



## POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF THE ARMED CONFLICT IN COLOMBIA: A HISTORY FOR NOT REPETITION\*

ANTECEDENTES POLÍTICOS DEL CONFLICTO ARMADO EN COLOMBIA: UNA HISTORIA PARA NO REPETIR\*\*

FUNDO POLÍTICO DO CONFLITO ARMADO NA COLÔMBIA: UMA HISTÓRIA PARA NÃO REPETIR\*\*\*

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*\* This article is part of a bigger and currently undergoing research work conducted by the authors in order to present some of the current challenges facing the Colombian transition to peace and the strengthening of democracy.*

*\*\* Este artículo es parte de un trabajo de investigación más amplio y actualmente en curso, realizado por los autores con el fin de presentar algunos de los desafíos que enfrenta la transición colombiana a la paz y el fortalecimiento de la democracia.*

*\*\*\* Este artigo faz parte de um trabalho de pesquisa maior e atualmente em curso realizado pelos autores para apresentar alguns dos desafios atuais que a transição colombiana faz para a paz e o fortalecimento da democracia.*

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**Abstract:** During the middle of last century, the merge of the armed conflict in Colombia began. The origin of the armed struggle had multiple basis, which were not only presented internally, but were also fostered for reasons that were due to the international situation that existed at the time, precedents that articulate the history of guerrilla movements and armed struggle in Latin America. This article explores some events that occurred in recent Colombian history, and tracks the key players who have had influence on the American continent's oldest armed conflict.

**Key Words:** Armed Conflict, Colombia, Communism, ELN, FARC-EP, Guerrilla, National Front.

**Resumen:** durante mediados del siglo pasado, se empezó a entrelazar el conflicto armado en Colombia. El origen de la lucha armada tuvo múltiples antecedentes, los cuales no solo se presentaron a nivel interno, sino que también fueron alimentados por razones que obedecían a la coyuntura internacional que se vivía en la época, precedentes que articulan la historia de los movimientos de guerrillas y la lucha armada en Latinoamérica. Este artículo explora algunos acontecimientos que se presentaron en la historia reciente colombiana, y rastrea los principales actores que han tenido influencia en el conflicto armado más antiguo del continente americano.

**Palabras clave:** Colombia, comunismo, conflicto armado, ELN, FARC-EP, Frente Nacional, guerrilla.

**Resumo:** Durante meados do século passado, o conflito armado começou-se a entrelazar na Colômbia. A origem da luta armada teve múltiplos antecedentes, que não só foram apresentados internamente, mas também alimentados por razões que se deveriam à situação internacional que existia na época, precedentes que articulam a história dos movimentos de guerrilha e a luta armada na América Latina. Este artigo explora alguns eventos que ocorreram na história colombiana recente e traça os principais atores que tiveram influência no conflito armado mais antigo do continente americano.

**Palavras-chave:** Colômbia, Comunismo, Conflito Armado, ELN, FARC-EP, Frente Nacional, Guerrilha.

## Introduction

The internal armed conflict in Colombia has many root-causes and actors, and it has been in existence for over 60 years. Is the sole and oldest armed conflict in the western hemisphere and one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world. The figures of the human cost of the conflict are just staggering; it has caused hundreds of thousands of deaths, mainly civilians<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, it has caused millions of victims of forced displacement, sexual aggressions, extrajudicial executions, forced disappearances, torture and forced recruitment of underage combatants

In a historical moment of transition towards peace and democratic strengthening in Colombia, the objective of this paper is to present some of the political roots causes of the internal armed conflict. The main focus of this paper will address historical episodes of political exclusion in order to highlight the remarkable importance of these manifestations of political violence and to create public awareness of its consequences in order to prevent them from happening again.

## The Influence of the Cold War as a Root Cause of the Internal Political Violence and the Emergence of the Most Remarkable Guerrilla Groups.

The control over the land and over the State is linked directly to the beginning of the armed conflict in Colombia. The backdrop is set under United States enrichment after World War I. The rise in coffee prices and growth in domestic demand triggered agrarian conflicts in coffee-growing areas dominated by the lease and colonization of badlands. Tenants were unaware of labor agreements with the haciendas and settlers invaded land belonging to them. The triumph of the Liberal Party in 1930 and the influence of socialist ideology in organizing leagues took farmers to play a decisive role in many regions that were suppressed by official or private weapons.

