

VIOLENCE AND COLOMBIAN POLITICS

SOME CLUES FOR ITS UNDERSTANDING¹

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RESUMEN

El presente artículo de reflexión comienza con un breve recorrido por el contexto político del país, en el que surgen los dos principales partidos políticos colombianos. En segundo lugar, abordamos los diferentes enfoques y estudios que se han realizado en Colombia sobre la violencia, lo cual implica referirnos al conflicto interno que vive el país. En tercer lugar, reseñamos el inicio de las guerrillas, el nacimiento de las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), el Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) y el Movimiento 19 de abril (M-19). Finalmente, tratamos los inicios y desarrollos de lo que se ha denominado paramilitarismo, su vinculación con el narcotráfico y la clase política hasta llegar a la expedición de la llamada Ley de Justicia y Paz.

Palabras clave: Violencia, paramilitarismo, conflicto armado colombiano.

ABSTRACT

This article begins with a brief consideration on the political context of the country, in which they emerge the two main Colombian political parties. In the second place, we address different approaches and studies on Violence that have been conducted in the country, which implies to make reference to the internal conflict

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within Colombia. In the third place, we review the beginning of the guerillas, the birth of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the April Nineteen Movement (M-19). Finally, we discuss the inception and developments of what has been so called Paramilitaries, their connection with the drugs trade and the politicians, to reach the so called Law of Justice and Peace.

Key Words: Violence, Paramilitaries, Colombian Armed Conflict.

INTRODUCTION

The considerations of the conflict in the country are very important for Transitional Justice research, specifically by considering its inception, its context and how to propose alternatives for peace. For those reasons, we begin this paper by reviewing each one of these points, and the different research and studies on the theme, as stated by Gomez (2002) "Colombian political life is intimately linked to political parties, specifically, to traditional political parties: Liberal Political Party and Conservative Political Party. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, both political parties divided the Colombian population between elites and masses, proletarians and burgeons, peasants and inhabitants of the city, etc. Those two political parties monopolized the Colombian Government during the nineteenth century with different conceptions of the State and the role of the Church. The Liberal Political Party represented federalist and reformist tendencies while the Conservative Political Party bet on a strong and centralized State and the Church as an institution having a fundamental role to Colombian society and politics. Six recognized civil wars were developed based on irreconcilable differences between political parties and the struggle for power in Colombia" in years 1815, 1860, 1876

– 77, 1885, 1890 – 1902, and a non-declared civil war during 1948 – 1957, (period known as The Violence, according to different researchers and historians).

Then, members of Liberal Political Party and Conservative Political Party "have polarized the political life of the country becoming the Violence, embodied in infighting, in a constant in the political confrontation". This conflict will be reflected in a series of Constitutions and Constitutional reforms (Davila, 2002).

The history of Colombia has been a succession of small and large forms of Violence. Since the wars of Independence, passing by the nineteenth century wars, and countless uprisings, revolutions and small fights, until the highest point of the violence in 1948, as parallel institutions: the death of Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, "*el Bogotazo*" and the years of Violence. (This is available in www.repositorio.usab.edu.co).

STUDIES ON VIOLENCE IN COLOMBIA

Violence in Colombia has resulted in a series of studies and research that began in year 1962 by a pioneer study of the Commission composed of Bishop German Guzman, Orlando Fals and Eduardo Umaña. Herein below we will present a brief summary of the most important.

From each one of these studies we see how each one is focused on the categories that will serve for the various researches in conflict or peace or to the scholars of the armed conflict in Colombia. Thus, when speaking of Colombian armed conflict it is necessary to refer to the study of the Commission², in which the authors attempt to make a history of the violence in the fifties, by looking back at the history of the thirties³ (Cinep, 2002).

On the other hand, the role of the State will be a central question in the analysis of Fluharty (1981), Dix (1967), Payne (1968), and, above all, Oquist (1978), all of them with focus on the fifties. Oquist's emphasis on peasant struggles will be retaken in Gilhodes (1974) and Hobsbawn (1968).

