



Chapter Title: Colombia ("La Violencia"), 1948—1958 Case Outcome: COIN Loss (Mixed, Favoring Insurgents)

Book Title: Paths to Victory

Book Subtitle: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies

Book Author(s): Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, Beth Grill and Molly Dunigan

Published by: RAND Corporation. (2013)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt5hhsjk.13>

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Colombia (“La Violencia”), 1948–1958

Case Outcome: COIN Loss (Mixed, Favoring Insurgents)

Case Summary

“La Violencia” in Colombia was a distinctive case in which an internal political conflict rose to the level of all-out civil war for a decade before culminating in a negotiated powersharing agreement. Beginning as an ideologically and politically motivated insurgency/revolution fought by Liberal Party members and supporters against the suppression of their political power by Conservatives in the government, La Violencia morphed into an economically motivated conflict involving extensive rural banditry. The COIN force, composed of both the national police and the armed forces, employed a number of good practices at times, such as measures designed to win popular support. However, it did so inconsistently over the course of the conflict. In the final phases of the conflict, the government and COIN forces under President Gustavo Rojas Pinilla became so repressive, and the Colombian economy deteriorated to such an extent, that Liberal and Conservative Party leaders on the sidelines were willing to overlook their differences and reach a compromise to both unseat Rojas Pinilla and form a coalition government.

Case Narrative

Phase I: “The Bogotazo and Its Aftermath” (April 1948–May 1953)

Phase Outcome: COIN Win (Mixed, Favoring COIN)

Key Factors: COIN force employed escalating repression; Indigenous forces conducted majority of COIN operations; COIN force employed local militias or irregular forces or engaged in/enabled community policing in areas it controlled or claimed to control; COIN force of sufficient strength to force insurgents to fight as guerrillas (or to prevail in the preponderance of conventional engagements, should overmatched insurgents choose to give battle); Expropriable cash crops or mineral wealth in area of conflict; COIN force employed indiscriminate force; Government repression and/or exclusion of significant societal groups

from state power or resources; COIN force employed practices considered beyond the pale by contemporary U.S. ethical standards

Violence between Colombia's two largest political parties, Liberal and Conservative, dates back to the mid-1800s, when warring factions of the postcolonial social elite first created them. By the late 1930s, the country was becoming increasingly urbanized, and this helped the Liberal Party, the dominant party in the larger cities, gain the national majority.⁹³ Violence flared up again after the 1946 elections, when the Liberal Party's vote split into two factions, taking Conservative Party candidate Mariano Ospina Pérez to the presidency.⁹⁴ With Conservatives taking over in both local and national government offices, violence broke out between followers of each party. Following the 1947 congressional elections, the level of violence increased, as did police intervention on the side of the Conservatives.⁹⁵

On April 9, 1948, this violence led to a riot in Bogota, where a pan-American conference was being held. A popular left-wing Liberal leader, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, was assassinated in the riot, sparking further riots and vandalism throughout the country. Known as "the Bogotazo," this outbreak of violence led to the deaths of 1,400 people over a two-day period and marked the beginning of La Violencia, which rapidly escalated from heightened rural violence to a state of undeclared civil war.⁹⁶

After the Bogotazo, President Ospina Pérez remained in office but declared a state of siege in the country, and his government became increasingly repressive. The government banned public meetings and fired all Liberal governors, the army forcibly closed Congress, and rural

⁹³ Richard L. Maullin, *Soldiers, Guerrillas, and Politics in Colombia*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, R-630-ARPA, 1971.

⁹⁴ Norman A. Bailey, "La Violencia in Colombia," *Journal of Inter-American Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 4, October 1967, p. 565.

⁹⁵ Maullin, 1971.

⁹⁶ Dennis M. Rempe, *The Past as Prologue? A History of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy in Colombia, 1958–1966*, Carlisle, Pa.: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, March 2002, p. 3.

police forces mounted efforts against Liberal Party members. All Liberals holding public office resigned in protest.⁹⁷

Intense political maneuvering in this phase led to a seemingly hopeless situation for the Liberals, and they refused to run a candidate in the 1949 presidential election. As a result, the only Conservative candidate, Laureano Eleuterio Gómez, assumed the presidency in 1950.⁹⁸ Notably, the economy was fairly prosperous during Gómez's reign, primarily due to increased levels of foreign direct investment and an expansion of the country's export markets.⁹⁹ However, Gómez proceeded to significantly curtail citizens' rights, canceling pro-labor laws, striking down independent labor unions, holding congressional elections without opposition, censoring the press, and allowing mobs to attack Protestant chapels. His government was a "relentless anti-Liberal Party force," claiming that the Liberal Party sought the destruction of traditional Catholic values and a well-ordered hierarchy of social status in Colombia.¹⁰⁰ He also branded the Liberals as communists, and the violence between followers of the two parties continued.

