

The Americas in the 21st Century: The Challenge of Governance and Security

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Colombia in the 21st Century: The Challenge of Governance and Security

I would like for each of you to take a moment and think about all the images that you can recall in your mind about Colombia, be it on television, newspapers, or even the movies. Think about those memories as far back as you can. And think about the first information you ever learned about this Andean–Caribbean–Amazonic nation that, depending on the source, has been at “war” for forty, a hundred or some might even say two hundred years. I don’t think I would be mistaken if I stated that many of you will have invoked images of violence, drugs, murder, and guerilla groups, although perhaps some of you may have a more positive reference point that includes our world–class coffee and beautiful flowers.

Colombia, however, has been a fortunate nation. Despite the problems it has faced throughout its almost two centuries of independence, democracy, as a political and social system, has never been seriously threatened. Eduardo Posada, prestigious Colombian political analyst, has pointed out that our people have turned out regularly to vote for their elected rulers since 1836, making Colombia an exception to the rule in Latin America. Colombians have never doubted that democratic values are the foundation on which we want to build our nation. Daniel Pécaut, French analyst, has also highlighted that Colombia

continues to insist, despite its eventful history, on the Rule of Law and democratic processes. This democracy has had its share of adversity, and the fact that it continues to mature despite those difficulties is a demonstration of the solidity of its institutions and the firm convictions of the entire nation regarding democratic values.

The so-called “revolution” in Colombia has failed, and ironically it is Ernesto Che Guevara who provides the best explanation as to why. In his book “Guerilla Warfare”, Che wrote with the finality of an epitaph: “Where a government has come into power through some form of popular vote, fraudulent or not, and maintains at least an appearance of constitutional legitimacy, the guerilla outbreak cannot be promoted, since the possibilities of peaceful struggle have not yet been exhausted”. When we talk about Colombia we are not talking about a series of fraudulent popular votes that have somehow managed to perpetuate themselves over two centuries, and we are certainly not talking about an ostensible constitutional legitimacy. What we are talking about is a solid and mature democracy that decisively faces adversity. If according to the Che’s own premise, the guerrilla outbreak cannot be promoted, then what is it that so threatens the Colombian people?

Today Colombia is facing a new enemy force. The new enemy is the gradual transformation of revolutionary guerrilla groups and illegal self defense groups toward a perverse mixture of vandalism, resource looting, terrorism, and drug trafficking. For the academic world, this phenomenon is not new. Paul Collier and Mary Kaldor have identified a generalized world trend toward the existence

of armed organizations that act as predators, justify their actions with political ideas that are weak and unpopular, and, what is worse, turn the civilian population into spoils of war. The Colombian people, its citizens, who are the very reason for the existence of democracy, become targets for terrorists and criminal organizations across the entire territory. When President Uribe began his term in 2002 there were an average of five terrorist acts, eight kidnappings, and eighty homicides daily. The challenge was not only to save our democracy, but also to guarantee that citizens would have the right to enjoy it.

How can a father of a family travel the roads of Colombia freely, if there is a chance he might be kidnapped? How can a union worker demand improvements in working conditions if he might be assassinated? How can a rural grade school student go to class if he or she might die from a homemade mine? We must guarantee the traveler's safety on the road, the union worker's right to dissent, and the children's right to a better future. That is why we are working on defeating terrorism, and all forms of violence.

And that is just what the Democratic Security Policy has set out to do. By increasing the standing force for the Colombian Police and the Armed Forces, 1,098 municipalities in Colombia now have Public Security Forces stationed in their towns. It was not always that way. In 2002, 15% of municipalities had no Colombian Police stationed in their towns. In addition to a substantial increase in members of terrorist organizations killed or captured, state control over the national territory has also allowed, for example, the return of 520 Wayuu Indians from Upper Guajira to their reservation lands. They had abandoned

their home after the assassination of 3 members of their community, and were displaced for 4 months. These are the true benefits of exercising territorial control.

