



spotlight

RESISTING ENERGY TRANSITION?

Understanding Roadblocks in Northern Colombia

La Guajira in northern Colombia has seen a disproportionate number of roadblocks recently, especially connected to wind park construction sites, staged by people demanding that the state implement economic, social, and physical security improvements. This conflict is an example of local impacts of the global energy transition on historically marginalized people. In this Spotlight we argue that La Guajira is a prime case showing how the energy transition is leveraged to indirectly address the state through private companies.



The peaceful appearance is misleading: Wind park in La Guajira in northern Colombia. Photo: © Martin Gubsch/PRIF.

**BY MARTIN GUBSCH AND
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La Guajira in northern Colombia has historically been an uncomfortable region, with its majority population, the Wayuu, resisting colonization since Spanish occupation. The region has always been conceptualized by *Alijuna*¹ as remote, empty and rebellious. In recent years, La Guajira has become one of the major arenas for the energy transition, accompanied by promises of investment, development, and relief from the ongoing struggles with food security, infrastructure, education, and security. Despite this, there has in fact been a surge in con-

licts between a variety of groups and several have increased in intensity. The region has also seen a significant increase in roadblocks, especially since the growth in wind park construction. Colfecar² reported in January this year that in 2023, a total of 70 out of 579 roadblocks nationwide had been in La Guajira alone, despite it being one of Colombia's least densely populated regions, a trend that has been intensifying since 2016 when the majority of planned wind park constructions commenced.³ The discontent and demands are mostly focused on improving infrastructure to ensure access to water, food security, physical security against armed groups, education and schools as well as job security. The question is: Why target private enterprises and hamper potential economic opportunities rather than the state?

The 60 projected wind parks currently in different phases of planning and construction have altered the relationship between the state and indigenous communities. The 1998 reform of legislation on public and private investment in ethnic territories mandated that private firms organize informed, free, and open prior consultations (*consultas previas*) with the communities affected by the projects, paid for by the companies themselves. By 2020, there had been 10,569 such consultations in Colombia, 4,745 of which were held in La Guajira alone. While this achievement should be a cause for celebration and a sign of healthy conflict resolution mechanisms, it is clear that this region remains a focal point of conflict. Many communities believe they are being taken advantage of and do not feel heard. They are also divided, with some still preferring legal options,

GUSTAVO PETRO

Gustavo Petro is the first left-wing president of Colombia and won the 2022 election with significant popular support, especially from marginalized regions and communities. After almost two years in power, his government is struggling to keep its promises of local citizen participation forums, “Total Peace” with all armed groups, health and pension reforms, energy transition, decarbonization, and others. Many initiatives are still in the pipeline, but hope and support is dwindling as Petro is implicated in numerous scandals and his cabinet constantly changes.

such as the *consulta previa* and alternative forms of dialogue, whereas others, having lost the little trust they had in the government, resort to protest.

The goal of roadblocks is to disrupt everyday life and to attract media attention. As a form of protest, they are part of a repertoire of different types of extra-parliamentary political participation, serving as means of communication when other channels, such as legal claims or dialogue forums, are perceived as ineffective. While in most cases, the addressees of the roadblocks are “the public” and “the state”, here the only really affected parties are the wind parks themselves. This stands in stark contrast to the demands that underpin most protests in the region: water, food safety, roads, education and health—issues that fall within the responsibility of the state.

This has led to diverging views when it comes to the purpose and value of the roadblocks, ranging from outraged criticism accusing them of “biting the hand that could feed them” to solidarity from other marginalized groups and activists throughout the country. There is a general feeling that wind parks have not fulfilled the development promises that were originally made, paying too little compensation to too few as well as complicating long-standing social issues. The region has been an arena for a variety of conflicts, including those involving indigenous groups and the state, urban populations, armed groups and smuggling operations. The difference now, however, is the power to directly engage in something the state desperately wants: the energy transition. We argue that any roadblock has to be understood in its historical and political context. In this case, a region shaped by a colonial past of marginalization, first with regards to the Spanish occupation and later the national government.

LA GUAJIRA: A HISTORY OF OPPOSITION AND MARGINALIZATION

La Guajira’s territory embodies a history of resource exploitation that influenced its early global relations, alongside the emergence of a local populace caught in the crossfire of aggressive development strategies. This historical narrative of a region ripe for exploitation has endured since colonial times and persists in attempts to reshape the existing order, leveraging the region’s natural wealth within its perceived spatial and conceptual wilderness. It reveals distinct periods of economic growth based on different resources, occupation and local resistance. Yet, these have been marred by cultural stigmatization, depicting Wayuu communities as barbaric contrabandists and opponents of Western modernity. These frictions persist within the contemporary realm of renewable energy industries. Their inherent neoliberal discourses, promising energy transition, necessitate critical analysis, revealing the basic epistemological conflict based on rival perceptions of this territory and its geopolitical significance. There is a continuation of exploitation narratives, occupation, and colonial modes of territorialization that we can observe in the way land is claimed for the energy transition.

The region’s commercial roots can be traced back to the 16th and 17th centuries when pearl banks caught the interest of the Spanish administration following a period of subjugation and extermination of the Wayuu people, all in the name of territorial pacification. This ended in the Spanish ceding control of the land in response to its people’s violent resistance, which led to the establishment and control of tax-free trade and smuggling routes. This facilitated not only the acquisition of sophisticated weaponry but also the adoption of Western warfare tactics. The latter was instrumental to Wayuu resistance and independence from the Iberic imperial enterprise, on the one hand, and the creation of a colonial image depicting them as savage bootleggers in need of cultural homogenization on the other.

