Uribe’s "Peace" Policies: Perpetuating Violence by Disguising the Colombian Conflict

Chapter - January 2008

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Chapter Four
Uribe’s “Peace” Policies: Perpetuating Violence by Disguising the Colombian Conflict

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Colombia’s problems are so complex that they make the Balkans look simple...If shooting people could solve the problems of Colombia, then Colombia would have become heaven on Earth long ago.¹

There can be no doubt that the violence in Colombia has increased in recent years due to the use of violent methods that had initially been set in place to address what has become a national quagmire. As a result of the current strong-armed policies aimed at the guerrillas, security seems to have improved, at least in the urban areas, where the large middle class and elites live, whilst the historically abandoned rural areas remain unstable, as guerrillas and other armed actors continue to control large parts of the country in their macabre dance of death (ICG 2005: 22).

Nevertheless, this perception of ‘tranquillity’ is not entirely due to the deployment of the army and its pressure on the guerrillas (TNI 2004: 4). Instead, it is significantly linked with the process of demobilizing the paramilitaries (paras) (ICG 2004: 7), which the government has been selling to the general public as the Ley de Justicia y Paz (Justice and Peace Law-LJP)². The Auto Defensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC- United Self De-

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² This law is seen by a great many people and international organisations as a carte blanche for the legitimisation of Narco-structures controlled by the paramilitaries. Indeed it is argued that there has been very little ‘peace and justice’. An editorial in the New York Times suggested it should be called “Impunity for Mass Murderers, Terrorists and Major Cocaine Traffickers Law”. New York Times, July 4, 2005. One set back for the government but a step forward for justice has been the pronunciation of the constitutional court that has deemed unconstitutional many of this law’s articles. For the Ley de Justicia Y Paz see: Office of the High Commissioner for Peace, www.altocomisionadoparalapaz.gov.co, http://www.altocomisionadoparalapaz.gov.co/justicia_paz/documentos/Ley1_975.pdf. For the constitutional court sentence see: http://www.altocomisionadoparalapaz.gov.co/justicia_paz/documentos/ley_justicia_paz.pdf
fence Groups of Colombia) are known for conducting numerous vicious attacks and massacres against civilians whom they believe to be collaborators of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC- Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces), and another guerrilla movement (the ELN), alongside union members and other sectors of the civilian population who are thought to be challenging not only their territorial and economic domination of a specific zone but also the government’s status quo.3

The Política de Defensa y Seguridad Democrática (Democratic Policy of Defence and Security- PDSD) has been exclusively directed at the guerrillas, and the Ley de Justicia y Paz has managed to contain outbreaks of extreme political4 and physical violence but neither of these are really aimed at dismantling and changing the dynamics of the structural violence (DUKES 1999)5, and other manifestations of violence, such as acting with endemic impunity, the drug business and the injustice behind the presence of so many violent actors in Colombia. These factors are ultimately a reflection or symptom of the original causes of the imbroglio that has been endured by Colombians for more than four uninterrupted and barbaric decades.

The constant mention of the word violence might seem confusing and a little over-imaginative, but it is a mirror reflection of the country’s present and recent history and from what this chapter argues: its future. As violence has become the primordial ‘essence’ of Colombia, the expression and its synonymous variants will appear as relentlessly in this article as they do in reality.

Why is Colombia scourged by such an ‘essence’, by such an undesirable presence? One could use this article to explain why it arose in the first place or why it has remained, conducting its dark mission in Colombia, but this would take more than just an article or, for that

3 The historical ‘communion’ between the government and the paramilitaries has been documented extensively. See Reuters Foundation Alertnet (October 2006); also, Human Rights Watch (September 2001).

4 Approximately 2,000 to 3,000 people are killed directly by political violence in Colombia every year. The total number killed per year oscillates between 25,000 and 30,000. The vast majority are killed by what is called ‘common violence’ or criminality which not being part of the political violence springs out of mainly the same reasons as other types of violent manifestations and cannot be objectively disentangled from the conflict.

5 There is a long story of political, economic and social exclusion which has generated conflicts within the country, which have not been mediated and addressed by the state. On the contrary, they have been targeted through mostly military means and through the extreme use of repression. This, in turn has transformed structural violence represented by the exclusion into physical outbreaks of violence.
matter, the best part of a lifetime. This essay will therefore analyse the current governmental policies and their intrinsically violent nature, before attempting to prove that their implementation does not aim at healing the core of the manifestations of violence but rather at covering them up by transferring or displacing one type of manifestation of violence by another phenomenon. One could call it a re-invention, or better put, a masquerading of the quagmire. Perhaps many other epithets could be resorted to, but certainly not the word ‘peace’.

