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The Quest for Indigenous Autonomy: Communication Media, Internal Conflicts, and Policy Reform in Colombia

By

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Abstract

In 2013, the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) and the national government signed Agreement No. 547, which commissioned to the five main national indigenous organizations of the country the drafting of a bill to propel the strengthening of the indigenous media in Colombia. This political reform would represent a significant advance in the democratization of the historically monopolized and exclusive Colombian media landscape, thus fulfilling one of the mandates of the 1991 Colombian multicultural Constitution. However, due to internal conflicts within the indigenous leadership, these five organizations failed to present any bill to the Congress of the Republic of Colombia, wasting this historic opportunity. Based on this case, the discussion on "radical" Zapatista autonomy, and the concept of "indigenous utopias" proposed by Rappaport (2005) (rather than impossible dreams, objectives to strive for), this article argues that a robust autonomous indigenous governance depends on the constant search for a "utopian balance" between legal protections (centripetal forces) and de facto practices (centrifugal actions). [territorial autonomy, neoliberal state co-optation, indigenous media producers, de facto autonomous practices]

Resumen

En 2013, la Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia (ONIC) y el gobierno nacional firmaron el Acuerdo No. 547, el cual delegó a las cinco principales organizaciones indígenas nacionales del país la redacción de un proyecto de ley para impulsar el fortalecimiento de los medios de comunicación indígenas en Colombia. Esta reforma política representaría un avance significativo en la democratización del históricamente monopolizado y excluyente panorama mediático colombiano, cumpliendo así uno de los mandatos de la Constitución multicultural colombiana de 1991. Sin

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embargo, debido a conflictos internos dentro del movimiento indígena, estas cinco organizaciones no lograron presentar ninguna propuesta de ley al Congreso de la República de Colombia, desaprovechando esta oportunidad histórica. Con base en este caso, la discusión sobre la autonomía "radical" Zapatista y el concepto de "utopías indígenas" propuesto por Rappaport (2005) (más que sueños imposibles, son metas por las cuales luchar), este artículo sostiene que una gobernanza indígena autónoma robusta depende de la búsqueda constante de un "equilibrio utópico" entre protecciones legales (fuerzas centrípetas) y prácticas de facto (acciones centríifugas). [autonomía territorial, coaptación del estado neoliberal, productores de medios indígenas, prácticas autonómicas de facto]

Introduction

In 2013, the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) and the Colombian Ministry of the Technologies of Information and Communication (MINTIC) signed Agreement No. 547 which commissioned the five main national indigenous organizations in the country to draft a law proposal that aimed to protect traditional, electronic, and digital indigenous communication initiatives.[1] The enacting of this bill into law would signify a step forward in fulfilling the indigenous people's "right of communication" stipulated in the 1991 multicultural Constitution. After several months of interorganizational negotiations, indigenous organizations failed to present any document for legal consideration due to internal conflicts over the administration of the public resources granted for this policy-making effort. This conflict ended abruptly a rare opportunity to reform the highly monopolized Colombian media landscape. Through the analysis of this failed policy-making effort, this article aims to problematize essentialized descriptions of indigenous people's approach to autonomous governance.

According to Postero and Tockman (2020), indigenous autonomy is "the ability of indigenous people to govern themselves according to their own logics and norms." Many other scholars propose similar general definitions (González, Burguete, and Ortiz 2010; O'Malley 1996; Sieder and Barrera Vivero 2017). Despite the general consensus over its definition, the failure of the Colombian indigenous groups to pursue the reform policy illustrates how the practice of autonomy continues to be the subject of controversy and political tension within the indigenous world.

These indigenous people and organizations have embraced two opposite approaches to exercise territorial autonomy. On one hand, some indigenous leaders advocate for "administrative autonomy," or access to public resources to control

the provision of cultural and essential rights such as communication, health, and education. In the case of the failed policy-making effort, national and regional indigenous organizations embraced this strategy to achieve territorial autonomy.

On the other hand, some other indigenous actors, many of them closer to political bases, propose to embrace de facto autonomous practices to bypass the state's legal and financial protections to prevent state intervention in indigenous affairs. During the negotiations for Agreement No. 547, this was the position taken by Colombia's best-known indigenous media producer (Cortés 2019), the Nasa's Tejido de Comunicación de la Asociación de Cabildos Indígenas del Norte del Cauca (Communication Network of the Association of Indigenous Councils of Northern Cauca, TC-ACIN). Due to the political discrepancies between these two visions on autonomy and some tensions over resource management within the indigenous world, the ONIC failed to present the law proposal as stipulated by Agreement No. 547.