The analysis of the role of the State served in addition to the object of study of many Colombian academics, such as Henderson (1984) on Urban Violence, Ortiz (1985) on Violence in Quindío in the fifties, Arocha (1979) referred to Violence in Quindío, Sanchez and Meertens (1983) on social banditry and Fajardo (1979) on social transformation in Tolima.

COMMISSION FOR THE STUDY OF VIOLENCE

A new tradition (referred to studies of violence) is created in Colombia with the

² Guzman, Fals and Umaña (1968).

³ As noted by Ortiz (1994), this study is distant from the traditional reading since it does not consider the people as a barbaric mass manipulated but as an active player of the process. But others had pointed out the lack of a deep reflection on the role of the State and the functioning of the two-party system in the analysis.

Commission for the Studies on Violence (1987). This Commission highlights the multidimensional nature of the violence and the need for a more pluralistic interpretation of the phenomenon. Furthermore, this Commission stated the need to differentiate between politic, socio-economic, socio-cultural and territorial violence, reinforced by certain culture of Violence. This way of thinking brought a proliferation of approaches⁴ which were reflected in the works, some of them were graduate thesis as in the case of Guerrero (1991) referred to violence in Boyacá in the thirties, Marulanda (1991) referred to colonization of Sumapaz in the twenties and thirties, Betancur (1990) referred to political murderers from Valle del Cauca, Barbosa and Medina (1990) referred to paramilitaries in Puerto Boyacá, Uribe (1990) referred to urban violence.

Also, there are a number of academic papers having as a main topic the recent Violence, such as Pecaut (1998) on two decades of violence in Colombia, Palacio and Rojas (1990) on what they call "para-State", Uprimny (1990) on the relationship between justice and violence, Sousa and Garcia (2001) on the same line of justice and violence, Orozco (1994) on fighters, rebels and territory, Rubio (1998) differentiating between political and ordinary criminal offender, Deas (1995) who makes a journey by Colombian political history, Gaitan (1995) on Colombian and international theories on Colombian violence,

⁴ Such approaches intended to provide an explanation of the violence take into consideration factors as the abandonment of the State in some areas, the exclusion of political power, the social and economic inequalities, the violation of human rights, the fighting between elites, the politicization of guerilla and drug business.

Montenegro and Posada (2001) who analyze the violence from Economy, Bejarano (1997) who focus the study on the economic analysis and empirical measurement on the relationship between poverty – lack of State – violence, Rangel (1997) who notice that the guerrilla fills the lack of State in impoverished regions and takes advantage of unsatisfied expectations, Echandia (1998: 24) who shows the historical evolution of guerilla to take refuge in “Fundraising Zones”, and Molano who makes a semblance of Jacobo Arenas, top leader of the ELN (1994).

This is a count of different perspectives that have been made to try to explain the origin of violence and armed conflict in Colombia. We now turn to look at violence during the period of independence.

INDEPENDENCE AND VIOLENCE

The Independence of Colombia marked the beginning of a conflict which has continued throughout the nineteenth century, in which there will be shifts between conservative and liberal political parties, declarations and civil war. The last one of such denominated civil wars took place between 1899 and 1902, which is known as the War of the One Thousand Days (*Guerra de los Mil Dias* in Spanish). During this war, Conservatives triumphed over Liberals and opened a period of 30 years called “Conservative Hegemony” (Urrego, 2002: 25).

A relative period of peace was known between 1902 and 1948, under Conservative Governments (1886 – 1930), and then with liberal reformers (1930 – 1946). During the Stage between 1930 and 1947, there was a game between liberal party and conservative

party, exercising the last one opposition to the development of reforms⁵, and, finally blocked them in 1947 (Urrego, 2002: 27).

