Indigenous governor murdered in Colombia: 
the limits of the Nasa people’s resistance

The young Indigenous governor of Cauca was murdered for her decision to expel legal and illegal armed actors from the territory and put an end to illicit crops. After her murder, the “Minga indígena hacia adentro” organized collective action in a demonstration of their autonomy and governance. Meanwhile, the indigenous authorities denounced the fact that the national government was not taking any action to enforce the Peace Accords.

By Diana Alexandra Mendoza - 1st May 2021

Sandra Liliana Peña Chocue, Indigenous governor of the La Laguna Reserve (‘Resguardo’), was murdered on 20 April last. The young leader was born in Sa’th Tama Kiwe, one of the Nasa people’s territories that lies nestled in the mountains of Cauca department. Like all of the descendants of Uma and Tay (the woman and the man who gave birth to the Nasa people and form their life paradigm), Liliana’s umbilical cord lies buried somewhere in this territory. She was thus rooted to the spirit of this Mother Earth from birth.

And yet the history of Cauca, and of other Colombian Andean territories filled with millions of Indigenous umbilical cords, has been scarred by episodes of violence and dispossession ever since the time of the Conquest and colonization. The native peoples went from being the ancestral owners of vast areas of the Tierradentro region to being Indians dispossessed of their land or confined to small reservations created by the Spanish Crown aimed at protecting their workforce and more easily collecting their taxes.

Resistance to landowners and drug traffickers
The history of the Nasa is replete with testimonies of struggle. The Nasa are a fierce people, known for their ability to challenge the power of the landowners and agro-industrial megaprojects that are threatening their territory and which have resulted in Cauca’s fertile lands being among the most concentrated in the country. Since the late 1970s, they have also been under threat from guerrillas and paramilitaries linked to drug trafficking, who are fighting for control of the strategic Cauca region.

There are corridors through Nasa territory that connect the Amazonian foothills with the Pacific region and the border with Ecuador. It has thus been an area of operations for decades in which land grabbers and businessmen, together with the armed henchmen of the growers, purchasers and distributors of coca, poppy and marijuana grown on the ethnic and peasant territories, have converged.

Coca cultivation for drug trafficking purposes was located in Indigenous areas to begin with, taking advantage of its ambiguity between tradition and survival given that it is a sacred leaf that has been used as food, medicine and ritual plant since time immemorial. With the increase in drug trafficking and armed conflict on their territories, however, this cultivation culminated in forms of control and violence so bloody that the Indigenous authorities themselves even issued Territorial Autonomy Laws to protect the population, natural ecosystems and water sources.

The Nasa people thus established penalties for any community members growing illicit crops. Unfortunately, the same political, economic and armed sectors interested in the drug trafficking business have, through death threats, prevented the Indigenous people themselves from dismantling these crops. In order to spread fear, they have made attempts on the lives of Indigenous leaders and guards who have tried to expel them from their territories.

State collusion
It is not an exaggeration to say that much of the Nasa territory has been a theatre of war. For the Colombian State, the battles that threaten the existence of thousands of Indigenous peoples are simply a natural outcome of unresolvable conflicts which are, for many, rather convenient. Armed conflicts form part of an “anachronistic” physical and cultural space the destiny of which is to dissolve of its own accord in the midst of contradictions of economic, political and military power.

It is a documented fact that the current government’s response has not consisted solely of absence or omission. Both Centro Democrático (Democratic Centre) and other parties aligned with President Iván Duque have stated their hostility towards the Peace Accords signed between the government of Juan Manuel Santos and the FARC guerrillas in 2016, as well as their intention to “tear them to shreds”. This peace agreement, which included measures to democratize the land, dismantle illicit crops, fight against paramilitarism and establish a transitional justice tribunal, as well as measures for individual and collective reparation of victims, also represents hope for a containment of the violence in the ethnic territories of Cauca.

However, when implementation of the Peace Accords first commenced, Indigenous, Afro-descendant and peasant organizations in Cauca began to denounce the fact that the Duque government was actively working to obstruct them. Not only by allowing drug trafficking “crossings”, run by Mexican cartels no less, but also by engaging in direct violence against the communities. Duque thus enabled the consolidation of a criminal apparatus from which drug traffickers, local and national politicians, legal and illegal armed groups, landowners, the media and private companies all benefit.

In 2019, a Public Statement from the Nasa people, meeting in Sa’th Tama Kiwe, noted: “[The government has designed] an apparatus of terror aimed at capital accumulation in which, while the uniforms and names may change as necessary, the underlying intention is to dispossess and dismantle the processes of the communities that are defending peoples,
processes and territories. And it is precisely when high-ranking military commanders of the Colombian army are involved in extrajudicial cases that the Sinaloa Cartel appears in territories such as Cauca to guarantee drug trafficking; anyone who opposes this is massacred.”

The determination that cost Liliana her life

It is in this context that Sandra began her term as Nasa governor only four months ago. Her murder comes as yet another lamentable death in this daily landscape of murders of social leaders and human rights defenders. The numbers are frightening: since 2020, 130 Indigenous individuals have been murdered in the country, making Colombia a world leader in terms of persecution of human rights defenders.

The community members of Laguna Siberia say that, immediately prior to her assassination, and in her capacity as governor of the Reserve, Liliana had been in touch with a joint commission from the National Government and the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC). She had informed them of her decision to expel legal and illegal armed actors from the territory and put an end to the cultivation of illicit crops within its jurisdiction. It was this determination that cost her her life.

Liliana's murder was an affront to the spirit of the Nasa people and only renewed their belief in their dignity and self-determination. The day after the assassination, the organized communities went out to implement her decision: to expel the armed actors and criminals and put an end to illicit crops. In this way, they were able to effectively demonstrate their autonomy and government on their own territory through a collective action that they called “La Minga indígena hacia adentro” (Indigenous Communal Work Within) or “Minga de control territorial” (Working Together for Territorial Control).

The reaction of both legal and illegal armed actors was not long in coming. They have already perpetrated armed attacks against the Minga and 22 people have been wounded so far. This
is not deterring the community, however. The Nasa are responding vehemently to put an end to the violence against themselves and their territory: they are raising the banner of autonomy and self-determination in the territory where both Liliana’s umbilical cord and body are buried.

On 20 April, the traditional authorities of the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca issued a statement entitled “Don’t wash your hands with the blood of our leaders” in which they denounced the systematic nature of the murders and the fact that the national government was taking no action to ensure Indigenous life and autonomy: “Neither the mass media nor the representatives of the national government and its ally parties can tell us that it is because of drug trafficking that the social leadership, the Indigenous leadership, is being assassinated. They cannot continue to sell us the idea that drug trafficking is the cause of our children’s recruitment when we know and have insisted that the structural failures underpinning the social and armed conflict in our territories are due to the policies of President Iván Duque’s government. Through his thinkers, he insists on ignoring and destroying the Peace Accords”.

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