

COLOMBIA

Can Colombia's Left Survive the Persistent Logics of Armed Conflict?

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ACROSS LATIN AMERICA, voters have rejected the Washington Consensus of Neoliberal economics and military imperialism. From Bolivia and Peru to Chile and Honduras voters have called on left governments to build a more equitable future.

Now in Colombia, a country whose successive governments have ranged from hard to center right throughout its modern history, [a social democrat and former guerilla militant leads in the presidential polls](#). Gustavo Petro, the runner up in Colombia's 2018 presidential elections, is the leading candidate for a coalition of left of center political parties called the Pacto Historico (historic pact), which seeks to change Colombia's status as a "center right" country, for the first time in its history.

If Colombia's left is successful in the spring 2022 parliamentary and presidential elections (March 13 and 29), it will be a miracle that defies the brutal logics of Colombia's 52-year-long internal armed conflict; a half century of U.S.-backed counter-insurgency and extrajudicial killings of civilian leftists.

Although peace accords were signed in 2016 and the principal guerilla group - the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) - officially demobilized in 2017, wartime logics continue to color dynamics between the far right Colombian state and the Colombian left.

Cold-War-era counterinsurgency logics, exported to the world by the U.S. military, blur the lines between civilians, state actors, and insurgents. These logics, present across Latin America from the early sixties onward, posited that every civilian in a territory of conflict had to pick a side: either collaborate with the military or be seen as a "communist/guerilla" and risk extrajudicial execution.

In 1962, two years before Colombia's conflict began, U.S. Colonel William Yarborough suggested during a visit to Colombia "the organization of local death squads accountable to the U.S. government" [1] to stamp out the threat of Colombia's peasant communists. In 1963, Colombian General Alberto Ruiz Novoa, a veteran of the Colombian battalion that fought alongside the United States in Korea, made a recommendation that slightly tweaked Yarborough's formula: he advocated for the creation of armed civilian "peasant self-defense" groups, accountable to the Colombian military, and trained to fight communists within their communities. [2]

Through the enduring political influence of military and paramilitary groups, counterinsurgency doctrine has persisted, even as the war came to an official close.

Stretching from 1964 to 2016, the Colombian conflict is the longest running cold war conflict in Latin America. Many attribute the length of Colombia's conflict to the FARC finding a sustainable income source through territorial control of Colombia's frontier regions and levying taxes on cocaine production. While this is a major factor, the rise of anti-communist paramilitaries and their implementation of scorched earth tactics against the civilian Left meant that an earlier negotiated end to the war was impossible.

In 1982, then-president Belisario Betancur began negotiating a peace process with the major Left insurgencies, offering the opportunity for leftists and demobilized guerillas to compete in electoral politics. By 1985, the FARC and the Colombian Communist Party had formed the Union Patriótica (UP), a political party that emerged as a popular alternative electoral option for Colombians. What followed was [political genocide](#). As Andrei Gomez-Suarez notes, between 1985 to 2002, "more than 5,000 UP members had been assassinated, hundreds had been disappeared or forced to leave the country, others had gone back to continue waging war against the state, and many others had abandoned their political identity in order to survive the violence." [3]

In the 1980s and 1990s, anti-communist paramilitarism - encouraged by U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine and often fused with narco-trafficking - was booming in Colombia. In the paramilitaries' war on the Left, civilians often paid the price. In [Segovia, Antioquia, where Union Patriótica won parliamentary elections](#) in 1988, the military abandoned a security checkpoint to let anti-communist paramilitaries into the town. In this case, paramilitaries commanded by [the infamous Castaño brothers](#) killed 43 civilians, one among many massacres that led to 1988 being dubbed "the year of the massacre." On the subject of civilian casualties, Carlos Castaño said, "In war, unarmed civilian is a relative term. Two thirds of the guerrillas are unarmed, act like civilians, and collaborate with the guerrillas." [4] Paramilitaries committed crimes with impunity, with official state forces either collaborating or looking the other way.

Paramilitary Power

With the growth of paramilitary power, these organizations soon found their political expression on a national level. Alvaro Uribe Velez, a wealthy cattle baron from Antioquia, rose to prominence as a senator and then governor of Antioquia. There, he fostered paramilitary structures called *convivirs*, [5] which reported directly to the military.

