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Colombia, Democracy, and the Intermingling Thereof

WILL CLIFFT

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Since it began in the 1960s, much has been said and written about the various layers and aspects of the conflict in Colombia. Beginning as a civil war, this ongoing struggle has evolved from a struggle between peasant groups fighting to recapture their land from a powerful class of agro-elites to include multiple local and international actors with such diverse motivations as philosophical ideals, capital gain, and the execution of international, sociopolitical power plays. To better understand the gravity of the modern-day situation in Colombia and to attempt to ascertain how and why this decades-long struggle may be finally drawing to a close, I briefly explore the history of the conflict and review the ways in which the principal actors have directly influenced the development of the social and political infrastructure of this country. By analyzing past trends in this conflict and comparing them to current actions of guerrilla groups, the Colombian government, and international actors, I explain why it is reasonable to believe that this bloody chapter of Colombia's history may be nearing a conclusion even if its memory will be etched into the minds of the generations to come.

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Democracy, as defined by Google, is “a system of government by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives.” While this definition is useful in a pragmatic sense, it falls far short of capturing what democracy means in a conceptual sense. To many Western-educated individuals, a democratic system of government carries sociohistorical connotations as the gold standard by which a populace can exist. However, this is due more largely to conflicting notions as to what actually constitutes a democratic system, not an actual appreciation of how a democracy functions. For example, one might believe that the people—not the system itself—constitute the heart of the democratic ideal by identifying these people as a cosmopolitan community with “divergent material interests” and “diverse cultural attachments” that is able to function as a cohesive whole. (McMahon 279) Others, such as philosopher John Rawls, identify democracy as a distinct set of political principles, namely the freedom and equality of all participating citizens, which demarcate it from other similar concepts of governance. (Mouffe 71) Still others choose to focus on how the democratic system is implemented, how it affects those who participate in it, and to what extent they are able to participate. (Beetham 46)

Although the definitions of what exactly constitutes democracy are diverse, the one unifying idea linking these theories together is the assertion that an ideal democratic system creates the best set of conditions for a population to exist within, both peacefully and efficiently, while maintaining complete influence over the structures with which it is governed. These conditions necessary for an ideal democracy will, for the purposes of this paper, be conflated with the ten components of a liberal democracy as laid out by Steven Taylor in his chapter Colombia: Democracy Under Duress. These ten components are: the control of the state lies with elected officials, there are clear limitations on executive power, legitimate contestation of power is permitted and respected, the rights of minorities will be respected and acknowledged, there will be other “associative groups” through which to express political will besides political parties, there will be access to a variety of informational sources, individuals will have “substantive democratic freedoms” (e.g. freedom of speech, freedom of press, freedom of assembly), citizens will be treated equally under the law, an unbiased judiciary will be present to secure the liberties of the citizens, and that the rule of law will provide ample ability to avert “unjustified detention, exile, terror, torture, and undue interference” in the lives of citizens from both the state and “organized nonstate [sic] or antistate [sic] actors.” (Taylor “Colombia ...”)

However, as this paper demonstrates, non-ideal democratic systems often contain factors that prevent a populace from reaching its full potential as a liberal democratic society. In the following pages, I will outline and discuss three such factors within the Colombian situation that prevent the Colombian people from achieving this ideal form of democracy, despite the fact that Colombia itself has been qualified as, broadly speaking, an electoral democracy¹ for the greater part of the last fifty years. (Taylor “Colombia ...”)

To provide brief context, I will specify and pursue each obstacle individually from beginning to the present time (December, 2015). This approach will be taken instead of examining the origins and consequences of all three within a holistic examination of Colombia’s recent history as the overlap and interplay between the obstacles being discussed would be too complex to examine in a chronological fashion within the confines of this short paper.

