

# Mogotes Municipal Constituent Assembly:

activating 'popular  
sovereignty' at a local level

**Monseñor Leonardo Gomez Serna**



Monseñor Leonardo Gomez Serna was the Bishop of the Diocese of Socorro and San Gil from 1996 until 2001. Currently the Bishop of Magangué, he is involved in various national peace initiatives and is a founding member of REDEPAZ

Colombia has experienced protracted violent conflict for much of its history and there have been efforts to address it for almost as long. The recent period of the conflict dates from the emergence in the early 1960s of a number of leftist guerrilla movements waging a 'popular struggle' against the state. Despite the attempts of successive administrations to bring the situation under control, the last few years have been marked by an upsurge in violence. The two main leftist guerrilla groups, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), as well as a growing number of right-wing paramilitary formations have attempted to consolidate their power throughout the country. Violence is particularly widespread in rural areas, where armed groups routinely intimidate and target local communities as they seek to expand their control. To date, over 35,000 people have died in a conflict that has displaced more than two million people inside the country.

Leftist armed groups frequently claim that they are fighting to secure major social, political and economic reforms that will wrest power away from corrupt political elites and benefit the majority of the population. As such, they have historically targeted and attempted to gain control of local authorities. The state tried to address this through efforts in the 1980s that were subsequently consolidated through the promulgation of the new national Constitution in 1991. The new Constitution requires the direct election of departmental governors and mayors as well as municipal council officials, with the aim of increasing their legitimacy at a local level. However, constitutional reforms have ultimately done little to affect the culture of patronage and corruption that runs through Colombian politics and the violent tactics of the armed groups have continued.

In a context where national level efforts to address the conflict have failed to halt violence, citizens of the northeastern town of Mogotes sought to address these challenges by developing local-level strategies for public participation in ending violence and creating a new political culture in their town. Their efforts had impact far beyond their own immediate surroundings. Amongst the first of the 'zones of peace' to be established in Colombia, the experience of creating new structures of local government in Mogotes has been a source of inspiration to communities who have replicated similar processes in their own municipalities.

## The occupation of Mogotes

During the run-up to local elections in October 1997, intimidation, kidnapping and sometimes assassination of government officials were common guerrilla strategies. As with other small towns in rural Colombia, the population of Mogotes, a municipality of 13,000

inhabitants in the department of Santander, has long been vulnerable to the actions of both leftist and right-wing armed groups. Strategically located in the eastern Andes, the outlying areas of the municipality are used as a corridor by these groups as they travel between their mountain bases. Within the town itself, the majority of the population suffered the consequences of political exclusion, with local government controlled by a small circle of powerful individuals who looked after their own economic interests at the expense of public services and development. On 11 December 1997, shortly after the elections, political violence took a new turn. The ELN entered the town of Mogotes and kidnapped the newly-elected mayor, denouncing his administration as corrupt. Three policemen and two civilians died in the one-day siege.

Despite the climate of fear generated by the heavy ELN presence around the town, the citizens of Mogotes mobilized in protest. With the support of the leadership of the local Catholic Church, they began a series of public demonstrations and prayer vigils, demanding the release of the mayor and an end to armed violence. After several days of campaigning, they were joined on 20 December by a diocesan solidarity pilgrimage of priests, nuns and lay people, led by the Bishop of the Diocese of Socorro and San Gil. They arrived in Mogotes and congregated in the centre of the town, issuing a public statement in which they rejected the ELN siege, the kidnapping of the mayor and the political corruption at the root of the violence. They encouraged the local population to defend the real interests of democracy.

## Developing the Municipal Constituent Assembly

In addition to public protests, the citizens began to organize themselves to reflect on the new situation. Earlier in 1997, as a result of a 'pastoral plan' developed by the diocese, new ecclesiastical groups had been created. Each comprised between eight and ten families, who met weekly to pray and to reflect on the problems facing the community. Following the siege, each group met to discuss the crisis. The analysis of all the groups was pooled and led to the identification of three overall problems that had culminated in the occupation: poverty, violence and administrative corruption.

