strategy of the EZLN, to limit violence against women. It actually did curb violence to a certain degree, but it never got rid of it because the basic problem was not taken into account, which involves recognizing women as people, as people with rights, and no longer seeing them as objects belonging to men.

Comandanta Esther
As women, we must continue to fight to defend our rights, because for more than five hundred years, the bad governments and those in power have denied us the rights that we are entitled to as people. They have treated us like objects and forced our fathers and grandfathers to do the same. That's why today, some of our fathers, brothers, and husbands claim that we are useless and that we are only good for taking care of the house and the children, that we're weak and that we don't think and can't make decisions. We are all ruled by these harmful ideas – the women in the countryside and in the city – but these ideas are not right. We women can organize, take over offices, and make decisions the same as men can. That's why we say we have to continue to fight together to defend the rights that we deserve as women and as humans.

Coni Suarez Aguilar
Behind that is also the problem of sometimes not knowing how to bring up these topics for discussion in a way that they are not seen

as confrontational. When we begin to work on women's rights, the idea often arises that families will break apart, the communities, too, and finally the political organization. That's why women demanding their rights are considered a threat to the organization. Possibly a self-critical perspective is lacking; yet it does exist up to a certain point. They have recognized that they don't have the right strategies or sufficient ones to address this problem. But what is missing begins with the necessity of opening up the doors so that women are able to communicate with one another and present their problems in their own language. Not only those who already hold positions of leadership, not only the *comandantas*, who can express their demands quite clearly, but also the women who are the daily base of support, who do not hold any offices, who are not trained as militias, and are not rebels: Those women who currently have no access to education and health, who have nothing to bolster their self-esteem, to empower themselves. Those who have a political identity as Zapatistas, who take that on, defend it and live it, but whose specific situation and demands are not yet recognized.

Good Government Junta, La Garrucha
As *compañeras*, we have just as much right to work here in the administration of the good government. In our struggle, we have seen through everything together with the men, women, and children. We also have a certain influence in our numbers, and so, in the communities, we banned the alcohol that the bad government gave us. We don't want it. As Zapatistas we want to move a step ahead, together with all of the villages and all of the people who have come from other communities, from other states and other nations. We want there to be peace among everyone.

Comandanta Esther
We thank the struggle that has given us this space to participate

and to unite our powers so that we can join together in our fight, men and women. Because without the men, or without the women, the struggle wouldn't make headway. That's why everyone's participation is very important, regardless of ethnic background or color. Finally, we want to tell you all that we should unite our powers to achieve democracy, freedom, and justice for all.

Comandante Tacho
Compañeras and c*ompañeros*, now, after nearly eleven years of battle against being forgotten, against marginalization, and against annihilation, we would like to tell you: we are here. We haven't given up and sold out. We will never sell out and give up, because we are entirely convinced that our struggle is a just one, for the poor of Mexico and the poor people of the world. We are the laborers who work in the country and in the city and we have the physical possibilities and the knowledge to manufacture and produce everything that our society needs. In light of our people's enormous ability, we are capable of producing wealth to sustain our country. For that reason, we believe that the solution for the great injustice that we suffer is on our side and in our hands, as we have already long recognized that we shouldn't wait for anything good to come from the government.

Coni Suarez Aguilar
Until now, the autonomies have functioned through a territorial structure. There are various levels: the autonomous districts, the communities with their own authorities, and the Good Government Junta that support the administration and coordinate the work at a regional level. A number of themes are discussed at these meetings; they are the places where questions can be asked, ranging from legal issues to education, from the health and inner organization of the communities to celebrations, which usually have a more traditional character. These meetings are not

permanent and they do not last for any uniformly defined period of time. Every region, every *caracole*, comes to its own decision about how long each Good Government Junta stays in office.

You are in the territory of the rebellious Zapatistas
Here, the people give the orders and the government listens – Gateway to the caracole

Good Government Junta, La Garrucha
At the meetings, people are elected to take care of the work and to do a job that really measures up to that for which they were elected. If any of these people make a mistake, then the assembly has to re-elect the authorities. The work is done in rotation and the tasks are carried out collectively.

This Good Government Junta has collectively decided to answer our questions in writing and have them announced by a compañero.

