

## **Violence as a Last Resort: How Government Failures Have Perpetuated the War System in Colombia**

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“A theory of the state or of revolution must assume a terrain of war to be normal” (quoted in Richani, 2002). These words, written by Antonio Negri in *The Politics of Subversion*, refer to the tendency of a nation divided by opposing factions to succumb to an indefinite state of war in an attempt to either reform or conserve existing policies. However, this statement is dependent on the assumption that these disparities cannot be solved by more democratic means, such as legislative or contractual compromises. A country’s susceptibility to this condition is reflective of the government’s inability to centralize power, thereby securing a monopoly on the legitimate use of force (Jung and Piccoli, 2001), or to establish a system whereby legal codes are understood and respected both by political actors and their constituents. This theory is directly applicable to the current situation in Colombia; the failure of governmental institutions to implement authoritative and effective policy has allowed the war system to perpetuate for decades.

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A “legitimate” government can be defined as one with “a consistency between the regime and the values and preferences of most citizens,” resulting in a situation whereby “civil society reinforces the legal system as social pressures make it costly not to comply with the law; trust and social cohesion are high, and many transaction costs are low as contracts are easy to enforce” (Thoumi, 1995). A war system would not endure in such a country. As it consists of a set of interconnected groups with their main pattern of interaction being a shared exercise of violence (Richani, 1997), a war system would be prevented in a society where the government exercises a monopoly on the use of force and is able to provide economic benefits and constitutional liberties across all socioeconomic spheres.

The Colombian government is inefficient in its protection of these provisions for the majority of its citizens. Its reliance on a patriarchal societal organization rooted in elitist sentiment, as well as its pattern of political instability, has allowed for the continued use of violence as a method of (unofficial) policy implementation. In order for a war system to survive, it must establish a positive-sum, political economy of scale in which the assets each group accrues outweigh the political and economic costs incurred (Richani, 1997). Due to the

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nature of its extensive economic inequities—it has the second-highest concentration of wealth in Latin America (Richani, 1997)—and high levels of unemployment (10.6%) and poverty (49.2%) (*World Factbook, 2008*), it is feasible that the economic benefits of a war system could outweigh those provided by legitimate governmental institutions.

### **Land Reform**

As with many other Latin American countries, patron-client relationships in Colombia have led to a government that is run for the benefit of party bosses rather than for the common good. Since government employees feel that their actions are mainly answerable to the patrons, they feel no obligation to the masses. This creates a barrier for the lower classes to achieve progress in exercising their rights through legal processes (Thoumi 1995). This is evidenced in the government's actions regarding the problem of land; the "Land Laws" of 1938 and 1944 cemented landlords' dominant control by allowing them to turn much of the land into pasture and cattle ranches, which led to a less labor-intensive market, a reduction in foodstuffs, and an increase in land prices (Richani, 2002). The peasants' land situation began rapidly declining again in the 1980s, when the country's rapid transition to capitalism led to a greater concentration of land and

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another decline in the need for local labor; compounding this was the fact that the industrial sector was in stagnation, and thus was unable to absorb the excess unemployed farmers (Richani, 2002).

### **Political Stalemate**

The clientelistic organization in Colombia prevents the government from attaining autonomy from pressure groups; such autonomy would hold beneficiaries of public policy more accountable (Thoumi, 1995). Furthermore, the establishment of the National Front ensured the political domination of two main parties: the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party (Archer, 1990). Although the creation of a system that relied on maintaining equilibrium between two groups—which had previously undergone thirteen years of violence in an effort to solve policy disputes—signaled an attempt at peace and negotiation, it also marked the end of partisan electoral competition (Archer, 1990). Thus, radical parties were driven from the political process; only the wealthy elite and the powerful had a voice in legislative decisions. As a result, the peasants and urban poor were without a legitimate means of expressing their dissatisfaction with modernization and the government's inability to transition the lower classes into a capitalist society.

