

1997

COLOMBIA: THE HERESY OF THE MANICHEANS

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Alongside the emergence of a new social sector arising from the drug economy in Colombia, has been an increase in the use of violence against those State officials most committed to applying justice. In effect, judges and magistrates, police, high-ranking functionaries and innocent bystanders have been assassinated, as drug traffickers attempt to force the State to reverse its position allowing for extradition to the US of arrested drug traffickers. This wave of violence, however, did not constitute the greatest cost that Colombian society has paid in terms of the effects of the emergence of drug trafficking on the country's socio-economic structure.

The most important social, political, and economic effects of drug trafficking in Colombia have been the impact of new social groups on the transformation of the agrarian structure, acquiring more than three million hectares of prime lands; their role in financing the dirty counterinsurgency war; their potential influence in accelerating the State's tendencies to privatize repressive forces, and their impact on the phenomenon of impunity, feeding into the void of institutionality and State legitimacy in Colombia.

Nevertheless, drug trafficking is not, nor has it ever been, the imported «disease» attacking the supposedly healthy body of Colombian society. Instead, it is a product of the same society, and has fed into the existing conditions that brought about gangster capitalism ^{3/4} the extended corruption and impunity. Drug trafficking has shaped the irrational nature of the structures that sustain the current model of development, above all in the countryside, as well as increasing the speculative behavior of the finance sector, creating fictitious imports, the growth of contraband trade, and in general contributing to a burgeoning underground economy.

Paradoxically, the ineffectiveness of the anti-drug policies that the US has pressed for in Colombia is due to the fact that the policies are directed against «the drugs» themselves and not at changing the socio-economic and political conditions, and the very structure of the justice system in the country, all of which make possible the consolidation of an illegal economy.

One of the characteristics of drug-trafficking in Colombia has been its role in strengthening counterinsurgency strategies, which includes money-laundering land investments in areas of strong social tensions, or in regions under guerrilla control.

The consolidation of local powers stemming from these investments, and the creation of new paramilitary groups ³/₄ legitimized by a 1968 law that empowered the police and the army to arm civilians in order to defend national interests (1) ³/₄ served to maintain political and social order in much of the countryside. By 1987, according to then-Minister of Government César Gaviria, there were 146 self-defense groups and paramilitary organizations operating in the country. (2)

Privatizing repression.

In the face of charges of state responsibility either --direct or indirect-- in nearly every reported massacre, new legislation has been approved aimed at eliminating the legal basis for such acts. Nevertheless, these changes have not led to the dismantling of private organized groups involved in violence.

In regions such as Magdalena Medio, Córdoba, Cesar, Sucre, violent groups continue operating in these gray areas as quasi-institutional yet illegal organizations. In other areas of conflict, especially in Antioquia in the heart of the coffee-growing region, and in El Meta, new «Security Cooperatives» (known as Convivir) were created, which have institutional backing and political support from the most violent sectors of society.

In theory, a dividing line exists between Convivir and the paramilitary groups, but their fields of action overlap. In Antioquia, which has 124 municipalities, there are Convivir groups in 56. At the same time, 48 of these form part of the 88 townships in which drug traffickers have bought lands. The result: a reconcentration of lands (counter-agrarian reform) with security guarantees.

The Convivir groups are present in areas of the country that will be affected by mega-projects such as: a high-speed railway that will connect the Uraba region with the central part of the country;

egion as Colombia enters the 21st century. (3)

The pragmatism and functionality behind this paramilitary model --sustained in large part by drug traffickers who are in the process of legalizing and legitimizing their operations, and who are tolerated by State security agencies-- contrasts with the diplomatic posturing of the Colombian government before the international community regarding the need to strengthen the role of the military in the war against drugs in Colombia.

The Armed Forces sets its sights on the south.

After maintaining themselves relatively distant from the State's efforts at combating the different facets of the illegal drug economy in Colombia, the armed forces recently made the decision to take on an important role in the anti-drug fight. At the beginning of the 1990s, a report by the US Congress

described the Colombian armed forces' lack of commitment in combating drug traffickers, a situation that contrasted sharply with the fact that the institution was the principle recipient of US assistance (4).

At the time, Colombia was considered a key country in the war on drugs, with efforts above all in the hands of the Anti-Narcotics Police. In the US report, investigators stated that US anti-drug assistance was being diverted toward counterinsurgency, charges that were denied by the military leadership, who argued that the guerrillas and the drug traffickers were in fact working together. At the time, however, the army's claims had little impact internationally or domestically.

