Transnational Black Social Movements in Latin America

Afro-Colombians and the Struggle for Human Rights

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This chapter analyzes black social movements with particular emphasis on Afro-Colombians, as national, regional, and transnational actors. It examines the relations between race and citizenship in Latin America by analyzing the current struggles of Afro-Latin peoples in Latin America and the Caribbean. From Los Angeles to Rio de Janeiro, from the Bronx to Salvador Bahia—brown, black, and Indigenous peoples are challenging racial inequality, while at the same time constructing alternative models for political participation. The struggle to be full citizens, on the one hand, and the day-to-day human rights violations faced by Afro-Latin Americans, on the other, serves to reinforce the shared experiences of black peoples in the Americas. It is argued that deeply entrenched racial and social prejudices and other forms of discrimination are the foundations for the de facto disenfranchisement of the hemisphere’s populations; in many black communities throughout the region, glaring poverty, widespread human rights violations, and the discriminatory impact of neoliberal agendas underscores the urgent need for constructing a common paradigm of social action in the Americas (Dzidzienyo and Oboler, 2005: 5). By analyzing and investigating the complex interactions and interrelations among culture, race, and politics, this research focuses on the cultural politics enacted by Afro-Latin social movements as they articulate and implement new visions and practices of citizenship, democracy, social relationships, and development (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar, 1998b: 2).
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Afro-Latin Social Movements at a Glance

Starting in the late sixties, new forms of popular protest emerged from grassroots and popular organizations in Latin America. These new social movements reflected broad participation by groups, organizations, and associations such as squatter movements, neighborhood councils, human rights committees, indigenous organizations, various black formations, women’s groups, environmental organizations, and cultural and artistic groups (Evers, 1985: 43). They are new compared to traditional political actors in that they either mobilized different people or they are the same people acting in more spontaneous, democratic, decentralized ways, or because they are introducing new participatory strategies outside of the traditional political arena. These movements may also be responding to new forms of social subordination (Hellman, 1992: 53, 167), often sharpened by neoliberal policies.

Contemporary black social movements are part of this trend, but Afro-Latin social movements in Latin America and the Caribbean have long histories. Their antecedents include maroon communities during slavery; the Haitian Revolution; the massive slave revolts in Bahia, Brazil, in 1835; and the Cuban Independent Party of Color in 1908 (Safa, 1998: 11). At times, blacks in Latin America fashioned their own independent formations such as slave runaway communities (palenques), black militias, religious practices, and mutual aid societies. Other times, they forged tactical alliances with whites, Indians, and mestizos to create multiracial movements that had a profound effect on the region. The independence armies, the national liberal parties of the 1800s and early 1900s, the labor unions of the same period, and the popular parties of the mid-1900s, were broad-based movements that included the core participation and support of Afro-Latin Americans (Andrews, 2004: 8). In Latin America where the two-party system was allowed to function, most politically active blacks and mulattoes identified with liberalism, contributing materially to liberalism’s eventual triumph throughout the region. Liberalism brought to power most of the black and mulatto presidents who held office in Spanish America during the 1800s. The black-liberal contribution also created a tradition of anti-oligarchical political unions that would later pave the way for a major twentieth-century political movement—labor-based populism (Andrews, 2004: 93–100).

