

### Democratisation and Civil War in Colombia

Colombia has had a long-standing tradition of constitutional government with regular elections and a two-party system. Unlike other Latin American countries, Colombia experienced only four years under the military rule in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, the regime has been elitist and exclusivist, and ridden by high levels of socioeconomic inequality. Colombia has been staging high levels of political violence since its independence and has acquired the top place on the list of human right violations. The regime has been facing accrued demands for democratisation and the alleviation of economic injustices since the 1970s. Various governments tried to democratise and negotiate with the guerrillas since then. In the 1990s however, the government undertook a series of major reforms such as curtailing the military's power, adopting a new constitution and decentralisation etc. These reforms took place when the government was not winning over insurgents. Why did the government implement democratic reforms and restrain the power of the military at a time when civil war was ongoing and the government was not winning over the guerrillas? What explains the timing?

These questions are worth dwelling upon Colombia presents a particular case. Often times, when fighting civil wars, governments muster all their forces to topple insurgents; they do not refrain from committing human rights violations, and more importantly, they postpone democratic reforms until a ceasefire, if not after the settlement. Colombia departs from this pattern; the government curtailed the power of the military and implemented reforms when guerrilla activity was rising. This paper is an attempt to make sense of the unusual timing of democratisation in Colombia. To this end, it looks at the variation in government capacity to fight insurgency from the onset

of the civil war to the adoption of the new constitution. It is argued that the timing had to do with the inability of the executive to overcome institutional veto points and to win over insurgents. At a time when guerrilla activities were rising and the government lacked the capacity to defeat them, and when the resistance by the military and Congress were high, the president chose democratisation as a cheaper and legitimate solution to overcome institutional resistance, to obtain popular support and to alleviate the war. The first part of the paper investigates the alternative explanations to the puzzle. The second part presents the argument and research design. The last part contains the analysis.

## I. The Literature and the Alternative Explanations

The studies on civil war and democratisation in Colombia have dwelled upon the civil-military relations, economic factors, the ties between drug trafficking and violence, and institutional factors. Scholars touch upon one or a combination of the abovementioned factors to explain democratisation reforms.

For Buitrago, what enabled democratisation in the 1990s was the military's willingness to accept a diminished role. (1994) Buitrago offers a zero sum game approach to civil-military relations in that when the military intervenes it fulfils the functions of the state; the military's power and control augment at the expense of the government. This thesis is puzzling because Barco government did not empower at the expense of the army. The army large enjoyed discretionary powers and support from hardliners while increasing violence justified their claims for tougher counterinsurgency. Thus, the argument raises the question of why would the military want to abandon its powers and vested interests when it was not convinced in the efficacy of negotiations and it was not getting weaker.

Davila argued that despite reforms, the military's *de facto* power and autonomy sustained given its long-standing ties to the traditional political elite and the bureaucracy. (1998) This argument overlooks the reforms under Gaviria government that further trimmed the military's power. Davila is correct on his claim that the military's autonomy occasionally augmented despite institutional changes. Yet, it is not straightforward whether that was because of the embedded ties or because the government adopted a tougher stance against guerrillas. This paper is inclined to believe the latter because after Betancur administration, the balance of power between the executive and the military altered in favour of the former. The army relied on its usual support basis (the traditional party and economic elite). Yet, reforms curtailed the power of the traditional party elites; therefore, it is unlikely that the army empowered on a support basis that weakened. Finally, although he long elaborates on democratisation and its relation to the army, Davila does not explicate timing.

From a political economic perspective, Richani argued that protracted conflict brought about an incentive structure for the army, paramilitary groups and guerrillas. Because they gained from the strife, the latter maintained the 'war system'. (2005) This thesis does a good job shedding light on the intricate relations between violence specialists. However, it excludes the role of the popular movements that pushed through democratisation reforms. Moreover, it does not elaborate on the institutional obstacles that dragged the reforms despite the rising popular demands for it since the 1970s.

Looking at the role of economic elites, Rettber holds that the elite promoted formal institutional changes and economic liberalisation but tolerated paramilitary repression so as to counterbalance the guerrillas' power. (2007) She explicates timing by the fact

that economic elites decided to advocate for democratisation because war augmented losses and risk factors after economic liberalisation, and prevented FDI. Although she provides an answer for timing, Rettberg does not account for how the government could overcome institutional obstacles such as the army and the two parties.

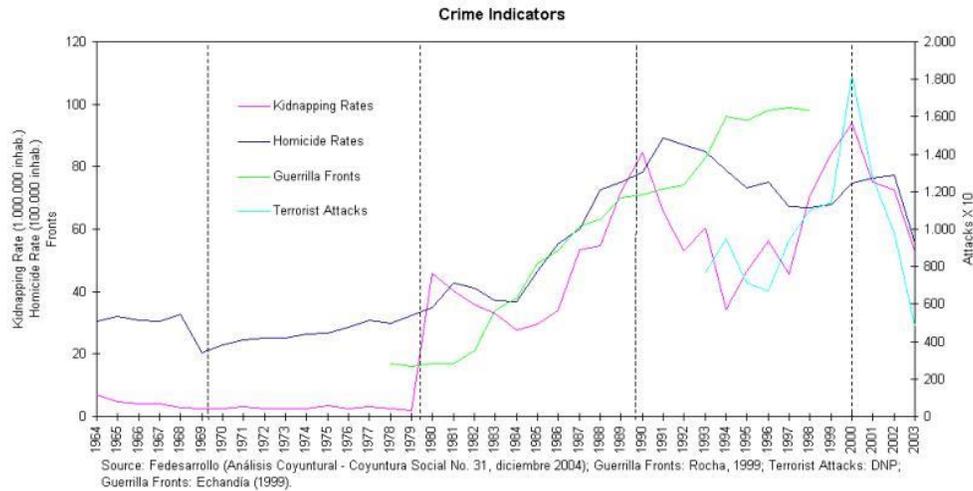
In sum, the scholarship offers alternative explanations on the role of the military, the economic elite, and the political economy that stems from the interaction between violence specialists. Of these arguments, only Buitrago considers the interaction between institutions; but he limits his analysis to the interplay between the military and the government. However, Colombia's political system displays many more institutional and societal veto points (interest groups or institutions that check the president) that need to be considered because of the restricted nature of the democracy. This paper is an attempt to elaborate on the institutions that affect the government capacity to realise democratic reforms.

## **II. The Argument and Research Design**

This paper starts with the observation that democratisation reforms are realised at a time when civil war was intense and the government capacity was not high. (see table I below) Instead of increasing military action, the government limited the power of the military as a part of a series of democratisation reforms, and set down to talks with guerrillas, which departs from many cases where governments postponed reforms until after negotiations. This move looks even more interesting when one considers the objections by the traditional party elites, large landowners and the army. Given that popular demands for opening were already present, the question that pops up is what explicates the timing.

Table I<sup>1</sup>

Figure 3.



