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the Barco Administration (1986-1990)

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Abstract

With its longstanding democratic institutions and high levels of contemporary violence, Colombia represents an anomaly within Latin America. Using a contemporary historical approach, this article examines the administration of President Virgilio Barco (1986-1990) both in terms of its democratic and institutional reforms and national security responses. It discusses how the government managed to push for democratic reforms, in spite of the unprecedented levels of violence. It argues that despite numerous negative summations of the presidency, both at the time and since, it should be viewed in a more positive manner from a contemporary perspective.

Key words: Democracy, Virgilio Barco, Narcoterrorism, Paramilitarism, Guerrillas, Political Violence, Political Reform, National Security Responses

Resumen

Con sus instituciones democráticas y los altos niveles de violencia contemporánea, Colombia representa una anomalía en América Latina. Usando un enfoque de historia contemporánea, este artículo examina la administración del Presidente Virgilio Barco (1986-1990), tanto en términos de sus reformas democráticas e institucionales y su política de seguridad nacional. Se analiza cómo el gobierno logró implementar estas reformas, a pesar de niveles de violencia sin precedentes. Sostiene que a pesar de numerosas opiniones negativas sobre la presidencia, tanto en el tiempo y desde entonces, ésta debe ser vista de una manera más positiva desde una perspectiva contemporánea.

Palabras clave: Democracia, Virgilio Barco, Paramilitarismo, Guerrillas, Violencia Política, Narcoterrorismo, Reforma Política, Estrategias de Seguridad Nacional



Introduction

Colombia seems an anomaly.¹ Some scholars have alluded to the country's democratic credentials and its capacity to avoid the economic crises of its neighbours. Colombia stands in stark contrast to many countries in the region, having had, with a few exceptions, no enduring period of military dictatorship, caudillos or populist regimes. In the post-Gustavo Rojas Pinilla period, it has maintained longstanding democratic institutions and a relatively competitive electoral system, in spite of significant challenges throughout recent decades.

Concurrently, Colombia has seen significant periods of violence since independence, varying in duration, geographical location and motivation. Given the country's high levels of violence, it would seem easy to claim, as Steven Taylor (2009, p.2) has, that "...political violence in Colombia is no new phenomenon, but rather one that seems part of its very DNA". This is too simplistic, and avoids the distinctions within the country's intricate history. Instead, this essay shall follow the prudence of Malcolm Deas (1997, p.351), who notes that "Colombia has at times been a politically violent country".

It is perhaps too easy for scholars to dismiss the country as on the permanent brink of collapse into a failed state. To suggest generalisations of Colombia's past and present fails to understand the subtleties of each period of governance. The post-1960s conflict has been too complex and changing to enable a concise summation. Whilst over the recent decades at some points the guerrillas have occupied the biggest threat to the state, at others this role has been played by the drug cartels and the paramilitaries, though agency and drug finances are increasingly confused. Therefore, it is important to examine administrations both individually and as part of a progression, to obtain a better understanding of the changing patterns of Colombian violence, and the precise 'times' that Deas refers to. In light of this, the specific

¹ This paper was originally presented for the degree of Master of Science in Latin American Studies at the University of Oxford. I thank Malcolm Deas, Jorge Restrepo, Andrés Vargas, Alonso Tobón García and Manuel Mocosco Rojas for their help and useful discussions at various stages of the text's development. I also would like to express my gratitude to CERAC for their resources and general assistance. I especially thank Eduardo Posada-Carbó for his support and suggestions in writing this essay; his views and insights were incredibly helpful. However, any oversights or mistakes remain my own.

administration of Virgilio Barco Vargas (1986-1990) has been chosen as the focus of this study.

Historical context

Having won the 1986 presidential election, the Barco administration had to withstand and attempt to control one of the most violent periods in recent history. A weaker president and political system may have collapsed under such pressure. To understand the context of Barco's presidency, it is important to summarise his predecessor's efforts at conflict resolution and where the 'threats' to stability came from.

Belisario Betancur was elected in 1982 and tried to resolve escalating levels of violence with his *Apertura Democrática* (Bejarano Avila, 1994). Attempting to bring the guerrillas in to the political sphere, he negotiated with them through the *Comisión de Paz*, created in 1982. This resulted in the signing of various cease-fire agreements with a number of the armed insurgents, including both the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) in March 1984 and the *Movimiento del 19 de Abril* (M19) in August 1984. However, it should be noted that under these pacts, the insurgents were not required to surrender their arms.

The main guerrilla groups active during Barco's presidency were the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), FARC and M19. In response to state brutality during *La Violencia* the formation of rural self-defence groups was encouraged by the Communist Party. Founded in 1964, the FARC took its origins from these rural, peasant-based enclaves (Pizarro Leongómez, 1991). The FARC slowly grew until the 1982 *Séptima Conferencia*, when decisions were taken to urbanise the conflict and seek new sources of funding, namely through kidnap, extortion and revenues received from the drug trade (Sánchez, 2006). The FARC used the bilateral ceasefire signed in 1984, which would continue for three years, to strengthen militarily and politically. This included the founding of the *Unión Patriótica* (UP) party in 1985, which won Congressional representation in 1986.

The ELN was a Marxist insurgent group founded by Cuban-trained students that began operating in 1962 (Peñate, 1999). At first relatively small in size, it, as the FARC, strengthened in numbers and *frentes* in the 1980s



to become the second biggest guerrilla group in Colombia, both in terms of recruits and acts perpetrated.

The M19 was formed in reaction to the outcome of the 1970 presidential elections, when Rojas Pinilla was allegedly denied victory through electoral fraud. Having gained notoriety in the 1980s through various criminal undertakings, it was the 6 November 1985 seizure of the Palacio de Justicia, with a death toll of 88 (El País, 9 November 1985), which showed both the extent of the group's force and the severe ineptitude of the army and peace process. According to Marc Chernick (1999, p.34), this event reduced Betancur's peace efforts to nothing more than "...un montón de escombros humeantes del edificio público que se había erigido para la justicia".

Criticism of Betancur's lax handling of the guerrillas was so strong from certain parts of the military that it saw a rise in paramilitarism and the first manifestations of the *Guerra Sucia*. Having originally mobilised in 1968 to counter the communist insurrection, additional paramilitary groups were formed in the early 1980s to protect the general population from the threats of kidnap and guerrilla violence. Not unified under the term *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC) until 1997, various groups were influenced and funded by various cartel bosses. These drug cartels began consolidating their power towards the late 1970s and early 1980s. The 1984 assassination of Betancur's Justice Minister, and to an extent the Palacio de Justicia assault, demonstrates the growing force and resort to violence of the drug mafias.² In this manner, Barco received a country plagued by increasing violence from various agents, with the government understanding the left-wing guerrillas as the main perpetrators.

