



ERPI 2018 International Conference  
Authoritarian Populism and the Rural World

**Conference Paper No.66**

**Historical Resistance for the defense of the land and the territory in the municipality of Cabrera, Colombia**

*Juanita Cuéllar Benavides*

17-18 March 2018

International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague, Netherlands

**Organized jointly by:**



**Cornell CALS**  
College of Agriculture and Life Sciences



International  
Institute of  
Social Studies



Institute of  
Development Studies



**In collaboration with:**



**OPEN SOCIETY  
FOUNDATIONS**



**OXFAM**  
Solidariteit | Solidarité



The Journal of  
**PEASANT  
STUDIES**



**Disclaimer:** The views expressed here are solely those of the authors in their private capacity and do not in any way represent the views of organizers and funders of the conference.

**March, 2018**

Check regular updates via ERPI website: [www.iss.nl/erpi](http://www.iss.nl/erpi)



# Historical Resistance for the defense of the land and the territory in the municipality of Cabrera, Colombia<sup>1</sup>

Juanita Cuéllar Benavides

## Abstract

*This paper walks through the history of the town of Cabrera, in Colombia, with the purpose of reflecting on the resistance in this region and the way it interacts with its past land struggles. We will focus on the recent struggles for the defense of the land and the territory that are taking place in this municipality, with regard to the threat of the introduction of a hydroelectric project in the region. The implementation of this extractive model occurs in the context of an environment marked by authoritarian, populist policies, which have affected democracy and the social fabric. However, the community has used various strategies to resist and defend their territory. This emancipatory experience in Cabrera has been possible, to our understanding, thanks to the historical memory of the struggle for the land and the territory, which is triggered at times when their permanence in the territory is at risk, and enables the reconfiguration of the repertoires of action used in collective acts of resistance.*

**Keywords:** Resistance, authoritarian populism, Cabrera, Colombia

---

<sup>1</sup> This article was translated by Laura Acosta.

## Introduction

This article seeks to characterize the experience of the town of Cabrera, in Cundinamarca, Colombia, as an emancipatory experience of historical resistance of the farmers for the defense of their land and their territory. The fight for the land in this region dates from the first decades of the 20th century, when communities had to organize and resist through various repertoires of action, faced with the power of large landowners and entrepreneurs interested in the land. These struggles led to the configuration of one of the most important peasant movements nationwide.

Since then, the town of Cabrera has been characterized by having an organized community that mobilizes for the defense of their land and their territory. Thus, in the year 2000, this municipality was declared a Peasant Reserve Area (in Spanish, *Zona de Reserva Campesina*, ZRC) in recognition of its land struggles. The ZRCs are one of the most important achievements of the peasants in Colombia, and were legally established through Law 160 of 1994. These are territories that are demarcated with the aim of ensuring the permanence of the peasants in the land and boosting the rural economy. Despite this important recognition as ZRC, the community was seriously affected during the government of Alvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2010), due to the intensification of authoritarian policies, with measures that limited democracy and had a strong impact on the rural areas. The community of Cabrera experienced strong repression during this period, as well as the militarization of the municipality, which affected the social fabric and weakened the peasant movement.

Extractivism intensified over this period as well. Thus, the town of Cabrera became an object of interest for multinational companies for mining and hydroelectric projects, due to the great wealth of water resources found there. This situation, which would affect the permanence of the peasants in the land and transform the economic orientation of the territory, has generated strong tensions and led the community to organize again. Specifically, the community has rallied due to the threat of construction of a small-scale hydropower plant.

Our goal, therefore, is to walk through the experience of resistance in this region, which is part of a context characterized by political and economic dynamics that can be characterized within the idea of authoritarian populism. To this end, we have divided the text into five parts, aside from the introduction. In the first part, we will make a brief introduction to the idea of authoritarian populism, emphasizing its characteristics at the rural level. In the following section, we will make a historical characterization of the struggle for land in Cabrera. In the third section, we will talk about the most recent period of resistance in the municipality, associated with the construction of the Cabrera Peasant Reserve Area (ZRC) in the year 2000, and the weakening of the social fabric during the government of Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2010). In the fourth part, we will talk about actions taken to defend the territory against the threat of construction of the hydropower plant. In the last part we will provide some concluding comments.

