

The Effect of 'La Violencia' on Colombia's Political System

Written by Lauren Picker

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La Violencia (The Violence) was the name given to the period of time from 1946 to 1966 where extreme violence in Colombia reached an optimum; approximately twenty per cent of the total Colombian population were directly affected in this violent period (Bailey, 1967, p562). The reader must be made aware that *La Violencia* as a phenomenon has defied all theoretical analysis by social investigators; where no fully rounded explanation has been agreed upon for why the violence occurred, why it took the form it did and why it escalated in such an unpredictable manner. Ideas put forward for an explanation are not lacking, but the validity of the attempted explanations are where the problem lies (Bailey, 1967, p563). For this reason this literature will attempt to draw together ideas to form a clear perspective of the violent epoch in order to define what *La Violencia* was. I feel it is appropriate to first define why the period of time was denoted as *La Violencia*. Then to give a brief summary of the events that led up to this violent period where it will be explained how certain triggers shaped the direction of the violence, and how different social groups conflicting simultaneously led to the prolonged atrocity. Furthermore, the essay will highlight the implications which stem from this violent past and will demonstrate the negative and positive consequences *La Violencia* has had on the political system. A conclusion will be evoked that the Colombian political system has never fully succeeded in uniting the country and has failed to complete the process of nation building partly due to the negative impact of the particularly violent epoch known as *La Violencia* (Sanchez, 2000, p20).

Colombian history has never been free from violence. Then why is it the case that this epoch was denoted as *La Violencia* 'The Violence' (Sanchez, 1985, p792)? There are several contributing factors. Firstly, the sheer brutality of the bloodshed that occurred in this period was like no other. The maiming, torture, rape and dismembering of victims were just a handful of techniques that were used on the opposition and by all perpetrators. The incredible ferocity of the inhumane nature of the killings that took place can better be understood through examples. The terms 'pica pira tamal', dissecting your living victim into small parts bit by bit and 'corte de mica' a process that involved quartering the head of your victim became very common and widespread (Bailey, 1967, pp. 562-563). This merely is a small insight into what took place. The second reason to why the period became known as *La Violencia* is due to the "conglomeration of processes that characterized the struggle...the mixture of anarchy, peasant insurgency and official terror", where participating actors played different parts in the insurgencies and were fuelled by different motives: oligarchical frustration; aggravation, property rights, political allegiances and anarchic tendencies to send the state into disarray (Sanchez, 1985, p.792). Understanding the composition of social rivals conflicting all at the same time is the integral part of understanding *La Violencia itself* but it is not simple or clear cut.

An insight into the background of the events that led up to *La Violencia* is a prerequisite to help explain what *La Violencia* was. 'Both Liberals and Conservatives are to blame for the inception of *La Violencia* in 1946' (Bailey, 1967, p 566). The Bi-partisan political system in Colombia has always been at the heart of the conflict. In the nineteenth century six of the eight civil wars that took place were ultimately due to the political parties, with each war helping to sow the seeds of affirming party loyalty, particular with the 'lower classes where division grew deep and bitter' (Livingstone, 2003, pp. 62-64). Both parties were multi-class organisations, with the wealthy elite in power and recruiting support from the 'lower orders in the cities, on coffee farms and the cattle ranches' (Harding, 1996, p17).

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The parties differentiated in views particularly on religion and the structure of the state (Harding, 1996, p17). Conservatives were in favour of a strong centralist, authoritarian state which was very inclusive of the Catholic Church; Liberals took a completely opposing viewpoint being in support of federalism and secularism (Livingstone, 2003, p61). These opposing stances are still present in Colombia today. It is noteworthy that agrarian reform also played a large role in fuelling conflicts between the political parties and their supporters and remains a dominant problem in society (Wiarda and Kline, 2011, p217).

Both the War of 1876 and the war of 1899–1902 known as the 'War of a thousand days' are pertinent examples of bipartisan wars fuelled by the fundamental political principles noted in the previous paragraph (Diamond et al, 1989, pp.292-294). These wars are drawn upon to show how they demonstrate similar characteristics found in *La Violencia*, but also how they differ enormously in both 'scope and brutality' (Wiarda and Kline, 2011, p217). By drawing upon the similarities, the differences become manifest and highlight how *La Violencia* lived up to its ferociousness of its name.

