

Colombian Social Leaders, COVID-19, and the US

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Since the historic peace accords in Colombia in 2016, well over 800 human rights defenders have been killed; in this year alone, more than 100 social leaders have been assassinated.¹ The COVID pandemic seems to be further closing spaces of participation for social movements opened up in the late 2000s. These policy contradictions by the governments of Colombia and the US camouflage an interest in territorial governance for mining and monoculture production for export. Under COVID quarantine restrictions, people on small farms fend for food not grown in local markets, and a big challenge is road blockages, many organized by armed groups. They control the ins and outs, who can pass on to the market and who cannot. Hunger is one consequence of this, as is the rise in domestic and sexual violence. Many of the social organizations strive to negotiate a different economic model than the deeply neoliberal model that currently stands, as a strong challenge to the status quo that explains a big part of the violence.

Keywords: Covid-19, rural Colombia, extractivism, solidarity

Desde los históricos acuerdos de paz de 2016 en Colombia, más de 800 defensores de los derechos humanos han sido asesinados, igual que más de un centenar de líderes sociales en el año en curso.² La pandemia del COVID parece contribuir su parte a la limitación de los espacios que se habían abierto a los movimientos sociales a finales de la década de 2000. Las contradicciones en las políticas de los gobiernos de Colombia y los Estados Unidos en verdad camuflan el interés por la gobernación territorial para la producción minera y el monocultivo agrícola destinado a la exportación. Las restricciones que impuso la cuarentena obligaron a la gente de las fincas a buscar productos agrícolas no cultivados para el mercado local y a enfrentarse a bloqueos de caminos, muchas veces organizados por grupos armados que controlan la entrada y salida, quién puede proceder al mercado y quién no. El hambre y el incremento de la violencia doméstica y sexual son una consecuencia de esta situación. Muchas organizaciones sociales buscan actualmente negociar un modelo económico distinto al modelo

¹ “Sube a 100 la cifra de líderes sociales asesinados en Colombia en 2020, dice ONG,” *EFE*, 17 mayo 2020, <https://www.efe.com/efe/america/sociedad/sube-a-100-la-cifra-de-lideres-sociales-asesinados-en-colombia-2020-dice-ong/20000013-4248539>. “Overview of Violence against Social Leaders in Colombia,” María Alejandra Navarrete and Laura Alonso, *InSight Crime*, 18 Feb. 2020, <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/overview-violence-social-leaders-colombia/>.

² See note 1.

profundamente neoliberal vigente que ha llevado a un fuerte cuestionamiento del estatus quo que explica gran parte de la violencia en su contra.

Palabras clave: COVID-19, Colombia rural, extractivismo, solidaridad

The killing of Colombian community leaders, human rights and environmental defenders over the past few years, now intensified under COVID-19, seems to replicate and presage the targeted attacks we are seeing in so-called “democratic” countries living under authoritarian rule. Community leaders are being systematically killed or judicialized, and the majority of them are indigenous, black, and *campesinx* small rural farmers who are voicing and defending their right to a life of safety and dignity, a life free of war and extreme militarization, and the freedom to live and think as they wish in their own protected territories and lands.

Since the historic peace accords in 2016, well over 800 human rights defenders have been killed; in this year alone, over 100 Colombian social leaders have been assassinated.³ Many others were threatened and displaced from their homes, and hundreds have been arrested under charges of allegedly having engaged in terrorist activities, as in the case of Julián Gil, Technical Secretary of Congreso de los Pueblos (Peoples’ Congress).⁴ He has been imprisoned for over two years, as part of what some call the “judicial false positives.”⁵

The COVID pandemic seems to be further closing spaces of participation for social movements opened up in the late 2000s, when diverse movements came together to challenge the *mano dura* (hard hand) approach of President Álvaro Uribe. Armed groups have returned to fierce attacks on rural leaders while under quarantine and to the implementation of social control tactics that add to the worries created by the lack of implementation of the recent peace processes.

The Peace Process and Its Fallouts

Peace with social justice is part of what organized rural communities fight for, and there was hope for this during the 2012–2016 negotiations and then signing of the peace accords between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The 2016 peace accords called for the implementation of several initiatives including the disarming and return to civilian life of members of the FARC, land and monetary restitution to victims of the long-standing conflict, rural structural changes that called for the strengthening of territorial and sovereignty rights

³ See note 1.

⁴ The People’s Congress is a grassroots organization that aims to construct and enact popular mandates for national policy changes toward the achievement of a life of dignity and autonomy for different rural and urban sectors. <https://www.congresodelospueblos.org/>.

⁵ “Colombia. Líder social Julián Gil: A 731 días de cárcel”, Julián Gil, *Kaosenlared*, 6 junio 2020, <https://kaosenlared.net/colombia-lider-social-julian-gil-a-731-dias-de-carcel/>.

for indigenous, Afro-Colombians and campesinx, and public policies for the gradual substitution of illicit crops and alternative rural development strategies. However, the promise of attention to unequal conditions seems to have been stripped down to an extremely tenuous cease-fire and the collapse of support for rural campesinx communities.⁶

The implementation of the peace accords, supported and financed in part by United States governmental institutions like the US Agency for International Development (USAID), appears to be filled with contradictions and hides much of the still-dominant securitizing approach that is happening on the ground. For instance, on May 28, 2020, the US government announced the deployment of 45–50 troops from SOUTHCOM’s SFAB (Security Force Assistance Brigades) to “assist [its] U.S. partners . . . based on operational and institutional needs” related to security and defense in so-called *Zonas Futuro*, or special zones that the government has deemed abandoned and prone to the presence of armed groups and drug production, and therefore enabling easy drug shipment routes.⁷ Whereas the peace accords promised funds to communities to shift their production from coca to agricultural crops and to the implement the Development Plans with a Territorial Focus (Planes de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial, PDET’s), people are instead being increasingly displaced from their lands due to violent attacks and fumigation by the Colombian armed forces.

