

Self-Determination: A Perspective from Abya Yala

Written by Emilio del Valle Escalante

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For those unfamiliar with the term Abya Yala, the concept emerged toward the end of the 1970s in *Dulenega*, or what, for others, is today San Blas, Panama, a Kuna Tule territory.[1] Abya Yala in the Kuna language means “land in its full maturity.” The Kuna believe that there are four cycles of life that have developed the planet earth: Kualagun Yala, Tagargun Yala, Tingua Yala, and Abia or Abya Yala. Today, we are living in the last cycle of life. After the Kuna won a lawsuit to stop the construction of a shopping mall in Dulenega, they told a group of reporters that they employed the term Abya Yala to refer to the American continent in its totality. After listening to this story, Takir Mamani, the Bolivian Aymara leader, and Tupaj Katari, one of the founders of the indigenous rights movement in Bolivia, suggested that indigenous peoples and indigenous organizations use the term Abya Yala in their official declarations to refer to the American continent. He argues that recognizing and “placing foreign names on our villages, our cities, and our continents is equivalent to subjecting our identities to the will of our invaders and their heirs” (Arias et al. 2012: 7, my translation). Therefore, renaming the continent would be the first step toward epistemic decolonization and the establishment of indigenous peoples’ autonomy and self-determination. Since the 1980s, many indigenous activists, writers, and organizations have embraced Mamani’s suggestion, and Abya Yala has become a way not only to refer to the continent, but also a differentiated indigenous locus of cultural and political expression (Muyolema 2001: 329).

The struggles of the Kuna epitomize the struggles of Indigenous rights movements on the continent to defend and maintain their territories and freely determine their own economic, social, and cultural development. Indeed, these movements have invoked “the concept of self-determination in formulating demands against actual or perceived oppression of the status quo,” and the necessity of establishing themselves as distinct sovereign peoples, with historical rights on their lands (Anaya 1993: 131). These struggles to dignify Indigenous identities and territories have been fought historically on many fronts. They include armed struggles, non-violent activism, accepting government jobs to gain degrees of self-government, or electoral politics in pursuit of making change from above. In this article, I explore the question of self-determination in Abya Yala by focusing on the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in Chiapas, Mexico, and the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) in Bolivia. These two movements are perhaps the most referenced within discussions of indigenous self-determination, sovereignty, and autonomy in the south of Abya Yala. In their approaches to indigenous rights to land and resources, both the EZLN and MAS allow us to critically explore what is at stake in our efforts to overcome (neo)colonialism.

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The Zapatistas and the Politics of *mandar obedeciendo*

The EZLN is a Maya social movement that emerged in January 1994 as a response to the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the governments of Mexico, the United States, and Canada. During the initial revolt, the Zapatistas wore ski masks to protect the identity of its members against institutional repression, and to express a non-hierarchical, more egalitarian political and organizational structure. Today, the ski mask symbolizes their historical marginalization and their struggle to overcome it. Their name, Zapatistas, comes from the Nahuatl peasant leader Emiliano Zapata (1879-1911), one of the leading figures of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 that overthrew the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz.[2] The EZLN began as an armed movement declaring war against the Mexican nation-state, but later turned into a social movement that struggles to promote basic human rights and a level of political and cultural autonomy within Mexico. Since developing into a social movement, they have established that they do not want to become a democratic political party, since this would perpetuate a political system that, by gaining power, distances itself from the needs of the people, especially those at the margins. They have, therefore, maintained independence from political parties and the state, promoting instead a mandate of *mandar obedeciendo* (command by obeying), attempting to transform the political system into one that raises the consciousness of civil society to address the needs and demands of the historically marginalized within modern societies. They have developed a discourse that addresses the major critical problems that affect not only indigenous peoples, but all those who suffer repression, poverty, discrimination, and political and economic marginalization. This is exemplified by Subcomandante Marcos, one of the spokespersons of the movement, when he explains the symbolism of his own political subjectivity as a masked dissident:

Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, Asian in Europe, Chicano in San Isidro, anarchist in Spain, Palestinian in Israel, Indigenous in the streets of San Cristóbal... Jew in Germany... feminist in political parties, Communist in the post-Cold War era, prisoner in Cintalapa, pacifist in Bosnia, Mapuche in the Andes... unemployed worker... rebellious student, dissident in neoliberalism... Marcos is all the minorities who are intolerated, oppressed, resisting, exploding, saying "Enough." [A]ll that makes power and good consciences uncomfortable, that is Marcos (Marcos 1995: 214-5).

By making effective use of the mass media, the Zapatistas have been able to attract global attention and achieve a level of global solidarity that has fuelled their uprising for over twenty years. They are the only movement in Mexico that has been able to successfully connect and universalize their struggle for justice in and outside the country.

