

## REPORT: AFTER RECOGNITION

The mingueros of Cauca began a march in October 2008, gaining momentum as it moved northward, first to the city of Cali, Colombia's third-largest city, and culminating in a massive rally on November 24, 2008, in front of the national palace in downtown Bogotá. The culminating event of the minga was a moment of considerable enthusiasm for the indigenous movement in Colombia, demonstrating to the country the movement's tremendous organizational capacity. From the crowded stage in the Plaza Bolívar, indigenous leader Feliciano Valencia declared: "The minga that we have given birth to during these last several weeks has a life of its own, but

it must be nurtured like an infant child. And we are all its parents, responsible for taking care to see it grow into maturity, take its first steps, and flourish for a Colombia that we all desire."

Valencia, a member of the executive committee of the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC) and one of the most visible leaders of the mass mobilization, charged the crowd of thousands to go back to their communities and continue the work already begun. The closing rally also saw a dramatic handshake and pledge of cooperation between Valencia and Narciso Mora, president of the Central Workers Union (CUT)—a public reaffirmation

## The *Minga's* History Repeats Itself

Colombia's indigenous movement is complex, multifaceted, and by no means homogenous, so it should not be surprising that there are important disagreements within it. Today the movement is facing a pivotal moment in which leaders must decide whether they can afford to spend time and resources building alliances when the economic and human rights crisis they face is so acute. History, it seems, is repeating itself. Similar, and profound, internal debates unfolded within Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC) during its early years.

Some, for example, felt that CRIC's executive committee was straying too far from the authority of the traditional indigenous structures of the *cabildos* (councils), instead turning into a typical, top-down bureaucracy modeled on non-indigenous forms of organization of the dominant society. Moreover, CRIC was committed at the time to coalition building with the peasant leadership—not surprising, given CRIC's origins in the peasant movement—as well as with workers and students. This caused some in Cauca to question the organization's indigenous credentials.

Much of this criticism came from the leadership of the Guambiano people, who objected to the number of non-indigenous "collaborators" participating in the planning and strategizing of CRIC's executive committee. From this perspective, the movement needed to be indigenous first and foremost. The Guambiano leadership at the time felt the direction needed to come from the traditional authority of the *cabildos*, and not from an executive committee influenced so much by so-called collaborators without roots in the communities.<sup>1</sup>

Eventually CRIC split, and a second organization was formed, the Indigenous Authorities of Colombia (AICO), representing the Guambiano community in Cauca and other parts of southwestern Colombia. It was a very difficult period for CRIC, exacerbated by the wave of repression com-

ing from state and para-state forces once the movement's dramatic land-recuperation efforts in Cauca began to take shape. The internal divisions were profound, and centered around questions of accountability, particularly of CRIC's executive committee. The split, however, did not derail the movement, which continued to grow, first throughout Cauca and gradually into other regions of the country with large indigenous populations.

The movement developed over a 20-year period, culminating in the rewriting of the Colombian constitution in 1991, which for the first time comprehensively recognized indigenous rights. But then, in the early 1990s—just as indigenous communities were claiming their legitimate stake in Colombia and having their rights finally recognized—the country underwent a process of "modernization," whereby all the institutions of the state supposedly designed to protect the communities were dismantled. Therefore, the other major legacy of President César Gaviria (1990–94), aside from presiding over the formation of the new constitution, was his famous *apertura económica*, or economic opening. This process, hoisted upon Colombia and other countries of the region by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, opened up the Colombian economy to foreign investment and called for the privatization of state entities and major cuts in domestic spending to limit the size of the state.

The *apertura* also led to a flood of imported agricultural products from abroad, which threatened thousands of peasant farmers' livelihoods and led many of them to begin cultivating illicit crops like coca and poppy to offset their losses. This coincided with a dramatic increase in U.S. military assistance to Colombia in the name of the drug war, resulting in large-scale aerial eradication efforts throughout southern Colombia and subsequent displacements of peasant communities.

that the minga would continue to expand beyond the indigenous movement. It was an unprecedented message to the nation that the indigenous movement was no longer acting alone to defend its own interests, but part of a national struggle against the entrenched interests that control the state.

