

The gift that keeps on giving: Colombia's magic laptops and the war against social movements

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One of Colombia's major magazines, Cambio, [published a story](#) quoting from the magic laptops that survived bombing in the Ecuadorian jungle and were retrieved after the Colombian government assassinated Raul Reyes just about a year ago (March 3/08). This particular story concerns my friends Hollman Morris and Manuel Rozental.

Since last year, supposed documents from these magic laptops have appeared at politically convenient times for the regime to provide public accusations against social movement activists.

In August 2008, for example, I quickly responded to an accusation against my friend and mentor Hector Mondragon. I wrote the following:

The legality of Uribe's second term in office is itself in question, since there are accusations that bribery was involved in the vote in Congress when it passed the constitutional change to allow Uribe's re-election. The evidence that his party was heavily involved with the death squads is available in spades. He is isolated from his neighbours, in the region, and in the world - except for the US. And recent events in Pakistan show, as the fate of US clients from Manuel Noriega in Panama to Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada in Bolivia that while authoritarian regimes are useful to the United States, any individual head of a regime is expendable if the costs of supporting him are too high.

But against all this, Uribe has a weapon that has served him well: tremendous popularity in Colombia as expressed in the polls. This has to do with various economic tricks that have been used to keep Colombia afloat (even as the underlying economic basis is being eroded) and Uribe's ability to polarize the country between his regime and the guerrillas of FARC and to capitalize on the unpopularity of the latter, in recent months by pulling off spectacular operations against them, from the assassination of their most visible commander Raul Reyes to the rescue of their most visible hostage Ingrid Betancourt.

Colombian regimes have always attacked social movements by claiming they are of the FARC. In Hector Mondragon, they attacked a pacifist and an economist with a history of work with indigenous movements. Manuel Rozental, like Hector, has a history of work with indigenous movements, and works with the indigenous movement in Cauca as part of its communication team, the "Tejido de Comunicaciones". It is thanks to Manuel that I was able to visit these communities and because he is a part of their movement and processes that they were willing to work with me at his recommendation. Likewise Hollman Morris, who I have toured with here in Toronto and translated for, is one of Colombia's best journalists and one who has covered the indigenous movements with the greatest depth and sympathy.

The Tejido de Comunicaciones of the Association of Indigenous Councils of Northern Cauca (ACIN) has been recognized as the best alternative media in the country. Competing with virtually no resources with a centralized corporate media, it has become one of the most popular and credible voices in the Colombian landscape (Hollman Morris is another such voice). The role of the Tejido was particularly important during the recent Minga, a massive mobilization that lasted 61 days and arrived in Bogota with a five point popular agenda for social change in Colombia. Its slogan was "From a country with owners and without peoples to a

country of the people without owners". By attacking Morris and Rozental together, the regime hopes to silence two very important voices that are exposing it.

Using the exact same trick as before, the Colombian regime has leaked some supposed emails from the assassinated FARC commander, with the ultimate goal of accusing and threatening activists and journalists. Mondragon was supposedly being introduced to a FARC leader in Canada. Rozental and Morris are supposedly touring the mountains with FARC. Here's Canadian journalist [Dawn Paley's translation](#):

In October, "Sara" says to "Reyes" that "Aníbal" - the apparent leader of the front - is worried because the ELN is taking his territory and because some of his recruits are touring around with [Hollman] Morris and Manuel Rozental [sic], a friend of [Morris]. In these moments, the FARC and the ELN are waging a bloody battle for territorial control in Cauca and Arauca.

Paley points out that the magazine, Cambio, that published this supposed email, is owned by the same group that owns El Tiempo, which published the earlier supposed email about Mondragon.

In Colombia, the turnaround time from an accusation like this to a death threat is remarkably short. Manuel Rozental has had to live with threats to his safety for some time. Indeed, [I have written about whisper campaigns and death threats against Manuel](#) in the past:

They followed the predictable pattern. They focused on Manuel. There was mud slung from diverse directions, and of many kinds. From friends and allies they consisted of trying to hold Manuel to standards to which they would not hold any human being, let alone themselves. From those less familiar with our work, the accusations got filthier, in concentric circles. At the outer circle were the filthiest accusations, made by those with the least knowledge. Manuel was a CIA agent (something there could be no proof for). Manuel denounced other activists in public (though no public record could be found). Manuel supported terrorism. Manuel used the indigenous cause to personally enrich himself. No one, of course, would stand behind such statements in public – if evidence was asked for, another "source" for them would be found. Ask that "source", and get sent off to the next source. But the whisper campaign worked...

When he left Canada in 2003, Manuel didn't announce his departure or where he was going. Sometimes, in those years, people in Canada who I suspected of being part of the rumor mill would ask me about him, pretending nonchalance. Worried about his safety, I was vague. Rumors in Canada were difficult enough. Rumors in Colombia can be a death sentence. They caught up with him there, in late 2005, transmuting into death threats, and he was forced to return to the place where the rumors started, where the technique of slander for demobilization was perfected, where "solidarity movements" can chew up and spit out the best and most decent people.

The threats forced Manuel out of Colombia at a time when the Nasa organizations wanted him to be there. National elections are coming up. The indigenous sparked a campaign for "Freedom for Mother Earth", recovering land in a process similar to that of the MST in Brazil and in a context that is even deadlier for activists.

As in the past, these attacks are not coincidental. The regime is militarily confident and attempting to take the offensive politically against social movements. A few weeks before the magic laptops found evidence against Hollman Morris, Colombia's Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos denounced him as a "collaborator" of FARC as part of a general denunciation of the militarily devastated FARC's attempts to talk

peace, unilaterally release kidnap victims, and make other such gestures that threaten to end the long civil war. Morris defended himself publicly (see [this interview](#)), and a few weeks later, "evidence" emerges from the magic laptop!

Meanwhile Rozental had been working with the indigenous in Cauca, who most recently have been [preparing to remove an armed faction from their lands](#). While the Colombian government is mired in scandals over human rights abuses and its relations with paramilitarism, the indigenous movement is trying to advance a popular agenda. As an activist who helps connect different groups, Rozental was pushing the popular agenda in Colombia's democratic left political party, the Polo Democratico Alternativo (PDA). Rozental was recently elected to the National Directorate of the PDA as part of the list that obtained the largest support.

The agenda of peace, democratic transformation, and of "freedom for mother earth" that Morris, Rozental, the PDA, and the indigenous movement have been working for, is the real threat to the regime. In Rozental's case, the content of the accusations this time is completely different from the last round (last time he was supposedly CIA, this time he's touring with FARC), but the content is irrelevant. All that matters is the denunciation, preferably repeated, but offered without evidence (or provided wholesale from magic laptops), to try to break the movement apart by isolating activists from one another. It's the same vile tactic that failed on Manuel in the past, failed on Hector last summer, and will fail again.

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