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## **ARMED CONFLICT, CRIME AND SOCIAL PROTEST IN SOUTH BOLIVAR, COLOMBIA (1996-2004)**

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## **Armed Conflict, Crime and Social Protest in South Bolivar, Colombia (1996-2004)**

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### **Violence, politics and crime in contemporary armed conflicts**

The literature on armed conflicts offers different views on the nature of contemporary irregular wars. According to what we might call the ‘classical’ approach, insurgencies want to achieve victory (either by seizing power or territory) or at least to force some form of institutional change. For instance, a well-known US Army manual on counterinsurgency states that ‘*in all cases*, insurgents aim to force political change’ (Department of Defense 2007: 8, italics added); and since, in theory, their struggle would reflect the aspirations of self-determination or justice of a population (e.g. a class or an ethnic group), civilians would be willing to support the insurgency and even to join their ranks. Indeed, civilian collaboration is one of the defining features of irregular warfare and is usually acknowledged as a crucial ingredient of a successful military strategy. Accordingly, the standard assumption within the classical approach has been that the insurgency and the state would compete for civilian allegiance through rewards, indoctrination, fear or violence. While Mao’s (1954: 149-50) doctrine encouraged guerrillas to give a fair treatment to peasants and to engage in the defence of popular causes, it did not rule out the use of violence to ‘suppress the activities of the counter-revolution in the countryside’ (Mao 1954: 27). Likewise, while some students of counterinsurgency have advocated soft approaches towards the population aimed to win their ‘hearts and minds’ (Thompson 1966), others have advocated a gloves-off approach, such as the ‘coercion’ school of counterinsurgency (Kahl 2007). Despite their differences, all have seen civilian allegiance as a means to achieve military advantage and, ultimately, victory.

This view of irregular conflicts has been challenged in recent years: the influence of neoclassical economics on how insurrections and civil wars are modelled has focused the attention on issues of financial feasibility and individual profit over the political projects and social roots of conflicts (Cramer 2002). Furthermore, many recent armed conflicts seem, in fact, increasingly driven by the personal appetites of politicians, warlords and combatants, attracted by the opportunities of power and enrichment that conflict and disorder create. In this context, insurgencies and even government forces no longer seem interested in defeating their enemies. As Keen (1998: 12) puts it, in these conflicts ‘the end is to engage in abuse or crimes that bring immediate rewards, while the means is war and its perpetuation’. In such conflicts, predatory behaviour towards civilians is widespread – either as a result of the generalised misconduct of combatants or as a planned strategy of economic exploitation,

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<sup>1</sup> The author is grateful to Jean-Paul Faguet, Dennis Rodgers and Jo Beall for their comments and suggestions on a previous version of this paper. He is also indebted to German Plata and Ademir Luna, of the *Magdalena Medio* Peace and Development Programme, in Barrancabermeja, Colombia, for their help in accessing some of the data used for this research and in making the opening contacts with several interviewees. This paper is part of a PhD thesis co-funded by the European Union’s Alban Scholarship Programme (Alban ID E03D02657CO). The paper does not intend to represent the views of any of the organisations mentioned above and any errors or omissions are the sole responsibility of the author.

exclusion or elimination – and so, the number of combatants killed in action is dwarfed by the civilian death toll. Thus, these ‘new wars’, as Kaldor (1999) called them, involve a mixture of war, crime and large-scale human rights violations.

A similar suggestion has been made in the case of civilians. Civil wars, Kalyvas (2003) argued, create a perfect environment for the emergence of ‘alliances’ between ‘political actors’ (i.e. state and insurgencies) and civilians, which have little to do with ideological sympathy. Rather, they are based on rational calculation: civilians try to use the force of armed organisations to gain local advantage allowing them, in return, to ‘recruit and motivate supporters and obtain local control, resources, and information’ (Kalyvas 2003: 486). Based on this idea, he later argued that information is the crucial element in that relationship and the key determinant of the spatial distribution of violence. ‘Political actors’ (state and insurgency), he argued, gather information from civilians to eliminate enemy collaborators. But in doing so, they create opportunities for civilians to take advantage by accusing their own personal foes and competitors (‘malicious denunciation’), leading, ultimately, to the privatisation of political violence (Kalyvas 2006: 332). While his view of the state and insurgencies is in line with the ‘classical’ approach, his view of civilian behaviour mirrors the self-interested, opportunistic image other scholars had painted of combatants and warlords.

In sum, both the theory and the facts seem to point towards a new form of war in which individual interests thrive, collective action collapses and private appetites spur violence against civilians. The evolution of the Colombian conflict over the last two decades is often offered as a typical example of these trends. Although Colombian armed organisations have not relied on identity politics – a key attribute of the new wars described by Kaldor (1999: 76) – they have been seen as the epitome of the convergence between crime and warfare. For instance, Laqueur (1999: 213) claimed that Colombian insurgencies spent less than ten per cent of their income in sustaining the war and ‘have become capitalists, collectively and, in some cases, individually’. The involvement of insurgents in the coca economy and of drug bosses in paramilitary organisations has led some observers to characterise the conflict as a ‘war of lumpen elements’ (UNDP 2003: 93) or a clash between ‘brigands’ and ‘mercenaries’ (Mueller 2003: 509). Along the same lines, Pecaut (1999: 145, 147) has argued that the Colombian conflict is a ‘war against society’, disconnected from ‘class divisions and other collective forms of social identity’. An important consequence of the criminalisation of conflict is that ‘traditional revolutionary movements... have turned more violent as a result of the drug trade’ (Bibes 2001: 244).

This paper challenges the adequacy of this emerging approach in understanding the development of the Colombian conflict during the late 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, it shows how armed organisations co-operated with social organisations and local elites in an effort to expand and consolidate their level of territorial and political control. Despite their involvement in the coca economy and the lack of credible, coherent political programmes, armed organisations used their power to favour specific social groups and organisations, as well as political parties, and pushed their agendas in the local sphere and beyond. What is more, they employed violence against civilians not because of their involvement in crime but precisely because they had political goals. On the other hand, it

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that Gutierrez has tackled this issue focusing on the whether FARC guerrillas behave like ‘criminal rebels’ (Gutiérrez 2004) and on the whether the criminalisation of conflict leads to an increase in terrorism (i.e. civilian victimisation) (Gutiérrez 2006). His answers are negative in both cases. This paper tackles essentially the same problem but focuses a different aspect: the relation between armed organisations and civilians.