In this article I analyze this failed attempt to formulate a communication policy by building on the strategies of the Mexican Zapatistas to develop de facto autonomous practices (Inclán 2018) and Rappaport's (2005, 8) concept of "indigenous utopias" (not impossible dreams, but objectives to strive for). Specifically, I argue that a robust autonomous indigenous governance depends on a constant search for a "utopian balance" between "centripetal" and "centrifugal" forces. In the first section, I discuss Roudakova's (2011, 270) concepts of "centripetal" and "centrifugal" which she uses to depict the necessary equilibrium needed to construct a well-functioning media system in post-Soviet Russia between forces that push social groups closer to the state power (centripetal) and others that have the opposite effect (centrifugal). In the second section, I provide the context of policy making in indigenous media and autonomy in Colombia. The failed communication policy-making process in Colombia is contrasted with the Zapatista's "radical" de facto autonomous practices. This comparison illustrates the difficulties indigenous people endure in their quest for autonomous governance to prevent simultaneously the state's co-optation and political isolation from the mainstream national public sphere. In section three, the article analyzes the discord between the administrative and de facto autonomous views and practices within the indigenous world in Colombia based on an ethnographic account of the failed attempt to draft a law proposal for indigenous media in that country. The article concludes by explaining that this political failure unveils the tension between administrative centripetal tendencies and de facto centrifugal views over territorial autonomy within the Colombian indigenous movement.

This article is the result of more than two years of ethnographic work (2013–15) in Colombia, particularly in the Cauca Department among the Nasa and the Misak, and at the Second Continental Indigenous Summit of the Abya Yala in Mexico in 2013. This ethnography relies on interviews with indigenous leaders, media

practitioners, and members of the Colombian Ministry of Culture. This work also results from my participant observation of organizational meetings between indigenous people and external collaborators, local academics, and lawyers responsible for drafting law proposals for indigenous communication.

Contexts of State Policy Making and Indigenous Media

The 1991 Constitution gave historical recognition of Colombia as a multicultural nation including the rights of indigenous communities. Specifically, a series of political and cultural rights were established that provide the legal bases for the consolidation of autonomous territorial zones where indigenous people could protect their culture and participate as citizens in the broader society. These rights were intended to overcome the historical exclusions that had condemned indigenous people—approximately 5 percent of the total national population—to endure poverty and development levels below the national average. As part of these rights for inclusive citizenship and democratic participation, Article 20 of the Constitution provides all Colombians the right to fund their own media to counteract the monopolization of media production and enjoy freedom of expression and access to veracious information. To facilitate the fulfillment of this right, the state launched various institutions and laws for the development of indigenous radio stations under the legal category of "radios of public interest."

Even though some indigenous radio stations have contributed to strengthening indigenous languages, forging a new generation of leaders, and keeping their audiences informed during moments of crisis, these projects have been in the center of the political discussion on indigenous autonomy within the indigenous world. The reason for the controversy is that the "public interest" legal frame has served as a "centripetal force" through which the state influences the media content of indigenous radio stations and prevents their expansion in the mainstream media market. This has allowed powerful media conglomerates to maintain a monopoly over indigenous representation and to retain control over public media and information (Cortés 2016, 2019).

The Colombian indigenous media practitioners have attempted to resolve their media problems through legislation reform in ways that are similar to other popular movements in Argentina (Macrory 2013), Venezuela (Waisbord 2010), Bolivia, and Ecuador (Waisbord 2011). However, the administration of public resources has frustrated policy-making efforts, revealing profound disagreements over "indigenous autonomy" between various indigenous actors, including local media practitioners, regional leaders, and national organizations.

The quest for indigenous autonomy in Latin America has resulted in one of the most complex political agendas for the indigenous movement in the era of

multicultural inclusion. On the one hand, it has facilitated the development of disruptive cultural and political practices that contribute to dignifying indigenous people's lives (Wiessner 2011). In Colombia, indigenous people's centrifugal practices include: the creation of unarmed self-defense organizations in charge of protecting indigenous territories (Rudqvist and Anrup 2006); the self-provision of education and health (Molina-Betancur 2012; Puerta Silva 2004); the auto-eradication of illicit crops (Izquierdo 2008); the drafting of alternative developmental plans (Monje Carvajal 2015); and the establishment of independent indigenous media outlets (Cortés 2019). On the other hand, the administration of public funding creates a centripetal control that, in many cases, disrupts autonomous governance. This is most evident in cases in which some indigenous organizations and authorities have been implicated in practices of corruption and clientelism, which undermines their legitimacy among their social bases, as exemplified in the case of the self-administration and provision of health care within indigenous territories (Puerta Silva 2004). In reaction, some sectors in the Colombian indigenous world, inspired by the Mexican Zapatistas, advocate for breaking loose from the state's funding to prevent "centripetal co-optation" and embracing de facto autonomous practices.