This paper believes that the answer lies in the institutional nature of the Colombian polity. The assumption is that, following Kalyvas, civil war is a dynamic process of interaction between actors. Motivations, capacities and resources vary over time as a function of interactions among the actors as well as those between the actors and the environment.<sup>2</sup> From an institutional perspective, this paper examines strategic interactions between the executive, the Congress, political parties, the army and the guerrilla. The reason is the executive has been traditionally constrained by the two-party factionalism. The support bases of the two parties regime overlapped with regional and socioeconomic differences. The traditional party elite relied on the support of large landowners, big business and financial elites. Thus, vested interests constituted another power centre. The army emerged as a third political force by the end of the 1980s, and its hardliner approach constrained the executive's attempts to use non-military means towards guerrillas. Finally, drug cartels rose as another power centre by

<sup>1</sup> Cardenas, M. et al. (2006), "Political Institutions and Policy Outcomes in Colombia: the Effects of the 1991 Constitution" Inter-American Development Bank, Research Network Working Paper R-508, <http://grupobid.org/res/publications/pubfiles/pubR-508.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Kalyvas, S. N. (2006) *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. New York: Cambridge UP.

the end of the 1970s. Thus, the executive faced many institutional obstacles in trying to resolve the puzzle of civil war.

The governments' responses to insurgency and its implications vary over time. Government tactics differ as to its capacity. Government capacity is defined by the ability to initiate and enforce policies to remedy civil war. The factors affecting government capacity are the success of its economic policies (hence the ability to obtain public and elite support), institutional obstacles (the resistance by/collaboration with the congress, the army) and president's popularity (among the economic elite with vested interests or the lower classes). The dependent variable is the success of government tactic against guerrillas measured as the rise or fall of guerrilla activities.

This paper makes a qualitative historical institutionalist analysis. Believing in the importance of sequencing, it adopts a process tracing approach. The argument is the following: the timing of the reforms has to do with the weakness of the executive and low autonomy of state institutions. Both factors have their roots in Colombia's history. State institutions have traditionally been captured by factionalism, which reduced the government autonomy. Under the National Front (NF) agreement, Colombia evolved into an elitist restrictive democracy. Exclusion coupled with socioeconomic disparities instigated civil war. The regime responded by political and military oppression and exclusion. The order destabilised as the regime's economic capacity, effectiveness and legitimacy declined. This engendered popular movements and fuelled guerrilla activities. The NF system had become untenable by the 1980s but vested interests (Congressmen, the military and economic elite) refused to acknowledge it and struggled to maintain it. These groups constituted the 'institutional obstacles' before democratic opening. The presidents lacked the autonomy and capacity to overcome

vested interests; therefore democratisation lingered until the end of Barco’s term. What enabled the adoption of the constitution was Barco’s decision to abandon the established institutional procedure, hence to circumvent the institutional obstacles. Thus, although the conditions were ripe for democratisation in the 1980s, the institutional obstacles dragged reforms. Agency explains the critical juncture. Barco’s decision to democratise had to do with the executive’s weakness as well. The executive wanted to negotiate with guerrillas because it could not win the war. On the other hand, the military that acted as a counterforce disrupted peace process; thus the government had to trim its powers. In a structure where popular demands for democratisation were high, democratisation appeared as a cheaper and legitimate solution to overcome institutional resistance, to obtain popular support and to alleviate the war. The next sections corroborate the argument with an historical analysis. It starts by laying out the roots of institutional weakness. In following sub-sections, the objective is to identify the type of strategies that the government adopted towards insurgents and to establish its capacity by looking at its economic policies, the type of support it enjoys and its relations with the congress and traditional political elite. The table below summarises the type of counterinsurgency tactics employed by governments across time.

Period	Method to handle insurgency			
	Political solution:	Changing the rules of the game: Constitutional amendments/new constitution	Military Solution: Offensive/count erinsurgency	Socioeconomic reforms
<b>1920s-40s:</b>	No	No	Yes	No
<b>La Violencia</b>	No	Yes: Gomez: <b>New constitution</b> to extend presidential powers	Yes	No
<b>Military</b>	Initially yes:	Yes: <b>new</b>	Yes	Initially yes

<b>regime</b>	Negotiation but no inclusiveness and trust building measures	<b>constitution</b> to extend presidential powers	Later	
<b>National Front</b>	No	Yes: <b>new constitution</b> to extend presidential powers and power sharing between the Lib and Con	Yes Also increased use of the paramilitary	Yes under the Liberal governments  Sporadic reforms towards small farmers.
<b>Betancur Gov</b>	Yes: Negotiation Ceasefire Amnesty  + democratisation	Constitutional amendments	Yes	No
<b>Barco Gov.</b>	Yes: Negotiation + democratisation referendum	Constitutional amendments	No	Yes

### III. The Process Leading to Democratisation

#### The Roots of State Weakness and Factionalism

The roots of state weakness in Colombia lie in factionalism that emerged after the independence war. After the war, the nation was divided between the Liberals (anti-colonial and pro-modernisation) and the Conservatives (authoritarian, supportive to the colonial legacy). Initially, the liberals drew support from ascending classes, and a pro-free trade coalition (i.e. merchants, manufacturers, artisans, small landowners and slaves). The Conservatives encompassed slave owners and large landholders. Peasantry

shifted side as to its patron, while partisanship divided the army.<sup>3</sup> Thus, factionalism displayed a class component based on socioeconomic differences.

Factions and class differences also overlapped with regionalism. The colonial era left Colombia with powerful local elites who detained military, economic and political power.<sup>4</sup> The latter opposed power sharing and centralisation so as not to lose their privileges. In addition to the centre-periphery contention, inter-regional and personal rivalries fuelled conflicts. Physical factors worked in favour of regional interests. Regions displayed idiosyncratic geographical factors, fauna and flora, which favoured the development of distinct socioeconomic structures and subcultures.<sup>5</sup> Ethnic and cultural divisions added to these patterns; intense racial tension between the natives, Spanish colonialists, European immigrants and African slaves challenged socio-political order. Hence, factionalism coupled with class differences and regionalism created tensions that played out as wars between the centre and the regions. At the end of numerous conflicts, the centre failed to overcome centrifugal power and penetrate the regions. Accordingly, the Colombian state grew into a confederation.<sup>6</sup> Following various wars by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Colombia shifted to a loose federalism.

Factional dispute frequently instigated wars in Colombia because state institutions failed to mediate and normalise tensions between the antagonists groups, as they themselves were absorbed by factionalism. In the lack of societal consent on the type of

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<sup>3</sup> “Consolidation of Political Division”, U.S. Library of Congress, Country Studies/Colombia, <http://countrystudies.us/colombia/15.htm>

<sup>4</sup> North, D.C., Summerhill, W. and Weingast, B.R. (2000). “Order, Disorder, and Economic Change: Latin America vs. North America in Governing for Prosperity” in de Mesquita, B.B. and Root, H. Eds. New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 1-55.

<sup>5</sup> Osterling, J. P. (1989) *Democracy in Colombia: Clientelistic Politics and Guerrilla Warfare*, New Brunswick, USA: Transaction, pp. 2-5.

<sup>6</sup> Lopez, A. F. (2000) *State Formation and Democracy in Latin America: 1810-1900*, London: Duke University Press, pp. 117-122.

government, unmet political demands and discontent easily erupted into violence. With almost every winner, institutions and the rules of the game were revised. Parties sought to physically eliminate one another (instead of using institutional channels), which in turn deepened family feuds and partisan hatred. Social inequality and injustices added to the centre-periphery strife because of the uneven distribution of productive lands for agriculture across regions. Thus, wars fed from partisan divides but also nurtured them. Recurring wars thwarted centralisation and caused institutional weakness. This pattern only became worse in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, because industrialisation and urbanisation sharpened social inequalities.

