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Paramilitary political violence spreads across Latin America and the Caribbean as a result of the implementation of "war neoliberalism"

Analyzing, reflecting and finding organizational antidotes to violence against peoples is a central aspect of political analysis today, and surely will also be in the immediate future.



Paramilitary political violence is spreading throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. Self-defense groups, drug cartels, militias, civic committees, *guarimbas*, commando groups and criminal organizations of all kinds. What are they? Why are they expanding? And above all, what purposes do they serve?

The phenomena of paramilitarism and political violence, understood as instruments of dispute for power, have been a characteristic present in several countries of Latin America and the Caribbean since the beginning of the twentieth century. But these have been strengthened and consolidated in the last forty years with the landing of the plundering

neoliberal model in connection with the counterinsurgency policies designed by the United States for the region.

The paramilitary structures are the materialization of an offensive counterinsurgency strategy that articulates actions of various natures (paramilitary, military, psychological, civic, political and economic) with the aim of fulfilling political and strategic orientations determined by the State based on the defeat of the insurgent movement (2009: 358).

Particularly in Latin America, in particular, we find different mechanisms. While in Colombia the design of policies and objectives occurs directly from the State, in Brazil groups articulated in this strategy emerge outside the limits of the State, from where repressive policies radiate.

There is also the case of the use of paramilitary forces by States that confront other States through proxy mechanisms or "*delegates*" – usually in articulation with local political groups – as in Venezuela. This includes the action of criminal gangs, instrumentalized in a geopolitical key, through a strategy aimed at chaotizing the target society, to install the notion of a "failed state" as a previous step to open, unilateral or "multilateral" intervention.

In any case, the paramilitary strategy, of a multidimensional nature and in close relationship with the dominant groups, maintains fundamental characteristics in all latitudes: political violence (symbolic, economic, military) is used as an instrument to maintain the status quo and silence any attempt at social transformation. Despite its multiple forms and origins, it recognizes a common objective: the defense of the interests of the extractivist, financial or industrial sectors that perpetuate the model of accumulation, as well as the attack on any group or leadership that seeks to oppose its reproduction and expansion. Let us now look at some representative national cases.

Colombia



Here was the fullest materialization of the link between the paramilitary project and the development and consolidation of the neoliberal model, in the context of a counterinsurgency dynamic driven by the State that keeps alive a conflict that originated decades ago.

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Within the framework of the bipartisan violence in the country (1936-1957) the "*Birds*" were created, the first paramilitary group at the service of the Conservative Party, whose practices against liberal and communist expressions were reproduced during the rest of the twentieth century and are perpetuated until today (Estrada, 2015: 273). After that period, a process of linking paramilitary practices with the counterinsurgency policies of the State continued to justify the persecution and extermination of dissident political thought and action.

Its strengthening found one of its high points in the 1980s, with actions aimed at consolidating a political genocide against the Patriotic Union (UP) party. The negotiation process between the State and the insurgency of the FARC-EP guerrillas (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army), a process in which the UP was participating, was interrupted by this paramilitary strategy.

The 1990s and the first years of the new century highlighted the bloodiest moments of paramilitary violence in the country. The negotiation of Plan Colombia with the United States led to the strengthening of the repressive apparatus of the State. Likewise, these

armed training strategies radiated to paramilitary groups, which developed a national strategy known as the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC).

The maximum political expression of this project occurred during the presidency of Álvaro Uribe. The injection of resources for the war made it possible to sustain the development of the latifundio, the extraction of mining and hydrocarbons, from the forced displacement of seven million peasants, in addition to giving a security framework to the drug cartels.

"War neoliberalism" is the result of the organization of generalized state war action against society, under an adaptation to the internal armed conflict of the "fourth generation and full spectrum wars" designed by the US (Ceceña, 2014). Thus, the neoliberal model uses violence as a tool of discipline and accumulation.

This model remains intact despite ongoing allegations of massive human rights violations. The co-participation of paramilitary groups and the repressive apparatuses of the State was evidenced in the National Strike of 2021. Between January and November 2021, there were 152 murders against social leaders, 88 massacres and 43 murders against peace signatories, plus the persecution and criminalization of opposition political expressions. This violence spread throughout the region with for-export versions of the counterinsurgency model.

Mexico

This country is another example of paramilitarism, used as a counterinsurgency strategy and mechanism of territorial displacement of indigenous and rural communities in favor of sectors of economic power. We highlight in this case two modalities: the offensive against the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in 1994 and the war against drug trafficking of Felipe Calderón initiated in 2006.