Throughout the Americas black social movement groups are now increasingly using sophisticated strategies and tactics to challenge racial and gender inequality. A new landscape has emerged as blacks are demanding more political and cultural space to advance social, cultural, and economic rights, while simultaneously articulating oppositional racial discourse. The literature on Afro-Latin social movements is sparse and focuses heavily on Afro-Brazilians, with
insufficient attention to the intersection of race and gender and the cultural politics of constructing citizenship and democracy. One notable exception is Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar’s *Culture of Politics, Politics of Culture: Re-visioning Latin American Social Movements* (1998a). In particular, the chapter on Colombia by Libia Grueso and Carlos Rosero, well-known Afro-Colombian activists/intellectuals, and Arturo Escobar examines the constitutional reform process of 1991 and the socio-organizational activities related to collective mobilization of Afro-Colombians. It focuses on processes of black identity construction and the intersection of race, territory, biodiversity, culture, and development. The authors explore racial discrimination, collective organizing, political enfranchisement, and developmental strategies, highlighting how Afro-Colombians at a unique historical juncture responded to discursive practices related to citizenship, human rights, and democratic inclusion. Another important exception is Michael Hanchard’s *Orpheus and Power: The Movimento Negro of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brazil, 1945–1988* (1994), which provides a highly critical assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of Brazil’s black social movements. Hanchard argues that the process of racial hegemony (promoting racial discrimination while simultaneously denying its existence) has effectively neutralized racial identification among non-whites, making it an improbable point of mass mobilization among Afro-Brazilians in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. This results in the reproduction of social inequality between whites and nonwhites while promoting a false premise of racial equality between the races.

Building on these cultural insights, I focus on the way black social movements have constructed identities woven around discourses of human rights, allowing them to link to transnational networks in the era of globalization. Social movements are transnational when they involve conscious efforts to build transnational cooperation around shared goals that include social change. Through regular communication and organization, activists are able to share technical and strategic information, coordinate parallel activities, or even mount truly transnational collectives (J. Smith, Pagnucco, and Chatfield, 1997: 243). Afro social movements in the Americas like other groups (indigenous and women) in the region are transnational as many now have regional, national, and global support and connections. Additionally, many share common political or ideological views such as challenging racial and gender discrimination in education or the workplace. Along with the struggle against racial and gender discrimination, many Afro-Latin social movements have waged popular resistance to neoliberal policies of Latin American and Caribbean governments.

Black human rights activists throughout the region—including the United States—have forged common agendas around combating and denouncing racism and racial and gender discrimination. On a regional level, groups like
La Alianza Estratégica de Afro-Latinoamericanos and Organización Negra Centroamericana are working to develop common strategies to address racial and gender oppression as well as build a movement that represents the interest of their communities (which are often economically marginalized and therefore suffer disproportionately from neoliberal policies).

Throughout the region Afro-Latin groups are emerging as powerful social movement actors in various countries, like the Afro-Venezuelan Network (Venezuela); Mundo-Afro (Uruguay); Coordinadora Nacional de Organizaciones Negras Panameñas (Panamá); the Process of Black Communities in Colombia (PCN); the National Movement for the Human Rights of Black Communities of Colombia, or Cimarrón, and the Association of Internally Displaced Afro-Colombians, or AFRODES (Colombia); and Geledés, the Institute for Black Brazilian Women, and CEERT, the Center for Research on Race Relations in the Workplace (Brazil). Many of these NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) function on shoestring budgets, are often excluded from national human rights discourse and face the daunting challenge of representing communities that are often dispersed, displaced, and suffer from low levels of self-identity. Their work over the years has been quite impressive as they have developed national, regional, and transnational networks, and by doing so, have been able to more forcefully articulate their struggle from a wider lens that includes comparative and international human rights perspectives. For example, since 1998 La Alianza Estratégica de Afro-Latinoamericanos has brought together Afro groups throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, offering capacity building, leadership training, and strategic planning, as well as providing a forum for groups to address common regional strategies.

The 1990s presented new historic opportunities for Afro-Latin Americans in the transnational arena as these social movements began to effectively use transnational networks, strategies, and contacts to elevate their struggle beyond national borders. This kind of “globalization from below” was part of the new wave of social movements that responded in part to the neoliberal erasure of borders for global capital. The transnationalization of Afro-Latin social movements provided new space for black groups across the Americas to build sustained relations throughout the region and the world. It was during this time that the struggles of Afro-Latin Americans became more visible and mobile within a transnational context. Three crucial factors explain the transnationalization of Afro-Latin social movements.

