



Comparative Revolutions in Latin America

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Revolution comes in a variety of different forms, with many coming about through violence, though others do have a basis in less violent methods. Between the two it is more commonly observed to have violence driven revolutions. Oppositely, a peaceful Guerilla movement is not all that common. Overall, Latin America has been host to a multitude of revolutions, movements, and groups trying to bring about societal change in many different ways.

The history of Latin America is filled with different people rising in the name of anti-Imperialism; from the Haitian rebellion against France, that resolved to be the one of the most successful slave rebellions in history, to the modern day with the Cuban Revolution, the FARC, and a broad range of other groups. One important factor worth noting regarding different modern day revolutionary groups is indeed their similarities. Usually, they are Marxist-Leninist groups inspired by Che Guevara's or Castro's actions in Cuba. However, since the fall of the Soviet Union multiple groups of differing ideologies have attempted to rise and take the place of the prior Marxist-Leninist ideology of the Cold War. An example of such a group can be found with the FARC of Columbia; their actions fueled by narcotics trading and rebelling against the Columbian government through kidnapping or illegal mining. Yet out of all these groups, two of the more interesting cases are found with the Shining Path Communist Party of Peru and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, or EZLN, a libertarian-socialist military and political group of southern Mexico. Although these groups may seem similar, at their core they are two very different groups that have little to no similarities ideologically, in addition to the differences in how they conduct their Revolutions as a whole. To add some necessary context, a dive into the history of these groups is required. Firstly, the Shining Path is most often thought of as one of violent Left-Wing terrorist group in modern history. They were founded in 1969 by Abimael Guzman at the forefront working as the main strategist and revolutionary for the group. He was a philosophy professor for a period at San Cristóbal de Huamanga National University¹. This university is where

¹ Coha, "The Rise and Fall of Shining Path." COHA, June 5, 2008. <https://www.coha.org/the-rise->

one of the larger footholds formed for the group, as much of the early points of stability for the Shining Path were hosted within universities.

Guzman's ideals would be substantially influenced by his visit to the People's Republic of China, and he was ideologically touched by Mao, basing many of his main points off him to format his revolution. Additionally, in an action that would be taken to carry out a successful revolution against the Peruvian State, Guzman was active within the Peruvian Communist Party, or PCP. The Shining Path was virtually a spin-off party of the PCP, one that took a stronger approach, and were more focused on the organization of workers than a revolution.² The Shining Path's initial success had to mainly do with Guzman himself. In many ways the Shining Path was a cult of personality based around Guzman, and when he was finally captured the group was substantially weakened.

After gaining a rather large following of students along with other intellectuals from universities, the Shining Path went on to recruit people from poorer districts within Peru, as well as indigenous people to invoke armed revolution against the Peruvian Government. Most of the insurrection started around the Andes mountains. Like many revolutionary groups, the Shining Path tried to gather their following by enticing those affected by social problems of the area. They used the intellectuals they recruited to serve as the "Vanguard," or the Leninist idea of a group of intellectuals to help spearhead the revolution. The Shining Path would carry out many assassinations, acts of revolutionary terror, and commit countless atrocities against the government of Peru in the name their Revolution.

In many ways they are one of the most, if not the most, violent left-wing groups of the modern day. The Shining Path was able to gain a lot of traction in the Southern Regions of the country, doing especially well within the rural community of Peru in regions such as Huanta, central Selva, and an area south of Vilcabamba. They were able to launch attacks on multiple regions of the nation, especially urban centers, which in general made the group less popular amongst the urban population.³ The Shining Path was able to sustain themselves in some capacity in a way similar to what

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² "Shining Path." InSight Crime, October 18, 2021. <https://insightcrime.org/peru-organized-crime-news/shining-path-profile>

³ Coha. "The Rise and Fall of Shining Path." COHA, June 5, 2008. <https://www.coha.org/the-rise-and-fall-of-shining-path/>.

the FARC had done in Columbia; drug smuggling, narcotics trading, especially with Coca plantfarming.⁴ Additionally, with the Shining Path would enact taxes on businesses, as well gain money from ransoms from kidnappings, is becomes apparat they were involved quite heavily within the crime world. The Shining Path's initial success had to mainly do with Guzman himself, in many ways the Shining Path was a cult of personality around Guzman, when he was finally captured the group was substantially weakened, eventually he called for his men to lay down their arms which some were totally against some claiming Guzman to be a traitor and refusing to lay down their arms. Although some eventually did eventually decide to voluntarily lower their arms.⁵

The Shining Path still in modern day operates, although to a much lesser extent, and even now the Shining Path show their violence once again in the form of a massacre on May 16, 2021. This showed that while they are weaker than they were previously, they are still a modern security threat to the government of Peru.

