

LATIN AMERICAN HISTORY

“The Colombian conflict in historical perspective : the evolution of the land issue“

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Introduction

The conflict in Colombia has been ravaging the country for the last four decades but its roots are traceable for a much longer period.

According to various analysts, the key issue at the core of the conflict originally was, and for many still is, the extremely unfair distribution of land.

This paper will analyze how land distribution has been a very conflictive issue within the Colombian society since the beginning of the colonial era. It will focus on the evolution of the problem and how it remained unsolved and even worsened in spite of several attempts of land reform. The main events characterizing the development of the land issue in Colombia contain certain patterns, discussed in this paper, which to a large extent are still valid today.

The relationship between land distribution and the origin of the current conflict is still a controversial issue for some analysts.

Most of these analysts identify a clear relationship between land distribution and conflict: “The basic antagonism between peasants and landlords has nowhere been resolved...many contemporary conflicts represent at once a continuation and a transformation of earlier struggles “.

This is “ ... a crisis whose underlying causes, specifically the long standing quest for land reform by campesinos... “.

Others do not consider the current conflict as being directly related to the historical inequality in the distribution of land : “... Nor can the uneven distribution of wealth and income, so typical of Latin America, be cited as the primary cause of the recent violence ... but rather the impact of drug trafficking and the traditional fragmentation of power... “

The current situation of land distribution will also be focused on as it can be considered the result of the historical process analyzed more in details.

The role of the illegal armed actors and more recently of the drug lords, will be analyzed in order to demonstrate how the spiral of violence has become a cycle in which poor peasants not only fail to improve their precarious situation, but in fact end up losing everything they owned, in particular the small plots of land, by being forced into displacement.

Description

Various economic and social indicators in Colombia express the serious inequality of distribution of wealth and other resources: 1 % of the population controls 45 % of the wealth. The top 10 % of the families owns 56 % of the country resources. In rural areas 86 % of the population is poor and rural poverty is actually increasing in the last years.

Nevertheless the most impressive indicators of this inequality relate directly to the distribution of land : 3 % of landowners own more than 70 % of the arable land; 30 percent of property owners control about 95 % of the best land. In 1996, 0.13 % of the landowners owned 39.23 % of the land, through estates larger than 1.000 hectares.

As a result of this concentration, 75 % of potential crop land is currently underutilized as the land is used mainly for pasture.

This situation has its roots in the history of the settlement of the country from colonial times : before the arrival of the Spanish Conquistadors all the indigenous groups in the territory which is now Colombia had a collective ownership of the land, which was owned by the community.

In the colonial period (1492 – 1810), when Colombia was known as Nueva Granada, the main use of the land was not for agriculture but for extracting minerals and other resources to ship to motherland Spain. Indigenous people and later African slaves were forced to work in the mines.

Land however was also regarded as a symbol of political power: one of the elements which shaped the distribution of land in Colombia was the assignation by the King of Spain of immense extensions of land, tens of thousands of hectares each, to the Conquistadors. These concessions were made through a mechanism referred to as “ regla de morada y labor “, as in theory the owner was supposed to “live (morada) and work (labor) ” there. In reality it was again African and indigenous slaves who were working the vast extensions of the best land available.

As of the sixteenth century, marginalized groups such as escaped Afro-Colombian slaves, mulatos, mestizos and other poor farmers without land began the migration towards remote areas where land was available. In these regions the State was absent and basic infrastructure unheard of. This settlement process often occurred at the expense of the local indigenous groups. Fernán Gonzalez, a researcher of Colombian political history, defines the process as “an escape route from the tensions created by highly concentrated rural land ownership “.

Interestingly even today in the most remote regions of Colombia one can find the descendants of the same actors, indigenous people, Afro-Colombians, and poor subsistence farmers, with similar dynamics (absence of the State and of most infrastructure and widespread violence). Where the best land and infrastructure is available, often it is the traditional elite families who own today even larger concentrations of land (along with the more recent ownership by drug lords).

In the following historical phase, the struggle for independence from Spain

(obtained in 1810) contributed to the increasing in the unequal distribution of land, as vast extensions of public land were assigned by the new government to militaries who had fought the independence war.

In certain cases, the land was formally property of the State (baldío) but had in fact already been colonized by poor peasants who had no formal legal title for it. The Liberal Party member Alejandro Lopez I.C. described this situation as “la lucha entre el hacha y el papel sellado “ (the struggle between the hoax and the stamped legal papers).

Several attempts at redressing the imbalance in ownership of land through land distribution were made throughout the nineteenth century. These attempts were never successful and often even worsened the situation.

For instance in the period from 1851 to 1881, 1.301.122 hectares of State land (baldíos) were adjudicated to companies, private landowners and farmers. However, only 6.066 hectares (or 0.46 %) were assigned to small farmers who would cultivate it directly.