## 1 Authoritarian populism: a few characteristics

The emancipatory experience of the town of Cabrera emerges as a response to a context where authoritarian populism defines the direction and focus of public policy. Authoritarian populism can be understood as political-economic dynamics, which find a clear expression in any or several of the following policies and discourses: protectionist policies, nationalist discourses over regional or global integration, controversial national elections, the appeal to the people and to the strong man, speeches that understand migration as an internal threat, the appeal to security at the expense of civil liberties, an increase in extractive capitalism at any cost, and power and benefit limited to a minority group (Scoones et al. 2017).

Authoritarian populism can take different forms and be found in different regimes. Thus, it can arise in systems characterized as democratic, where there is some sort of space given to the opposition, and it can also happen in most authoritarian regimes as well. Authoritarian populism understands politics as a battle between “us” and “them,” and justifies its interventions arguing the need to take control of the

population. These policies are characterized by a logic of inclusion-exclusion, including some specific groups while excluding other segments of the population (Scoones et al. 2017). Another characteristic feature of authoritarian populism has to do with the way it affects democracy, since it eludes or captures democratic institutions, or uses them to legitimize its domain, centralize power, and constrain the opposition.

Authoritarian populist policies are not uniform, and may even be contradictory at times. For example, progressive policies may exist in parallel with violent political and exclusionary power, or there may be discourses focusing on inclusion and equity, while in practice conservative politics are conducted to benefit the elite. Understanding the complexity of authoritarian populist policies also requires understanding that these are not necessarily associated with right-wing or authoritarian governments. In the case of Latin America, some authors show how various neo-populist governments came to power and implemented poverty reduction policies and other policies that benefited marginalized groups (see Scoones et al. 2017). This, however, happened due to income from extractive industries, such as mining and oil, in a context in which social protests against these activities were controlled.

At a rural level, authoritarian populism is expressed through a number of practices and situations that put populations living in these territories at risk. In this sense, pacts with traditional local powers and local elites are quite common, thus affecting the permanence of traditional populations in their land. Although changes in the rural areas have occurred over time, i.e., they are not a particular feature of this historical moment, an increase has been perceived in recent years in processes of financialization, commodification, appropriation, and extraction of resources (human, financial, and natural) to a much greater intensity and speed. The hoarding of land, energy, mining, and water occurs with the idea that their future scarcity will produce greater profitability. This has led to displacement and dispossession of the rural population, which is forced to inhabit urban perimeters. One of the discourses that underpins this practice has to do with the assurance of food security, which ultimately bestows more and more power to the discourse of agribusiness, even leading to an increase in the concentration of land in some places. Thus, there is a dispute, often violent, for the ownership and control of resources. This happens through various mechanisms, which end up seriously affecting the rural areas. The unsustainable use of natural resources and extractivism are an example of this.

The processes of authoritarian populism must be studied altogether, i.e., not only perceiving their effects, but also studying the resistance processes generated by them (Scoones et al. 2017). The reasons that lead a population to organize around a collective action are varied and depend heavily on the history of each place. In this perspective, it is important not to take this resistance for granted, but rather to wonder how it is built and where it goes. These emancipatory experiences may occur horizontally, creating networks among themselves, and overcoming geographical boundaries. It is also worth asking ourselves whether emancipatory experiences could also bring alternatives for solidarity economies and democratic organization. Studying these processes in rural areas requires the inclusion of a historical, interdisciplinary, comparative, and inclusive perspective. The new emancipatory movements may result from the combination of various struggles, such as the fight for women's rights, race, or environmental justice (Scoones et al. 2017).

## **2 Cabrera: 100 years of resistance**

Understanding a region undoubtedly requires the reconstruction of its history. Thus, understanding the struggles of the town of Cabrera, its constitution as a Peasant Reserve Area (ZRC), and its most recent battle for the defense of the territory against the threat of mega-projects in the region necessarily includes reconstructing the historical struggles for land that defined the peasant identity in this place. It is in the past where we find the configuration of the collective memory of this region and its community, which, to our understanding, enables the development of new acts of resistance.