These policy contradictions by the governments of Colombia and the US camouflage an interest in territorial governance. Heavy mining of gold and other minerals, a handful of energy megaprojects, and the takeover of lands to produce monoculture-style crops for export is extensive, including in the five *Zonas Futuro*.

Territories of Peace in Dispute

Civil society has been adamant about creating peace with social justice, and through strong mobilizations and national strikes, campesinx, Afro-Colombian and indigenous groups have achieved several accords related to alternative rural policies. Currently, many of these negotiations are stalled under the presidency of Iván Duque.

The mistrust stems from a history of failures of governments in their promises to improve infrastructure and structural inequities in rural Colombia. The issues today still have much to do with exploitation of labor for a capitalist economy predicated on exporting food and raw materials to the rich nations, but they also now involve the heavy extraction of minerals. According to a campesinx leader from the Department of Cauca, the threats and murders of so many social leaders (34 killings just this year in Cauca) is related to territorial dominance:

⁶ Alex Diamond, “Will Megaprojects Destroy Colombia’s Peace Process?” *NACLA* Aug. 5, 2019, <https://nacla.org/news/2020/03/03/will-megaprojects-destroy-colombia's-peace-process>.

⁷ Adam Isacson, “Bring the Trainers Home: This is No Time for U.S. Military Personnel to be Advising Offensive Operations in Colombia,” June 1, 2020, <https://adamisacson.com/category/latin-america/colombia/>.

These are areas we have called territories of peace, where together we construct our own guarantees, our own sovereignties. The objective of the armed actors is to decimate the ancestral culture and tear down these and all forms of free-thinking. The impact of militarization and targeted assassinations in times when people stay home due to COVID-19, is that it is tearing apart the social base, furthering the destruction of democracy, and threatening the loss of Cauca as a territory of peace.⁸

Community-based organizations such as the Movimiento de Mujeres por la Vida (MoMuViC), in Cajibío, Cauca, have conceived of these territories of peace for quite a while.⁹ The MoMuViC is an association that emerged from organizing by women who had lost their children to massacres by paramilitary forces that occurred at the height of the civil conflict in the early 2000s in the region. They organized initially around human rights, but always with an intent to stay in their lands and territories and to fight for rights to land, autonomy, health, housing, and food sovereignty. Today the movement is composed of more than 100 women from several *veredas* (small towns) who cooperatively produce organic compost, corn, beans, other vegetables, and herbs.

With Covid-19, we see the need to intensify the production of food in the *veredas*, even as a way to establish more of a firm standing in our territory. The technical assistance and machinery that was promised as part of the PDET negotiations has not arrived. We have lots of concern for economic survival and food availability; there are limits because we have been finding that the soil in our lands is growingly acidic, due to the big plantations of eucalyptus and pine trees for export that surround us.¹⁰

Under COVID quarantine restrictions, people in the *fincas* (small farms) fend for food not grown in local markets, usually owned by people they know well. A big challenge these communities have faced is road blockages, many organized by groups such as the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional) or FARC dissidents who have returned to armed rebellion. They control the ins and outs, who can pass on to the market and who cannot. Hunger is one consequence of this. The women also have been struggling with the rise of domestic abuse during quarantine and warn that in times of social control, sexual violence in general ramps up. The women constantly check on one another's wellbeing and raise alarm with local officials and their own community campesinx, indigenous and *cimarrón*/black guards about the need to hold accountable violent state and nonstate actors and domestic partners.

⁸ M.S., campesinx leader speaking at a webinar on June 11, 2020. Facebook: Geografia Unicauca.

⁹ See Yudy Campo y Cristhian Cruz, 2018, "Cultivadoras de paz: experiencia territorial de construcción de tejido social en Cajibío-Cauca." *Middle Atlantic Review of Latin American Studies* 2(1): 125–129. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.23870/marlas.181>.

¹⁰ Interview with Y.G., April 3, 2020.

Anti-capitalist Solidarity Projects

Collectives like the MoMuViC also work *beyond* the local level and posit a strong challenge to the status quo. MoMuViC is one organization (among many) that has been involved in regional and national organizing with numerous efforts to bring about an antineocolonial economic and political project for the nation. They strive to negotiate a different economic model from the deeply neoliberal model that currently stands and is decimating vast areas of their environment, their territories, and their social and cultural fabric. They insist on alternative production, distribution, and consumption models built on food sovereignty principles and on solidarity and local economies (*economía propia*). This means liberation from models of capitalist development that cause destruction and a rethinking of ways in which they can build on the knowledge of social movements throughout Latin America. The construction of new economies is not easy, as Colombian officials continue to sign agreements that deepen the dumping of foreign food crops.

The strengthening of protections and guarantees for social leaders is paramount, as is solidarity. As political prisoner Julián Gil expressed in this recent letter from jail about the collective educational, legal, and logistical support he has received from people in groups such as the Committee of Solidarity with Political Prisoners: “These experiences [of solidarity] have given [me] the necessary strength to be able to face the recent intensification of the contradictions.”¹¹

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¹¹ See <https://peoplesdispatch.org/2020/06/06/julian-gil-our-triumph-and-our-victory-are-in-the-hope-and-strength-of-being-together/>.