Liberalism in power from the 1930, tried to get to its side the public armed forces in some regions to impose its electoral majority or to defend it. Conservatives were unwilling to lose in the elections they had gained with the use of weapons in the Thousand Days War. They used these two

1. For example Human Rights Watch provides substantial research on how many of the victims wear no uniform, hold no gun, or profess any allegiance to any armed group, however, are deliberately and implacably targeted and killed by these groups, based on the mere suspicion that they support their enemies.... War without quarter. Colombia and the International Humanitarian Law. Human Rights Watch.1998 <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports98/colombia/Colom989-03.htm>

modes to gain influence and added a powerful third: the strength of the Catholic Church (Molano, 2015). Liberalism appealed to lead agrarian struggles as political support. The Communist Party took the same path. In such a way that arms, national budget, ideology and land, all forms of struggle, became the explosive mixture called *The Violence*.

During the second part of the last century, Latin America was living through different changes in the political arena. Populism and national-democratic speeches were the development ground for new social activities. While different social movements like the farmers' and students' were emerging in several countries such as Mexico, Brazil, and Peru, Colombia wasn't the exception to the rule.

In the context of Cold War and with an obvious ideological conflict that had repercussions at the Latin American level, different actors began to play an important role in the continent. Echeverry (2007) argues that early in the decade of 1960s, Communism was strengthened after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and by the Vietnamese resistance. In the ruling classes of the continent it generated a profound anti-communism, led by the United States, the OAS and the Catholic Church.

In order to address that matter, United States' President John F. Kennedy implemented a series of socio-economic reforms that had a direct impact on the Latin American region, such amendments aimed to reduce poverty, improve literacy and led to equality, however, others, this was translated into resources, establishing economic cooperation to strengthen the army forces in these countries to counterbalance the insurgency. This policy was known as the *Alliance for Progress* (1961), which lasted about ten 10 years, and the main objective was to extend its anticommunist policies as Latin American countries were engaged in guerrilla conflicts, including Uruguay, Venezuela and the Colombian case with the Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN – (National Liberation Army), Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC – (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and Ejército Popular de Liberación – EPL – (Popular Liberation Army).

This decade also had several events at the regional level as described by Echeverry (2007):

- 1962: State of siege in Guatemala, Cuba expelled from the Organization of American States.
- 1963: Francois Duvalier, president of Haiti decreed martial law.
- 1964: The Brazilian military led a coup to President



Goulart ending democracy in that country and ushering in a regime that will last 20 years.

The decade of 1960's was also marked by military power dictatorships and in the case of Haiti, *"the mandate of Duvalier was soon revealed as a brutal dictatorship supported by the strength to dominate the population"*. (Sanchez, 2010) This is where the violation of Human Rights and extreme poverty constituted both the common denominator in the region.

The armed conflict in Colombia dates back to the mid-twentieth century, which happens in parallel with other international developments such as the Cold War and the Cuban Revolution. In order to addressing Colombian history, there are two main events that fed the conflict. One was the military dictatorship of Rojas Pinilla<sup>2</sup>, and the second was the **National Front**<sup>3</sup>, this coalition surged in response to the dictatorship, however it also led to the subsequent emergence of guerrillas such as the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army), Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and Ejército Popular de Liberación (National Population Army) in the 60s, and the M-19 (19th of April Movement) in the 70's. (Trejos Rosero, 2011).

It must be clear that while the formal origin of the FARC-EP dates back to the nineteen sixties, the fact is that the armed confrontation that this guerrilla organization performs against the Colombian state finds its justification in a previous conflict, the political conflict that characterized the traditional political bipartisanship in Colombia in the early twentieth century. Therefore, the FARC-EP was officially founded in 1964 under the initial name of "Bloque Sur" and rapidly began its important fight-related claims in the context of social inequality, unequal distribution regarding the ownership of land and adequate political participation. In this regard, the National Center of Historical Memory (2014, p. 31) relates the origin of the FARC-EP with three important sociopolitical phenomena such as agrarian struggles of the twentieth century, the political activity

2. Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (12 March 1900 – 17 January 1975) was the 19th President of Colombia from June 1953 to May 1957. An Army General, he mounted a successful coup d'état against President Laureano Gomez Castro (1889—1965), imposing martial law and establishing a dictatorship-style government in Colombia.