Yet continuing the grassroots, cross-sector organizing that the minga had by then committed to represents one of the biggest challenges for the indigenous movement—perhaps its greatest challenge since the movement emerged in the early 1970s. Despite the symbolic gesture of coalition building by Valencia and Mora, the role that

non-indigenous sectors would play in the minga's development was never clearly articulated, leading some in and outside of the movement to resent the indigenous leadership for its lack of clarity on this important point.<sup>1</sup>

Now, two years later, Colombia's indigenous movement finds itself at a difficult crossroads: Will it continue on as a broad-based, multi-sectoral movement or will it redefine itself as a strictly indigenous movement? The debate within the many indigenous organizations that make up the movement over what the minga's main agenda should be has been at times divisive. The direction it goes in will either place the movement's leadership at the forefront of

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All of these developments inevitably forced the government to renege on its many constitutional commitments to respect indigenous territorial claims. How can a government attract foreign investors eager to begin development on mineral-rich land when all these pesky regulations are in place protecting these same lands, now under the firm control of indigenous communities? How could the Colombian government permit indigenous communities to govern themselves according to their own cultural and social traditions when it had international obligations to destroy illicit coca crops? The state and the interests it serve began a process of counter-reform, through means legal and illegal, to displace indigenous people from their lands.

This effort accelerated under Uribe, who, eager to sign a trade agreement with his underwriters in Washington, looked for other mechanisms to reverse many of the territorial gains of the 1990s. Like many of his predecessors of the previous century, Uribe looked to dismantle the *resguardo* (reservation) system through a series of counter-reforms, although he did not openly describe it as such. Uribe also took it upon himself to directly confront the "terrorism" of the guerrillas on indigenous territories, which is consistent with the military offensive his administration took throughout the country to strategically weaken the guerrillas and debilitate their fighting capacity.

The indigenous movement's first large-scale attempt to fight the state's counter-reform came in September 2004 with a nationwide "conversation with the people." This was a broad-based mobilization that took place during a period of heightened tensions on indigenous territory that coincided with the negotiations between Uribe and the Bush administration over a free trade agreement. The moment was considered so important for the indigenous movement that some indigenous leaders called it the "fourth historical phase of

the indigenous experience in Colombia" since the Spanish conquest in the 16th century.<sup>2</sup>

According to this historical interpretation, the first phase for Colombia's indigenous communities was "the resistance," which lasted for centuries, from the colonial era through the post-independence period, right up until 1970. The next phase, known as "the recuperation," began in 1971, when the CRIC was founded in the mountains of northern Cauca after the dramatic land takeovers that the communities were initiating all around the department. This "recuperation" phase lasted until 1991, with the rewriting of the Colombian constitution with representatives of the indigenous movement in the Constituent Assembly. This launched the third period of "autonomy" for the indigenous movement, an autonomy that was abruptly confronted by the domestic manifestations of globalization and all of its sociopolitical and economic by-products.

With the 2004 mobilization, for the first time, indigenous communities began articulating the need to build a cross-sector "alternative" for the next historical phase, one that would link indigenous communities to other sectors in Colombia—including peasants, the trade union movement, Afro-Colombians, and students. In short, some of the more radical elements of the indigenous movement, many of whom were based in northern Cauca and had experienced the worst of the dirty war waged against the communities throughout the 1980s and 1990s, called for a popular uprising of sorts, designed to transform Colombian society and politics through coordinated, nonviolent mobilization and political action.

This process of constructing an alternative program to the government's interventionist, neoliberal development model and militarism was reignited in the fall of 2008 with a new mobilization: the *minga indígena y popular*. □

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