### **Rising Demands for Social Justice and la Violencia**

In the 1920s, labour entered the political arena as the third actor. The Communist Party channelled lower classes' demands for social reform. The traditional elite initially ignored these demands. However in the 1930s, discontent with the socio-political order escalated and labour unrest began spreading across the country. The conservative government repressed the leftwing. Some Communists groups responded by organising peasants in southern regions dominated by large coffee estates and forming militias to defend themselves. The progressive wing of the liberals chose to incorporate the issue of social inequality into their agenda. By inveighing against the conservative dictatorship, they gained the support of the peasantry and urban workers.<sup>7</sup> The conservatives retaliated with greater oppression and violence, especially in the countryside so as to weaken the liberals' support basis. In some areas, conservative militants took liberal peasants' lands. The ensuing polarisation led to the assassination of the Liberal leader, Gaitan. Local popular riots erupted in rural areas following the assassination, and they

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<sup>7</sup> Livingstone, G. (2004) *Inside Colombia, Drug, Democracy and War*. Rutgers University Press. pp. 42-43.

quickly spread across the country.<sup>8</sup> A group of university professors, writers and intellectuals formed a revolutionary junta; radical students seized radio stations to broadcast revolutionary proclamations. This movement was followed by the formation of revolutionary councils in some towns. Workers took over oil refineries.<sup>9</sup> Briefly, the country fell into a period of violence and disorder called *la Violencia*.

To handle violence, the governments turned to repression; i.e. banning public meetings, firing liberal governors, suspending the Congressional meeting etc. The liberal ministers resigned to protest this policy. Oppression peaked when the conservative president Gomez rose in power in the 1950s. By changing the constitution, Gomez extended the powers of the president and departmental governors. To bring down the liberal opposition, he restrained civil liberties and the independence of the judiciary, suspended labour rights, closed down trade unions, imposed censorship on media and accused the opposition of communism. The regime forces burned down villages, tortured people and alike. Communist and liberal peasants formed militias to defend themselves. The strongest resistance communities received migration from other regions. Gomez criticised the moderates and the military for not siding with him. Large-scale violence and oppression turned the liberals, the military, and the lower classes in the urban and rural areas against Gomez. The president drew support only from large landowners (because the regime protected them against rural insurgency) and export-oriented business (given his open market policies and measures to channel FDI).<sup>10</sup> The military coup overthrew his regime in 1953 and terminated *la Violencia*.

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<sup>8</sup> "The Collapse of the Democratic System", U.S. Library of Congress, Country Studies/Colombia, <http://countrystudies.us/colombia/21.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Livingstone, *op.cit.*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>10</sup> "La Violencia", <http://countrystudies.us/colombia/22.htm>

La Violencia is significant because it set the stage for future insurgency. The roots of the FARC (both in terms of actors and grievances) lie in this period. La Violencia started out as a spontaneous social uprising against large landowners and regional elites. But given that social inequalities factored in partisanship, it also played out as a civil war between the liberals, conservatives and communists. Thus, la Violencia presents a period where all the factors that fed conflict since the independence played out, i.e. socioeconomic differences, social inequality, class conflict and partisanship. The fact that the urban-rural disparities, partisanship and class conflict coalesced affected the intensity of the conflict. Another factor determining the intensity of the conflict was the government's decision to handle the issue with oppression. In other words, violence spiralled into civil war and sowed the seeds of rural insurgency because the traditional elite chose military means over political solutions such as incorporating new social forces (political means) and responding to grievances (socioeconomic reforms). The same factors account for the protraction of the strife; the president pursued a counterrevolutionary repression, instead of recognising demands for social equality. In the end, the government failed to restore order. Violence left many grievances that prepared future insurgency. After the coup, some resistant communities refused to drop guns and took refuge in the countryside. These groups formed the core of the FARC.

### **The Military Regime**

The military regime led by General Pinilla emerged as a "third force" transcending partisan divide. Pinilla wanted to appeal to the peasantry and urban workers. Instead of using counterinsurgency methods, he offered amnesty to insurgents. Most armed factions dropped the guns; but those in the southern regions did not. This partial pacification of country gained Pinilla the support of the traditional party elite. With regards to the rebel areas, Pinilla chose the negotiation method. He coupled this

political solution with socioeconomic reforms. He launched agrarian reforms, and various public projects to build infrastructure, highways, railways, airports, schools and universities so as to improve living standards and to alleviate inequality.<sup>11</sup> He nationalised the oil industry to finance public works.

On the other hand, the regime did not improve upon inclusiveness. Pinilla suspended elections that were being regularly held since the independence. He fervently persecuted communism, although he was more tolerant towards trade unions than Gomez. In addition, Pinilla accentuated his discourse of creating a permanent third force. This cost him the support of the traditional elite, while it failed to appeal to the public. As rural violence did not attenuate due to mistrust, Pinilla turned to oppression. He launched a military offensive against unyielding communities, which forced most peasants to migrate and concentrate in the southern regions defended by guerrillas. They formed armed self-sufficient farming communities. Furthermore, Pinilla also curtailed the freedom of press and arrested people for political crimes etc. He made a new constitution, which helped him change the composition of the congress. To enhance control, in 1962 Pinilla attempted to extend its presidential term. The military ousted him as a result. Pinilla left office before he could defeat the guerrillas.

To recap, the military regime departed from the previous civilian rules in choosing to handle the insurgency by political solutions (dialogue, amnesty) and socioeconomic reforms. In so doing, Pinilla envisaged remedying grievances and enhancing the regime's legitimacy. Yet, his good intentions floundered when he failed to increase inclusiveness (persecution of the left and oppression of trade unions) and to take trust-

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<sup>11</sup> "The Rojas Pinilla Dictatorship", U.S. Library of Congress, Country Studies/Colombia, <http://countrystudies.us/colombia/23.htm>

building measures. Two additional factors disadvantaged the military rule. It lacked the partisan or ideological appeal to masses, and the ‘third independent force’ discourse did not fit in with the Colombian political culture that had developed a long-standing tradition of partisanship. Besides, it lost him the support of the traditional party elite. On the other hand, socioeconomic reforms did not help Pinilla because they would reveal their benefits only in long run. Thus, Pinilla did not succeed to gain the support of the peasantry and workers, as well as trust of the guerrillas. When he saw the ineffectiveness of his methods, he took up Gomez’s repression tactic and attempted to rewrite the rules of the game by making a new constitution. Thus, he lost all legitimacy. This period falls in line with an established pattern of the Colombian politics; that is, monopolising power in a way to exclude the opposition, and trying to physically eliminate the opponent when it resorts to unconventional ways. In sum, as the state chose again oppression to topple guerrillas, it failed to stop civil war.

### **The National Front**

After ousting Pinilla, the military brought the two parties back on the forefront in 1963. The liberals and conservatives signed a power sharing agreement called the National Front (NF). The NF aimed to assuage the interparty strife and partisan distrust that had caused violence and the collapse of democracy by instituting alternation in government between the two parties. It thus restrained political competition to the two parties.<sup>12</sup> Besides, a new constitution was made in 1968 and it stipulated that the president would provide the country’s second largest party with an adequate and equitable proportion of all appointive positions in all legislative bodies (congress, regional assemblies and

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<sup>12</sup> “The National Front 1958-74”, U.S. Library of Congress, Country Studies/Colombia, <http://countrystudies.us/colombia/24.htm>

municipal councils).<sup>13</sup> Parties would also get to share mayoralties and governorships. In short, the two parties would share state patronage. Moreover, the constitution necessitated a two-thirds majority for any legislation.<sup>14</sup> The NF drew support from large landowners, industrial and financial capitalists. As such, this NF agreement brought about an elitist polity with the purpose of ensuring political stability and development.

