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Colombia's Killing Fields

In Colombia, the last week has been a particularly bloody one for indigenous leaders. In the state of Cauca, just south of the major city of Cali, the indigenous governor Edwin Dagua Ipia was assassinated after having received numerous death threats from paramilitaries in the area. He is one of at least ten indigenous people murdered in the country just in the last week.

In fact, according to the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), more than 100 assassinations of human rights advocates and members of marginalized and oppressed communities have taken place just in 2018. There is a sense among observers that the killings have escalated since the election of Ivan Duque, the young right wing president and close ally of former president and international criminal Alvaro Uribe.

In a damning report published by the Consultancy on Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES), the human rights NGO noted that 35% of the social leaders and activists murdered belonged to ethnic minorities (19% Afro-Colombian, 15% indigenous), a staggering figure which demonstrates just how targeted those groups are, considering the proportion of violence with which they're targeted versus their total share of the national population. Moreover, CODHES indicated that:

“Approximately 50 percent of the victims were authorities or representatives of ethnic territories and organizations. Another 36 percent were community or union leaders, 8 percent land rights claimants and 6 percent are members of the family of women social leaders. The worst affected regions in order of total numbers were Cauca, Valle del Cauca, Antioquia, Chocó, and Córdoba.”

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The continued killings have drawn the attention of the United Nations, though little has been done to stem the tide, particularly as the government of Ivan Duque has slithered into power. Luis Guillermo Pérez Casas, a lawyer with the Colectivo de Abogados José Alvear Restrepo (CCAJAR), explained in a report jointly submitted with the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, that the killings, and total impunity due to government inaction, rise to the level of crimes against humanity.

He told the Guardian that:

“The murders of our colleagues must stop... We hope the Office of the Prosecutor of the ICC will warn the Colombian government that if the impunity persists, they will be forced to open an investigation into those responsible, at the highest level... The peace process is failing because there’s a lack of implementation of the agreement. The process that was agreed upon has not been delivered.”

International human rights organizations have also raised the alarm about the violence and assassinations in Colombia. In early 2018, after the killing of 10 human rights activists, Amnesty International issued a report which called on the Colombian government to protect at-risk activists, especially those in remote parts of the country, who face extraordinary risks from paramilitaries and contract killers. Similarly, Human Rights Watch called on the Colombian government to do more to protect activists after a very bloody 2016. Sadly, the situation has only gotten worse.

Brazil’s War on Activists

The election of the fascist Jair Bolsonaro, the man who as candidate promised to open up the Amazon to mining and other environmentally harmful, extractive industries, has sent a very dangerous signal to indigenous and peasant groups in Brazil that the impunity that has long existed will only expand further while their rights are curtailed.

Bolsonaro represents a unique threat to activists from all spheres, especially indigenous and peasant communities who stand in the way of the right wing goal of stripping land rights from those groups in the interests of corporate investors and international financiers. And unlike the somewhat more muted (though no less destructive) rhetoric from the traditional neoliberal right, Bolsonaro and his far right, fascist politics will likely escalate the war on oppressed groups from simmering to white hot.

Speaking of the potential impact of Bolsonaro on the already ghastly violence against activists, Brazil-based independent journalist Michael Fox explained to me that:

“It’s still very early to tell the effect his election has had. Violence spiked in the lead-up to the second round vote, but there has been a lull since the election while people regroup

The recent killing of [two] Landless Workers' Movement (MST) leaders was very likely a sign of things to come.”

Fox's analysis, which is no doubt accurate, reflects the general sense of anxiety about the future, especially in the wake of the most recent assassinations which he referenced.

On the night of December 8, 2018 two leaders of the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) were assassinated in the state of Paraiba in the Northeast of the country. Their deaths, in an area regarded as a traditional stronghold of the left, have left many asking just what the future holds for activists in Brazil.

