Dignidad Agropecuaria Nacional:

The Rebirth of the Agrarian Movement in Colombia

Few events in recent Colombian history have shaken the political landscape as much as the agrarian protests of February and August 2013. The mobilizations marked the birth of a new social movement, Dignidad Agropecuaria Nacional (National Agricultural Dignity), which is currently in the process of forming a national, legally recognized organization with the capacity to advance the interests of Colombian farmers and challenge the neoliberal agricultural model championed by President Juan Manuel Santos Calderón.

To understand the nature and origin of this new social movement, I conducted fieldwork in the regions of Boyacá and Caldas, two of the strongholds of Dignidad Agropecuaria Nacional, where I out carried out a series of in-depth interviews with farmers, students, and organizers who participated in the 2013 protests.

It all started back in 2012, when a meeting of coffee farmers, organizers, and political leaders was convened to discuss the crisis of the coffee economy. Prices had been hitting record lows for the previous three years, while the costs of production, particularly pesticides and fertilizers, had skyrocketed. These shocks were taking place in a context of state disinvestment and growing debt that threatened to displace farmers from their land. The meeting attendees agreed to organize a series of marches and rallies and send a letter to the ministry of agriculture demanding government support to withstand the coffee crisis. When their pleas were mostly ignored, discontent grew, and leaders began planning for a strike that would block major roads as a form of leverage to press their demands. On February 25, 2013, thousands of coffee farmers from different regions of the country went on a massive strike that blocked major roads and lasted until March 8. To put an end the strike, the Santos administration was forced to negotiate a number of important concessions, most notably a subsidy of 145,000 Colombian pesos for every 125 kilos of coffee whenever the internal price of the grain fell below 700,000 Colombian pesos.

While coffee farmers were negotiating the conditions to end their strike, the situation for producers of other agricultural products was becoming ever more precarious. A few months later, inspired by the coffee strike, farmers from various regions of the country organized the largest agrarian strike in recent Colombian history, the Paro Agrario Nacional (National Agrarian Strike), which paralyzed large areas of the country between August 19 and September 7, 2013. Once again, after a wave of police repression in an attempt to clear the roads, the government was forced to negotiate and make a number of concessions. As leaders from the two strikes began connecting with each other, the idea of forming a stable, national organization with a long-term strategy began to take shape. After a year of arduous organizing, leaders from all over the country are ready for the first congress of Dignidad Agropecuaria Nacional, a legally recognized organization that aims to lead the struggle for Colombia’s food sovereignty.

To understand the origins of Dignidad Agropecuaria, we must analyze the confluence of two development models: the Green Revolution, which was brought to Colombia in the 1950s, and neoliberal trade liberalization, which has dominated agrarian policy since 1990. The Green Revolution model reinforced mono-crop farming and generated a deep dependence on synthetic seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides that are produced and commercialized by a handful of foreign multinationals. Over the course of six decades, excessive use of agrochemicals has caused the deterioration of soils, requiring even heavier use of pesticides and fertilizers, which are the main contributor to high costs of production. This has been aggravated by progressive state disinvestment in agriculture, the privatization of key agricultural institutions, and a flood of foreign imports, all brought about by the implementation of neoliberal policies and Free Trade Agreements over the last 25 years.

Given this grim picture, it’s not surprising that a movement like Dignidad Agropecuaria would emerge. However, there are a number of key elements to the movement’s organizing model that have allowed it to remain active beyond the 2013 strikes and to become a national organization. The movement has primarily focused on the issue of food sovereignty and the right of farmers to produce their crops profitably. Unlike more traditional demands like land redistribution, the issue of food sovereignty has allowed for the unity of a wide sector of Colombian farmers from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Dignidad Agropecuaria has also resisted the temptation to form alliances with political parties, creating a space for farmers from the entire political spectrum as long as they support the movement’s agrarian platform. So far, this model has proved successful for a movement that has been systematically repressed and stigmatized both by the government and the mainstream media. Now that Dignidad Agropecuaria Nacional is set to become a legally recognized organization, it remains to be seen to what extent the movement can change Colombia’s deeply entrenched neoliberal agricultural model.