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Armed Actors in the Colombian Conflict: State vs Armed Groups

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In 2016, the agreement for the cessation of the conflict and the establishment of a sustainable and long-lasting peace was reached between the Colombian National Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC), one of the largest insurgent groups in the country, after more than fifty years of conflict. Based on the above, the chapter presents an overview of the characteristics of these two actors: it analyzes the role of the State and the FARC as the main actors in the conflict, without ignoring the fact that other protagonists emerged in this prolonged war.

First, the chapter addresses the different definitions and conceptual contributions of the state, where the state is recognized as having the legitimate monopoly of violence and force. This is emphasized in the discussions of classical authors and specialists on the subject, where the state is identified as one of the main actors in the Colombian conflict. It is evident that marginalization and exclusion have determined elements in the development and prolongation of the conflict. In addition, this chapter presents an analysis of the meaning of insurgency, discussing concepts from different lenses, which allows for a general mention of the main movements in Latin America. Colombia, in particular, witnessed the emergence of social movements with defined political traits and ideology, armed groups inspired by the socialist narrative and based on the internal and limiting narratives of the country's own political system, as detailed in the text. Lastly, the chapter provides a synthesis of the conflict in Colombia, where socio-political and economic uncertainties form important elements to further study the inefficiency of the government and institutions.

Defining 'State'

If we are talking about armed conflict, the category of 'state' becomes prevalent given its protagonism. Multiple authors, researchers, academics and others define it while at the same time giving it its functions and laying out their criticisms. Therefore, it is necessary to clearly establish, what is really the state? Is it possible to talk about a classification of the state? Is the category of a proletarian state valid?

The meaning of state appears during the 16th century. If the contributions of Engels are taken into account, he would argue that the state presents itself to us as the first ideological power over, on the other hand, would define the state as 'a group of officials who through their representations and acts involve the community, without being a product of it' (Durkheim 1883, 58).

For Weber (1992), the state is defined as the political institution of continuous activity, which in turn contains a legal and administrative order, which makes it necessary to talk about power, domination and other categories that its analysis pertains; as well as reviewing what Marxism contributes in reference to this: The state is in no way a power imposed from outside society; neither is it the reality of the moral idea, nor the image and reality of reason.

It is a product of society when it reaches a certain degree of development; it is the confession that this society has become entangled in an irremediable contradiction with itself and is divided by irreconcilable antagonisms, that it is powerless to conjugate them. But in order for these antagonisms, these classes with competing economic interests to devour themselves and not consume society in a sterile struggle, a power seemingly above society and called to cushion the shock is necessary, to keep it within the limits of order. And that power, born from that society and which divorces from her more and more, is the state (Engels 1894).

Therefore, it is manifested as a fundamental idea of Marxism that the state is the result of class struggles and contradictions, contradictions that are not reconcilable and give rise to the category of state.

Marx argues that,

The State is characterized, in the first place, by the grouping of its subjects according to territorial division; the second characteristic feature is the institution of a public force that is no longer the armed people. This special public force becomes necessary because the division of society into classes makes it impossible for a spontaneous armed organization of the population to spring. This public force exists in every state; and it is not only made up of armed men, but also of material accessories, prisons and coercive institutions of all kinds, which the gentile society did not know about (Engels 1894).

The elements mentioned by Engels and others such growth and ownership of the public force given the rivalry of the classes, the collection of taxes, universal suffrage, and the use of violence; provides a clear picture of the conception of the state as an instrument of exploitation of the oppressed class the basic argument about revolution and its origin for Marxist theory; as the state was born from the need to curb class antagonisms, and at the same time, in the midst of the conflict of those classes, it is a general rule that the state is that of the most powerful class, of the economically dominant class, thereby acquiring new means for the repression and exploitation of the oppressed class (Engels 1894)

Likewise, and based on the recognition of a struggle, Engels denies the idea of a state that has existed perpetually in the following manner:

The State has not existed eternally. There have been societies that managed without it, that did not have the slightest notion of the State or its power. Upon reaching a certain stage of economic development, which was necessarily linked to the division of society into classes, this division made the state a necessity. We are now rapidly approaching a phase of development of production in which the existence of these classes not only ceases to be a necessity, but also becomes a direct obstacle to production. Classes will disappear as inevitably as they arose in their time. With the disappearance of classes, the state will inevitably disappear. Society, by reorganizing production in a new way on the basis of a free association of equal producers, will send the whole state machinery to the place where it belongs: the museum of antiquities, next to the spinning wheel and the bronze ax (Engels 1894).