The municipality of Cabrera is located in the region of Sumapaz, which covers 13 municipalities<sup>2</sup>, located in the departments of Cundinamarca and Tolima<sup>3</sup>. Cabrera is part of the department of Cundinamarca, and was founded as a municipality in the early 20th century. It is 144km away from the city of Bogotá and has an extension of 449km<sup>2</sup>, with nearly five thousand inhabitants. 99.8% of the territory is classified as rural area, where 76.6% of the population lives. This region, located in the Andean area of the country, is characterized by the existence of *páramo*, i.e., an ecosystem with high ecological value, as it contains endemic species of flora and fauna, in addition to a large number of water springs. *Páramos* are characterized by retaining and storing water, and are mainly located in the highest parts of the Andes Mountains (De los Ríos, 2009). 99% of them are located in this mountain range, and Colombia, in particular, has 34 of them, representing 49% of the total *páramos*. The Sumapaz *páramo* is the largest in the world, and has an altitude between 3,500 and 4,000m. The weather is cold and damp, with temperatures that can oscillate between -8°C and 17°C (Ospina, 2003).

The process of colonization in this region was first associated with the production of coffee and cinchona<sup>4</sup> towards the end of the 19th century and the early 20th century. Thus, a system of estates was established in the Sumapaz region, entailing the consolidation of latifundia. This was promoted largely by investments in land carried out by merchants from Bogotá, motivated by the existence of public lands (Marulanda, 1991). However, at the beginning of the 20th century, there was another event that prompted migration into the Sumapaz region even further. Between 1899 and 1902, the country fell into the Thousand Days' War, where liberal and conservative forces clashed. It is believed that one of the main consequences of this war was the loss of Panama. After the end of this conflict, some of the fighters who had fought in the war began to migrate to this region (Londoño, 2011), primarily as a result of poverty in their places of origin.

Peasants started to work in the estates, and rented plots of land or occupied public land, thus opening the agricultural frontier. This led to various types of conflict. According to Renán Vega (2002), two types of conflict can be identified in this region between 1870 and 1925. The first one was between factions of the ruling class (landowners, businessmen, and merchants) for the appropriation of public lands and control of the workforce. The second conflict included owners, on the one hand, and peasants, on the other, who were rivals for the right to the land and to the free marketing of their products. The first type of conflict was dismantled little by little, when the elites began to align their interests. The second type of conflict, however, persisted during the first half of the 20th century.

In a region where property titles were virtually non-existent, the landowners' strategy was to occupy lands and add them to the ones already under their domain, even when these were being occupied by peasants. Through the control of the land, the landowners also took over the workforce. In this period, specifically between 1913 and 1923, there were civil lawsuits, police proceedings, and evictions of families in a conflict involving farmers, local authorities, and landowners.

Although the peasants were in a situation of vulnerability, the fact that social injustices existed did not necessarily lead to the beginning of the mobilizations, as "a discourse that justifies, dignifies, and encourages collective action is necessary" (Ibarra *et al*, 2002). Thus, the construction of collective action in this region went through a process of articulation of a discourse that responded to the situation of injustice that the population was experiencing. Under this perspective, the work of Laura Varela and Yuri Romero (2007) points out the initial difficulties for the organization of collective action, which arose as there was no prior organizational experience, the majority of the population was illiterate, and there was no strong ideological training among the leaders.

---

<sup>2</sup>The Sumapaz region comprises 13 municipalities, 10 in the department of Cundinamarca (Fusagasugá, Tibacuy, Pasca, Pandí, Arbeláez, Silvania, Granada, San Bernardo, Cabrera, Venecia) and three in the department of Tolima (Cunday, Icononzo, Villarrica). In addition, it includes part of the municipality of Bogotá. However, other studies refer to this territory excluding the municipalities located in the department of Tolima.

<sup>3</sup>Departments are the administrative and political units into which Colombia is divided.

<sup>4</sup>Cinchona comes from a tree bearing the same name, and is used in medicine as an antiseptic.

Various authors indicate that the transition from isolated acts of resistance to the consolidation of the peasant movement was highly determined by the arrival of a leader to the region: Erasmo Valencia. Interested in agrarian conflicts in the estates, Valencia came to this region in 1924 and became one of the main leaders. Around 1925, he founded the *Claridad newspaper*, which disseminated the complaints and demands of the peasants, and defended their right to occupy the public lands that were being seized by the estate owners. This newspaper had a strong ideological function, as it granted the peasant movement an ideology of their own through its editorials and reports (Londoño, 2011, p. 194). Through the *Claridad newspaper*, the population gained access to legal tools, as the land was often usurped due to a lack of knowledge about legal norms (Azuero, 2012).