The protection of the civilian population, one of the central tenets of the security policy, has also been successful. Homicide was reduced by 37% over the last four years. Today, Colombia has its lowest homicide rate since 1987. Although the number of Colombians who die violently each year continues to be high, the downward trend is an indicator that the effort has been worth it. Vulnerable populations have been another priority of the national government. It is not possible to guarantee democracy if we do not protect diversity, minorities, and candidates to popularly elected positions. During the last four years we have also seen a significant reduction in massacres of peasants by terrorist groups, and a lower rate for assassinations of union workers, teachers, and indigenous persons.

As a mechanism for protecting the public, this policy is producing results. We are also seeing satisfactory results in the war on drug trafficking. The United States, as an ally and a friend, has provided decisive support in this battle. The war against the world drug problem is everyone's responsibility. The United States has understood that reality, and has given us valuable assistance, allowing us to present decisive results. Sandro Calvani, UNODC representative in Colombia, has said that the country is winning the battle against the production of narcotics. According to UNODC figures, in Colombia 80 thousand hectares of illicit crops have been substituted with productive projects under the

Family Forest Guard program, a presidential program that helps peasant families to construct economic alternatives and to abandon illicit crops. So far, 59,000 people have benefited from this program, considered by the UNODC to be a model for the world as an alternative development program.

As a measure for sustainability in the war on drug trafficking, the Ministry of Agriculture has handed over 58,000 hectares expropriated from drug traffickers to victims of violence and displaced persons during 2005. These lands are equivalent to almost four times the area of Washington D.C. Together, Colombia and the United States are defeating drug trafficking, terrorism, and organized crime in our country. We still have a long road to travel, but you and we should all feel proud of what we have achieved.

We cannot protect the civilian population if we do not consolidate state control of the territory. And we cannot recover territory without strengthening our public security forces. We cannot strengthen the public security forces if we do not guarantee their efficiency, transparency, and responsible administration of resources. Coordinated action by the state goes hand-in-hand with the consolidation of democracy, and the defeat of terrorist groups goes hand-in-hand with a definitive end to drug trafficking.

An act of terror against a union worker is an outrageous act of intolerance; a kidnapping robs the confidence of citizens and confines them to their cities and towns. The same thing happens every time the terrorist groups plant an anti-personnel mine. Terrorism and violence undermine each individual's

democratic values and threaten the whole of society. Each act of terror produces a fracture in democracy as a social system, as a form of life, in schools, homes, and at work. That is why there cannot be democracy without security. Just a week ago we learned of a teacher who was assassinated by the FARC in front of her students, all boys and girls from 4 to 8 years of age. Her two daughters were there to witness this atrocious act. Security, which is nothing less than protecting Colombians from any threats, today incarnate as terrorism, is a condition without which it cannot be expected that our behavior as individuals, groups, society, and as a nation, will be democratic. Security thus becomes a form of social policy because it is a basic minimum for exercising the rights granted by our Constitution.

In Colombia, however, we are not opting for a “lesser evil” of which Michael Ignatieff has written about. We are opting for the best way to defeat terrorism and all forms of violence, based on our democratic framework as a fundamental premise. The Colombian people, and therefore the government that represents them, does not believe in sacrificing fundamental rights such as liberty in order to defeat terrorism. On the contrary, we believe that defeating terrorism is the road to the strengthening and full exercise of democratic rights. The Colombian government does not believe that radical and anti-democratic measures, like those our continent has witnessed, are the road to a safer, freer, and more democratic nation. Democratic security has not been characterized by restriction, coercion, or repression. It has been characterized by protection for citizens, and by democracy on the part of the state, with solidarity, cooperation, and commitment from all of society.

The Democratic Security Policy has created conditions for the exercise of the democratic rights and duties of the people. When President Uribe was elected, 350 mayors ran their offices from places other than the cities they governed, due to threats from terrorist groups. Currently, all Mayors are working from the cities and towns where they were elected. We have also guaranteed protection for democratic representatives. There are still unacceptable victims of terrorism, but the direction that Colombia has chosen is the right one.

It would be naive to think that the armed groups of criminals, drug traffickers, and terrorists are static organizations. In fact, they have demonstrated over time a capacity to adapt and transform themselves in order to maintain their businesses at any cost. Just a short time ago I read in the foreign press that the joint work between European nations and Colombia to strictly control maritime and air routes has forced drug traffickers to look for new ways to get drugs into Europe through African countries. It should not surprise us if in the future these organizations decide to expand not only routes but also markets, wherever institutional weakness will so allow.