The FARC Dilemma

To begin this analysis, I will focus first on the most glaring aspect of Colombian society that is preventing the implementation of ideal democracy in the present day, as it is also the aspect which the other two obstacles are predicated upon. I am speaking of what has been designated as (for lack of a better term) the Colombian civil war.²

After the conclusion of La Violencia, a ten-year war between Colombia’s two (at the time) dominant political parties which resulted in over 100,000 deaths, (Chacon, Robinson, Torvik 369)

an agreement emerged in 1958 in which the two parties agreed to share political power in a pact that became known as the National Front. (Lorente Section 2)

The National Front consolidated power in the hands of Colombia's political elite who began using their power to appropriate the land-holding rights of Colombia's rural poor and to restrict these individuals from defending themselves through legitimate democratic structures. (Bejarano 219) The continued abuses of the peasant population gave rise in the 1960s to several revolutionary groups dedicated to overthrowing Colombia's developing "agro-elite" and restoring land rights to the alienated economic minorities. Chief among such groups was the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which was formed upon and fought for primarily Marxist ideals including the eradication of "rural inequality" and the creation of "an equitable rural society when they first formed." (Nelson 86-7) The FARC was one of the largest and most successful guerilla groups to oppose the Colombian government, and understood by many to be the face of the revolutionary and guerilla forces throughout the duration of Colombia's conflict.

In its infancy, the FARC and its associated movement held a substantial level of popularity amongst Colombia's rural and poor citizens; during the 1970s it was said that "the guerillas did not represent or fight for the masses, but that the insurgency was the masses." (Brittain 31) Eventually, this threat to Colombia's economic elite proved too great for Colombia's military forces to handle, and wealthy business owners and companies contracted their own private armed forces as a way to combat the rising guerilla threat. Thus the paramilitaries³ were brought into play. (Velasco 292)

As violence increased as the conflict continued for over a decade, the FARC and the Colombian government made several attempts to come to some sort of compromise that would reduce the number of deaths and abductions (perpetrated by both sides) plaguing Colombian society. The effort that came closest to resolving the conflict occurred from 1984 – 1990, during which the FARC attempted to deconstruct its identity as a revolutionary guerilla group and to integrate itself into the Colombian political system in the form of the much more politically palatable group Union Patriótica, a political party composed largely of ex-FARC members and sympathizers who attempted to achieve through the democratic process what the FARC militia had been unable to achieve with sheer force. (Laplante, J., Theidon 60)

This attempt failed for two primary reasons. First, while the reintegration into Colombian society was identified as a necessary prerequisite for the party to fulfill its function – which was accurately translating the FARC's mission into politically viable policies – the conflict had already impacted so many segments of Colombian society that it was nearly impossible for ex-combatants to integrate into civilian communities without succumbing to a fear of revenge for crimes committed during the conflict. (Laplante, J., Theidon 72) Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, over 3,000 Union Patriótica members were assassinated by paramilitary groups before the Union Patrióticas's dissolution in 1990. (Laplante, J., Theidon 60)

The next significant point in this summary occurs in the early to mid-1990s. With the end of the Cold War, the FARC needed to find new sources of income to replace the funding it had previously received from communist states. They found this new flow of revenue in the illegal drugs trade and quickly became known as much for perpetrating drug-related violence as for their politically motivated brutality. (Lorente Section 2) This surge of drug-money, enduring public outrage over the "political murder" of Union Patriótica, and widespread public dissatisfaction with the failure of the 1991 constitution produced a successful decade for the FARC, which saw a massive spike in recruitment numbers (estimated total membership exceeded 30,000) and forced the Colombian government to cede a Switzerland-sized piece of land, which the international media dubbed "FARC-landia." (Dudley 170-2)

The FARC began losing its momentum in the early 2000s after the implementation of Plan Colombia which, after extensive interference by the U.S. government (covered more thoroughly later on), both guaranteed the Colombian government large amounts of U.S. aid money on the condition they ramp up aggressive military actions towards the FARC, and granted them (the Colombian government) the funds to pursue such aggressions with. (Aviles 130) The 2002 election

of President Alvaro Uribe, who ran on an aggressively anti-FARC platform, decisively halted the FARC's chances at finally achieving a conclusive military victory and forced the group to resort once again to evasive tactics. Uribe's efforts, backed by funding from Plan Colombia, culminated with the killing of high-ranking FARC commanders Raul Reyes and Victor Suárez in 2008 and 2010, respectively. (Crandall 233)