The NF pursued a growth strategy based on the export of coal, petroleum and mine, the supply side policies to support the expansion of financial services, public utilities, transportation, and manufacturing and construction sectors. On the other hand, because this pacted democracy had appealed to the US that was trying to promote democracy in the region, it provided financial assistance to Colombia. Thus, continuous economic policies, foreign aid coupled with the positive oil shocks in the 1970s helped the NF attain robust and sustained growth rates across the decade. Also, the coffee boom of the early 1980s (which happened due to low supply by Brazil and high international prices) augmented Colombia's per capita GDP. On the other hand, redistribution, social and welfare policies were not a priority. In the early years of the NF rule, president Camargo attempted to initiate an agrarian reform by distributing public lands and idle lands to small peasants. Large landowners opposed the reform. President Restrepo from the liberal party tried to follow through with the initiative by organising a grassroots peasant movement, the ANUC, in 1967. This move was inconclusive. One reason was the ANUC delineated itself from the regime and was taken over by various leftwing groups. Secondly, the liberal elite came to believe that the agricultural sector needed modernisation instead of a land reform. Hence, both Restrepo and his successor Pastrana abandoned the reform. Meanwhile, land ownership

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<sup>13</sup> Dugas, J. (2000) "The Conservative Party in Colombia", in ed. Middlebrook. K.K. *Conservative Parties, the Right, and Democracy in Latin America*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 99.

<sup>14</sup> Livingstone, *op.cit.*, p.45.

concentrated more and more in the hands of large landowners.<sup>15</sup> This had vital implications for the regime's stability. Small farmers fell into a poverty trap. Most of them migrated to big cities, and added to the large mass of unskilled unemployed urban workers. Rising unemployment pushed most of the unskilled workers to seek their living in the underground economy. The underground economy swelled accordingly; and it became a major obstacle to the government's political and economic policies over time. Moreover, urban unskilled workers had weak party affiliation, which decreased the regime's legitimacy and stability by causing abstentionism and swing votes. On the flipside, rural exodus decreased the number of votes subject to the clientelist exchange between the parties and the departments. On the other hand, small farmers that remained in their remote regions impoverished even more. Deprived from public services and remote from government authority, they joined guerrilla movements such as the FARC and/or worked for drug cartels. Thus, the inconclusive issue of land reform nurtured grievances underling civil war. Even if the NF governments occasionally pursued rural development programmes, and provided credits to small landowners; their main allies of the regime remained big business and large landowners.<sup>16</sup> As a result, the NF did not emphasise socioeconomic reforms to remedy the structural causes of civil war.

The aggregate impact of the NF economic policies was decreased poverty (when compared to the 1950s), improved per capita income, education level, and extended labour market as a function of high growth and rapid industrialisation. On the flipside, although attenuated, income inequality remained high; rapid industrialisation and migration sharpened social tensions. Hence, despite high growth, democracy did not

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<sup>15</sup> Livingstone, *op.cit.*, p.46.

<sup>16</sup> "Dismantling the Coalition", <http://countrystudies.us/colombia/27.htm>

mature, since the elitist front excluded lower classes, persecuted leftwing ideologies that they saw as an obstacle to capitalist economy and to receiving US aid. The two parties mobilised support at the local level by distributing rents to local bosses; clientelism and corruption became widespread accordingly.<sup>17</sup> This turned out to be a costly choice for the government, because discontent coupled with elitism and ineffective government fuelled demands for inclusion and social reforms. The NF repeated the mistake of its predecessors; relying on landowner and business support and high growth, it did not respond to demands until the 1980s. Growing dissatisfaction led to the formation of the four leading guerrilla groups; the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), and the 19<sup>th</sup> of April Movement (M-19).

As mentioned earlier, the FARC drew support from the dissatisfied peasantry of the southern regions. Pinilla's offensive had failed to defeat guerrillas in these areas, and what is more, it had forged the ties between deported peasants and the insurgents. In 1964, the government launched another offensive with the US's help. The rebels were successfully expelled; but given that the local community continued to clandestinely support insurgents, the latter returned to the region in 1966 and formed the FARC. The FARC replaced self-defence strategy with an offensive one. The FARC easily gained control over the eastern regions such as Meta, Caqueta and Guaviare, since the population was supportive and the state was almost non-existent. The FARC undertook most state functions in these regions such as taxation, and provision of social services like health and education. It established courts to adjudicate local disputes. Ensuring order gained it the support of not only the peasants but also large landowners. Thus, the

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<sup>17</sup> Thoumi, F. E. (1995) *Political Economy and Illegal Drugs in Colombia*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner. pp. 22-30.

FARC stole the traditional support basis of the Conservatives. Moreover, it profited from the Liberals' inconclusive land reform to reinforce legitimacy among the peasants; the latter were grateful to the FARC for stopping the concentration of land ownership in the hands of large farmers, as was the case in the regions under the government's control. On the other hand, fighting guerrillas prompted the professionalization of the army. From 1964 to 1968, the number of troops increased from 22800 to 64000. The US augmented its financial aid and helped the government with its counterinsurgency plan, the Latin American Security Operation. The state also passed a legislation allowing the military to organised groups of armed civilians, death squads, to enhance counterinsurgency in the localities.<sup>18</sup> From the demand side, large landowners hired death squads to ensure the security of their lands.

The ELN, M-19 and EPL drew support from urban middle classes.<sup>19</sup> The EPL appealed to Marxist urban middle class intellectuals. The ELN gathered Marxist intellectuals and students, and later won support by displaced peasants and oil workers from the north, hence spreading across the countryside. The first structural problem underlying the issue of urban guerrilla was the oppression of trade unions and the persecution of leftwing parties. Leftwing supporters had no option but to follow unconventional ways. The international conditions increased the salience of revolutionary appeals; advanced democracies were staging the 1960s student movements, the Cuban Revolution had taken place and the ever-expanding state sector in Colombia was providing more and more employees to join leftwing movements. These structural conditions provided the grievances that the ELN and EPL appropriated. The government easily defeated these

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<sup>18</sup> Livingstone, *op.cit.*, p.45.

<sup>19</sup> Livingstone, *op.cit.*, pp.46-48, 54.

groups using military means in the 1960s; yet the ELN and EPL re-appeared in the 1980s due to the discontent with the two-party system.

The two-party system constituted the second structural problem feeding insurgency. The NF agreement left room for parties other than the liberals and conservatives. Even if they allowed others, electoral thresholds were too high for small parties to get elected. This restriction propelled popular movements. The M-19 derived from an urban-based populist movement called the Anapo, launched by Pinilla in 1961 to challenge the two parties. Anapo matured in the 1960s and gained support from dissident liberals and conservatives, urban middle class and alienated large landowners. It presented a presidential candidate as dissident liberals in 1966 and in 1970. Their candidate outpaced the candidates of the traditional parties; but the regime denied their victory. The M-19 stands for the date of the presidential elections in 1970. FARC dissidents also joined the M-19. The M-19 specialised in stealing guns, kidnapping diplomats and politicians and political assassinations.<sup>20</sup> The government's counterinsurgency tactics were less effective against the M-19, since the latter resorted to point shot operations and terrorist tactics instead of fighting guerrilla war. Since the NF refused to negotiate or to improve inclusiveness it failed to stop this movement.

