

Venezuela Land Struggles of Indigenous People: Sabino Romero's Widow Testifies Amidst Threats

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By Lucas Koerner

Dozens of activists gathered outside the Ministry of Justice in the capital today in solidarity with Lucia Martinez de Romero, the widow of assassinated indigenous Yukpa leader Sabino Romero. Today she testified in the trial of Angel Antonio Romero Bracho, (aka "Manguera") accused of murdering the indigenous chief or "cacique".

Lucia herself also suffered multiple gunshot wounds the night of March 3, 2013 when her husband was shot and killed by hired assassins reportedly acting in the service of wealthy cattle ranchers.

Lusby Portillo, 66, Coordinator of the Zulia-based Homo Et Nature Society, explained what is at stake in today's proceedings:

"Today there is a trial against the physical murderer, who shot and killed [Sabino] and wounded Lucia Martinez. Five police officers from Machiques have already been tried and given seven years of prison... They gave them seven years, because there was influence on the part of the cattle ranchers, who paid so that the court would decide a minimum sentence of seven years".

Portillo is one of the principal activists to have followed the case over the past 23 months. He told Venezuelanalysis that many indigenous activists feared that a miscarriage of justice would take place unless supporters continued to draw attention to the case. One witness today also noted that the family of Manguera began to threaten Lucia before she was due to testify.

"If we let our guard down, if we don't protest, if we don't make movies, if we don't write articles, if we don't get the word out, these courts are going to give Manguera ten, eleven years, and then within two or three years he can go free with all of the benefits... So we are demanding thirty years of prison [for Manguera], and we're also demanding that the trial against the five police officers be annulled, that there be a new trial, and that... the intellectual actors... the cattle ranchers who financed [the murder], who are millionaires, go to trial."

Land Struggles

In the leadup to his assassination, Rabino spearheaded a series of occupations by Yukpa

campesinos of the expansive rancher haciendas established on their ancestral land in Sierra de Perijá, which were returned to them by the current socialist government under the Constitution. According to Portillo, these lands were violently confiscated by the government of dictator Juan Vicente Gomez in 1930, driving the Yukpa people into the mountains. When they subsequently attempted to retake their lands, as Sabino would do over eighty years later, they were brutally massacred by the cattle ranchers.

For indigenous rights activist Tibusay Maldonado, 52, however, this struggle goes much further back than eighty years.

“We are active in the organization National Front for Land Struggle, because, even though we are from Caracas we are from the city, this problematic of the land, this plundering from 500 years ago. We are the inheritors of a dispossession, of an invasion 500 years ago, and the indigenous peoples remain in resistance, and we must stand with them”.

Amid Trial, Impunity Continues for Murder of 8 other Yukpa Leaders

Portillo went on to criticize what he described as “impunity” for the hired killers of indigenous leaders and their intellectual and financial backers.

“Of the Yukpa [leaders] killed over the question of land, who are nine up until now, only the case of Sabino has been taken to the courts, but the [case of the] other eight murdered [leaders] has not been investigated nor brought to trial...Besides trial for [the case of] Sabino, there also needs be trials for the other eight Yukpa who were assassinated.”

Nonetheless, for Leonardo Dominguez, the problem goes well beyond these nine assassinated leaders, encompassing the issues of paramilitary violence in Venezuela writ large;

“This is something that is practiced in Colombia. These are new crimes in Venezuela. So I think the laws need to stipulate a decent punishment for this murderer to mark a precedent, because enough is enough. There have already been 359 campesinos assassinated at the hands of the hitmen, plus workers’ leaders, plus popular leaders. We want peace, but we believe peace is achieved through struggle. If you want peace, prepare for war,” he said.

A Test for the Revolution

For those present outside the Ministry of Justice, today’s trial represents a fundamental test of the Bolivarian government’s commitment to defending indigenous rights.

“Socialism has two paths,” warns Dominguez.. “Either we’re with the indigenous people or we’re with the murderers.”

Despite the challenges faced by the Yukpa people, including the relative inaction of the government, Jessy Rojas, 20, of Urbano Aborigen, is nevertheless hopeful. She stated that there had been a “fair amount of gains” for indigenous people under the Bolivarian Revolution, including the trial of Sabino’s murderer.

“In the past, there generally weren’t trials for indigenous cases. In the past, there wasn’t

this openness to discussing indigenous issues in the capital”.

According to Jessy, these historic gains are propelling young activists to take the struggle even further.

“This is the moment to demand,” she asserted.

The case has been adjourned until February 13th.

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