This brings us to the present day. The FARC has been engaged with a new round of peace talks with the Colombian government since 2012 with the ultimate goal of finally reaching an agreement by March 23, 2016. The four main points being discussed as part of this agreement are 1) land reform, 2) the reintegration of ex-FARC members into Colombian society and politics, 3) the deconstruction of the FARC's illegal drugs trade, and 4) "amnesty for combatants, excluding those who have committed the most serious crimes." (What ... Process, BBC) But while the general content of these peace talks seems encouraging, will the government and guerilla members be able to overcome the bloody legacy that the FARC conflict has left on the Colombian psyche? I do not believe that they will, at least, not within the immediate future. Furthermore, I believe that failure to overcome this legacy will directly impede the realization of an ideal democracy within the Colombian context.

To justify this position, I will explore briefly the concrete impacts of approximately fifty years of warfare and explain why these impacts prevent progress towards a fully realized democratization of the democratic process.

The FARC conflict has left a permanent impact on Colombia and its citizens, who have suffered murder, forced disappearance, and the widespread use of sexual violence as a means of terrorizing the general population into submission. (Salazar, Herrera, pg. 2) In Constanza Galvis's book, *The Heart of the War in Colombia*, she details the stories of ten Colombians personally affected by the violence, including Gabriela, whose husband was murdered as part of the Union Patriótica extermination campaign (Galvis 113), Daniel, who was subjected to horrific psychological torture for not being able to provide information he did not have to military officials (Galvis 124), and Antonia, whose husband was murdered simply because his brother had associated with people accused of being guerillas. (Galvis 163) I mention these three people, whose stories are representative of all in Galvis's book, to give a human face to the incredibly deep psychological scars left by FARC-related conflicts and to support my first point that a peaceful, liberal democratic system, which necessitates at bare minimum the mutual tolerance of participating citizens, cannot be reasonably expected to exist while so many citizens suffered so intensely at the hands of their compatriots. The amount of Colombian citizens estimated to have died as a direct result of this conflict exceeds 220,000 – at least 5.7 million citizens have been internally displaced, and approximately 45,000 Colombians are listed as "missing." (Ince 26) Colombia's overall population as of 2013 numbered approximately 48 million, meaning that at least one out of every eight Colombians has been directly targeted in connection with this conflict. This is to speak nothing of those who have indirectly suffered. Such a large proportion of affected citizens must inherently exclude the possibility of sharing the "same social bases of self-respect" necessary for citizens in a democracy to maintain their status of equality, and will prove the implementation of a liberal democracy that is fair and respectful to all citizens to be unachievable within the lifespan of the current generation. (Mouffe 71)

Apart from the violent wake left behind by the government/FARC struggle, other elements of the dispute continue to loom as distinct barriers to the realization of an ideal democracy and all that it entails. For example, even though the current conflict may come to an end in the near future, the deaths resulting from it will likely not. In the early 2000s, as part of a "strategic defense" against the Plan Colombia-backed offensive being made by the Colombian government, the FARC laid thousands of landmines across over 60% of Colombia's departments. These mines were responsible for over 7,000 deaths between 2000 and 2009. (Crandall 234)

Furthermore, there are several indicators that the FARC still possesses significant support amongst minorities in Colombian society such as the peasant class, indigenous groups, and

Afro-Colombians who have all remained silent during the past decade and a half due to their fear of persecution as terrorist sympathizers by the Plan Colombia movement. (Brittain 32, 39-40) However, these specific minority groups have thus far been excluded from current talks between President Santos and the FARC for unclear reasons. (Velasco 295) Is this not the same situation that led to the formation of groups such as the FARC in the first place – exclusion and alienation from the political process? Even if the current peace talks succeed and history does not repeat itself with the formation of minority-based rebel groups, the exclusion of such groups, who also constitute part of the FARC membership (Brittain 31), from the peace talks necessarily violates the principles of a truly democratic solution which mandates an “equal opportunity of access to political influence” for all citizens. (McMahon 280)