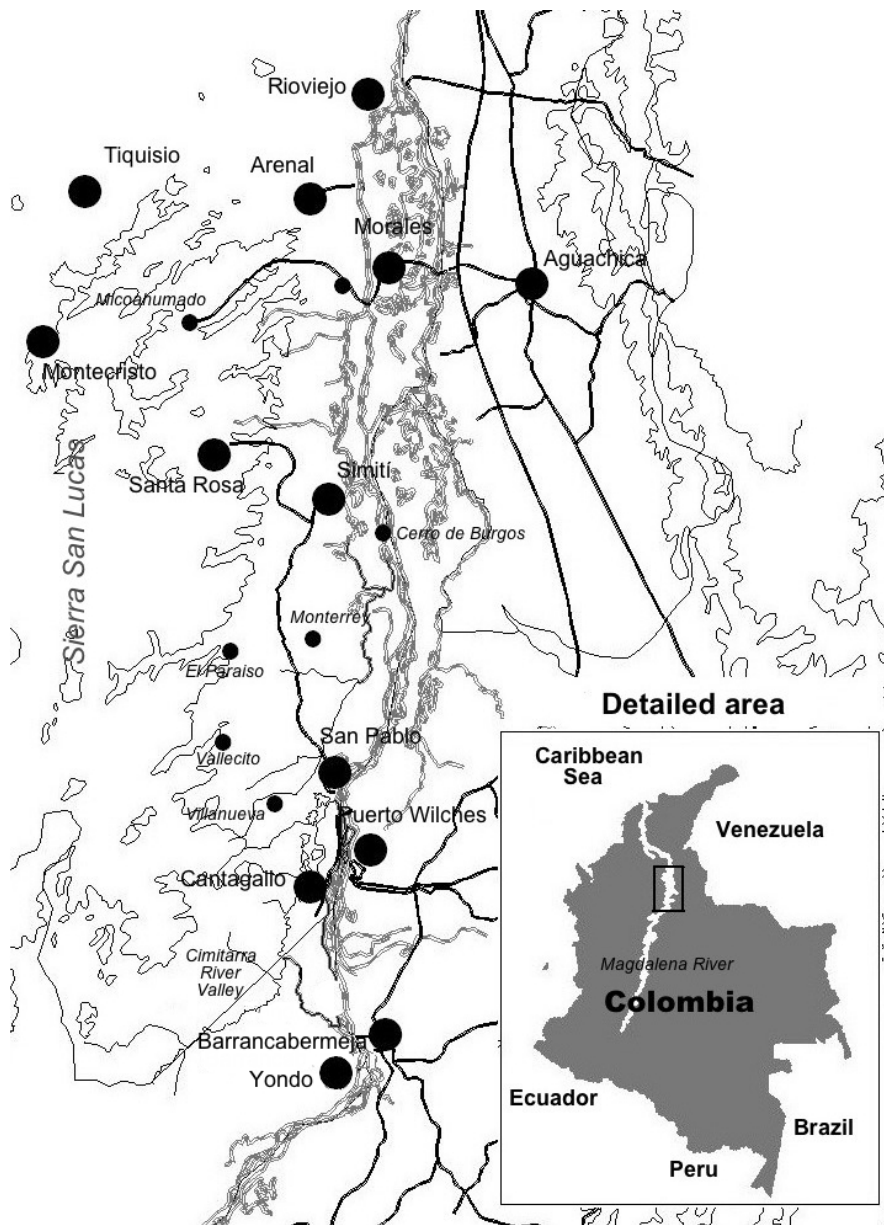
shows how civilian collaboration does not necessarily assume an individualistic, opportunistic character, as civilians take part in social protest and other forms of political collective action and engage in alliances with armed organisations that enabled them to exert pressure on the national government on local issues such as security, human rights and access to basic services and infrastructure.

The next section of this paper provides a quick regional background on South Bolivar. The third section summarises the evolution of armed conflict in this region during the late 1990s and early 2000s. The fourth section describes the links between civilian and armed organisations, their manifestations and their effects on the evolution of armed conflict. In the final section, the paper discusses the significance of the evidence in the context of the debates referred to above. The paper is based on primary and secondary sources, including press reports, official databases, a dataset built specifically for this research, original interviews and data gathered in the field.

### **Armed conflict in South Bolivar**

#### *The emergence of insurgent organisations*

Rather than the forefront of armed conflict, South Bolivar was for years a safe haven for insurgent groups. While the left bank of the Magdalena River is relatively flat and most towns of the region sit on this valley, to the west a mountain range known as Sierra San Lucas, with ‘two million hectares of tropical and subtropical forest’ (Davalos 2001: 71-2) offers an ideal environment for guerrilla warfare: ‘dense forests [and] steep mountains’ (Guevara 1985: 65) (see Map 1).



**Map 1. South Bolivar**

Source: Map drawn by Cesar Moreno, edited and used with his permission. Note: South Bolivar comprises the towns on the west side of the Magdalena River, which splits into several streams or ‘arms’ (visible in the map between San Pablo and Rioviejo) creating marshes, shallows and some small riverine islands that ‘emerge’ only during the dry seasons.

Furthermore, despite several economic booms (e.g. oil in the 1920s, rice in the 1950s), the region has remained relatively poor and vast rural areas have been uninhabited until very recently. Geographic isolation and economic stagnation have gone hand in hand with the precarious presence of the state, evident in the lack of infrastructure and the poor provision of services. Grassroots organisations have played an important role in building infrastructure (e.g. schools), providing services and creating mechanisms to manage natural resources. During the 1960s and 1970s, the Catholic Church was also very active in the region, organising the provision of basic services and infrastructure and serving as a link between these communities and the departmental authorities (Interview, a Catholic priest, Barrancabermeja and South Bolivar).

In the 1960s, the National Liberation Army (ELN) – a guerrilla group founded by young, urban intellectuals inspired by the Cuban revolution – chose South Bolivar as one of their first fronts of activity. Despite important setbacks, they had an uninterrupted presence in the region, establishing its headquarters in Sierra San Lucas. In the 1980s, the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC), a peasant guerrilla group born in the 1960s as a federation of peasant self-defences, had to relocate one of its fronts into this region after being pushed out from Puerto Boyaca by a paramilitary group funded by cattle ranchers and drug traffickers and discreetly supported by the military (Medina 1990). Until the 1980s, these insurgencies remained weak and hardly posed a substantial threat to the Colombian state; but they gradually turned into a liability for cattle ranchers, oil palm growers and multinational oil companies in neighbouring, more dynamic areas, such as Cesar and Santander. As extortion, sabotage, kidnappings and ‘armed strikes’ increased their risks and costs of operation, South Bolivar was flagged by the central government as a ‘red zone’ and treated accordingly – sometimes with social programmes aimed to strengthen the presence of the state, e.g. the *Plan Nacional de Rehabilitacion*, but most often with repression, especially in areas such as the Cimitarra and Santo Domingo valleys, controlled by the FARC and the ELN, respectively (Interviews, former PNR officials, Barrancabermeja and South Bolivar).<sup>3</sup>

### *The rise of the insurgency in the 1990s*

Kidnappings, extortion and fees on the cultivation and trade of coca, among other sources, enabled the insurgency to increase their manpower and challenge the state’s authority in several regions during the 1990s. Moreover, the decentralisation reforms, originally aimed at strengthening the capacity and legitimacy of the Colombian state, had a limited (and perhaps counterproductive) effect, as municipal governments were influenced or co-opted by insurgents in the areas they controlled.