In response, Liberal guerrilla squads took retaliatory action against Conservative farms and villages in the plains east of the Andes and elsewhere. Numbering approximately 20,000 members between 1949 and 1953, the Liberal guerrilla squads were challenged by Conservative civilians who similarly organized armed groups to both defend against and attack the Liberal factions.¹⁰¹ The conflict was extremely bloody, with an estimated 250,000 people losing their lives in riots, killings, and small-scale attacks between 1948 and 1956.¹⁰² At the height of the

⁹⁷ Mario Chacón, James A. Robinson, and Ragnar Torvik, "When Is Democracy an Equilibrium? Theory and Evidence from Colombia's La Violencia," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 55, No. 3, June 2011, p. 384.

⁹⁸ Chacón, Robinson, and Torvik, 2011, p. 384.

⁹⁹ Armed Conflict Events Database, "The 'Violencia' in Colombia 1948–1958," last updated December 16, 2000a.

¹⁰⁰ Maullin, 1971.

¹⁰¹ Maullin, 1971.

¹⁰² Corum and Johnson, 2003, p. 361.

violence, deaths reportedly reached 1,000 per month.¹⁰³ Moreover, brutality and humanitarian abuses were rampant throughout the conflict. As Norman Bailey noted,

Certain techniques of death and torture became so common and widespread that they were given names, such as “*picar para tamal*,” which consisted of cutting up the body of the living victim into small pieces, bit by bit. Or “*bocachiquiar*,” a process which involved making hundreds of small body punctures from which the victim slowly bled to death. Ingenious forms of quartering and beheading were invented and given such names as the “*corte de mica*,” “*corte de franela*,” and so on. Crucifixions and hangings were commonplace, political “prisoners” were thrown from airplanes in flight, infants were bayoneted, schoolchildren, some as young as eight years old, were raped *en masse*, unborn infants removed by crude Caesarian section and replaced by roosters, ears were cut off, scalps removed, and so on.¹⁰⁴

Toward the end of this phase, Gómez became gravely ill and allowed his first presidential designate, Roberto Urdaneta Arbeláez, to become acting president. Significantly, Arbeláez refused to fire General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla from the Colombian military, despite Gómez’s suspicions that Rojas Pinilla was conspiring against the government.¹⁰⁵

Phase II: “Installation of a Seemingly Benevolent Military Government” (June 1953–December 1953)

Phase Outcome: COIN Loss (Mixed, Favoring Insurgents)

Key Factors: Significant government or military reforms; Amnesty or reward program in place; Amnesty program reduced number of insurgents; COIN force employed local militias or irregular forces or engaged in/enabled community policing in areas it controlled or claimed to control; COIN force of sufficient strength to force insur-

¹⁰³ Armed Conflict Events Database, 2000a.

¹⁰⁴ Bailey, 1967, pp. 562–563.

¹⁰⁵ Armed Conflict Events Database, 2000a.

gents to fight as guerrillas (or to prevail in the preponderance of conventional engagements, should overmatched insurgents choose to give battle)

In June 1953, General Rojas Pinilla waged a coup to depose Gómez when Gómez attempted to return to office. Rojas Pinilla then assumed the presidency and imposed a military government. To defuse the ongoing violence, he offered amnesty and government aid to fighters who willing to lay down their arms, relaxed press censorship, and released political prisoners. He also transferred the national police to the armed forces in an effort to depoliticize the police.¹⁰⁶ These measures were initially somewhat successful in reducing the extent of violence and persuading thousands of Liberal fighters to lay down their arms. This relative peace was short-lived, however, and as the fighting again intensified, it became clear that a real reconciliation between the parties was required before a lasting peace could be established.¹⁰⁷ Yet, the nature of the conflict had begun to change as a result of these measures, transforming from a politically motivated guerrilla conflict to an economically motivated one perpetrated by bandits. As a result, the conflict became increasingly localized in those areas where agrarian extortion was most easily practiced.¹⁰⁸

Meanwhile, wide swaths of the public initially supported the coup, primarily due to the benefits afforded to the urban working and lower-middle classes by Rojas Pinilla's ambitious government programs.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, Rojas Pinilla created the National Social Welfare Service to meet the needs of the poorest citizens and restructured the tax system to place a greater burden on Colombia's elite. His government also embarked upon extensive public works projects to create jobs for the large number of unemployed citizens in the country. These projects included construction of improved transportation infrastructure and hospitals, as well as improvements of the credit system to aid small

¹⁰⁶ Bailey, 1967, p. 567; Armed Conflict Events Database, 2000a.