While initially the EZLN tried to promote its demands through negotiations with the Mexican government, peace talks came to an end in April 2001. Their demands, which included the implementation of Indigenous Accords, such as land tenure, health, and indigenous education, were not addressed by then president, Vicente Fox (2000-2006). They went into "silence," and in 2003 declared the birth of *Caracoles* (snails), which marked the beginning of Zapatista autonomous communities within the territories they control. They broke relations with all political parties, including the "leftist progressive" Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and their representative, Manuel López Obrador, who, some argue, lost the elections in 2006 due to losing Zapatista support.[3]

In December 2012, the EZLN mobilized thousands of Indigenous Zapatistas, peacefully taking five municipalities in Chiapas. They published an official communiqué at the end of the month, announcing how, after decades of struggle, they successfully created self-sufficient and autonomous communities with their own political projects and objectives, independent of the Mexican nation-state. They indicate, "We don't need them [Political parties and the nation-state] in order to survive" (Marcos 2012). Since becoming autonomous communities, they boast that they have significantly strengthened and improved their material conditions. They underscore, among other achievements, that their standards of living are "higher than those of the indigenous communities that support the governments in office, who receive handouts that are squandered on alcohol and useless items." Zapatista homes, they state, "have improved without damaging nature... Our sons and daughters go to a school that teaches them their own history, that of their country and that of the world, as well as the sciences and techniques necessary for them to grow without ceasing to be indigenous" (Marcos 2012).

On 1 January 2014, the Zapatistas celebrated the twentieth anniversary of their initial uprising. Their revolution and

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struggle for self-determination has combined armed struggle and the effective use of the media to spread an ideological discourse that has been attractive to many, precisely because it proposes distance from electoral politics. They identify the nation-state and its established structures as naturally imbricated in economic, political, and cultural systems that reify hierarchical structures based on the domination of certain ethnic/racial and social groups. Self-determination, in this sense, is

understood as a means of gaining distance or protection from rather than inclusion in state institutions... [They] express a profound sense of alienation toward these institutions, which carry the stigma of colonial domination (Murphy 2008: 186).

The Zapatistas even posit themselves as a global example of resistance and self-determination, indicating that their struggle represents “a new form of social life” that “attracts the attention of honest people all over the planet” (Marcos 2012). They insist that they will maintain a “critical distance with respect to the entirety of the Mexican political class which has thrived at the expense of the needs and desires of humble and simple people” (Marcos 2012).

MAS: Self-Determination and the Path of Electoral Politics

The Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) in Bolivia grew out of the *Cocaleros* (Coca leaf growers) popular movement in the region of El Chapare. It is a movement highly influenced by the *Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia* (Unitary Syndical Confederation of Peasant Workers of Bolivia – CSUTCB), and their struggle for improved agricultural policies.[4] In 1989, the *Cocaleros* allied with *Izquierda Unida*, or United Left (IU), in order to gain political prominence in local municipalities. In 1995, they created the assembly “Political tool for the Sovereignty of the Common People” (IPSP), which later turned into the electoral political party MAS (Dangl 2007: 49). The movement gained national prominence in 1997 with its resistance to President Hugo Banzer’s neoliberal privatization policies, particularly Law 1008, which declared a “zero coca” policy in Bolivia (Crabtree 2005:38). Out of the struggle to defend the growing and production of the coca leaf, the Aymara coca farmer Evo Morales rose in political standing and became the MAS leader. Given public discontent with neoliberal policies and politics, MAS political discourses – based on “anti-neoliberalism,” “anti-imperialism,” and multiculturalism – were well received by large sectors of the Bolivian population who voted them into national office with 53.74% of the popular vote.

In his inauguration speech as Bolivian President on 21 January 2006, Morales evoked the words of the Zapatistas by indicating that his government would be based on the “Command by obeying” mandate. He told thousands of Bolivians that his presidency would be the first step to ending the “colonial state and the neoliberal model,” and made reference to the rights of Indigenous Peoples in Bolivia (Aymaras, Quechuas, Guaranies, Mojeños, Chapacos, Vallunos, Chiquitanos, Yuracarés, Chipayas, and Muratos) as the true and absolute owners of the land. Invoking the right to self-determination and the sovereignty of Bolivia as a free nation-state, Morales proposed the nationalization of resources like natural gas, oil, and minerals. “We have the obligation to industrialize our national resources in order to get out of poverty,” he said (Morales 2006, my translation). In a 2008 interview, he indicated how, after natural reserves were nationalized, the country began to receive \$8 billion annually, in contrast to the \$1 billion they received prior to 2005 (Goodman et al. 2008). The wealth in the hands of the state, from Morales’ perspective, now served to create social programs to benefit the population. Despite criticism regarding the nationalization of resources, Morales’ presidency and his policies gained much support. In 2009, he was re-elected president for a second term in office, winning with over 60% of the national vote.