“That opposition that emerged in the fourteens (40s) will be a belligerent opposition in defense of both, on one side, to the idea of a legitimate violence against abuses of power, and on the other side, to the practice of personal attack. In this way will be organized groups outside the law, armed, seeking to paralyze electoral participation of liberalism and, then, subtracting the difference in votes killing the opponent” (Oquist, 1978).

Oquist (1978) adds “The highlight of this violence will occur in year 1948 with the assassination of liberal leader Jorge Eliecer Gaitan. His murder caused a popular uprising called “*el Bogotazo*”, which gives the start of the so-called “Violence”. “The government of the conservative President “Mariano Ospina Perez managed to control the situation, and completed his presidential period ended in 1950. The Liberal Political Party did not participate in the 1950 elections arguing lack of guaranties. This facilitated the victory of the Conservative Political Party led by Laureano Gomez, who continued and deepened the security policy of his predecessor before partisan violence, which did not include negotiating with Liberal Political Party””(Fernandez de Soto, 1961).

“The Liberal Political Party, not totally without internal controversy, took the decision to promote guerillas to oppose the

⁵. The main reforms were the legalization of worker unions, the establishment of the right to strike, the reform of the land ownership system, new laws to protect and encourage the national industry, the creation of institutes for technical and agriculture matters.

military power of the Government of Gomez. In addition to the liberal guerrillas, which mainly operate in the Llanos Orientales area (Eastern Plains), different types of irregular armed groups were created in various regions. The failure of Government policies and mistrust that inspired some personal attitudes of Gomez, led to lose the support of many of the members of his own party, and in 1953, the political class lean on the military establishment to strike a coup. The power was assumed by General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (Posada, 1968) (Fernandez de Soto, 1961).

EMERGENCE OF THE NATIONAL FRONT OR ALTERNATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES

“When the political leaders of the country and the social sectors opposed to the regime considered that the Government of General Rojas Pinilla should end and not be prolonged for other four years period or more, they promoted a strike which forced the retirement of General Rojas Pinilla. The power was assumed by a transitional political committee while thinking of reestablishment of the traditional democratic political system of the Republic”. (Ocampo, 2006).

“The leaders of Liberal and Conservative Political Parties finally agreed that during a new period of transition, which will be extended for the following four periods (16 years), they will alternate in the Power!. (Ocampo 2006). This system, known as Alternation or National Front, was reflected in a Treated signed in Sitges (Spain) in 1953.

The National Front agreement, which was enshrined in the Constitution in 1957 by a plebiscite, strictly ensured that neither

liberals nor conservatives would be excluded from power, while cutting the way to possible new political parties (Bedoya, 1991).

“During the Government of Guillermo Leon Valencia (1962 – 1966), the second president of the National Front, and due to the concern for the existence of some of the so-called “Independent Republics”⁶ within the country, the president ordered the Army to bring such republics and to restore authority there” (Gonzalez, 1992).

THE BIRTH OF THE REVOLUTIONARY ARMED FORCES OF COLOMBIA (FARC)

“In 1964 and after the government of the National Front headed by Guillermo Leon Valencia had declared as “Independent Republics” and as subversive communist the peasant communities of Marquetalia, Villarica, Rio Chiquito, El Pato y El Guayabero, the Colombian army launches against them the largest extermination operation. It was the “Operation Sovereignty”, also called “*Operacion Marquetalia*” in Spanish⁷. The guerillas led by Manuel Marulanda Velez, alias “Toro-fijo”, (This means “Sureshot”, managed to overcome the military encirclement becoming later in a guerilla army FARC, which became in a clear roadmap of the seizure of political power by the use of armaments (Pizarro, 1991).

⁶ Conservative Senator Alvaro Gómez Hurtado denounced in the Congress of the Republic of Colombia the existence of 16 “Independent Republics” beyond the control of the State.

