

# Colombia: a paradoxical state

Dirk Kruijt & Kees Koonings  
Utrecht University

Colombia is a paradoxical state, one of stable instability and unstable stability. The spheres of stability and instability, equally persistent, are linked to the country's recent economic, social and institutional history. The explanation for this contradictory situation lies in the fact that functioning democratic institutions regulate a large part of the country's territory while, at the same time, Colombia is the world's largest cocaine producer and exporter and suffers from the consequences of an armed guerrilla conflict which has been going on for sixty years. There are no significant external security threats, military or otherwise. However, internal violence has seen thousands of people lose their lives and between 1.9 million and 3 million people have been displaced in the last ten years. Emigration levels have risen sharply; according to the UN's (2007) calculations, approximately 3.6 million Colombians have left the country.

Yet in terms of public institutions and organisations at the local level in most of its cities, the institutional life of the country is solid. The same can be said of its civil society and the media. The public sector in Colombia is generally efficient and competent. Some of its universities are amongst the best in the hemisphere. From the beginning of the current decade, local governments in places like Bogotá, Medellín, Cali and Bucaramanga have made notable improvements in terms of infrastructure, public transport, education, health and security. The subordination of state forces to civil authority is firmly established and is accepted without question. Colombia's army does not see itself as a political player, in spite of the *de facto* autonomy which it enjoyed in the past in areas where the conflict is rife. The judiciary has been able to strengthen its independence and effectiveness in recent years. Colombia has pioneered the introduction of special legislation tailored to the needs of indigenous ethnic groups within its general framework of jurisprudence and legal practice. The current constitution, which dates from 1991, saw the strengthening of the judiciary and the Public Ministry (Ministerio Público). A whole range of civil, social and cultural rights have been ratified, and mechanisms have been established for direct access by ordinary citizens to ordinary justice.

## Economy and society

In macroeconomic terms, Colombia stands out as a stable country. Only between 1999 and 2001 did the country suffer serious recession. Since 2002, however, with the arrival of the Uribe administration, economic policy, with perhaps the exception of fiscal policy has been stable and is considered sound by the international financial community. There are no major problems with balance of payments, foreign debt, exchange rates or inflation. The principal institutions charged with monetary and economic policy (Banco de la República, Departamento Nacional de Planeación - National Planning Department and The Exchequer) are prestigious, competent and generally free of political meddling.

In socio-cultural terms, a modern, urban, and stable middle class has consolidated itself in Colombia. This segment of society aspires to form part of what might be called trans-Atlantic modernity, based on a global set of values and lifestyle. This urban middle class, estimated

at twenty percent of the overall population and found mainly in the large cities, is the backbone of consumerism and public opinion in the country. However, despite the efforts of the present government, its social programmes are incapable of reversing the drastic increase in poverty and inequality caused by the recession of 1999-2001. The Gini index, which charts the distribution of wealth, was at a high point of 0,584 in 2003/2005, having risen steadily since the end of the nineties. In 2006, 45 percent of the population was classified as poor and 12 percent as being destitute (2007 figures from CEPAL). The macro-economic recovery from 2001 has not seen a similar improvement in creating stable employment. According to figures from DANE (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística, or the National Administrative Department of Statistics), casual labour had risen from a total of 54 percent, as a proportion of the workforce in 1992, to 61 percent in 2002, falling back slightly to 59 percent in 2005.

## Protagonists in the armed conflict

### *The state forces*

The state forces in Colombia are made up of almost 300,000 members of the armed forces and 130.000 police officers and auxiliary back-up. Their combined number is second only to Brazil, which has almost five times the population and eight times the land mass of Colombia. In terms of its functioning, the military depends to a large extent on intelligence provided by the United States, a situation also common to Argentina, Bolivia and Peru. The army's priority is still to carry out counter-insurgency operations, recently renamed "counter-terrorism operations", against "internal enemies"; anti-narcotics activities are another military priority, a task which other Latin American countries see as principally a matter for the police. In general, it is the army which offers leadership in the control of the police and in overseeing the implementation of public security measures. In the past, members of the armed forces resorted to tacitly delegating the most difficult parts of certain counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations to whatever paramilitary force was active in each area.