Another worry that many critics of the peace talks have raised is that of the primary point being discussed: land reform. BBC reports that these reforms would be aimed at the “economic and social development of rural areas and provision of land to poor farmers,” which sounds as though it directly addresses the primary issue that FARC was formed upon back in the 1960s. However, it appears that the primary way the Colombian government plans to implement these development plans is to begin replacing all illegal crops, specifically and most importantly coca, with legal crops. (What ... Process, BBC) This strategy has failed in the past.

A similar effort was made in the early days of Plan Colombia to eradicate coca in which rural farmers were also encouraged to begin growing more corn, yucca, and banana, but which was unsuccessful due to both the difficulties in storing and transporting the “legal” harvested crops to market (as opposed to very easily stored coca byproducts) and the substantially smaller profit made by growing “legal” crops as opposed to “illegal” ones. (Joune 31) From the information made available so far, it does not appear that this new attempt at replacing the coca plant bears any significant differences from the previous attempt, so it does not appear that this effort is any more likely to succeed. If that project fails, the attempt at land reforms will also fail, leaving unresolved the original issue around which the FARC formed and fought. This means that the FARC or another group will likely continue the fight against the Colombian government, disrupting the non-violent democratic process, and impeding the implementation of an ideal democracy for years to come.

US Intervention

A second aspect of the Colombian situation that is preventing the institution of a fully liberalized democratic system is the looming specter of the world’s foremost hegemonic power, the United States. Made possible by the revision of the Colombian Constitution in 1991, the adoption of neoliberal policies throughout the 1990s drew the attention of U.S. based business interests to the Colombian countryside. (Lorente Section 5) But Colombia’s natural wealth is concentrated in the rural regions – the exact same part of the country where the FARC and other guerilla groups held the most sway.

U.S. business interests realized there was a great deal of money to be made in investing in and exploiting the energy and mining sectors within the Colombian private sector, but the FARC would not allow them to evict the impoverished citizens occupying the land. So how to go about removing the peasants from the land under which lay such valuable resources? The U.S.’s tactic was ingenious. Capitalizing on the trail blazed by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, the U.S. government in the 1990s began demanding of the Colombian government that it implement tighter control on the production and exportation of coca products. (Velasco 297) When this tightening failed to materialize (as was inevitable – the coca plant was too deeply ingrained in society, and transportation throughout the regions where coca was grown too difficult to traverse for government forces) the U.S. used it as an excuse to begin involving itself in the drafting of Plan Colombia, a political action plan conceived by President Andres Pastrana and aimed at ending the conflict with the FARC by focusing upon “social redistribution” as a means of equalizing the wealth

gap between Colombia's elite and its much larger rural population. (Aviles 123,130) However, this original form of the plan would lend more agency to the poor population and would very likely mean that they (rural farmers) would be able to keep their plots of land and retain the rights to the resources sought by international investors. As such, U.S. consultants spoke with members of Pastrana's government and within a brief span of time Plan Colombia was rewritten to end the conflict with the FARC not by diplomatic, economic measures, but by force. The reasoning used to publicly justify this action was that the FARC, due to its violent actions throughout the 1990s, should henceforth be qualified as a terrorist organization, meaning that they should not be treated with, only exterminated. (Aviles 134) This new mandate for a strengthened offensive would be backed by copious amounts of U.S. aid money funneled into the Colombian military. It was the allure of this aid money that caused President Pastrana to alter his plan and to end this particular attempt at making peace with the guerilla organization. Interestingly, the Colombian military, which would be receiving the vast majority of aid promised by the U.S., had a thoroughly documented "long history of assisting and supporting paramilitary groups" who themselves received approximately 70% of their funding from the illegal drugs trade, exactly like the guerillas which the U.S. was claiming to intervene because of. (Aviles 131) The key difference was that the paramilitaries represented the interests of the economic elites who sought to work with U.S. business officials in their appropriation of peasant-owned land and thus posed no threat to the neo-imperialist process taking place, while the guerilla groups represented the exact opposite.