Reasons abounded to discard the army's argument:

In the first place, the focus of the terrorist actions of the drug trafficking organizations was against the State, as a means of blocking efforts to extradite to the US captured members of their crime groups.

As a result, the war between drug lords and the State was above all carried out in urban areas (Medellin, Bogotá, Cali, etc.), which were the operating areas for the principal drug trafficking organizations. This fact contributed to highlight the police role in the war, at least until the Joint Special Command or the «Search Bloc» were created, which included the participation of the armed forces.

Thirdly, even though in real terms Colombia had begun to be seen in the 1990s as a country with a significant problem of illicit drug cultivation, this fact had not really become clear before the public opinion or before State authorities. Nor was it considered an important matter in the bilateral anti-drug agenda with Washington.

Fourth, the early short-lived relation between the guerrillas and the drug traffickers was rapidly dissolved, a situation made clear later on with the openly visceral anti-communist stance expressed by drug capos such as Rodríguez Gacha or Fidel Castaño.

At the time, reports were made public that the army had allowed the financing of paramilitary groups with drug trafficking funds, corroborated by the fact that these groups received increased resources, logistical support, with the arrival of military instructors, and the participation of high-level military leaders -- either directly or indirectly.

This was the same period in which the country experienced a wave of massacres --between 1987 and 1990-- committed with absolute impunity and without response on the part of State security agencies.

All of these circumstances tended to weaken the argument of a «narco-guerrilla» that had begun surfacing during that same period. US ambassador in Bogotá, Lewis Tambs, was among those publicly discussing the

alleged link between the guerrillas and the drug traffickers.

Today, the decision of the military to get fully involved in the fight against drugs is being justified by resurrecting the decade-old concept linking drugs and insurgency. The argument that the military presents can be reduced to the following considerations:

«The phenomenon of the narco-guerrillas is the result of collaboration between the guerrilla organizations and the narcotraffickers, in an alliance that in practice became a strategy to subvert order and further particular illicit interests, while mutually guaranteeing their survival.»
(5)

Major Rey Navas argues that the guerrillas established a regional influence for the guerrillas based on their involvement in the illegal drug economy. In conclusion, he points out: «the FARC (Colombian Armed Revolutionary Forces) dedicate 37 fronts, some 2,800 men (half of their force) to drug trafficking activities, and the ELN dedicates seven fronts and 500 men (20% of their strength)».

Rey Navas' analysis of the problem of illicit drug production is based on an analysis of the FARC's financial strength, more so than on an examination of the issue, in the context of the international flow of illegal drugs: «...the FARC derive from this activity financial resources far greater than those available from kidnapping, extortion or war tax. This makes it unlikely that they would be willing to abandon it, when the State's impotence in responding it is so evident. For that reason, the State will have to come up with more severe laws penalizing drug trafficking and assuring the effective administration of justice so that impunity is eradicated».

Rey Navas considers that the guerrillas' involvement in drug trafficking has improved the insurgents situation and hurt the efforts of the Colombian army. He points to several factors to explain why: the State's absence from the isolated regions in which illicit drug cultivation is favored over legitimate businesses such as cattle ranching and farming; the impact of drug income on strengthening the guerrillas both logistically and in terms of membership; the illicit drug trade increasing the «corrupting» capacity of the guerrillas; and finally, «the national and international protection (for the guerrillas) by characterizing them as 'belligerent groups' struggling for political causes in an internal conflict, allows the narco-guerrillas to make use of their alleged political condition to receive support needed for their struggle».(6)

In military terms, the ties between the guerrillas and the illegal drug economy would appear to favor the insurgents logistically: «the combination of the armed struggle with narco-trafficking activities, to a certain degree strengthens the guerrilla units, since their commitment to work with illicit drugs provides them greater freedom, increased funds, and at the

same time allows them greater freedom of movement in their distinct fronts. This can be corroborated by the fact that the units based in coca and poppy growing regions tend to be the 'strongest' both quantitatively and qualitatively». (7)

Nevertheless, according to the military, in the long run the participation of the guerrillas in the drug economy will progressively undermine their vocation for struggle, replacing it with corruption from within. «The involvement of the subversives in drug trafficking, will lead to internal battles over the control and possession of the large quantities of money involved, and could even lead to a war between the terrorists and the drug traffickers. The postulates of the narco-subversives seeking to defend social justice and overcome the social inequalities lose their validity and the models of state socialism that had inspired them have fallen from grace. This social balance has never been achieved, not even in countries where revolutionary movements were more fully developed, such as in the case of El Salvador». (8)