Historically-speaking, these policies may be traced back forty or fifty years ago when strategies to end wars were designed from a ‘superpower’ perspective and there was no literature about the conflict that could offer some explanations and alternative options beside the basic resort to violence. The current administration’s rigid strategies have an archaic, simplistic, displacing and cosmetic structure and hence they can neither address the different intertwined spheres of violence nor the structural causes of the Colombian problematic. This article does not, however, attempt to explain why the government acts the way it does, as this would involve a much lengthier subject.

When president Uribe took office for the first time, in 2002, he spoke in front of a full Congress, addressing the violent conflict in a non-conventional way. At first, this seemed bizarre, although rather surprising and even hopeful, as he had pledged a military end to the conflict; a strategy that had been failing for the forty past years. Was he talking of a non-conventional solution vis-à-vis the previous president who opted for peace talks? Or was he intentionally oblivious of Colombia’s national history, ignoring its previous fifty years? In the latter case, the conventional method of dealing with the conflict has been to try to defeat it through yet more violence allied to weak and crooked exclusionary political solutions. Conversely, this ‘non-conventional’ solution to end the violent conflict in the country had been in practice since 2002. The administration is optimistic that it is achieving its declared aims of reducing political violence; despite allegations of statistical manipulation and that the governmental data does not seem to

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6 For a very detailed account of the peace talks under the Pastrana administration see Ruiz 2000.

7 One of these exclusionary political processes was the National Front. The latter was an alliance between the Conservatives and the Liberals that shared the government every four years. This agreement might have terminated most of the fighting between the two leading political parties but cemented deeper exclusionary policies, closing the political door for any other parties. This power-sharing agreement would last from 1958 to 1974. For further information and analyses on the National Front see HESPER 1978, and BERMUDEZ 1995.
match any other national or international organisation (SEMANA.COM 2006), in addition to military scandals which have involved the planting of bombs to blame the FARC just days before President Uribe took office for a second term. This optimism is questionable from many different perspectives. Despite the full military escalation of the present administration and the increasing financial aid to the military from the United States, there is little to show for the administration’s strategic success against the guerrillas or for that matter any reduction in violence (HANSON & ROGERS 2005: 24).

Political violence in Colombia is not solely a result of violence for its own sake, which would make violence some kind of regenerative phenomenon, neither is it an exclusive result of the illegal armies’ thirst for blood, economic interests and the plague of the drug business. If this were to be the case, fifty years of barbaric bloodshed and endless violations against humanity through an all-out war would have simply defeated the violence; and with reference to the opening lines of this article, Colombia would have transformed itself into a ‘heaven on earth’ (RUIZ 2001: 77). Unfortunately, there is more about types of violence related to physical, terrorist and drug trafficking in this conflict, and this has been documented endlessly by far too many social scientists and international organisations. The formational structures of the conflict can be seen daily, in the streets of the country: In the anguished faces of beggars, around the major cities, or in the lost lands of displaced people; as well as in the news that broadcasts yet another massacre; or in Congress where senators, the so called ‘fathers’ of the motherland, are backed up by criminals (SEMANA 2006); in the civilians who breath uninterested indifference (BARON & MOND 2001: 17), and where one of the highest inequality rates in the world persists, where 22 million out of 40 million people find themselves on the poverty line (SEMANA 2006). To these root causes must be added to the degenerative dynamics of fifty years of war.

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8 Senator Cecilia Lopez stated “that the country cannot be managed with lies” referring to the many discrepancies between the DANE, the national centre for statistics, and data from NGOs, unions, academia and multilateral organisms. It is to be note that the previous director of the DANE resigned three years ago when explicitly asked not to make public security data for Bogotá, Medellin and Cali.