3. Frente Nacional (National Front) was a period in which the two main political parties, the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party agreed to rotate power, intercalating for a period of four presidential terms. The growing worries that the regime of the military dictatorship of Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (1953-1957) expanded to become a populist dictatorship and the creation of a third political party united both Liberal and Conservative parties against the regime. The Liberal Party was then headed by Alberto Lleras Camargo and the Conservative Party was led by Laureano Gomez. They both signed an accord on June 24, 1956 to begin the National Front.

of the Communist Party and the creation of the peasant self-defense groups because of the bipartisan violence.

Regarding this first component (Pizarro, 2011, p. 27, quoting Gilhodes, 1974, p. 25) argues that in the early twentieth century there were three main types of agrarian conflicts that could be clearly evidenced in Colombia and these, essentially related in a first step with the peasant claim for improvements in working conditions on the plantations, second, the disputes related to property rights over land through constant questioning of titles and finally caused disagreements regarding indigenous issues, and their desire to maintain or regain control of large tracts of land on which have had a traditional presence.

As regards to its political activity of the Communist Party it is important to note how the FARC-EP was originally born as a predominantly rural structure of the Colombian Communist Party (PCC) in rural areas under the attempt to organize the nascent worker, peasant and trade union movement in the country at the beginning of the twentieth century, proclaiming vindication of the interests of the least favored against neglect and abandoned state (Trejos & Gonzalez, 2013, p. 65). Finally, the creation of peasant self-defense is framed in the context of political violence originated from the government of President Mariano Ospina Perez, who assumed the political leadership of the country in 1946 on behalf of the Conservative Party, after sixteen years of liberal governments and beyond the end of the Second World War. From this point it is evident in the country an open implementation of the repressive force of the state against liberal activists and communists, at a time when the international political situation was already conditioned by the Cold War (Trejos, 2015, p. 25).

Access to power by President Mariano Ospina Perez, meant the unthinkable retaking of national political power by the Conservative Party after several presidential terms led by the Liberal Party in what was known as the **Liberal Republic**. This political situation of conservative hegemony led to the emergence of a hunt for any different form of political expression, especially liberal opposition, and whose impacts would be initially limited to regional areas. However, the subsequent assassination of liberal leader Jorge Eliecer Gaitan on April 9, 1948 represented a serious disruption of public order at national level. The overindulgences and manifestations of political intolerance and the bipartisan barbarism that previously occurred mainly in rural and remote areas began to replicate throughout the national territory (Chacon, 2004).

Since the murder of Jorge Eliecer Gaitan in Colombia in 1948, the civil war emerged, this period called *La Violencia* was marked by the inability to contain the Conservative Party's violence in a peaceful manner, an increasing formation of Liberal's groups and communist's paramilitary forces was evident because of State repression. Widespread violence between liberals and conservatives was fought mainly between citizens attached to both political groups by attacking militants from the opposing party or by confronting their territories of influence. Within political parties armed groups with different levels of organization were established: on one side, *Chulavita Police* and *The Birds* (paramilitary groups hired to murder political opponents), serving the Conservative government on one side; and liberal communist guerrillas and paramilitary groups on the other. (Torres, 2015, p. 25).

This situation would be transformed after the coup provided by General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla in 1953, against the conservative government of the President Laureano Gomez. In an attempt to pacify the country, General Rojas Pinilla promoted amnesty for political crimes by Decree-Law 1823 of 1954. Despite the above, this call was only attended by the liberal guerrillas and communist guerrillas remained standing (Atehortúa, 2010, p. 40). Along with military operations, the government of General Rojas Pinilla was also strongly criticized by allegations of corruption and using repressive measures, which ultimately entailed yielding to the political pressure from national elites and to the resignation of power. It became clear that in order to promote the peacetime, there was a need for restoration of dialogue, effective bipartisan reconciliation and a return to a system of democratic government headed by civilian authorities (Chacon, Robinson and Torvik, 2011, p. 385).

After this circumstance a *military junta*<sup>4</sup> was entrusted with conducting an open and participatory elections to such an extent that finally allowed the democratic transition wait to a civil court government (Dias & Paredes, 2007, p. 186). Throughout this unstable period, political leaders from the Liberal and Conservative parties, established the basis for a negotiation of peaceful transition to break traditional paradigms of bipartisan confrontation in national history.