First, Afro-Latin groups over the years had laid strong infrastructural foundations in their countries after many years of intensive grassroots mobilization and organization. In Brazil and Colombia, black groups fought successfully for black rights legislation and had built strong social movements.
often considered a model for other black groups in the region, spawned an impressive network of diverse groups starting in the 1970s, with progressive black formations like the Movimento Negro Unificado (Unified Black Movement), cultural groups like Ilê Aiyé, and newer groups like Geledés. Some of these groups were also intertwined with resistance against the market-oriented model of globalization that had produced the exclusionary "Brazilian economic miracle," and the authoritarian political model that sustained social and economic exclusion.

Second, starting in the 1990s international civil society groups such as the Ford Foundation, International Human Rights Law Group, and the Minority Rights Group began to include Afro-Latin communities in their work and reports. In particular, the Ford Foundation and the International Human Rights Law Group began to fund projects and to work directly with Afro-Brazilian groups. In 1995, the Minority Rights Group published No Longer Invisible, and continued to publish reports on the status of black populations throughout the region. Also during this time, universities, researchers, and policy makers started to increase their focus and dedicate more studies (beyond those focused on slavery) of blacks in the Americas. Blacks from the Americas were also being increasingly invited to the United States and Europe to discuss Afro-Latin America.

The third factor explaining the rise of transnational Afro-Latin social movements is the role of the United Nations and to a lesser extent the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB). In 1997, the United Nations decided to convene a World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, and Xenophobia held in Durban, South Africa, in 2001. Leading into the main conference were a series of sessions and expert seminars held in different regions of the world in preparation for the conference in Durban. Afro groups throughout the region—for example, in Brazil, Colombia, Uruguay, Panamá, and Venezuela—would play a central and defining role in this historical conference. In preparation for the World Conference against Racism, many Afro-Latin groups began to use the strategies, tactics, and language of international human rights discourse to advance democracy in their countries. Also, many groups in the region were being trained for the Conference against Racism by the generous support provided by Gaye McDougal, then the head of the International Human Rights Law Group. The International Human Rights Law Group trained movement activists and lawyers from Brazil on the procedural and technical aspect of international human rights law in preparation for the World Conference against Racism.

Before the Conference against Racism, other events were unfolding. In 1995 (Brazil) and 1997 (Colombia), respectively, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Racism produced two excellent reports on the status of black
communities (Gele-Hanhanzo, 1995, 1997). Written squarely within the context of international law and human rights, these special reports on human rights violations brought into sharp focus issues of racial and gender discrimination, labor force exclusion, low rates of education, poor housing, and other critical factors that affect blacks in the region. At the time, these reports were seen as an objective evaluation of the black experience in Brazil and Colombia and thus became crucial organizing tools for black social movements in their struggle for human rights. Moreover, given the nonpoliticized nature of these particular reports by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, both the Brazilian and Colombian governments reluctantly acknowledged that Afro communities in their countries were subjected to forms of discrimination rooted in race. In short, the publication of these reports was a major tactical victory for the black movements in Brazil and Colombia.

In many ways the preparatory meeting and seminars served as a motor force propelling black social movements further into the broad network of transnational actors. Afro activists from Brazil were probably the largest black delegation from Latin America, with approximately 150 to 200 attending. Additionally, the World Conference against Racism allowed the issues of Third World peoples, and the struggle of racial and ethnic minorities from advanced first world countries, to take center stage within the broader frame of the largely white-led, -controlled, and -elitist human rights movement. This reconfiguration of the struggle brought Afro-Latin Americans into the heart of what might be broadly labeled the global justice movement.

In this context, the transnationalization of Afro-Latin social movements and their strategic adoption of international human rights discourse have been key to the resurgence of black identity-based organizing, as I will illustrate by focusing on the Colombian case.

The Emergence of Black Social Movements in Colombia

Colombia has the second largest African-descended population in South America, after Brazil. It is difficult, however, to determine precisely the size of Colombia's African population: estimates range from 15 to 35 percent of the overall population of about 44 million. The largest concentration of Afro-Colombians is found on the Pacific Coast where the black population is said to be roughly 80 to 90 percent (Dixon, 2002: 82). Afro-Colombians are not homogenous—culturally, historically, or politically. There are six sociocultural regions with a strong black presence: the Caribbean Coast, the Pacific Coast (Chocó), the Magdalena, the Cauca and Patía river valleys, and the English-speaking Archipelago of San Andrés and Providencia (Alvarez, Dagnino,
and Escobar, 1998a: 201). Large concentrations of blacks are also found in many of the Colombia's largest cities, and their numbers are growing because of the armed conflict that is displacing thousands of black peasants. These communities constitute a range of political visions and historical experiences and therefore possess different perspectives, strategies, and approaches on their complex political situation.

