

The crisis of Colombia's state

By Jenny Pearce,
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The editor-in-chief of the Colombian weekly, *Semana*, is driven around in an armoured car with several bodyguards. *Semana* is a key source of some extraordinary political revelations over the last few months in a country with extraordinary politics. At the same time, it should be said that the "news" about connections between paramilitary groups and politicians in Colombia - which on 14 May 2007 led to the [arrest](#) [1] on criminal conspiracy charges of twenty politicians and business leaders, including five congressmen, almost all political allies of Colombia's president, Álvaro Uribe - only confirms what many observers have known for a long time.

In 2005, I visited Sincelejo in the northern department of Sucre, and found a town in the grip of fear. Locals talked about a new form of politics: *narcoparamilipolismo* (rule by an alliance of paramilitary, politicians and drug-traffickers). Nearby in San Onofre, they were digging up the remains of some 500 victims of the local paramilitary boss known as [Cadena](#) [2] (Chain), whose henchman had just spilt the beans on a mass grave on El Palmar farm. It was from here that a group of paramilitary set off on 17 January 2001 to massacre twenty-seven peasants in El Chengue village.

Sincelejo was a chilling place, despite the fact that the paramilitary were at the time supposedly demobilising in Santa Fe de Ralito. Yet it had once been the centre of vibrant civic and peasant movements. Many of these social leaders are now dead; "there is no civil society here", one surviving NGO activist lamented.

War and politics intertwined

The wave of exposures is politically of great significance. Colombia's attorney-general has publicly stated that they are more serious than the most severe political crisis of Colombia's recent history, unofficially known as the "8,000 process", when [Ernesto Samper](#) [5] was investigated for the partial funding of his presidential electoral campaign of 1994 with drugs-cartel money. The *Washington Post* is now talking about "[Paragate](#) [6]". The speculation is whether President Álvaro Uribe - in his second term of office and despite the scandal, while being buoyed by a 72% approval rating in the four main cities of the country - will manage to distance himself from the scandal, even though most of the politicians involved are his supporters.

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But the questions at stake are not so conjunctural. Colombian politics are a labyrinthine world. The thread of continuity is the intransigent resistance to democratising and pluralising political change and socio-economic reform on the part of key sectors of the Colombian elite. To them, supping with the devil of private armed groups and drugs mafias has been an acceptable cost

for the pacification of the country and its insertion into global economic markets. At stake are big issues that affect the lives of millions of Colombians: what kind of peace is being created in [Colombia](#) [7], what kind of democracy, and what kind of economic development - and for whom?

The revelations began, following the impounding in 2006 of the computer of the paramilitary leader known as "Jorge 40". The computer revealed in great detail the formal agreement made in 2001 between northern regional and local political elites and the paramilitary, now known as the "Ralito accord". Following judicial investigations, nine congressmen and a provincial governor, all supporters of President Álvaro Uribe from the Atlantic coast region of the country were in prison even before the 14 May arrests. And the net is extending further. Detailed research conducted by the NGO [Nuevo Arco Iris](#) [8], the Javeriana University and others found that at least 30% of the present congress won their seats through illegitimate deals with the paramilitary and no less than sixty congressional representatives and a good number of governors, mayors and councillors might end up in prison.

In January 2007, Salvatore Mancuso was the first senior paramilitary leader to voluntarily confess to kidnappings and mass murder; although he confessed to only a fraction of his crimes and named only deceased collaborators, amongst them was the head of the army's fourth brigade. In February 2007, [Jorge Noguera](#) [9], the former head of the intelligence service (DAS) and a direct presidential appointment, was arrested, accused of allowing the paramilitary to [penetrate](#) [10] the state service. Noguera brought the scandal closer to the president, who had offered him a diplomatic post in Milan as the evidence mounted against him. Then, on 19 February, Uribe's foreign secretary María Consuelo Araújo [resigned](#) [11]. Her brother, Álvaro Araújo, is one of the imprisoned senators, her father is on trial for kidnapping and murdering indigenous leaders, and her cousin is accused of winning the governorship of Cesar thanks to his pact with the paramilitary.