⁷ May 27, 1964. Starting date for the “*Operacion Marquetalia*”. This is taken as an official date for the origin of the FARC since a group of 48 peasants constitutes themselves in a guerilla group as a response to official aggression. It is available in www.anncol.com

In 1966 the FARC is presented as a guerilla group. In January of 1966, the Communist Party in the X Plenum sponsors the constitution of the FARC as a guerilla group. The FARC were born of the Second Conference of the South Guerilla Group, as part of a National Liberation Democratic Front. (Villamizar, 2002: 183 – 184) and (Pizarro, 1991: 171).

In the political arena of the FARC, the Agrarian Program of the Guerillas acquires significant importance becoming the main battle flag of this politic – military organization. It is in the Agrarian Program of the Guerillas or Government Program of the Guerilla, (which had been studied and updated in the eight National Conferences of the organization, and to become the main guideline for education, propaganda and organization to the political and military action), that the FARC clearly defines its ideological and political conception referred to its medium and long term objectives to the conquest of absolute political power by part of the working masses, all tending to build a socialist society in Colombia (Ferro and Uribe, 2002).

On July 4, 1964, shortly after FARC was founded, the Youth of the Liberal Revolutionary Movement (JMRL) – excision of the Liberal Party -, and the Liberation Brigade named Jose Antonio Galan, composed of youth University students along with members of the Peasants, Students and Workers Movement (MOEC) merged and it was founded the National Liberation Army (ELN – *Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional* in Spanish), inspired by the success of the Cuban revolution (Alameda, 2005).

“On January 7, 1965, the ELN began activities as a guerilla group. That day, thirty ELN combatants occupied the Simacota Villa, located in the Department of Santander, and by

publishing its revolutionary program calling for the struggle of the dispossessed classes, they signed a document called “Manifiesto de Simacota”, which is still taking effect”. (Vargas, 1992).

“After achieving several military victories in the Department of Santander, the ELN dramatically enhanced political support for its cause when, in December of 1965, the revolutionary priest Camilo Torres Restrepo joined the ELN”. (Medina, 1994).

“On the other hand, the Popular Liberation Army (EPL) (*Ejercito Popular del Pueblo*) has its origin in the founding of the Communist Party of Colombia (Marxist – Leninist), as a product of the deep division of the International Communist Movement among pro – Soviet and pro – Chinese (Maoist), which occurred during the first half of the 1960s. The PCC (ML), founded on July 20, 1965, and directed by Leon Arboleda, Jesus Alzate and Francisco Garcia, gives birth to its guerilla force on December 17, 1967, the Popular Liberation Army (EPL)”. (Calvo, 1987).

“On January of 1968 began the combats of EPL, when a military patrol was annihilated by one of his guerilla groups in the Department of Cordoba. Soon after, the Colombian Communist Party and its armed wing, the EPL, proclaim its willingness to build a Liberation Patriotic Front to lead and to promote an alliance between workers and peasants with the purpose to take and exercise the revolutionary political power by means of armed struggle.” (It is available in traducciones. espacioblog.com).

At the ideological level, “the Colombian Communist Party undergoes its more profound transformation when, in 1974, formally

resigned Maoism, after intense discussions initiated in the Six Plenum held in 1972. ” (Villaraga and Plazas, 1994).

APRIL 19 MOVEMENT (M-19)

For the last presidential period of the National Front (Alternation of Political Parties), the official Conservative candidate of the National Front, Misael Pastrana Borrero, confronted the independent Conservative candidate of the National Front, former president Gustavo Rojas Pinilla. In the elections of April 19, 1970, Pastrana won under numerous allegations of fraud. This prompted that several university students subsequently joined the April 19 Movement, M – 19, an insurgent group which became known after an expectation advertising campaign in the press in 1974.⁸

“During the Government of Julio Cesar Turbay Ayala (1978 – 1982) a national security policy was promoted. As a result of it, several leaders and members of those groups were imprisoned, but most remained active. In 1980, the M – 19 made the seizure of the Dominican Republic Embassy, as a sign of their ability to act. Finally, the end of the seizure of the embassy was peacefully negotiated, and the participants of the M – 19 departed for exile in Cuba.

