



Politicide Warning: Colombia, Stage 6: Preparation 3 August 2012

Colombia has been a very unstable country since its independence, 20 July 1810. Tensions in Colombia have arisen because of the polarization between political parties, its large income distribution inequality and its long history of violence. Since 1980 violence has increased, the drug cartels have corrupted law enforcement, and the Communist FARC rebels have taken over whole areas of the country.

In Latin America after independence, *latifundios* (*caudillos*) owned huge estates. This land distribution inequality led to a large landless peasant class. Colombia has never had a government that supported the redistribution of land. The most consistent feature of the political system was the revolving door rule of just two parties, the Liberal and Conservative parties, both opposed to radical land reform. The struggle between the parties was often quite violent.

From 1946 to 1964 the period of *La Violencia* made Colombia one of the most violent countries in the world. It was a feudal conflict, expressed as a conflict between the political parties, but rooted in competition for power between Colombia's leading families. On April 9, 1948 the leader of the liberal party Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was shot in the center of Bogotá. He was a populist who before joining the liberals had organized his own political party. His assassination outraged the population and massive riots broke out, called *Bogotázo*.

During the ensuing civil war between the conservative and liberal parties, 200,000 people were killed. The most destructive period was from 1948-53 when 50,000 people died. From the mid 1950's to the mid 1960's, the war took the form of "Mafia" violence, as marauding groups sought economic gain. In protest against the abuse of power from the Conservatives, Liberals abstained from a presidential election. This gave an excuse for president Ospina, who was a Conservative, to close congress and declare a state of siege. Conservatives burned the buildings of two of the most respected Liberal newspapers, *El Tiempo* and *El Espectador*. Liberals formed guerrilla units as a way to defend themselves. A coup d'état led by Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, commander of the armed forces, took power. Rojas Pinilla was considered to have a mild, brief authoritarian regime.

From 1958 to 1974, the National Front was created, a period of alternating rule of the Conservative and Liberal parties. The peace of this period created the political space for a transition to democracy in Colombia. Popularly elected bodies were equally divided as well as the cabinet and the judicial branch.

However, there was no room for other political parties, and in the 1970's, a left wing Marxist guerrilla movement started. The National Front system ended with Conservative President Pastrana. Fraud in the ensuing elections spawned a guerrilla movement called M-19. Former president Rojas Pinilla established an opposition party, ANAPO, which gave rise as a splinter radical group that allied with M-19. They became well known for snatching the sword of Simon Bolivar from his statue and seizing the palace of Justice. However, M-19 dissolved quickly to participate in politics.

In 1966, the FARC, or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia was created with a Marxist-Leninist program. Other smaller groups were also organized, including the ELN, which was inspired by its leader, Fidel Castro, and the EPL, Ejército Popular de Liberación, which espoused Maoism. In the 1980's, FARC's leadership broke with the Soviet communist party and FARC became independent, with its own Marxist-Leninist military and political doctrines. The FARC is currently the most powerful guerilla movement in Colombia.

Since the 1980's the FARC has made alliances with narco-traffickers and it moved directly to the cultivation of coca, marijuana and opium. FARC grew from 3,600 insurgents in 1968 to 20,000 by 2000.



In the 1990's, Colombia was disintegrating. One source of danger came from the narco-trafficking cartels that made enormous profits from the export of cocaine, principally to the United States. Especially well known was Pablo Escobar, who owned an entire town, but was shot in 1993. Smaller cartels were created in Cali that were less visible, just as profitable, and more difficult to trace.

Drug cartels undermined the authority of the government in several ways.

They employed violence and intimidation with impunity. When the government tried to pass an official decision to extradite traffickers for trial in the United States, their cartel hit men assassinated judges, prosecutors, law enforcement agents, and political figures. They blew up an Avianca airliner because they thought it was carrying police informants. Four out of six presidential candidates in the election process were shot to death. They also won public support by sponsoring soccer teams, building playgrounds, and supporting charities. Pablo Escobar even owned a preschool in Medellin. With their enormous wealth they corrupted the Colombian judicial system and police. Pablo Escobar's prison cell was designed by him and was more luxurious than many private villas. From it he continued to run his criminal empire.