However, there is debate over whether the Zapatistas have achieved stable territorial autonomy by embracing de facto autonomous practices and foregoing the state's legal protections and economic support. As various scholars have documented extensively (see González 2015; Harvey 2015; Inclán 2018; Krøvel 2010; Mora 2017), the Zapatistas have successfully provided essential and cultural services—such as health care, education, justice, and communication—to thousands of indigenous people in Chiapas through de facto autonomous institutions (or *Juntas de Buen Gobierno*). The Zapatistas embraced this "radical centrifugal" form of governance after the Mexican political elites failed to legalize the indigenous autonomy framework that was negotiated after the 1994 Zapatista uprising. The Zapatista self-reliance model builds on the economic and political support of a transnational solidarity network forged through years of steady relationships with Catholic liberation theologians and other non-state actors, rather than appealing to state funding and the weak legal recognition approved by elites. Their audacious use of digital media has facilitated the global dissemination of the Zapatista's progressive discourse and the expansion of their strategic alliances with secular non-governmental organizations (NGOs), becoming involved in different Left-leaning causes both locally and internationally.

Due to their impressive organization and dignification of the traditionally subjugated indigenous people, the Zapatista de facto autonomous model has inspired popular actors who seek alternative forms of self-governance in Colombia and around the world (see Anderson and Springer 2018; Esteva 2015; Mignone, Nállim, and Gómez Vargas 2011). However, as the political scientist Maria Inclán (2018)

shows, the Zapatistas' de facto autonomy (radical centrifugal governance) and lack of articulation with the state—or "politics of refusal" (Mora 2017, 3)—have facilitated the movement's survival but extinguished its relevance and prominence within the context of national politics. The Zapatista isolation, according to Inclán (2018), resulted from several factors: the traditional exclusionist attitude of the Mexican political elites; the Zapatistas' unwillingness to participate in mainstream politics; their refusal to forge alliances with oppositional elite forces; and their reprioritization of a global-oriented agenda over México-oriented discourses as a way to maintain engagement with its transnational support network. Consequently, the Zapatistas lacked legal protections to contest governmental development projects that affected Zapatista territories, such as the Maya train and the San Cristóbal-Palenque highway (Estrada Saavedra, López Leyva, and Inclán 2020). The Zapatista nomination of María de Jesús "Marichuy" Patricio Martínez as its candidate for the 2018 Mexican presidential elections is, however, an acknowledgement of the strategic importance of maintaining a centripetal synergy (or pushing for political influence beyond one's locality) to achieve a stable territorial autonomy (Inclán 2018, 18).

Based on Inclán's (2018) analysis, I argue that the Zapatista case serves as an outstanding example of de facto autonomous organization. Still, it fails to shed light on how autonomous groups can establish a productive relationship with the state as citizens—that is, as subjects with rights and not only obligations (Postero 2007)—and thus to construct a stable "territorial indigenous autonomy" within the modern neoliberal nation. If the Zapatista model falls short, what other case can serve as a concrete example of a balanced relationship between centripetal and centrifugal forces?

I argue that the case of the Colombian Misak (Guambiano) evangelical media offers an excellent example of a successful negotiation of the "centripetal" and "centrifugal" forces. Since the 1980s, the Misak's Evangelical Church Alianza Cristiana Misionera Guambiana (the Misak's Christian Missionary Alliance) has been running a radio station and other institutions to provide emotional support and mental health services to the indigenous Misak community that neither the neoliberal state nor the indigenous authorities have been able to provide (Cortés 2020). To create and maintain these institutions, Evangelical leaders have reached out to external supporters without compromising their local agendas and appealed to the constitutional "right of communication" to contest the state's attempts to close their unlicensed radio stations. Further, they have reenacted a widespread practice employed among grassroots organizations before the arrival of external funding: *pasar el sombrero* (passing the hat among commoners to collect money). Balancing external support, legal protections, and internal fundraising, these Evangelicals participated in ecumenical events and other autonomous practices that stimulated

cultural invigoration without the "approval" of the state or any external religious organization.

However, the balance between centripetal external influences and centrifugal autonomy is a utopian and idealized goal that must be constructed daily. The right to freedom of worship—a right recognized by the 1991 Constitution—allowed the significant growth of Pentecostal, Jehovah Witness, and other Christian denominations within the Misak territory, including the Misak Evangelicals. This has triggered increased competition and radicalization of religious factions and groups. Hence, the Evangelicals—some of them local agents of radical religious views—began to disrupt the earlier balance between "local indigenous practices" and "external influence" and, consequently, threatened the militant indigeneity that had propped up the Misak's struggle for cultural survival (Cortés 2020).

The Dilemma of Indigenous Autonomy

Since the 1960s, the Colombian indigenous people have embraced territorial autonomy as central to their struggle to preserve their traditions and lifestyles (Rappaport 2005). Capitalizing on a moment of political crisis, the indigenous movement achieved the legal recognition of their right for territorial autonomy, as stipulated in the 1991 Constitution (Sieder 2002; Van Cott 2006). As part of this territorial autonomy and a neoliberal decentralization process, indigenous people also acquired the administration of essential services such as health and education, partially endorsed by the political elites. Due to the Colombian elite's economic interests in oil, gold mining, and other raw materials, this decentralization restricts the administration of natural resources within indigenous territories (Rodríguez 2014).