By 2003, "U.S. involvement [in Colombia] encompassed forty U.S. agencies and over 4,500 people ... working out of the U.S. Embassy in Bogota," which constituted the largest embassy staff at the time outside of Afghanistan. (Priest, Washington Post) In 2004, an agreement was reached between Pastrana's successor, President Uribe, and former U.S. President George W. Bush that demarcated ten types of covert action that U.S. forces could execute independently of Colombian oversight. (Villar, Cottle 116-7) Since that time, the U.S. has been named "the most influential foreign actor in Colombia" due to the massive amount of capital they continually pump into the Colombian military and police budgets (approximately \$225 million in 2014), and has been implicated as at least partially responsible by the Human Rights Watch for the roughly 3,500 civilians killed as a result of military actions between 2002 and 2008. (Kovalik, Huffington Post)

Furthermore, Plan Colombia resulted in "high levels of peasant displacement" due to the aerial fumigation tactics used against coca growers by U.S. funded Colombian military aircraft which unintentionally also "led to large-scale destruction of food crops in the regions where Plan Colombia [was] implemented." (Jounes 29) The plots of land most recently abandoned by the peasants were typically taken over by "large planters or multinational corporations" who began mining and otherwise extracting the land's natural resources. (Jounes 31) This displacement tactic efficiently stripped rural Colombians of at least one of the "primary goods" (in this case, the right to own land) endorsed by Rawls as part of the necessary components of a properly active democratic citizen. (Mouffe 71)

As with those of the FARC, the legacy of U.S.' actions continue to disrupt the application of a completely democratic system within Colombia. Democracy, among other things, hinges upon the "responsiveness of leaders to being led" by those who elected them, not those who contributed the most money to their leaders. (Beetham 46) If the gestures of peace being made in 1999 were so quickly turned into acts of violence (which has had repercussions into the present) by a non-Colombian actor, how are the Colombian people to know that the trust they place in their governing bodies will not be betrayed so easily once again? It is impossible to believe that the level of autonomy granted to the U.S. and its interests by the Colombian government without the consultation of the wider democratic process is permissible; in effect, recent history suggests that the Colombian government has auctioned off control of its land and people to the highest bidder, necessarily precluding itself from claiming the title of a liberal democratic government. Regarding the present day, it is difficult to gauge the extent of which the United States had a direct influence on the current peace talks, but it is more difficult to imagine that they will be completely detached

given both the U.S. and Colombia's recent history and the millions of dollars still being annually gifted to the Colombian government in order to fight off the FARC and those affiliated with it.

Institutional Frameworks

The final aspect of Colombia's current situation that impacts its status as a completely democratic nation is that of the effectiveness of the structures and institutions being used to implement such democracy. These structures and institutions are important in the application of the democratic process because "it is ... the structure, strength, and autonomy of the state apparatus and its relation with civil society that crucially affects democracy's future prospects." (Bejarano 45)

Throughout its history, Colombia has suffered from inherently weak democratic institutions. This is evidenced by two things: 1) the fact that Colombia's two major parties have historically been the vehicles through which the state's structures were formed, meaning that the state has repeatedly been crafted to serve the interests of these two parties specially, (Bejarano 47) and 2) that the Colombian government has repetitively failed to legitimately "consolidate power" within its country's democratic institutions. This consolidation of power is a necessary component of an effective democracy as an organized and legal contestation of power between candidates for leadership cannot be ensured without the state's ability to guarantee that such contestations will be recognized as fair and legitimate throughout the territory that the state oversees. (Bejarano 46) By "the consolidation of power," I am referring to Taylor's tenth component of a liberal democracy, the ability of a state to maintain a legitimate monopoly on the level of violence perpetrated within the state, as the existence of uncontrolled violence is "problematic at best" for a democratic system. (Taylor 891 – "Response to ..,") In short, this failure to consolidate influence within lawfully regulated political structures and institutions has resulted in the failure of any one political actor – be it the state, the guerillas, or the paramilitaries – to effectively prevent the use of politically-motivated violence against Colombian citizens throughout any large sector of the country. (McLean 131)