Clausewitz's famous dictum about war as the continuation of politics by other means appears to have a real resonance in Colombia. Yet the Bogotá government's closest foreign friends - the British government and diplomatic corps foremost among them - continue to regard Colombia as a beleaguered democracy. They view the Colombian state as weak, and Álvaro Uribe as successful in his efforts to strengthen it against armed militias and drug-traffickers who are seeking to [undermine](#) [12] it.

This analysis reflects the remarkable sense of international class solidarity and deeply conservative political lens through which Britain in particular sees and reads Colombia's history and prospects. This ideological bias has prevented Bogotá's allies from recognising the full extent over the last two decades or more of the appalling brutality against peasants, social activists and opposition forces in Colombia in the name of preserving the status quo.

War and politics are deeply intertwined in Colombian history as well as contemporary events. Since independence in the early 19th century, Colombia's political elites have fought for their

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power militarily as well as electorally. They have dragged the Colombian people into their partisan battles for state power and bounty and bequeathed a legacy of violence that is embedded [13] and reproduced through the generations.

Unlike many other parts of Latin America, the armed forces in Colombia [14] were kept subservient to the political elites, a fact which has proved important for the country's reputation to this day. The civilian character of government led observers to ignore the abuses committed by the armed forces against the population when they came up against an insurgent threat in the 1960s and 1970s which they could not deal with militarily. This threat emerged out of the gross social and economic injustices in the country and the political exclusion maintained by traditional political elites. The armed groups were articulated through leftist ideological frameworks in the cold war and sympathy for them was significant into the 1980s even amongst sectors of the intellectual and professional middle class. However, it diminished greatly as the cold war ended and when those armed groups which did not negotiate in the early 1990s built armies without clear ideologies and proved capable of committing terrible abuses of their own.

In the meantime, the landowners and business elites who had been victims of guerrilla "taxation" systems had begun to fight back. The first incarnation of the paramilitary appeared in the early 1980s, funded by the millions of dollars from the drugs trade accumulated by a new criminal capitalist class who shared the political interests of the legal capitalist class and sought the same social status. These death-squads eliminated social activists and other "undesirables" with the connivance of members of the armed forces and powerful landowners.

The rise of the paramilitaries

The importance of self-defence groups acting as adjuncts to the state-security forces has a history in Colombia. Cattle-ranching families are used to firing guns for their defence against rustlers, and this principle has extended to other threats such as the guerrillas. It was Álvaro Uribe himself, a man who combines the disposition of cattle-rancher and bureaucrat, and who in the early 1990s when governor of Antioquia created the *Convivir* (security cooperatives). Uribe's father had been killed by the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army / Farc [15]), and his hatred of the group is understandable. However, the Farc is only one of many sources of outrage in Colombia, and most observers would argue that the force created to defeat it has ended up committing much worse atrocities.

Evidence from interviews with Salvatore Mancuso [16] has revealed how the paramilitary army which came to be known as the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia / AUC), recruited from the *Convivir* cooperatives, even though their right to bear arms and offer security was removed in 1994 as a result of the abuses committed. Mancuso had used the cooperatives while they were legal to build up the force which Vicente Castano, brother of future AUC leader Carlos, was building illegally. The AUC emerged in 1997-98 and had become an aggressive and fully-fledged irregular army by 1999. It went on to severely weaken the guerrillas in the north of the country during the first Uribe presidency. Although hotly denied by the government, most human-rights observers consistently noted the collusion of regional armed forces units in lifting army blockades, for instance, at key moments when massacres were committed.

The Farc and (especially) the ELN guerrillas lost control of most of the north through the paramilitary offensive, though at a terrible cost in human life and livelihoods. An estimated 3 million people from all parts of the country have been displaced [17] in the course of Colombia's insurgency and particularly counterinsurgency war - the highest number today outside of Sudan. However, President Uribe has been able to claim success for his "democratic security" policy.

The middle class were once again able to travel without fear of kidnap between the main cities of the country.

The paramilitary demobilisation in 2005 coincided with a decline in the homicide statistics. According to the human-rights and international-humanitarian law office of the vice-presidency, there were 12,580 murders in Colombia from January-September 2006 (7% fewer than for the same period in 2005) and "only" 193 massacres in 2006 compared to 252 the previous year (although the number of murdered trade unionists rose from fourteen to twenty-five). In the meantime, United States military aid was channelled [18] to the Colombian army to improve its fighting capacity and human-rights record, so that when it became important to deactivate the paramilitary, the army would be sufficiently robust to take on the remnants of the Farc.