In sum, the NF governments joined the past regimes in choosing military means (counterinsurgency offensives and death squads) to deal with the civil war. They did not consider political solutions and socioeconomic reforms were not a priority. Thus, they failed to alleviate grievances. Also, by siding with the business and large landowners, they further alienated the peasantry, urban middle and lower classes. One factor underlying this political choice was the desire to continue to obtain the US's

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<sup>20</sup> Livingstone, *op.cit.*, pp.49-51.

political, military and financial assistance. The other reason had to do with the traditional elitist paradigm that saw the left as a threat and demands for social and political reforms as populism. These factors however, provided ripe conditions for the expansion of guerrilla activities. In sum, the NF regime failed to assuage civil war.

### **The Decline of the National Front**

In the 1980s, Latin American economies suffered the repercussions of the Tequila Effect and most regimes began democratising. Colombia remained the only country not to enter the debt crisis thanks to petrodollars and foreign aid (from the World Bank and the US). Yet, growth slowed down from over 5% in 1987 to 3.1 % in 1990, even if the average was higher than the rest of the continent.<sup>21</sup> Decelerating growth partly had to do with the large ineffective state. The NF had chosen to curb down ramping unemployment by launching construction works and infrastructure projects. National debt was rising up as a result. Another reason was the end of the coffee boom of the early 1980s, and the ensuing drop in export revenues. Economic decline propelled the expansion of an underground economy, including drug trafficking and marijuana cultivation. This parallel economy set back the government's efforts to control inflation, and challenged government authority by cooperating with the guerrilla especially in the areas under insurgents' control.<sup>22</sup> Rising inflation and unemployment instigated social unrest and forced governments to implement austerity measures. Economic problems amplified the impact of social and political discontent, and eroded the elite support to the NF.

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<sup>21</sup> Martz, J. (1997) *The Politics of Clientelism*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers. p. 266.

<sup>22</sup> "The Post National Period", <http://countrystudies.us/colombia/28.htm>

Moreover, clientelism and partisan support basis had eroded since the 1960s, as a result of rural exodus and the expansion of a large unemployed urban class with weak or no party affiliations.<sup>23</sup> Clientelistic partisanship was impeding policy processes, as it forced the government to constantly bargain with its support basis. The fact that regions were often divided along factional lines complicated negotiations between patrons and clients. Hence, political and economic factors decreased the regime's capacity and legitimacy.

Ineffectiveness coupled with exclusion spurred apathy, abstentionism, and swing votes on the one hand, and popular movements on the other. Trade union militancy augmented; strikes, protests and marches multiplied to such an extent that in 1977 factories, public services and transportation became paralysed and the government sent military police into slums to break up protests.<sup>24</sup> Hence, economic decline prepared a favourable opportunity structure for social demands.<sup>25</sup> The Ayala government (1978-82) yet, retaliated with great oppression. Ayala developed a national security doctrine that defined all opposition to the government as a threat. Within this framework, he extended the military's discretionary powers and allowed it to penetrate the civilian life. As a result, the military arrested many trade unionists, and held trials for political crimes in military courts. Cases of disappearances and torture augmented. The army also persecuted opposition in the rural areas; many peasants had to flee their lands.<sup>26</sup> The resulting discontent translated as greater support and legitimacy for the guerrillas. Civil war intensified accordingly.

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<sup>23</sup> "The Erosion of Party Affiliations", <http://countrystudies.us/colombia/28.htm>

<sup>24</sup> Livingstone, *op.cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>25</sup> Haggard, S. and Kaufman, R. (1995). *The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>26</sup> Livingstone, *op.cit.*, pp. 52-53.

In contrast to the oppressive façade, regime capacity had weakened considerably, which manifested itself through the proliferation of private militias and the escalation of drug trafficking. In parallel to the expansion of guerrilla activities in the 1970s, landowners increasingly employed private militias for protection. On the other hand, Colombia underwent a coca boom as a result of the concentration of land ownership. Small peasants that did not migrate to big cities due to unemployment moved to the areas under the control of the insurgents for protection. In the lands they appropriated, they began cultivating coca, marijuana etc., and they rapidly prospered. This business attracted more and more discontented peasants as the government increased its oppression, hence creating an incentive structure. The FARC initially opposed coca cultivation on ideological grounds. Yet, it needed financing to successfully counter the government's ever improving counterinsurgency tactics. Besides, it had no alternative offer to break into the incentive structure shaped around coca trade. The FARC ended up collaborating with some drug traffickers. It protected coca lands and taxed drug dealers, while the allied cartels constrained the government authority through kidnapping, sabotages and assassinations.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, as drug trade extended, some dealers became large landowners themselves and began complaining about the FARC's taxes. This shared interest provided the incentive to side with the army and the traditional landowning elite. In 1982, by the end of Ayala's term, local elites, drug dealers and the military agreed to form a death squad called MAS (death to kidnapers) to fight the FARC.<sup>28</sup>

Both of these pacts produced unfortunate results for the government. To fight the guerrillas, it needed to cut off its financial links, which meant to stop drug trade.

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<sup>27</sup> Thoumi, F. (1995) *Political economy and illegal drugs in Colombia*. Boulder: L. Rienner. pp.51-54.

<sup>28</sup> Chernick, M. (1998) "The Paramilitarization of the War in Colombia," *NACLA-Report on the Americas*, Mar./Apr., 31 (5): 28-33.

However, drug cartels were very powerful; they had infiltrated the state apparatus, they were collaborating with the army to fight the FARC and political assassinations by the cartels deterred the political and judicial class from persecuting them. Moreover, some coca lands were located in the areas under the control of the FARC, and some dealers cooperated with the FARC. On the other hand, to continue receiving the US's military and financial aid, it had to stop drug trafficking. Three other obstacles toppled this problem: The government had no absolute control over the military, popular demands for democratisation had been rising, the traditional party and business elites strongly opposed to any policy that harmed their vested interests. Facing these constraints and seeing the failure of Ayala's strategies to attenuate civil war, the presidential candidate Betancur decided to side with the public, to negotiate with the insurgents and simultaneously launch a fight against drug trafficking to undercut the guerrillas' financing.<sup>29</sup> He used *apertura*, democratic opening, as a slogan to rally the population. This tactic won Betancur the elections.

The end 1970s and early 1980s constitute the transition period to the post NF era. The regime underwent crucial transformations that affected its capacity. Economic decline and demographic transformations weakened the regime's support basis and output legitimacy. Demands for inclusion intensified accordingly. Following its predecessors, the government resorted to political and military oppression instead of meeting demands and undertaking socioeconomic reforms. The resulting grievances fuelled guerrilla activities and drug trafficking. The latter emerged as a third force that factored into the civil war and that reduced the government capacity to win over insurgents (since drug trade financed guerrillas) and to ensure law and order in the country (because drug cartels infiltrated in the state.) Towards the insurgents, the

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<sup>29</sup> Thoumi, *op.cit.*, pp.53-54.

government pursued the traditional counterinsurgency tactics, no-negotiation policy, and exclusion without making any socioeconomic reform. What differed from the previous NF terms were the intensification of paramilitary use and the extension of the military's discretionary powers. With the latter, the civilian control over the military loosened, human right violations accrued. As the army gained partial independence, it would decrease government capacity in the next terms. Another fatal mistake was the alliance between the government, the army and drug cartels against guerrillas. This move mirrored the state's incapacity to overcome insurgency and to enforce law and order in its territories. Overall, this period exposed the ineffectiveness of the traditional policies to handle insurgency. Ineffectiveness became conspicuous when the regime capacity declined as a result of declined support and economic performance.