In South Bolivar, the expansion of coca crops during the 1990s improved the insurgency’s finances and allowed them to establish themselves as regulators of the coca-paste market, playing a role that, for obvious reasons, the Colombian state could not perform (Fonseca et al. 2005: 63-9). Although coca crops in South Bolivar never represented more than 5 percent of the national estimates (UNODC Office for Colombia & Ecuador 2003), they reinvigorated the regional economy and became a vital source of income for many in the region. Furthermore, the cultivation of coca reinforced the disconnection between the population and the Colombian state as thousands of peasants, coca pickers and cultivators were pushed into illegality and ostracised as part of the ‘war on drugs’.<sup>4</sup>

Political and fiscal decentralisation allowed the population to choose their mayors and enabled local governments to improve the provision of infrastructure and services (e.g. sanitation, health and education). But local elections and financial transfers were capitalised by the insurgency as they gained influence over the local authorities through persuasion, negotiation or coercion, thus being able to redirect public funds towards projects and communities of their choice (Peñate 1999). Richani (2002: 89) reported how in San Pablo, Cantagallo and Yondo, FARC guerrillas organised informal local assemblies in which the winners were decided before the elections.

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<sup>3</sup> The FARC and the ELN have rarely clashed in this region and in the early 1990s were part of an umbrella organisation known as *Coordinadora Guerrilla Simon Bolivar*. They often joined forces to repel counterinsurgent attacks by government forces or paramilitaries..

<sup>4</sup> According to the UNODC (2003), by 2001, more than 80 percent of the coca plots in the region (out of approximately 2,600 identified using satellite imagery) were less than three hectares in size.

However, in 1997, the insurgents sabotaged the local elections, apparently in an attempt to maintain in power the existing officials, many of whom were under their influence, and also motivated by fears that some of the candidates, who sympathised with paramilitary groups, could win seats in the councils or even be elected as mayors (Gutierrez 2004b: 35). The sabotage also had a symbolic purpose as it showed the inability of the Colombian state to perform one of the fundamental operations in a democracy. The sabotage consisted of kidnappings and deadly threats against the candidates, destruction and theft of ballots and attacks against electoral staff and facilities. It was widely covered by national and regional newspapers; and proved to be very effective as the elections had to be postponed or repeated in several towns (El Espectador, August 27, 1997; El Colombiano, September 12, 1997; El Herald, September 3, 1997; El Nuevo Siglo, August 26 and September 17, 1997; El Espectador, June 24, 1998; Vanguardia, May 17, 1998).

The sabotage faced mixed responses from the population in different towns. In Yondo, it provoked a rift among local politicians as an agreement reached among the contestants to boycott the election was breached by a few of them and, as a result, the mayor was elected with only seven votes. The opposition formed an alternative government, a local *junta*, apparently backed by the FARC, and demanded new elections. The winners refused to resign their posts but were kidnapped by insurgents and forced to do so. They later denounced an alliance between the insurgency and ‘politicians from the Cimitarra River Valley’, an area with heavy presence of insurgents (El Colombiano, March 14, 1998; El Espectador, May 7, 1998; El Tiempo, July 6, 1998).

In Santa Rosa, the sabotage was less successful: although the rural polling stations could not open, in the town the elections went ahead as planned. When the insurgents demanded the resignation of the elected mayor and councilmen, the locals convened a meeting with guerrilla commanders and dismissed their threats, supported by a crowd of their followers. The mayor and councilmen took up their posts in January, as planned, and no reprisals followed (Interview, local politician, Santa Rosa). As the cases of Yondo and Santa Rosa show, the relation between local elites and the insurgency was marked by dialogue, compromises and veiled partnerships between them; but the use of threats and intimidation during the electoral sabotage of 1997 left a sour taste among politicians and, arguably, helped the paramilitaries to cultivate local support (Gutierrez 2004b).

Besides the electoral sabotage, guerrillas escalated their attacks against police and military facilities and, in general, against the state’s institutions. The town of Simiti, for instance, was the target of sustained incursions by ELN guerrillas who, eventually, forced the police to leave the town and raised their own black-and-red flag on top of the abandoned police station (El Herald, August 19, 1997). The insurgents also destroyed and looted the local branch of Caja Agraria, a state-owned bank specialising in services to farmers and cattle ranchers (El Tiempo, July 2 and August 17, 1997). In a sign of their intent on replacing the state, they pledged to protect the town from petty criminals and, reportedly, offered loans to peasants (Aranguren 2001: 334).

The rise of the insurgency during the second half of the 1990s also had consequences beyond the region as they escalated attacks against vehicles travelling along the *Troncal de la Paz*, one of the main roads that connect the Colombian capital with the Atlantic Coast. Buses and trucks were often set on fire to punish companies that failed to pay protection fees. Travellers were randomly stopped in improvised checkpoints and kidnapped for ransom.

### *The counterinsurgent campaign*

Paramilitary organisations mushroomed across the country during the 1980s and 1990s as local collective responses to the insurgency or simply as the private armies of drug-traffickers, cattle ranchers and local patrons. But South Bolivar did not develop their own groups, possibly because it lacked large landholders, agriculturalists or merchants who could finance such force – or who were so badly affected by the insurgency in the first place. Up until 1997, only paramilitary groups based in neighbouring regions occasionally forayed into this region. However, in 1998 things changed radically as Carlos Castaño and the Peasant Self-Defences of Cordoba and Uraba (ACCU) entered the region having the defeat of the ELN as the main purpose – but also well aware of the rents that could be derived from the coca economy and the support that could be obtained from politicians, merchants and companies targeted by the insurgency.<sup>5</sup>

Roughly speaking, the ACCU's counterinsurgency campaign progressed in two stages: the first aimed to secure the villages and towns in the valley and cordon the sierra; the second, to reduce the rural areas under their control. The first stage started in June 1998 and consisted of raids against town and villages such as Montecristo, Tiquisio, Cerro Burgos, Moralitos, Buenavista and Micoahumado (El Tiempo, August 31, March 7, 1998, September 5 and 9, 1998; El Espectador, September 1, 1998; Vanguardia, March 6, September 20 and November 22, 1998; El Pais, September 19, 1998). The paramilitaries quickly moved into the region and established checkpoints at crossroads and other points of access to the region. They also distributed leaflets, reminding guerrillas of the harsh conditions they had to endure and enticing them to join their ranks. As the insurgency reacted to the paramilitary incursions, the media reported clashes between paramilitaries and combined forces of FARC and ELN in July and September near Monterrey, a village halfway between San Pablo and Simiti (Vanguardia, July 11 and 17, 1998; El Tiempo, September 25, 1998).