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### **Controlling Violence**

In addition to the government's inefficiency regarding land reform, it has also proven unsuccessful at controlling violence. Latin America has a long history of using the military to implement policy; this proclivity was exacerbated in Colombia throughout La Violencia, the period from 1945-58 in which a civil war ensued between the Liberals and the Conservatives (Richani, 2002). More than 200,000 people died as a result; these were mostly the "peasant clients" that "made up the bulk of the landed elite's unprofessional, fragmented, and often haphazard armies" (Archer, 1990). La Violencia served to stress the fact that policy decisions were most effectively resolved through violence, rather than by democratic means. This was not lost on the peasants, who first fought under their landowning patrons, then later supported guerillas, recognizing that as a marginalized group without valid representation, violence was the only means of asserting their rights and expressing discontent (Thoumi, 1995). When a government is unable to redistribute funds in an effort to decrease inequality, the call for a revolution can always be justified by the masses.

Another cause of the government's inability to monopolize the use of legitimate force is its failure to establish an operative, capable

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justice system with clearly documented and successfully implemented legal codes. Due to case overload, the majority of criminal processes do not result in a judgment (Thoumi, 1995). This is in large part due to insufficient budgeting; in 1987 only 2% of the government's budget went to the judicial system (Thoumi, 1995). This significantly reduces the threat of repercussions to those involved in the illegal sector, effectively rendering the government's threat obsolete.

Colombia's attempt to democratize its institutions has not yet led to a separation from the *mano duro* practice ("to rule with a strong fist"), and the resulting use of violence as the most effective tool for political actors within the country. In response to peasant revolts regarding the loss of land and rural unemployment subsequent to the nation's entrance into the capitalist global market, the government responded with the 1978 Statute of Security. This legalized the use of violence against "radicalized" peasants through the use of paramilitary forces (Richani, 2002), which has triggered a rise in violence within the country today, as drug traffickers have formed paramilitary troops of their own (Richani, 1997). The government is unable to control the various guerilla resistance organizations and violent forces employed by those within the drug trade; as a result of the government's weak authority and failure to concentrate power, the military has grown

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nearly autonomous (Richani, 2002). The “re-emergence of the military as the principal organ responsible for public order...is a by-product of a long history in which the State failed to resolve conflicts without a resort to violence” (Richani, 1997). As we will later see, the amount of power that this autonomy entails is dangerous in regards to the perpetuation of violence; the military has a vested interest in prolonging a state of war.

### **Economic Policies**

Closely related to policy failures concerning land disputes, and the broad implementation of violence across conflicting political actors, is the Colombian government’s inability to formulate effective economic policies. The process of democratization brought with it a sudden shift in economic theory. Elites embraced the neoliberal economic concepts that left many small agrarian laborers unemployed and without sustenance, while regional political bosses enjoyed the surge in power they inherited along with fiscal decentralization efforts (Garman, Haggard and Willis, 2001). This served to tighten the wealthy elite’s hold on economic policy and to further diminish the lower class’s political voice (Garman, Haggard and Willis, 2001). Business elites are able to take advantage of the peasants’ and urban poor’s marginality due to the clientelistic nature of their relationship.

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As buyer/seller relationships are not necessarily anonymous (as they are in most countries that employ free trade methods), a market price does not exist; and there is no clear link between the cost of a product and its price, or opportunity cost (Thoumi, 1995). Another reason for this disconnect between the opportunity cost of a product and its price is that many fees are the result of a political transaction (Thoumi, 1995). When prices are set through negotiations between business and political elites, there are severe consequences to marginalized members of society. Businesses impose the equivalent of an excise tax on these consumers, who are provided with no method of exerting influence, not even through participation in a market-based economy (Thoumi, 1995).

This practice of enacting policy for the benefit of the political elite and patrons has led to vast inefficiencies in investments. Large sums of money have been bestowed upon public institutions without broad returns to the economy—such as mining, where profits are concentrated in the hands of the wealthy elites who manage the industry. Businesses such as these are not conducive to the increases in productivity that sustain economic growth (Thoumi, 1995). Rather, they only serve to enlarge the public sector, with the elites and the powerful being the only beneficiaries.