### Apertura

Democratisation started under the conservative Betancur government. He drew support from the lower classes but not from the political and economic elite. Betancur recognised the freedom of opposition and popular mobilisation, the right to issue a writ for the protection of human rights (for citizens to request a hearing about those who violate their human rights).<sup>30</sup> Another novelty was decentralisation; he enacted the popular election of municipal mayors (who were appointed by governors who in turn were appointed by the president), eliminated congressional funds that congressmen used for patronage instead of the community development. Decentralisation reforms were a major blow to partisan ties between the centre and the regions, since mayors were a source of patronage, and their appointments reflected the vote delivering ability

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<sup>30</sup> Martz, *op.cit.*, p.209. *The Politics of Clientelism*.

of parties.<sup>31</sup> Betancur proposed reforms concerning the electoral system (public financing of political parties, electoral reform, the establishment of an adequate civil service system) and decentralisation; but the Congress turned down.<sup>32</sup> These proposals challenged their clientelistic ties to the regions and their control over state patronage by increasing resources and the autonomy of the local level vis-à-vis the centre (decentralisation) and reducing the entry barriers to small leftwing parties such as the Patriotic Union, the legal party of the FARC, that the NF had been trying to keep out.<sup>33</sup> Betancur failed to realise all reforms he intended to pass due to vested interests.

Betancur also altered state policies towards insurgency. Betancur initiated a dialogue with the guerrillas. To the president, assuaging civil war was a priority. Therefore, he turned to economic issues only when he could not afford to ignore them. This choice however, reduced his capacity. Even if it fared better than its neighbours, the Colombian economy was undergoing through dire times when Betancur rose to power; i.e. the balance of payments problems, escalating foreign debt, public sector deficit, shrinking foreign reserves, the excesses of the financial system as a result of poor regulations.<sup>34</sup> As mentioned earlier, rising unemployment was pushing unskilled urban workers to the underground economy.<sup>35</sup> Domestic problems coincided with the tightening of the international trade. To narrow down the widening trade deficit and rising debts, Betancur occasionally devaluated the currency. He also wanted to increase trade protectionism; but he faced strong opposition by export sectors; i.e. coffee producers, flower exporters and the financial elite. The latter formed the allies of the

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<sup>31</sup> Shugart, M.S. (1992). "Leaders, rank and file, and constituents: Electoral reform in Colombia and Venezuela". *Electoral Studies*. 11:1. p. 27.

<sup>32</sup> Dugas, J. "The Conservative Party in Colombia", in ed. Middlebrook. K.K. *Conservative Parties, the Right, and Democracy in Latin America*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000, pp. 97-99.

<sup>33</sup> Shugart, M.S. (1992). "Leaders, rank and file, and constituents: Electoral reform in Colombia and Venezuela". *Electoral Studies*. 11:1. p. 24.

<sup>34</sup> Martz, *op.cit.*, pp.212-13. *The Politics of Clientelism*.

<sup>35</sup> "Inflation and Unemployment", <http://countrystudies.us/colombia/63.htm>

traditional political elite and had close ties to the bureaucracy.<sup>36</sup> Besides, he had many dissidents within his own party.<sup>37</sup> Without elite and congressional support to protectionism, Betancur pursued trade liberalisation. This choice sets Colombia apart from the rest of the Latin American countries that went with trade liberalisation because economic recession and foreign borrowing left no choice. Colombia followed liberalisation for political (and not economic) reasons. Thus, vested interests checked the president. Trade liberalisation reduced support from the large group of unskilled workers (that cannot compete in the open economy), small landowners, and middle classes. These however, formed the support basis of the guerrillas. Betancur appeared to side with the traditional elites, which limited the effectiveness of his dialogue initiative.

Betancur was the first president after Pinilla to try to negotiate with the guerrillas and to reincorporate them into civilian life. He set up a peace commission, offered unconditional amnesty, and a national rehabilitation plan before even the guerrillas agreed to negotiations. He also announced cease-fire and promised constitutional reforms to improve inclusiveness.<sup>38</sup> The military denounced the negotiation plan and cease-fire for being a part of an international conspiracy, and insisted upon counterinsurgency.<sup>39</sup> Regardless, the guerrillas dropped arms in 1984, and Betancur sat down for negotiations with the FARC, the M-19 and the ELN.

There was a lack of consensus on the meaning and possible implications of negotiations. Firstly, the guerrillas demanded representation in the assembly while the

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<sup>36</sup> Rajapatirana, S. et al. (2002) "Political Economy of Trade Reforms, 1965–1994: Latin American Style". *The World Economy*, Volume 20, Issue 3, pp. 307–338.

<sup>37</sup> Remmer, K.L. "The Politics of Neoliberal Economic Reform in South America, 1980-1994", *Studies in Comparative International Development*, Summer 1998, Vol. 33, no. 2, 3-29.

<sup>38</sup> Chernick, M. W. "Negotiated Settlement to Avoid Conflict: Lessons from the Colombian Peace Process", *Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs*. 30. No: 4 (Winter 1988-89). pp.53-89.

<sup>39</sup> Martz, *op.cit.*, p.218.

government offered consultation. Secondly, the parties divided over whether disarmament and demobilisation should take place before or after a peace agreement was signed. Thirdly, the parties disagreed on the format and feasibility of rehabilitation programmes. By 1984, the peace commission reached short-term accords with most major guerrilla groups, with the exception of the ELN. The army often intruded the negotiations with its denunciations. In 1985, the M-19 broke the ceasefire by seizing the Palace of Justice because it did not trust Betancur's sincerity.<sup>40</sup> The army retaliated with a big offensive. A lot of guerrillas, civil servants and civilians died in the fighting. Betancur took responsibility but whether the army took initiative without consulting the government was never established.<sup>41</sup> The other groups also took up arms. The cease-fire collapsed accordingly.

Betancur lost support in his party, the Congress, from the military and economic elites.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the peace process collapsed in 1986. Human right violations by the armed forces escalated. As the president's popularity declined, democratisation reforms halted as well. Betancur also failed his fight against drug trade. The cartels had expanded business considerably and had infiltrated into the judiciary, the Congress, the financial system including the central bank, the police, the army and the media. The cartels shot dead some ministers who adamantly advocated the struggle against drug trade. The government launched a series of operations but could not arrest anyone.

Despite all failures, it can be argued that Betancur's *apertura* discourse made a breakthrough in the system. It decreased abstention by appealing to dissatisfied urban

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<sup>40</sup> Chernick, M. W. "Negotiated Settlement to Avoid Conflict: Lessons from the Colombian Peace Process", p.66.

<sup>41</sup> Livingstone, *op.cit.*, p.55.

<sup>42</sup> Dugas, *op.cit.*, p.98.

voters. (Participation rate was 45% in 1974, 20% in 1976 and 50% in 1982 and 61% in 1986.<sup>43</sup>) Moreover, it encouraged the FARC and the Communist Party to participate in the 1986 elections through an affiliated party, the Patriotic Union (UP). The UP obtained 4.4 % of the votes.<sup>44</sup> In the end, democratisation became a dynamic that compelled the incoming governments to continue with this initiative.