Another important process relating to land in Colombia in this period was the so-called “colonization “: in 1850, approximately 75 % of the land was still public land and open to large migrations and settlement by peasants in frontier lowlands. They created small family farms but normally failed to obtain any legal title. When, at a later stage, investors acquired the title from the state, the settlers were turned into tenants.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the high concentration of land and the conditions of extreme poverty of most peasants led to the creation of organized movements of protest : the first agrarian trade union was founded in Colombia in 1913 in Colosó, Bolivar department, by a school teacher.

Then in the 1920s more political movements were created or consolidated to give voice to the landless peasants who called for land redistribution. Some of these movements were socialist “currents” which later turned in the Communist Party of Colombia. Others were sectors of the Liberal Party, like the one led by Jorge Eliecer Gaitán.

Violent confrontations between these movements and the state forces took place in many regions, particularly in Magdalena, Cundinamarca, Tolima and around the Atlantic Coast.

During the period 1930 to 1946 Liberal Party-run administrations made various attempts at land reform .

For instance in 1936 during the government of Alfonso López Pumarejo, legislation on the land reform was approved (Ley 200 de 1936). The objective of this legislation was to regularize land titles and to implement the principle that those who really work the land should be the legitimate owners. Squatters and tenants could apply for free grants of land they were living and working on, if the landlords could not prove legal ownership.

The landowners, backed by the Conservative Party, reacted by forcing the expulsion of many peasants from the land that they owned. Landless peasants, again as a cycle, were forced towards the colonization of unclaimed frontier in remote regions.

These attempts of social, economic and political modernizing reforms by the Liberal Party and the absolute and fierce opposition by the Conservative Party created a climate of extreme polarization which exploded in widespread political violence.

In the late 1940s, Liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, who had emerged from the Liberal and communist led agrarian reform movements, was a popular presidential candidate. On April 9, 1948 he was assassinated. His murder provoked a popular uprising and explosions of violence throughout the country

(in the capital, the city looting which took place is remembered as the Bogotazo: much of the city was destroyed and 2.000 people were killed).

This event is regarded by many analysts as an important turning point in Colombian history: the Conservative Party started a wave of terror to repress the popular insurgency, as well as took the occasion to legitimize the systematic repression against various kind of social movements.

The next decade is known as “La Violencia “(the Violence) and claimed the life of between 200.000 to 300.000 Colombians. Rural violence spread in the country, especially in rural departments as around 20.000 combatants were fighting in the name of the Liberals and the Conservatives. Clashes also occurred between Liberal and Communist guerrillas and the violence strengthened the traditional parties “as the collective identities derived from membership were all that gave violence a meaning “. Fernan Gonzalez describes the phenomenon as “atomization of campesinos “.

Meanwhile in 1953 General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla took power and this was the only period of military rule in Colombia in the twentieth century.

In order to end the conflict and the dictatorship, Conservatives and Liberals in 1958 concluded a pact known as the “National Front”: for the next sixteen years they divided the positions of state power between them. This became a shared monopoly of power which prevented the political expression of other parties, increased corruption and impeded the adequate addressing of unresolved key issues, such as the structure of land ownership and its distribution.

In the meantime, towards the end of the period of “la Violencia “, many Liberal and Communist peasants had survived the military offensives undertaking long marches and then establishing themselves in remote new lands, particularly in Meta and Caqueta’ departments. There they declared “Independent Republics “, but new military attacks forced the peasants deeper into the jungles.

These armed peasants movements dispersed to various regions of the country establishing several fronts of confrontation with the state army. In particular the “Independent Republics “ of Marulanda and of Arenas were attacked in 1964 with 16.000 soldiers by land and by air. Some 43 guerrillas, including Marulanda, who is to this day the leader of FARC (known as Tirofijo, Sureshot), fled to the mountains of Cauca department.

On 20 July 1964, the various fronts issued a joint agrarian reform program. In 1966, they officially became the FARC, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Colombia’s Revolutionary Armed Forces).

Other guerrillas groups, such the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional , National Liberation Army), of Cuban inspiration, and the EPL (Ejército Popular de Liberación Popular, Popular Liberation Army), of Maoist tendencies also emerged in the mid sixties.

These groups are still active today and are among the main actors of the four decade - long civil conflict in Colombia.

The other main actor of the current conflict emerged as a reaction to the advances of the FARC: the paramilitary groups, also known as Self Defence Groups (AUC, Auto-defensas Unidas de Colombia) since the early nineties are the fastest growing illegal armed actor in Colombia. Among the main promoters and financiers of these groups are rich landowners that feel threatened by FARC.