During the second stage, after securing the towns and setting up bases in the valley, the paramilitaries launched new attacks on rural villages, along tributaries of the Magdalena river such as the Boque, Inanea, Santo Domingo and Cimitarra rivers, until then controlled by the insurgency. In the north, the fighting took place in rural areas such as Regencia and Villa Uribe, near Montecristo, and Colorado, near Tiquisio (Noche y Niebla 1999: No.11, 91; No.12, 119; No.14, 82). In the south, the action focused in Yondo and the Cimitarra river valley. Paramilitary raids on rural villages along the Cimitarra River were followed by insurgent attacks on paramilitary camps; these, in turn, prompted the reaction of the military, leading to counterinsurgent operations, sometimes supported by riverine units and aerial fire (Noche y Niebla 2000: No.16, 94, 105, 166; 2001: No.19, 52, 94, 106). During 2002, the fighting continued in the Cimitarra river valley; paramilitaries periodically attacked and plundered villages and occasionally clashed with FARC and ELN insurgents (Noche y Niebla 2002: No.23: 77, 117; No.24: 69, 86; No.25: 67, 72).

In contrast with the swift progress made during the first stage, the second was more costly for the paramilitaries and, ultimately, had limited success. As they established permanent bases and outposts across the region, they became more vulnerable to ambushes and the insurgents

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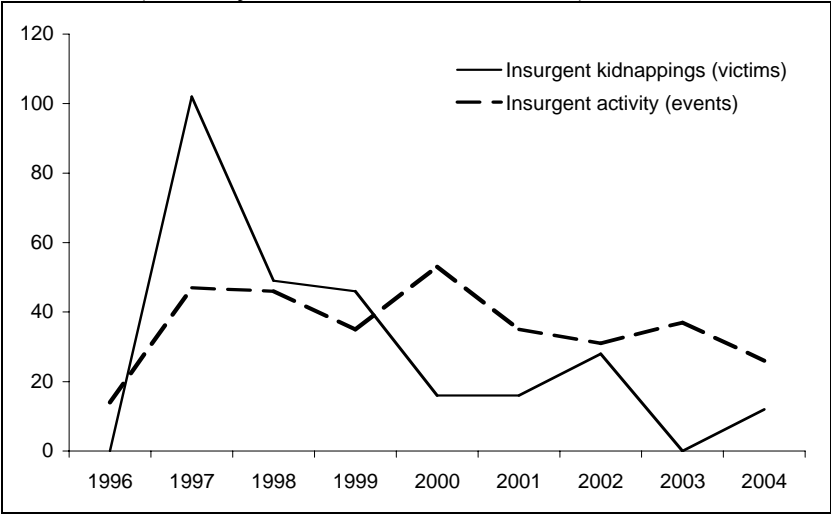
<sup>5</sup> Unlike most paramilitary organisations, the ACCU launched several operations in geographic areas well beyond their original turf, including South Bolivar and Meta. This seemed to have the double purpose of increasing the rents obtained by the group and buttressing Castaño's political career. Indeed, he promoted a national confederation of paramilitary organisations known as the United Self-Defences of Colombia or AUC, which he used as a vehicle to advocate negotiations with the national government and to promote himself, with great success, in the national political arena.



managed to strike them on several occasions from 2000 to 2003, causing a notable rise in paramilitary casualties (El Tiempo, December 28, 2002; *Voz* January 14, 2004; *Noche y Niebla* 2003: No.27, 194, 207, 208). The insurgents also resorted to the use of land mines to resist the counterinsurgent campaign in areas such as Santo Domingo, Villaflores and Micoahumado, but they could not reverse the progress made by paramilitaries and by 2003 a stalemate had been reached, with the insurgency alive but confined to the most isolated, mountainous areas and the state and paramilitaries in control of towns and villages in the valley.

Although the counterinsurgent campaign only led to a slight reduction in the level of insurgent activity across the region, it was successful in several aspects. It forced the guerrillas back into the sierra and, as result, the proportion of insurgent events taking place in the towns fell from 26 percent in 1997-98 to less than 10 percent between 2001 and 2003, and was null in 2004.<sup>6</sup> It also led to an ostensible reduction in the number of kidnappings in the region (see Figure 1), improving the security conditions of local politicians and merchants and allowing oil-palm companies to expand their plantations from 250 hectares in 2000 to 3,600 in 2004. Indeed, in San Pablo, oil palm became the most important crop in terms of planted area, even above coca.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, the campaign imposed a heavy cost on the rural population, especially in insurgent-controlled areas. Beside the risks posed by armed conflict itself (e.g. raids, clashes and killings), peasants had to endure the embargo imposed by the paramilitaries, who rationed the amount of food and other goods that could be brought into the rural areas of South Bolivar. Moreover, the aerial spraying of coca crops often damaged staple and cash crops, eroding their livelihoods (*Noche y Niebla* 2001: No.21, 111).



**Figure 1. Insurgent activity in South Bolivar and Yondo, 1996-2004**

Sources: Activity, VNN dataset; kidnappings, *Fondelibertad*.  
 Note: Includes 32 passengers of flight kidnapped on April 1999. Excludes first half of 1996.

<sup>6</sup> The figures provided in this section came from three sources: a dataset specifically developed for this research and based on the *Noche y Niebla* series, published by the Colombian NGO CINEP since July 1996. This dataset is referred below as ‘VNN’ and provides information about armed conflict, including hostilities and casualties. The other two sources are official databases on forced displacement and kidnapping, developed by *Red de Solidaridad Social* (later known as *Accion Social*) and *Fondelibertad*, two Colombian government agencies. The figures cover twelve municipalities in South Bolivar and one in Antioquia (Yondo); the latter belongs to the Cimitarra Valley, one of the key theatres in the armed confrontation in this region.

<sup>7</sup> According to figures provided by the Secretary of Agriculture in Cartagena, Bolivar.