Unfortunately, the transfer of administrative responsibilities to indigenous authorities has not resolved the disproportionate material exclusions. According to the Colombian Department of National Statistics (DANE), the department of Cauca—which has the second-largest indigenous population in Colombia—is the nation's second-most impoverished, with a poverty rate of 62 percent (almost double the national poverty rate) and an extreme poverty rate of 34 percent (nearly three times higher than the national average). Some indigenous leaders claim that the current crisis is not the result of taking on the administration of state responsibilities but of not taking them on fully (Aylwin 2014).

According to these leaders, the indigenous people's destitution is the result of a lack of a political-administrative reform that would transform indigenous *resguardos* (semi-autonomous indigenous territories) into Entidades Territoriales Indígenas (Territorial Indigenous Entities, ETIs). In the 1991 Constitution, the ETIs were projected to have the same administrative rights and responsibilities as

municipalities, providing them with the legal framework for managing public funding (Baena 2015). This constitutional mandate was never implemented due to opposition from different sectors, including powerful local elites—who maintained their power through clientelism and paramilitarism—and other grassroots groups such as peasants, Afro-Colombians, and indigenous dissident groups—who compete against indigenous organizations for local influence, territory, and resources.[2]

In addition to this resistance, scholars have documented some unexpected negative consequences of implementing administrative autonomy in indigenous territories throughout Latin America. For instance, Charles Hale (2011) explains that administrative autonomy in Central America has made indigenous organizations act as agents of the neoliberal regimes they were attempting to challenge. The "neoliberal governance," Hale continues, has brought about many consequences, including the restriction of indigenous grievances to local boundaries, the creation of administrative responsibilities without providing adequate resources, the taming of outspoken community members with quasi-governmental jobs, the distraction of talented leaders with "urgent" operational procedures and pointless meetings, and the relocation of motivated grassroots leaders away from struggles towards structural changes. Therefore, administrative governance fractures social movements by way of a fatiguing tension between the neoliberal technocratic restrictions and the anti-systemic discourses that sustain indigenous people's claims for autonomy (Hale 2011).

A similar expansion of neoliberal governance via administrative autonomy happened through the 1990s privatization and decentralization of the health provision in Colombia. These reforms facilitated the creation of indigenous people's health companies (Empresas Promotoras de Salud, EPS) and health-care delivery facilities (Instituciones Prestadoras de Salud, IPS), expanding health coverage and bilingual services and generating new professional opportunities for indigenous health practitioners. However, this decentralization also deepened corruption, created legal restrictions on the incorporation of indigenous health knowledge, restricted covering plans to essential procedures, and promoted competition among indigenous institutions over patients and resources (Portela-Guarín 2014; Puerta Silva 2004). Therefore, the decentralization of health services has become a "centripetal incorporating force" for moving indigenous people into the state's institutional apparatus instead of creating an alternative path for indigenous governance. Even worse, it has resulted in the extension of the Colombian state's high levels of corruption (Daheshpour and Siân 2018; Larrarte Córdoba 2018) and robust clientelist culture (Fergusson, Molina, and Riaño 2017) within the indigenous world.

Responding to these inconveniences, a few indigenous leaders have pushed forward the construction of a centrifugal political agenda through projects such as the TC-AICN or the Proceso de Liberación de la Madre Tierra (Process of Liberation of Mother Earth), which seek territorial expansion via land seizures in Northern

Cauca (Aljure Sánchez 2018). However, Zapatista-like autonomous practices have not been widely adopted in Colombia for several reasons. First, a large sector of the indigenous leadership has engaged in a culture of deradicalized political activism after the 1991 multicultural inclusion. For instance, dissident actors within the indigenous world created the National Coordination of People, Organizations, and Indigenous Leaders (CONPI) to counteract (what they consider) the "corruption and cooptation" of national indigenous organizations. Rather than proposing de facto centrifugal autonomous practices, this new organization aims to establish more "efficient interlocution" with state institutions to improve the administration of public resources (Gutiérrez Lopera and Alvarado González 2018).

Second, the high levels of state, paramilitary, and Leftist guerrilla violence within indigenous territories have also deterred the development of de facto indigenous autonomy in Colombia. For instance, the 2016 peace accords between the state and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) opened an intense territorial dispute in Northern Cauca. Motivated by the state's negligence in the fulfillment of peace accords and the substantial revenue from drug trafficking, extortion, and illegal mining, the FARC and other unlawful groups killed more than fifty-seven indigenous people in Cauca in 2019 (Rodríguez 2020). This violence has had numerous consequences, including the departure of members of solidarity networks—fundamental for the development of de facto autonomy (Inclán 2018, 35)—from indigenous territories. Also, the high levels of violence keep the indigenous leadership focused on "maneuvers for survival" and prevent them from engaging in practices that aim at "decolonial ontological reinvention" (Albán Achinte 2013). Due to the precarity of the situation, many indigenous leaders resort to requesting security protection from state agencies, as is the case with Feliciano Valencia—senator for the Nasa-dominated political party, Movimiento Alternativo Indígena y Social (Indigenous and Social Alternative Movement, MAIS)—who, despite state "protection," suffered two assassination attempts in 2020.

