

Colombia's Indigenous March for Justice

<http://www.coha.org/2008/11/colombia/s-indigenous-march-for-justice/>

Colombia's indigenous have a modern history of unifying in order to defend their territory, traditions, and their status as a native people. Similar to other Latin American indigenous groups, Colombia's population has faced centuries of discrimination and repression by the country's rulers and, in the case of Colombia, from leftist-guerrilla groups as well. Since the 1970s, armed conflict has leapt into flames throughout the country, with numerous recorded cases of forced displacement and violent confrontations affecting the indigenous.

Politically, Colombia's local communities have failed to establish a distinctive position of autonomy in the face of increasing polarization taking place in what serves as the Colombian version of the two party system, involving the left and the right. Instead, indigenous peoples have been forced into political and economic agreements that have led to their displacement, induced confrontations, and limited their freedom of movement within territory allocated to them by the government. A series of challenges during the 1970s led indigenous groups to break apart from peasant organizations, just as the state was attempting to have them merge into one of Bogotá's front organizations, such as the People's Revolutionary Organization (ORP). The rejection of the ORP led to the indigenous' renewed repression by the entire government. In 1978 the Regional Council of Cauca (CRIC), an indigenous organization formed in the seventies, discovered that thirty of their members had been murdered. Polarization within the government and amongst Colombian political organizations has sapped much of the indigenous people's spunk, leadership, and the resources they would need to fully develop socially, economically and politically. Their communities have since faced demographic stress in the form of deteriorating health, insufficient vaccinations and other kinds of preventive health care, dispossession from their land, and forced migration as a result of militarization and guerrilla activity in regions traditionally populated by native peoples.

The daily situation has only worsened with the escalation of civil war in Colombia's countryside. Despite a history of social exclusion and government neglect, indigenous groups have recently come into their own, formulating legislation to protect their rights, and to organize mass mobilizations to voice their concerns within Colombia and to the outside world. Their most recent manifestations against the government began on October 13th, 2008, when the Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ORC) marshaled a march from the Department of Cauca to Cali. As a result of their current mobilization efforts, many are questioning what exactly can be accomplished with the ongoing march to Cali, and if real change is truly within grasp of the indigenous population.

Defending Their Roots: The Indigenous Community Attempts to Fight Back

Colombia's indigenous have a reputation for maintaining a strong

ethnic identity which has helped bolster their commitment to political causes dear to them. A milestone in the indigenous fight for equality was the adoption of the new Colombian Constitution in 1991. As a result of an agreement between the government and indigenous groups, Articles 246, 287, and 330 of that document provided the indigenous territories with "self-governing, autonomous entities, authorized to devise, implement and administer internal social, economic and political policies in accordance with indigenous customary law."

The government's pledge to make beneficial changes in their indigenous communities has helped these communities form numerous institutions focused on social change, and has led to their success in organizing mobilization efforts. Organizations such as the Association of Indigenous Council of Northern Cauca (ACIN), The Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC), along with the Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONC) are being used by indigenous groups as a vehicle to exert pressure on the government and to secure their territorial, political, and social aspirations. These organizations are committed to political integration through the coordination of projects with local officials and indigenous community leaders, in order to carry out the fight for cultural rights, the recuperation of their land, community development, and advocacy of institutional participation. Through the formation of these organizations, the indigenous community has gained important support from multiple NGOs in various fields. This backing has brought further awareness to various indigenous causes through liaison with such bodies as the League of Indigenous Sovereign Nations and through projects aimed at attempting to end oil drilling on indigenous territory. Additional support comes from such international groups as Amnesty International, which releases frequent reports condemning the civil war's victimization of native peoples, human rights abuses, and wanton killings by the Colombian army, its security forces, and associated paramilitary groups.

The indigenous population has voiced its concerns to the government through the media and by means of street mobilization and road blockades. The most successful mobilization to date took place in September 2004. A three-day march in Santander de Quilichao drew in an astonishing 60,000 indigenous citizens. Similar to current mobilizations, the 2004 march was aimed at condemning the aggressions committed against indigenous people. Protesters rejected constitutional reforms promoted by the central government, that adversely had affected the autonomy of indigenous communities, and threatened their security and rights during protracted negotiations to achieve a Free Trade Agreement with the United States. Such massive mobilizations of indigenous groups in Colombia, like the march of 2004, fuel hope and provide motivation for the 12,000 demonstrators who are currently marching for their rights throughout southwestern Colombia.

Mobilizations Continue in Order to Defend the "Plan of Life"  
"We don't have a government," was the chant heard on Columbus Day, when indigenous communities began their march in search of moral and material support, both nationally and internationally. As the

mobilization began, President Uribe was confronted by protesting university students, sugar-cane farmers, and judiciary workers. Colombian military and anti-riot police were present at the October 14th march, when thirty-five people were wounded and two others were murdered. Following the violent crackdown, the military and police randomly shot into a crowd of 12,000 people, who were blocking sections of the Pan-American Highway, in order to demand a conflict-resolution meeting with President Uribe.

Colombia's indigenous population continues to mobilize in order to defend their "Plan of Life," which was created in the 1980s to promote greater economic autonomy. As described by the ACIN, the Plan of Life was established by the indigenous populace with hopes of developing their communities in productive ways; through textile production and the conservation of their habitat by turning to agricultural and development projects. They also have aspirations to reinforce their autonomy by creating strategic plans for community organization, health, and education. In order to strengthen their Plan of Life, the indigenous leaders believe they must address the government's excess which has infringed on their ability to fully develop their organizational processes and maintain social cohesion.