To make things worse, the paramilitaries reorganised the coca paste market: in the past, buyers from so-called ‘cartels’ were free to enter the region and producers could sell the paste to the buyer of their choice. Under the paramilitaries, only a handful of buyers were authorised to buy coca paste. The price was set at Col\$2 million (approximately US\$1,000) per kilogram of coca paste and attempts to sell the coca paste to non-authorized buyers outside the region were severely punished. Furthermore, the authorised buyers often paid for their purchases with undated IOU notes rather than cash (Interviews, merchants and local politicians, Santa Rosa; Gutierrez 2004b: 35). Although the interviewees could not confirm it, it is very likely that the authorised buyers were all at the service of the well-known drug lord Carlos Jimenez, (aka ‘*Macaco*’), who was also one of the three top commanders of the *Bloque Central Bolivar*, a new paramilitary organisations, which, by 2002, had taken over the previously existing structures in South Bolivar and other Colombian regions (Semana, June 9, 2007). In this respect, and despite the casualties, the paramilitary campaign was also a success.

In 2002, paramilitary groups signed an agreement with the Uribe administration pledging to demobilise their troops as part of a ‘peace and justice’ process underpinned by an ad-hoc judicial framework that established sentences of up to eight years for their members, conditioned to the full confession of their crimes. However, the demobilisation process as such in South Bolivar had to wait until 2006, when they formally withdrew their troops from South Bolivar (OAS-MAPP 2006).<sup>8</sup>

### *Magnitude and outcomes of armed conflict*

**Table 1. Combatants’ and civilians’ death tolls in South Bolivar, 1996-2004**

Source: VNN dataset.

Warring forces	Combatants*				Civilians**
	Government	Guerrillas	Paramilitaries	Total	
<b>Government forces</b>	0	176	0	176	8
<b>Guerrillas</b>	56	0	202	258	61
<b>Paramilitaries</b>	0	86	0	86	227
<b>Unknown/mixed</b>	1	6	0	7	136
<b>Total</b>	57	268	202	527	432

\* Figures in columns represent deaths inflicted *to* a group; figures in rows represent deaths inflicted *by* a group. Combatants’ deaths only include those occurred while in action.

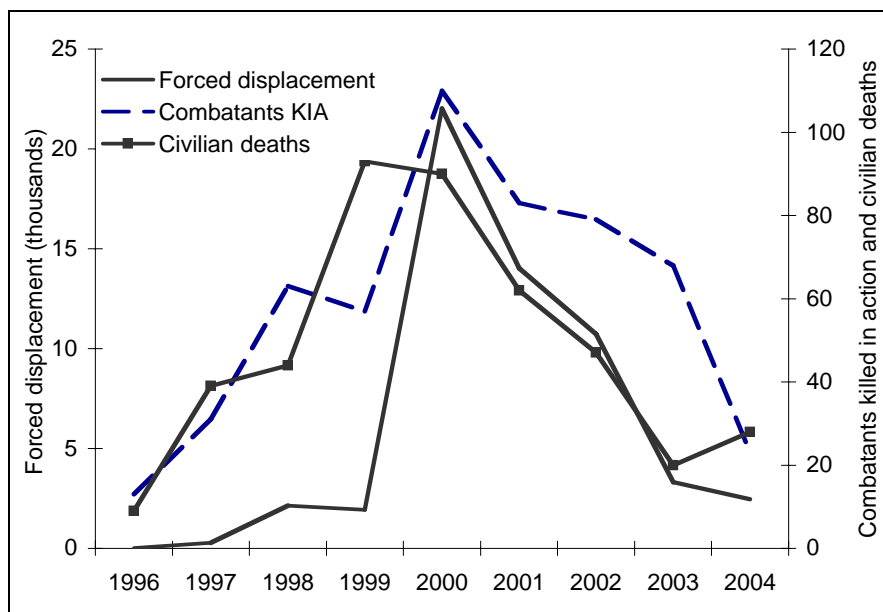
\*\* The first three figures in the column only include deliberate killings out of combat; the fourth figure includes 51 civilians killed in the course of hostilities and 85 deliberately killed, out of combat, by unidentified or unknown members of armed organisations.

The intensification of armed conflict and its impact on civilians are evident in the statistics. Table 1 summarises the death tolls produced in the course of the conflict from July 1996 to December 2004. Approximately two thirds of the guerrillas killed in action died in clashes with government forces; hostilities between guerrillas and paramilitaries were less frequent (approximately one in four) and very costly for the latter in terms of casualties. Government forces and paramilitaries never inflicted any losses to each other so, even though the conflict involved three sets of organisations (government forces, insurgent groups and paramilitary

<sup>8</sup> However, paramilitaries continued threatening human rights workers and Catholic priests in South Bolivar (*El Tiempo* 15 April 2008).

groups), in practice it developed as a two-sided conflict.<sup>9</sup> While paramilitaries played a modest role in fighting the insurgency, they were quite effective in killing civilians, accounting for more than half of the civilian death toll. However, the ratio of civilians to combatants killed was well below the levels seen in ‘new wars’ (Kaldor 1999: 8); in other words, despite intense violence against civilians, armed conflict as such (i.e. hostilities) still was the dominant aspect of the confrontation, as reflected in the number of lethal casualties it produced.<sup>10</sup>

Expectably, forced displacement also increased dramatically: according to the official database, nearly 57,000 people fled their homes during this period, most of them in 2000 and 2001; that is approximately one quarter of the population of the region. If the 2005 Census is anything to go by (as some areas were inaccessible to census workers), the rural areas of *municipios* such as San Pablo, Santa Rosa, Morales, Simiti and Rio Viejo lost between 50-70 per cent of their population, in relation to the official population forecasts (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Forced displacement, civilian deaths and combatants killed in action in South Bolivar, 1996-2004**

Sources: Civilian and combatant deaths, VNN dataset; forced displacement, Red de Solidaridad Social.

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, on occasions, the army and the paramilitaries acted collaboratively. For instance, in January 1999, forty men massacred fourteen people in San Pablo, including a former mayor and a local politician. According to witnesses, the police locked themselves in the station and did not react to the incursion, prompting a raft of criticism in the national media (El Espectador, January 10, 1999; El Tiempo, January 12, 1999). Likewise, during the paramilitary siege of Montecristo, government forces sent to protect civilians from an imminent confrontation targeted only insurgent-controlled areas (El Tiempo, August 31, September 5 and 9, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Recent political violence, at least in this region, is then notably different in its character from the *violencia* of the 1950s, when ‘relatively few deaths were the result of armed contacts between guerrillas or other unofficial forces’ and ‘deaths were caused less by acts of war, however unconventional, than by atrocities and vengeance’ (Palacios 2006: 137). Indeed, as Gutierrez (2006: 142-3) has noted, the 1950s *violencia* fits better into the ‘new wars’ template than the recent armed conflict.