However, the defeat of the Farc was not the only objective of the paramilitary and their political allies, although it probably was the objective of the president. Personal enrichment was clearly another aim. Carlos Castano [19] revealed that 70% of their funding came from drug-trafficking and with the expropriation of peasant lands and the proceeds of extortions of all kinds, they are rich men. But the study by Nuevo Arco Iris and partner institutions reveals a third aim: to negotiate their reinsertion into civilian life with the state, so that they can enjoy their gains after a minimum period of incarceration. In this they needed the political support of the country's traditional landowners and politicians, deeply hostile to the modernisation tendencies of other sectors of the elite which had begun with the new constitution of 1991.

The study correlates the expansion [20] of the paramilitary with new political movements in the regions and shows that a new political map had begun to emerge in the 2002 elections, consolidated by 2006, which was based on paramilitary-funded congressional candidates who all backed the Uribe presidency. The outcome was the much criticised "justice-and-peace law" of 2005 which aimed to facilitate the paramilitary demobilisation with virtual impunity for the crimes committed. A fourth objective of the paramilitary has recently become clear: to participate politically. From their prison in Itagui, paramilitary bosses have written to the president demanding to be allowed to take part in the 2007 elections.

Álvaro Uribe: reputation and reality

Álvaro Uribe is known for his attention to detail, his hard work and inability to delegate. It is inconceivable that he is not aware of the relationship between the paramilitary and his key supporters in congress. But he had also been supported in 2002 by another wing of the elite, followers of former Liberal Party president Cesar Gaviria and author of the 1991 constitution [21]. This support had helped Uribe rise from relative obscurity to the presidency. But it was lost over the justice and peace law and Gaviria's growing awareness of the alliance between the regional politicians and the paramilitary which lay behind it.

In any case, the Uribista ranks could not guarantee the full version of the law. It is a tribute to the strength rather than weakness of some of Colombia's institutions - notably those not controlled by the executive, such as the constitutional court and supreme court - that the deal of impunity sought by the paramilitary was challenged and diluted. The demobilised paramilitary leaders realised that their agreement with the government would not be fully honoured. Gradually the facts began to emerge of why and how it had been reached.

The question is not whether Uribe himself was directly involved in the paramilitary-politician deals. As head of the government, he has stood by and sacrificed the moral integrity of the state by implicitly sanctioning deals, which would have allowed pathological serial killers and drug-traffickers to serve minimal sentences before rejoining society and enjoying their spoils of war.

In his single obsessive objective of defeating the Farc, it may never be known whether he personally supped with the devil: but he was the ghost at the banquet.

Uribe has been helped by the international support he managed to win, using the argument encountered above that the Colombian state is too weak to deal with the threat of terrorism. The current crisis shows that this state has some strong institutions - but they do not act throughout its territory. The establishment of the rule of law has never been a priority of the governing elite of Colombia. The latest exposure of atrocities has focused on the north of the country, but they are increasingly touching on other areas such as the eastern plains, especially the provinces of Casanare and Meta.

I was also in the town of Buga in the Valle del Cauca in southern Colombia in 2005. Here, the drugs cartels are in total control; the town is their playground. Abuse of all kind is rampant, and stands out in the treatment of the cartel's women, the "flesh of the traffickers" as they are known. In other areas of the south, the Farc remains the *de facto* power despite Uribe's resolute commitment to their defeat. In their dispute over "drug- corridors" with the paramilitaries they terrorise the indigenous communities in their path.

The "pacification" of northern regions of the country through the paramilitary has won Uribe a reputation as the man who will bring security to the country's citizens. It is a very tarnished and temporary security, although one that long-suffering Colombians still desperately hang onto. The human cost of this "security" is now emerging. As a corollary to the deal with the paramilitary and under great pressure from the international community, Uribe set up a commission to look at the reparations to victims of the paramilitary.