¹⁰⁷ Chacón, Robinson, and Torvik, 2011, p. 384.

¹⁰⁸ Bailey, 1967, p. 568.

¹⁰⁹ Maullin, 1971.

farmers. However, many of these reform programs were poorly administered and largely unsuccessful, rendering them counterproductive. Thus, while Rojas Pinilla continued to enjoy some popular support throughout the first two years of his presidency, support for his regime had already begun to fade somewhat during his first year in office.¹¹⁰

Phase III: "Rojas Pinilla Resorts to Repression"
(January 1954–June 1956)

Phase Outcome: COIN Win (Mixed, Favoring COIN)

Key Factors: Corrupt and arbitrary personalistic government rule; Expropriable cash crops or mineral wealth in area of conflict; COIN force employed indiscriminate force; Government repression and/or exclusion of significant societal groups from state power or resources; COIN force employed practices considered beyond the pale by contemporary U.S. ethical standards; COIN force employed local militias or irregular forces or engaged in/enabled community policing in areas it controlled or claimed to control

As noted earlier, the relative peace afforded by Rojas Pinilla's early actions was short-lived, and rural violence had flared up again by the end of 1953. By 1955, the conflict's transformation to one of economically motivated banditry was complete, and La Violencia was entirely in the hands of a highly organized, institutionalized consortium of rural bandits and urban gangsters, often working together with corrupt public officials and professionals. During this period, the insurgents were known as *pajaros*, and their operations and tactics had also shifted by this time. At times, they extorted wealthy urban and rural elements of the population. More often, they would demand a portion of an estate's crops or impose their own members as overseers of an estate, refusing access to the owners. They would then sell the crops to collaborators in urban areas and keep a portion of the profits. As a result, the profile of La Violencia took on a seasonal pattern, with violence and threats of violence escalating at harvest time. Meanwhile, the

¹¹⁰ Armed Conflict Events Database, 2000a.

pajaros were able to operate with impunity, securing compliance from state and local officials through very viable threats of assassination.¹¹¹

Rojas Pinilla's regime took several drastic steps to counter the violence, including raising police and military budgets, reversing its initial social reform measures, relying on repression, censoring the press, and jailing or fining anyone who referred to the president in a disrespectful manner.¹¹² The administration became increasingly corrupt during this phase, with Rojas Pinilla abolishing the existing Colombian constitution in 1954 and creating a new one that included a legislative assembly of 59 Conservatives and 33 Liberals (20 of whom were to be nominated by the president). The assembly elected Rojas Pinilla to the presidency for four years in 1954 and confirmed him as president again in 1957, a term that was to last until 1962.¹¹³

Meanwhile, the military became increasingly brutal in an effort to quell the violence. The economy was also deteriorating at this time, suffering a foreign-exchange crisis due to a drop in coffee prices and the government's inflationary policies.¹¹⁴ Faced with the threat of an ongoing military dictatorship, Liberal and Conservative elites decided to join forces to defeat Rojas Pinilla and began negotiating an alliance in early 1956.¹¹⁵

Phase IV: "Formation of the National Front" (July 1956–August 1958)

Phase Outcome: COIN Loss (Mixed, Favoring Insurgents)

Key Factors: Postconflict government a power-sharing government, with some kind of representation by both sides in the conflict; Insur-

¹¹¹ Bailey, 1967, p. 568.

¹¹² This measure was taken to extremes at times. For instance, in the February 1956 Bull Ring Massacre, security forces killed a sizable number of citizens for failing to sufficiently cheer Rojas Pinilla. See Armed Conflict Events Database, 2000a.

¹¹³ Armed Conflict Events Database, 2000a.

¹¹⁴ Maullin, 1973, p. 20.