## **Armed conflict and social mobilisation**

Civilians were deliberately targeted by armed organisations as part of their strategies to preserve or expand their control over South Bolivar. However, they were not passive spectators or mere victims of the process. This section shows how social organisations engaged in collaborative arrangements with armed organisations that enabled them to make claims vis-à-vis the state regarding the protection of the rights and interests of specific social groups while reinforcing the legitimacy of insurgents and paramilitaries in the political arena. While these arrangements had different manifestations (such as the electoral deals mentioned above), two episodes of social and political mobilisation were particularly significant in terms of their magnitude and political consequences. This section narrates these episodes and describes the involvement of civilians and armed organisations in the process.

### *The peasant marches of 1996 and 1998*

In 1996, peasant demonstrations took place across the country, in reaction to the government's new, tougher coca-eradication policies. In South Bolivar, the protests took place in San Pablo and they also addressed old demands, made in previous demonstrations, on issues such as education, health, infrastructure and loans. Although the departmental government reached an agreement with most of the marchers in October 1996, delegates from the Cimitarra Valley adopted a radical stance and, despite the efforts of Navy's riverine units, managed to gather 3,000 peasants in Barrancabermeja, across the Magdalena River (Interview, ACVC member; El Tiempo, October 3 and 4, 1996, Vanguardia, October 11, 1996). The demonstration finished after two weeks of negotiations, when the national authorities agreed to invest US\$50 million to improve the living conditions in the rural areas of South Bolivar and pledged to protect the population from paramilitary groups (El Tiempo, October 28, 1996; Acta de Acuerdos 1996).

However, as seen in the previous section, the situation in the region quickly deteriorated as the paramilitary offensive became imminent. In 1998, two peasant organisations launched a new massive demonstration, more comprehensive in scope and better coordinated in political and operational terms. The Cimitarra Valley Peasant Association (ACVC) was integrated by *juntas de accion comunal*, one for each *vereda* (rural community) and drew on the networks of a peasant cooperative created in the 1980s to reduce the costs of purchasing and distributing goods from outside the region. The South Bolivar Agricultural and Mining Association (*Fedeagromisbol*) was created in the 1990s by miners' and peasants' associations from Sierra San Lucas who had actively participated in the march of 1996; they were particularly concerned about recent attempts made by an absentee family to assert their alleged legal rights over their mines and evict them. According to one of their leaders they worked for over a year persuading the population about the march and preparing the logistics (Interview, ACVC member).

As in 1996, the marchers chose Barrancabermeja as the place to stage the demonstration (or 'exodus' as they called it), where the local government, the Church, NGOs and the oil workers' union were helpful in providing food, shelter and sanitation to the marchers (Interviews, ACVC member and human rights activist, Barrancabermeja). After three months of negotiation, an agreement was reached in the first week of October, when the government agreed to fund a participatory process aimed to formulate a regional plan aimed to promote peace, development and security for the peasants. Helped by a team of technical advisors, the peasant organisations produced the 'Plan for the Development and Integral Protection of the Human Rights in Magdalena Medio' in February 1999 (ACVC 1999).

At first sight the document resembled a typical ‘development plan’: it included a diagnosis of the problems faced by the region in a variety of aspects (e.g. education, agriculture, mining, environment, health) and proposed a number of solutions and investments, in most cases vaguely stated.<sup>11</sup> However, a good deal of the document was aimed at questioning the legitimacy of the Colombian state: the army was repeatedly accused of working hand in hand with paramilitaries to unleash a campaign of state-terrorism against the peasantry. Local authorities were deemed weak and corrupt so the document called for a ‘new, popular’ institutional arrangement, in which peasant organisations would have the leading role in implementing the development strategy (ACVC 1999: 30).

The plan’s estimated budget amounted to approximately one tenth of the entire national public investment budget for the same four-year period and, as one of the economists involved in the formulation of the plan put it, was more symbolic than practical as, in their view, it reflected the huge ‘debt’ of the Colombian state with the people of the region, after decades of absence and repression.<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, the plan was not taken very seriously by the national government. Furthermore, members of the negotiating team received deadly threats (I-11) and two of them were killed by paramilitaries in 1999 (Interview, Magdalena Medio Peace and Development Programme, Barrancabermeja). Others were formally accused later of having links with the insurgency and, thus, prosecuted and imprisoned.<sup>13</sup>

The question of whether the marches and the plan itself were ‘genuine’ or were ‘manipulated’ by the insurgents deserves some discussion. The demands made by the peasant organisations certainly reflected the concerns of the population regarding their security and living conditions. Furthermore, the second march occurred precisely at the time of first stage of the paramilitary campaign, so it is likely that many peasants, truly worried about their lives, had joined the march hoping to get the attention of the national authorities and humanitarian organisations. But some sources suggested that the march had been planned or at least backed by the insurgency. The magazine *Semana* (September 14, 1998), for instance, claimed that guerrillas were manipulating the peasants and using them as ‘pawns in a political chess’. An interviewee also confirmed that guerrillas put some pressure on the peasants to participate in the march (Interview, human rights activist, Barrancabermeja).<sup>14</sup>

At any rate, both peasant and insurgent organisations found it beneficial to promote massive participation in the marches. For the former, they were a chance to raise their profile in the local and national political arenas and present themselves as true representatives of the population. But even if they were successful in convincing the population about the advantages of taking part in the marches, they still had to overcome the risks of free-riding, that is, of people staying at home in the hopes that their neighbours did all the walking and the shouting by them – just as in any other instance of collective action. So a discreet but

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<sup>11</sup> In Colombia, national, departmental and local executives are legally bound to prepare ‘development plans’ shortly after they take power.

<sup>12</sup> The plan had an estimated cost of Col\$6,7 trillion (approximately US\$3,4 billion). The official national investment budget for the same period (1999-2000) was Col\$65,6 trillion, as by Law No. 508 of 1999.