11 See: HUMBERTO (1998); RUIZ (2001); ROCHLIN (2003); BERQUIST (1992), and PAPACCHINI (2001).
Nevertheless, during President Uribe’s administration there has been a renewed effort to further convince both national and foreign audiences alike that there is no political conflict and hence no structural violence, but only terrorism and drug-financed terrorism. Thus, it would seem that the simple cause of the violent conflict is based upon the very presence of guerrillas, who are the paramilitaries of the drug barons, and their filthy business, which is a violent extension of the military (RABASA & CHALK 2001: 57). For the interested reader this is an unsophisticated premise with little foundation. But, it does not cease to surprise, at least this is the public perception, that to most national and foreign politicians, might sound like the best, least demanding, simpler and more plausible explanation; one that could produce a tangible result, namely the end of the imbroglio. It is in this one-dimensional manner that Uribe’s administration is conducting its policies.

If we go back some fifty years, we will realise that it was state violence that triggered the violent peasant response (ROCHLIN 2003: 97). In simple terms, their raison d’être was to fight against the political exclusion of the ruling class and persecution of the army. The continuation of these violent methods generated the conditions for the creation of the FARC (SEMANA 2003: 53-54)\(^\text{12}\) and pushed many rural inhabitants to join them. Not ‘from any strictly voluntary decision, but as the people’s response to official violence and military aggression’ (BERQUIST 2001: 181). It could be contested that nowadays the army does not conduct these types of operations that violate human rights and International Humanitarian Law as well as the national constitution, and that it only conducts operations against the guerrillas or narco-terrorists as they are referred to nowadays, in line with the US war on drugs and terror.\(^\text{13}\) It could also be argued that there are no systematic government operations against civilians. There is always reality to prove the opposite. Attacks on civilians by the military and its illegal branch, the paramilitaries, still go on. They occur time after time and they cannot be blamed on mistakes when it is proven that they are blatant and evi-

\(^{12}\) In a review of a book called ‘Rebelion y Amnistia’ by Carlos Ronderos where he gathered eighty one people of the Colombia reality to talk of sixty years of history in the Colombian imbroglio, Jacobo Arenas one of the leaders of the FARC narrates how the FARC originated: (translation by author) … the guerrilla moved to Chiquito, others stayed fighting in Marquetalia. There were a lot of bombardments (by the army), they tried some bombs which weighed five tons. We took one of those bombs that did not go off…this action led to the creation of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias Colombianas.

\(^{13}\) For an interesting account of the US lead war on Drugs and Terror see STOKES (2005).
dent executions which are later portrayed as the casualties of the political war (EL TIEMPO 2006 a).

If one was aiming at explaining why the government continues to pursue a violent approach to the conflict, one would have to have at least one conspiracy theory. Yet, returning to the analysis of current policies and their unsophisticated approach towards ending political violence, one can only emphasise that what is being driven as government policy is nothing other than the disguising of violence. One example of this is the full military escalation against the guerrillas as part of the War on Terror and Drugs (mainly FARC), given that they have some involvement in the illegal drug economy (ICG 2005: 8 – 13). Yet, why are these military operations only conducted against the guerrillas and not against the paras, when they are known to be powerful cocaine exporters, whilst most human rights violations are committed by them? (HYLTON 2006: 4). In opposition to this, it could be said that they are taking part in the demobilisation process, but as will be demonstrated later, this serves as yet another disguise for the conflict. Stokes skilfully demonstrates that the War on Drugs is the public name of a continuous US Counter Insurgency strategy aimed at preserving US interests in the region, and using paramilitaries is part of this strategy (STOKES 2005: 112).

Furthermore, the War on Drugs is using what could be called “violent” methods to eradicate coca plantations, where the spraying of thousands of hectares has been proclaimed as the best method to eradicate coca plants. Again, the complexity of the conflict dynamics reasserts the failure of simplistic strategies. Recent figures show that after years of spraying the coca plantations, the number of hectares has increased from 114,100 hectares in 2005 to 144,000 hectares in 2006, a 26% increase (LEECH 2006). Numbers aside, the fumigation strategy is again inherently violent, the bio-warfare agent used to destroy the plantations is banned in the US for fears it may be damaging to other organisms including human beings (NACLA 2000: 15). It not only kills the coca leaves but most others things as well, destroying the lives of thousands of peasant farmers and causing increased deforestation (LEECH 2006). By destroying the lives of peasants and their crops as well as the national natural riches the government is in full violation of these people’s human rights. Their livelihood is being destroyed by a basically violent method that can only generate more violence, pushing the people to abandon their lands and join one of the armed actors; again, extending the exclusionary arm of the state: an evident form of structural violence.