Theoretical approach and essay structure

The four years of any presidential term are often complex and multifaceted. Thus, given the nature of this essay, it will only be possible here to provide brief descriptions and analyse specific aspects of the Barco administration. Whilst many commentators and academics of the time passed negative judgements over Barco's presidency

² More recent findings have suggested that the Medellín Cartel financed the M19's seizure of the building (see for example: El Mundo, 17 December 2009). However, it should be noted that there is continued debate over this linkage.

(Mendoza, 1990; Pearce, 1990), it shall be argued that a more positive summation of his term in office is warranted.

This essay adopts a contemporary history methodological approach, based on the consultation of key primary sources of the period, such as journalistic articles, Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) reports, official publications and memoirs of political protagonists of the time, taking also into account the available secondary literature. Whilst some examined texts are significantly critical of the Barco administration, most notably the *Comisión de Estudios Sobre La Violencia* and Amnesty International publications, counterbalancing sources including official Presidential documents have additionally been consulted.

Section One assesses the nature of violence during this administration, evaluating the extent of the threat presented by the guerrilla groups, what the government termed 'narcoterrorism' and the increase in paramilitaries. As a point of departure for this exercise, it is important to understand the dimension of violence that Colombia faced during the Barco administration. Section Two examines the manner in which the government attempted to confront this rising surge in violence. It compares the measures Barco took when taking office and contrast them with those in the second half of his time in power. Section Three examines some of the democratic reforms undertaken by the administration, including attempts at constitutional reform, decentralisation, the widening of the political sphere to include new actors and the outcomes of democratic elections.

The essay will then conclude that during his four years in power, Virgilio Barco managed to steer the country away from complete collapse that many perceived Colombia was heading towards (Zuleta, 1990). Instead, he managed to weather the fiercest of 'storms'. Before leaving power, Barco claimed that "*Colombia ha logrado superar, con éxito, quizás el período más difícil de su historia reciente. La tormenta ha quedado atrás. La nave se ha perfeccionado*" (Barco, 1990, p.12). It will be the task of historians to pass judgement, to which this modest essay hopes to contribute.



Section One: An imploding society

To return to Deas' previous observation, "Colombia has at times been a politically violent country". Coming into power on 7 August 1986, Barco faced one of these specific 'times' with four years of high-level violence. Violence, as can be seen in Graph One, was already on the increase from 1984 allowing Barco no time to 'ease' into office. Combating violence, which was critically eroding the state's capacity to uphold the rule of law and implement socio-welfare schemes, became the primary challenge for this administration.

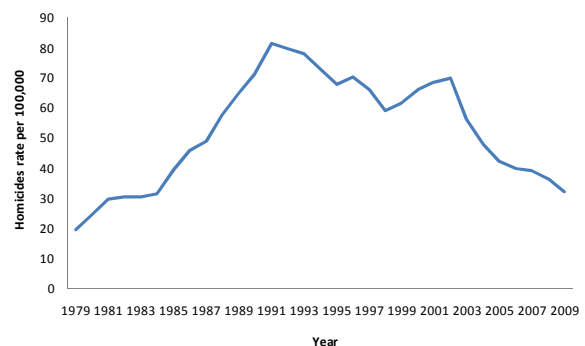
In 1987 the government funded an independent enquiry into Colombian violence and democracy, led by experienced academics. This commission understood violence as a collective phenomenon, predominantly the result of social factors such as inequality, poverty and lack of education. Their conclusions were summarised by the phrase: "*Mucho más que la del monte, las violencias que nos están matando son las de la calle*" (*Comisión de estudios sobre la violencia*, 1987, p.18), declaring that the armed conflict was only responsible for 7.51% of murders in Colombia. The findings were by and large accepted as the 'official' diagnosis of the problem (Deas, 1999), remaining within governmental circles largely until Álvaro Uribe's presidency.

However, more recent investigations have questioned this interpretation (Montenegro & Esteban Posada, 2001; Rubio, 1999); Rubio in particular has argued that the empirical evidence for the commission's findings was weak. These authors suggest that the rise in Colombian violence should be explained predominantly by other factors: the development of narcotrafficking, a weak criminal-justice system, the range of violent actors and the weight of agency in the form of powerful criminal organizations; with such factors as socio-inequality and poverty carrying less explicative weight (Ibid.). Therefore, it is important here to stress the multifaceted and complex nature of the violence in Colombia. As Daniel Pécaut (1999, p. 142) has stated "...the extremely heterogeneous nature of the violence prevents it from

coalescing along a single axis of conflict". It is necessary to seek precision instead of referring to 'violence' as a homogeneous, historical phenomenon.

Following the latter diagnosis, this Section focuses on the main agents of violence, namely the guerrillas, drug cartels and paramilitaries. They led to the increase in violence, directly and indirectly, themselves killing numerous citizens, as well as spreading arms throughout Colombia and undermining the judiciary. It is not the intention of this Section to assess the historical origins of the violence.³ Rather, it presents the extremity of violence during the period, when the number of yearly homicides increased from 15,672 in 1986 to 24,267 in 1990 (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 1993, pp. 123, 183).

Graph 1: Homicides rate in Colombia (1985-2009)



Source: Dane and National Police of Colombia
Data processed by CERAC

The Drug Cartels

The Colombian conflict changed with the convergence of "coca y Kaláshnikov" (Pizarro Leongómez, 2004, p.71). The global upsurge in drug consumption in the late 1970s

³ The reader is recommended to consult Deas & Gaitán Daza, 1995



and early 1980s was a major factor in explaining the increase in the nation's violence and the persistence of high murder rates in the 1980s. An extension of the violence occurred under Betancur and was passed on to Barco, with an all-out war occurring between the drug distributors and governmental forces, journalists and the judicial system.

Drug-funded violence, labelled by the government as 'narcoterrorism', affected every level of society, becoming in reality the greatest threat to social stability in the late 1980s, in contrast to the findings of 'los violontólogos'. The cartels inflicted countless murders and assassination attempts intimidating those who spoke out against drug trafficking, thus creating, what the Barco government termed, a "ministry of fear" (Office of the President of the Republic, 1988b, p. 25). They violently opposed the extradition treaty between the US and Colombia, with the so-called *Extraditables* claiming "*Preferimos una tumba en Colombia a una cárcel en los Estados Unidos*" (López Restrepo, 2006, p. 422). In contrast to other forms of terrorism, narcoterrorism had no nationalist or ideological aims. It was instead, the pursuit of impunity that saw the cartel bosses attack all those who stood against them. As the bombings of both an Avianca plane on the 27 November 1989, killing 107 passengers, and the *Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad* (DAS) headquarters on the 6 December 1989, killing 52 people and injuring over 1,000, showed: no-one was safe (El Tiempo, 30 November 1989, & New York Times, 8 December 1989). Bombings, of which there were a further 88 during Barco's administration, were indiscriminate and spread fear throughout the country (Pardo Rueda, 1996).

