

The End of Ideologically-Motivated Violent Movements in Latin America?

Written by W. Alejandro Sanchez

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W. ALEJANDRO SANCHEZ, SEP 24 2012

Violence continues to flourish in Latin America, perpetuated by a variety of ongoing criminal trends ranging from gruesome murders in Mexico to deadly ambushes by guerrillas against security forces in Peru. While the crimes themselves are not new, the collective profile of the perpetrators has changed. In major cities like Caracas in Venezuela, Juarez in Mexico, and in the *favelas* (shantytowns) of Brazil, there seems to have been a shift in their goals and *raison d'être*.

The era of insurgent movements that fought governments in order to carry out regime change and install leftist-style governments seems to be coming to an end. Only a few movements remain, as compared to their heyday in the 1980's, like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The new wave of violent organized movements is made up of international criminal networks, such as Mexican cartels or criminal gangs in Central America, who have gained power through the lucrative drug trade but lack a political ideology or objective. Does the change that we have witnessed in the past two decades signify the end of ideologically-motivated violent organizations in Latin America?

A Brief History of Ideological Terrorism in Latin America

Insurgent movements spread throughout Latin America at the height of the Cold War as a combination of proxy wars between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and as a way for masses to attempt regime change and alter social orders that, for the most part, essentially labeled poor and indigenous groups as second-class citizens. While few of those groups remain today, they had the numbers, strength, and support to make an impact in Latin America throughout the 1980's. An incomplete list would include Peru's Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA), Colombia's 19th of April Movement (M19) and Popular Liberation Army (EPL), the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR) – which had factions active in Chile and Bolivia among other countries – Argentina's Montonero Peronist Movement (MPM), Uruguay's Tupamaros National Liberation Movement and Nicaragua's Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN).

Several insurgent movements ceased to exist between the end of the 1980's and the mid-1990's. Some of them went peacefully, as in the case of the Central America regional peace accords, which saw the end of insurgent movements like the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) in Guatemala. Other groups, like the MIR and the Tupamaros, were defeated via military operations, such as the Washington-orchestrated Plan Condor. Such initiatives, known for their abuses of human rights, were carried out by the military governments that ruled much of South America from the 1960's to late 1980's. In Peru, the MRTA became severely weakened after the capture of its major leaders, including its founder, Victor Polay Campos, which brought their operations to an end in the mid-1990's. The group's last major operation occurred in 1996-1997.

As part of demobilization initiatives, there were instances where some guerrilla movements attempted to become part of their countries' political systems, with mixed results. For instance, the FMLN won the presidential elections of El Salvador in 2009 with Mauricio Funes as its candidate. On the other hand, Carlos Pizarro, leader of the M-19 Movement, was not so lucky. In 1989, M-19 disbanded as an insurgent force and became a political party known as the M-19 Democratic Alliance. Pizarro ran for president of Colombia in the 1990 elections but was assassinated on

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April of that year. Pizarro's murder was allegedly ordered by Pablo Escobar—head of the infamous Medellín Cartel.[1] Another example of violent groups trying to become part of a political process is going on right now in Peru. In the Andean country, there is a political party known as *Patria Roja*, which has alleged ties with the Shining Path. In addition, Alfredo Crespo, lawyer of incarcerated Shining Path leader Abimael Guzman, has created an NGO called the Movement for Amnesty and Fundamental Rights (MOVADEF). MOVADEF's goal is to free Guzman and other individuals accused of terrorism, whom MOVADEF considers to be "political prisoners." The group has twice attempted to register as a political party, but the Peruvian government has rejected it each time, leading Crespo to denounce the government's "antidemocratic tendencies." The attempts by demobilized insurgent movements to join legitimate political processes throughout Latin America are controversial, to say the least, but do exemplify that such organizations had, arguably, some kind of political objectives which they chose to pursue via non-violent, legal means.

By 2012, only a handful of groups forged in the ideological crucibles of the 1960's-1980's continue to be operational. The biggest of these movements are the Colombian FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN) as well as Peru's Shining Path. While all three are weaker and more disorganized than they were decades ago – the FARC, for example, allegedly has around 9,000 troops, down from 16,000 in the 1990's – they continue to carry out deadly operations. A major reason for the weakening of these groups has to do with successful military operations carried out by local security forces. As another example, the Shining Path's last major leader, Florindo Flores, was captured on February 2012; effectively dividing the remaining insurgent groups into two separate factions. Meanwhile, the FARC has been weakened since losing its major leaders in recent years, such as Manuel Marulanda (AKA Tirofijo), Manuel Reyes, and Jorge Briceno (AKA Mono Jojoy). At the time of this writing, there are negotiations underway between the Colombian government and the FARC, though it is uncertain that these will be successful considering that the guerrillas are known for having broken previous ceasefires and other similar agreements.

The Rise of Narco-Violence

As insurgent movements backed up by political ideologies come to an end, major criminal cartels that lack political objectives and are centered on profiting from illegal activities have begun to rise. This isn't to say that criminal groups did not exist in the 1970's and 1980's, during the period of ideological civil wars. For example, during the 1980's and early 1990's, Colombia became notorious for the drug-related wealth and violence of the Medellín Cartel as well as the Cali Cartel.