Although, the tactics mentioned above are similar to the historic governmental approach, nowadays, from the perspective of the gen-
eral public, there is no conflict but terrorist threats and drug traffickers, thus the use of violence to end this threat is necessary to end the conflict. This masquerading of the violence, of the conflict itself is a very dangerous gamble that aims at obscuring the root causes of the imbroglio. It is easier to use the monopoly of violence to cover up the causes of conflict than it is to implement integral (SEMANA 2006) and just policies that would generate the socio-economic and political dynamics needed in Colombia. It is also less politically risky and more in line with Colombian society (BARON 2001: 15) and the international system, especially US pressure that sees everything through a simplistic terrorist lens (STOKES 2005: 115).

The protracted nature of the Colombian conflict makes it prone to simplistic, short term solutions such as those presented by the president’s office, which are: ‘monopolise[d] by a dominant interest maximised by the government at the expense of marginalised groups,’ (FISHER 1997: 85) over a period of fifty years of war, that witnessed thousands of deaths and more than two million internally displaced people (UNHCR). Calling armed actors narco-terrorists might be a convenient method of justifying the use of violent methods in a country that has been living with the reality of terror due to more profound reasons, thus reducing the war to the presence of armed actors. This allows it to pursue a conventional ‘superpower’ strategy that would continue to be unsuccessful (FISHER 1997: 79), and obscures the fact that the armed actors are a brutal persistent symptom of the original root causes of the quagmire. Unless, this is politically and publicly recognised, the changes will be cosmetic, whereby one type of violence will be exchanged for another. There will be a displacement of the manifestations of violence, and this would serve to trick Colombians out of a true solution that has peace at its heart. As the FARC and the ELN, the smaller of the two exiting Colombian guerrilla movements continue to be thought of as terrorists and not as the symptom of a socio-economic and political malady, the manifestations of violence will be stirred up endlessly.14

Despite having lost much of their political agenda (SEMANA 2003) due to the duration of the conflict, the dynamics of the war itself and their involvement with the drug business (RABASA 2001: 3915, the

14 A regrettable but timely example of this is the latest bomb attack by the FARC that happened as I was writing this article. Not only was the bomb in the capital of the country but in its biggest military complex. EL TIEMPO (2006 c).

15 Rabasa points out that revenue from drugs and criminal activities has allowed the FARC to buy guns and supplies that are smuggled into the country from Central America, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.
guerrillas still represent exciting political and socio-economic problems (Leech 2006 a). Nonetheless, the obliteration of history by disguising the conflict is vital in the current security strategies. One could question: what is the difference between fighting the guerrillas as such and fighting them as terrorists? In practice not much, but in terms of achieving a real end to the several manifestations of violence and reaching some kind of peace, it is enormous. If the current trend persists, fighting narco-terrorists seems necessarily to be a military strategy that limits actions to a strictly violent solution that can only generate more destruction and misery as well as erode even more the loss of humanity; sadly reminiscent of much of the archaic and unsophisticated actions from fifty years ago (Stokes 2005). Furthermore, it will continue to add even more complex dynamics to the quagmire. Controversially, it could be argued that had governments in the past, prior, let us say the period of, La Violencia, opted for a non-violent approach and had they promoted a more balanced distribution of wealth, political and social structures, that more recent factors such as the drug trade and the devastation it has brought to the country would not have happened (TNI 2005: 4). This line of argument could be applied to every administration since then. Of course it is impossible to know this for certain but there is little doubt that aiming at solving such a complex conflict with violence can only bring to the surface new forms of destruction and generate even more complex war systems. What this means, in other words, is more scenarios of macabre violence and more misery for Colombians.

Furthermore, it must be taken into account that the state has a constitutional obligation to protect its citizens from any violence, including violence by the state itself (Avalés 2001: 33). The state should therefore generate the necessary dynamics that are based on regaining human dignity, morality and the value of life itself which have all been lost in Colombia. The state should improve the quality of life starting with the most basic right: the right to life. The state should strengthen

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16 Leech comments that the: ‘...UN special envoy to Colombia James LeMoyne warned in May 2003 that, in a country where the inequitable wealth distribution has left 64 per cent of the population living in poverty, it would be a “mistake to think that the FARC members are only drug traffickers and terrorists.”’