The authorities have to go out and travel to the villages in order to hear the needs of their populations in the communities. They can't just sit in an office, but instead, they have to go out and make inquiries. The people order and the government listens; that's how it works. If someone is voted into the meeting, then they have to go to the communities in order to see what the needs are in every village. To solve problems and to find their own solutions, the one is there for the other, for farmers and indigenous people.

Nothing will be accepted from the bad government because they only make promises that they never keep. That's why we are organizing collectively, to find ways of meeting the needs in the villages: education, health, and water. I believe that water is the most important, as there are communities where we don't have enough of this essential liquid. There are communities without

water and we have to find a form that allows the *compañeros* to survive in resistance.

The success, which we see as being in our autonomy, can be found in that various communities have set up clinics. Corresponding with our development, we can set up health centers and autonomous schools in the villages and the *caracoles*.

The villages make their own decisions on who will provide the education. We take care of ourselves and the task of education. We are in resistance and no longer accept the education offered by the bad government, because the bad government does not allow us to have our own autonomous education. That is why our educators are chosen by the communities, so that they don't forget our language, our culture, and our tradition.

We do not charge a single peso and no one is interested in doing anything for money, like in the bad government. Here, solutions are found but no one goes to jail. Here, solutions are found that demand processes, but without punishing anyone.

After attendance at the meeting, they go back to their communities to continue with the work of farming, because the work in the fields is their livelihood.

The village populace supports the *compañero* when he fulfills his obligations. Work is collective; the one supports the other. There is agreement and equality.

Coni Suarez Aguilar
Characteristic of all *caracoles* is rotation. There were times when the assemblies lasted a week and times when they lasted for a month, depending on the decisions that were made. That allowed a great number of people to participate in the practice of public

administration, in hearing the demands, and in coordinating actions. That is an advantage, but it also has a detrimental side, and that is: let's just say, I come to the Good Government Junta today on a Wednesday and I bring forth a problem that is urgent, profound, painful, and that could possibly put me in a vulnerable position. I go there looking for justice and resolution. The meeting listens to me and gets to know my problem, but if they can't solve it at that moment, then they set up a new appointment so that the case can be heard. If this particular meeting, which has heard me, takes leave of their office on Saturday and I come back on Tuesday, then I have to start again from the beginning. The entire case has to be rolled out again, and the details of the situation have to be explained again so that those who are now in office will have some understanding in order to solve the problem. In terms of practicability, that is somewhat tiresome, it slows things down and bears the risk that the people don't see their issues resolved.

Comandante Moises

I speak in the name of my *compañeros* and *compañeras* for the political-military sector. The *compañeros* and *compañeras*, *comandantes* and *comandantas*, are the political-organizational sector and they lead us on the path of our struggle. We are the soldiers of the population and we have left our fathers and mothers and everyone behind. There are rebellious *compañeros* and *compañeras* who have already left their families forever because they fell in battle while they were fulfilling their duties. And we are here; we who continue to live, striking out against the bad government of exploiters, and we will not stop beating this bad and exploitative government. We rebels are here because of our awareness. The greatest reward that we will receive one day will be to see the freedom of this people that calls itself Mexico. That's why we are a political-military army, because we have taken up

arms to protect and defend the *compañeros* and *compañeras* of the struggling population.

You have already seen that repression comes when we fight, when we speak truthfully and clearly about how we are exploited and humiliated, when we organize in opposition, and when we fight against repression.

Coni Suarez Aguilar
The government's answer to the armed movement was very discordant. At the level of discourse, there was an attitude of creating political programs and a foreign policy attitude that recognized a deficit in terms of the indigenous people. They said that they are welcome into the country's political life, that their demands are just, and that the state has recognized the necessity of listening to them. Nonetheless, parallel to that, a series of attacks were launched; ranging from military and paramilitary invasions through to divisive programs implemented in the communities, programs to certify property ownership, to hand out public services, and a shameless distribution of money. That's why we spoke here of a low-intensity war, an undeclared war, a war that is equipped by state institutions and carried out at their level of possibilities. In the course of transformations that the Zapatista Army is going through, first the armed battle will be abandoned and a path of political work will be embarked upon. Autonomous districts are beginning to form and organizational structures in the communities are strengthening. In light of this change – the EZLN's new form of organizing and negotiating – the government also changed its strategies of attack and unleashed all of its paramilitary groups. Since 1996, there have been a lot of attacks, in particular in the north. Especially in the district of Tila, there have been a series of deaths and abductions.

