Colombia's 'La Violencia' and How it Shaped the Country's Political System

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La Violencia was a terrible time for Colombia. The violence that occurred between 1946 and 1964 resulted in over 200,000 deaths. An estimated one million people were displaced from their rural homes. Guerrilla movements arose from the anarchy to fully establish themselves in the 1960s and still trouble Colombia to this day. This essay will provide an overview of the history of *La Violencia*, and it will explore the ways in which the violence altered the government and governance at the time, as well as the lasting effects *La Violencia* has had on the country. This essay will additionally explore the Colombian revolutionary movements and their motives as a reaction to Colombia's political structure, questioning the level of democracy since *La Violencia*. This is due to the belief that Colombia's political system has not changed dramatically since *La Violencia* because of the inherently elitist nature of the dominant parties and leaders. Colombia is to the present day, still a limited democracy.

Historically, the two mainstream parties, the Conservatives and the Liberals, had dominated Colombian politics from the 19th century onwards, both enjoying large periods in power. These periods of hegemony were more partisan than personal (Peeler, 2009, p. 56) because politics was characterised by voter affiliation to either party, based on social and economic class, regardless of who led them. However, after 1946, traditional party competition had broken down in Colombia. Mariano Ospina Pérez, the newly elected president, and his Conservative party government used the police and the army to repress the Liberal party. The Liberals then responded by arming peasants to fight back against the government (Chaffee, 1992, p. 66). This created pressures within civil and political society, and violence began on a small scale.

There were pre-existing tensions in the Liberal party due to the rivalry of Gabriel Turbay, the voice of the old-guard liberals, and the representative for the radicals, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán (Gunson et al, 1990, p. 162). In 1947, Gaitán had won the leadership of the Liberal party. Scholars such as Eric Hobsbawm (1963) believed that he was the significant voice of the Colombian Left, and Gaitán had close ties with the rising Fidel Castro of Cuba. Gaitán was also widely expected to be the next president. However, in April 1948 he was assassinated. Gaitán was an immensely popular leader, and his death sparked *Bogotazo*; a three-day uprising that left the capital city Bogotá in ruins. This protest was the catalyst that triggered *La Violencia*, as the looting in Bogotá led to the subsequent violence in the countryside of Colombia (Gott, 1970, p. 172).

The violence that had engulfed the rural areas ranged from assault on people and property to brutal inhumanity. Norman Bailey described how some of the killings and torture took place, for example one method, which involved cutting up the body of a living victim into small pieces, known as *picar para tamal* (Bailey, 1967, pp. 65-75). There were numerous other torture techniques and acts of atrocities carried out, for example hangings and crucifixions, which demonstrate how brutal *La Violencia* was. The acts of violence were so savage that many lost sight of the reasons for *La Violencia*. *La Violencia* stemmed from partisan roots, but spiralled out of control by mobs and bandits, whom sought plunder and vengeance, which contributed to the bloodshed (Dugas, 2009, p. 505). The fierceness of *La Violencia* spread rapidly like a forest fire, wreaking unprecedented havoc in towns and villages.

The ferocity in the countryside had an enormous effect on what was to happen in the political scene. Because of *Bogotazo* and *La Violencia*, a branch of the Liberal party joined forces with the Conservative government of Ospina to try to halt the continuing violence. However, when this bipartisan government failed due to further partisan friction and violence, the Liberal party withdrew from the presidential election in 1949 (Dugas, 2009, p. 504). As a result, Conservative candidate Laureano Gómez won the election unopposed and assumed the presidency of Colombia.

Nevertheless, Gómez and his government could not quell the violence, and *La Violencia* plunged into further depths. The Conservative President continued the oppression of his political opponents by purging members of the Liberal Party from public life (Gunson et al, 1990, p. 303). The 50,000 deaths that occurred during Gómez's first year in power encouraged the organisation of leftist guerrilla movements against the government (Dugas, 2009, p. 504). This was a significant period in Colombian political history because the Liberals and Communists armed themselves and formed groups of peasant fighters that would later go on to form significant guerrilla groups in the 1960s and 1970s. Ultimately, there were divisions within the Conservative party itself, and former President Ospina collaborated with the military to oust Gómez. There were discussions of a coup d'état spearheaded by a military general named Gustavo Rojas Pinilla. In 1953, once Gómez was removed from office, Rojas was installed as president and sought to end *La Violencia*. This was the only period in twentieth-century Colombia that witnessed military government (Gray, 2011, p. 217), which indicates that before *La Violencia* there were generally stable civilian administrations.