Valencia's presence was crucial in the land struggles, as he had been involved in trade unions in Bogotá, which enabled him to introduce this organizational structure to the region. During that same period, Valencia created the Agricultural Society of the Sumapaz Colony, a peasant organization with bylaws, a flag, and an anthem, which organized meetings dealing with issues associated with the constant evictions that were taking place. Sánchez (1991) believes that this was the largest peasant organization of that time, and it is estimated that in its moment of greatest splendor, it had the participation of nearly six thousand peasants. One of the leaders of this organization was Juan de la Cruz Varela, who would later assume the leadership of the peasant movement (Londoño, 2011).

Erasmo Valencia contributed to lay the bases for the organization of collective action, as he helped to communicate and convey the requirements of the movement, externalized its demands, contributed to the generation of solidarity and symbolisms that shaped a particular identity, and challenged opponents, creating uncertainty on the impact that the fact the peasants were organized could have. Uncertainty is a key element in social movements, as opponents cannot calculate the duration nor the cost of the protest, and also, there is fear that the possibility of the protest spreads to others (Tarrow, 1997).

Peasant struggles in this region had a national impact. Some of the factors that made possible the creation and consolidation of the movement include: the experience of farmers in the legal and de facto defense of their land, their capacity for organization and coordination, the constant appeal to the law to defend themselves (Londoño, 2011), and the important role held by leaders Erasmus Valencia and Juan de la Cruz Varela. These constitute a fundamental background for the construction of collective action and for the consolidation of the movement as a space of struggle for the land.

The force that peasant movements in Colombia were gathering led the State to respond to the pressure. One of the first relevant measures was the ruling issued by the Supreme Court of Justice, which began to demand property titles in 1926, as a result of the agrarian conflicts. This demand prompted new questions about the regime of the estates (Vega, 2002). A second measure was adopted by conservative president Miguel Abadía Méndez (1926-1930) which, in order to calm estate-related conflicts, established a program of controlled colonization, where new areas were defined to open the frontier. These were called Agricultural Colonies. The decree that created these territories was appropriated by the peasants as a symbol of struggle, as an instrument for the defense of their land, and as a mechanism to stop the evictions. Agricultural colonies were established in various locations, including one in Sumapaz. This legislation promoted the accession of new peasants to the movement, which was increasingly strengthened. Landowners, on the other hand, defended their interests through the use of public and private forces, and they tried to stop the effects of this rule with the support of a number of judges and local authorities.

These governmental measures aimed at mitigating conflicts coincided with the weakening of the regime of the estates in the Sumapaz region during the late 1920s, which occurred as a result of the decline in coffee exports and the consolidation of new coffee growing areas in the country (Marulanda, 1991). Thus, a third measure taken by the government, particularly in the Sumapaz region, was the direct purchase of land from large estates in order to parcel it and hand it over to farmers. Finally, in 1936, Law 200—known as the Land Act—was enacted. This rule, combined with

policies such as agricultural colonies and the purchase of land by the government for its fragmentation, were altogether actions that enabled the beginning of a period of relative peace in the countryside.

This quiet period broke on April 9, 1948, the day when leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was murdered. This was, without a doubt, a turning point in history, as it represented the beginning of clashes in various places, such as Sumapaz. Gaitán had been an important figure in the defense of the land by the peasants in the Sumapaz region and had provided legal advice to the peasant movement (Londoño, 2011). His murder led to the start of a period known in Colombian history as *La Violencia* (The Violence), in which there was an intense confrontation between liberals and conservatives. The conflict was felt with great intensity in the region of Sumapaz. From this period, a cycle of wars and social and political clashes began in the region, known as The Wars of Sumapaz. Thus, between 1948 and 1974, this region experienced an intense cycle of violence, which had a more political nature although it was also based on the struggle for land. In this context of repression, the peasant movement began to use armed confrontation as a repertoire of action, as this was the only alternative the peasants had to safeguard their families and their land (Varela & Romero, 2007). With the arrival of military officer Gustavo Rojas Pinilla to power, an amnesty was proposed where the government undertook to respect the life of the insurgents and ensure their safe return home. The liberal guerrillas, as these groups were called, surrendered weapons in October 1953, at the main square of the town of Cabrera. The government did not fulfill its part of the deal, and it was only towards the end of the decade of the 1960s that this region began to experience a moment of peace, when violent and armed clashes decreased and the conflict moved to other parts of the country (González F. , 1990). The Sumapaz leaders began to occupy public spaces in local politics, thus using new repertoires of action for the defense of their land.