According to General Bedoya: «we have forgotten that for almost two decades, a vast and complex network of organized mafias has been operating in our countryside. We have called them everything from subversives, to guerrillas, to insurgency. In reality they are disguised gangsters and sometimes they are undisguised. They have based their operations in the systematic development of drug trafficking in all of its modalities, and they have become rich. They survived the war of the cartels against the cartels, the war of the State against the cartels, that of the whole world against the cartels, and now they are practically the only and the most powerful of all». (9)

On the other hand, the author of the book, *El Cartel de las FARC*, has another definition of the phenomenon of narco-guerrilla: «From logical suppositions we have moved to documentary evidence, during a historic period in which neither ideology nor geography is a critical issue in modern wars. The political leadership of the FARC understood the overwhelming economic potential for destabilizing the institutional order in Colombia, by means of a well-equipped guerrilla force with a capacity for terrorism, that systematically attacks the legal order».

The contradictions in the military's approach toward controlling the country are worth noting: the very paramilitary model that provided short-term control in important regions, at the same time served to undermine the institutional legitimacy of the State, due to repressiveness and human rights violations in those areas originally controlled by land-holding drug dealers, now in the process of legalizing their stakes. The security forces' strategy of unleashing a «war on drugs» has focused on another region: the departments in which illicit planting is taking place -- the Amazon region, especially Guaviare, Caqueta y Putumayo.

The development of the Colombian Amazon was heavily influenced by the

establishment of agrarian colonies from the 1950s, which grew as large numbers of campesinos were forcibly displaced toward the southern forests by the consolidation of large-scale farms in other parts of the country. Forgotten by the State and unable to survive on traditional crops, the campesinos in this region found that the cultivation of coca was the only means of survival, both profitable and easy to sell. According to residents of these regions, in the early 1990s the Colombian coca-producing area reached nearly 150,000 hectares, with 300,000 persons directly dependant on the crop for their income.

These regions have been under the control of guerrilla groups that obtain important income from «taxes» they collect from medium- and large-scale growers, from those involved in processing and selling the drug, and above all from those running the refining laboratories and the clandestine landing strips for shipping the cocaine. These funds are used to strengthen the guerrillas' logistic and communications capacity.

In this sense, the army perceives the small-scale coca grower as a direct collaborator of the guerrillas. This perception has led the army in its war on the coca crop, to take direct actions against the campesinos, based on the thesis of the «narco-guerrillas».

As a consequence, since mid 1996 in the Guaviare area, there has been an increase in human rights violations, as security forces agencies burn campesinos' homes, destroying their belongings, and threatening them with violent eviction from the region.

In effect, these regions have been especially hurt by the creation of decrees 900 and 1717 in 1996, which created the Special Zones of Public Order, placing these areas under the direct control of the State security forces.

This situation led to the mobilization of more than 200,000 colonists and campesinos in August 1996, denouncing the abuses suffered by the campesinos and protesting the government's decision to eradicate the only product that has generated profits for the residents of these areas. Today, the conflict in the region continues.

Notes

- 1) See «El fenómeno paramilitar en Colombia: una visión por regiones» (unpublished manuscript) 1997.
- 2) Massacres were increased as a means of terror in numerous areas, such as Trujillo, Segovia, La Rochela, La Negra, El Tomate, Punta Coquitos, Honduras, etc. Some of the massacres there were more than 100 persons killed.
- 3) See the magazine Alternativa No. 5, Nov. 1996.
- 4) See the US General Accounting Office report on Colombia, 1991.
- 5) Major Javier Enrique Rey Navas, «La narcoguerrilla una grave amenaza

para Colombia y el mundo» in Revista de las Fuerzas Armadas vol.LI, No. 160, July-September 1996.

6) Ibid, pages 40-41.

7) Col. Fernando Millan Pérez and Col. Eduardo Santos Quiñones, «La guerrilla en Colombia, una negación a la ideología y la política» en Revista de las Fuerzas Armadas Vol. LI, No. 160, July-September, 1996.

8) Ibid, page 30.

9) Prologue to Major Luis Alberto Villamarin's book, «El Cartel de las FARC», Ediciones El Faraón, June 1996