The assassinations knew no bounds, having started on 30 April 1984 with Betancur's Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara, a strong supporter of the United States of America (US) extradition treaty. Under Barco these killings continued and soon began targeting journalists as well as security officials. The 17 December 1986 assassination of Guillermo Cano Isaza, editor of *El Espectador*, showed the cartel bosses' intention of silencing journalists (El Tiempo, 18 December 1986). Cano himself had been a leading voice in opposition to the drug trade, writing constant editorials about its negative effects on Colombia. Whilst this murder was the most publicised, a significant number of other journalists were also being killed,

curtailing Colombia's freedom of speech within this new unwritten 'law of silence'.

Barco announced the launch of an unprecedented offensive against the drug cartels on 19 December, which the mafias answered with a significant increase in violence. This violence included the 13 January 1987 attack on the former Justice Minister and then Ambassador to Hungary, Enrique Parejo González, as the drug bosses showed their determination to spread terror throughout Colombia (El Tiempo, 14 January 1987).

The drug mafias infiltrated and intimidated the constitutional forces of law and order to thwart the rapid administration of justice.⁴ The rising crime rate, corruption and intimidation all served to undermine the efficacy of the judiciary. The cartels used their financial strength in attempts to bribe judges, and if this failed, they were very often threatened, and sometimes murdered, including Attorney General Carlos Mauro Hoyos on the 25 January 1988.⁵ This particular assassination was part of what El Tiempo (1 February 1988, p. 1A) termed "*un mes que Colombia recordará con horror*". This month witnessed bombs in public spaces, assassinations and numerous kidnappings, such as that of Mayor of Bogotá candidate, Andrés Pastrana.

The most impacting effects of the cartels on the political sphere and their relationship with paramilitaries and *sicarios* were the assassinations of three presidential candidates, Luis Carlos Galán on 18 August 1989, Bernardo Jaramillo on 22 March 1990 and Carlos Pizarro on 26 April 1990.⁶ *Semana* (31 July 1989, p.36) commented that these killings "...pone los pelos de punta, a pesar de la familiaridad con que ahora se trata el tema de la violencia", and Pardo Rueda (1996, p.173) referred to the assassination of Galán as "*El día que cambió la*

⁴ The judge leading the investigation into Cano's death was told "You know perfectly well that we are capable of executing you at any place on this planet." (Kline, 1999, p. 46)

⁵ However, it should be noted that this dichotomy between corruption or death is unjust to those who continued to fight the cartels

⁶ These killings illustrate the levels of force that drug-funded violence could exert on the political sphere. Recent research has shown that cartel-funded paramilitaries were responsible for the Jaramillo's assassination (Dudley, 2006), and paramilitary leader Carlos Castaño confessed his involvement with Pablo Escobar in Pizarro's murder (Aranguren Molina, 2001)



historia". Galán had been the favourite to win the presidential election and his death had a dramatic impact on Colombian politics. Barco himself claimed that the drug-financed attacks posed a threat to Colombian sovereignty, national security, the stability of institutions, civil liberties and the lives of the entire population, stating that "*El afán de lucro que anima a esos delincuentes comunes, los ha llevado a ejecutar actos que el mundo no sufría desde los tiempos del nazismo y el fascismo*" (Presidencia de la República, 1990b, p.618).

The Barco administration answered this attack with a set of decrees to fight the drug bosses (Ibid.), discussed in Section Two, which the cartels responded to by declaring "total and absolute war" on all who had persecuted them (New York Times, 25 August 1989). This 'war' would continue beyond the end of Barco's term.

Guerrilla activity

The 1980s were largely a decade of expansion, consolidation and fortification for the ELN and FARC. The ceasefire agreed during the Betancur administration was used by the insurgents to both increase their numbers in troops and *frentes*. The process lacked clear mechanisms for the verification of the ceasefire and did not force the guerrillas to lay down their weapons. More recent revelations underline the fact that the FARC had no intention of fulfilling their discourse of democratic reformism, instead remaining maximalist, intent on a military victory, perceiving "a truce [as]...a form of war and not a form of peace" (IISS, 2010, p.29)

These groups also both extended their territorial presence, aiming to further destabilise the Colombian State through increased urban penetration, and the FARC heightened their involvement within the drug trade in search of greater financial income during Barco's government.⁷

In Barco's first year in office the FARC largely continued the ceasefire signed with Betancur, with only a number of open confrontations with state forces. The M19 and *Ejército Popular de Liberación* (EPL) had both broken

⁷ Whilst the FARC leadership had previously declared their disapproval of the taxation of coca growers and farmers at the 1982 *Séptima Conferencia*, as they represented a vital constituency of potential support for the FARC's cause, once the financial benefits of involvement in the drug trade became apparent this preoccupation soon disappeared (IISS, 2010).

previous peace agreements, and the ELN continued with its violent offensive. For example, on 21 November 1986 the ELN attacked villages in Antioquia and Bolivar, killing 17 people, in what was described as "*...una de las más violentas ofensivas de los últimos años*" (El Tiempo, 22 November 1986, p.1A).

The government had to combat what Semana termed 'la Petro-Guerra'. This was the third tactic that the ELN added to their strategy of 'guerrilla warfare'. In addition to their campaign of attacks and kidnap, Barco had to contend with a rising tide in the bombing of economic targets, most notably oil pipelines. Between the 1 January 1986 and the 5 June 1989, 104 attacks were carried out on various elements of oil-sector infrastructure, with the 50 attacks in 1988 alone costing the government over \$260million in un-exported oil (Semana, 27 July 1989).

The ELN maintained their attacks throughout the rest of Barco's time in office. The 13 September 1988 killing of three policemen and injuring of four civilians at a village celebration in Zaragoza (El Tiempo, 13 September 1988), was just one of many that continually occurred.

By November 1987 the FARC had decisively broken the official ceasefire. The continued attacks on the FARC-backed UP political party saw violent retaliation against various state organisations, especially the army and the police. Both UP Congressman Braulio Herrera and Barco's peace adviser Carlos Ossa, felt that various senior army officers were attempting to end the peace process and demonstrate that only a military solution would successfully conclude the armed conflict (El Mundo, 14 November 1986).