Afro-Colombians, like other black groups in the Americas, have faced institutional racism that is compounded by the ideology of racial democracy. According to the anthropologist Peter Wade, a leading scholar on Colombia, the concept of blackness and discrimination are deeply embedded in Colombian society. Drawing deeply on his extensive anthropological field research, Wade presents a composite picture of Colombian society governed by racial stereotypes and institutional discrimination against blackness and pervasive attitudes that are masked by Colombians' erroneous perception of racial equality. In Colombia, and in other parts of the black Americas, blackness is an obstacle to economic and social progress. The solution proposed by dominant racial ideologies is the process of whitening, or blanqueamiento (Wade, 1993).

In Colombia the historical position of Afro-Colombians in the political economy—including slavery—and the ideological construction of Afro-Colombians as nonpersons, Indians as subpersons, mestizos as half-persons, and whites as full-persons, suggest that blacks, until recently, did not have real legal standing and thus, were not considered legitimate concerns of the state. In short, Afro-Colombians were socially constructed as noncitizens and had no real legal or juridical personality before the constitutional reforms enacted in the 1990s. These changes, and the constitutional reform process, will be analyzed in the context of the Afro-Colombian struggle for human rights and democracy. It is argued that Afro-Colombians, through human rights discourse and social movements, challenged the state's narrowly constructed conception of “citizen”—read, “as white”—and reframed and expanded the concept to include Afro-Colombians, at least theoretically.

Many black social movements in Latin America fit the characteristics that define new social movements. Black-based movements are not entirely new, as black slave and maroon societies have historically challenged systems of domination. However, black social movements in the Americas are advancing an ideological reframing of Afro-Latin identity and collective rights, emphasizing the myriad ways in which race and gender, as well as other crucial factors, shape, determine, and affect the life chances of Afrodiasporic populations. Moreover, Afrodiasporic communities posit a race- and gender-centric framework along with innovative strategies to combat racist and gender violence. The various black movements throughout the Americas have drawn on their new transnational networks to develop a specific vocabulary and language to
better understand the codes of racial and gender discrimination. By doing so, Afro-diasporic communities have made significant contributions to recasting social movements in Latin America, as part of the broad demand for recognition of collective rights in an era when the liberal individualistic concept of citizenship was proving unable to meet basic needs.

Starting in the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, black, urban, educated college students mainly from the Pacific Coast began to deconstruct racist practices and ideas by challenging prevailing hegemonic structures. In 1975, Juan Dios Mosqueros, along with other progressive, young student militants, founded a university student group called Soweto. These were students—with strong ties working in the burgeoning student movement in Colombia—who had become dissatisfied with traditional social movements. During this period in Colombia, left-leaning progressive groups lacked serious theoretical approaches to race and ethnicity. Moreover, they did not understand the unique historical reality of Afro-Colombians. Given these circumstances, Afro-Colombians took it upon themselves to construct a new social movement methodology, vocabulary, and language in order to better understand the multiple forms of oppression and marginalization existing in their communities (Dixon, 1994–2000 [1995]). In doing so, they had to create new frameworks in order to deconstruct patterns of racial and gender discrimination, develop new methodologies to organize their communities, and devise new strategies to defend their varied interests.

In 1975, Amir Smith Córdoba, another young black militant, founded the Center for the Investigation of Black Culture in Bogotá, which produced a newspaper called Presencia Negra. Many of these young progressives were influenced by the writings of Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon, and Angela Davis. At the same time, a growing interest in Afro-Colombian and black culture was on the rise throughout the region. In 1977, the historic First Congress of Black Culture in the Americas was held in Cali, Colombia, which marked an important historical juncture in black organizing in the Americas. Black groups from Colombia and Ecuador and elsewhere in the Americas came together to discuss common regional problems. The founding of Soweto, the Center for the Investigation of Black Culture, and the meeting of the First Congress on Black Culture represented the beginning of a new type of social movement activity.