The success of the Democratic Security Policy had had some effects different than those expected by the government. Throughout the last fifteen years we have seen how groups who once identified themselves as “political” have let their masks slip, and their true interests have become evident. Last week we discovered in La Macarena Natural Park that this organization had planted anti-personnel mines in the roots of coca plants. This is an irrefutable

demonstration of the interests of that organization. Nevertheless, this government, like all governments since 1984, has left the doors open to negotiation as a means to ending the violence. It is foreseeable, however, that, in years to come, the depoliticization of these organizations will continue, and they will abandon their political facade and concentrate all their efforts on maintaining their illicit business. That is precisely the dilemma described today by scholars of the “New Wars.”

In addition, the government’s decision to weaken these organizations has caused them to lose the flimsy unity of command they once had. This fracturing weakens the organizations as a whole, but because of their ties to drug trafficking and traffic in human beings (kidnapping), over the long term we could face self-sufficient bands of criminals, as we have seen in other countries in the region, that will tend to turn into mafias and gangs in urban centers.

If Colombia were to allow this to happen, we would see a rising tide in the culture of illegality, and the reappearance of corruption and violence as a mechanism for conflict resolution. This, of course, would be in detriment to the legality and viability of democratic institutions and to a culture of peace. Because we have learned from our lessons from the past, today we know that a security policy in a democratic context must be a comprehensive policy that foresees potential threats to security, and prevents them.

That is why in Colombia we believe that today’s social policy is tomorrow’s security policy. Between 2002 and 2006, the budget dedicated to social

investment has been greater than the budget for security. Seek and destroy strategies may win battles, but they do not build institutions nor do they generate the trust needed to make a modern democracy function. Poverty has been pushed back by at least 8 percentage points. A large number of Colombians still live in unacceptable conditions of poverty, but it must not be forgotten where we have come from and the efforts that have been made.

The Colombian Government has established, with the assistance of the United States, an Integral Action Coordination Center (CCAI) an inter-agency effort which seeks the social recovery of our national territory and counts on the participation of eleven different state agencies. The CCAI has focused its efforts on seven critical geographic areas that require the urgent attention of the government in order to guarantee the protection and security of its inhabitants and the improvement of justice, education, and health services amongst others. With an investment of over \$75 million dollars, 1.5 million people have benefited throughout approximately 113,000 square kilometers, an area larger than Iceland.

In addition, the national government has created more than a million new spots in schools, has signed up 7.7 million new affiliates to subsidized health, and has given technical training to almost three million people. It has provided food security for a million and a half people through the food security program, and has given a subsidy to 350 thousand families to keep their children in school under the Families in Action program. In 21st-century Colombia, social

investment and security cannot be mutually exclusive. They must be complementary

The policies to foment a culture of good citizenship in cities such as Bogotá and Medellín, and the commitment by the private sector to promote democratic values, education for peace, and peaceful mechanisms for conflict resolution, have resulted in a reduction in homicide rates and an increase in the capacity for peaceful co-existence in urban centers. Campaigns against corruption and the dedicated implementation of meritocracy have strengthened the credibility, popularity, and legitimacy of democratic institutions. Today the public believes more than ever in its representatives and in the institutions that protect it. The Armed Forces, for example, have a popularity rating without precedent in our history. Eighty-two percent of Colombians perceive favorably the officers, non-commissioned officers, and soldiers who protect them and defend them from the terrorist groups.

Without leaving to one side our total commitment to the security of Colombians, to protect them from terrorism, and to fight drug trafficking, additional effort in social areas and support for local initiatives to promote a culture of good citizenship will make our country's agenda for security sustainable. This coordinated action by the state, involving civilian society, and forming the foundation for democratic values, is what is going to keep Colombia from falling into the trap of illegality and violence in which we find immersed some of our brother Latin American countries.

Democracy is not nor can it be simply a political system where a few citizens vote and elect their governors. Today, Colombian democracy is a social system – a common accord regarding behavior, norms, and values that transcend the legal sphere and penetrate all arenas of the life of an individual. Today, Colombians behave democratically, sharing values such as tolerance, respect, diversity, honesty, and trust. This, in the long run, is the democracy that we must protect.