Major drug trafficking cartels, such as the Sinaloa, Zetas, and Gulf Cartel have appeared throughout Mexico, and are slowly expanding their influence to Central America, like in Guatemala, and there are troubling reports that they have a growing presence in South America as well. Unlike the FARC or Shining Path, the Mexican cartels lack any kind of ideology or objectives beyond profit from lucrative crimes. Their goal is not to overthrow the Mexican government, but rather to create expanding spheres of influence where they govern parallel to central governments as a kind of narco-fiefdom.

There are also groups like the Maras Salvatrucha, an international gang based in Central America.[2] It is necessary to stress that the Maras do not have the same origins as the cartels; the Maras are a Hispanic gang that originated in cities like Los Angeles and whose members were deported to their countries of origin. A 2008 Time article reported that, "[t]iny El Salvador has over 55,000 gang members, including some 10,000 deportees." While the Maras' reason for existence arguably was not drug trafficking, being involved in illicit activities like robbery and extortion has allowed it to gain considerable amounts of power. The Maras have become particularly influential in El Salvador, to the point that the Salvadoran government recently brokered a peace agreement between them and one of its major rivals, the Barrio 18, in order to cut the level of violence in the country.

Other groups include the drug cartels in Brazil, which have brought violence to several major cities. The Washington Times reported in 2009, "In Brazil, 35,000 people were fatally shot in 2007, and most of the deaths were drug-related. According to the government's public safety secretariat, there are nearly 23,000 drug-related homicides a year." Confrontations between the Brazilian police and criminal organizations have escalated as the government tries to pacify the favelas in preparation for the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro.

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A June 2011 operation between Brazilian Special Forces and armed naval personnel in a favela in Rio ended in a confrontation with local drug traffickers; a total of eight people were killed in the shootout. In addition, in order for Brazil to achieve greater internal security in the country, it will have to deal with the infamous First Command of the Capital (PCC).[3] The PCC is a criminal group that originated in Brazil's prisons in the 1990's and today has a strong influence around the country. Unlike other criminal groups, the PCC claims that its goal is to fight "injustice and oppression in the prison system under the banner 'Liberty, Justice, and Peace.'" It is debatable to what extent the PCC members actually believe in bringing peace and justice to the country's prisons and streets, particularly considering the 2006 PCC-orchestrated violence that Sao Paulo suffered in 2006. Rather than demanding political goals, the violence was more as a way for the PCC to showcase its power.

Finally, it is important to highlight that the FARC, ELN, and Shining Path all have morphed into criminal entities that finance themselves from drug trafficking, but continue to claim that they are fighting for a political ideology and some kind of ultimate goal (such as installing a new regime in their countries). It is highly debatable how many rank-and-file troops of the aforementioned movements actually believe in the group's ideologies anymore. In an interview with the author, a security consultant who wished to remain anonymous and who has done extensive work regarding the FARC explained how years ago, new members were supposed to attend indoctrination classes that could last as many as six months, so they would learn the organization's ideological origins and goals. Nowadays, he quipped, such "classes" last two weeks at the most.[4] Arguably, only a few older members within any of the aforementioned guerrilla groups remain faithful to the ideological origins of their movement. In other words, the morphing of the old-guard groups into narco-insurgent movements, combined with the rise of non-ideological entities like the cartels and international gangs, seems to stress the fact that the ideologically-motivated violence in Latin America may be ending.

The EPP: A return to the Past?

The Paraguayan People's Army (EPP) presents a fascinating case study as it may arguably be the first violent guerilla movement to appear in Latin America with a political ideology since the end of the Cold War. A 2011 report by the Council on Hemispheric Affairs explains the different origins attributed to the group. According to *Jane's Defense*, the EPP was created in 1992 when a group of training priests, who were expelled from a Catholic seminary for their radical political views, established the *Movimiento Monseñor Romero* with the aim of plotting a socialist revolution. Meanwhile, a 2008 article in Paraguayan daily ABC defines the EPP as a group comprised of criminals who have murdered police officers and attacked police and military outposts, without attributing ideological objectives to it. One of the group's most well-known operations was the 2005 murder of Cecilia Cubas, daughter of former Paraguayan president Raul Cubas.

To justify its violent operations, the EPP argues that it is a group made up of peasant communities armed to fight for social justice and denies Asuncion's accusations that it is a group of criminals or has any affiliation with criminal organizations like the Colombian FARC. Carmen Villalba, a self-declared spokeswoman of the EPP, has stated that the group's support comes from "the Paraguayan people, the people who eternally feel that they have been ridiculed, discriminated against and stepped on." The EPP has said that it is influenced by Cold War heroes like Che Guevara and Regis Debray, as well as Paraguayan heroes like Mariscal Francisco Solano Lopez. Fidel Zavala, a former hostage of the EPP, has declared that the EPP also looks up to leftist-statesmen and ideologues like Fidel Castro, Hugo Chavez, and Karl Marx. It is important to note that even though the EPP arguably has a Marxist-Leninist ideology, prominent individuals such as Luis Casabianca, leader of the Paraguayan Communist Party and a guerrilla member in the 1960's (as part of the *Frente Unido de Liberación Nacional* – Fulna) have condemned the Zavala kidnapping. In 2009 Casabianca stated that the EPP "is not revolutionary, rather, terrorist."