Morales’ biggest challenge, on the other hand, came in 2011, when his government proposed the construction of a highway that would run through the *Parque Nacional y Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro Sécore*, or Isiboro Sécore National Park and Indigenous Territory (TIPNIS). This territory, which encompasses 1.2 million hectares of land, is inhabited by Amazonian Indigenous nations like the Mojeños-Trinitarios, Chimanes, and Yuracarés in the North, and by Quechua and Aymaras in the South. The latter are called *colonizadores* (colonizers) since they migrated to and established themselves in the region in the 1970s (Webber 2012). Morales’ decision to build the highway led to a 65-day march in August 2011 by Amazonian indigenous nations to La Paz to protest the project. Initially, the marches were denounced by the government as an “imperialist conspiracy,” and were violently repressed in September 2011 (Webber 2012). Morales insisted “that the road was needed to bring economic

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development to poor [Amazonian] indigenous communities” (Frantz 2011). However, as the protests grew to the point of acquiring national and international attention, Morales gave in to the demands and, in December of the same year, signed the *intangible* (untouchable) law, which states that the national park cannot be exploited by commercial enterprises. The decision, however, led to new protests by indigenous sectors that had supported Morales’ initial decision and represented his constituency, like The *Consejo Indígena del Sur* (Indigenous Council of the South – CONISUR), residents of Cochabamba and San Ignacio de Moxos, and Cocaleros (Frantz 2011). The conflict showed the tensions between the various indigenous peoples and, at the same time, some of the contradictions of Morales’ socialist and sovereign agenda.

Indeed, while Morales proposes to “change the colonial state” because it is based on “plundering, exploiting and marginalizing” important sectors of the Bolivian population, the TIPNIS affair displays how his economic agenda still depends on extractivism; that is, the exploitation and exportation of natural resources that are used in capitalist international markets (Gudynas 2009: 190). While these policies have indeed created profound political changes that have benefited sectors of the population with the improvement and implementation of social programs, with his ideas of “poverty” and “progress,” Morales still endorses a Eurocentric discourse that sees Mother Earth as an entity that can be “exploited” to end poverty. In this sense, his economic policies characterize themselves as some form of more humane capitalism. The problem, however, is that they are still capitalist and have maintained divisions among Indigenous sectors. These types of policies have led some scholars, like Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, to argue that Morales’ presidency represents the interests of an elitist and commercial capitalist class (Dulce 2014). She goes as far as to indicate that Morales is not an indigenous leader, and that there are no indigenous presidents in Latin America.

Conclusion

In January 2006, after Morales was elected President of Bolivia, he invited the EZLN’s leadership to his presidential inauguration. The Zapatistas declined the invitation. In an interview months later, Subcomandante Marcos explained that the EZLN does not look toward

the Bolivia of above, but, rather, the Bolivia from below. And these are the values that are taken into account: those of the popular movement that caused Bolivia to crash and opened the possibility that the government of Evo could decide for one side or the other (Rodríguez Lascano 2006).

The statement defines the two distinct paths followed by MAS and the EZLN in their efforts to establish self-determination and autonomy for indigenous peoples. Both movements, in their own ways, represent struggles that occur

within the structure of domination *vis a vis* techniques of government, by exercising their freedom of thought and action with the aim of modifying the system in the short term and transforming it from within in the long term (Tully 2000: 50).

Despite their differences, both movements display the challenges of transcending (neo)colonialism. As Cherokee theologian William Baldrige states, for indigenous peoples “the most pervasive result of colonialism is that we cannot even begin a conversation without referencing our words to definitions imposed or rooted in 1492” (Weaver 2001: 292). These movements show that, whatever political road is taken, the path toward self-determination necessarily involves negotiating with the nation-state and its hegemonic institutions. While attempts to break free have involved enormous sacrifices characterized by the loss of lives, as well as psychological and epistemological violence, the EZLN and MAS represent options in a “globalized” world that continues to threaten our existence. Yet, the debates and discussions and respective struggles give us the hope and dignity necessary to one day recover our territories, and use them according our own needs so our cultures and peoples continue flourishing. They also allow us to think of the possibility of materializing our own civilizational project: Abya Yala.

Notes

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[1] “Dulenegea” in the Kuna Tule language means the homeland of the people (“dule” means people and “nega” home, habitat, or homeland). For additional information about the Kuna peoples, see Howe (1998) and Salvador (2002).

[2] The bibliography on the EZLN is extensive. For examples, see Collier (2005), Hayden (2002), and Marcos (1995; 2004). Most of the EZLN’s manifestos and official communiqués can be found online at: <http://www.ezln.org.mx/> and <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/>. They also have created the monthly online journal, *Revista rebeldía*, which is available at: <http://revistarebeldia.org/>.

[3] The break with López Obrador and the PRD occurred on 10 April 2004. The EZLN claims that PRD sympathizers and officials ambushed a group of Zapatistas that was commemorating Emiliano Zapata in the region of Zinacantan. They were also denied access to water. The incident was neither addressed nor resolved when it was raised with López Obrador.

[4] The bibliography on MAS and Evo Morales is very extensive. For examples, see Crabtree (2005), Dangl (2007), Dunkerley (2007), and Harten (2011).

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