¹¹⁵ Rempe, 2002, p. 4.

gency followed by another insurgency, significant terrorism campaign, or other conflict fomented by the same (or lineal) insurgent group

In July 1956, former presidents Conservative Laureano Eleuterio Gómez (in exile in Spain) and Liberal Alberto Lleras Camargo signed the Declaration of Benidorm, laying the foundation for a coalition government. In 1957, reactionary Conservatives and Liberals signed the Sitges Declaration in Sitges, Spain, agreeing to a power-sharing plan.¹¹⁶ The plan was formalized later that year by the San Carlos Agreement.¹¹⁷

The San Carlos Agreement laid out the details of the coalition government, stipulating that a Conservative would be the first president under the National Front and would be selected by a National Congress, which was to be elected by popular vote. The agreement also called for the restoration of the 1886 constitution, the alteration of the presidency between the Liberal and Conservative parties every four years, parity between the parties in all legislative bodies, a two-thirds majority vote for passage of any legislation, the establishment of an administrative career service of neutral parties not subject to partisan appointment, women's suffrage and equal political rights for women, and the allocation of at least 10 percent of the national budget to education.¹¹⁸

Also in 1957, President Rojas Pinilla ordered the arrest of a Conservative leader involved in the formation of the National Front, Guillermo León Valencia. This arrest led to student demonstrations, massive strikes, riots, the church's declared opposition to the regime, and the defection of top-ranking military officers. As a result, a five-man junta led by General Gabriel París deposed Rojas Pinilla in May 1957, forcing him into temporary exile in Spain.¹¹⁹ General París proceeded to assume power, promising a free election of a civilian president in August 1958. However, in December 1957, Colombians voted overwhelmingly in a national plebiscite to approve the San Carlos and

¹¹⁶ Chacón, Robinson, and Torvik, 2011, pp. 384–385.

¹¹⁷ Armed Conflict Events Database, 2000a.

¹¹⁸ Armed Conflict Events Database, 2000a.

¹¹⁹ Rempe, 2002, p. 4.

Sitges agreements as amendments to the 1886 constitution.¹²⁰ These plebiscites marked the approval of the National Front as a coalition government to lead the country.

While most Colombian citizens welcomed the establishment of the National Front, some of the leftist guerrilla forces established during La Violencia moved to the mountains and isolated rural areas, where they carried on a low-level insurgency with a few hundred followers.¹²¹ The guerrillas continued operations under Colombian Communist Party's tutelage and received financial support from the party. This relationship was firmly established by 1964 with the formation of the Southern Bloc, an insurgent movement with revolutionary intentions. Significantly for the future state of Colombian security, the Southern Bloc would become the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias Colombianas (FARC), or the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, in mid-1966.¹²² La Violencia was thus an important precedent to a much longer-lasting insurgent movement in Colombia.

Conventional Explanations

Most scholars of La Violencia focus on the repressive regime of Rojas Pinilla, as well as his failed economic and social policies, to explain the outcome of this conflict. The general argument holds that it took a government as unpopular as Rojas Pinilla's to convince Liberal and Conservative Party members to overlook their differences, join together to unseat Rojas Pinilla, and form a coalition government. Other explanations of the conflict focus on its transformation from a politically motivated insurgency affecting regions throughout the country to a more localized, economically focused conflict involving extensive agrarian banditry. Although this transformation is seen as narrowing its geographic reach, it is not considered to have decreased the extent of the violence in any significant way.

¹²⁰ Armed Conflict Events Database, 2000a.

¹²¹ Corum and Johnson, 2003, p. 361.

¹²² Maullin, 1971, p. 14.

Distinctive Characteristics

- La Violencia is distinct from many other insurgencies in that it began as a politically motivated guerrilla-inspired civil war that divided the country along party lines, later transforming into an economically motivated conflict involving extensive rural banditry in several smaller areas.
- The level of brutality employed by guerrillas on both sides of the conflict is notable, particularly to the extent that it reached innocent civilians and children.
- This conflict is unique in that its outcome was nearly evenly mixed, with both insurgents and COIN forces enjoying privileges and making concessions under the coalition government of the National Front. We consider the outcome to favor the insurgents because they gained the power of the presidency first under the National Front, but the COIN force did not “lose” in the traditional sense; it was willing to negotiate and was given substantial political rights under the National Front.

Figure 5
Map of Colombia



SOURCE: CIA, 2013.

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