The FARC and ELN began increasing their funding by both protecting various drug plantations in exchange for weapons from the narco-traffickers, and targeting urban locations, where they continued their kidnappings (Semana, 14 February 1989). Having grown in recruits and become better equipped thanks to their use of extortion and the FARC's use of taxation on coca farmers, these two groups continued with their campaign of violence against public order in the remaining years of Barco's presidency. Figures compiled by Semana (11 October 1988) in October 1988 showed the potency of this threat, within 26 days the ELN and FARC attacked 17 times, kidnapping 20 people, injuring 21 and killing 66.



Whilst the Palacio de Justicia assault had significantly weakened the M19, they managed to capture the headlines in 1988, with the 29 May kidnap of Alvaro Gómez. Gómez, leader of the Conservative party and a 1986 presidential candidate, spent 54 days in captivity until being liberated on 20 July.

Paramilitarism

Ley 48 de 1968 stated that civilians could be trained by the armed forces or police to protect themselves from the perils of the left-wing guerrillas' insurrection. Armed *autodefensa* groups thus appeared in the 1970s under the self-justification of protecting the territory, which they felt that the state could not effectively control. The paramilitaries believed that the security forces were not combating the guerrillas effectively, with paramilitary commander, Carlos Castaño stating "...cada día el Estado, a través de las Fuerzas Armadas se muestra más incapaz de controlar ese avance de la guerrilla. Entonces nosotros tenemos que ir marchando párlelo a como se vaya perfilando nuestro enemigo" (Pizarro Leongómez, 2004, p.120).

With at least 140 groups active in 1987 (Cubides, 1999), motivations ranged from protecting urban areas from guerrilla threats, to attempting to rid Colombia of the left-wing revolutionaries, by those who viewed the UP as the illegal political wing of armed insurgents. Alberto Rojas Puyo, former UP leader, claimed that the FARC used the paramilitary groups' UP assassination campaign as justification to continue the guerrilla war against the government. It was felt that the UP was merely a 'political instrument' in the continuation of *la combinación de todas las formas de lucha*, with Rojas himself stating "Jacobo [Arenas – ideological leader of the FARC] never wanted the party to be anything more than something that could open up political space for the movement...We were the sacrificial battalion, so they could justify their war" (Dudley, 2006, p.95). On 12 October 1987, presidential candidate and UP leader Jaime Pardo Leal was assassinated, and on 3 March 1989, new UP leader José Antequera was also murdered. The message from the right-wing paramilitaries was clear; the guerrilla groups and all those involved with them were being specifically targeted.

This message was underlined in 1988, which Semana (27 December 1988) termed "*El Año de las Masacres*". This particular year saw paramilitarie groups massacre uncountable peasant communities suspected of having a guerrilla presence or sympathisers. The worst of these occurred on the 11 November 1988, when 43 people were massacred in Segovia (El Tiempo, 12 November 1988). In this particular instance, armed paramilitaries entered the town and started shooting indiscriminately for several hours. Such massacres as Segovia and Ocaña in October of the same year saw an increase of human rights violations persistently denounced by various NGOs (Amnesty International, 1987, 1988, 1989; Americas Watch, 1990). Carrying out assassinations through *sicarios*⁸ and death squads, the paramilitary groups, often acting under the illegal orders of military officials,⁹ were murdering judges, journalists, and political figures, as well as ordinary citizens.

According to a leaked DAS report, in 1987 the Medellín cartel became the chief financial backer of the death squads and illegal counter-insurgent groups. This funding enabled the paramilitary forces to hire Israeli and British mercenaries to train recruits in military practice and terrorist tactics. As Miguel Maza, director of DAS claimed "...los grupos paramilitares, como hoy los conocemos...son la interpretación particular que el narcotráfico ha hecho de las autodefensas" (Semana, 8 May 1989, p. 26). The particular murder of Jaramillo showed the dark relationship between Escobar and Castaño, with the Medellín cartel funding two armed wings, the urban *sicariato* and the rural paramilitaries (Semana, 27 March 1990). The government now had to confront violence from the right as well as the left.

In sum, this Section has outlined the extremely high levels of violence that Virgilio Barco was faced with during his time in office. A week rarely passed without a report of violence in the newspapers; as one contemporary headline sarcastically stated "*Para variar...más violencia*" (Semana, 8 May 1989). Barco was faced with a multifaceted violence. With the exception of *La Violencia* the level of violence, political destabilisation and victimisation was without precedent in the country's

⁸ Contract-killers

⁹ The paramilitary groups enjoyed almost full-exemption from the law, indicative of the political support they could rely on



history. Weakened by the rise and range in violence and intimidated by personal threats, the Colombian judicial system, National Police and army were unable to fully subjugate all violent actors.

Section Two: *El pulso firme.* In defence of public order

Barco's Guerrilla Policy

"*La mano tendida y el pulso firme*" was the slogan Barco used to define his approach to the peace process (Bejarano Avila, 1994, p.79). This phrase illustrates the president's open disposition to negotiation, whilst understanding that at times force may be necessary. The president attempted to change both the structure and programme of the peace process of his predecessor. According to *Plan Nacional de Rehabilitación* (PNR) director, Rafael Pardo Rueda (1996), four dominant issues faced the administration in redefining *la política de paz*. First, it was necessary to reformulate the process and renew credibility within negotiations, second, maintain the truce with the FARC, which had weakened and was poorly defined, and third, generate both military and public confidence in the new strategy. Finally, the peace commissions that fulfilled the variety of functions under Betancur were centralised around the position of *Consejero Presidencial Para la Paz*, with this role designed to reconfigure the peace policy and PNR.

The second structural reform of Barco's policy incorporated the development of three concepts: "*reconciliación, normalización y rehabilitación*" (Bejarano Avila, 1994). The word 'paz' was regarded as part of Betancur's terminology, with Barco's administration understanding peace as more than just dialogue with guerrilla groups (Presidencia de la República, 1986). It was felt that opening up institutional pathways to allow free political and ideological discussion would delegitimise violence as an instrument to achieve political ends. The modification of the PNR within the reconciliation policy was aimed at bringing the State and citizens closer, especially within the more impoverished

and marginalised areas of Colombia, where the most social support for the guerrillas was.

It was important for the PNR to move away from the traditional customs of Colombian politics, including clientelism and electoral manipulation, and strengthen democracy and participation (more on this in Section Three). The government's progress in implementing the PNR was slow, yet should not be underestimated. According to Pardo (1996), the state increased its presence and responsibility for essential public services from 178 *municipios* in 1986 to 311 in 1989.¹⁰ However, by the end of Barco's period, Pardo (Ibid.) claimed that 15% of the population and 50% of Colombian territory were incorporated within the programme. Thus, the PNR had some significant success, especially considering the importance that the 'Violentólogos' had placed on re-legitimising the state as the best way to solve the problem of the violence.