With the support of the Church, the community developed proposals for a 'project of liberation' in response to the problems. This project, still ongoing some five years later, has three components: a plan for integral and sustainable human development to combat poverty; a strategy to build a 'community of peace' and reduce violence; and a commitment to the recovery and expression of the sovereign power of the people in order to root out corruption. These responses were inspired by

their understanding of the liberating words of the Gospel studied by the ecclesiastical groups during bible sessions, as well as by a strong local tradition of resistance and popular mobilization that had its roots in the colonial period. They were also encouraged by the notion of 'popular sovereignty' as a basis for the exercise of power as enshrined in Article 3 of the Colombian Constitution, which states: "Sovereignty rests exclusively in the people, who are the source of public power."

Unwilling either to accept the remnants of the corrupt local administration or the dictates of the ELN, the people of Mogotes developed a strategy to implement their 'project of liberation' themselves. With the support of experienced teams of pastoral animators from the Catholic Church, the population was divided into 18 local assemblies based on the ecclesiastical groups in different zones of the town and surrounding countryside that formed the municipality. These local assemblies then elected 180 delegates to form a Municipal Constituent Assembly. The large number of delegates ensured the inclusion of a diverse array of political sympathies and interest groups, including members of trade unions, non-governmental organizations, business leaders and local officials. Approximately two-thirds of the delegates were women, with young people actively encouraged to participate in the politics of their town through involvement in 'young peacebuilder' initiatives. The new Municipal Constituent Assembly of Mogotes (AMC) was inaugurated on 6 April 1998.

The AMC is mandated to monitor the implementation of the municipal development plan and to supervise the functions of municipal management. AMC plenary sessions take place on the first Monday of the month. The sessions are chaired by the three-person Presidency that performs the functions of president, treasurer and secretary. The meeting agendas are based on reports, analysis and reflection on everyday events, including the management of the town's authorities and the mayor's office. All AMC delegates are required to consult with their local assemblies prior to the sessions. Decisions in the AMC are made by consensus, although when this is not possible a system of majority voting is used. The AMC is guided by an 'operational committee' comprising 13 delegate representatives of different social groupings including the Church, the business sector, teachers, health service personnel and representatives of the rural areas. Its role is to oversee and evaluate the work of the AMC and to ensure the functioning of the local assemblies. It is also responsible for public information about the workings of all the structures.

## Building support for the process

Despite the clear popular momentum behind the process, the AMC has had many enemies. Families of the previous administration issued violent threats and spread negative propaganda. The armed groups have also posed a continual danger to the ongoing development of the process by attempting to disrupt the proceedings for their own interests. So far, despite some isolated incidents, an ongoing process of community dialogue with representatives of the guerrillas and paramilitaries has persuaded them to accept the process and not to besiege the town.

The AMC leaders have also sought to strengthen their position by enlisting support at regional, national and international levels. They promoted their process extensively in the surrounding region, encouraging support and solidarity from provincial and departmental level 'peace working groups' in the area. National reaction to the process was at first mixed, with the government of President Ernesto Samper unsure whether to recognize the new organizational structures. However, following assurances from the Catholic Church that they supported the new mechanisms and that they reflected the will of the people, the Santander Governor gave formal recognition to the new Assembly and attended its inauguration. The Bishop of Socorro and San Gil also intervened personally and held meetings with the national and departmental authorities and with the Commander of the Colombian army. He assured them that the process was not a front for guerrilla activity – as had been alleged – but a genuine movement of the people to recover their power. Finally, the new leaders invited representatives of the international community to visit the town and see the situation for themselves. Thus ambassadors from eight countries visited Mogotes in 1998 and subsequently offered financial support for some small development projects that had been identified by the community.