The Government of Belisario Betancur (1982 – 1986) had a rapprochement and a truce with insurgent armed groups. The failure of these negotiations due to political differences

between different sectors of the Government and political groups, led to a breakdown and the subsequent seizure of the Palace of Justice in year 1985, by the M – 19, which ended with the dead of several of the retained civilians, as a consequence of an offensive operation by the army and the armed resistance of guerilla occupants.

Subsequently, the Government of Virgilio Barco (1986 – 1990) promoted a policy of “Firm Pulse and Outstretched Hand” (“Pulso Firme y Mano Extendida” in Spanish), which was echoed in the M – 19 starting a demobilization process that ended in year 1989” (Tirado, 1989: 52).

PARA-MILITARISM, THE COUNTERINSURGENCY STRATEGY

Since the early sixties the Security Forces and the State Security Agencies were formed under the parameters of the doctrine of National Security and the application of the fundamentals of Low Intensity Conflict, which are related to the counterinsurgency logic of the time of the Cold War (Richani, 2003: 167). Within this purpose, some mechanisms have been implemented to the elimination the “internal enemy”, represented in the existence of communism, subversion or insurgency”.⁹

⁸ May 27, 1964. Starting date for the “*Operacion Marquetalia*”. This is taken as an official date for the origin of the FARC since a group of 48 peasants constitutes themselves in a guerilla group as a response to official aggression. It is available in www.anncol.com

⁹ The term Low Intensity Conflict has been defined as: politic – military confrontation between groups or contended States which is below the level of conventional war and above the peaceful competition and the routine between States. It frequently involves protracted struggles for competing principles and ideologies. The Low Intensity Conflicts ranging from subversion to the use of armed forces. The Low Intensity Conflicts are performed using a combination of media applying political, eco-

Thus, in the framework of this strategy, at the beginning of the same decade it is recommended by US military advisors the shaping of organizations of the “antiterrorist type”, and to the “anti-communist fight”. In furtherance of this purpose is issued Decree 3398 of 1965, which was later converted into permanent legislation through Law 48 of 1968, by means of which gave the legal basis for the organization of “National Defense”, “Civil Defense”, and the promotion in the organization of “Self - Defense”.

“The emergency of paramilitaries, according to Garcia (2004), was due to a reactive manifestation of an excessive violence of the guerilla and to the inability of the Government to solve problems of public order and social conflicts.

The origin of paramilitary groups and self – defense as such could be located at the early eighties, period in which the Government of Belisario Betancur (1982 – 1986) decree the amnesty and pardon laws, and decided to initiate peace dialogs with the armed groups.¹⁰ In his study of the emergence of self – defense in Puerto Boyaca, Medina (1990) argues that concessions derived from the policies of peace of the Government were not well received by landowners and ranchers, who, besieged by the guerillas decided to form self – defense

groups with the purpose to fight against the insurgency in conjunction with the Army.

In late 1982, merchants, ranchers and farmers of Puerto Boyaca met in Medellin to organize and defend themselves against the guerillas. Within this step, the self – defense are no longer protectors of land, property and lives to become bands defending private interest of the owners affected by the guerillas. It is important to note that during this time, they wanted to project the image of legitimate defense groups of estates and people, with a clear vocation anti – insurgency.” (Rivas and Rey, 2008: 44).

This is ratified by Palacio and Safford, who say:

“Eventually some paramilitary receive patronage from old and new landlords, such as drug traffickers. They acquire mobility and offensive power by searching for projects on national scale, but the image that, at least since 1990, want to offer these organizations is that of self - defense.” (2002: 661).

EVOLUTION OF PARA-MILITARISM

“A first pillar which allowed the development of para-military groups was that of emerald traders, landowners and peasants who wanted to defend themselves from guerilla; another great pillar was that of drug traffickers who strengthened or recruited these paramilitary groups and the army, who eager to end the insurgency used any method to achieve an objective.