In almost a direct contrast, the EZLN or the "Zapatistas" group in Mexico came out of nowhere after the North American Free Trade Movement, NAFTA, was put into action. While the NAFTA agreement was perhaps a catalyst, the Zapatistas rise was due to the mistreatment of indigenous people within Mexico by the Mexican government for years. Not to confuse the group as one that is formed purely out of hate for NAFTA, however their actions surprised many. This is due to the fact most believed insurrections such as these were a part of the past and died with the Cold War. In some ways this is one of the only main similarities between the two groups besides being on the spectrum as "Left-Wing" groups. They both suddenly popped out of almost nowhere, however the EZLN was able to show themselves on the national scale almost right away, meanwhile the Shining Path took a rather long time to get to that point. Many within the indigenous community believed NAFTA to be something that could hurt many of their own, on top of the poorer people in the region, as NAFTA seemingly ignores the unique rights that tribes have. Additionally, the agreement fails to recognize tribal governments and reservations. This is highly

⁴ Kathryn Gregory, "Shining Path, Tupac Amaru (Peru, Leftists)," *Council on Foreign Relations*. Accessed October 21, 2021. <https://www.cfr.org/background/shining-path-tupac-amaru-peru-leftists>.

⁵ "Shining Path." InSight Crime, October 18, 2021. Accessed April 15, 2022. <https://insightcrime.org/peru-organizedcrime-news/shining-path-profile/>.

problematic for the indigenous people of Latin American Nations, and in many ways without protection against large capitalists, and without protection for their land rights, the indigenous people of Chiapas, the poorest region of Mexico had a lot more to lose than the non-indigenous population. The Zapatistas main spokesman was known as Subcomandante Marcos. He was an influential and charismatic speaker who was able to convey the Zapatistas message clearly, and many journalists were taken aback by this movement and Marcos. Songs were created about this event, and of course many interviews were conducted.

For the most part the EZLN are a Leftist group however they take inspiration from many different influences, that are not Marxist in nature. While the EZLN is shrouded in some mystery, they are one of the more interesting cases of the Guerilla in Latin America. While they did start as an armed group and attempted some form of insurrection, for the most part they did not rely on terror and dealt mainly between them and the state diplomatically. They secured parts of Chiapas in a autonomous area with communal living spaces for its, and became a force of good for the indigenous people that still exist even to this day. In direct contrast to almost any Guerilla movement, the Zapatistas are not all that violent, and the little they did commit being nearly nonexistent. Not only were they able to escape the large amount of violence of other groups, but the EZLN were able to avoid getting caught trafficking narcotics where the Shining Path and FARC did. Working in that way did not fit their platform or goals at all.⁶ Marcos himself has spoken out against groups killing innocent civilians. Due to that, the EZLN believes in arming themselves, but they are not thugs that willingly kill innocent civilians.

Within their original demands, the EZLN had made the situation clearer to the Mexican people. For the most part it was decrying the unfair nature of the Mexican government as they often forgot the rights of the poorest region in their nation. They called for better treatment, land that they could work on, and a general end to the exploitation of its people. They demanded equal rights and fair Democracy in addition to creation of better infrastructure including daycares, dining halls, preschools, and workshops; they also called for supplies such as animals like

⁶ "How Mexico's Zapatista Guerrillas Stayed Clear of Organized Crime." *The Christian Science Monitor* (January 10, 2012). Accessed April 15, 2022.
<https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/Latin-America-Monitor/2012/0110/How-Mexico-s-Zapatista-guerrillas-stayed-clear-of-organized-crime>.

chickens, sheep, etc. as well as food.⁷ Due to its interventions, the EZLN has been able to make more progress than their more revolutionary Guerilla counterparts. While the FARC is disarmed, and the Shining Path are a small terrorist organization, the Zapatistas still hold a good amount of influence in Chiapas and are not viewed as a dangerous organization by the international community. They further legitimize themselves with their own access to education, and healthcare, which in many ways is superior to non-Zapatista controlled health clinics or schools.⁸