The state of Chiapas was the epicenter of the military and paramilitary offensive to stop the advance of the EZLN and the process of organizing different communities. The articulation between the Army, intelligence services and local power sectors (politicians, businessmen and police) led to the constitution of armed paramilitary groups. One of the best-known cases of his actions was the Acteal massacre in 1997, in which 45 people died. The attack had three objectives: to attack neo-Zapatista support bases, to break community ties and to paralyze civil society (Galindo De Pablo, 2015).

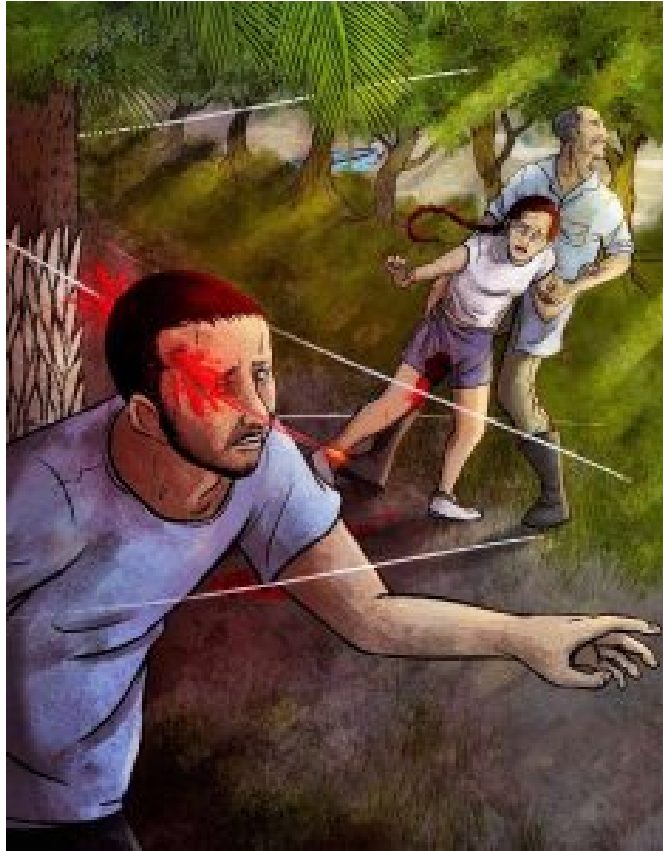


Illustration: Vorágine.co.

The presidential terms of Calderón (2006-2012) and Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) were marked by the anti-drug war promoted by the former. Following the guidelines of Plan Colombia and the war on terrorism initiated by the United States (Paley, 2020), a militarization process sponsored by the so-called Merida Initiative was carried out. Violence was structured as a way of resolving conflicts — for example, the form of the hitman — and social militarization was the breeding ground for the emergence of new paramilitary groups.

The war took place in indigenous and peasant territories, whose inhabitants were displaced and their lands destined for investments by transnational corporations (Paley, 2020). The cartels expanded alongside the illicit economy and arms trafficking, taking the form of irregular armies. The civilian population was a victim of the conflict: high rates of homicides, human rights violations, displacement and enforced disappearances. The case of the disappearance of the Ayotzinapa students in 2014 stands out.

Venezuela

In Venezuela, within the framework of a hybrid and multidimensional war, attacks with irregular groups were integrated into the US strategy, as evidenced by the so-called Operation Daktari (Britto García and Pérez Pirela, 2012), dismantled in 2004 by the Venezuelan State. While the action of shock groups structured the street protests from the guarimbas that began in 2014 – and relaunched in 2017 – the violence was especially intense during the administration of Donald Trump, in particular around the fake government of Juan Guaidó, when an open transnational participation was reached.

The most relevant episodes were the operations led by former police officer Oscar Pérez – among them, the attack on the headquarters of the Superior Court of Justice in 2017; the attack against Nicolás Maduro in 2018 and various operations by irregular forces. Operation Gideon —May 2020—, prepared in Colombian territory, stands out, which constituted an attempted invasion by retired military personnel of the special forces of the US Army, Colombian mercenaries and deserters of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces (FANB) residing in Colombia. The operation was organized by Miami's Silvercorp company, led by former Marine Jordan Goudreau and hired by Guaidó.



The help of the Colombian government was even denounced by one of the leaders of the operation, Yacsy Álvarez, who confessed that he maintained permanent contact with the Colombian National Intelligence Directorate, which offered him protection against the eventual capture by the Venezuelan Police. The Colombian state, which has lent itself as a pivot to U.S. interests, has been on a permanent offensive against the Bolivarian process in Venezuela.