Harrowing tales have begun to emerge of rape, torture and murder. This may be the beginnings of another narrative of the counterinsurgency war if witnesses can be protected (at least three are known to have been murdered already for giving testimony). At present the attitude of many victims is similar to that of Maria Helena of Ituango, Antioquia, who recounted her story to investigators from the public-prosecutor's office. She described how at the age of 15 she was raped for over a week by seven members of the paramilitary despite being eight months pregnant and while her boyfriend was tied to a tree. She asked: "what good will it do for me to have told you all of this?"

A state in question

The problem is that Uribe's "security" is not underpinned by the rule of law. The paramilitary devil now rides again, but in new guises [22]. Dozens of new groups have reformed out of previously demobilised lower-level commanders. Just as the dismantling of the Medellin and Cali cartels led to the proliferation of competing drugs bosses, so have the paramilitary splintered. They are now fighting in different regions of the country for control of criminal pickings alongside other mafias. At the local and even micro level, Colombia is rife with multiple illicit intrigues [23] which in addition to drugs-traffickers and paramilitary include local politicians, corrupt public servants and members of the state-"security" apparatus.

Whoever takes control of the territory exacts "taxes" from ordinary people in return for an offer to provide "security", the most undemocratic kind imaginable. A combination of factors - high unemployment, young people with no life but violence, ongoing global demand for Colombia's cocaine and an impoverished peasantry willing to supply it - deepen the social and economic crisis at the local level and threaten to engulf the national political one.

A negotiated end to the war would be only one step forward, but a vitally important one, in Colombia's painful history. The possibility of taking it, however, has now become incredibly

complex, as bilateral deals with armed groups (such as the present one under negotiation with the ELN) generates precedents which others would seek to replicate or improve on.

As the majority of Colombians make no distinctions [24] between armed groups, equivalence of treatment becomes an issue of great political significance. Would the Farc accept that the abuses it has committed cannot go unpunished and that its own conservative and authoritarian politics cannot serve as a basis for a modern state any more than that of the paramilitary? Would the reinsertion into political life of Farc commanders be any more acceptable than that of paramilitary commanders?

On the other side, would the military and civilian rightwing accept far-reaching land and other economic reforms? These will be essential if the Farc is to give up its claims to state power, meet the demands of its social base in neglected and impoverished peasant communities, and provide livelihoods for a demobilised insurgency. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of the sustained demobilisation of any of Colombia's armies [25] until a peace-driven economic policy is designed and implemented.

These complexities hamper the construction of a national peace accord. Such an accord would need to build sufficient political authority to override the competing claims of armed groups where they compromise the path to peace. The state would also have to rise above the particular interests of the country's civilian elites and rally Colombia's citizens around a project to construct the moral integrity of the state and its institutions. It would need to enlist the forces for peace and democracy which have also proliferated over the last two decades, constituting a movement for peace which has mobilised millions at different points in time.

Courageous and creative organisations of women and young people, human-rights workers, trade unionists and environmental activists risk their lives everyday to build the conditions for Colombians to live without violence. President Uribe has made no secret of his disdain for these people, but they are the active agency for building the moral authority of the Colombian state which has been so deeply compromised under his presidency.

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[4] <http://www.rienner.com/viewbook.cfm?BOOKID=1176&search=pearce>

[5] <http://www.bartleby.com/65/sm/SmprPzno.html>

[6] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/17/AR2007041702378.html>

[7] http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?action=conflict_search&l=1&t=1&c_country=29#map

[8] <http://www.nuevoarcoiris.org.co/>

[9] <http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/blog/archives/000242.htm>

[10] <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0312/p04s01-woam.html>

[11] <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0221/p04s01-woam.html>

[12] <http://www.latinamericabureau.org/?lid=2139>

[13] <http://hrw.org/englishwr2k7/docs/2007/01/11/colomb14884.htm>

[14] <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900LargeMaps/SKAR-64GDRC?OpenDocument>

[15] <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/farc.htm>

[16] <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/N11483694.htm>

- [17] <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/RMOI-6Z5SA8?OpenDocument&rc=2&emid=ACOS-635NUU>
- [18] http://www.cfr.org/publication/12955/colombias_parapolitics.html
- [19] <http://www.crimesofwar.org/colombia-mag/career.html>
- [20] <http://www.gwu.edu/%7Eensarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB166/index.htm>
- [21] <http://jurist.law.pitt.edu/world/colombia.htm>
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