When comparing the two groups they are almost in complete opposite camps from each other with one being a Terrorist organization that fought heavily against the Peruvian Government using different tactics to keep themselves afloat, as well as to be an actual threat to the Peruvian Government. In general, most of the goals of the Shining Path have failed, and they are now a minor terrorist group that has splintered into multiple different groups and lost any sense of direction. Meanwhile the Zapatistas have taken a much less militant approach, with them only really having brief standoffs with the Mexican military. Marcos and the Zapatistas attempted to capture the hearts of the people, which for the most part they were able to do. With the group still able to survive and function without any interference from the Mexican government, the EZLN has taken a diplomatic approach to their situation and has ended up for the most part, better off than their counterparts.

The differences are not only staggering; in many ways they are nearly opposites of one another. Economically, the Zapatistas operate in stark contrast to Shining Path; ironically, without the need of illegal trading, the local economy is based on the well-being of others. The EZLN occupies a large portion of former private property, with their political economy being based upon cooperatives and mutual aid.⁹ In many ways, the Shining Path still participated in Capitalism with the

⁷ "Mexico Reader," *San Francisco University High School* Accessed December 7, 2021. <http://inside.sfuhs.org/dept/history/Mexicoreader/Chapter6/ezln%20demands.pdf>.

⁸ Anya Briy, "Zapatistas: Lessons in Community Self-Organisation in Mexico." *openDemocracy* (June 25, 2020). Accessed April 15, 2022. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/zapatistas-lecciones-de-auto-organizaci%C3%B3n-comunitaria-en/>.

⁹ James Wilhelm, "To What Extent Does the EZLN Political Economy Framework Offer a Viable Development Alternative to Its Followers?" *E*, July 26, 2011. <https://www.e-ir.info/2010/07/09/to->

taxation of businesses, while the people of the EZLN and their autonomous communities participate within their own specific modes of production. Ideologically, as stated before, they also contrast heavily with the Shining Path being influenced by Maoist philosophy, taking from the belief of Lenin that a Vanguard must lead the revolution, in a way be the head of an arrow, and the Maoist beliefs of popular war or people's war, of maintaining support for the war and basically wearing the enemy down with attacks more concentrated in the rural areas of a country, spreading the enemy thin. Of course, the Marxist belief of establishing a state that would carry the revolution into Communism, is a direct contrast to the Zapatistas who never really say what they are but are influenced by leftist philosophies. While they are a less armed and less violent, they still believe in arming themselves. They are not just influenced by a small group of thinkers such as the Shining Path, rather they are influenced by Marxism, Anarchism, Libertarian Socialism, in addition to their own indigenous practices and belief. Not to mention the Mexican Revolution and Emiliano Zapata.¹⁰

Leadership in these two groups was very different also. While Marcos is the main spokesperson, he is not the leader of the Zapatistas, rather they are led by a Council of Elders of Indigenous heritage. However, the Shining Path is mainly based on the sole leadership of one person, which was Gonzalo. After he was captured, the group lost a good amount of its steam and will for the most part probably never regain the same momentum they once had. One other similarity these two groups have is a charismatic person in a leadership position; Marcos is charismatic and has a special way with words. He has many great quotes and can show the world what Zapatismos means. He is a well-educated man and knew how to effectively speak to people. Gonzalo was also quite charismatic and was able to get people to follow his teachings, he was also a quite educated man and was in fact a professor in philosophy. Gonzalo was able to basically enact a cult of personality based upon himself.

The nearly nonviolent Guerilla of the EZLN still is significant, exists,

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¹⁰ "Critical Analysis: The Zapatista Rebellion: 20 Years Later." *Denver Journal of International Law Policy* (January 9, 2014). Accessed April 15, 2022. <http://djilp.org/critical-analysis-the-zapatista-rebellion-20-years-later/>.

and in general continues to grow while the violent Shining Path had become quite irrelevant in modern times, especially on the international stage. While they do pose the largest security threat to Peru, they are not legitimate in the way they used to be. In many ways the EZLN was a force that brought about a large amount of societal change for the people that most needed it. They helped the indigenous people they set out to help. While the Shining Path claimed to be such a group that would help indigenous people, they would make victims out of some of the people they claimed to help with brutal terrorist killings of innocents in the rural regions of Peru.