Third, the Colombian indigenous organizations' very nature restricts those who aim to implement Zapatista-style de facto autonomous practices. The Zapatistas are a political organization with strong indigenous roots but also explicit social and economic agendas. This ideological unity makes it possible to embrace centrifugal practices of governance regardless of implicit sacrifices. In contrast, the indigenous organizations in Colombia are primarily ethnic associations that bring together indigenous people of different political tendencies. For instance, the Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca (Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca, CRIC)—the earliest and most influential regional indigenous organization of Colombia—gathers sectors that embrace de facto autonomous politics such as the TC-ACIN and the "Liberation of the Madre Tierra." Nevertheless, CRIC also assembles others who pursue centripetal administrative actions aimed at autonomous territorial governance, as shown below in relation to the indigenous

media's failed policy making. Unlike the Zapatistas, however, CRIC members have actively participated in political alliances and won elections at municipalities, governorates, and the national Congress.

Even though administrative autonomy has facilitated some forms of self-governance, it has also brought new challenges for the indigenous movement, such as fostering internal conflicts, enforcing centripetal neoliberal governance, and constraining strategic relationships with other oppressed groups. Through a historical analysis of the discussion on the failed indigenous communication law, we will see how the Colombian indigenous organizations are oriented toward an administrative autonomy, creating difficulties for the development of de facto autonomous practices that balance power dynamics with state funding and regulations to construct a steady territorial autonomous agenda.

The Development of the Discussion of Communication Law

Indigenous people have benefited from various initiatives to strengthen the legal protections that guarantee their right to communication in Colombia. To consolidate that right, the indigenous people have launched various initiatives in the last twenty years. One of these was the Minga con los Pueblos Indígenas y por el Derecho a su Palabra (MPIDP) in 2001. This 2-year program, organized by several indigenous *cabildos* (councils) and the Colombian University of Valle, and sponsored by the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), offered workshops, talks, and concerts on communication strategies to more than a thousand participants from the Misak, Toroto, Yanacona, Kokonuco, and Nasa communities from the Department of Cauca. According to the MPIDP's final report and the event organizers' testimonies (personal anonymous interviews, 2015), regional and national indigenous organizations boycotted this event claiming that this type of initiative fostered "institutional divisions" among the indigenous organizations.

In the years that followed, regional and national indigenous organizations became more supportive of grassroots media initiatives. In 2010, CRIC organized the Primera Cumbre Continental de Comunicación Indígena del Abya Yala (First Continental Summit of Indigenous Communication of Abya Yala, PCCCIAY) in La María, Piendamo, Cauca. At this summit, 1,500 representatives of more than 150 organizations denounced the legal restrictions and violence that have disrupted the growth of indigenous media. As a solution, they called for legislation that would guarantee training, sustainability, and media infrastructure within indigenous media. They also requested the elimination of taxes, free access to the electromagnetic spectrum, respect for the sacred indigenous territories, monitoring and control of mass media representations of indigenous people, the inclusion of indigenous issues within mass media agendas, and legal protection and property rights over

indigenous cultural production. The participants also committed to carrying out thirty-five different actions, including the organization of the Second Continental Indigenous Communication Summit of the Abya Yala (SCCCIAY) in Mexico, the declaration of 2012 as the International Year of Indigenous Communication, the creation of a continental indigenous media network, the training of indigenous technicians to lower the costs of media equipment maintenance, the creation of academic programs on indigenous media, and the promotion of indigenous cultures and indigenous political views (CRIC 2011).

Despite the political significance of the event, some participants manifested their discontent over the sponsors of the PCCCIAY: "Ecopetrol (a semi-private Colombian oil company) and ISA (a public Colombian energy company) intend to sell the false idea of being friendly industries, even though they are responsible for destroying mother earth and killing her sons and daughters. These companies have manipulated our brothers and leaders' consciousness, provided gifts—motorbikes and cattle—to take over indigenous territories. Their sponsorship implies a form of co-optation of our organizations and our spaces for deliberation because these companies impose rules that benefit their interests in retribution for their investment" (CRIC 2011). Critics condemned the sponsorship of these semipublic energy companies as counterproductive to the indigenous people's vital connection with nature and territory. They added that Ecopetrol specifically had given indigenous leaders motorbikes and cattle in exchange for their support for their development projects within indigenous territories. In other words, the protestors deemed that the sponsorships of these two companies represented another centripetal force to co-opt indigenous organizations.