<sup>13</sup> The army captured the leader of the miners’ association a few days after our interview, in April 2007. He was accused of rebellion but the district attorney (*fiscal*) found the evidence insufficient and he was later released (Human Rights First 2009: 24). Other members of these organisations have been killed, allegedly, in clashes with between insurgents and the army but their families have rejected such claims (Semana Online, July 28, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> However, there are no indications that they had used coercion or violence with that purpose: according to the available data, only one civilian was deliberately killed by insurgents in 1998 in this region but his death occurred in September, when the march was about to end (Noche y Niebla 1998: No.9, 92).

effective nod from the insurgency was not unwelcome and, arguably, may have helped them in achieving the massive and sustained mobilisation they needed to get Bogota's attention. For the insurgency, in turn, the 'development plan' and the marches themselves were functional to their political and military interests as they questioned the legitimacy of the Colombian state and required a decisive military action against the paramilitaries. Moreover, by backing the march they made themselves stakeholders in their success so, even if a small fraction of the demands made in the development plan had been met by the government, it would have been a triumph for the insurgents.

To conclude, rather than manipulative, the relation between insurgent and social organisations could be better described as collaborative or, following Kalyvas's (2003) terminology, as an 'alliance' – although the term suggests a degree of formality that was lacking in this case.

### *The local opposition to a demilitarised zone*

The election of Andres Pastrana as Colombian president in 1998 offered the insurgents an opportunity window to advance their agenda: peace talks with FARC rebels were his top priority. Soon after taking power, his government created a demilitarised zone in the south of the country, comprising five large *municipios*, in an area traditionally controlled by insurgents but occasionally attacked by the government.<sup>15</sup> Once the zone was put in place, in early 1999, a vague negotiation agenda was issued and the 'civil society' was invited to participate in audiences held in the zone and broadcasted on national public television. Even foreign diplomats visited the zone and talked with the rebels. While it lasted, it was a political and military success for the FARC.

Although the ELN did not enjoy the same cosy relation with the Pastrana administration, they wanted a similar arrangement in South Bolivar and, as the paramilitary offensive advanced, this aspiration turned into an urgent need. In March 1999, they proposed the demilitarisation of four *municipios*, but several mayors quickly showed their opposition. Moreover, according to a regional newspaper, paramilitaries and government forces asked the people to sign a petition against the creation of such zone (El Colombiano, March 14, 1999). In a sign of desperation, the ELN captured a domestic flight, forcing it to land near Monterrey, and demanded the demilitarisation of this village, recently occupied by paramilitaries as a condition to release the hostages (El Espectador, April 25, 1999), but they only managed to elicit an aggressive rescue operation.

However, negotiations about a demilitarised zone continued, facilitated by the Cuban and German governments, and, early in 2000, the government put forward a proposal to demilitarise some *municipios*. While some rural communities (e.g. Paraiso, Vallecito and Villanueva, Micoahumado) greeted the idea (Vanguardia, January 31, 2000), by and large the reaction was negative. Several demonstrations took place in the towns of San Pablo, Santa Rosa, Morales and Simiti and, in February 2000, the protesters (between 1,000 and 7,000, depending on the source) crossed the Magdalena River and blocked the *Troncal de la Paz* (El Tiempo, February 8, 2000; El Colombiano, February 9, 2000).

What followed was a succession of failed proposals in which the government tried to conciliate the demands of the insurgency with the concerns of the local governments and the population, most of whom fiercely opposed the idea. New demonstrations followed in April

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<sup>15</sup> The demilitarisation involved the withdrawal of all government forces, including the police – but armed insurgents patrolled the zone.

and May and, in solidarity, ‘civic strikes’ were declared in *municipios* outside the region such as Puerto Boyaca, La Dorada, Puerto Nare, Puerto Triunfo, Puerto Salgar and Puerto Berrio, which had been controlled by government forces or paramilitaries for more than a decade (El Tiempo, May 14 and 24, 2000). In 2001, a rumour about the imminent demilitarisation of the zone prompted new demonstrations (Vanguardia, April 18, 2001). In the end, as talks with FARC guerrillas in the demilitarised zone of El Caguan did not show significant progress, scepticism grew and the idea of a demilitarised zone lost any political feasibility.<sup>16</sup>

The protests were organised by several ad-hoc organisations led by *Asocipaz* (Civil Association for Peace in Colombia) and *No al Despeje* (‘not to the withdrawal’ of government troops). Behind *Asocipaz* and, more generally, behind the anti-*despeje* movement, there was a broad array of local actors and groups such as politicians, local officials, merchants, agro-industrialists, cattle ranchers, drug-traffickers and business organisations (Gutierrez 2004b). While some were just afraid of the reprisals that could follow if guerrillas regained control over the region, others were content with the new order imposed by the paramilitaries. Coca growers, coca pickers (*raspachines*), drug-traffickers and, in general, everyone involved in the coca economy, were uneasy about the media attention that a demilitarised zone could bring and the possibility that the insurgency might engage in a serious programme to eradicate coca crops in the area within a reasonable period.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond the potential immediate consequences, they were also afraid of the agreements that could be reached in a negotiation, as the ELN had expressed their interest in turning South Bolivar into a special zone where they could put to test their ideology. This could involve experiments like an agrarian reform, which could imperil the existing distribution of property rights. In addition to the local concerns, agro-industrialists and cattle ranchers in the neighbouring departments of Cesar and Santander were afraid of the impact of a demilitarised zone and feared a new wave of extortions and kidnappings. They joined the anti-*despeje* campaign and made public their views. Similarly, sympathetic politicians from Antioquia, Santander, Cesar and Norte de Santander created their own anti-*despeje* movement.

As in the case of the peasant marches, these demonstrations were followed by rumours of manipulation by armed organisations – in this case, by paramilitaries. Indeed, Castaño claimed to be the promoter of the protests occurred in 2000 (Aranguren 2001: 317-47). Reportedly, they put pressure on the population to participate in the anti-*despeje* demonstrations, although by then they had managed to build ‘wide social support’ (Gutierrez 2004b: 38). Moreover, they apparently resisted several calls made by the government to withdraw their troops from the zone, though these claims have not been confirmed (Aranguren 2001: 317-47).

At any rate, this episode shows how paramilitaries, social organisations and regional elites acted together and forced the government to shelve a decision that threatened their political and economic interests and their standing in the region. Thanks to the massive demonstrations, local authorities and the ad-hoc organisations mentioned above raised their profile and were recognised by the national government as representatives of the population, taking back a role that peasant organisations, sidelined by the evolution of armed conflict, had

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<sup>16</sup> The Pastrana administration suspended FARC’s demilitarised zone in February 2002. Alvaro Uribe, a fierce critic of the demilitarised zone, won the presidential election three months later.

<sup>17</sup> The FARC, for instance, offered to eradicate coca crops in the demilitarised zone of Caguan in collaboration with international donors (Uribe and Ferro 2002: 74).

assumed in the previous years. While they did not sanction the atrocities committed by the paramilitaries, they legitimised their presence in the region. In 2002, one of the leaders of the movement, Carlos Clavijo, was elected senator, backed by the paramilitary organisation *Bloque Central Bolivar* (Valencia 2007: 15).