While I acknowledge that it would eventually be possible to examine each and every case in which Colombia's actors have failed to exert a proper level of control over Colombia's populace and its political structures, here I will discuss only the most recent instances, beginning with President Alvaro Uribe's election, and will only discuss the instances involving the failure of the Colombian government to exercise a legitimate monopoly of control, rather than all viable actors, as according to the tenets of democracy it is the government who should have the *de facto* claim to such control.

Before Uribe was elected in 2002 and after the 1991 Constitution had been enacted, Colombia suffered from acute atomization of political interests as multiple parties flooded the national stage, making it extremely difficult for different parties to coordinate effectively. (Bejarano, Pizarro 16) However, when Uribe rallied the support of the Social Party of National Unity, the Conservative Party, and the Radical Change party, he began gaining the momentum needed to break Colombia of its political gridlock. (Posada-Carbo 138) Uribe ran his campaign on the premise of forming a "democratic security government" that made protecting the Colombian people and eliminating the threat of the FARC (newly deemed a terrorist organization as per the U.S.) his top goal. (Alvarez 124) Uribe claimed that violence disrupts the solidarity of a people and that the FARC were the main perpetrators of this violence. Since solidarity is for a functioning democratic nation, the FARC represented an existential threat to the country and must be eradicated. (Alvarez 125)

Uribe set about this eradication plan by declaring a "state of exception" just four days after his election. This granted him emergency powers to "carry out arrests, searches, and wiretapping without warrants." He used these new powers to expand the military's authority above that of

many elected civilian authorities, to limit the free movement of Colombian citizens, to restrict the agency of journalists and foreign nationals, and to justify detaining citizens without proper identification papers for up to 24 hours. (Alvarez 126) While this state of exception did not last through the end of the year, it showcased an incredible disregard for the judicial and legislative processes through which a democracy must act if it is to avoid stripping the people of their own oversight of the political process, and it set a precedent of dangerously powerful and hyper-consolidated authority for the rest of Uribe's time in office.

In addition to acquiescing to U.S. interests for the purpose of securing more aid money, Uribe's government was massively tainted by corruption and human rights violations, the most notable of which involved instances over multiple years of the Colombian military purposefully conflating the identities of civilians with those of guerilla fighters and executing mass numbers of them to reach quotas set by the Uribe administration and Plan Colombia, which mandated that a specific number of guerilla fighters be killed each month. (Velasco 294) Further instances of questionable uses of governmental authority to benefit politicians at the expense of their constituents occurred in 2003 when, in order to free up money to fight the FARC, Uribe signed off on U.S. affiliated privatization plan that resulted in thousands of Colombians losing their jobs and resulted in over 600,000 citizens taking to the streets in protest, (Aviles 124) and in 2011 when Jorge Noguera, one of Uribe's most trusted officials, was sentenced to 25 years in prison on convictions that, while employed by Uribe's administration, he had leaked the names of dozens of "suspected leftists" to paramilitary groups, who essentially acted as death squads throughout the first decade of the 21st century. (B., *The Economist*) Lastly and most succinctly, an estimated one third of all legislators elected to Colombia's Congress during Uribe's time in office have been credibly accused of having connections with paramilitary forces. (Arias 890)

It should be noted, however, that gross governmental abuses of power and the establishment of disreputable connections to privately armed forces have not been limited to officials within Uribe's administration. To cite a current example, the city of Buenaventura has become the subject of much controversy as local governments have been recently accused of employing privately contracted forces to terrorize destitute citizens living on the city's low-income waterfront properties. The waterfront properties have been established as prime sites for new developments, and the Colombian citizens residing there established as obstacles blocking the government officials from gaining a potential profit. As a result, it is widely suspected that the government has employed a number of gangs and small-time paramilitaries to coerce these citizens to move elsewhere, sparing government officials the expense of officially relocating these citizens on behalf of the city. Many of these individuals have felt no choice but to flee their homes and neighborhoods given that levels of violence have risen significantly in recent months and many are aware that their own governing bodies are implicitly responsible for this process. (Neuman, *NY Times*)