The assassinations are certainly not the first high-profile killings of social movement activists in Brazil in recent years, though they have received some added attention given that they come on the heels of the Bolsonaro victory – a worrying signal for some that the horrendous violence is only going to escalate.

To put it in perspective, the Brazilian religious advocacy group Comissão Pastoral da Terra – CPT (Pastoral Land Commission) released a thorough report which found that:

The brutal reality of Brazil's rural areas has become increasingly harsher since 2013, back when 34 murders were recorded. In four years, these figures have increased by 105%, reaching 70 executions in 2017 – a 15% increase over 2016.

It should be noted that, of course, this shocking rise in violence cannot be attributed to Bolsonaro himself, but rather to deeper structural and economic factors, in particular corporate privatization. As CPT coordinator Ruben Siqueira explained to Brasil de Fato:

We see this as a new land rush, in which land is a means of production, a store of value, like wood, water, ore, agribusiness, expansion of land-based businesses. This has to do with the financial crisis that started in 2008 with the speculative bubble. Since then, the hegemonic capitalist sector, which is financial capital, is looking for backing, something that can support this international speculative game

Indeed, it seems the escalation of violence against indigenous and peasant activists is directly connected to the growing need for consolidation of land and natural resources resulting from the economic downturn of the last ten years. However, it is perhaps even more precise to pinpoint the drop in commodity prices, most conspicuously the collapse of oil prices in 2014-2015, as one of the primary drivers of this renewed push for capital accumulation.

And though this process was jumpstarted during the tenure of Dilma Rousseff and the Workers' Party (PT), it has picked up momentum under the right wing Temer government.

And it's about to go into overdrive with Bolsonaro taking power. For it is Bolsonaro himself who has promised to open up as much protected land as possible to big business. Indeed, within days of Bolsonaro's victory, reports began to circulate that indigenous lands were being invaded and/or seized, with all the attendant violence one would expect. As Beto Marubo, a native leader from the Javari Valley Indigenous Land in Brazil's far west, explained to National Geographic, "Many brothers tell us there are invasions, people entering the territories with no regard for the rules and no fear of the authorities." This final point is critical because while impunity has long been the norm in Brazil, the utter disregard for any semblance of governmental or law enforcement oversight will likely increase under Bolsonaro who has all but given his blessing to displacement and violence against these groups.

Ultimately, the struggle is about land rights, especially for the indigenous peoples who have fought for official demarcation of lands for decades.

Dinamã Tuxá, Coordinator of Brazil's Association of Indigenous Peoples (APIB) summed it up neatly:

This scenario is totally heartbreaking. Bolsonaro has made clear and consistent declarations about ending the titling of indigenous lands, which are completely opposed to our rights. His racist, homophobic, misogynist, fascist discourse shows how Brazilian politics will be in the coming years... His discourse gives those who live around indigenous lands the right to practice violence without any sort of accountability. Those who invade indigenous lands and kill our people will be esteemed. He represents an institutionalization of genocide in Brazil.

Of course it must be remembered that Afro-Brazilian communities will be targeted as well. Marielle Franco's assassination in March 2018 was in many ways a watershed moment for the social movements in the country. However, rather than driving positive political change on the national level, Brazil has instead elected a fascist leader who praises the extrajudicial methods historically employed by the dictatorship and its enablers in the country. It remains to be seen how the left can regroup, respond, and reestablish its political power.

One thing is certain in both Brazil and Colombia: the far right is in power, and that means the war on social movements and activists is only just getting started.

And while it may seem bleak as we read about seemingly daily atrocities visited upon the indigenous and poor of these (and other Latin American) countries, we cannot simply despair. Instead, we must organize and mobilize. For those of us in the Global North, that

means doing what we can to be in solidarity with these activists, helping to build power internationally.

Duque, Bolsonaro, and the far right of Latin America may have ascended to power, but they are not omnipotent.

Now is the time for organizing; the time for struggle; the time for resistance.