As a result, through the agreements of Benidorm (1956) and Sitges (1957), The *Frente Nacional* was created. While leaders who negotiated the pact for the creation of the National Front presented it as a favorable political project for the exercise of government in the country, the fact

4. The Colombian Military Junta was a transitional government established between 1957 and 1958, replacing President Gustavo Rojas Pinilla. The junta's members were: General Gabriel Paris Gordillo, Brigadier Rafael Navas Pardo, Rear-Admiral Ruben Piedrahita Arango and Brigadier Luis Ernesto Ordoñez Castillo.

is that for many sectors of society such agreement represented the continuation of a political dictatorship in Colombia, and not in the hands of the military, but a dictatorship of a civil nature, in which the traditional political parties reshaped its monopoly of power through undemocratic pact that left out of political life to those political parties and movements that were not attached to the ideological currents of Liberalism or Conservatism (Mesa, 2009, p 159; & Duque Varela, 2011, p 175.). The National Front eminently due to its undemocratic nature precisely laid the foundation for other kind of violence, a targeted violence against the political regime and against the state, a revolutionary violence (Vargas, 2006, p. 92).

The bipartisan political agreement that gave birth to the National Front was devoted mainly to solve the traditional frictions of hegemonic political parties, completely forgetting about the profound social and economic needs that exist for the remaining majority of Colombians. To this extent, many supporters of the excluded political movements chose adherence to clandestine leftist movements and the integration into the armed guerrilla organizations ranks, which was taken by the regime of Government as an adequate justification for addressing major military operations in agricultural areas that served as shelter to the guerrilla redoubts and peasant self-defense groups.

In their quest to recover the monopoly of force in the regions, the national government designed and implemented the Plan LASO (Latin American Security Operation) in 1962 as a counterinsurgency strategy with guidelines issued from the US Government to order the militarization and bombing of several agricultural areas established in guerrilla territories that were called from the national political establishment as alleged independent republics (National Center of Historical Memory, 2013, p. 121).

Perhaps the most emblematic fact in the process of emergence of the FARC-EP is precisely linked to the attack in 1964 at what was then known as the Independent Marquetalia Republic. In this episode of national history, although there is no unified data that account for the exact number of troops deployed for such an operation, it has been speculated that about 16,000 soldiers accompanied by artillery and air cover, harassed the region to reduce the subversive group led by Pedro Antonio Marin, who later *nom de guerre* used was Manuel Marulanda and Tirofijo (Verdabierta, 2012). Despite the numerical superiority and the deployment of technical support, government troops failed to comply fully with its objective, since the rebels used a strategy of guerrilla warfare and constant motion, opting for conducting attacks from territorial enclaves' difficult ac-



cess followed by strategic convolutions, therefore enabling them to subsequently perform the first Guerrilla Conference and give rise to the so-called *Bloque Sur*.

Up to this point, what is now known as FARC-EP has passed several transformations ranging from the agrarian struggle of small farmers in southern Tolima in 1948, into mobile guerrillas before the siege and harassment of the State between 1953 and 1955, the consolidation of the armed movement and transfer to Marquetalia from 1960, and the formation of Bloque Sur after the First Guerrilla Conference in 1965 (Moreno, 2006, p. 626). In this context the emergence of the FARC-EP was initially given as a small number of fighters in open rebellion against the government, deployed in outlying, rural and marginal areas of the country in which it sought to replace the state group, but without the operational capacity needed to represent a serious threat to the ruling political establishment (National Center of Historical Memory, 2014, p. 30).

There are individuals and social sectors, which preserve the historical memory of the abuses committed by the state and the ruling sectors in every age; and it is true that many of them have managed to preserve traditions of armed struggle over decades and in this sense have managed to crystallize separate cultural values of the predominant majority networks at certain periods.

The FARC decided to achieve their political ends by means of armed struggle; this entails within it a violence that is political, and the conception of the very nature of violence. The group needs to be constantly standing to gain acceptance; and how to carry out this process is through the speech, which is itself, a function of legitimation.

The use of violence as a legitimate means of action is defended by Marx and Engels in his conception of communism. They both seek the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie, however, they consider an only way to achieve political power captured by the bourgeoisie, through the means of violence. That would be the only chance to open the way to the proletariat's dictatorship (Chevallier, 1997, p. 323).