These and other operations coincided with the activation of criminal groups linked to the "common" underworld, such as the one led by 'El Koki', which in 2021 clashed with state forces in their attempt to take strategic popular areas on the periphery of Caracas. After the clashes, state forces reported that they had found heavy weapons and technological devices, such as drones, grenades, bazookas and even a sniper rifle used by us and other NATO special forces (Mission Truth, 10/07/2021).

Haiti

Paramilitarism in Haiti has been expressed through organized crime, which for years has had a large presence in a country with a state in crisis, which does not have a monopoly on the use of force (Rivara, 2021). The institutional crisis, product of the authoritarian drifts of the ruling party (PHTK), could find a starting point in the dissolution of parliament at the beginning of 2020, through the intervention of courts of justice, the illegal extension of the presidential mandate and the intention to reform the Constitution in a regressive sense. These attempts to control the mobilizations initiated in 2019 by the embezzlement of Petrocaribe funds were not enough and were complemented by the action of organized crime gangs.

With a huge number of kidnappings and murders, the gangs had the ability to terrorize the population and completely isolate neighborhoods or cities, discouraging popular participation whenever the people demonstrated against former President Jovenel Moïse.



Several organizations denounced the collusion of the gangs with the PHTK. According to the National Network for the Defense of Human Rights, the G9 gang group was created to ensure its electoral victory (Francisque, 2021) and there are strong indications and denunciations of its financing by state actors and power groups. In fact, its leader, '*Barbecue*' Cherizier, is an exonerated policeman suspected of collusion with that party.

The second way in which paramilitarism manifested itself in Haiti was in the assassination of M \ddot{o} ise, starring former Colombian soldiers hired by the company CTU Security, a private security company in Miami based in Colombia and with a history of participation in destabilizing operations such as the aforementioned Operation Gideon.

Internally or organized from abroad, paramilitary violence has been playing a decisive role in maintaining the neoliberal order in the country that once dared to rebel against slavery and found the first black republic in the world.

Brazil

One of the forms of violence of the Bolsonaro government are the so-called "*militias*", made up largely of agents and former agents of public security. They do not seem to have arisen as a result of the absence of the State; they are organizations that act on their margins, committing crimes – torture, executions, disappearances – and forming an auxiliary force, carrying out the "dirty work" that the security forces cannot undertake. Militias are used to control territories in areas of the urban periphery, especially in Rio de Janeiro, and also for political purposes, as envisioned with the murder of councilwoman and activist Marielle Franco.

These practices achieve a certain legitimacy since they operate in the reproduction of material life and in the economic sphere — control of illegal activities such as arms trafficking or the sale of gas canisters; and also in the ideological.

The militias have their representatives in the legislative and executive branches. It should be remembered that the Bolsonaro government, by applying policies to promote armaments, benefited paramilitary groups. The number of registered weapons in circulation has doubled between 2019 and 2020 (FBSP, 2021).



Bolivia

In the process that led to the 2019 coup d'état, security forces articulated with parastatal groups were used. Generally, paramilitary organizations are in coordination with the so-called "civic committees", which bring together businessmen and politicians opposed to the Process of Change led by the MAS-IPSP. Some of these forces are long-standing, such as the Cruceñista Youth Union (UJC), founded in the mid-twentieth century and with a long history of fascism, including its participation in the coup d'état in 1971.

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Others emerged in recent years, such as the group Resistencia Juvenil Cochala (RJC), whose role was key in the protests prior to the coup, carrying out violent acts against MAS leaders and journalists. Among the most resonant cases is the attack on Patricia Arce, then mayor of Vinto, kidnapped from her office and publicly humiliated. After the recovery of democracy, several of these facts began to be investigated and some of their leaders, arrested and even sentenced to several years in prison.

A phenomenon that spreads

The information presented in this article aims to offer an overall look, representative of a problem that has grown in recent years and threatens to become part of the usual political landscape of the continent. However, this is not an exhaustive list of cases. Other

territories are traversed by violence, with varying degrees of development. In all cases, related to the old and new forms of national political disputes, but increasingly to US-oriented geopolitical intervention.

The use of paramilitary forces in the strict sense, as well as other irregular actors, is related to the development of hybrid warfare, which characterizes the political stage and seems to be here to stay. Analyzing, reflecting and finding organizational antidotes to violence against peoples is a central aspect of political analysis today, and surely will also be in the immediate future.

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