Fast forward to the 1970s and 1980s. Colombia, grappling with a deteriorating economy amid a global oil crisis, seizes the opportunity for coal extraction. La Guajira, tainted by the bonanza *marimbera*,⁴ is thrust into the spotlight once again as territory to be exploited and seized from its residents. Extractive projects, exemplified by the Cerrejón open-pit coal mine, in particular, reinforced narratives of inevitable development and progress. This trend is now mirrored by nonconventional renewable energy installations that have been present in the region since 2001 and expanded their activities

following the 2015 Renewable Energies Act. As early as 2004, these developments positioned the Colombian Caribbean as the most promising region in the country due to its year-round trade winds. In 2022, a total of 65 wind parks, including projects like Enel Green Power's Windpeshi, engaged in prior consultation processes with over 288 local communities while awaiting licensing approval. This national wind energy endeavor increased the region's dependence on external capital and technology.

WINDPESHI: PARTICIPATION AND FAILED COMMUNICATION

A particularly noteworthy case is the Windpeshi wind farm, which sparked continuing political unrest and frequent roadblocks, culminating in the permanent suspension of the project. While some eventually ended the blockades, they had conducted since April 2023, other communities resolutely continued their protest within the wind park's confines. Enel Colombia, the driving force behind the project, emphasized the efforts it had invested in dialogue and negotiation with all affected communities and government bodies. Despite these endeavors, one blockade persisted for over 70 days and continued to thwart the Enel Green Power's progress, disrupting the planned construction timeline. This protracted standoff cast a shadow of uncertainty over the fate of the project, prompting Enel Colombia to consider a range of potential outcomes, ultimately opting to indefinitely suspend the construction of the wind farm. The blockades also had financial ramifications, pushing up initial investment costs to over US\$400 million, and stalling construction progress at a meager 35 percent.

The problem has attracted significant government attention, resulting in various solutions being proposed, ranging from completely abandoning the project to intense attention along with media and NGO efforts to highlight the humanitarian situation. One direct result of this situation in combination with last year's roadblocks has been the interests of the current government, led by left-wing Gustavo Petro, who symbolically moved the government to the capital of La Guajira in May 2023, promising a development package for the region.⁵ In addition to funds for education, water, and food programs, he promised the construction of 300 kilometers of roads and even an airport. When we talked to the NGO *Nación Wayuu*, they expressed skepticism regarding these promises: "We will believe it when we see the results." As of now, almost a year later, no tangible progress can be observed.

EMPOWERMENT AND MARGINALIZATION

Many activists feel that the region has been abandoned by the state and the regional governments— institutions seen as responsible for the protection of their citizens. The roadblocks have become a form of political communication; a democratic act to express demands of national concern. However, the primary targets of these actions are not state actors, but energy companies. These private entities often reject the notion that it is their responsibility to address these demands, arguing that public infrastructure primarily falls under the purview of the government. The state, for its part, tends to blame local governments and their representatives, asserting that the main problem and reason for the conflict stems from Wayuu culture.⁶ Local political participation remains complex and is often oversimplified in the media and by the public, reducing it to merely voting. This political protest should in fact be seen as an opportunity to improve governance, as the product of a continuing process of antagonistic modernization, in which local communities have been marginalized.

These protests should therefore be understood as the latest expression of an ongoing struggle of a disempowered region and its people against a state they do not identify with. The persistent perception of La Guajira as a primitive wilderness, initially perpetuated by Spanish dominance and later reinforced by the disdain of the Colombian state and urban population, continues to influence today's social relations. Politicians and experts still characterize the Wayuu people as inherently violent, thus attempt-



Wind parks in La Guajira, Colombia. PRIF's own compilation, based on https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=80897&lang=de.

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ing to discredit their capabilities, and absolving the state and energy companies of responsibility for disrupting regional social dynamics.

CONCLUSION

The energy transition has empowered and transformed a historically marginalized region and enabled it to use private companies to address an absent state. As the state has a vested interest in listening to the owners of the wind parks, the protests against their projects do not aim to undermine the ambition of the energy transition and the project of ecological modernization, but rather to establish a new channel of communication with the government. These protests force energy companies to convey Wayuu demands to the state. If the state does not improve consultation, trust and the humanitarian situation, the result will be heightened conflict this year.

Historical processes have shaped the way this region and its people relate to the "outside". Nei-

ther prior consultation nor private investment have changed the fundamental structural conditions. So, are the Wayuu blocking the energy transition? The simple answer is: No. They use the wind parks as leverage to make demands of the state. The energy transition has given their territories new economic value and politically empowers them to demand that these parks be established in a way that could actually solve the ongoing humanitarian crisis situation in the region. In the global reconfiguration of the energy infrastructure, local circumstances matter in how new initiatives and power are perceived.

The target of these protests has never been the wind parks or the energy transition, even though they have been problematic in itself. The aim was, as many local activists reiterate, to drive home the point: "*Transición energética sí, pero no así.*" – Energy transition yes, but not like that.

PRIF SPOTLIGHT: The Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) is the largest institute for peace research in Germany. PRIF sets out to analyze the causes of violent international and internal conflicts, carrying out research into the conditions necessary for peace and working to spread the concept of peace.

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*References and further reading:
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