The state is a special organization of force, an organization of violence to repress any class (Lenin 1917). Without this being conditioned by the exploitation of oppressed classes. A material and specific condensation of a relation of force between classes and class fractions (Engels 1894), where the unity of the bloc in power practically polarizes the interests of the other classes or fractions that are part of it, as represented in the following figure and is the basis of Marx's analysis:

The state has been classified under multiple figures such as the ancient state, the feudal state and the representative state, among others; the isolation with society can be contemplated (that is, with the social and economic relations that concern it, given the divided classes) as another defining element of the State, following this theoretical line where the divided classes would guarantee political domination to the extent that they are politically unified and the state acts as an organizer of their properly political unity, with specific interests by class or fraction (Poulantzas 1968).

Continuing with this debate and in accordance with Marx, we have the proposals of Miliband (1976), who does not

share the notion of the total state of the previously mentioned Poulantzas, and denotes it not only as an instrument, but as a more complex concept; that of a systematic expression. Although they differ in some general conceptions, they coincide in the formal and therefore real separation between state and society. Other conceptions, somewhat far from the theoretical line initially proposed, contemplate that it is the state who must provide the necessary minimum of human capital without market disturbance (Becker 1964) through institutions that reduce uncertainty for development and economic growth (North and LeRoy 1976), although it has other functions to consider.

Starting from these approaches, other questions arise – such as is the classification of the capitalist state valid? Does this classification include all forms of state? Is the state a real structure of organization or domination? The role of the State as an institution within society, normative, would frame it as being 'the rector of economic development to guarantee the fulfillment of the goals of a national project, which is up to the Federal Executive (and in a mandatory way, the entire Federal Public Administration) to elaborate and execute' (López 2013, 54) so in this sense national development is its ultimate goal, development that must be comprehensive and sustainable, through all the powers that it owns and with the organs that operate. In accordance with this, the role of the state, although it has not changed, has not always been able to fulfill these stated purposes, being insufficient to respond to the needs of its population, which is added to the modes of investment of public spending.

Whether or not it is an instrument of domination, the crisis of the contemporary state, and all the decomposition and dilution of its role in socioeconomic development, cannot be ignored. Therefore, in the face of the state's failures, constant structural actions are designed to avoid perpetuating the existing pattern. To achieve this, it is necessary to eliminate the concentration of wealth, poverty and inequality and to preserve the social order.

In the words of Dabat (2010, 21):

While in certain times and places the role of the state has been fundamental in promoting economic, social and cultural progress, in others it has been a strong obstacle to development and human progress, it has absorbed from society more resources than those that it has helped to produce, and has subsidized parasitic groups, stifling the most creative and innovative social expressions, or else it has organized huge apparatuses of death and destruction.

The State as an actor in the armed conflict in Colombia

In the case of the Colombian state, it is necessary to review two articles of its National Constitution that contain fundamental principles which indicate:

a. The Colombian territory is a social state of law, organized in a manner of a unitary republic, decentralized with autonomy from its territorial entities, democratic, participatory and pluralistic;
b. Founded on respect for human dignity, on work and on the solidarity of the people who make it up and on the prevalence of the general interest;
c. As well as aims to serve the community, promote general prosperity and guarantee the effectiveness of the principles, rights and duties enshrined in the Constitution;
d. And to ensure compliance with the social duties of the state and individuals.

Defining Guerrilla

Another conception of guerrillas can be defined as a group of revolutionaries made up of individuals with a strong ideology, in defense of social justice, having as motivation the group or collectivity, which has a greater benefit than acting individually; waiting to obtain power in order to meet basic needs and the aforementioned social justice, eliminate the oligopoly of violence against the state and open up for political participation (Harnecker 1988). But, how is it possible to arrive to this approach?

Answering this involves establishing that the origins of guerrillas have been the object of multiple studies, where it has been affirmed that its birth was due to being a self-defense group in the face of the state's opposition and for the protection of its private property. There is no single consensus on definitions and the debate is getting stronger. While

for some people the term must be limited to conceptions related to ideology, for others the concept must include the meaning of sources of dissent, to which the individual interpretation that is given must be added, giving rise to confrontations and generating a degree of greater complexity.

According to this, and in order to establish the concept of war under which this chapter operates, it was necessary to review the existing definitions. The term guerrilla, according to Guillén (1969), refers to an army that is taken out of parts that make up a whole and that must act strategically with the aim of attacking the state, given favorable internal and external revolutionary conditions: economic, diplomatic, social and political aspects.