The general had limited success in power. He did initially curtail the flow of violence, possibly owing to his military stature and non-partisan alignment with either political party. However, though he firstly had the support of the Liberals and the Ospinista wing of the Conservatives (Dugas, 2009, p. 505), he wanted to tighten his grip on power and went about forming political bases of support, which angered both parties. Chaffee stated that the situation in Colombia had not improved, and on July 24 1956, the leaders of the Liberal and Conservative parties signed the *Pacto de Benidorm*, which opposed the continued rule of General Rojas Pinilla (Chaffee, 1970, p. 66). Having lost the support of the parties, as well as within the army, Rojas was exiled in 1957 and this period until 1958 would be the transition between the past and a new era for Colombian politics.

The Benidorm Pact signed by Alberto Lleras Camargo of the Liberal party and Laureano Gómez of the Conservatives articulated the decision to oppose Rojas Pinilla (Dugas, 2009, p. 505). It also conveyed that it would not be reasonable for both the Conservative and Liberal Parties to renew their struggle for power following the end of Rojas' reign, thus opening the possibility to the route of equal power sharing (Henderson, 2001, p. 374). It was hoped that this would finally end *La Violencia* by introducing a bipartisan system of government. Following a series of discussions, both parties proposed amendments to the constitution that would necessitate a power sharing treaty. On 1 December 1957, the people of Colombia voted in a referendum accepting this agreement, and this new civilian administration became known as the National Front.

The National Front regime required alternative governments between the Liberal and Conservative parties every four years, for 16 years, until 1974. This meant that the parties did not have to compete with each other in elections (Gray, 2011, p. 218). The seats in the Chamber of the Deputies, the Senate and lower level elected bodies were to be shared equally between the two parties (Peeler, 2009, p. 57). The agreement also suggested high-level administrative appointments, for instance ministers and mayors, were to be divided equally between the parties regardless of the electoral results within a district (Gray, 2011, p. 218). This meant that the equal divisions of power provided the nation with a "pacted democracy" (Dugas, 2009, p. 505) where the frequent change in government meant both parties had an equal time in command. It was anticipated that this agreement would discourage further rebellion by the people by eliminating the repressive and damaging regimes of Gómez and Rojas that had fuelled additional turmoil during *La Violencia.*

The situation improved in Colombia. The National Front was successful in restoring civilian rule, which has lasted to the present day, and it brought greater stability to a country torn apart by violence. The partisan violence that had erupted in the countryside slowly extinguished. Colombia also maintained a certain degree of economic stability during this time (Cardozo Da Silva, 2002, p. 36), owing to the growth in the coffee market, in which it was a major exporter. The National Front also survived the full sixteen year term that the arrangement was intended for, highlighting the public's general acceptance of the reformed political structure. By the early 1960s, *La Violencia*,

which forced this change in the country's political system, was over.

Conversely, the rule of the National Front created new problems. The strict rules of the pact prevented any other political parties or organisations taking part in politics or elections for the duration of the agreement. This regulation gave Colombians a reason to believe the National Front was an elitist agreement that restricted democracy. By the political elites controlling and supressing political involvement (Martz, 1992, p. 27) it simply protected both mainstream parties without addressing the issues that the country was facing, for example the growing urban population. This concern, along with the growing number of unemployed throughout the country, provided the trajectory for the formation of left-wing guerrilla groups.

Peeler suggested that the National Front left behind a feeling of widespread apathy in its wake (2011, p. 57), and organisations on the Left saw little possibility of the country's problems being resolved by the coalition government (Gott, 1970, p. 182). This meant that, despite being excluded from political participation during the National Front period, the Colombian Communist Party (PCC) was acquiring prominence.

During *La Violencia*, The PCC had armed a small number of peasants, but after the National Front period, it attracted a growing number that wanted to join the organisation and its policy of 'the self-defence of the masses' (Gott, 1970, p. 176). Even before *La Violencia*, the Communists had experience of peasant organisation. Gott explained that in the early 1930s the Communist Party had persuaded the peasants in Viotá to keep the lands that they seized (Gott, 1970, p. 176). This enabled the peasants of Viotá to establish their own armed forces and judiciary (Gott, 1970, p. 176) through the endorsement of the Communist Party. They then became powerful enough for the Colombian Army to stay clear of Viotá during anti-guerrilla campaigns in *La Violencia* (Alexander, 1957, p. 252). It is reasonable to suggest that this behaviour of seizing land and commanding authority in anarchistic districts shaped and influenced the formation of major guerrilla groups in the 1960s. This section of the essay therefore endorses that the Communist Party of Colombia played an important role before, during and after *La Violencia*. This historical relationship between the Communists and the peasants, coupled with the disillusionment with the National Front and its military campaign against Communist self-defence groups (Dugas, 2009, p. 507) led to the formation of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 1964. This formation was also made possible through the effects of *La Violencia* and its subsequent years.