It is believed that one of the main results of the period of wars in the Sumapaz region was the elimination of large estates. The disintegration of the estates and their parceling were an immediate effect of the *La Violencia* period, particularly in Sumapaz. Both for the landowners and the peasants, the worst years in terms of agricultural production were those in which the war was the most intense, mainly between 1952 and 1955. In 1961, a new period of mass occupations of land began, thirty years after the first intense cycle of occupations. With the economic crisis of the estates, a process of negotiation was conducted and these were subdivided as well. Thus, Sánchez states, regarding Sumapaz: “The area also constitutes the example most akin to an “agrarian revolution” as the final unsought outcome of *La Violencia*” (Sánchez, 1991, p. 167).

The history of this place, at first characterized by the struggle for land, and in a second moment having a more political connotation, without abandoning the initial claim, contributed to the formation of a community organized around resistance.

### **3 From the hope of the Peasant Reserve Area to the weakening of the social fabric**

The town of Cabrera is characterized by its biodiversity and importance in environmental terms. It has three types of climate: temperate, cold, and *páramo*. For this reason, it has abundant springs of water and forest reserve areas. The region of the *páramo* contains several endemic plants, and 178 thousand hectares of this ecosystem constitute the Sumapaz National Park, a space for environmental preservation established in 1977. Cabrera is located in a strategic place, as it borders the departments of Huila, Meta, and Tolima, and therefore, is a gateway to Bogotá. Due to its geographical position, it is an area that has been disputed by the various actors of the armed conflict. Additionally, it is a municipality close to places that were historically controlled by the guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP), which is why it became the target of military operations for many years. For this reason, the community has been stigmatized as collaborators of this guerrilla group.

In 2000, the territory of Cabrera was defined as a Peasant Reserve Area (*Zona de Reserva Campesina*, ZRC). The ZRCs are territories created based on Law 160 of 1994, and their background is constituted by the peasant mobilizations of the 1980s demanding the solution of problems associated with the



issue of land as well as support to the rural economy. In the Colombian context, the ZRCs constitute a proposal of rural development and agrarian reform that seeks to guarantee access to land and permanence in it, as well as promoting economic development through an active role of the local communities. The establishment of the Cabrera ZRC was largely determined by the existence of an organized community, which brings into focus the past of struggles and resistance in this region. These struggles enabled the creation of a territory whose characteristic features are the absence of large estates and the prevalence of a peasant economy. The ZRC was declared in the entire municipality, which means that, in practice, when speaking of the town of Cabrera or the Cabrera ZRC, one would be referring to the same territory.

In the same year of the creation of the ZRC, however, some leaders of the town began to receive threats from paramilitary groups. Such is the case of the mayor, the municipal ombudsman, and 30 other social leaders. Additionally, as of 2001, the military forces increased their presence in the region with the establishment of the High Mountain Battalion in the town, specifically in the Sumapaz *páramo*, affecting the ecosystem. This represented a dramatic change in the way of life of the population, as it was not used to the presence of large numbers of soldiers in the region. Likewise, it entailed a greater stigmatization of the community (ILSA, 2013), as it was viewed as a base of support of the armed insurgency. Thus, the town of Cabrera, with five thousand inhabitants, came to have a military base in its territory, with eight thousand soldiers.

The arrival to power of President Álvaro Uribe Vélez in 2002 entailed a difficult situation for all the ZRCs constituted and for the organized communities. We can characterize the policies adopted during this mandate within the logic of authoritarian populism described in the first part of this article, in at least two aspects. First, Uribe came to power with a discourse where security prevailed over freedom, and where the image of a strong man was consolidated: a man who would save the people from their internal enemy, which would be the guerrillas. His ascent came at a moment when the peace talks with the FARC-EP guerrillas were broken off during the government of Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002). His campaign slogan, with which he won the elections, was “firm hand, big heart.” Second, during this period, extractivism increased at the expense of natural resources. Between 1990 and 2001, 157 mining titles were granted on average per year, while between 2002 and 2009, the period coinciding with Uribe’s term in office (2002-2010), 984 mining titles were granted on average per year. The number of mining titles granted in *páramo* areas also increased during this time (Andrade-C, 2011).