For her part, Mariguella (1969) defines the term from its origin, stating that the guerrilla is the result of the political instability of the territories, making some classifications: urban guerrilla warfare, psychological warfare or rural guerrilla warfare as forms of revolutionary war. From this, the distinction between guerrilla and delinquent is made, where the latter category differs from the purpose of the guerrilla. Although the criminal personally benefits from his actions and attacks indiscriminately, the guerrilla particularly pursues a political goal, where they attack and are an implacable enemy only to the government and therefore inflict systematic damage on the authorities and the men who dominate and wield power, with the aim of collaborating in the creation of a totally new system and a revolutionary social and political structure with the masses in power.

Consequently, Guevara (1950) agrees with the previous definitions considering that the guerrilla struggle has the main objective of liberating itself from a government that constrains it, given the forces that remain in power against established law and for this liberation people's capacity is required. In opposition to Guillen, Guevara affirms that it is not always necessary to wait for all the conditions for the revolution to be in place since the insurrectionary focus can create them. Likewise, it points out that the field and the strategy are the epicenters for the struggle in Latin America, or underdeveloped America in its terms, and it is necessary to demonstrate to the people that it is not possible to maintain the struggle for social demands within civic and peaceful spaces. Geographical and social characteristics determine the mode and forms that war and guerrillas will adopt, although the general parameters are universal.

In addition, Castro (2008) affirms that the guerrilla is an embryo of development of a force capable of taking power originated from the class struggle. Taking into consideration the Communist Party of Colombia (1973), guerrilla is defined as an organization with orientation, methods and discipline whose objective is the armed struggle for the achievement of social justice.

In the 1808–1814 War of Independence between Spain and the French Empire the term guerrilla was used for the first time, mythologizing for posterity the importance of this defensive movement. In 1809, faced with the general frustration of the Spanish civilian population in the face of the repeated defeats of its army in front of the ranks under the command of Napoleon Bonaparte, the local organization arose to attack French objectives in a surprising way. It should be clarified that the excessive mistreatment of the Napoleonic troops served as a breeding ground to generate great guerrilla leaders such as *Chaleco,* the most important guerrilla in *La Mancha*, who joined the confrontation by witnessing the *Valdepeñas* fire where his mother and brother died.

This model of fighting arose under the incapacity of traditional combat due to the asymmetry of the armies; the Spanish troops were widely outnumbered by their invaders. The uncertainty of the French about the lightning attacks carried out on key objectives for the distribution of resources, communication and roads, dismembered the Napoleonic strategy based on the war of vast armies, giving way to the establishment of a command dedicated to persecuting guerrillas, significantly neglecting the main battle fronts. The guerrillas provided key information to the army and were a fundamental piece to obtain victory, although they did not win the war properly, their appearance and combat tactics turned the French onslaught upside down (Ibid.). Examples of this model had previously been seen, however only in Spain were they strategically articulated, being indispensable to achieve victory.

The basic structure of a guerrilla model is simple; It is fundamentally composed of three elements, a group of people with access to military weapons, ideological support through the civilian population and a terrain with conditions that allow an attack on the enemy, Von Clausewitz (1832) describes that the success of a guerrilla is based on two factors: a terrain with geographical access difficulties that make it possible to protect and camouflage the guerrilla,

and a civil war that encourages dissent and support for the rebel group.

The aforementioned structure, according to Mariguella (1969), is characterized by the autonomy of its movements translated into the belligerence of the area where they operate, under a functional hierarchy specialized in ambushes: surprise assaults in order to destabilize the enemy. The members that compose it are volunteers and act independently from a pre-established military command or political party; they have the popular support of a percentage of civilians and encourage the appearance of *caudillos* or visible heroes who embody the voice of the voiceless.

There are contributions of the organization in the Latin American revolutions from the Spanish yoke between 1810–1824, among the most recognized *caudillos* in command of guerrilla groups are the Uruguayan José Gervasio Artigas, the Mexicans Hidalgo, Morelos and Guerrero, the Argentine Martín Güemes, the Chilean Manuel Rodríguez, commandos that acted in order to disrupt the development of Spain on these colonies and in some cases worked hand in hand with regular armies based on independence, anti-racism, anti-colonialism and in some cases anti-property.