## **Conclusion**

As noted in the first section, scholars from different traditions have suggested that recent armed conflicts are akin to criminal enterprises, and often mention the case of Colombia as a clear instance of a conflict that has lost connection with class struggles and ideological disputes and is increasingly driven by the appetites of drug lords and other criminals. However, the evidence presented above shows that the involvement of armed organisations in criminal activities does not necessarily mean that they are less willing or able to engage in politics, co-operate with politicians, local governments, political parties and social organisations, and engage in talks, negotiations and deals with them and even with the national government and foreign agencies. Furthermore, they relied on the coca economy as a resource that ultimately helped them in their struggle to increase their political and military power and used violence and coercion against civilians with more ambitious political and economic goals than those typical of organised crime and used.

While the production and trade of coca and coca paste provided armed organisations with financial resources, it also created political opportunities for them. Insofar as coca involves thousands of peasants and provides a substantial share of the agricultural income in the region, it demands a regulatory framework that cannot be provided by the state, creating opportunities for armed organisations to jump in and fill the void, providing and enforcing that framework. Furthermore, as the trade in cocaine sits at the top of the national political agenda by virtue of the ‘war on drugs’, controlling coca-cultivated areas turned out to be a useful card in a political negotiation with the national government or international donors.

In the case of the paramilitaries, it may seem that the actual purpose of their campaign in South Bolivar was taking over the coca-paste market and that, after all, they were merely acting as a large-scale criminal organisation. True, reorganising the coca market (e.g. restricting the access to unauthorised buyers) required the ability to control the main points of access to the region and use violence and coercion. But the scale of the violence against civilians was out of proportion with the goal of controlling the coca-paste market; for instance, it is hard to see how the forced displacement of thousands of people, most of whom fled the region in response to threats and recurrent paramilitary attacks against villages in insurgent-controlled areas, was required to achieve such an effect.

Likewise, there is little correlation between the scale of the crops and the intensity of violence at the municipal level. Santa Rosa, for instance, where paramilitary violence against civilians (civilians killed, forced displacement) was relatively moderate, had the largest coca-cultivated area in the region. Yondo, by contrast, with about an eighth of that area, had three times more forced displacement and eleven times more civilians killed (see Table 2). Furthermore, it is worth noting that controlling the coca paste market did not entail a direct control over the cultivation areas, the crops or the peasants, who found in coca an attractive alternative to less profitable crops and did not need to be forced to grow it.



**Table 2. Coca and violence against civilians in *municipios* of South Bolivar, 1999-2001**

Source: UNODC; VNN dataset; Red de Solidaridad Social.

<b>Municipio</b>	<b>Coca crops*</b>	<b>Civilian deaths**</b>	<b>Forced displacement***</b>
<b>Arenal</b>	58	11	1,187
<b>Montecristo</b>	84	2	5,781
<b>Tiquisio</b>	121	0	5,288
<b>Rio Viejo</b>	151	0	1,688
<b>Morales</b>	199	2	2,245
<b>Yondo</b>	207	44	7,748
<b>Simiti</b>	1,024	20	1,309
<b>San Pablo</b>	1,292	36	6,853
<b>Cantagallo</b>	1,412	6	2,996
<b>Santa Rosa</b>	1,642	4	2,495

\* Average area 1999-2001 (hectares).

\*\* Deliberately killed by paramilitaries (out of combat) between 1999 and 2001.

\*\*\* People who fled their homes because of violence between 1999 and 2001.

Insofar as paramilitaries used violence to weaken the insurgency, they helped the state in reducing the risks for companies, merchants, agriculturalists and cattle ranchers in the region and defused a threat to the government's authority, making possible the peaceful running of local elections and reducing the chances of terrorist operations such as the kidnapping of a domestic flight in 1999. What is more, they did it at a fraction of its actual cost, because they funded their operations with resources obtained from the drug business.<sup>18</sup> Thus, it was their criminal nature and their ability to use unlawful methods of warfare and criminal forms of funding that made their assistance so valuable in the effort to fight the insurgency and enable the Colombian state to increase control over the region. Paradoxically, they were violent precisely because they were more than just criminals, but it was their criminal nature that made them most valuable in crushing the insurgency.<sup>19</sup>

Regarding the role of civilians, the paper shows how they were sometimes caught in the crossfire and, more often, deliberately targeted by the armed organisations that harassed them, killed them or forced them to leave their homes to gain military advantage. But there was more to their role than being victims: local politicians and peasant organisations developed 'alliances' (Kalyvas 2003) with insurgents and paramilitaries, reaching compromises that enabled them to better position themselves in the local, and even national, political arenas. Thanks to massive social mobilisation, social organisations gained visibility and legitimacy as representatives of their constituencies to a degree that would not have been possible without the pressure exerted by armed organisations on the population.

Therefore, focusing on accusing collaborators as the decisive role of civilians in civil wars, and characterising their behaviour as individualistic and opportunistic as the concept of 'malicious denunciation' implies (Kalyvas 2006), misrepresents the relation between them and armed organisations. Indeed, by contrast with the alliances described by Kalyvas (2006), the arrangements seen in South Bolivar went well beyond the sphere of the individual,

<sup>18</sup> According to Castano, one of the top paramilitary cadres during the late 1990s, the protection money paid by cattle ranchers and others was not insufficient to cover the costs of operation of these organisations (Aranguren 2001: 253).

<sup>19</sup> As Naylor (2002: 55) pointed out 'mature criminality is compatible with the continued existence of the formal state and can even be employed to defend it'.

atomistic interests of civilians and, therefore, could not lead to a privatisation of violence. They involved the aggregation of interests of a variety of local actors, manifested in the episodes of social and political mobilisation described in this paper.

In conclusion, this paper supports the notion that, in contexts of irregular war, civilians and armed organisations may co-operate and provide support to each other, in ways that reflect the diverse interests of specific social groups and elites as well as the political and territorial ambitions of the warring parties. In South Bolivar, these ‘alliances’ involved peasant organisations and local elites, and their shape and purpose evolved in response to the challenges and opportunities created by public policy making and the changing patterns of territorial control at the local and regional level. Furthermore, the paper shows that the involvement of armed organisations in criminal activities, such as the drug business, does not make them less willing or able to engage in deals with politicians, political parties and social organisations. For this reason, despite the increasing convergence between armed conflict and organised crime, the political dimensions of the Colombian conflict during the late 1900s and early 2000s should not be underestimated.

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