By 2002, a time when paramilitaries began to run electoral candidates and win by intimidating voters, Uribe ran for president, on the platform of what he called "democratic security:" no more than recycled cold war counterinsurgency theory. His message was clear: in order for the war against the FARC to be won, citizens would have to collaborate with the military. In his own words, "In democratic societies there is no citizen neutrality in the face of crime. There is no distinction between police and citizens." [6]

After assuming the presidency in 2002, Uribe continued links of patronage with paramilitary actors, [including prominent narco-traffickers](#). While waging all-out war on the Left insurgencies, [Uribe negotiated an amnesty deal with the major paramilitary groups, insulating them from accountability for human rights violations and array of criminal activities](#). The deal capped prison sentences at 6.5 years and was rejected by both the EU and UN for failing to punish crimes against humanity. [During this time of demobilization, paramilitary leaders estimated that 35% percent of the Colombian Congress was under their control](#).

Under his plan for Democratic Security, Uribe organized over one million civilians to be paid informers, and presided over Plan Colombia, a major influx of U.S. military aid which began in 2000

and massively modernized the armed forces. With this influx of U.S. defense money, and the FARC at an all-time low popularity, Uribe was convinced that now was the time to win the war on the Left insurgents.

But victory, for Uribe's policy of democratic security, required complete submission to the state. For communities that sought neutrality in the conflict, like San Jose de Apartado, in the banana region of Uruba, this was a doomed endeavor. Long caught in the crossfires of armed groups, San Jose de Apartado declared itself a neutral "peace community" in 1997 and was the site of international human rights accompaniment. Despite international focus, in 2005 prominent community leader Luis Eduardo Guerra was killed, along with four children and three other community members. This massacre meant that, since declaring itself a "peace community," 115 community members had been killed. [7] Of the killings, president Uribe said: "There are good people in the community, but some of its leaders, patrons, and defenders have been signaled by people who live there as FARC auxiliaries." [8]

Again, Uribe blurs the lines between combatant and civilian, and through encouraging the use of force, emboldened his security forces to do the same. As one soldier said, "I feel supported by the government because finally there is someone who understands us and encourages us to win this war." [9] During the period of 2002-2010, when Uribe commanded the armed forces with U.S. trained General Mario Montoya, [the army tried to spur soldiers toward "victory" against the FARC by offering bonuses to kill combatants](#). Through a mix of zeal, impunity, and incentive systems for kills, many units in the military began the widespread practice of kidnapping working class Colombians, often displaced because of the internal armed conflict and living in a new community. These civilians would then be dressed up as insurgents and killed. [This practice, which became known euphemistically as "false positives," is estimated to have taken up to 10,000 lives, according to military whistleblowers](#).

In 2022, the memory of the Uribe era of armed conflict persists, as does his political influence. Throughout the term of Alvaro Uribe's protege and current Colombian president, Ivan Duque, Colombia experienced a series of paros nacionales "Uribe Paraco, el pueblo está berraco," ("Uribe, you paramilitary, the people are fed up").

On April 28, 2021, a paro nacional convened in response to a tax reform and the handling of COVID by president Duque. These strikes were brutally repressed, but protesters remained in the streets for months, now protesting militarization in the country. "We saw how bodies appeared dead in the rivers. We saw how the police and the ESMAD (riot police) shot at young people point blank," says Miguel Villanuevas, a student leader in Caqueta. "This showed us that the military and police don't serve the constitution, but instead serve a specific political class that wants to defend its privileges at all cost."

Throughout the months of mobilization, viral videos circulated of police committing atrocities against protestors, which fed the indignation behind the marches. President Duque, for his part, took a hard line in his defense of the police and military, [ordering law enforcement to be "overwhelming in their response to terrorists, vandals, and criminality."](#) [Colombia's defense minister claimed that protests were infiltrated by the FARC, and Alvaro Uribe went further, tweeting "Let's support the right of soldiers and police to use their firearms to defend their integrity and to defend people and property from criminal acts of terrorist vandalism."](#)

This rhetoric is a classic tack for Colombia's far right: demonize political opponents as the terrorist, the guerilla, the vandal, or the criminal in order to execute them with impunity. So far, [42 protesters have been killed through state repression](#), adding to the ever-growing list of "social leaders" killed in Colombia.