The kidnap of Gómez Hurtado by the M19 was a turning point in Barco's peace process. The process was at a standstill at the end of 1987 following the FARC's breaking of the ceasefire and the intensification of the guerra sucia against the UP. The kidnap motivated a significant mobilisation within civil society, demanding the release of the Conservative leader. Gómez was successfully freed after negotiations in Panama, on 20 July 1988. As Antonio Navarro Wolf, former M19 commander, has since reflected "*Después de eso se abrió paso el camino a la paz*" (Iragorri, 2004, p.111).

This affair led to a political debate over how to prevent the destabilisation of Colombian democracy into complete chaos. A process of National Dialogue began on 29 July, attended by Gómez himself and opposition leaders, although the government itself did not take part (El Tiempo, 28 July 1988). The guerrilla hierarchy did not attend either, as the government refused to grant safe passage. However, Barco announced himself open to listening to the proposals coming out of the discussion (El Tiempo, 28 July 1988). As a follow up, various proposals were presented by the FARC to the *Comité de Seguimiento* at meetings in La Uribe throughout August.

¹⁰ However, it should be noted that this still represented over half of the total *municipios* in the country.



This process led to an entire re-examination of the peace plan.

On 1 September 1988 Barco announced his remodelled plan, *La Iniciativa Para la Paz*, outlining the need for significant legal and constitutional reforms to improve the state's means of addressing the prevalent violence. Within the framework of the peace process, three phases were proposed: 'Detente', 'Transition' and 'Definitive Incorporation into Democratic Living' (Office of the President, 1988a). This methodology established a form of collective solidarity in order to isolate those armed actors who continued to persist in violence. Additionally, eight governmental stipulations were put forward for successful demobilisation (Ibid.). The most important of these required the rebels to both demonstrate their desire for peace by giving up their arms and cease all acts of terrorism and human rights violations. Regional dialogues were also to be introduced, to create institutional possibilities for communities to present their own resolutions to their violence. Once the procedure for their incorporation was fulfilled, each armed rebel would be issued with a pardon in accordance with the law.

The lack of direct governmental participation in the Panamanian talks over Gómez's release was important in upholding the constitutional authority of the state and the law, and to avoid showing any weakness in the face of insurgent demands. If the government had directly negotiated with the kidnappers, it would have damaged confidence in the rule of law and the democratic process, and risked showing that the guerrilla's resort to violence had succeeded.

On 17 July 1989 the M19 and the government signed a peace declaration in Santo Domingo, Cauca (El Tiempo, 18 July 1989). As former M19 commander Navarro has since commented, the group had concluded that "...ya no era realista esa idea que teníamos de que el pequeño ejército comandando por Pizarro, sumado a un alzamiento popular, nos iba a dar la victoria" (Iragorri, 2004, p.119). This demobilisation increased the credible power of the Colombian state, re-incorporated a guerrilla group into the political and institutional sphere and opened additional peace dialogues with the EPL, *Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores de Colombia* (PRT), *Corriente de Renovación Socialista* (CPS) and the *Movimiento Quintín Lame* (MQL).

These talks continued under President César Gaviria, Barco's successor, until these groups were also demobilised.

In contrast, government efforts to negotiate with the FARC and ELN were altogether unsuccessful. In a joint proposal, on 17 August 1988, the two groups announced their belief in a political solution to the conflict. However, on 22 August 1988 the groups combined to ambush an army patrol in what Semana described as the bloodiest battle since the Palace of Justice assault (30 August 1988). From this point on, all negotiations with these groups were unsuccessful as their violence increased. Whilst the FARC and ELN remained at large, the opening of dialogue with various insurgent groups, successful with the M19, should be viewed as a significant success of the Barco administration.

Barco's Narcotrafficking Policy

In a similar manner to his predecessor, Barco initially placed more importance on dialogue with the guerrillas, than on any other threat to national security. Thus, he did not at first present a well-defined strategy for dealing with the problem of narcotrafficking. It was not until the latter half of his term that Barco publicly declared the violence as "...[una] combinación compleja de narcotráfico, guerrilla, delincuencia común y terrorismo" (Presidencia de la República, 1990b, p.536).

During his four year term, Barco oscillated between two separate drug policies. One was intensely militarised, whilst the other saw governmental representatives attempt negotiations with drug mafia delegates. The key issue was always that of extradition. Confronted with a weak judicial system, the government was reduced to pushing for US prosecution of the narcotraffickers. This in turn saw the cartels launch an anti-state terrorism campaign, in an attempt to force the government to suspend the extradition law.

Whilst extradition was used as the major deterrent against the drug cartels, it could not feasibly be used in each individual case. Therefore, it was important to reform the justice system into an effective tool to fight the drug mafias. The government's use of Estado de Sitio was crucial in introducing the much-needed judicial reforms.



Reforms such as *El Código de Procedimiento Penal*, passed in 1987 (Orlando Melo & Bermúdez, 1994), and the annual rotation of the head of the Ministerio de Justicia, saw Barco attempt to decongest the judicial system and curtail the possibility of high-tier bribery and the cartels' influence.

Barco's militarised anti-drug policy can be understood within four crucial events. First, in response to the assassination of Cano, an *"ofensiva sin precedentes contra el narcotráfico"* was announced (El Tiempo, 20 December 1986, p.1A). This 'offensive' was to include the payment of rewards for information leading to the successful arrest of cartel bosses and the use of military courts for the prosecution of drug-related crimes.

Second, as Melo and Bermúdez (1994) point out, the government's decision on 14 December to continue with extradition, under Ley 68 de 1986, in spite of the Supreme Justice Court decreeing it unconstitutional, was crucial. This declaration would have provided the government with the opportunity to renounce extradition without losing any significant political respect. The question thus arises, would the drug cartels have submitted to such a weakened judicial system, without continuing their retribution against law enforcement officials?

Third, significant progress was made in the first month of the government's 'offensive'. The 4 February 1987 capture of Carlos Lehder, described as *"uno de los más buscados narcotraficantes colombianos del mundo"* (El Tiempo, 5 February 1987, p.1A) showed the government's determination to eradicate the drug mafias. However, it was followed by significant retaliation by the cartels, which used violence to intimidate and ultimately paralyse the judicial system. The murder of Attorney General Hoyos saw Barco reply with new antiterrorist executive orders. The subsequent *Estatuto de defensa de la democracia* included such reforms as: an increase in judges and army patrols, the restriction of habeas corpus, harsher sentences for those found guilty, increased witness protection and plea-bargaining (Presidencia de la República, 1990b).

