Indigenous people ‘provoke’ peace in Colombia

Kristian Herbolzheimer, July 2012

In mid-July communities in the Cauca region (south-west Colombia) made it into the national and international headlines. The country was caught by surprise when they saw hundreds of unarmed indigenous people expelling both the army and the guerrillas from their territories.

A picture of indigenous people carrying away a crying army sergeant shocked a nation that has developed a narrow understanding of the conflict: good and evil, enemy and foe. A not uncommon reaction was, “How can these people show such a lack of respect for the institutional forces that are there to protect them against the FARC terrorists?”

Nobody listened to local people

In reality the indigenous people have been saying “enough is enough” for many years. But nobody has taken them seriously. The indigenous territories have been one of the major battlegrounds in this protracted armed conflict, as the Cauca region is a strategic corridor for troop movements and for drug smuggling. When I first met some of the indigenous leaders back in 2000 they were already reaching out to the Government and to FARC insurgents, requesting them to settle their differences and bring peace, and offering a special space for dialogue in their communities.

The background to this situation is predictably complex. This region’s struggle for identity, territory and autonomy has been going on since the time of the Spanish colonisation, 500 years ago. This has led to a long lasting political confrontation with the Colombian State over land and cultural and political rights.

But on the other hand, FARC guerrillas recruit indigenous children, and threaten or kill the leaders who don’t follow their orders. As though that weren’t already an abundance of competing interests, on top of this mining companies are now moving in to their ancestral domains to dig up the natural resources.

All in all the Cauca region is one of the most conflict-affected in the country and the quarter of a million indigenous people who live there suffer disproportionally the humanitarian and economic consequences of this war.

A reference for other peace initiatives

The indigenous people in Cauca feel that neither the State nor the rebels represent them. For a brief period of time, in the 1980s, they created their own armed group, the Quintin Lame, to support their struggle with the State and protect them from insurgent forces. But that experience was short-lived as they concluded that violence can’t be addressed with more violence. Since then they have been leading a nonviolent struggle for peace in Colombia, protected by an unarmed indigenous guard.

Initially the guard were defending their own communities from hostilities carried out by any armed actor. However increasingly they are collaborating with other peace initiatives across the country: with peasants, women and black communities who share their struggle to be recognised as a third actor in any discussions for a peaceful settlement of the armed conflict. And with other sectors of society who see, in this unarmed resistance against war, a symbol and a reference for a Citizen’s Path to Peace that focuses more on public participation and strengthening democratic institutions than further armed confrontation or an elitist negotiating table.
Open questions

This indigenous riot raises questions on several fronts: how long can this unarmed confrontation last? Won’t the guerrillas benefit from this political stance against the State security forces? Do the indigenous people fool themselves that they can be an isolated ‘island of peace’ in a country at war? What lessons can be learned from other similar international initiatives to create zones of peace? Would the guerrillas agree to withdraw if the Army did? Could such simultaneous withdrawals lead to some sort of humanitarian dialogue? Could a humanitarian dialogue signal an opening for a new peace process to put an end to 45 years of war?

So many questions but one thing is clear: the indigenous people in Cauca are the most radical anti-war expression in Colombia. They are offering a rare opportunity for the Government, FARC and society at large to take a step back, re-assess their current approach, and show the will and capacity to take the bold and creative steps that are needed to put an end to almost five decades of confrontation.

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