17 For a historical view of this period see: Vallejo (1949), and Sánchez and Meertens (2001), who state that La Violencia did not end in 1958 with the beginning of the National Front but around 1965. Their view is that La Violencia ‘assume[d] different characteristics [under] the expression of [what] was political bandolerismo (Banditry)’. For a slightly different timeline see Rochlin (2003: 95).
institutions; it should eradicate the practices of *Clientelismo*,\(^{18}\) and dismantle the network of corruption in both the executive and the legislature, thereby forging a positive peace and not a negative one. Above all the state needs to relentlessly promote a more equal and inclusive society. It should engage in peace negotiations, not in selective humanitarian exchanges (SEMANA 2006)\(^{19}\) of which Colombia has experienced far too many and will experience many more, as the kidnappings continue (HRW 2005) This would to some extent initiate the process of addressing the root causes of the conflict and one suggests that this could be done with the US$ 8.5 billion dollars that the President aims to raise for continuing the war (EL TIEMPO 2006 d).

However, as the government intends to convince national and international audiences that there is ‘no conflict’, but only criminality and therefore that none of the root causes actually exist, the war will continue as it has been doing, for many more decades. The current political discourse and actions pretend to cover up the structural causes of the conflict that are more relevant than ever as more and more people fall victim to the barbarity of present-day Colombia.\(^{20}\) It will be speculated in this article that this masquerade is employed out of a desire to stay in power and establish new political and economic networks. Simply put, this implies: ‘a political model based on organised crime’ (HYLTON 2006: 5), that would allow particular individuals to hold onto power. However, this is nothing new in Colombia; it has been going on for decades. Some Colombians sit and watch whilst others are killed, displaced, disappear, or are dismembered. Indeed this list could go on for pages. The political and socio-economic exclusion of the past is powerfully present in Colombian politics nowadays. Aviles, describes the domination of the ruling class in Colombia through repression, based upon the military and its illegal arm, the *paras*, the preferred

\(^{18}\) *Clientelismo* is a term use in Colombia, which implies ruling through and for personal loyalties. The distribution of national resources and political relations is based on the completion of personal interests that overwritten democracy (ESCOBAR 2001: 108).

\(^{19}\) Here, Eduardo Plata argues that the problem with the current humanitarian exchange is that it classifies human dignity as though it is up to the state to select who is ‘valuable’ to be exchanged or not. If someone is useful to the state then this person would be on the list. It is important to note that due to the bomb attack by the FARC mentioned in footnote 14 the president cancelled the humanitarian exchange and promised to rescue the hostages.

\(^{20}\) This can easily be corroborated by reading a national newspaper, reports from International Organisations such as International Crisis Groups, Colombian Journal, www.colombianjournal.com, The Centre for International Policy’s, www.ciponline.org, Human Rights Watch, www.hrw.org, etc.
method, and a more consensual method: the promotion of a low-intensity democracy (AVILES 2000). This is a continuation of past practice, but under this current administration there is a relentless effort to picture the conflict as something that is not, a crude and obvious effort to cosmetically “paint” the conflict in scenarios that hide the reality to a fraction of Colombian society and the international community. One wonders why most Colombians cannot see this more clearly. The masquerade goes beyond treating guerrilla groups strictly as terrorists; it also treats criminal organisations (LEECH 2006 b)21 such as the paramilitaries as guerrilla groups.

The Ley de Justicia y Paz passed by Congress, last year, has resulted in the demobilization of some 31,000 members of the paramilitaries. Under normal political and conflict conditions a demobilisation process would be interpreted as being a very positive process; namely, the end of that group as a guerrilla movement or as paramilitaries, including their activities and the structures that fund them. The Ley de Justicia y Paz is, however, not that kind of process. Nor can it be called a peace process as the paramilitaries have claimed that they are fighting for the government (HYLTON 2006: 4). Just like the Política de Defensa y Seguridad Democrática, this aims at sending the political conflict and its root causes into oblivion. The Ley de Justicia y Paz publicly aims at removing one armed actor from the violent realm of the country to let it continue under a different name or in anonymity. It could be argued that the government is doing this regardless of what the future consequences might be. Blatant evidence of this is provided by the ever increasing occurrence that demobilised paras are joining other drug-related, illegal organisations. Nonetheless, the High Commissioner for Peace (HCP), Luis Carlos Restrepo has assured the Colombian public that the emergence of these gangs is independent from the demobilisation process and will be treated as organised crime (EL COLOMBIANO 2006). This assurance must be examined more closely, given that a demobilised paramilitary will hand in his weapons, to then join the network of the same or a similar organisation that is also funded by the drug business and this is supposed to be independent from the demobilisation process. Certainly, the HCP cannot be talking of the same conflict. It is again a simple way of turning the realities of the conflict into a superficial and unsophisticated political discourse that somehow