Fourth, the assassination of Galán saw Barco issue further decrees as part of his fight against the cartels. The most important of these were the suspension of the article in

the Penal Code requiring an international treaty for extradition, thus enabling *"la posibilidad de extraditar por vía administrativa, sin necesidad de concepto previo de un órgano judicial"* and the entitlement for the police to detain a suspect without charges for up to seven days (Ibid. p.536).

The cartels answered with a bombing campaign that would continue for the duration of Barco's term. One of the only government victories came on 14 December 1989 with the killing of one of the leaders of the Medellín Cartel, José Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha. This symbolic event, as *Semana* (19 December 1989) portrayed it, changed everything. Gacha was, together with Pablo Escobar, one of the most powerful leaders of the drug mafia, and as such, this represented a significant triumph for the state. This victory was internationally praised, with US 'Drug Czar' William Bennett's declaring *"...todo el mundo civilizado le tiene al presidente Barco una deuda de gratitud"* (Ibid. p.22).

A major positive result of Barco's policy was the insistence on the international dimension of the fight against drugs. At key international summits in the United Kingdom and the US, Barco managed to persuade European countries and, perhaps more significantly, the US to accept the principle of co-responsibility in the fight against the drug trade. It was a considerable achievement for the president to make the international community understand that the demand in their respective countries and their *"...actitud laxa y tolerante frente al consumo como a la distribución local de drogas"* (Presidencia de la República, 1990d, p.45) financed the cartels and narcoterrorism in Colombia.

The government's attempts at indirect dialogue with the cartel leaders were also important. Whilst narcoterrorism continued, various governmental representatives met with spokesmen from the drug mafias. With Escobar having appeared to decide that negotiation was best for the cartels' interests, various meetings occurred in May 1988. On 29 August 1989, drug lord Fabio Ochoa Restrepo approached the government publicly with proposals for dialogue and Escobar published a statement advocating a legal path of action to peace (New York Times, 30 August 1989). But whilst dialogue continued into 1990, the government refused to negotiate, claiming that it would only accept an unconditional surrender,



refusing to grant amnesty. The drug mafias took this as a lack of disposition to dialogue and therefore increased their bombing campaigns.

Although it was criticised at the time by a number of ministers, it was important for Barco to seem open to the drug mafia's surrender, while simultaneously refuting negotiation. The government had to withstand the cartels' demands for the end of extradition. Anything less than complete firmness in the face of escalating terrorism would have damaged confidence in the rule of law and the democratic process, and shown the cartels' blackmail to have succeeded.

Barco's Paramilitary Response¹¹

Until the end of 1988, when criticism from a NGO report forced governmental focus on the issue, the problem of paramilitary groups acquired relatively little presidential attention (Amnesty International, 1988). This statement is underlined by the fact that the 1 September 1988's 'Initiative for Peace' was predominantly focused on guerrilla demobilisation and the ending of narcoterrorism (Office of the President, 1988a). However, there were allegations at the time that the government was aware of the paramilitaries, but was content to allow them to continue in the fight against the guerrillas. For example *Semana* (17 May 1988) claimed that when the 1988 peace initiative was launched, the administration's own figures suggested that more citizens had been murdered in 1987 by paramilitary forces than by the guerrilla groups. Leading columnist Enrique Santos Calderón's allegations in 1986 that a clandestine 'dirty war' was being carried out in Colombia, would seem to concur with the suggestion that the government was aware of this issue (*El Tiempo*, 18 May 1986). Indeed, in 1987 government minister César Gaviria denounced the existence of at least 140 groups of paramilitaries in congress (Cubides, 1999). This first official reference to the groups was not followed by corresponding measures to counter the paramilitary issue. It seemed that the government perceived paramilitaries as an inevitable consequence of citizen self-defence as permitted by *Ley 48 de 1968*.

¹¹ The word 'response' has been chosen instead of 'policy' as has been the case in the previous sections as there was less of a cohesive policy and more of an irregular and relatively sporadic governmental response.

Having launched an official intelligence operation into the issue of paramilitarism, the government instigated a new crime plan in April 1989 to eradicate the death squads and self-defence groups (*Semana*, 11 April 1989). *Ley 48 de 1968*, which permitted the constitutional right for groups to take up arms in self-defence, was also outlawed, thus ending the argument that these groups were legal. In addition *Decreto 1194 de 1989* was issued, stating that prison sentences were warranted for those who promoted or financed paramilitary groups (Pizarro Leongómez, 1991). The president entrusted DAS,¹² the single national security organisation that answered directly to non-military authorities, with the task of finding those members of the army with close ties to the paramilitaries.

In spite of this, it seems a reasonable conclusion that the Barco government saw the guerrillas and drug cartels as the biggest threats to the state's stability, and therefore largely diverted its attention away from the paramilitary groups. In hindsight this can be understood as an error. However, it is important to consider the constant barrage of drug-funded terrorism, the priority of guerrilla negotiation at the time and the fact that the government perceived the paramilitaries as having no motivation for existence if the dialogue with the guerrillas and the PNR were successful.¹³

This Section has outlined the basic responses by the Barco government towards what it viewed as the three major sources of violence. Whilst some have criticised the administration for its inability to dialogue with the FARC and ELN further, contain the threat of narcoterrorism, and bring the paramilitaries within the rule of law, it is argued that a more positive historical reflection is warranted. Considering the significantly high threat from the drug cartels, managing to avoid granting major concessions to the terrorists whilst preventing the country from collapse and globalising the fight against the drug trade, should be seen as positive governmental reactions.

¹² Whilst recent allegations have arisen over DAS' role in certain political assassinations, it is dubious as to whether Barco was aware of these at the time

¹³ However, this has since been proved wrong within the emergence of Neoparamilitarism and the counter-agrarian reform undertaken by the paramilitaries (see: Granada, Restrepo and Tobón García, 2009).



Section Three: 'The winds of change'

In his acceptance speech as presidential candidate, Barco (1985a, p.7) emphasised his belief in change: "*Soplan por la nación los vientos del cambio*". He spoke of the need for decentralisation and institutional reform, and stated his desire to make Colombia's democracy more participatory. This Section poses the question of whether this administration was able to push for democratic reforms in spite of the extraordinarily high levels of violence that the country faced, and to what extent they improved the strength of Colombia's political system.

A New Political Horizon: Opposition Parties

According to Article 120 of the National Constitution the winner of the presidential elections was obliged to offer the second place party "*una participación adecuada y equitativa*" within the new government (Presidencia de la República, 1990c, p.17). Barco offered the Conservatives three ministerial positions, which were refused by the party's leaders. During his campaign, Barco had promised a Liberal government, thus he was fulfilling a campaign promise. Therefore, for the first time in more than thirty years there would be no coalition government with the Conservative Party.