When studying this period, we see that the town of Cabrera was seriously affected by Uribe’s government policies, as this was a time in which the destruction of the region’s social fabric was sought through threats to social leaders and the militarization of the area. In addition, the region’s stigmatization due to its alleged command by the guerrillas helped to limit the participation of the community, for fear of being identified as collaborators of the insurgents. Thus, a period of great social and political instability began to be felt. In February 2003, the mayor was murdered, and in June of that same year the mayor’s office was closed. In a span of six months, three municipal elections were conducted to elect a new mayor (Otero, 2014). An increase in forced displacement can be seen during this period, as 136 people had to leave the town (ILSA, 2013), including several leaders of Sinpeagricun, a union that was leading the ZRC process. This caused the weakening of the organization, to the point of almost disappearing.

#### **4 The defense of the territory**

In August 2010, Juan Manuel Santos took office as president of the republic. In 2012, he started the peace process between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP guerrillas, after more than 50 years of armed struggle. During Santos’s term, the ZRCs were reactivated in Colombia. These had been eliminated in practice during the Uribe government. In the peace agreement, namely in the point called Comprehensive Rural Reform, the ZRCs were included as tools to carry out the transformation of the Colombian countryside. The town of Cabrera began its process of revitalization by updating its sustainable development plan in 2012. The document prioritized four components: environmental, social, economic-productive, and land. In this reactivation process, a committee of support for the

ZRC was elected, comprising various grassroots organizations. However, the Santos administration continued some of his predecessor's policies. On the one hand, it maintained the military base in Cabrera, and on the other, it continued with policies focused on capitalist extractivism, granting titles for mining exploitation and pushing extractive industries and agribusiness.

In the case of Cabrera, the town is seriously threatened by the construction of a hydroelectric project in the region, which would affect the permanence of the peasants in the land. The company responsible for this project is EMGESA, a subsidiary of the multinational ENDESA. This company is pushing the "El Paso" project in the region of Sumapaz. The company has a special interest in this region due to the great amount of water sources that are there. The project would affect the environment, life, and agricultural productivity of Cabrera, as well as those of the neighboring municipalities of Venecia, Pandi, and Icononzo. The initial plan envisioned the construction of a hydropower plant with the flow of the Sumapaz river, which would involve flooding a large portion of the land, including the *páramo* region. EMGESA amended the initial idea and proposed making eight micro-hydro plants for the production of energy without flooding the land (ILSA, 2014). This proposal includes diverting the course of the river so that it reaches a powerhouse through pipes. This hydroelectric project could be understood as an economic enclave, which utilizes natural resources in a manner that is completely disjointed from the local economy. Enclaves generally do not improve local conditions; on the contrary, they cause a series of problems in the regions, such as the deterioration of economic sectors, poverty, and corruption (Serje, 2011).

Although Colombian law has tools to protect the strategic areas of environmental preservation, such as the Sumapaz *páramos*, a report by the Ombudsman's Office shows that out of the 34 existing *páramos* in Colombia, 21 are at risk due to licenses issued for mining activities (ILSA, 2014). Therefore, this ecosystem, which has been considered strategic for the production of water, could be potentially harmed. According to ILSA (2014), this project would have repercussions on at least three levels: ecologic, economic, and sociocultural. With regard to the first, some effects worth highlighting are the impacts on water resources due to the diversion of the river, as this would affect the flora and fauna. In economic terms, the pollution of the river due to construction works would cause irreparable damage to the ecosystem and affect agriculture due to repercussions in terms of soil fertility and a decrease in water resources. Meanwhile, the socio-cultural impact would be related to changes in the way of life of the peasants and the displacement of families. There is fear in the community about facing high levels of violence, forced displacement, and human rights violations, which are mechanisms used in other areas of Colombia for the introduction of hydroelectric constructions (ILSA, 2014).

The community of Cabrera, however, is still fighting to remain in the territory. In addition to the history and collective memory of this region, we believe that the creation of the Peasant Reserve Area in 2000 and its reactivation since 2010 have made it possible to provide a new meaning and new tools to this fight. The community has not only resisted, but it has also become a major counterweight to the authoritarian policies, as it has strengthened popular participation and democratic processes. The resistance is directed toward the EMGESA company, but also toward the national government, as their extractive policies are questioned and a voice is given to the communities to express their demands. Thus, the environmental issue has become the fundamental axis, and this way, the reconfiguration of the struggle in Cabrera is perceived, no longer for access to the land, but now for what we have called the defense of the territory.