Because the effects of *La Violencia* left remote parts of the country in a power vacuum, corresponding to the aforementioned situation in Viotá, this created the platform for FARC and other guerrillas to be able to create infrastructures and command with a non-official authority. Gray noted that especially during Rojas' time in power, 'pockets of resistance' survived where the peasantry had become radicalised, and that much of Colombia 'remained isolated and without formal governance' (Gray, 2011, p. 217). This further challenged Colombia's political system. Without any form of authority in the rural areas, by the 1970s the Colombian government observed four primary guerrilla movements. These organisations were FARC; the Army of National Liberation (ELN); the Popular Liberation Army (EPL) and the April 19th Movement (M-19) (Dugas, 2009, p. 507). The purpose of these groups was to disrupt the political and socioeconomic order in Colombia. These groups contributed to an upsurge in violence in the 1970s that affected the safety and security of Colombians (Martz, 1992, p. 28). They were all directly opposed to the country's political system.

By this time, the National Front regime was over, and though open elections had been resumed, scholars such as Harvey Kline said that there was only partial democracy in Colombia. Because the Constitutional Article 120 required that the nation's presidents after 1978 had to offer "adequate and equitable" representation to the largest party other than their own (Martz, 1992, p. 28), this favoured the prevailing Conservative and the Liberal parties. Thus, Kline (1988) believed that this was the "bipartisan machine-oriented clientelism continued" (p. 25). It seemed as if the resulting consequences from *La Violencia* had not changed the political system as hoped. The two-party monopoly of power fuelled the actions of guerrilla movements, who took advantage of the public apathy and took part in kidnappings of elites (ELN and EPL) and drug trafficking (FARC). What made matters worse was that President Julio César Turbay (1978–1982), used the military to try to extinguish these groups, though the three organisations above actually increased in size (Dugas, p.508, 2009).

By the 1980s, the Conservative and Liberal parties were no longer ideologically different and still inherently elitist (Dugas, 2009, p. 508). Though Colombia called itself democratic, it maintained traditional political practice behind a façade (Vellinga, 1998, p. 11). The population became more disillusioned with the political process, and this was reflected in the 1982 presidential election when only half of the electorate voted (US Library of Congress, 1988). However, the new president Belisario Betancur called for political reforms, permitting the direct election of mayors for the first time (Mejia, 1983). He also tried to deal with the increasingly problematic anti-government guerrilla groups, in a more diplomatic way than his predecessor did. Betancur negotiated amnesties and truces, and one outcome of this process was the creation of a political party Patriotic Union (UP), made up of former FARC insurgents who abandoned the use of weapons (Gray, 2011, p. 219).

However, right-wing paramilitaries, originating from self-defence groups in the 1960s (Council on Foreign Relations, 2008), started a campaign of assassinating the members of the UP. The paramilitaries formed after government legislation in 1968 authorised the arming of civilian patrols in order to defend their land (Americas Watch, 1990, pp. 11-18). Still, the paramilitaries were suspected of being the unofficial armed wing of the elites due to their close ties with the Colombian military. The UP assassinations are thought to be one of the greatest human rights tragedies in recent Latin America (Dugas, 2009, p. 509) and show how much of Colombia's culture was still embedded in violence, years after *La Violencia.* This Right versus Left battle intensified with the upsurge of guerrilla groups and paramilitaries in the mid-1980s. In addition, drug cartels in Colombia, most notably the Medellín and Cali cartels, were beginning to thrive due to the state's lack of enforcement and the corruption of the military. This created a culture for the cartels to assert their own authority, similar to the guerrilla movements after *La Violencia*. They eventually gained the attention of the government however, because of their increasingly violent activities. For example, the Medellín cartel, controlled by Pablo Escobar, assassinated presidential candidates, bombed government buildings and partook in kidnappings. The Medellin cartel even used to cut up bodies in a way that was reminiscent of *La Violencia* (Gray, 2011, p. 221). One presidential candidate murdered in 1989 was Luis Carlos Galán. Galán's death prompted then President Vigilio Barco (1986-1990) to declare war on drugs, in an attempt to destroy the *La Violencia* influenced cartels.