Often repeating the phrase "*Los males de la democracia se curan con más democracia*" (Cepeda, 1994, p.59), the Barco presidency tried to open the democratic sphere and encourage the existence of an opposition that would debate, critique and raise objections or alternatives. This, in theory, would help Colombia become more pluralist and competitive, and reduce the corruption and ineffectiveness of the state. Under the previous system, the electorate "*votaba pero no escogía*"¹⁴ (Presidencia de la República, 1990c, p.18); even if they voted against one party, it would still end forming part of the new government. Under this presidency the electorate were beginning to recognise that "*...en sus manos descansa la*

¹⁴ It should be noted how official rhetoric incorporated the diagnosis of those who opposed the system: the logic of this sentence, if applied to Barco's own election, implies that he himself was '*votado pero no escogido*'.

posibilidad de otorgar un mandato" (Ibid. p.19). Thus, the formation of an opposition to the government gave greater meaning to elections, and forced more fiscal responsibility from the party in power. Theoretically, with parties in opposition the government's financial actions would be more thoroughly scrutinised, thereby reducing the probability of "*conductas indeseables*" (Ibid. p.19).

However, it is important to balance these comments with the suggestions of Francisco Leal Buitrago, who argues that Barco's desired rejuvenation of the political system was not fully achieved. Marginalised political parties, such as the UP, under attack by the paramilitaries, were prevented from fully entering the political sphere by the bipartisan and anti-communist monopoly of the political system (Leal Buitrago, 1990). The destiny of the UP was ultimately tragic. Initially receiving some electoral success, with Pardo Leal coming third in the 1986 presidential elections, the party saw twenty-four provincial deputies, 275 municipal council representatives, four senators and four congressional representatives elected in the congressional and local elections of 1986 (Dudley, 2006, p.92). However, the UP began to be increasingly decimated by a 'political genocide', with military officials engaging, in what Amnesty International (1988, p.12) termed, a "deliberate policy of political murder" against the party. In contrast, while this tragedy took place, the government was having some successes in the negotiations with the M19, who were later successfully incorporated into political life.

Decentralisation

In his 1985 report on regional autonomy, Barco (1985b, p.1) epitomised the traditional asymmetrical context of the country's regions, within the phrase "*Autoridad lejana, autoridad ausente*". With marginalised areas of the nation being those most likely to contain guerrillas, the president posited that a new political-administrative map should be created.

Through the PNR, the president attempted to move away from clientelist relationships that were seen to dominate all levels of the political system. As Angell, Lowden and Thorp (2001, pp. 19-20) comment: "By the mid-1980s...[c]lientelist exchanges defined both the relationship between the party bosses and their electorate, and the way in which those bosses divided the



spoils and patronage opportunities in the management of the state itself". Decrees 78-81 of 1987 enabled the administrative decentralisation of various basic services to municipality level (Presidencia de la República, 1990a). These services included basic sanitation, water, housing and health and education infrastructure. However, various sources questioned the competence of the municipal governments (El Espectador, 10 July 1988). In an attempt to combat this and re-legitimise the political system through broader participation, March 1988 saw the first election of mayors. This initial election saw little change with 859 of the 1,009 municipalities being won by the official candidates of the two main political parties (Angell et al., 2001). However, it was too soon to judge what in any case would be a slow process of reform.

One should not undervalue the importance at the time of bringing citizens closer to local governments. Barco himself highlighted the significance of the elections when stating that they would enable the voter to both hold members of local government responsible for their actions, and help decide which public infrastructural projects were most needed within individual communities (Presidencia de la República, 1990a).

The election of mayors aimed at strengthening both participation and accountability. Barco felt that if Colombians were able to judge for themselves who was the most appropriate political representative for their municipalities, the guerrillas would not find a receptive audience within rural populations.

It is questionable however if decentralisation, while a democratising measure, was 'good' for governability. The election of mayors caused party fragmentations, by encouraging local alliances which did not follow national trends. Fabio Sánchez and Mario Chacón (2006) have suggested that decentralisation might have actually contributed to the increase of violence, providing criminal organisations with easier access to economic resources. As power devolved to local governments, certain areas became more susceptible to the influence of clientelismo armado, namely the use of violence as a method to guarantee the appropriation of state resources and funds by criminal organisations (Ibid.). Decentralisation also allowed the emergence of 'independent' individuals, capable of election without the backing of a party. Whilst this had 'democratising effects', it did create problems of

governability, in as much as it undermined the 'institutionalisation' of parties (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995.)

The election of mayors aided in the prevention of party hegemonies and the monopoly of power. As Minister Fernando Cepeda (1994, p.64) commented in a 1987 speech: "En los países donde existe la elección popular de Alcaldes...el hecho de que partidos que están colocados en la oposición ocupen alcaldías ha servido como un factor de morigeración, de moderación, en el ejercicio del poder".

Constitutional Reform

The Colombian constitution was successfully rewritten and signed by Barco's successor in 1991. This new constitution was a triumph for participatory democracy, and would strengthen democracy through changes in opposition rights, civil rights and presidential powers. Whilst signed by Gaviria, it was Barco's administration whose efforts provided the platform for the reforms.

From the outset, Barco considered the best way to change the political system to a more pluralist and participatory democracy. His government attempted unsuccessfully to reform the constitution. On 30 January 1988 he proposed a plebiscite that would abrogate *el artículo 13 del Plebiscito de 1957*, which only permitted constitutional reform through Congress (El Tiempo, 31 January 1988). If it had been successful, this plebiscite would have enabled the convening of a referendum on constitutional reforms.

On 20 February 1988 the government and the opposition signed what was termed a "*Historico acuerdo*" at the *Casa de Nariño* (El Tiempo, 21 February 1988, p.1A). This agreement formalised the will of all parties to "...permitir que el pueblo soberano reasumiera el poder de decidir de si mismo" (Presidencia de la República, 1990c, p.39), and would lead to a constitutional referendum on 9 October. However, this proposal was deemed unconstitutional by el *Consejo de Estado*. Respecting the council's decision in his 14 April speech to the nation, Barco vowed to continue in his struggle (Presidencia de la República, 1990a).