On September 21, 2010, then-Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo allegedly received a threatening letter from the EPP, calling him a "walking cadaver" and calling Minister of the Interior Rafael Filizzola and his wife, Congresswoman Desire Masi, "oligarch bullies" and "money wasters." Such terminology is similar to statements made by groups like Shining Path and the FARC during their heyday in the 1980s. The now deposed Fernando Lugo government pursued a tough policy to crush the EPP. In late April 2010, the Paraguayan leader ordered the deployment of 3,300 troops and police officers to the country's northern provinces to crack down on the insurgents,

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an operation which was ultimately unsuccessful.

The June 2012 constitutional coup in Paraguay that overthrew Lugo from the presidency and installed his vice president, Federico Franco, has not seen any major changes in the EPP's attitude towards the government. In late July, EPP guerrillas attacked an outpost in the Azote region. The attackers left a note identifying themselves as EPP members and blaming the oligarchy for the country's poverty, illegal deforestation, and pollution of the environment, including water sources. Earlier in July, the EPP sent an email to a Paraguayan radio station in which it declared war against Franco's government, which the group described as "extreme right" and a continuation of corruption and pro-oligarchy politics in the country. Franco has labeled the EPP as an extension of Colombia's FARC (an accusation made also during Lugos' government), and recently created a new security council to fight the insurgent group. From its public declarations, the EPP appears to be fighting for political objectives, though greater analyses will be necessary to confirm whether its members actually believe in installing a communist government in Asuncion or they are simply criminals using political ideologies as an excuse for their crimes.

Chaos with a Cause

In an interview by the author, a retired Colombian Army general was asked whether the era of ideologically-motivated violent insurgent movements in Latin America had come to an end. The officer stated that there continues to be a romantic perception of leftist Socialist ideology in the region, as well as a fascination of Cold War-era regional heroes, such as Fidel Castro and Ernesto "Che" Guevara.[5] An example of this can be seen in the rise of democratically-elected left-leaning governments in the region in the past decade, like Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, Bolivia's Evo Morales or Ecuador's Rafael Correa. Meanwhile, young Peruvians who did not live throughout the extreme violence of the 1980's are joining the pro-Shining Path NGO known as MOVAREF. A July 2012 report in the British daily The Guardian quotes a young MOVAREF member saying that "the only man in the world who can solve our problems [is] Abimael Guzman."

Regarding insurgent movements still active in the hemisphere, namely the FARC, ELN and the Shining Path, many seem to have become narco-terrorist organizations, with, arguably, only a few of their members maintaining some kind of loyalty to their founding ideologies. Greater in-depth analysis of the Paraguayan EPP will be necessary to fully state whether this new movement is true to its public declarations regarding its leftist ideology and political objectives, as this group could prove to be the exception to the rule regarding whether ideologically-motivated violence in Latin America has come to an end. Within a forthcoming article the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), will be specially discussed. Like the EPP, the Zapatistas claim to have an ideology; in this case, protecting the rights of indigenous Mexicans, though it does not have as an objective to overthrow the government. It is debatable whether the Zapatistas should be labeled as an insurgent movement due to their goals and actions, which included both military operations as well as non-violent initiatives.

The rise of groups like the Mexican cartels, gangs like the Maras, criminal entities like the PCC and the reformation and rebranding of narco-terrorist movements like the Shining Path arguably indicates that we have witnessed the end of ideologically-motivated violence in the region, the debatable cases of the EPP and Zapatistas notwithstanding. Unfortunately, this does not mean that violence has ended and Latin America is finally at peace. Rather, it means that the motivations for the violence have slowly mutated from ideological collectives fighting for social change to more loosely aligned individuals fighting for personal and financial gains. A more complete analysis regarding the motivation of why individuals choose to join violent movements like the FARC and or a cartel like the Zetas, will require interviews with both current and former members, in order to make it clearer to what extent political ideologies and financial wealth play a factor when it comes to recruiting, and if this has changed over the years.

Like the aforementioned Colombian general said, there is still a certain romanticism associated with leftist ideologies, especially since, in spite of major economic growth in Latin America within the past decade, there are still large economic disparities which are often aggravated by ethnic and racial factors. In a worst-case scenario, the kind that Latin America seems to have an affinity for, this might mean that we will see the eventual return of ideologically-motivated violence.

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[1] Bowden, Mark. "Killing Pablo: The Hunt for the World's Greatest Outlaw." Atlantic Monthly Press. April 2001.

[2] Logan, Samuel. "This is for the Mara Salvatrucha: Inside the MS-13, America's Most Violent Gang." Hyperion. 2009.

[3] Garzon, Juan Carlos. "Mafia & Co.: The Criminal Networks in Mexico, Brazil and Colombia." Latin America Program. Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. June 2008.

[4] Author interview with security consultant. June 2012.

[5] Author interview with Colombian Army General (ret). June, 2012.

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