Comandante Moises

They don't want us to learn new politics or a new way of doing politics. That's why we defend our people who have organized, who wage a political battle. That is precisely what we are now doing with the people who are here and who are not here: we want to fight politically and peacefully. We are not a military army; we need weapons to defend ourselves, to seize freedom, justice, and democracy. Politically, we understand that democracy should be for the entire population of Mexico. We demand that it is put into action, that's why we are organizing. We had to found a people's army for the realization of actual democracy and so that it is really practiced by the people. We are completely different, a different type of army: crazy, but good and healthy for the population. We are ready to go to extremes, and we are prepared to die for the Mexican population if necessary. The way EZLN practices democracy with its people and in its regions is to ask the population about its military initiatives. That's how it was done in 1993: We asked if we should begin our battle, and that's how it was done on various occasions. That's also the way it was with the Sixth Declaration, and the great majority of our population answered, "Yes." It is easy to just give an order but we didn't do that, because that wouldn't be democratic. The people are asked and consulted about whether they are in agreement with the initiative. The avant-garde's task of sounding out the terrain for the other campaigns is done by the rebellious *compañero* Subcomandante Marcos.

Subcomandante Marcos

Laugh *compañeros*! It is good to laugh. It is necessary to laugh, because what we are doing is utterly serious. What we will do is this: Together, we will shake this land from below, stir it up, turn it upside down to finally expose all of the plundering, all of the

contempt, and all of the exploitation. We will shake it up and perhaps we'll discover that it was not on its deathbed, and that it shouldn't be. Then we will spread it out again, without a top and without a bottom, except for its mountains and valleys, its rivers, and lagoons. And we will spread it out again anew, as something new, between the Pacific and the Atlantic, between Rio Bravo and the Suchiaté, and then we have to start to live.

What we build up can't be decided on by tribunes, charisma, by strengths, weaknesses, or eloquence. It should be discussed at a ground level, decided and worked on at the basis. The tribunes are only there to get the message across to as many ears as possible. Their place should be secondary, because it already inherently implies a selection and exclusion. Speakers are to be mistrusted. The other campaigns should therefore name those of us who are imprisoned, who have disappeared and died. When we have done this work, we shouldn't look to the future; or if we do, we'll do it backwards: We look back at our past, at those of us who have died. When we look ahead, then the alibis come up, the realism, "One must be mature, rational; one must think about what might happen; we shouldn't do that or that, be careful."

So, let us live up to the duties and pay the debts that have accumulated and let's fight for them, for those of us who have died and for ourselves. Then, tomorrow will come of its own power and it will undoubtedly be something different. When we look towards the future and forget where we have come from, then the constraints come, the prudence, the rationality, fear, capitulation, and the worst kind of betrayal, which is to betray ourselves. If we don't make an effort to hand down freedom to the next generation, then we will hand them down chains and a load to bear. We must accept that they determine their own fate, for that and nothing else is what it is to be free. The world will then be a bit better and then

others will give it the form and direction, pace, speed, and fate; and whatever is missing will always be missing.

The EZLN puts its life into the other campaigns and the *Sixth Declaration of the Lacandonian Jungle*; it places its survival as an organization, its moral authority, the modest advances that have been achieved, in brief, everything that we have in their hands. In exchange for this, we demand: Everything for everyone, nothing for us. People should determine for themselves how much they can bring into this effort and what they are prepared to do. Accordingly, everyone should carry out their responsibilities and consider what they expect in exchange. The idea is that our place and path, pace and fate, and mainly the diverse feet and paths they choose in this other campaign are defended by the nobodies that we are. In all of this, let's leave room for imagination, *compañeros* and *compañeras*, for what can happen is certainly not at all the same as what we expect. Let's hope that it will be better and hope that it is not burdened by the kind of load that we could hand down: And, let it also be free of ourselves.

The comandantes and comandantas were recorded by Roberto Chan Kin Ortega and Rogelio Rodriguez Luna at the meetings for the Sixth Declaration on 16 September 2005 in La Garrucha.

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