In 1876 there was a particularly violent, bloody war which lasted for eleven months between the political parties; approximately 20,000 people died (Sánchez, 2011, p 152). It was an organised civil war, containing specific objectives laid out by the structured elite. In terms of geographical regions of conflict this war resembled *La Violencia*, but differs in organisation and objectives of the conflicting parties (Bailey, 1967, p564). A second war that is apparent is the war reputed as the 'longest and bloodiest' of all of the bipartisan wars of the century, the 'War of a thousand days'. This was a war that left behind a similar volume of casualties as substantial as that of *La Violencia*, but diverges in the rival participants and leadership. Once again it was organised by an elite, who evoked the war (Diamond et al, 1989, pp. 292-294).

Thus being *La Violencia* was not an organised civil war with a definitive leader with set objectives like other similar violent wars. The conflict in the bipartisan regime was foreseeably the instigation to the ignition of the war, but rapidly spun out of control as other 'organised violence spawned' and a long way past the two rival parties (Wiarda Kline, 2011, p.217). Instead *La Violencia* appears to have begun as a social uprising from the rural peasantry in the coffee grower areas such as Tolima, where peasants came together to violently attack the systematic oligarchy. In conglomeration with this, a barbaric social revolt in Bogota shook the capital after the Liberal candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was assassinated on the 9th April 1948 (Chacón, Robinson and Torvik, 2011, p.384). A wave of angry protests and mass rioting drastically shook the capital; it became known as *Bogotázo*– the revolt, and the violence and banditry rapidly escalated all over the country. Significantly the violence was more intense in rural areas in particularly areas experiencing land conflicts (Wiarda and Kline, 2011, p 217). The conflict was also a spontaneous eruption of impotent rage by the urban poor who attacked and looted government buildings, offices, shops and churches to cause great disorder (Bailey, 1967, pp.566-567). As violence became incorporated into society 'almost everyone became a victim, perpetrator, or firsthand witness to carnage' and consequently a complete social break down took place (Wiarda and Kline, 2011, p216). So whilst the conflict in the partisan regime ignited the conflict initially, the war rapidly took a considerable amount of different directions.

It is immediately apparent another difference between previous wars and *La Violencia*; predominately the different conflicting opponents of *La Violencia*: it was partly a civil war between the Liberals and the Conservatives, whereby-peasants killed Peasants; In other areas it was spontaneous social uprising against the landlords and village nobles; In other areas it was a conscious attempt to carry out a revolution (Livingstone, 2003, p66-67). The combination of all this led to the rupture of what appeared to be the most violent epoch in Colombian history and strongly undermined a country from nation-building and further democratization (Wiarda and Kline, 2011, 217). Many rural areas were isolated and without any formal legitimate authority during *La Violencia*; parts of Colombia today still remain without politicised governance and instead are controlled by illegal armed groups (BBC, 2012). This is merely one consequence that is still present in society today of the aftermath of the violent epoch. Furthermore, vast arrays of scholars consider Colombia to still be in a 'permanent state of crises' since the atrocity (Sanchez, 1985, p 790).

The *Violencia* period also witnessed Colombia's only military government, which was headed by Gustavo Rojas Pinilla between 1953 and 1957, whereby a conscious attempt by the leader to pacify using force and money was made (Wiarda and line, 2011, p219). Partially a success, evidently repressive; but ultimately a failure, as the peasant

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resistance survived in areas where they had organised themselves into armed self-defence forces (Wiarda and Kline, 2011, 218). Due to the survival of these peasantry armed forces and Rojas' military approach at eradicating them along with his interest in retaining power over the longer term, the leaders of the Liberal and the Conservative parties joined in alliance to remove Rojas' from power and instead implement a power sharing agreement called the National Front (Wiarda and Kline, 2011, p218). After all it was due to the conflict between the political parties in the first place that started the *La Violencia* period so now it was down to them to put it all to an end. The National Front agreement consisted of conditions that remained in place for sixteen years; they consisted of alternating the presidency every four years between the two traditional parties; the Conservatives and the Liberals. Administrative appointments at all levels were equally weighted between the two parties; that no new political party could participate in elections and that new legislation could only be passed with a two-thirds majority in the national congress (Livingstone, 2003, p68). The agreement that the parties constructed was an attempt by the elite to put an end to *La Violencia* period. Undeniably it shaped the political system of Colombia and still does so today.