It is only recently that the police force has had a presence in all of Colombia's 1,911 municipalities. Prior to 2005, there were 300 municipalities which lacked any police presence at all. However, in the regions where the conflict is most acutely felt, the police presence is more symbolic than anything else, and in general the police keep a low profile in comparison to other armed groups. According to European Union contacts, tensions go beyond those felt between the police and the army. There are frictions in the police force itself, between its departments; the intelligence department refuses to cooperate with the criminal investigation department, or with customs and excise.

### *The insurgents*

The guerilla organisations active in Colombia have been present since the time known as "The Violence" (1947-1958), when intense confrontations took place between armed groups under the liberal and conservative banners. In the Seventies and Eighties, four different guerrilla groups existed; an agreement was negotiated with two of them, allowing for them to be rehabilitated into the democratic process. At present, only the FARC (the larger group) and the ELN (the smaller group) still resort to violence. According to military estimates, in the summer of 2007 there were around 3,200 ELN combatants and militants and 3,400 sympathisers, and at least 7,500 FARC combatants active on its various fronts. At the beginning of the Eighties, the majority of the guerilla cells collected a "war tax" from cocaine producers and traffickers in "their" areas of influence. Later on, many FARC fronts (local military-political formations)

offered protection and incorporated cocaine cultivation into their military-financial operations. The ELN relies on the ransom money obtained from kidnappings of members of the economic elite - later businessmen selected at random and passengers on buses - and the "war tax" levied on local business for its finances. Both the ELN and FARC's objectives reflect the left-wing ideology of armed groups active in Latin America from the 1960s through until the 1980s. Twenty-five years later and much has changed in Latin America, yet the ideological language of the guerrillas resembles that of Albania before the fall of the Berlin wall. However, the simple presence and activity of these groups amounts to the continuation of the armed struggle. And their negotiating strength lies in the following fact: they represent a formidable source of destabilisation.

### *Paramilitary Forces*

On repeated occasions, the Colombian government authorised the creation of regional, self-defense organisations (paramilitary groups) to carry out counter-insurgency activities. In 1981, drug cartels in Cali and Medellín formed paramilitary units to prevent the kidnapping and extortion of their own members. Several high-ranking (ex) army officers joined this initiative. Other rural businessmen soon followed suit, leading to groups of regional private armies and *sicarios* (professional hit-men), for the most part in the north and the west of the country. These paramilitary groups offered protection against the local guerrilla groups and soon established themselves as a counter-insurgency alternative, with or without the consent of the armed forces in the region. They gradually established "clean zones" where they saw that the law was enforced by means of violence, extortion and intimidation.

In 1997, these regional forces joined together to create the AUC (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia - United Colombian Self-Defense), a confederation of paramilitary groups. The old alliances between the drug cartels and paramilitary leaders soon solidified into unified entities. The higher echelons of the paramilitary groups were soon moving into "legitimate" business: they acquired real estate in the countryside and financed local and regional political campaigns for "obedient" politicians, a phenomenon known as "para-politics". In 2004, through the intervention of two regional bishops, the national government reached an agreement with the AUC, based on disarmament, rehabilitation into political life and a non-extradition guarantee vis-a-vis the USA. The agreement was reached under the auspices of the new Justice and Peace Bill. However, the Fiscal General is still obliged to pursue murderers or the perpetrators of other terrible crimes, and the bill is not a general amnesty. By the end of 2007, some 30,000 combatants had handed in their weapons and the majority of both high-ranking and rank and file soldiers had begun the process of rehabilitation, under conditions of significantly more lenient sentencing. There is no consensus as to whether the paramilitary forces have totally disappeared or not. Whilst most analysts agree that there has been a considerable reduction in paramilitary violence, others argue that the paramilitary groups have been reforming in local, smaller, criminal gangs, comparable to the mini drug cartels which emerged after the downfall of the Cali y Medellín cartels. Whatever the case may be, the dismantling of the paramilitary forces has contributed considerably to the consolidation of the state's monopoly on legitimate violence.