In the early 1980s, the left-leaning black student group Soweto was transformed into Cimarrón, or National Movement for the Human Rights of Black Communities of Colombia (Movimiento Nacional por los Derechos Humanos de las Comunidades Negras de Colombia). Throughout the 1980s, Cimarrón continued to build its organization and, along with other black based groups, increased its organizing efforts through grassroots mobilization and political
education. By the early 1990s, the various black social movements in Colombia through grassroots education, coalition building, and wide-scale mobilization had created new institutional space for organizing around ethnic rights, which led to the black rights law known as Law 70.

Social Movements and Constitutional Changes:

The Black Rights Law (Law 70)

In 1990, a unique historic movement emerged as Colombia prepared to make substantial changes to its constitution. A new Constituent Assembly began work to replace the 1886 constitution. The assembly’s main task was to develop a special legal mechanism that would make indigenous peoples’ rights permanent as recognized by Law 89 of 1890 (De Friedeman and Arocha, 1995: 67). Afro-Colombians as a group were totally excluded and had no representation in the assembly. The challenge for black groups, who were being excluded from this historic political process, was to seek inclusion—to get a seat at the table. Building on the organizing successes of the preceding twenty years, Afro-Colombian groups, including Cimarrón, began to organize and mobilize their constituents through grassroots mobilization, peaceful protests, and an intense lobbying campaign that targeted select indigenous leaders and politicians. Their aim was to be represented in the Constituent Assembly.

Concretely, along with wanting their interests represented in the assembly, Afro-Colombians from the Pacific Coast demanded a special article that would grant them collective titles to riverbank and jungle lands of the Pacific Coast region and other areas where they had exerted ancestral territorial domain. Their demands, however, were soundly rejected. The Colombian Institute for Agrarian Reform, which was largely responsible for analysis of the land claims, argued that there were no ethnic minorities in Colombia apart from indigenous peoples. Dismayed but not discouraged, Afro communities redoubled their grassroots mobilizations efforts by collecting signatures and peaceably seizing government buildings in the city of Quibdo, the capital of the department of Chocó. Afro-Colombians argued that their ethnic claim was linked to their ancestral ties to the lands on the Pacific Coast where they had lived for centuries.

The Colombian case illustrates some of the mixed implications of recent advances by indigenous social movements in Latin America. Collective rights gained as a result of multicultural citizenship have included the recognition of indigenous customary law as official policy, collective property rights, and official status of minority languages and guarantees of bilingual education (Hooker, 2005: 285). Juliet Hooker argues that the question of cultural and
ethnic identity in Latin America is linked to a group's ability to successfully articulate multicultural constitutional demands. For indigenous groups, these demands have linked land rights (habitat) to a broad agenda of territorial self-governance and cultural rights of difference (Mattiace, 2003). In almost every case of multicultural reform in the region, indigenous groups have been much more successful in gaining collective rights from the state than Afro groups (Hooker, 2005: 286). In Colombia, for example, the legislation for Afro-Colombian communities on the Pacific Coast is in no way comparable to similar laws for indigenous peoples, whose lands, or resguardos, are autonomous territorial units (in contrast to Afro-Colombian collective territories).

The main difference is that the resguardos receive direct financial support from the Colombian national budget. (Without such support, the neoliberal model would have a devastating impact on indigenous subsistence communities, as in Mexico where the 1992 "reform" of Article 27 of the Constitution threatened the survival of ejidos.) Also, the territory apportioned to each group relative to their size is not comparable. Indigenous groups are estimated to be roughly 4 percent of the Pacific Coast population and have legal title to 1.6 million hectares. In contrast, Afro-Colombians make up 90 percent of the Pacific Coast population and have been granted legal title to only 1.5 million hectares (Oakley, 2001: 21). Hooker argues that the main criteria used to determine the recipient of collective rights in Latin America has been the possession of a distinct cultural or ethnic identity. Therefore, the question of racial framing (race, culture, and ethnicity) is crucial to understanding the struggle for black rights in Colombia.