The mythical meaning of the word guerrilla thickens much of the history of the second half of the 20th century in Latin America, after the defeat of Nazi Germany, when the dispute for the application of a global economic model takes place: in one extreme capitalism, which is based on the free flow of the market, and on the other hand communism, based on the regularization of the market by the state. Given this situation, the southern countries of the American continent with emerging economies and due to the direct influence of the US hegemony adopt the capitalist-Keynesian system, an implementation that is achieved thanks to the influence of the newly founded International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

This is how Latin American countries embrace an economic-social system that is alien to their culture and history, developed under multiple pro-independence coups. A series of guidelines is acquired that do not correspond to the nature of its economy. It is in this historical milestone where North American hegemony arises over the entire continent, the decision to apply this model is not made taking into account the environment itself and the existing variables in each region, it is simply limited to the replication of models from the north, without taking into account the particular conditions of this geography. With the adoption of this model, outbreaks of deep dissatisfaction arise as well, which prompt movements extending from Cuba to Patagonia in Argentina. From there, we start from the premise that the guerrilla assumes this condition of his own free will without any pressure other than the submission of his peers, which leads to the generation of a violent clash with an evidently asymmetric force.

Highlighting the multiple organizations which were part of the guerrilla struggle in Latin America, in Paraguay, there was the emergence of the Paraguayan People's Army (EPP), known as a revolutionary and political-military organization, based on Marxist-Leninist ideology (Mariguella 1969).

For its part in Chile, the Manuel Rodríguez Patriotic Front was the main left-wing group in the country, having as its background the confrontation against the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, together with the *Vanguardia Organizada del Pueblo* group, founded in 1968. In Peru the group Partido Comunista del Perú – Sendero Luminoso (PCP-SL) or Shining Path – is notable, as well as the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA), who were inspired by the leftist guerrillas forming in nearby regions. In Uruguay, for its part, the National Liberation Movement-Tupamaros (MLN-T) was present, which had its stage as an urban guerrilla and later as a political movement. Likewise, Nicaragua witnessed the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), which had its origins in left-wing political and military organizations, initially called the National Liberation Front. Argentina, with the presence of *Montoneros* as a manifestation of the armed struggle, the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP) as an Argentine guerrilla organization, and finally the Peronist Armed Forces (FAP) carried out urban guerrilla actions. In Mexico, the representation was for the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), as a political-libertarian organization, with military origins, as well as the Mexican Popular Revolutionary Army and the Revolutionary Army of the Insurgent People. In Cuba, there was the July 26 Movement (Cuba M-26-7), as well as the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR) founded in 1965 (Ibid.).

Finally, in Colombia, we saw the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the people's army (FARC-EP), and the National Liberation Army (ELN). Each of these with different origins, causes, ideologies, environmental conditions and operating characteristics, under a specific motivation: to fight against the Colombian army. The FARC-EP, for their part, insisted on the existence of the class struggle, so power could only pass into the hands of the proletariat and the poor peasants through armed insurrection and the overthrow of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie (Lenin 1960).

Armed groups in Colombia

It was in the 1960s when the first social movements emerged with a defined political trait and ideology based on internal contexts of the country – such as the narrowness of the political system. Starting as self-defense groups, and later transforming into mobile guerrillas due to the specific circumstances such as the destruction of *Marquetalia* in 1964 and the attack on *Río Chiquito*, *El Pato* and *Guayabero* at the hands of the military; as a consequence of the implementation of the LASO plan, whose purpose was to counteract the revolutionary movements, the Southern Guerrilla Bloc emerged, later called the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC, which contained a revolutionary program including agrarian struggle, national liberation, a popular government, among other aspects, which identified with the politics and influence of communist thought.

Later came the National Liberation Army, ELN. It was started by young people in the region of Santander, who saw the revolutionary example of Cuba. It is one of two main guerrilla armies with leftist political ideologies that operate in Colombian territory, although militarily weakened.

M-19 was born in 1974. The movement springs up in cooperation with ANAPO, its founders being former leaders of the Communist Youth. In the same way, there are other unsuccessful attempts to form guerrillas such as Tulio Bayer, the Student and Peasant Workers' Movement, MOEC, and the Popular Liberation Army (Harnecker 1988). The EPL Popular Liberation Army emerged in 1967 in the Alto Sinú and Alto San Jorge regions, as the armed wing of the Maoist-inspired Marxist Leninist Communist Party, whose cadres come from urban middle classes, many of them of Antioquia origin. It was on 17 December, in the midst of peasant uprisings, that the first guerrilla detachment of the PLA emerged – led by Pedro Vásquez Rendón and Francisco Caraballo.

Currently, the groups with the greatest presence and participation are reduced to the FARC and the ELN, together with a strong presence of criminal gangs and organizations that do not follow a political purpose.