## Successes of the new administration

One of the first successes of the new Municipal Constituent Assembly was to secure the release of the kidnapped mayor from the ELN. However, in an effort to break with the corruption of the past, the Assembly informed him that they were not prepared to reinstate him and asked him to resign. When he refused, the population began silent marches and prayer vigils. Finally, the AMC organized a popular referendum throughout the municipality; when the results demonstrated that 95 per cent of the town demanded his resignation, the mayor conceded. The AMC then developed a new political and ethical code of conduct for future mayors and asked the national government to organize fresh elections. They replaced the title of 'mayor' with

'manager' to indicate that the purpose of the role was to ensure the implementation of the people's wishes. The subsequent elections passed smoothly with Jose Angel Gualdron emerging with a majority of votes. The result was recognized by the National Election Council and Gualdron was inaugurated.

The Assembly has also begun to change the culture of local politics. The large number of delegates to the AMC – which now stands at 230 – has substantially broadened political participation in and responsibility for local affairs. Extensive consultations in the local assemblies formed the basis for an integrated plan for development, peacebuilding and democratic governance that reflects the wishes of the population beyond the assembly. When the first manager's term expired in 2001, all candidates wishing to stand for election had to accept the plan for the municipality as the basis for their work. During the election campaign, assembly members accompanied all candidates to the constituencies, encouraging them to listen to the requests of the people rather than deliver lengthy speeches.

The AMC has strengthened accountability through changes to local electoral law and increased reporting requirements. It introduced new regulations obliging the manager to present his work for evaluation by the Assembly every twelve months. Permission to continue in office for the full three-year term is granted subject to a positive evaluation of the work undertaken during each year. The manager is also required to report to the AMC every three months, which then delivers a public report on its activities.

The AMC has also made significant progress in implementing the integral development plan at the heart of its project of liberation. The Assembly has built consensus on development and governance issues, begun to implement new agricultural projects and succeeded in improving the distribution and management of municipal resources.

The process of recovering popular sovereignty in Mogotes has served as a catalyst for community reconciliation in a previously polarized and violent society. As people have become accustomed to discussing their problems openly, incidents of violence have decreased considerably. Furthermore, the experience has offered local people a chance to participate in a peaceful process of political change and succeeded in involving young people, the future of the community, in the peacebuilding project. These experiences have underpinned the efforts to build a community of peace.





Perhaps most significantly, the experience of Mogotes has provided inspiration to other communities around the country. Often called the 'laboratory of peace', Mogotes was awarded the first National Peace Prize in Colombia in 1999. The municipality is now one of hundreds of zones of peace throughout the country and the inspiration behind the development of Municipal Constituent Assemblies elsewhere in the departments of Antioquia, Santander, Tolima and Huila. The Diocese of Socorro and San Gil also stimulated the development of a national network, the *Red Nacional de Iniciativas por la Paz y contra la Guerra* (REDEPAZ), which serves as the technical secretary to the Coordinating Committee for the Peace Territories and Communities. REDEPAZ runs a national 'hundred towns of peace' project to strengthen and support their activities throughout Colombia.

## Challenges and problems of popular sovereignty

Considerable challenges lie ahead for the town of Mogotes. Development potential is circumscribed by the inability of the state to invest sufficiently in the social capital of the community. In retrospect it is clear that more could have been done at an early stage to encourage external investment in economic development. The prevalence of violence, combined and entwined with recent escalations in the armed conflict,

has an impact on attitudes at the community level and requires constant attention. Similarly, the traditional political culture of patronage and corruption is deep-rooted. All these challenges require the creation and implementation of ongoing, long-term strategies for peace, development and community reconciliation. In addition, there is the underlying need to ensure that the mechanisms they have created are able to continue stimulating the active engagement of all sectors of local society, which is a necessary precondition to sustaining popular sovereignty.

It has been five years since this experience started. Although it is not yet sufficiently consolidated, the people of Mogotes recognize that, despite the difficulties, it has been a very positive step in advancing the integral development of the community and in enabling authentic democratic participation in local politics. While meaningful progress towards peace continues to elude Colombia at a national level, local populations in Mogotes and elsewhere are exercising their popular sovereignty and building their own peace.