It is against this backdrop that Transitory Article 55 was established. Transitory Article 55 was presented as a compromise by the National Organization of Colombian Indigenous Peoples (Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia). This article called for establishing a Special Commission for Black Communities. It is through this mechanism that Afro-Colombians would have legal standing to pursue land claim issues on the Pacific Coast as well as other civil and political rights. Article 55 would lead to the elaboration of the Black Rights Law referred to as Law 70 (Dixon, 1994–2000 [1996]).

Law 70 allows black communities in rural areas of Colombia's Pacific Coast region to apply for collective land titles, until now considered state lands or unoccupied territories (Wade, 2000: 1). This very important law also contained provisions to improve black education, training, and access to credit, and to improve living conditions for black communities nationally. It also created two seats reserved for the black communities from the Pacific Coast in the congress and a Special Ministry of Government for black community affairs. In addition, discrimination against black communities was outlawed, and Law 70 included provisions that aggravate criminal penalties for specific
crimes if they are inspired by racial or ethnic intolerance or discrimination. To date, however, it is unclear if an individual or organization has been tried successfully for racial discrimination, illustrating how the neoliberal fiction of individual rights fails to protect community rights.

In this context another important group, the Process of Black Communities (*Proceso de Comunidades Negras*—PCN) was born. The PCN is a progressive network of roughly 120 black peasant organizations and, like Cimarrón, is an important player on Colombia’s political scene today. Representing mainly the interests of black peasants, PCN enjoys widespread support and grassroots legitimacy, and it places a strong emphasis on black cultural identity. The regional focus of the PCN is the southwest of Colombia, concentrating on the cities of Buenaventura (the location of the PCN headquarters), Cali, Tumaco, and their surrounding rural areas. This region includes the southern half of Colombia’s Pacific Coast region, predominantly rural and inhabited mainly by black people.

The PCN has worked to clarify and interpret the meaning of Law 70 by translating the legal aspects of the legislation into practical application for poor black communities who may not be able to fully comprehend its complexities, contradictions, and nuances. A major concern of the PCN has been pursuing the land title claims that rural black communities on the Pacific Coast region can make under Law 70. The PCN also has a broader socio-cultural agenda as it seeks to carve out a space for black identity. And, while the PCN participates in local and regional electoral processes, they are not connected to mainstream institutional parties or traditional party politics. They focus not so much on racism but on cultural difference. Rather than working for integration, PCN sees a future of equality based on cultural difference and autonomy in which black people control territories—rather than plots of land—constructing ways of life rooted in local black cultural practices of production, kinship, and ritual (Wade, 2000: 2).

The stellar work of the PCN has not gone unnoticed by the international community. It was the recent recognition of the work of the PCN and Libia Grueso that demonstrates the transnational dimensions of the struggle for human rights in Afro-Colombia and their significance. In 2004, Libia Grueso—an Afro-Colombian human rights activist, intellectual, mother, and cofounder of PCN—was awarded a Goldman environmental prize (the largest of its kind, considered the “Nobel Prize for the Environment”) for her sustainable development projects in the Colombian southwest. Like the famous case of rubber-tapper activist Chico Mendes in the Brazilian Amazon, sustainable development in Afro-Colombian regions represents a challenge to globalization and to the mega-investment projects seeking to convert natural resources into private commodities on the global market (stripping away the
self-determination claims of local communities). A social worker and environmental educator, Grueso is one of the many forces behind Law 70 and is known throughout Colombia and the world for her defense of black rights. While Afro movements in Colombia and the region had already achieved international visibility, the Goldman award offered fresh opportunities to cultivate and build new allies in the transnational community.