In 1985, the National Guerrilla Coordination (CNG) was created, made up by eight of the nine guerrilla groups existing in the country, excluding the FARC. Consequently, in 1987, the Simón Bolívar Guerrilla Coordinator was formed (CGSB) (Aguilera 2013), in order to create unity with M-19, ELN, EPL, Quintín Lame, the PRT, and the FARC-EP (Guaraca 2015).

On the other hand, it is not only the FARC, the ELN and the alliance units that have been actors at certain times in the country's conflict. Colombia has witnessed the presence of minority insurgent groups that had an armed project as stated by Aguilera (2013):

- The Popular Liberation Army, EPL – originated in the sixties, had the participation of peasants from Córdoba, banana unions, and urban sectors of Antioquia. Originally with a Maoist, militarist and abstentionist vision, it transformed its prolonged people's war scheme and considered other models (such as the Albanian one) for the construction of socialism.
- The Quintín Lame Armed Movement, MAQL – created in the 1980s, represented the Indigenous communities of Cauca, since they defended them and fought against the landowners in order to protect their territory. They also maintained the internal order of their communities without using a political-military project like the two groups with the highest representation.
- Revolutionary Workers Party, PRT – a group with similar characteristics to the MAQL in terms of the absence of a political-military project; and not being considered a militia or self-defense.
- M-19 – with high political capital, given its actions and movements. Originated in the seventies.

- Stream of Social Renewal – detached from the ELN.
- Francisco Garnica Front – made up of the EPL dissenters
- Popular People's Militias and for the people – arose in relation to the ELN.
- Independent militias from the Aburrá Valley.
- MIR – Free homeland.

Conclusion

To discuss, and to try to define, the actors of the Colombian armed conflict is a complex and ambitious task. The presence of social, political and economic uncertainty is pertinent when we talk about an inefficient state and an organized group which confronts it. From an insurrectionary viewpoint, the armed struggle is a process which vindicates the social, political and economical absences that the state has constantly provided and legitimizes the people's resistance, their right to revolt. Likewise, social unrest, originated by the presence of specific interests from the state, institutional inefficiency, socioeconomic inequality, political violence and repression, influence of foreign military forces, persecution of social mobilizations (from students, unions and other sectors of the population), Indigenous persecution, land struggle and inefficient rural policies; were detonating factors of the confrontation between the state and the armed groups. The Colombian armed conflict is part of a decolonization process whose foundation is found in the rejection of the policies of exclusion of the ruling bourgeoisie. As well as considering the genesis and emergence of armed groups in the country, it is a conflict that arises from the post-Cold War world processes because it reflects the new political order that emerged because of the conflict between the two superpowers (Pastor Beato 2013).

So, behind the political objectives of the armed actors in Colombia there was an anti-imperialist dynamic that opposed the hegemonic power and the intent to push the country towards the periphery of global capitalism. This means that for the armed actors in Colombia, there were two social groups within the state, of the privileged one and of the exploited, therefore, their political agendas had to be aligned on the side of the marginalized.

Analyzing the Colombian conflict from a decolonial perspective requires an understanding of the ways in which political power was configured in this post-Cold War Latin American country as well as how political actors operated at the time. From a decolonial perspective, one can say that the armed actors in the country of our interest correspond to the modern forms of the creation of technologies of killing because their actions have affected communities and individuals differently (Maldonado-Torres 2008).

Earlier, we identified the actors involved in one of the longest armed conflicts in the history of mankind, highlighting that the forms present in the conflict in Colombia were different depending on the particular armed group and the struggle for the defense of local lands was considered as a survival alternative against global capitalism. This is what Maldonado-Torres (2008) calls a scream of terror made by the populations who lived under the domination of the Global north that mask its actions under a civilizational mission. The armed conflict in Colombia must be interpreted from this perspective as a turn towards socialism; therefore, some Colombian armed actors, of course, have to take into account the specificities of the capitalist policies to which they opposed. This allows us to note that the peace agreement signed by the main actors of the armed conflict does not differentiate the political actors of the socialist side from those with capitalist tendencies, but rather it is all about recognizing that all of them were equally bad in managing the longest conflict in history Latin American.

In the Colombian conflict we see a combination of the cultural with the social and the national. In other words, this was a resistance to neoliberalism and neoimperialism (Anderson 2004) in the 1960s to highlight a process of recognition of the practices of social groups that have been historically victimized (De Sousa Santos 2018). In short, the Cold War precedes and explains the genesis of the Colombian conflict, whose actors turned to the great economic and military blocs. Although over the years, Colombia will experience the multiplication of armed groups, what they all had in common was the territorial control and therefore the control of the communities that live on those territories. Because of the exclusion from global markets that suffer those territories, they were forced to develop a kind of social economy.

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