In this experience of resistance, various repertoires of collective action have been triggered. First, the community has participated in different meetings, workshops, forums, and seminars where they discuss the impact of megaprojects and promote strategies of resistance. Second, it is on a permanent exchange of experiences with people from other places who, despite having rejected similar interventions, are now suffering the consequences of their implementation. Third, the community, especially the driving committee of the Peasant Reserve Area (ZRC), is working together with academic institutions and universities, as well as NGOs, with the aim of understanding and highlighting their impact in the region. Fourth, acts of resistance have taken place in the villages of the municipality, where the company has gone to share information about the project. In these meetings,

the organized community has been present with banners expressing their rejection to the hydroelectric project. The population has found the support of farmers from other municipalities.

Finally, we found an act of resistance that has become an example for other municipalities. On February 26, 2017, a referendum took place with the following question: “Do you agree, yes or no, with the construction of mining and/or hydroelectric projects in the municipality of Cabrera, Cundinamarca, a Peasant Reserve Area, which would transform or affect the use of the land, water, or the agricultural vocation of the municipality?” 97% of the votes were No, thereby explicitly stating the community’s rejection of this project and the defense of their territory. At the end of 2016, the EMGESA company changed the project, reducing its impact. Thus, the initial project included eight micro-hydro plants in four municipalities. The change consisted in excluding the town of Cabrera and reducing the number of micro-hydro plants, from eight to six (El Espectador, 2017). Due to its being in the buffer zone of the Sumapaz *páramos*, this project continues to spark strong rejection and resistance. The referendum also sought to shield the municipality not only from hydroelectric projects, but also from mining projects.

Referenda are becoming a recurring and interesting repertoire of action used by communities to reject extractive projects in their territories. In a context where authoritarian populism limits or restricts democracy, experiences such as the one in Cabrera tend to expand direct democracy and the reflections regarding popular participation. The first municipality to conduct a referendum of this kind was Piedras, in the department of Tolima, in 2013. Other municipalities have also used this experience, such as Tauramena (department of Casanare), Cajamarca (Tolima), Marmato (Caldas), Cumaral (Meta), and Arbeláez (Cundinamarca). In all cases, No has had a crushing victory, with more than 90% of votes rejecting extractive projects in their respective territories (Pineda, 2017). At this moment, the legal obligation of complying with the referenda is being discussed. Some government entities, as well as the multinational companies, have argued that the natural resources and the subsoil belong to the State, and therefore, the referenda would not have the ability to stop the extractive projects. Other positions, however, argue that the decisions of the people would be sovereign, and therefore, the referenda would be valid and should be respected.

This experience of resistance confirms what was said by Serje about experiences that challenge the hegemonic models of development:

These cases (among many others) demonstrate in an increasingly forceful way that the budgets of the modern market (what we all want, if we have a chance, is to have increasingly more economic gains) and of development (its offer is exactly what people want and need) should be questioned (Serje, 2011, p. 295).

The struggle for the land in Cabrera was intense, long, and painful, and therefore the community’s permanence in the area is a central issue for them. If there is an element that characterizes and runs across the history of the region is the resistance and fight for access to the land and for the defense of the territory. Understanding these past processes means understanding that the past of wars, struggles, and resistance interacts with the present, as it marks the history and the memory of the community.

## **5 Final remarks**

Throughout this article we have attempted to walk through the history of the town of Cabrera, not only with the intention of identifying the way authoritarian policies have affected this community, but also to document the emancipatory resistance that can be found here. Studying the experience of Cabrera, using authoritarian populism as one of our main axes of analysis, allows us to identify a series of dynamics that occur in the regions. This concept represents a methodological key to identifying these dynamics affecting populations, restricting their rights and their voice, beyond the type of regime (democratic or authoritarian) that characterizes a country. The construction of a domestic enemy, the stigmatization of the community of Cabrera, and the threats and repression suffered seem to go hand

in hand with the intensification of extractivism, which leads to considering that these are not parallel processes, but they are rather part of the same strategy for the control of natural resources.

The analysis of emancipatory experiences such as the one in Cabrera requires that we ask ourselves how this resistance emerges, to whom it is addressed, and how it can be implemented. It also requires that we go back to the past, as communities seem to have a collective memory that is triggered when there is a threat to their existence. In the case of Cabrera, the resistance of the early 20th century interacts with the present, serves as an element that injects dynamism into the community, and makes it possible to wage this battle. Similarly, the creation of the ZRCs in the year 2000, the fruit of the historic resistance for the land, has also become a tool to defend and safeguard the territory, as there is a law now that recognizes this territory as a reserve area.

