

BACHELOR-THESIS SUMMARY

DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT: CAUSE AND CONSEQUENCE OF THE ARMED CONFLICT IN COLOMBIA

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The Republic of Colombia has been going through a violent and prolonged armed internal conflict for more than fifty years. This situation has been threatening both the economic as well as the political stability of the country since the beginning of the conflict, and has affected in many ways the lives of the Colombian population.

The thesis tries to analyse in which ways deficits in the democratic system could have partly been the cause of the conflicts' emergence, but also in which ways the conflict is affecting the performance and stability of the democratic institutions. The principal hypothesis of the paper is, consequently, that such a relationship between the conflict and the democracy exists for the case of Colombia. In order to focus the investigation only on democratic factors, the essay leaves aside the other problems of the country like the illegal drug business and the various economic problems.

After a brief presentation of the Colombian political system and its principal characteristics, the paper elaborates a brief summary of the country's history, beginning with the years of *La Violencia* at the end of the 40's, and ending with the present day. The chapter shows in many ways how the different authoritarian Colombian governments and the indisposition of these to adequately address the social concerns and other problems, partly ended in confrontations that later evolved to the armed conflict. It presents also the principal aspects of the constitutional amendment in 1991, which tried to correct many problems contained in the previous Constitution, including democratic improvements like a broader limitation of executive powers.

Taking into account that the Colombian democratic system was not working properly at the years of the beginning of the conflict, the relevant question of the legitimacy of an armed struggle arises. Although the system in Colombia could have legitimized such actions at the beginning, many sources specify that the political conditions today (democratic liberties, elected government) don't justify in any aspect violent means of expression. This factor and the fact that only an insignificant part of the population supports the illegal armed actors, demonstrates that the Colombian armed conflict can't be considered a civil war.

Based on political science tools for the analysis of political systems, as it is the division of such a system in three dimensions (polity – policy – politics), the next part analyses the negative repercussions of the conflict over the democratic system and its performance as the principal question of the investigation. The thesis bases its statements principally

on sources of the Colombian political science literature, but also on an interview with former General Attorney of the Nation and former Colombian Ambassador in the United Nations Organization, Mr. Alfonso Valdivieso.

On the polity or system dimension, the paper addresses three aspects.

On one hand, the effects of the conflict over the individual socialization are analysed. Essential aspects of this socialization like the educational system, the liberty of expression and the mass media, but also the family integrity, are observed. And it is shown how the conflict, in many aspects, definitely has negative repercussions over these democratic institutions. The destruction of the educational infrastructure and the influence of the illegal armed actors over teachers is one example.

On the other hand, the paper takes the forced population migration caused by the conflict, the control of the illegal armed groups over considerable parts of the territory and the direct attacks on the civil population into consideration, and tries to analyse the effects of this situation over the representation of the population at national level, a situation called by the thesis “representative distortion”. Many of these aspects cause such a distortion, like the fact that most displaced persons end in life conditions under which it is impossible to participate in the system.

Finally, the problem of a political “brain drain” is analysed. Although emigrants keep the possibility to vote and participate being in a foreign country, the emigration of people with superior education probably causes a decrease in quality of the political debate and of the political socialization.

On the politics or process dimension, again three aspects are taken into consideration.

First, the effect of the armed conflict over such an important institution as the elections is analysed. Being the popular vote the most important mechanism to confer legitimate authority to the legislative and executive powers, and taking into account the proved pressures that the illegal armed groups exercise over the population and the candidates (as the very known example of the kidnapping of former presidential candidate Mrs. Ingrid Betancourt shows), the paper concludes that the situation of the electoral process finds itself in a very critical situation in some parts of the national territory. However, it has to be taken into account that the subversive fight has never been able to interrupt the electoral process in Colombia. The investigation also shows the considerable improvement that has taken place in the last three years in this aspect.

The paper also shows how the armed conflict in Colombia has partially caused manipulations and distortions in the electoral campaigns. Although, it is proved that electoral fraud is almost inexistent in the Colombian electoral process today, the paper analyses the fact that most candidates use the problem of the conflict to win votes, polarizing in this way the electoral census in a demagogical way. By promising the eradication of the illegal armed groups in his campaign, the actual President Uribe Vélez won the elections on the first round in 2002. Next, the paper makes some statements about how the problem of the conflict can be an obstacle to carry out a complete census of the population, taking into account the domination of the armed groups over some parts of the territory discussed in previous chapters. If the census doesn't correspond to the reality of the population, the electoral system can't reflect the real interests of the population as a whole.

Second, the situation of interest groups under the armed conflict is analysed. It has been stated by many NGO's that the illegal armed groups exercise a very strong influence over the labor unions, partly through infiltration and partly through pressure measures like threats. This has caused in part strong measures and repressions on the side of the state against the labor unions in the country. This leaves the labor unions in the middle of three forces (the state, the paramilitary groups and the subversive groups), not being able to perform their important task of interest articulation in the democracy.

Finally, this segment of the paper analyses the situation of the civil servants in some regions where the illegal groups' control predominates. These groups, by exercising pressure over the civil servants or killing and kidnapping them, and by influencing the policy process mostly at municipal level, obtain a substantial control over the public policies. Moreover, a rumor of paramilitary influence on the Colombian parliament has arisen in the last years, without being proven as yet.

The next part of this chapter analyses the way in which the armed conflict affects the dimension of politics. Concretely, the danger for a democracy that arises from the trend of governments to make abuse of its executive powers, justifying their policies on an existing armed internal conflict, is discussed. In the special case of Colombia, certain aspects of an authoritarian government have been present, mostly before the constitutional amendment of 1991. After this, the country has seen a notorious reduction in situations of Human Rights violations on the part of the government and the military forces. However, such cases still exist, even though the Colombian political system and its constitution provide many instruments to avoid this. It is not clear if the necessity of ending the war justifies the partial use of some authoritarian policies.

Another important fact that has to be considered at this dimension is the distortion of priority in governmental policies. The conflict being the most urgent problem to solve, the policies and financial resources are directed in a disproportionate way to military purposes and to other conflict-solving policies. This leaves other not so urgent, but also very important issues of national interest like education, unemployment and poverty, partly forgotten, affecting in some way the optimal development of the democracy.

Finally, the chapter in question makes an analysis of the effects of the conflict over the democracy at the individual level. How can an individual opt for democratic ways of interest articulation, if he or she has grown up in the middle of a violent conflict? A democracy is based on the conviction of its population that the democracy is definitely the best political system, and also on the credibility of the government. The conflict in Colombia has affected both conditions in many ways.

The next part of the paper turns the initial question to be investigated in the other direction. Is the existence of a democratic deficit a significant obstacle for the achievement of peace in the case of Colombia? The principal problem to be analysed at this level is the structural weakness of the judicial branch. Impunity is still a frequently reappearing problem in Colombia, and law enforcement often still very weak. Demobilisation of illegal armed groups has to take place in an effective legal framework. Otherwise, the demobilisation can end in a still more uncontrolled violent situation.

Other important aspects of democratic deficits in present Colombia are the still very strong two-party-system factor and the existing limitations for democratical participation imposed by the state.

The last chapter of the paper is dedicated to a reflection about the future of the country regarding security, peace and democracy, and analyses some of the political achievements of the actual president Álvaro Uribe Vélez. It also shows the need to address other important social, political and economical issues, in order to build a desired and sustainable peace protected by a fair and social state in which the rule of law governs, and based on mutual respect and love for Colombia, one of the oldest democracies of the world.