Since the peace process in 2016, extrajudicial killings of territorial or environmental defenders, political party activists, human rights defenders, displaced peasants, and ex-combatants of guerilla groups have been cast into this euphemistic frame of “social leaders”. For protesters in the paro, the killing of social leaders, along with the lack of implementation of the 2016 peace agreements, are major sources of ire with Duque’s “Uribista” government. In 2020, [120 social leaders were murdered in Colombia according to the U.N.’s High Commissioner for Human Rights](#).

After the strikes and brutal repression, the Duque government is [at a historically low approval rating](#). With mass participation in the national strikes, there is a growing popular opposition to the paramilitary doctrines of Alvaro Uribe. [For the upcoming elections, even right-wing parties are excluding his candidate from coalitions for the upcoming elections, for fear that the “Uribista” status quo is politically toxic](#).

For the Pacto Historico, the newly-formed coalition of Left parties contesting the presidency, their intention is to translate the energy of street protests and rejection of the status quo into a positive project of major reform. Attempting to ally themselves with the paro movement, their slogan has become: “from the streets to the polls, from the polls to power.”

Miguel Villanuevas, the student leader in Caqueta, is a Pacto Historico volunteer. “Now there is a fracture,” Villanuevas says. “The strike of April 28, 2021 changed the consciousness of the (Colombia’s) citizens. Not just in Cali or in Bogota, but in many places in the country where there had never been a strong mobilization, citizens went to the streets to say: Enough.”

The Pacto Historico, as a political movement, hopes to tie messages of national unity to social spending and poverty reduction, in what Villanuevas describes as not just a rejection of militarism, “but a social pact with Colombia’s citizens.”

From their campaign announcement video, it is clear the Pacto hopes to break with past dynamics and provide a positive vision moving forward. In the video, a smiling young person cheerily affirms: “the past doesn’t matter, this is our opportunity to generate a positive change. This is our moment of national unity.”

The question is whether the paramilitary and [narco-bourgeoisie, who consider the electoral Right and Uribe’s Centro Democratico movement to be beneficial to their power](#), can sow enough fear in the population to prevent a leftward shift. After such monumental national strikes, can counterinsurgent logics (the fear of being stigmatized as a guerilla and killed) continue to regulate people’s political participation? In many ways, it already does.

Because of the specter of political violence in frontier regions where armed groups from the conflict still operate, many political leaders look for electoral vehicles outside of left parties like Pacto Historico. [As Diana Sanchez, director of the MINGA association, explained, leaders across the ideological spectrum “have to look for party endorsements that guarantee that they are not killed and can participate.”](#) In these territories, where the majority of social leaders are killed, vote winning will prove to be most dangerous.

[During the 2018 elections, when international observers visited these areas, they found civil society groups terrorized by paramilitaries, with social leaders killed during their visits, and armed groups declaring voters for Gustavo Petro \(the leading Left candidate\) to be “military objects.”](#)

Miguel Villanuevas notes that “in the places where Pacto Historico campaigners do not have control over security, we’re not going to go, because the war, at this moment, is beginning.”

According to Villanuevas, the Right is launching their strategy of reaction, knowing the deep

unpopularity of their movement. “The Uribistas know they’re going to lose power, they’re afraid to lose power, and the only method they have to prevent this is taking up arms.”

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P.S.

• Against the Current. No. 216, January-February 2022:
<https://againstthecurrent.org/can-colombias-left-survive-the-persistent-logics-of-armed-conflict/>

Footnotes

[1] Forrest Hylton, *Evil Hour in Colombia* (Verso Books, 2006), 55.

[2] Ibid

[3] Andrei Gomez-Suarez, *Genocide, Geopolitics and Transnational Networks. Contextualising the destruction of the Unión Patrónica in Colombia*, 1.

[4] Mauricio Romero, [Democratización Política y contra reforma paramilitar en Colombia](#), 333.

[5] John Lindsay-Poland, *Plan Colombia.U.S.Ally Atrocities and Community Activism* (Duke University Press, 2018), 45.

[6] Quoted in Forrest Hylton, *Evil hour in Colombia*.

[7] Lindsay-Poland, *Plan Colombia*, 21.

[8] Ibid., 161.

[9] Ibid., 177.