The origin of the ELN is linked directly with influences of the Cuban Revolution, and especially by the impact produced in college middle-class youths of the largest urban centers of Latin America. This was also articulated with the struggles of nationalist type, such as, the situation of oil workers, the struggles of armed resistance, as continued by the liberal guerrillas in Magdalena Medio and Llanos Orientales, and the expectation in urban progressives Co-

lombians from the so-called new left, facing the possibility of revolutions from armed action combined with social discontent (Sierra, 2001). Although FARC-EP has a strong rural base and a historical large military deployment, the ELN moves on a smaller scale from the point of armed view, but has a profound grasp at the political level, working their social bases in areas of the State where it operates.

While FARC-EP was emerged in Marquetalia, department of Tolima, in response to an Army advanced on a group of farmers who had established a sort of independent republic, the ELN was born further north, in the department of Santander, in San Vicente de Chucurí. Its founders were not armed peasants, as the FARC, but inspired by Marxist ideology and the Cuban Revolution intellectuals. Bushnell (1993) argues that ELN was built on a model of terrorist leftist guerrillas, widespread in Latin America, which had the peculiarity of recruiting their fighters among young disillusioned middle class.

Camilo Torres, priest and founder of the faculty of sociology of the National University of Colombia, plays a very important role as it forms a movement along with his students and members called the *United People's Front*, making counterweight to the National Front, a coalition between liberals and conservatives who they were divided power for four years each, hampering free political participation. This coupled in parallel with the reconfiguration by the Church was happening in front of their new dynamics for economic and social development, and the influence of liberation theology, have a direct impact on the creation of the National Liberation Army (ELN).

The Magdalena Medio felt marginalized by the bipartisan leadership of the national order and the express frustration made the region earned a reputation as rebel and nonconformist territory. This scenario explains the inclusion of radicalized student groups of the Industrial University of Santander to the ELN's project, the host of the thesis of the *United Front* of Camilo Torres, and the support of some leaders from the *Communist Youth* (JUCO), the *Revolutionary United Front Action* (FUAR), and the *Movimiento Obrero Campesino Estudiantil* (MOEC). (National Center of Historical Memory, 2013)

In this context and with the attack on Marquetalia by the FARC, Camilo Torres concludes rising against the elite violently as the only response to the subordination and exploitation to which they were being subjected. The Colombian government at that time was not able to offer sufficient guarantees to society, so deeply that this condition ended up feeding these acts of violence. Finally, with

this militant thought he joins the National Liberation Army (ELN) in 1965.

In the militant action of Camilo Torres, many other Christians followed the path of struggle and they found popular support few years later with the first theoretical formulations of the Theology of Liberation. After his death in combat, Camilo Torres became one of the strongest references of the revolutionary movement in Latin America and the symbol of the confluence between Christians and revolution. (Korol & Obregon, 2009). Although he was a man to take up arms to fight against poverty and in favor of farmers, their time in the insurgency did not last long, as it was shot dead in 1966.

Both the FARC and ELN were born within a national context in which political and social violence composed the outcome of an atmosphere created by Rojas' dictatorship and the establishment of the National Front. Simultaneously, the international context in the case of the ELN constituted an essential circumstance shaped by the revolutionary wave engendered in Latin America through the Cuban Revolution.

The success of the 'July 26 Movement' led by Fidel Castro and Ernesto Guevara generated a questioning process over the control strategies' policy for old leftist opposition parties in Latin America. That also brought the possibility to rethink their tactics, which resulted in new organizations policies that came apart from the fervor of the Cuban process. This constituted the so-called 'new left' in Colombia.

## Conclusion

In a historical moment of transition to peace and the strengthening of democracy, one crucial aspect of the peace accord between FARC-EP and the Colombian government, is their inclusion in national democracy through legal means. In other words, the biggest guerrilla organization agreed to pursuit their political objectives, no through the use of violence, but through the use of democratic means.

Historical episodes of Colombian political life has shown how traditional political elites have been reluctant to this possibility and have even used violence and political exclusion to preserve their own political interest. These historical episodes presented in this paper are just a few of the root-causes of internal confrontation, and have many lessons for the current moment of political transition. Therefore, incurring in new episodes of political exclusion and violence would definitely restart a cycle of internal confrontation and war that could last decades. Knowing the

past is crucial in order to set a course for the future of the Colombian society.

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