From then on, serious efforts were made to change the political system in Colombia. Because the activities of the drug trafficking brought corruption, where bribes were made to officials to allow the continued use of violence and illegal drug production, this had further damaged the reputation of the Colombian elites. This clientelism and lack of political reform throughout the 1980s helped fuel the rise in violence from all armed groups, including drug cartels. The decreasing legitimacy of the political regime had also highlighted public discontent (Dugas, 2009, p. 510). However, after winning the 1990 presidential election comfortably, Cesar Gaviria Trujillo voiced that he wanted to serve "all Colombians" (Martz, 1992, p. 39) and reform Colombia's political structure.

Gaviria oversaw the election of the Constituent Assembly in December 1990, which had enabled representation to the M-19, who had won more delegates than the Conservatives (Peeler, 2009, p. 118). This marked a turning point for Colombian democracy. A new constitution was drafted in 1991, expected to further break ties with elitism and its roots in *La Violencia*. This constitution contained ballot and electoral reform, which allowed political participation from all parties, and restricted the powers of the president, for example, it reduced emergency powers and prohibited re-election (Peeler, 2009, p. 118). The new constitution too recognised indigenous peoples by giving them rights to defend their cultures and traditions (Peeler, 2009, p. 42). Furthermore, the power of the Supreme Court was transferred to a newly independent Constitutional Court, adding legitimacy to the country's legal system.

Yet all this progress in reforming Colombia's political framework was being marred by rising violence that plagued the end of Gaviria's term. By the mid-1990s, FARC and the ELN grew so powerful that there were frequent attacks on cities and pipelines, killing civilians and disrupting petroleum production. These attacks display how violence was still rife in Colombia, influenced by *La Violencia*. Due to the communist roots of both FARC and the ELN, destruction of property was widespread, and this is reminiscent of the burning of villages and towns in *La Violencia*. However, one victory for Gaviria was the destruction of the Medellín drug cartel in 1993. At the time, it was seen as significant step forward in the war on drugs. Plan Colombia in 1998 soon followed, which was a $1.6bn package that funded the destruction of coca crops and provided the Colombian military with intelligence on traffickers (US Department of State, 2000).

In further strides towards Colombian democracy, the 2002 presidential election witnessed Alvaro Uribe win the presidency with a party other than the Conservative or Liberal. Although he was a former member of the Liberals, Uribe ran on an independent ticket. Uribe made great efforts to strengthen the armed forces and demobilise the paramilitaries, and the country saw a rapid decline in violence and kidnappings. It was true that the lasting effects of *La Violencia*, where the troubles were associated with partisan violence, had dwindled due to increasing democratization, but the drug related violence that took over had not yet disappeared.

Though cartels were eventually destroyed, drug trafficking became more fragmented and even harder to control. This prompted Juan Manuel Santos, the current president, to adopt a new approach. He was open to negotiate with FARC, who had become increasingly involved in drug trafficking since the decline in cartels. Not only did he want to challenge illegal drug production, Santos also wanted to stop the insurgency altogether. The government – FARC peace talks began in October 2012 (BBC, 2012). History dictates that for FARC to lay down their arms however, the state security forces need to respect the civil and political rights of all Colombian citizens (Dugas, 2009, p. 519), highlighting the government's brutality towards its citizens during *La Violencia*.

It is promising that demobilization may happen in the future, as FARC's stature and membership has declined. Many will be pleased that this is the case, as *La Violencia* left a terrible legacy that ultimately caused the emergence of left-wing guerrillas like FARC and the ELN. The emergence of these was additionally caused by the elitist nature of the Colombian state, as the culture of clientelism and the National Front regime highlighted the flaws in Colombia's political system. It needed to be reformed in order to include more political participation. This in turn would provide greater representation and reduce the need for Marxist influenced guerrilla warfare.

However, in order to maintain stability in the country, it is reasonable to understand the nature of the National Front pact. It had to suspend democracy to end *La Violencia*, and it worked to an extent. It was in the 1960s though, that the political system should have changed radically, and not in 1991. By the state overlooking the disillusioned public in the 1960s and 1970s, guerrilla groups found the basis of their legitimacy and were able to become powerful. Drug cartels were able to flourish when there was no political reform in the 1980s. They corrupted officials and filled the void in authority left by *La Violencia*, which the state did not deal with. It is the nature of Colombia's small state that enabled these problems to occur.

It was from 1991, when constitutional reform took place, and then in 2003, when guerrilla and paramilitary organisations were disarming, that Colombia saw progress. By establishing a Constitutional Court, the country has shown it can protect the rights and political freedoms of its people that were denied until then. It is also encouraging to observe more political parties participating in the electoral process.

Though the period of *La Violencia* was tragic and witnessed horrific abuses to human rights, the changes that eventually resulted from it have finally begun to bear fruit for Colombia. However, it needs to further progress in order to become more democratic and eliminate the continuing violence.

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