These critical voices also condemned the participation of members of state institutions: The PCCCIAY "is a process of popular participation and construction of our forms of life; thus, we question ministries and government representatives' direct involvement. This government has favored the intervention and devastation of our communities and territories. We wonder about the contradictions between our political discourses and the negotiations engaged by our organizations" (CRIC 2011).

This statement makes evident the conflict between those sections of the indigenous movement that advocate for exercising their autonomous territorial rights by appealing to the state institutions' economic resources versus those that consider state intervention—especially from entities related to developmental projects—to be potential sources of centripetal control. Like the Zapatistas, the former group promotes alternative autonomous actions—providing services, organizing events, and developing media initiatives—without state funding that could compromise their epistemic, political, and social agenda.

The TC-ACIN represented, *at the moment of this policy-making process*, one line of critique that demanded the construction of a self-sustained organization

within the indigenous movement in Cauca.[3] According to Vilma Almendra and Manuel Rozental (2013), two of the founding members of the TC-ACIN, this media project was intended to counteract the powerful media groups that sought the consolidation of a homogenizing capitalist ideology through pro-developmental and anti-social movements' propaganda. The mass media propaganda, they add, complements a plan that aims to destroy indigenous lives, including terror and war, the legislation for territorial displacement, and the state's attempts at co-optation.

Even though Nasa's oral and spiritual traditions spearheaded the TC-ACIN's media plan, Almendra and Rozental (2013) explain that the adoption of modern technologies—such as radio stations, video production, and digital media—has facilitated cultural recovery and autonomous governance. To invigorate that process, they demanded from indigenous leaders a more substantial commitment and better political clarity on indigenous communication. According to them, the authorities that receive funding and licenses to establish radio stations compromise and destabilize indigenous people's voices by creating political commitments and dependencies that undermine their struggle toward much-needed structural changes.

After the PCCCIAY, friction increased between those who supported indigenous autonomy beyond the state's legal frameworks and those who promoted the increased participation of indigenous organizations in public resource administration. These tensions were exacerbated in 2013, when the members of the TC-ACIN decided not to participate in the SCCCIAY in Mexico. The TC-ACIN made this decision after the Mexican media indigenous producer, Ojo de Agua, decline to attend the event to protest against the Mexican government's intervention in the financing, organization, and development of it. According to a press release, the state sponsorship, the participation of the Mexican secretary of communication and transportation, and the potential presence of the then Mexican president, Enrique Peña Nieto (who finally recused himself), was an attempt to cleanse the image of the government after accusations from various sectors about human rights violations against popular groups in Mexico. The boycotters found the presence of the government representatives extremely offensive: it was these very officials who had repeatedly harassed the unlicensed indigenous media radio stations. Ojo de Agua and the TC-ACIN clarified that they were not wholly and fundamentally opposed to receiving support from the state—at least, not in principle. However, they were determined to fight against the use of an indigenous event as a public relations tactic to rescue and recoup the image of governments and institutions that violated indigenous rights (Ojo de Agua 2013).

Vicente Otero, the coordinator of communication and external relations for CRIC, criticized the decision of Ojo de Agua and the TC-ACIN, arguing that the summit's agenda was "the indigenous people, and not…the sponsors" (Servindi

2013). This statement further illustrates the tensions between the two sections within indigenous organizations: one group welcomed public funding while the other viewed state intervention as a means to undermine their political struggle.

Hundreds of participants attended the workshops, concerts, presentations, and discussions during the more than four days of events held in Santa María Tlahuitoltepec Mixe, Oaxaca, Mexico. However, no Zapatista-affiliated media attended it. The Colombian delegation was the second largest (after the Mexican delegation) and far outnumbered other international groups such as the Bolivian and Peruvian delegations, which were no larger than five people each. Among the Colombians were more than ten representatives from CRIC, more than twenty Misaks (who are not members of CRIC), many others from other indigenous media projects, state ministries and public companies, and local NGOs. In conversations and interviews with some delegates, it was revealed that almost all Colombian representatives had had their travel expenses covered by Colombian governmental institutions.

The question remains whether the SCCCIAY contributed to the consolidation of the indigenous people's communication projects in Latin America. On the one hand, this event assembled more than 1,500 indigenous media practitioners and others involved in its development from different regions to exchange experiences, discuss grievances, and consolidate networks. On the other hand, the event concluded with demands for actions that were not much different from those from the first summit in Cauca, Colombia, three years earlier. For instance, they ratified the need for a continental communication network and created a continental school of communication—both are still to be enacted. They also proposed the development of legal frameworks for indigenous communication and the organization of the Third Continental Summit of Indigenous People of Abya Yala in 2016 in Cochabamba, Bolivia, another event that received criticism when it received state funding. As for new proposals, some were too general, with suggestions such as "rescuing the family values, remaking the role of women, the young, and children in the exercise of the territorial and human rights." Other proposals were too banal, like the one to "propose a communication week of the indigenous people and promote an international campaign to spread this right" (SCCCIAY 2016, 20).