### *The drug cartels*

Contrary to popular belief, the drug trade in Colombia does not amount to very much in macroeconomic terms. El Banco de la República estimates its size at 2-3 per cent of Gross Domestic Product. Nor has the capital obtained from the drug trade contaminated the country's large business groups, being recycled instead in property and money laundering deals outside

the country. The significance of the drug-economy should rather be measured in terms of its corrupting influence, and because it constitutes the financial base for the guerrilla and paramilitary forces, criminal gangs and the drug cartels themselves. The first illegal cultivation for the export market was of marijuana and it was carried out by local business men and traffickers in the 1970s. The second phase saw the establishment of the Cali and Medellín cartels and stretched between the 1970s and 1980s; it led to a much more sophisticated division of labour between producers, those who cut the drugs, the traffickers, the money launderers and a whole host of international middle-men.

The bosses of the big Medellín and Cali cartels formed and subcontracted their own security forces and bodyguards, at the same time as they co-opted and intimidated local, regional and national politicians. The use of para-politics was soon adopted by the 250 mini-cartels which mushroomed after the break-up of the two big cartels and, more specifically, by the paramilitary organisations. The establishment of the mini-cartels represents the third phase (1995 - 2000) and brought with it new alliances with dealers and middle men from other parts of South America (especially Peru), Central America and Mexico. The fourth phase, from around the year 2000 to the present, has seen a changing panorama of intensive cultivation, regional control, and a division amongst the various illegal armed groups in terms of production sites, transport and trafficking, along with a gradually more systematic effort by the state to eradicate the trade on a large scale. The USA joined this effort with extensive fumigation programmes, as well as direct military and financial aid. Fumigation continues to be controversial; reports from UNHCR suggest that up to 50% of internal refugees are a direct result of this policy.

This gloomy outlook has been complicated even further by in-fighting between the various armed groups involved, the activities of the army and the forced, internal migration of the local population. In spite of the efforts to stifle the drug trade, the volume of Colombian cocaine entering the North American market is not shrinking, nor is the street-price of the drug increasing. The only conclusion that can be drawn is that the illegal drug trade has achieved long-term stability, which may explain why the corruption it leads to goes unchecked as the illegal trade continues to fund the violence of the armed groups in the conflict, with the exception of course of the state itself.

## Security and democracy under the Uribe administration.

Since the beginning of the first Uribe mandate (2002), security in the country has generally been enhanced. At the end of 2004, it was estimated that there were between 40,000 and 50,000 men and women in illegal, armed groups. By the end of 2007, a large number of one of the conflict's key players, the paramilitary forces, had been disarmed; officially, 30,000 armed militants are in the process of being co-opted back into the Colombian economy and society at large. Despite the debate about the actual numbers of disarmed and rehabilitated militants, a notable decrease in violence has been achieved.

The Executive's role has been steadily widening since 2002. The electorate supports the President by a wide margin and he obtains consistently good numbers in the opinion polls. The strong presidential office is creating a "super ministry", an umbrella group of working committees and coordination groups concerned with the peace initiative, the rehabilitation of ex-combatants and, in general, the special government social services initiatives. Examples of these groups (recently created and re-named) are: Acción Social (an umbrella group which directs the presidency's social programmes), the High Council for Reinsertion (Alta Consejería

para la Reinserción), and the National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation (la Comisión Nacional para la Reparación y Reconciliación, or the CNRR). The Executive, however, does operate within the limits of the law, and checks and balances are in place in the shape of the Judiciary, especially the Procurator Fiscal and the *Defensoría* (the ombudsman) at national, regional and local level. The growth of administrative power has not led to an increased militarisation of the country. Colombia is not comparable to those dictatorial and highly militarised “counter-insurgency states” found in Central America during the civil war years.

Nowadays, to classify the FARC and the ELN as “forces of liberation” would be somewhat grotesque. Compared to the situation in Central America, where the guerrilla groups in the 1970s, Eighties and Nineties offered an alternative politics to the dictatorial regimes in place, the guerrilla movements in Colombia today constitute a force contaminated by the drug-economy, in spite of a reliance on socialist rhetoric from the past.

Colombia is not a fragile state, much less a failed one. In spite of being plagued by criminal violence, organised drug trafficking and an internal armed confrontation, its macro-economic stability and the elastic nature of its democracy means Colombia is a country which compares favourably to many of its Latin American neighbours.

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Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior  
C/ Goya, 5-7 pasaje 2ª - 28001 Madrid - Telf: 91 244 47 40 - Fax: 91 244 47 41 - E-mail : [fride@fride.org](mailto:fride@fride.org)  
[www.fride.org](http://www.fride.org)