Consequences and Implications of Law 70

Law 70 is uneven, unclear, and has been hotly contested. While the law was welcomed by broad segments of Afro-Colombian civil society, there is no common agreement regarding its significance and relevance. Some argue that Law 70 lacks real power of enforcement, while other movement leaders argue it is an effective tool for black empowerment. However, the most crucial provisions of the law (regarding collective titles) only apply to Afro-Colombians of the Pacific Coast and not to the Afro population of the Atlantic Coast, therefore leading some to conclude that the law is divisive, as it favors one group over another. This illustrates another dilemma of identity-based movements, as interests are not necessarily homogenous within any racial or ethnic group, highlighting the importance of linking identity-based struggles to their global context.

Notwithstanding these debates, the law had several significant effects on Colombia’s complex sociological landscape. First, it brought the issue of black rights squarely within the parameters of mainstream discourse. Second, it increased black mobilization and organizing while simultaneously forcing “blacks” to come out of the closet and accept their blackness as a cultural and social reality. Third, it forced the Colombian state to deal with, though unevenly, growing black demands on the status and standing of Afro-Colombians as an ethnic group. Fourth, it should be interpreted as a major victory for black social groups and movements in Colombia. Lastly, it helped to propel their struggle to a regional and international level, and now as a consequence, the black struggle in Colombia has strong regional, national, and transnational links. Most importantly this law recognizes and codifies the rights of Afro-Colombians and bestows upon them rights that the state must recognize. It is the relationship between race and social citizenship that Afro-Colombians sought to address as they effectively challenged the notion of Colombia being a mainly white or mestizo nation. So with Law 70—at least in theory—Afro-Colombians became real citizens for the first time in the history of Colombia. By connecting to a transnationalized construct of human rights, black movements in Colombia inserted the collective identity of race into the concept of citizenship, challenging the neoliberal framework of rights based on individuals in a global marketplace.
With Law 70, a new level of intensity was achieved with respect to black mobilization. Small black NGOs blossomed while issues of black rights dominated the Colombian social landscape like never before. The years of black grassroots organizing had finally paid off, as Afro-Colombians now were seen as an ethnic group with a history, identity, and status, and as an official part of Colombia’s national identity. In Amilcar Cabral’s framework (1979), Afro-Colombians, like all peoples subject to forms of oppression, had reclaimed their past and in doing so had recaptured their culture, history, and identity.

While all aspects of the law are important, few are as problematic as the provisions of the law allowing for the issuance of titles to black communities on the Pacific Coast. Many Afro-Colombians complain that since the passage of the law, few communities have been granted titles to their properties. It is difficult, therefore, to judge the efficacy of this provision given that it is hard to determine precisely how many communities are negotiating, requesting, and receiving titles at any given time. Also, for those communities who have applied for such titles—successfully or unsuccessfully—it is not always clear on what basis such a determination was made. Moreover, since the passage of the law, land values have increased exponentially on the Pacific Coast, while at the same time, Colombia’s four-decade-old armed conflict has spread to Chocó and surrounding communities, resulting in the large-scale displacement of Afro-Colombians and the loss of huge portions of their lands.

Afro-Colombian communities on the Pacific Coast occupy some of the most strategic and valuable land in the region, and the inhabitants are caught between their struggle to obtain titles for lands and a myriad of complex state and nonstate actors, including the drug traffickers, the army, the paramilitary groups—who are supported by the army—and the guerrillas. The Afro-Colombian struggle can be seen as a conflict of local communities seeking the right to define their own priorities, against powerful geopolitical and global economic interests. According to a United Nations Special Rapporteur’s report on Colombia, black populations are seriously affected by violence as they are trapped in the crossfire between the drug traffickers, the army, the paramilitaries, and the guerrillas. In rural areas, where the problem of land ownership and use includes whether to grow lawful or unlawful crops or to exploit mineral resources, indigenous and black leaders are murdered by members of paramilitary organizations (armed by landowners or the military), drug traffickers, or guerrilla groups. The establishment of military bases on indigenous territories and black communities is perceived as an act of cultural aggression (Gele-Hanbazo, 1997: 11). Moreover, each party to the conflict (the paramilitaries, formal military, drug traffickers, and the guerrillas) expects the communities
to support their strategy, with total disregard for the communities’ basic living conditions, and as a result the opposing party in the conflict considers them enemies and legitimate targets.