From the perspectives of some participants, the Mexican government used the event to clean up its image, just as Ojo de Agua had warned. The Mexican government provided an impressive campsite with several showers, toilets, a large dining place, medical services, a permanent exhibition on indigenous crafts and art, three enormous concert tents, continual transportation between locations, and several full-color plasma screens, among other such facilities. The government also provided free food, sheets, and sleeping bags. National and international audiences could witness this "multicultural event" by way of a daily national television

broadcast that showed the folklore groups' presentations, which were invited from all around Mexico.

Despite the significant expenditure on such events, the Mexican and Colombian governments continued to limit their support to locally oriented media initiatives (Cortés 2019; Wortham 2013). They also continue failing to fund initiatives that benefited large-scale indigenous political agendas such as the proposed continental network of indigenous media. In this political context, the ONIC signed an agreement with the Colombian Ministry of Culture to develop and disseminate a communication law proposal for indigenous people.

Agreement 547

The ONIC and MINTIC signed Agreement 547 to draft a document to serve as the basis for the first national public policy for indigenous communication in 2013. For this purpose, the Ministry of Culture gave ONIC and the other four national indigenous organizations a sum of 900 million pesos (approximately US$501,113) to consult, publicize, and construct the law proposal. To carry out this mission, they formed the National Commission of Indigenous People's Communication (CONACIP), comprising indigenous media practitioners from different Colombian regions, including members of the TC-ACIN. According to this agreement, the CONACIP had to submit a law proposal approved by all five national indigenous organizations by May 2014. The government committed itself to presenting the proposal in the national Congress for final approval.

The members of CONACIP constructed the law proposal in several deliberative stages during 2013 and 2014. These stages included two rounds of visits to five national macro-regions, six other meetings in different Colombian cities, the Second Continental Summit of Indigenous People of Abya Yala in Mexico, several sessions in Bogotá, visits to indigenous media projects, and meetings with members of different state institutions, such as the Ministries of Culture, Education, and Telecommunications, the presidential program for indigenous people, the National Television Authority (ANT), the National Agency of Electromagnetic Spectrum, and the National Office of Copyright (ONIC 2014).

In June 2013, the TC-ACIN declared it would no longer participate in CONACIP. According to a letter submitted to the organization, the TC-ACIN stepped down because of the process' "lack of autonomy." They claimed concerns about the lack of willingness of indigenous authorities to fulfill the communicative needs of indigenous people at the grassroots level and the excessive bureaucratization around this policy-making effort. The TC-ACIN also warned about the

time frame imposed by the state institutions. As explained, in less than two years, the technical team of the CONACIP had to compile different indigenous people's views, conceptions, and necessities on communication, draft the policy proposal, and notify the results to more than a hundred indigenous cultures across the country.

Despite these internal divisions and the problems in dealing with such a monumental task, CONACIP drafted a seventy-five-page proposal that discussed the importance of a communication law for indigenous people. It described the methodology and theoretical framework and its four main structural components: forms of indigenous communication; media technologies incorporated into the indigenous world (radio stations, video, and digital production, and news press); a plan for the training of indigenous media practitioners; and guarantees and rights for indigenous communication (ONIC 2014).

The final document contained several controversial points. First, it focused on indigenous communication and excluded other groups traditionally marginalized by mass media, such as Afro-Colombians, mestizo peasants, and the urban working class. Such legal privileges and exclusions have increased interethnic conflicts, creating divisions between social sectors (López Gómez 2014; Rosas 2013; Valencia 2015; Vélez-Torres 2018). Second, the proposal did not directly tackle the Colombian mass media's broader problems, such as excessive monopolization of media production and ownership, and the general exclusion of popular sectors (Cortés 2016). Third, the proposal asked for legal frameworks and economic support for carrying out activities that were part of the indigenous people's cultural traditions. For instance, it asked for funding to reinvigorate indigenous "spiritual communication," strengthen spaces for thought and dialogue, and disseminate indigenous principles such as solidarity and autonomy. As shown by the case of the indigenous radio stations of Cauca (Cortés 2019), incorporating the state logics and funding into indigenous projects could provide some legal guarantees for fulfilling indigenous rights but, at the same time, strengthen centripetal governance over indigenous political actions.

Finally, instituting such a law implies significant financial investment, especially considering its broad scope. In addition to the support for "spiritual communication," training for indigenous media practitioners, permanent support of media production and distribution, it also planned to create new state institutions to develop indigenous communication and oversee mass media content. To pay for this ambitious agenda, the proposal contemplated the creation of new taxes on mobile phone services and contributions from existing state institutions such as the Administrative Department of Science, Technology, and Innovation (COLCIENCIAS) and the National System of Loyalties. This financial approach is problematic considering that other traditionally disenfranchised sectors could see these new taxes to support indigenous communications as unfair, especially as they would

not benefit directly from the end product, resulting in increased tension between social groups. Also, the Colombian state had financed this type of social welfare policy in the past with royalties from the extractive sector, especially oil production, which helped elites promote the development of polemical fracking projects for "the benefit of all Colombians" (Campos 2019). Therefore, relying on the state to finance indigenous communications projects could result in a very contradictory cycle that involved the necessity of furthering even more polemical development projects that would affect indigenous livelihoods.