Members of the M-19 kidnapped family members of drug cartel leaders, who unleashed a campaign of more assassinations. Also *nouveau riche* drug traffickers purchased rural estates and joined the landed oligarchy against agrarian rebels like the FARC.

Paramilitaries organized themselves as self-defense groups against both the communist guerrillas and the drug traffickers. Their argument was that if the government could not protect its citizens, they would. With a vague right-wing ideology, they offered their services to landlords, wealthy businessmen and even drug traffickers. Evidence showed that paramilitary units had close ties to the Colombian armed forces.

Serious human rights abuses have been committed by paramilitaries, especially by the paramilitary coalition known as the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, AUC). The AUC regularly commits massacres, killings, forced displacement, rape, and extortion, and creates a threatening atmosphere in the communities they control. They target human rights defenders, trade unionists, victims of the paramilitaries who are seeking justice, and community members who do not follow their orders.

Conflicts between drug cartels, guerrillas and paramilitaries have inflicted frightful violence in Colombia. By 1995, homicide rates in Colombia averaged 95 per 100,000 citizens, the highest in Latin America.

Assaults, kidnappings and assassinations between 1985 and 1995 forced more than half a million people to leave their rural homes and resettle in the country's major cities. By 2011, one out of every 55 Colombians has been forced to migrate because of violence.

Colombia is one of the most heavily land mine-affected countries in the world. Land mines claimed at least 8,081 victims between 1990 and October of 2011. Casualties have increased since 2002. Most have been planted by government forces in their war against the FARC. "A landmine is a perfect soldier: It doesn't eat, it doesn't ask for vacation, it doesn't need to rest and it is active for 30 years," said Lt. Colonel Mauricio Moreno, commander of the School of Military Engineers.

On March 12, 1997 the Inter American Court of Human Rights ruled that there have been systematic crimes against humanity against members of a political party, "Unión Patriótica" or Patriotic Union perpetrated by the Colombian government. In 1985 the Patriotic Union was established as a result of the peace negotiations between the FARC and the government of the former President Belisario Betancourt. Since its beginnings, its members have been victims of persecution, extrajudicial executions, disappearances, unfounded criminal prosecution, assaults and threats. In their court case, the petitioners said that the goal of this persecution is an attempt to eliminate their party. Agents from the state have participated in at least 1,163 murders of members of the Unión Patriótica, who were executed extrajudicially between 1985 and 1993.



Colombia's state, criminal, and revolutionary terrorism targets moderates, and includes kidnapping and attacking the civilian population.

Genocide Watch concludes that extreme polarization in Colombian politics, the rise of the paramilitary "self-defense forces", emergence of violent drug –trafficking cartels, and the continuing battle against communist FARC guerillas as well as corruption within the government place Colombia at stage 6: preparation for politicide.

Genocide Watch makes the following recommendations:

- The US needs to review its PLAN COLOMBIA aid to Colombia, and in addition to supplying arms and training to Colombia's police and Army, provide funding for education and health services.
- Prevent corruption during elections by encouraging creation of a powerful Election Commission with numerous poll monitors, both domestic and international.
- Assign more DEA agents to monitor investigation, capture, arrests, trials, and imprisonment of drug traffickers from start to finish.
- Provide funding for 24/7 security protection for moderate leaders and direct security assistance to human rights leaders.
- Assets of cartel leaders should be seized under a Colombian version of the RICO law, and visas for international travel denied to them and their families.
- Recruit and train a new group of uncorrupted, highly trained police to physically protect civil society leaders, and moderate leaders, such as activists, judges, and political leaders.
- Finance a major mine-clearance program to clear antipersonnel mines.
- Cooperate fully with the Inter American Court of Human Rights in lawsuits against traffickers, paramilitaries, and government officials responsible for killing, kidnapping, or assaulting Colombians.