To expand upon the belief that the National Front shaped the political system of Colombia it is necessary to examine the ferocious actions of the largest group of participants – the peasants. The peasants made up the vast majority of the population during *La Violencia*-they still do today- and they had certain motives that were the driving force for their eruption of violence and banditry during *La Violencia*. Their motives included dissatisfaction with the oligarchy, rights over land, and the rivalry between the competing supporters of the political parties. These three motives were the means behind the peasant insurgency, so therefore one would expect that the National Front agreement would have sought to address these underlying issues. However, this was not the case and instead they continued to form a political system that only favoured the elitist Conservative and Liberal parties by introducing an agreement that was highly undemocratic and blocked anyone else from getting into power. This agreement stipulated that no new parties and candidates outside of the two main parties could enter into the political system and at any level. In creating this agreement it further aggravated the peasants, as they had no way of channelling their views into politics in a legitimate way. Consequently their fury and frustration was manifest through promotion of violence to oppose the system enforced upon them. The National Front agreement did therefore not promote unification of the country, and only further exacerbated the divide in society between the powerful rich and repressed poor as the peasants were still not being respected or represented in politics (BBC, 2012). Moreover, the National front continuously failed to address the process of nation building and consequentially failed to implement a strong rule of law allowing the armed and organised peasants to create a series of guerrilla bands; the most famous in being the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) who still have a great presence in society today (BBC, 2012). It is strongly apparent that it is only in recent times that other parties and presidential candidates have been able to officially obtain a proportion of power; 2002 was the real turning point when the independent Uribe, notably who also is associated strongly with the Liberals, won in the presidential election.

It is highly applicable that the current political system still does not incorporate the views of the poor which are still channelled through FARC, where nearly five decades on from their creation peace talks are still an on going process to try to achieve a ceasefire between them and the government (Freedom house, 2009). The weakness in the state not only failed to destabilise the guerrilla bands that were forming, it also allowed for illegal industries to flourish (Kline, 2011, p218). Industries such as the illegal arms trade, illegal extraction of natural resources including gold, and drug trafficking all became the financial sources for the guerrillas, particularly the FARC. The National Front agreement was unsuccessful and a poorly planned attempt to put an end to *La Violencia* as it only targeted the initiators of the conflict – the conflict between the two political parties. As one can see it did not address the underlying principles as to why other violence spawned so rapidly throughout the country. Therefore it helped with the continuation of a bipartisan political system which has only seen other political parties have an active role since 2002 (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2012).

As stated previously another cause for *La Violencia* was Bogotá – the revolt that exploded when Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, the Liberal candidate was assassinated. After his assassination he became even more of an iconic figure; his ideas of uniting the country and standing up in the name of the poor lived on. One line of enquiry suggests that Gaitán stance was not just a variant of the liberal oligarchy but instead a discourse that was distinct; an antioligarchical movement that gave a voice to the un-politicised poor, to stand up and counteract the repression received through the oligarchical political system (Sanchez, 1967, p797). To further expand this point; Gaitánismo

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(as it has common become known as) did not just prevail and fizzle out, after Gaitán was assassinated. Instead, it helped peasants to find the driving force to actively induce political change. Elements of Gaitánismo can be found in FARC, and in one light this can be seen as being a positive outcome of *La Violencia* which has shaped the political system of Colombia. Gaitán's ideas can be seen to have been channelled through FARC, who have given the largest social sector in society a voice in politics. The violent insurgency used by FARC to topple the oligarchy is still highly condemned here, but the fundamentals which played a substantial part in the creation of the group should be taken seriously. A vast amount of literature on this period exposes the detrimental effects that the violent period had on helping to shape the political system of the country, but often misses the point that Gaitánismo has helped to politicise the masses in the Colombian state. The revival of Gaitán's ideas on unifying the nation is therefore a positive outcome which is trying to shape the political society, where diplomatic talks are still an on going process.

In conclusion, La Violencia was a phenomenon that defied all theoretical analysis by social investigator as the nature of the violence spun far beyond any previous requisition of its kind. The initial cause of the ferociousness was a common clash of fundamentals between the Conservative and the Liberal party, but the bi-partisan war had become a host, an arena of other conflicts; social and economic, local and personal which together imploded into a violent massacre of human life. After ruminating into the academic literature on the *Violencia* I have come to the conclusion that the violent period is ambivalent in nature. The brutality and volume of lives lost during the Maelstrom is obviously a negative characteristic and occurred because of three main triggers: large disagreement between political parties in the bi-partisan regime, social uprising from the peasants in rural areas largely due to disputes over land, and the assassination of the Liberal candidate Gaitán. Evidently the combination resulted in the break down of society. However, the epoch did manage to achieve one important progressive step, a change in the way the political system was structured in the country. Before this time the masses – the peasants – were un-politicised and without a driving force to provoke change. The positive outcome is that the violent anarchy witnessed during *La Violencia* gave political strength to the masses to show the oligarchy that the peasants were not just going to accept repression. Furthermore that they were going to keep on fighting in the name of change. FARC is one way in which the peasants are represented and these guerrillas are an outcome of *La Violencia*.

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