Although the town is at risk of having the hydroelectric project implemented, the various repertoires of action used by the community to prevent this from happening have made it possible to stop it somehow. An example of this is the fact that the multinational company has redefined the project on several occasions, despite not having given up on it. Thus, although extractivism has been implemented in various places around the region, we cannot ignore the fact that generally, behind these projects, there are communities that are trying to resist.

## References

- Andrade-C, M. G (2011) Feria de la minería amenaza ecosistemas colombianos. UN Periódico, 11 Junio, 2011.
- Azuero, J. F. (2012). Claridad: El periódico popular-campesino del Sumapaz (1928-1937). Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes. Facultad de ciencias sociales. Departamento de historia. Monografía.
- De los Ríos, J. C. (2009). Percepções e formas de adaptação a riscos socioambientais na região do páramo colombiano. Porto Alegre, Dissertação de mestrado.
- El Espectador (2017). Cabrera (Cundinamarca) dijo no a proyecto hidroeléctrico en Sumapaz. 26 Febrero, 2017.
- González, F. (1990). Prólogo. In: Marulanda, E; González, J. J. Historias de frontera: colonización y guerras en el Sumapaz. Bogotá: Cinep.
- Ibarra, P; Martí, S.; Gomà, R. (2002). Creadores de democracia radical. Barcelona: Icaria.
- ILSA. (2013) Plan de desarrollo sostenible. Zona de Reserva Campesina de Cabrera. Bogotá: Gente Nueva Editores.
- ILSA. (2014). El río Sumapaz. Proyecto hidroeléctrico "El Paso": Agua y vida campesina en riesgo. Bogotá.
- Londoño, R. (2011). Juan de la Cruz Varela. Sociedad y política en la región de Sumapaz (1902-1984). Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia.
- Marulanda, E. (1991) Colonización y conflicto. Las lecciones del Sumapaz. Bogotá: Tercer Mundo Editores.
- Ospina, M. (2003). El Páramo de Sumapaz un ecosistema estratégico para Bogotá. Sociedad geográfica de Colombia. Academia de ciencias geográficas.
- Otero, M. E. (2014). Aproximación al caso de la Zona de Reserva Campesina de Cabrera desde las instituciones y la acción colectiva. Bogotá: Trabajo de Grado.
- Pineda, F. (2017). Minería y petróleo: las consultas populares y el futuro de la Colombia del siglo XXI. Las Dos Orillas, 15 Junio 2017.
- Sánchez, G. (1991). Guerra y política en la sociedad colombiana. Bogotá: El Áncora Editores. 1991.
- Scoones, I., Edelman, M., Jr., S. M., Hall, R., Wolford, W., & White, B. (2017). Emancipatory rural politics: confronting authoritarian populism,. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* .

- Serje, M. (2011). *El revés de la nación. Territorios salvajes, fronteras y tierras de nadie*. Bogotá: Ediciones Uniandes.
- Tarrow, S. (1997). *El poder en movimiento. Los movimientos sociales, la acción colectiva y la política*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial.
- Varela, L.; Romero, Y. (2007). *Surcando amaneceres: historia de los agrarios de Sumapaz y Oriente del Tolima*. Bogotá: Fondo Editorial UAN, Universidad Antonio Nariño.
- Vega, R. (2002) *Gente muy rebelde. Indígenas, campesinos y protestas agrarias*. Bogotá: Ediciones Pensamiento Crítico.

ERPI 2018 International Conference  
Authoritarian Populism and the  
Rural World

---

17-18 March 2018  
International Institute of Social Studies (ISS)  
The Hague, Netherlands



## About the Author(s)

**Juanita Cuellar Benavides** is a PhD student in the Graduate Social Science Program in Development, Agriculture, and Society, Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro (CPDA/UFRRJ). She has a Master's degree in the same program, and a Master's degree in Development Evaluation and Management from IOB, University of Antwerp. Cuéllar is a political scientist from the National University of Colombia, with experience working in NGOs. Her areas of interest include agricultural issues in Colombia, the peasant movement, and she is currently studying agribusiness policies and land grabbing in Colombia.

**The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI)** is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

For more information see: <http://www.iss.nl/erpi>  
or email: [emancipatoryruralpolitics@gmail.com](mailto:emancipatoryruralpolitics@gmail.com)