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21 Leech comments that: ‘The Resource Centre for Analysis of the Conflict (CERAC) [found that] the Colombian military and its right-wing paramilitary allies have been responsible for 58 percent of Colombia’s conflict-related civilian deaths over the past 16 years.’
pretends to demonstrate the end of the paras. An ex-commandant of the Bloque Catatumbo (a bloque is paramilitar military division) has stated that some demobilised members are now in the service of the specific drug cartels (EL COLOMBIANO 2006). If the demobilised paras who join drug cartels are to be treated as criminals then one must ask why the paras are not also treated as such. The one difference is the association to a loosely-defined organisation called the paramilitaries, nothing else.

It is generally known, and has been extensively reported, that many drug barons have paid their way into the paras in order to gain a clean legal record and continue with their illegal business (ISACSON 2006). Let it be noted, too, that the paras have been heavily financed by the drug business. So there is little change in the supporting structure of their business and brutal activities, only their name changes in the political realm, and this is well-understood by the government (EL TIEMPO 2006 b). Colombia might not have this organisation but many more fragmented ones will appear that will engender a cycle of bloodshed and social malady even greater than now. Again, we can see the false portrayal of this law and its intention, which does nothing more than remove from view what is seen as an actor of the war, and thereby legitimise the existence of these drug barons and by doing so, the very drug business itself.

In Congress, Senator Gustavo Petro described President Uribe’s ‘two-year-old peace pact […] with the paras] as a charade that has allowed the illegal paramilitary groups to reconstitute themselves and maintain their dominance of drug trafficking’ and has also accused him of lying to Colombian society (YAHOO NEWS 2006). Representatives of the government disputed Senator Petro’s accusations and data. Nonetheless, the reality that is being transformed by the Ley de Justicia y Paz, still survives and comes into play again. Petro stated that since the beginning of the peace process approximately 3,005 people have been killed by the paramilitaries. Representatives of the government said that the number is 252. The difference between the two figures is significant, but it was tilted more to Petro’s representation of the figures by data obtained from the computer of a paramilitary leader. It was found that he had ordered 558 assassinations since the process began (EL TIEMPO 2006 b). These are the numbers from just one paramilitary leader, just one. But it is not only the data concerning ordered assassinations that is disturbing, there are even more factors that prove that the demobilisation process is a masquerade of the conflict, riddled with flaws and new cycles of violence, despite being sold by the current administration as a positive process. The Attorney General Office’s has produced a report
in which it is put into evidence that one of the most powerful paramilitary leaders recruited peasants to play the part of paramilitary fighters in demobilisation ceremonies, to keep his good fighters in order to protect vulnerable zones (EL TIEMPO 2006 b). In addition, at the beginning of the demobilisation process the paras numbered some 15,000 and somehow now there are 31,000 of them, a number the government cannot explain away convincingly (EL TIEMPO 2006 e). Furthermore, a new criminal group, the 1,300 strong, *Aguilas Negras*’ (the Black Eagles) has emerged from what was once a paramilitary group. This group is already bringing its theatre of death and barbarity to five zones of Colombian national territory (EL TIEMPO 2006 e).

The demobilisation process is one of the cornerstone policies of Uribe’s administration and as in the case of any such process, there are many difficulties and setbacks. Nevertheless, when the process is flawed from the beginning (ISACSON 2005), given that paramilitaries and their drug business structures have been allowed to remain intact, then what we can affirm is that the basic premise and intention is not to remove the violence created by them, but to remove the entity known as the self-defence groups. These facts prove that there is an unequivocal process aimed at showing fundamental changes in the quagmire. However, the only change that seems to be taking place is the development of a process in which one manifestation of violence is mobilized into a totally different one, which may prove more damaging than all previous forms of violence (ISACSON 2005). It is hard to think that an administration that has conducted such a coordinated military offensive against the guerrillas, and has pressed for a referendum to allow the re-election of the president and other popular elected functionaries, should also be putting pressure on curtailing the media (STOKES 2005: 108) whilst advocating the curtailment of civil liberties and fundamental rights with an iron grip, as witnessed by the 4,362 people who have been arbitrarily detained in the administration’s first year in power. These figures account for almost double the number of detentions in the previous six years (HANSON 2005: 23), a policy that is well in keeping with the current US war on terror and its anti-drug rhetoric. Furthermore, it is equally unimaginable that this administration is not aware that the paramilitaries continue in their delinquency, as the paramilitaries go on massacring, whilst retaining their power in the zones under their control, at the same time as maintaining links with members of Congress (ISACSON 2005).\(^\text{22}\)