### **The Illegal Sector**

Furthermore, the government has been unsuccessful at distinguishing between profits accumulated from the legal sector and those that are a consequence of illegal activity. Although it has been illegal since 1931 to hold foreign exchange in or outside the country, the Central Bank has relaxed its restrictions on this statute many times, and has also bought black market foreign exchange (Thoumi, 1995). It would be difficult for the government to ignore the profits from the illegal sector that are made on the foreign market, as foreign exchange scarcity is one of the largest continued economic constraints in Colombia (Thoumi, 1995). In the year 1995, the total income from the illegal sector amounted to about 13.2% of the nation's economy (Richani, 1997) and was equivalent to the total annual sales of the 14 largest legal industrial enterprises in the country (Richani 1997). The addition of these figures into official reporting provides greater access to foreign exchange; while it is understandable that government officials would press for their inclusion, this only further blurs the line between legality and criminal activity. It is through such legal disregard on the part of the government that civilian distrust and dismissal are advanced.

### **The “Comfortable Military Impasse”**

Under conditions such as these, where the government is ineffective in instituting change and improving civilians’ social and economic positions, it is natural that marginalized groups seek alternative methods of reforming political institutions. This is precisely how a war system is created; the government’s ineffectiveness forces its citizens to generate other means of meeting their needs. Because the legal process has been abandoned, organizations seek violent means to achieve their ends.

The war system in Colombia has come to be known as a “comfortable military impasse,” whereby the three main actors (military, guerilla organizations, and drug trafficking forces) have learned to adjust to and capitalize on the present situation (Richani, 1997). Thus, they are willing to postpone peace indefinitely; it is more profitable for them to remain in their current positions. Although in many democratized countries military interests are interrelated with those of the state, Colombia is similar to other Latin American countries in that the military is largely autonomous. Therefore, it can use the war as a resource for securing more funds, and ultimately more power.

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Government spending on the military branch reached the fifth highest in the hemisphere in 1995, and within Latin America, Colombia ranks second only to Brazil (Richani, 1997). The risk that is incurred in times of war has caused a significant increase in salaries; a general's salary increased 407.7% between 1991-4, while that of a lieutenant climbed 200% (Richani, 1997, p. 50). In the decade between 1989-1999, military expenditures rose from 1.2% of the GNP to 3.5% (Richani, 2002). This increase was accompanied by very little increased responsibility on the part of the military, as its relations with other key actors in the war remained steady (Richani, 2002). Thus, a rise in allocated funds implies greater profits for military personnel.

The military is able to secure funds through other channels when engaged in war; many members ally with those involved in the drug trade by accepting bribes or imposing "taxes" on local peasants (Richani, 2002). They are also able to secure more advanced weaponry and intelligence from foreign interests (primarily the United States) and have negotiated security contracts (for the amount of \$67 million) with multinational oil companies (Richani, 1997).

But the military's benefit from the war system is not limited to monetary gains; it is also able to secure a nearly immutable level of power and jurisdiction. This is evidenced through the 1985 incident at

the Supreme Court of Justice, in which the military attacked M-19 guerillas without presidential orders (Richani, 2002). This event led to the death of nearly all occupants of the building—both the judges and the guerillas—and to a virtual coup. Although President Betancur completed his term, the peace negotiations the military opposed were extinguished (Richani, 2002).

### **The Benefits of War beyond the Military**

While the military branch is afforded a great deal of power, and thus possesses a large degree of influence on current affairs, the war system would not exist if it was the only political actor to profit from the situation. The “low-intensity” war in Colombia also provides more opportunity for guerilla organizations to prosper than in times of peace. One of the most prominent of these groups is the Coordinadora Nacional Guerrillera (CGN); in 1994, its profits totaled \$535 million (Richani, 2002). This number exceeds that of Colombia’s most profitable legal company—the National Coffee fund—which earned \$14 million less that year, and is more than twice the amount earned by ECOPETROL (Colombia’s state-owned oil company).

Additionally, the CGN owns many of its own businesses (mostly within the mining sector) and earns profits from investments in farms, hotels, firms, drugstores, transportation services, etc. (Richani, 2002).