Thus, while with the Uribe regime Colombia finally managed to begin consolidating power within its government, it did so while simultaneously "concentrate[ing] power and increas[ing] repression" of its citizens, limiting their rights and voices in the name of preserving democratic ideals in the face of the FARC, and it did so while establishing a precedent for government officials to use subversive force in their pursuit of policy goals. (Velasco 294) Although Uribe was replaced in 2010 by the less aggressive Juan Santos and although there have been no known circumventions of legislative and judicial procedures in Santos's administration that are on par with Uribe's, the Colombian people still have been given little reason to suddenly begin placing their undying trust in the ability of their government to do its job while providing the transparency necessary to warrant faith in the democratic process. If anything, the government's shaky record of adhering to oversight regarding some of its most major policy decisions in past years merely suggests to the Colombian people that there are currently ongoing scandals and violations of power which will be discovered in 5 – 10 years' time. This mistrust directly disallows the existence of at least two of Taylor's ten components of liberal democracy, specifically the sections mandating that there

should be credible belief that there are decisive constraints on executive power, and that citizens' democratic liberties will be protected by a judicial system able to fully review and restrict the actions of other state institutions. (Taylor 502-3 – "Colombia ...").

Solutions and Conclusions

As illustrated above, the situation in which Colombia finds itself is intricate, volatile, and enduring. It is impossible to extricate completely one, three, or even more of these existing impediments to the realization of an ideal liberal democracy from the others, and it is impossible to realize fully the impacts made by each aspect of the situation without at least briefly appreciating the historical context within which Colombia's current problems are based. Outlined in this paper, I have identified three major impediments to Colombia's progress towards a more ideal democracy: 1) the presence and significance of the FARC, 2) the political influence exerted by the United States, and 3) the weakness of Colombian governmental institutions and the subsequent mistrust placed in them by the Colombian people. While I have expressed occasionally a disbelief that the current climate is one that is conducive to the full realization of a liberal democracy, I do believe that the peace talks currently being pursued by the Santos administration represent the best viable option with which to begin pursuing such a lofty goal. It was the lack of availability of the means to pursue meaningful dialogue which prompted the FARC and other revolutionary groups to take up arms at the beginning of this conflict – which has in turn given rise to so many other problems – and it is only the long-awaited for construction of such means which will bring an end to this bloody chapter of Colombia's history.

Notes

¹An electoral democracy meets “minimal definitions of democracy, which include basic political freedoms (e.g., press, speech, association) and [has] governing institutions populated by officials selected in free and open elections.” All of which Colombia has managed to maintain. (Taylor, pg. 502 – “Colombia ...”)

²Many have claimed that the term “civil war” does not apply to the Colombian context as its actors are too varied with too many equally varied interests to be so clearly demarcated as a civil war. For example, Steven Taylor has identified four primary actors at play within the contemporary conflict including the military/police forces, guerilla groups, “narcotraffickers,” and the paramilitaries, all of which have had varying objectives and interests not necessarily of a political nature. (Crotty, pg. 508)

³Paramilitaries are in effect small, privately armed forces which typically act on behalf of those with enough power to afford them. In the Colombian context, paramilitaries were often employed by the wealthy and state-affiliated military forces to carry out illicit attacks against groups or individuals deemed a threat, which was usually those affiliated with the leftist or guerilla movements. (Garcia-Godos, Jemima, Lid, pg. 491-2)

⁴These categories are: 1) direct action, 2) strategic reconnaissance, 3) unconventional warfare, 4) foreign internal defense, 5) civil affairs, 6) psychological operations, 7) counterterrorism, 8) humanitarian assistance, 9) theater search and rescue, and 10) activities “specified by the President or Secretary of Defense.” (Villar, Cottle, pg. 116-7)

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