

The day George Bush came face to face with Latin America's revolt

Thanks to a powerful indigenous movement from Colombia to Bolivia, US free-trade policies are in tatters

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When Manuel Rozental got home one night last month, friends told him two strange men had been asking questions about him. In this close-knit indigenous community in south-west Colombia, ringed by soldiers, rightwing paramilitaries and leftwing guerrillas, strangers asking questions is never a good thing.

The Association of Indigenous Councils of Northern Cauca, which leads a political movement that is independent from all those armed forces, decided that Rozental, its communications coordinator, had to get out of the country - fast. He had been instrumental in campaigns for agrarian reform and against a free-trade agreement with the United States, and the association was certain that those strangers had been sent to kill Rozental - but by whom? The US-backed national government, which notoriously uses rightwing paramilitaries to do its dirty work? Or the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Farc), Latin America's oldest Marxist guerrilla army?

Oddly, both were distinct possibilities. Despite being on opposing sides of a 41-year civil war, the Uribe government and the Farc agree that life would be infinitely simpler without Cauca's indigenous movement, which is part of an increasingly powerful political force sweeping Latin America, challenging traditional power structures from Bolivia to Mexico.

Prominent indigenous leaders in Northern Cauca have been kidnapped or assassinated by the Farc, which seeks to be the exclusive voice of Colombia's poor. And indigenous authorities had been informed that the Farc wanted Rozental dead. For months rumours had circulated that he was the worst thing you can be in the books of a leftwing guerrilla movement: a CIA agent. But there had been other rumours too, spread through the media by government officials. They held that Rozental was the worst thing you can be in the books of a rightwing, Bush-bankrolled politician: an "international terrorist".

On October 27 the association, representing the roughly 110,000 Nasa indians in the region, issued an angry communique: "Manuel is no terrorist. He is no paramilitary. He is no agent of the CIA. He is a part of our community who must not be silenced by bullets." The Nasa leaders say they know why Rozental, now living in exile, has come under threat. It is the same reason that two peaceful indigenous villages in Northern Cauca were turned into war zones in April after the Farc attacked police posts, which the government used as an excuse for a full-scale occupation.

All of this is happening because the indigenous movement in Cauca, as in much of Latin America, is on a roll. In the past year the Nasa of Northern Cauca have held the largest anti-government protests in recent Colombian history and organised local referendums against free trade that had a turnout of 70%, higher than any official election (with a near-unanimous no result). And in September thousands took over two large haciendas, forcing the government to make good on a long-promised land settlement. All these actions unfolded under the protection of the Nasa's unique Indigenous Guard, who patrol their territory armed only with sticks.

In a country ruled by M16s, AK47s, pipe bombs and Black Hawk helicopters, this combination of militancy and nonviolence is unheard of. And that is the quiet miracle the Nasa have accomplished; they have revived the hope that died when paramilitaries systematically slaughtered leftwing politicians, including dozens of elected officials and two Unión Patriótica presidential candidates. At the end of the bloody campaign in the early 90s, the Farc understandably concluded that engaging in open politics was a suicide mission. The key to the Nasa's success, Rozental says, is that they are not trying to take over state institutions, which "have lost all legitimacy". They are instead "building a new legitimacy based on an indigenous and popular mandate that has grown out of participatory congresses, assemblies and elections. Our process and our alternative institutions have put the official democracy to shame. That's why the government is so angry."

The Nasa have shattered the illusion, cherished by both sides, that Colombia's conflict can be reduced to a binary war. Their free-trade referendums have been imitated by non-indigenous unions, students, farmers and local politicians nationwide; their land takeovers have inspired other indigenous and peasant groups to do the same. A year ago 60,000 marched demanding peace and autonomy; last month those demands were echoed by simultaneous marches in 32 of Colombia's provinces. Each action, explains Hector Mondragon, a Colombian economist and activist, "has had a multiplier effect".

Across Latin America a similarly explosive multiplier effect is under way, with indigenous movements redrawing the continent's political map, demanding not just "rights" but a reinvention of the state along deeply democratic lines. In Bolivia and Ecuador, indigenous groups have shown that they have the power to topple governments. In Argentina, when mass protests ousted five presidents in 2001 and 2002, the words of Mexico's Zapatistas were shouted on the streets of Buenos Aires.

Facing mass protests in Argentina yesterday during the Summit of the Americas, George Bush saw that the spirit of that revolt is alive and well. And although Bush didn't take up Hugo Chávez's offer to hold an open debate on the merits of "free trade", that debate has already happened in the continent's streets and ballot boxes, and Bush has lost. Consider this: the last time these 34 heads of state got together, it was April 2001 in Quebec City; it was Bush's first summit after his election, and he announced with great confidence that the Free Trade Area of the Americas would be law by 2005. Now, four years later, many of the faces of his colleagues have changed and Bush can't even get the free-trade area on the agenda, let alone get it signed.

As in Colombia, there are attempts across the continent to paint the indigenous-inspired movements as terrorist. Not surprisingly, Washington is offering both military and ideological assistance. Congress has approved a doubling of the number of US soldiers in Colombia and there has been a marked increase in US troop activity in Paraguay, worryingly near to the Bolivian border, which could move decisively to the left in upcoming elections. A recent study by the US national intelligence council warned that indigenous movements, although peaceful now, could "consider more drastic means" in the future.

Indigenous movements are indeed a threat to the free-trade policies Bush is hawking, with ever fewer buyers, across Latin America. Their power comes not from terror but a terror-resistant strain of hope, so sturdy it can take root in the midst of Colombia's seemingly hopeless civil war. If it can grow there, it can anywhere.