

# US Sponsored “Democracy” in Colombia: Political Assassinations, Poverty and Neoliberalism

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Not a week goes in Colombia without reports of assassinations and persecution of labor and political activists.

Ana Fabricia Cordoba, gender activist and leader of displaced peasants, was shot dead on June 7th inside a street bus, after she foretold her own death due to constant threats and abuses against her family.(1)

Manuel Antonio Garces, community leader, Afro-descendent activist and candidate for local office in southwestern Colombia received on July 18th a disturbing warning that read “we told you to drop the campaign, next time we’ll blow it in your house” next to an inactive hand grenade.(2)

Keyla Berrios, leader of Displaced Women’s League was murdered last July 22nd, after continuous intimidation of her organization and threats on behalf of death squads linked to Colombian authorities (3), a fact so publicly known after hundreds of former congressman, police and military personnel are either jailed or investigated for colluding with Paramilitaries to steal elections, murder and disappear dissidents, forcefully displace peasants and defraud public treasury, in a criminal network that extends all the way up to former president Alvaro Uribe and his closest aides (4).

The official explanation for these crimes is also well known; Bacrim, an acronym which stands for “Criminal Gangs”, a term created from the Colombia establishment including its omnipresent corporate media apparatus to depoliticize the constant violence unleashed against union leaders, peasants and community activists.

Human Rights defenders point to the unequal and unjust structures of power and wealth which rely heavily on repression. However, no matter how much effort is put into misleading public opinion about the nature of this violence, the crimes are so systematic and their effects always turning out for the benefit of the elite that a simple class analysis debunks the façade of these “gangs” supposedly acting on their own, and exposes the insidious relationship between the armed thugs and seats of political power in Colombia.

What we are dealing with is the expression of present-day fascism in Latin America.

In a country overwhelmed with unemployment and poverty – nearly 70% – and 8 million people living on less than U\$2 a day who daily look for their subsistence in garbage among stray dogs or selling candies at street lights and city buses, is also shockingly common and surreal to see fancy cars – Hummers, Porsches – million dollar apartments, country clubs and a whole bubble of opulence just in front of over-exploited workers, ordinary people

struggling merely to make ends meet, or at worst, children, single mothers, elderly, and people with disabilities, without social security and salaries, much less higher education and decent housing.

For instance, in Cartagena, a Colombian Caribbean colonial city plagued with extreme poverty, beggars, child prostitution and U\$400 a night resorts, you can pretend to feel in Miami Beach or a Mediterranean paradise, and in less than five minutes away you can also visit slums which would make devastated Haiti look like suburbia.

The same shocking contrast can be experienced in all major cities in Colombia. Thus, in order to keep vast privileges of a few amidst inhuman conditions of the majority, the elite needs to have an iron grip on political power. And once its power is contested or mildly threatened by the collective action of social movements, democratic parties and conscious individuals, a selective burst of state violence is unleashed effectively dismantling any kind of peaceful organizing by fear and demoralization.

The high levels of attrition suffered by activists raising moderate democratic banners such as the right to assembly, collective bargaining, freedom of expression and reparation from political violence, are the result of decentralized state repression carried out by death squads led by high state officers (5) who supply them with intelligence and economic resources extracted from defrauding public treasury and money laundry in the narcotics chain, where social investigators claim that most of the profit accounts for institutional economy, the banks and the state (6). This elaborated repressive strategy differs from the one perpetrated by the military juntas that ruled Argentina, Uruguay and Chile, among others, where public forces exercised directly the political violence against dissidents without pretentious democratic credentials, such as the ones constantly regurgitated by the Colombian establishment, making it more difficult to expose its deep dictatorial mechanisms that have disappeared more than 30000 Colombians (7) in the last years of US backed "counterinsurgency" policies, far surpassing Pinochet's reign of terror.

In Colombia, where the dominant social elite prevails, thousands of bodies of the "disappeared" have been buried into mass graves, the assassination of trade union leaders is the highest in the world (on a per capita basis rate). Meanwhile, several million peasants have displaced and impoverished. In a context of brutal social repression backed by neoliberal policies, an atmosphere of generalized fear prevails.

This state of affairs raises a basic question, as James Petras puts it: "How does one pursue equitable social policies and the defense of human rights under a terrorist state aligned with death squads and financed and advised by a foreign power, which has a public policy of physically eliminating their adversaries?"(8). Some in Colombia already found an answer in the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a document that constitutes the basis for all modern states:

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule

of law (9).

In the light of the exposure of the Colombian hybrid state which pits formal democracy and excessive privileges for a few against brutal repression and poverty for the majority, one must comprehend the existence of an armed conflict. This class confrontation has resulted in a “polarization of civil war proportions between the oligarchy and the military, on one side, and the guerrilla and the peasantry, on the other”, (10) and is mostly funded by US government using taxpayers money to back a rogue state and a comprador elite that prefers to wage dirty war against its own population rather than yield some political power and moderate social reforms. Modernity hasn't arrived in Colombia, where few can enjoy excesses and vices of promised 'civilization' in fancy restaurants and country clubs, and most still live in 1789.

In times when president Obama justifies his “humanitarian intervention” and escalation of the Libyan civil war by having public opinion to believe NATO and US bombs are there to protect civilians, and when the International Criminal Court applies selective justice as it rushes to levy charges against Gaddafi for alleged crimes that pale in comparison to the ones daily committed by the Colombian regime, the international community is turning a blind eye to crimes against humanity in the shameful custom of double standards and insulting those truly resisting with their teeth, the savagery and abuse of power.

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## Notes

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7. Kelly Nicholls. "Breaking the Silence: In search of Colombia's Dissappeared". The Guardian. December 9, 2010.

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8. James Brittain, op cit. Foreword. By James Petras.

9. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. United Nations. 1948. <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>.

10. James Brittain, op cit. 144.

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