Before it began to mobilize, the indigenous community released a list of demands and proposals. It hoped to publicize its opposition to free trade agreements negotiated with the United States, Canada and the E.U, Plan Colombia One and Two and free standing regulations such as the Code of Mines and the Law of Forests, which would lead to new unwanted mining developments and eradication of subsistence agriculture. The Colombian indigenous community presently objects to the pursuit of military and economic policies that have resulted in the displacement of their people and created a humanitarian crisis for eighteen out of the country's eighty-four indigenous groups. Plan Colombia, the U.S.-Colombia agreement conceived in 1998 primarily to curb drug trafficking, but which was later converted into a militarized anti-guerilla initiative, has produced a menacing atmosphere within indigenous communities. Fumigation of crops has always been a dangerous cornerstone of the plan. Fumigation, which has been shown to engender negative health effects and wreak environmental havoc, also has caused hunger due to the destruction of food crops.

The U.S-Colombia Free Trade Agreement has not been ratified by the United States Congress, but in hopes of expediting its implementation, if it overcomes legislative hurdles in the U.S., Bogotá already has imposed regulations which would eliminate indigenous people's land rights. Approval of the FTA would require changes to Colombia's Constitution which would revoke indigenous peoples' communal landholding status and could result in the obligatory sale of their land parcels. Currently, the U'wa, a Colombian indigenous group in northeastern Colombia, is battling the foreign oil company Ecopetrol, which is attempting to extract oil and plan future field operations on U'wa territory. Indigenous communities would be coerced, with the help of indecently small payments, into surrendering their rights to private commercial interests. Representing the ACIN, Manuel Rozental stated:

"Everyone must know that the FTA with the United States was negotiated without consulting the people it most affects, and that the potential results of this agreement will have a backwards effect on the interests of our community."

Another reason for mobilization is to insist upon the protection of indigenous rights which were outlined in Colombia's 1991 Constitution. That organic document defines the country as a "social state of law," meaning that political, social, and economic rights of citizens must be protected. Even so, after the reforms were made in the Constitution, twenty Nasa Indians in Northern Cauca were massacred by government forces. No results have been seen from the agreements signed by the government, which stated that 15,000 hectares of land would be returned to indigenous communities affected by the massacre. Despite the Constitutional changes, the number of murders in indigenous communities has dramatically increased since the 1980s. According to the Natural Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC), there have been 1,253 murders over the past six years alone, within Colombia's indigenous groups.

The indigenous community also is marching to end the displacement of its people. According to the ACIN, in the past six years, 53,885 indigenous people have been pressured to leave their land so that the Colombian government and paramilitary groups can have the opportunity to pursue their own government projects on territories that are not rightfully theirs.

A Meeting with Uribe: Hope or Disappointment?

Colombian indigenous groups were hopeful that the march would earn them a meeting with President Uribe where they could discuss their concerns and long-term goals as a discrete society. Throughout the mobilization, shootings and murders have taken place, and many speculate that the Colombian government was involved in these violent acts. On October 22nd, CNN released a video showing a man in uniform opening fire on a protestor. After the video was circulated to various news organizations, President Uribe acknowledged that police indeed had opened fire on protestors during their demonstrations. In light of these events, Uribe agreed to a face-to-face meeting with indigenous leaders. The session was originally scheduled to take place at a studio of the Telepacífico news station. However, in order to involve all of the demonstrators, indigenous leaders asked to have the meeting location changed to a town square in Cali. Unfortunately, according to Colombia Reports, Uribe arrived to the meeting hours late, angering the indigenous crowd and prompting a hostile environment. Negative chanting by protestors infuriated Uribe, causing the meeting to be cut to only forty minutes, leaving major issues unresolved, let alone addressed, and making it more difficult for future arrangements to be made.

The ongoing mobilization by the indigenous has succeeded in generating media attention, but change has yet to arrive due to the government's failure to halt land seizure measures, a move that would be detrimental to some important business interests and would increase the Colombian government's costs throughout the country. The failed meeting with Uribe noticeably strained the fight for the

indigenous "Plan of Life." Manuel Rozental states, "A majority that doesn't seek our goals and an indigenous minority that sought land for the indigenous in El Cauca is the reason for tension between the two bodies. This tension has caused the agenda's political and logistical goals to not be adequately prepared or fully developed." Officially, patching the intense differences between the indigenous community and government is the only way indigenous leaders will have in order to carry out their proposals.

Although the indigenous community is forging ahead in an attempt to solve its differences with the government, it still faces many challenges and obstacles before its representatives are shown some respect from the Colombian majority, as well as political autonomy, and economic justice. Deborah Yashar of Cambridge University states, "Successful indigenous movements have occurred only when indigenous communities had the motive, capacity, and opportunity to organize themselves." Colombia's indigenous community possesses the capacity to accomplish its goals as a result of its longstanding struggle and self-determination. Their backbreaking work in the past is proof that the indigenous people of Colombia have the ability and durability to generate new political processes. However, it remains unclear whether their unrelenting efforts will be able to ensure a more democratic, secure and prosperous environment for their communities anytime in the near future.

This analysis was prepared by COHA Research Associate Jennifer Acosta  
November 7th, 2008

[Delete & Prev](#) | [Delete & Next](#)

Move to:

INBOX



Move