In sum, Betancur government departs from the established strategies to fight insurgency. The president abandoned the traditional 'no-negotiation' policy; he declared unconditional amnesty, and a ceasefire before the insurgents even acquiesced to negotiations; and he initiated constitutional amendments. These moves initially worked to convince guerrillas to drop guns and sit down to the talks. But the process collapsed due to the army's denunciations, rising mistrust and violence. Three factors propelled this outcome. Firstly, the government lacked sufficient support in the Congress, from his party, the traditional party and business elite, and the army. Hardliners believed the constitution project and negotiations proved the lack of resolve and weakness. On the other hand, the president's decentralisation and democratisation reforms harmed vested interests. His economic policies did appeal neither to the traditional business and export elite nor to lower classes. Hence, Betancur faced a strong anti-reform resistance that he could not overcome. Secondly, the army had too much discretionary power that escaped government control. Its human right violations, alliance with drug dealers and open denunciation of the peace process weakened the government's capacity to initiate and enact policies as well as its credibility and public support. On the other hand, drug business had blossomed to such an extent that cartels counterweighed the president's authority. Finally, the president did not consider

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<sup>43</sup> "The Electoral System", <http://countrystudies.us/colombia/85.htm>

<sup>44</sup> Livingstone, *op.cit.*, p.55.

implementing social reforms to improve living conditions. This could be due to his focus on assuaging war through diplomatic and political means or the shrinking state revenues to finance such reforms. Even if their benefits are reaped in the long run, doing social reforms to improve life standards could be a good move to convince people to its peaceful intentions, to muster support from the public and partially to remedy the land issue that dragged most peasants into drug business or illegal economy alike. Overall, it is not certain whether or not Betancur was a true believer of the democratic process but his apertura discourse induced a powerful dynamic. What is more obvious than his intentions is the president did not have much alternative to not democratising the country and launching peace negotiations. The government had weak capacity due to insufficient support, the lack of control over the military, and declining economy, whereas guerrillas and drug cartels ever empowering. The government lacked the means and support to defeat both. Negotiation presented a cheaper and more legitimate solution to handle civil war and get public support.

### **Democratisation Attempts and A New Constitution**

The liberal Barco government came to power in 1986, with an agenda of terminating guerrilla violence and crime through social reforms, reducing poverty and reforming the judiciary. Barco relied on the support by the excluded classes and the reformist intellectuals to whom he also promised to terminate the NF tradition of coalition governments and to replace it by a single party government. He contended that the power sharing agreement underlying the NF regime yielded to an exclusionary democracy and that the two-party system gave no room for real opposition since governing parties offered similar programmes. However, according to the constitution, he had to offer cabinet positions to the Conservatives. The Conservatives declined the

offer on the grounds that they wanted to operate as an effective, reflexive opposition. Thus, Barco headed the first single party government of Colombia since la Violencia.<sup>45</sup>

However, single party government and effective opposition did not much transform the traditional partisan ways. Instead of making constructive policy propositions, the Conservatives frequently attacked the Liberals on a partisan basis, not because policy proposals countered their programmes but because their programme was almost no different than the Liberal one. Thus, partisan competition continued and it became particularly conspicuous with regards to economic issues.

Barco had a social agenda. His Social Economic Plan aimed at job creation and poverty reduction, because Barco wanted to reduce social dissatisfaction, and to prevent people from joining insurgency or going in the underground economy. The plan contained measures such as housing, social and health improvements, the upgrading or installation of sewage, water, power, health, and education facilities, and improving market and production capabilities for some small farmers.<sup>46</sup> The conservatives opposed Barco's reforms to eradicate poverty and to initiate neoliberal reforms because of partisan rivalry.<sup>47</sup> The Congress dragged most fiscal and monetary policy proposals. On the other hand, Barco government faced pressures for economic liberalisation by the World Bank and the US, export lobbies and the Colombian transnational elite.<sup>48</sup> Barco pursued neoliberal policies to attract FDI, privatised state-owned enterprises, deregulated labour markets, and lowered tariffs on imported goods. It follows that Barco's single government plan did not succeed to curb partisan and elite pressures.

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<sup>45</sup> "Post-National Front Political Development", <http://countrystudies.us/colombia/89.htm>

<sup>46</sup> "Role of Government in the Economy", <http://countrystudies.us/colombia/65.htm>

<sup>47</sup> Dugas, *op.cit.*, p.100.

<sup>48</sup> Aviles, W. (2006). "Paramilitarism and Colombia's Low Intensity Democracy" *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 38: 379-408.

Like Betancur, Barco had promised to improve upon participation and accountability. He was particularly keen on fiscal and administrative decentralisation reforms; i.e. redirecting tax funds from the central government to local and municipal authorities, popular election of mayors etc.<sup>49</sup> Decentralisation would strengthen the weakened ties between parties and citizens and curtail the power of regional bosses. But it would also mean to unravel the long-standing partisan ties between parties and the local elite, and to force parties to devote resources to improve party organisations at the local level and to launch affiliated grassroots organisations in the short run, which the Congressmen did not sympathise.

In 1988, Barco government proposed a constitutional amendment package including reforms to modernise the judiciary (the establishment of a constitutional court, the restriction of the attorney general's office to ruling only on human rights matters, putting human rights under constitutional protection), the legislative (mandatory voting and voter registration, and the use of the plebiscite on important issues), public administration, and the state of siege provision in the Constitution (Article 121).<sup>50</sup> Yet, as was the case under Betancur government, the Congressmen turned the package down because it harmed their interests and it hindered the fight against the insurgents. Hence, by the end of his first term, Barco happened to have failed to pass the reforms he promised and to assuage polarisation.

With regards to insurgency, Barco pursued Betancur's peace process approach but he de-emphasised negotiation and gave greater role to social reforms to reduce in poverty,

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<sup>49</sup> Martz, J.D. (1992) "Review: Democratisation and National Development in Colombia". *Latin American Research Review*, Vol.27, No.3, p.218.

<sup>50</sup> "Post-National Front Political Development", <http://countrystudies.us/colombia/89.htm>

and democratic reforms to improve inclusion. In 1987, he set a new peace commission that centralised power in the president, and an intergovernmental body for rehabilitation, reconciliation, and normalisation. However, negotiations remained inconclusive as the FARC refused to disarm and its continued guerrilla and terrorist attacks. The FARC did not trust in the government's capacity to follow through with the peace process when he faced so much resistance in the congress and in his party. In effect, the collapse of the peace process coincided with the rejection of democratisation reforms. As a result, civil war intensified, and the army and the guerrillas empowered at the expense of the government.

With regards to drug cartels, Barco intensified Betancur's policies to persecute drug dealers. The cartels retaliated by killing the liberal presidential candidate Galan who was an adamant advocate of the fight against drug trafficking. In response, Barco set up a special corps to combat cartels and received the US's military help. The cartels declared war on state, which led to bloodshed under Gaviria government.<sup>51</sup> Overall, Barco's administration did not make much progress in its fight against drug trade.

Determined to follow through with democratisation reforms, Barco mobilised public support. He helped to promote a student-based movement to advocate for an unofficial plebiscite on constitutional reforms in 1990. More than 1 million voters turned out at the polls, and voted in favour of the constitutional reforms. This unofficial referendum proved public support to Barco's presidency, and empowered him to set an official referendum to elect a constituent assembly and a new president. Parties and congressmen demanded the demobilisation of guerrillas (especially the M-19) as a

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<sup>51</sup> Livingstone, *op.cit.*, pp.59-60.

condition. The M-19 demobilised to support the reform process, hence allowing the referendum to take place.