The logic of the Afro-Colombian situation is further complicated by the neoliberal reforms sweeping across the region and aggressively promoted by Colombian president Álvaro Uribe. Given the vast mineral resources and the strategic locations of Afro-Colombian communities, transnational corporations (pharmaceuticals, petroleum, and agribusiness) have taken a keen interest in the Pacific coastline. Many black Colombians are often forced to choose between staying on their lands, which means putting their lives on the line abandoning their properties in order to save their lives; or selling their properties (at reduced values) to land speculators. Thus, the struggle to enforce Law 70, based on assertion of black identity and rights, becomes a direct challenge to the neoliberal agenda promoted by global capital seeking access to lucrative extraction and investment opportunities in Colombia. While Afro-Colombian movements have engaged with the state for purposes of passing the Black Rights Law, the slim protection offered by that legislation has obliged them to remain constituted as a social movement outside the framework of institutionalized politics.

Reports by the United Nations and other groups estimate that Afro-Colombians make up about 33 percent of internally displaced peoples (IDP). Afro-Colombians constitute a large part of the 3 million Colombians who have been forced to leave their homes since 1985 due to the gratuitous violence of the illegal armed groups and the Colombian military, as well as the U.S.-backed anti-drug fumigation campaigns. Displaced Afro-Colombians from the coastal regions now swell urban slums such as the popular neighborhood Nelson Mandela located on the edge of Cartagena de Indias (U.S. Office on Colombia, 2003: 1). Many of these displaced families are headed by women. The human rights violations committed against Afro-Colombians underscores the tensions between individual and group conceptions of human rights. Conceptually, Afro groups, like indigenous peoples, often see the group as the focal point and not necessarily the individual. Moreover, these groups focus on collective and identity issues within a human rights framework. Black and indigenous groups have broadened the conceptual, legal, and philosophical debates surrounding human rights and, in doing so, have helped to shift the discourse.

As a consequence of the war, scores of Afro-Colombian leaders have been killed or forced to seek exile. In response to the violence and displacement, Afro-Colombians have organized in their communities, and groups like AFRODES (the Association for Internally Displaced Afro-Colombians) now work with Afro-Colombians to assist them in reestablishing their lives.
AFRODES believes that communities of the southern Pacific region, and generally most Afro-Colombian communities, have suffered from the neglect of the Colombian state, racial discrimination, and social exclusion, as well as from the violation of their most fundamental rights and aggressions against their lives, culture, land, and forms of organization by armed actors.

Conclusion

Social movements in black Colombia are now transnational in scope and recognition. Like never before, the struggle of Afro-Colombians for land rights, decent housing, education, and other rights is becoming more known around the world. Afro-Colombians have established strong ties with groups in the United States, Canada, and Europe. The work of Afro-Colombians and their struggle is increasingly recognized by the international human rights community.

Like other groups in the region, in the 1970s Afro-Colombian social movements had spent a tremendous amount of time working in their communities, laying a solid infrastructural foundation and building regional and national networks. By the 1990s, Afro-Colombian social groups and networks had sprung up across the country. Also, civil society groups, U.S.-Latin American solidarity networks, and intergovernmental organizations had started to take a keen interest in Afro-Latin issues. The 2001 World Conference against Racism provided the historic opportunity for blacks and indigenous groups from the Americas to talk about their issues as well as build more networks and other forms of transnational solidarity.

By inscribing their struggles within the discourse of human rights and connecting to transnational networks, Afro-Latin movements are reconstructing identities in ways that both challenge the narrow neoliberal version of citizenship and strategically resist the disempowering impact of globalization. Their battles for legal and constitutional reform represent toeholds in the reconceptualization of citizenship to include collective identity-based rights. For Afro-Colombian communities found in strategic areas in the new process of global capital accumulation, asserting black identity in the framework of global human rights is key to survival.