

LATIN AMERICA - The Threat of Hope (Naomi Klein, ALAI)

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25-11-07 - [ALAI](#) - *When Manuel Rozental got home one night last month, friends told him two strange men had been asking questions about him. In this close-knit indigenous community in southwestern Colombia ringed by soldiers, right-wing paramilitaries and left-wing guerrillas, strangers asking questions about you is never a good thing.*

The Association of Indigenous Councils of Northern Cauca, which leads a political movement that is autonomous from all those armed forces, held an emergency meeting. They decided that Rozental, their communications coordinator, who had been instrumental in campaigns for agrarian reform and against a Free Trade Agreement with the United States, had to get out of the country-fast.

They were certain that those strangers had been sent to kill Rozental-the only question was, by whom? The US-backed national government, which notoriously uses right-wing paramilitaries to do its dirty work? Or was it the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), Latin America's oldest Marxist guerrilla army, which does its dirty work all on its own? Oddly, both were distinct possibilities. Despite being on opposing sides of a forty-one-year civil war, the Uribe government and the FARC wholeheartedly agree that life would be infinitely simpler without Cauca's indigenous movement, which is part of an increasingly powerful political force sweeping Latin America, one challenging traditional power structures from Bolivia to Mexico.

Prominent indigenous leaders in northern Cauca have been kidnapped or assassinated by the FARC, which seeks to be the exclusive voice of Colombia's poor. And indigenous authorities had been informed that the FARC wanted Rozental dead. For months rumors had been circulated that he was the worst thing you can be in the books of a left-wing guerrilla movement: a CIA agent. But that doesn't mean the strangers were FARC assassins, because there had been other rumors too, spread through the media by government officials. They held that Rozental was the worst thing you can be in the books of a right-wing, Bush-bankrolled politician: "an international terrorist."

On October 27 the Indigenous Council, representing the roughly 110,000 Nasa Indians in the region, issued an angry communiqué: "Manuel is no terrorist. He is no paramilitary. He is no agent of the CIA. He is a part of our community who must not be silenced by bullets." The Nasa leaders say they know why Rozental, now living in exile in Canada, has come under threat. It is the same reason that this past April two peaceful indigenous villages in Northern Cauca were turned into war zones after the FARC attacked police posts in the town centers, giving the government an excuse for a full-scale occupation.

All of this is happening because the indigenous movement in Cauca, as in much of Latin America, is on a roll. In the past year the Nasa of northern Cauca have held the largest antigovernment protests in recent Colombian history and organized local referendums against free trade that had a turnout of 70 percent, higher than any official election (with a near unanimous "no" result). And in September thousands took over two large haciendas, forcing the government to make good on a long-promised land settlement. All these actions unfolded under the protection of the Nasa's unique Indigenous Guard, who patrol their territory armed only with sticks.

In a country ruled by M-16s, AK-47s, pipe bombs and Black Hawk helicopters, this combination of militancy and nonviolence is unheard of. And that is the quiet miracle the Nasa have accomplished: They revived the hope killed when paramilitaries systematically slaughtered left-wing politicians, including dozens of elected officials and two Unión Patriótica presidential candidates. At the end of the bloody

campaign in the early nineties, the FARC understandably concluded that engaging in open politics was a suicide mission. The key to the Nasa's success, Rozental says, is that they are not trying to take over state institutions, which "have lost all legitimacy." They are instead "building a new legitimacy based on an indigenous and popular mandate that has grown out of participatory congresses, assemblies and elections. Our process and our alternative institutions have put the official democracy to shame. That's why the government is so angry."

The Nasa have shattered the illusion, cherished by both sides, that Colombia's conflict can be reduced to a binary war. Their free-trade referendums have been imitated by nonindigenous unions, students, farmers and local politicians nationwide; their land takeovers have inspired other indigenous and peasant groups to do the same. A year ago 60,000 marched demanding peace and autonomy; last month those same demands were echoed by simultaneous marches in thirty-two of Colombia's provinces. Each action, explains Hector Mondragon, well-known Colombian economist and activist, "has had a multiplier effect."

Across Latin America a similarly explosive multiplier effect is under way, with indigenous movements redrawing the continent's political map, demanding not just "rights" but a reinvention of the state along deeply democratic lines. In Bolivia and Ecuador, indigenous groups have shown they have the power to topple governments. In Argentina, when mass protests ousted five presidents in 2001 and 2002, the words of Mexico's Zapatistas were shouted on the streets of Buenos Aires.

Facing mass protests in Argentina yesterday during the Summit of the Americas, George W. Bush saw first hand that the spirit of that revolt is alive and well. And although President Bush didn't take Hugo Chavez up on his offer to hold an open debate on the merits of "free trade," the truth is that the debate has already happened on the continent's streets and at its ballot boxes and Bush has lost. Consider this: the last time the 34 heads of these states got together it was April 2001 in Quebec City; it was Bush's first Summit after his election and he announced with great confidence that the Free Trade Area of the Americas would be law by 2005. Now, four years later, many of the faces of his colleagues have changed and Bush can't even get the FTAA on the meeting's agenda, let alone get it signed.

As in Colombia, there are attempts across the continent to paint the indigenous-inspired movements behind this massive political shift as terrorist. And not surprisingly Washington is offering both military and ideological assistance. Congress has approved a doubling of the number of U.S. soldiers in Colombia and there has been a marked increase in U.S. troop activity in Paraguay, worryingly near to the Bolivian border, which could move decisively to the left in upcoming elections. Meanwhile, a recent study by the U.S. National Intelligence Council warned that indigenous movements, although peaceful now, could "consider more drastic means" in the future.

Indigenous movements are indeed a threat to the exhausted free-trade policies Bush is currently hawking, with ever fewer buyers, across Latin America. Their power comes not from terror but from a new terror-resistant strain of hope, one so sturdy it can take root in the midst of Colombia's seemingly hopeless civil war. And if it can grow there, it can take root anywhere.

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