The fact of holding a plebiscite and electing a constituent assembly presented another breakthrough within the Colombian political system. The referendum circumvented the Congress and parties. Moreover, for the first time, elections occurred in a single nationwide district instead of individual districts. This implied the elected president would not have to depend on partisan ties for support.<sup>52</sup> The election results were significant in many respects. Firstly, abstention was surprisingly high, about 75%.<sup>53</sup> Secondly, the M-19 won the largest vote share on any list in the elections; due to the low threshold of representation, the liberals obtained the largest number of seats. The Conservatives did not perform well due to internal factions.<sup>54</sup> Still, large support for ex-combatants gave some legitimacy to guerrillas, which translated as greater say in the constitution making for the guerrillas and higher costs of repression for the government.<sup>55</sup> Equally important was that the barriers to the entry of small parties were lowered enough to improve their chances at the polls. This transformation enabled some minority to have representation. Finally, Cesar Gaviria from the liberal party was elected the new president.

The new constitution brought transformations in three areas. It improved civilian power by bringing human rights under constitutional guarantee, enhancing the government's accountability by extending participation, taking away the president's emergency powers, and increasing local governments' resources (the notorious

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<sup>52</sup> Shugart, M. S. (1992). "Leaders, rank and file, and constituents: Electoral reform in Colombia and Venezuela". *Electoral Studies*. No. 11. pp.21-45.

<sup>53</sup> "Post National Front Political Developments", <http://countrystudies.us/colombia/89.htm>

<sup>54</sup> Dugas, *op.cit.*, p.101.

<sup>55</sup> Shugart, M. S. (1992) Guerrillas and elections: An institutionalist perspective on the costs and conflicts of competition. *International Studies Quarterly*, 36, p.136.

decentralisation reform). It curtailed the army's discretionary powers and increased the civilian control over its acts. It curbed down the traditional factionalism by abolishing the traditional party privileges such as the provision requiring an equitable proportion of all appointive posts to the second largest party, the congressmen's discretionary funds, alternate delegates in public bodies such as the congress etc. These measures undercut the two-party system as well as its partisanship and clientelism at the normative level.

It follows that the new constitution aimed to improve the government capacity and autonomy vis-à-vis vested interests. While the reforms concerning the party system transformed the relations between the government and the opposition, the reforms on the military remade the civil – military relations. Hardliners believed the constitution was too liberal and counterproductive for fighting insurgency, whereas some popular movements were disappointed by not seeing more democratic measures. The next administration by Gaviria abandoned Barco's single party project and sought conciliatory relations with the Conservatives. While smooth relations eased legislative activity, it allowed the Conservatives to maintain access to high-level sources of state patronage.<sup>56</sup> Thus, not much has changed with regards to their patron-client networks. On the other hand, the regime made significant improvement with regards to the military. Gaviria appointed a civilian minister of defence for the first time in 40 years. He created special civilian agencies to supervise the military's budgets, and training and education programs to alleviate human rights abuses. Hardliners accused Gaviria of siding with guerrillas that had been demanding the curtailment of the military's power. Regardless, Gaviria negotiated with the FARC and the ELN until the end of 1992. The

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<sup>56</sup> Dugas, *op.cit.*, pp.102-103.

process collapsed when the president failed to meet the guerrillas' demand for economic and social concessions.<sup>57</sup>

To sum, Barco administration followed the path to democracy that Betancur had paved. By the time Barco rose to power, the institutional veto points (the Congress, the army and elites with vested interests) were even more resistant and prejudiced due to the failure of negotiations with guerrillas. Therefore, Barco de-emphasised dialogue that proved to be ineffective and fragile in the face of so powerful spoilers. He accentuated social and democratic reforms to meet demands, while he tried to enhance government capacity through electoral and decentralisation reforms, and higher economic performance (which had limited Betancur's ability to initiate and enforce policies). Although his economic policy fared well, his political reforms hit into congressional resistance. As the rejection of democratic reforms deteriorated the president's image and credibility, peace negotiations collapsed. It can be inferred from the presidential terms of both Betancur and Barco that the executive remained too weak to outweigh vested interests and to enforce policies. Barco's particularity lies in his perseverance in pursuing democratic reforms. Seeing he cannot overcome vested interests through conventional ways, he sidestepped the usual procedure and actuated a popular movement for referendum. By resorting to popular pressure, Barco paved way to the making of the 1991 constitution that enhanced the executive and curtailed the military power. Hence, his presidency presents a critical juncture for Colombia's democratisation. Although he could not stop civil war, his social reforms ameliorated living standards from before and the relations with the guerrillas. The new constitution has not renewed the Colombian political system; clientelism and the weakness of the executive persisted. Yet, it checked the military's power.

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<sup>57</sup> Aviles, *op.cit.*, p.389.

## Conclusion

This paper sought to explain the unusual timing of democratisation, particularly the adoption of the 1991 constitution. To his end, it looked at the variation between the government capacity to initiate and enforce policies. The historical analysis communicates that the Colombian state has been a weak one since its independence; state institutions were captured by factionalism. Partisan strife brought about a tendency to physically eliminate the opposition and to rewrite the rules of the game in a way to monopolise power. This situation worsened when labour entered the political arena. The elitist regime neglected and oppressed popular demands for inclusion and social equality. This choice led to la Violencia. The roots of the civil war lay in these grievances. The military coup took Colombia out of civil war. Interestingly, the military regime was the first to de-emphasise oppression to handle civil war. Given the lack of support and mistrust, this strategy failed.

After the military regime, Colombia established a pacted democracy based on a power sharing agreement between the two factions in an attempt to attenuate partisanship. This elitist regime chose to oppress popular demands and uprisings. The order destabilised as the regime's economic capacity, effectiveness and legitimacy declined. This engendered popular movements and fuelled guerrilla activities. The regime accrued oppression, because the traditional political and economic elite refused to admit the need for change. This tactic exacerbated civil war. Seeing the rising demands and guerrilla activities, Betancur government chose to go for democratisation and to negotiate with insurgents because it lacked the political and military capacity to defeat them. Yet, the vested interests impeded the peace process. Coupled with economic decline and the withdrawal of support, Betancur could not finalise democratisation. Barco pursued Betancur's democratisation and negotiation strategy. He faced the same

institutional obstacles that lost popularity to his predecessor. Yet, he overcame them by resorting to popular support for democratisation.

Thus, the anomaly of the Colombian case lies in the incapacity of the executive. The executive wanted to negotiate with the guerrillas because it could not win over them. It lacked the control over the military that acted as a counterforce and disrupted policy enforcement. Democratisation appeared as a cheaper and legitimate solution to overcome institutional resistance, to obtain popular support and to alleviate the war. The making of the 1991 constitution was the culmination of a process of struggle by the post NF governments against vested interests. Ayala's oppression led Betancur no choice but to democratise. Yet, Betancur lacked the capacity to push democratisation through because of low economic performance and political support. Thus, the constitution had to wait until Barco administration. Barco faced similar resistance, yet his decision to launch a popular movement made a critical juncture that enabled the opening. Thus, the timing has to do with agency but also with the rise of popular demands that provided a more permissive structure.

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