\(^\text{22}\) Isacson comments that: ‘…paramilitary leader Salvatore Mancuso boasted that the AUC controlled at least 30 per cent of the Colombian Congress.’

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It is also important to remember that the demobilisation process had promised no more killings, even though, as has been proven before, the killings still continue. It could be argued that it was not the fault of the paras, as they are being broken down into other organisations; nevertheless these killings have been committed by the same people no matter what the administration wishes to call them.

The previous president took a great political risk in achieving a peace settlement through failed negotiations, but this process at least made Colombians aware of the existing territories of violence (PAPACCHINI, RESTREPO & ESTRADA 2001: 236). The current administration has aimed at making these war zones disappear altogether, and displaces any manifestations of violence through a masquerade of new dynamics of war. Uribe’s administration also took a great risk by promoting its current “peace” policies. Nonetheless, this does not involve any political risk for the president and his administration as they are protected by the “success” that disguising the conflict has given them. Rather, it is a risk for the country and its future, which can only be envisaged in violent terms. The current strategies have a duality of existence. The Política de Defensa y Seguridad Democrática is based on simplistic and even cosmetic principles that aim at defeating the guerrillas and force them to negotiate from a weak stance. History has proven that it has not ‘resolved the country’s deep-seated structural flaws [and that] more fighting [cannot] permanently end violence’ (SWEIG 2002). The only outcome of violent means to address the conflict will be a further erosion of humanity and peace in this country where life has a price and where the military approach has failed for decades no matter how many more bullets the state can shoot.

Consequently, we begin to draw out some of the similarities between the old violence, that is the state violence and repression of some forty years ago and the new and current ‘non-conventional’ approach to the conflict. They are both motors of extreme manifestations of violence by either action or omission, which largely remain in place with impunity. The current administration does not aim to dismantle the economic and violent structures of the paras, as this would entail loosing one of its armed branches that can be used against the guerrillas (STOKES 2005: 113) and serve as an ally in controlling the country and its political institutions. (AVILES 2006: 407).23

23 Aviles points to: ‘[…] Uribe’s long history of support and links with actors or organisations associated with paramilitarism, including the CONVIVIR, while governor of Antioquia in the late 1990s, or with narco-traficants while mayor of Medellin in the 1980s.’
In addition, a breakdown of the process would mean a return to the massacres and disappearances that are linked to the existence of these groups (ISACSON 2005). So, the administration will ensure that the demobilised paras will get off the hook lightly. It is indeed this impunity that carries with it what must be referred to as structural violence, as most members of the self-defence groups will walk away freely, having served only minimal sentences, whilst the paramilitaries and drug barons will walk away with their riches and machines of destruction still intact. The situation remains violent because the victims receive no justice, whilst their families know that the killers of their relatives have won. Relatives of the dead see the process more as a ‘whitewashing of crimes than as a punishment of the perpetrators’ (WASHINGTON POST 2006). This disguising of the conflict also allows the violent parties to continue to kill, extort and disappear while there is supposed to be a process of demobilisation. Thus the government is not only guilty of manipulating the quagmire but also guilty of allowing this violation of human rights to gain a political victory, by claiming that they have “disarmed” the paras; whilst continuing with their very particular type of democracy that sponsors repression whilst promoting a liberalisation. Such a process supports inequality, while claiming the opposite, and claims to uphold justice while leaving civilians to endure the rule of drug barons for whom the whole country is being divided (TNI 2005).

The administration would like to claim the conflict does not exist, that all the abandoned people do not exist, that the dead are merely a number – and a small one at that, that justice reigns, and that Colombia does not need real inclusive peace, because the conflict simply does not exist. As history and the facts as presented have shown, reality does and will prove them wrong; violence is being perpetuated and legitimised. Unfortunately, for Colombians, the masquerade will eventually fail.

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