After a number of further failed attempts at reform and the deaths of Jaramillo, Pizarro and Galán, a frustrated civil



society emerged in support of the constitutionality of the 18 August 1989 Estado de Sitio measures mentioned in Section Two. Approximately 25,000 students participated in a march of silence on 25 August. This popular mobilisation would continue on through the movement *Todavía podemos salvar a Colombia*, until they gathered more than 30,000 signatures in support of a plebiscite on whether to reform Colombia's institutions. This petition, delivered to President Barco, became known as *La Séptima papeleta*, with the other six cards being used for various other posts at the 1990 election. This action showed the convergence of public opinion in favour of reform.

This 'Seventh Voting Card' (*Séptima Papeleta*), which asked people to vote on whether a constitutional assembly should be convened to reform the constitution, was deemed an acceptable manner by the Supreme Court in which to change the constitution. On the day of the presidential elections, 27 May 1990, 5,221,992 Colombians voted in favour of convening a constitutional assembly (Presidencia de la República, 1990). This overwhelming majority voted to strengthen and modernise democracy through the peaceful and democratic participation of the people. The decision was crucial in demonstrating that peaceful change was possible.

The *Séptima Papeleta* and the mobilisation of the students and citizenry was a decisive force in the change, yet without the 20 February 1988 or the Barco government's positive posture the conditions for the reform process would have not been present.

In contrast to criticisms that "Colombia is a democracy without the people" (Pearce, 1990, p.207), it has here been argued that democracy during the Barco administration was, in fact, fortified. In spite of extreme levels of violence, the government enabled Colombian democracy to become more participatory and accountable. Barco's establishment of a formal opposition was significant; however the legacy of the UP's 'political genocide' was a tragic and lingering one. Whilst decentralisation attempted to move away from clientelism, the poor timing of this reform created a new armed form of clientelist relationships. In spite of a

campaign of violence and the assassinations of three presidential candidates, the populace exercised its right to vote in an attempt to overcome the problems of the past, a solution with the people at its centre.

Conclusion:

¿La tormenta se ha quedado atrás?

At the end of his presidential term, Barco asked the historian Malcolm Deas (Deas & Ossa, 1994, p.17) "*¿Y qué tal el veredicto de la historia?*" a question to which we return now. A number of ranging summations have been written with regard the Barco administration, with some highly critical. Instead, this essay concludes that this president's time in office is deserving of a more positive assessment.

Whilst it is perhaps somewhat easy as a historian to merely use hindsight and judge the administration's effects in terms of what occurred under his successors, it is important to evaluate the actions of Barco within the parameters of his contemporary Colombia.

In an attempt to understand the violence plaguing the nation, the independent report commissioned by the government claimed that this violence derived from social issues. As this diagnosis was the work of esteemed researchers it was only rational for Barco to trust their findings. This explains his government's desire to solve issues of state legitimacy through such measures as the PNR and the local election of mayors. Academics since the administration have questioned the evidence of the commission's claims, arguing that Barco should have focused instead on the agents of violence, especially the powerful illegal organisations. Regarded within the context of 1986-1990 Colombia, Barco's policies, whilst ultimately not the most appropriate in hindsight, were the most apposite, based on empirical evidence presented to him.

The continuous violence of the guerrillas, paramilitaries and drug cartels combined to undermine Colombians' democratic liberties and civil rights. The dimensions of these threats to democracy were enormous. Attacks such



as the Avianca plane bombing showed the indiscriminate nature of the cartels' murder campaign. It appeared that no Colombian was safe from violence. Standing firm against narcoterrorism, the government showed that the cartels would not achieve their ends through bomb, bullet or political manipulation. A governmental overreaction would have risked destroying democracy, and an insufficient reaction would have failed to preserve the constitutional authority of both the state and the rule of law. Relenting to the mafias' desires for impunity and an end to extradition would have encouraged the illegal organisations to further exploit this perceived weakness in authority in search of additional concessions. The blackmail of these criminals could not be seen to succeed. Considering that outside demand for illicit drugs brought in between \$2 and \$5 billion a year to Colombia (Thoumi, 1995, p.199), governmental insistence on the international dimension of the fight against the drug trade was also vital. Until this money stops entering Colombia, no element of conflict resolution has or will ever be fully successful.

When policies are implemented, a number of risks are always apparent: are they the correct ones, is the timing right and what will be the unintended consequences? In hindsight, it would appear that some policies were perhaps not the most appropriate in their contemporary context. Whilst the premise of decentralising the state is a positive democratic reform, it was introduced at the wrong time. The cartels were increasing in power and therefore the threat of 'armed clientelism' was significant. Weaker localised governments, where criminal organisations operated with relative impunity could force the appropriated state funding into strengthening their own groups. However, returning to the context of the commission's findings, this policy was understandable in light of their recommendations to provide greater legitimacy to resolve the violence.

Barco had to contend with issues from previous decades which had significantly decreased the power of the state, through such manifestations as loss of legitimacy in large areas of Colombia and the problematic functioning of political institutions. No rapid fix was available, and thus Barco's administration had to be one of slow reform. For example governmental efforts at democratic reform aided the civic movement to galvanise the conditions for the reform process, enabling a new constitution to be signed

and for the state to strengthen under Gaviria. It has been a common place in the literature to identify the Colombian political system with the absence of change. Under Barco, Colombia did not experience a revolution, but it did undergo a process of political reforms that ought to be more properly acknowledged. Democracy under Barco was made more participatory and representative, measures strengthened by the 1991 constitution.

The most significant achievements within Barco's peace process were with the guerrillas. Whilst the FARC and ELN continued to operate, at the end of his time in office the M19 had demobilised and dialogue with the EPL, PRT, CPS and MQL was ongoing, eventually reaching a successful conclusion under Gaviria. The important combination of *'la mano tendida'*, after the liberation of Gómez together with *'el pulso firme'* of prerequisites and objectives was crucial in the peace agreement with the M19 and their incorporation into civil society. This successful result demonstrated that reconciliation was viable.

Under Barco, not only did Colombia avoid becoming a failed state, but the country's political system also continued to undergo reforms to regularly elect its subsequent governments. Just holding elections and pushing for political reform in spite of the violence were themselves significant actions. This fact cannot be overstated: given the dimension of the threat and the severity of the conditions at the time. Without such a resilient president as Virgilio Barco, Colombia would have collapsed.



List of Abbreviations

| | |
|------|--|
| AUC | Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia |
| CPS | Corriente de Renovación Socialista |
| DAS | Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad |
| ELN | Ejército de Liberación Nacional |
| EPL | Ejército Popular de Liberación |
| FARC | Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia |
| MI9 | Movimiento del 19 de Abril |
| MQL | Movimiento Quintín Lame |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organisation |
| PNR | Plan Nacional de Rehabilitación |
| PRT | Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores de Colombia |
| UK | United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland |
| UP | Unión Patriótica |
| US | United States of America |



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