Regardless of the difficulties and contradictions within the proposal, the indigenous communication law represented a step toward the democratization of the highly monopolized mass media and the protection of de facto alternative media projects. However, it did not even have the chance to be discussed in the national Congress: the other four national indigenous organizations—OPIAC, AICO, ATIC, and CIT—rejected the law proposal one day before the deadline for final submission. They claimed that ONIC's methodologies restricted the participation of local authorities and communities in this policy-making effort. They also complained that they were excluded from the administration and control of the funding involved in the agreement, arguing that ONIC did not report how the funds had been spent. They also criticized the government for not providing them with extra funding for disseminating the proposal among the communities they represented.

The Ministry of the Technologies of Information and Communication finally refused to provide extra funding to the four indigenous organizations, thus ending this policy-making effort. The leadership of the main national indigenous organizations—many of whom had little or no previous interest in "indigenous communication"—thus brought to a standstill the hard work, effort, and hopes of indigenous communicators, academics, and some sympathetic state functionaries who had dedicated almost two years to drafting the law proposal. This unfortunate event shows how centripetal administrative practices can foster divisions within the indigenous world, as Hale (2011) also observes in the context of Central America and the Mexican Zapatistas try to prevent it by embracing de facto centrifugal actions within their territories.

Conclusion

The case of the failed policy for indigenous communication shows some of the difficulties, developments, and disagreements endured by indigenous people in the construction of "indigenous autonomy" in Colombia. Due to the conflicts among indigenous organizations caused by the administration of public funding, the indigenous people lost an opportunity to present before the national Congress a proposal that would potentially provide the legal grounds for fortifying indigenous

media. The failed communication law reform, therefore, shows that cultural rights like communication cannot be reduced to centripetal forms of "neoliberal governance" (Hale 2011), nor are they an effective facilitator of centrifugal "indigenous decolonial" agendas (Wiessner 2011). Instead, this case shows that cultural rights and practices operate as a site of ongoing tensions between different political approaches to what "autonomy" means and how it should work within the indigenous world.

The failure to draft the law proposal for indigenous communication opens up an interesting debate for the indigenous leadership and anthropologists on the best way to develop effective practices toward a sustainable territorial indigenous autonomy. Zapatistas and some Colombian indigenous sectors have embraced autonomous practices without state sponsorship and, as much as possible, the state's legal constraints. They have developed a range of political strategies to prevent the risk of state co-optation via public funding, such as the Zapatistas' development of an international support network and the Proceso de Liberación de la Madre Tierra's redistribution of plots of land previously controlled by speculators and agro-industries. In addition to resisting the cohesiveness of the state's centripetal force, these practices of self-governance also create venues for consolidating ontological decolonial agendas (Esteva 2015) that challenge the traditional exploitative rule of the elites that are of late dressed in neoliberal fashion. But, as Inclán (2018) shows, even the Zapatista centrifugal resistance needed some centripetal legal protections and political alliances with sectors of the political elite in order to make its model politically relevant at the national level, more effectively protect territorial autonomy, and (I add) to exercise their citizenship beyond their territory.

In the Colombian case, divergent factions within the indigenous world attempt to pursue de facto autonomous practices of governance and accountability. These centrifugal forces seek to counteract the practices of corruption and greed related to public administration in Colombia, and that push the indigenous movement toward the state's control. As many indigenous elders remember and some Evangelical indigenous groups practice, the indigenous movement can return to *pasar el sombrero* to counteract the influence of external forces and de-escalate rivalries among its leadership and grassroots members. At the same time, they also have to find legal grounds and venues for a constructive relationship with the state that guarantees their territorial autonomy and the ability to exercise their rights as Colombian citizens.

Notes

[1] The Organización Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas de la Amazonía Colombiana (OPIAC), Autoridades Indígenas de Colombia (AICO), Confederación Indígena Tayrona (CIT), and Autoridades Tradicionales Indígenas de Colombia Gobierno Mayor (ATIC).

[2]In 2015, CRIC and the government of Juan Manuel Santos tried unsuccessfully to negotiate the implementation of the ETIS. I witnessed in the municipality of Silvia, Cauca, how this negotiation caused ethnic tensions between the members of CRIC, Afros, peasants, municipal inhabitants, and indigenous communities unaffiliated to CRIC, such as the Misak of Guambia. They were worried that CRIC would end up controlling the resources for education and health, withdrawing everyone else from any possibilities for decision-making over those services.

[3]I stress *at the moment of this policy-making process* because the orientation of these indigenous media projects changes rapidly in relation to their dependency on the political will of the local authorities.

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