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It is estimated that the average family that directly relies on the CGN's income consists of four people. Excluding those working in guerilla-owned businesses or the peasants who receive loans from the CGN "bank," about 60,000 people are supported by the CGN's annual profits (Richani, 2002). Thus, a disruption of the war system would result in economic upheaval for a large sector of Colombia's population; recognizing this, many guerilla organizations regularly bribe military officials stationed within their areas in order to "ensure maintenance of the *status quo*" (Richani, 2002).

One of the largest groups to benefit from the war system has been those involved in the drug trade; the wealth they have accumulated throughout the past few decades has led to their emergence as a new elite. Due to the country's poor justice system, Colombian drug traffickers have a comparative advantage; risk is still factored into the cost, which allows the price to surge, yet the threat of being charged is not as high in a country with an ineffective judicial branch (Thoumi, 1995). Furthermore, the elites within the drug trade business are able to earn significant profits from the marketing and distribution of drugs in the United States; as the peasants receive very little of this share, this translates into high returns for low production costs (Thoumi, 1995). The money earned by this emerging wealthy

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class is usually invested in real estate, where drug traffickers are able to gain a political voice and economic influence within the territory (Thoumi, 1995). Political economist Francisco E. Thoumi has observed, “The lack of legitimacy of political institutions makes it easy for those in the [drug trade] industry to believe in the legitimacy of their economic activities, their income, and their accumulated capital” (Thoumi, 1995). Thus, it is beneficial for those involved in this sector to engage in the constant subversion of government authority to ensure the continuance of Colombia’s current state of affairs.

Although the military, the guerilla organizations, and drug traffickers are the three main units within the war system, the peasants and other members of the lower classes are additional significant beneficiaries of the system. The high unemployment rate and substantial disparity between social classes have already been discussed, as has been the government’s inability to remedy the situation, and the lack of a political voice for marginalized groups. In light of this, violence appears to be the most effective channel for land and economic reform in regards to Colombian peasants.

It is no coincidence that the cultivation of crops for the drug trade has prospered in isolated areas stricken with poverty and a lack

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of transportation infrastructure; in some cases, peasants were not able to take produce to sell at a market because the transportation costs exceeded market prices (Thoumi, 1995). The loss of profit suffered by small farmers due to the lack of legitimate market pricing can be subsidized by additional cultivation of crops for drug traffickers.

Yet elites in the drug trade are similar to wealthy landlords in that their goal is to earn the most profit from the process. Thus, peasants could potentially be as vulnerable to exploitation as they would be if they were working on an *hacienda* or a *latifunda*. However, the war system affords peasants an advantage in this situation. Unlike the legal sector, which is dominated by a group with similar interests and is thus able to prevent the legal unionization of lower-class workers, the clash of interests between the actors of the war system plays to the peasants' advantage. Not only do guerilla organizations fight against the military's aerial eradication efforts via the periodic spraying of herbicides (Thoumi, 1995), but they impose a *gramaje* tax on growers and processors of illegal drugs, to ensure that traffickers pay on time and that they pay the market value (Richani 1997). Thus, wealthy traffickers are prevented from extracting peasant labor without adequate compensation. In this way, guerillas protect cultivators from exploitation and secure a fair price for their labor.

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The war system has promoted the development of a new business sector; this has increased the availability of jobs for those affected by the massive unemployment rates (Richani, 1997). Excess labor in cities such as Medellín, where high unemployment levels exist as a result of the decline of the textile industry, has been utilized in the form of the *sicario* (assassin) industry (Richani, 1997). Further jobs have been created with the growing popularity of personal security agents; due to the failure of the Colombian government to ensure protection of its citizens, many wealthy families have hired private guards (Richani, 1997). Clearly, those who benefit from the increased availability of jobs within this emerging sector support the continuance of this system of violence.

## **Conclusion**

Today there are many Colombians whose social, economic, and political improvement are dependent upon the various opportunities that have arisen within the context of the war system, and this can be attributed to the government's inability to legislate effective and just policy measures. If the government provided secure, efficient legal means of political expression, one can presume that the attitudes toward violence would not be the same. It is through the failure of the government to provide equal representation and to attain

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a monopoly on the use of legitimate force that the war system has prospered in Colombia; without a significant shift in policy, the practice of violence as a tool of implementation will continue indefinitely.

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