The privatization, in 1973, of the exploitation of emerald mines in Boyaca allowed the creation of private armies tolerated by the State. (Rivas and Rey, 2008: 46). In this regard, it is necessary to note that the inability of the

conomic, informative and military instruments. The Low Intensity Conflict are often local, generally in Third World countries, but include effects of global and regional security. (Department of Defense, Dictionary of Military and Associated, 1989: 212).

¹⁰ Law 35 of 1982 granted a general amnesty for perpetrators of political crimes. Law 49 of 1985 authorized the President to grant pardons to perpetrators of these crimes.

State to legislate effectively on mining was an incentive for the emergence of paramilitary emerald trader groups and that the war was the main formula to divide areas and control the emerald production.” (Uribe, 1992: 93).

These armies of emerald traders were related to paramilitary groups and they had alliances in which the profiles and objectives were unclear. This is ratified by Richani, who says:

“... The power struggle between clans of emerald traders converged with another fight that was emerging between the guerillas and their allies, the drug - bourgeoisie (narco - burguesia in Spanish) and large landowners and ranchers in Puerto Boyaca. The two struggles are intertwined in this area in subsequent years, when these groups began fighting for territorial control exercised by the guerillas on which they had acquired those lands and cattle ranches. The emergence of MAS led the antagonism up to the higher levels of violence.” (2003: 171).

On the other hand, “the decision of President Belisario Betancur to grant amnesty to the guerillas was poorly received by the Military and the elites who saw the peace policy as an unlimited tilt to the insurgency, which used violence to take the power by means of weapons.” (Leal and Zamosc, 1990: 490 – 493). Furthermore, “the limits to the military, in those years, led these to find new ways to confront the guerillas to prevent the bankrupt of the country and to prevent coexistence.” (Uprimny and Vargas, 1990).

DRUG TRAFFICKING IN THE COLOMBIAN ARMED CONFLICT

“The paramilitaries had strong ties with the so – called “Carteles de Medellin y de Cali” and Carlos Castaño, the main paramilitary leader at that time, acknowledged that the “paras” were directly put to the service of the

ranchers and drug traffickers for protection of their interests. The guerilla harmed the interest of the drugs trade since they requested a percentage of the money earned by the drug business, but also they charged them for their land and farm possessions. As a consequence, there was an alliance between paramilitaries and drug traffickers.” (Aranguren, 2001: 38).

Thus, an unprecedented counterinsurgency project was organized in the country. The residents of areas controlled by paramilitaries came to pay anti-communist tributes instead of communist tributes (Garcia, 2004: 65) and to carry a high degree of violence (Reyes, 1991: 38). With the purpose to trying to destroy the communist forces, its bases, peasants and residents of rural zones were repressed. Paramilitary activities of repression and killings originated the exodus of the population (Rivas, 2007: 94).

“Under the assumption that the populations of areas with high subversive presence are highly collaborators of the guerilla, the paramilitary strategy was based on carrying out massacres and forcing large displacement of population deepening the conflicts’ degradation. It increased due to confronting the State and by sentencing to death of penalty the personalities who were fighting against the drug business” (Garcia, 2004: 65).

As a final thought, we could accept that paramilitary strategy allowed pacify areas where guerillas had spread terror in the population, but at worst barbaric acts. In other areas of the country, paramilitaries implemented extermination and violence methods against the population that did not exist before. And as if that was not enough, the paramilitary project learned that it could be a counterinsurgency nationwide project and it could get political status on a macabre alliance with corrupt politicians, even with their help to

have the approval of Law 975 of 2005 to be judged with alternative penalties much more smaller than those provided by the Criminal Code.

The enactment of Law 975, known as the Justice and Peace Law, could have been interpreted as the sign of the beginning of a transitional justice process to Colombia, in response to the combination of what could be understood as the “Building Blocks” for a transition: a political agreement (Pacto de Rialito), a social demand for historical truth and Justice, the decision to repair, the creation of special and transient mechanisms for reinsertion and demobilization initiatives having as central reference the rights of the victims.

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