General Analysis and Discussion

The situation described above through the main events characterizing the evolution of the land issue in Colombia contains certain patterns which to a large extent are still valid today, after more than five hundred years.

Certain groups of people have been marginalized since the dawn of the colonial times: for instance indigenous peoples whose land, owned collectively, was confiscated first by authorities of Nueva Grenada, the colony, then by the government arising out of independence. Their land was assigned by these authorities to rich landowners in certain regions.

In other more remote areas, the colonization process above described as an indirect effect (“escape route for poor farmers”) of the vast concentration of the best land in the hands of few elite families, also victimized the indigenous peoples who originally lived on those “colonized “ land.

Similarly the black slaves and their descendents, when escaping from the plantations in coffee growing regions, hid and then settled in indigenous areas, such as Chocó department, which today has a predominance of Afro-colombians.

These traditional inequalities and conflicts were aggravated, as described above, during the period known as “La Violencia “. Some analysts have interpreted these events as violence deliberately intended by large landowners to force peasants to abandon their lands thereby creating a cheap land market.

Others regard the phenomenon as an effort by the political and social elite to reinforce the control over the campesinos in order to eliminate land reform movements.

One of the masterpieces of Colombian literature, “Siervo sin Tierra “ (Siervo without land), composed by Eduardo Caballero Calderón, describes the odyssey of a family of poor peasants in the Boyacá department during this period. The deep aspiration of this family for a piece of land; the polarization between the two parties, Conservatives and Liberals at the local level; and the disorientation of Siervo the peasant, dragged into the spiral of violence with the hope (then completely frustrated, as he ends up losing the little he owned) of finally obtaining a small plot of land on his own, are the main themes of this powerful book, which is still studied in Colombian schools.

The origins of the two main parties which have dominated the political landscape in Colombia for many decades, show that the Liberal Party started as a heterogeneous coalition of *golgotas* (merchants supporting free trade), *draconianos* (artisans and manufacturers supporting protectionism) and smaller landowners.

The Conservative Party on the other hand expressed the interests of large landowners and of the Catholic clergy (the Church has traditionally been a very large landowner itself in most of Latin America).

Interestingly, peasants traditionally tended to support the party for which their landowners (*patróns*) sympathized, rather than the one which may have expressed more closely their interests. The above mentioned book, “*Siervo sin Tierra*“, describes impressively this phenomenon, which helps to explain the intensity of rural political conflict.

Following the pattern mentioned above, the same marginalized groups today remain vulnerable, are manipulated by different actors or are caught in rural conflicts. Most of their plight appears to be still related to the issue of land.

For instance indigenous peoples, in spite of the legal protection given by the Colombian Constitution of 1991 and by international human rights instruments, remain a proportionally high number among the groups most affected by forced displacement. So today, their land is still threatened as some analysts estimate that nearly 80 % of the mineral and energy resources of the country are located in the 27 % of the territory which is collectively and inalienably owned by indigenous communities.

Similar considerations are valid also for Afro-Colombians and other poor farmers, who to this day live in remote regions where the state is absent, where infrastructure is lacking or is inadequate, and where they have no access to the markets for outputs and no access to credit .

In these regions the illegal actors of the armed conflict have de facto control of the territory. Peasants are often displaced by the violence of these actors, who often are (in particular the paramilitaries) interested in their lands.

The origins of these illegal actors involved in the current internal conflict appear to be rooted directly in (FARC), or are indirectly (AUC) related to, the unresolved issue of land distribution.

While some analysts regard the origins of ELN and EPL in movements led by urban intellectuals, in contrast the peasants’ roots of FARC are generally acknowledged. Alfredo Molano considers that FARC “is deeply rooted in a legacy of class conflict ... seeing that it would be impossible to break through the rigid political and agrarian structures using legal means, the opposition declared an armed rebellion “.

The subsequent evolution of the FARC during these last decades, including its more recent links with narco-traffic and its violent actions in disregard of basic principles of International Humanitarian Law, have led many analysts, both Colombians and foreigners, to question FARC’s current real objectives, priorities and strategies.

AUC, like their mortal enemy FARC, have also shown a total disregard for International Humanitarian Law and are considered the main actor provoking internal forced displacement, which in fact results in an even higher concentration of land (defined by

some as “contrareforma agraria”, agrarian counter-reform). They also have clear links with narco-traffic.

These are legitimate questions regarding both groups, however their modus operandi or current real main objectives are not the focus of this paper.

Actualization

It may be interesting to have a closer look at the current situation of land distribution in Colombia as the result of the historical process the paper has focused on.

The agriculture sector today is not as important as it was in the past. Nevertheless it still accounts for 21 percent of national income, 20 percent of employment and 36 percent of merchandise export revenues , especially through coffee.

The State organization currently in charge of redistribution of land is INCORA, Instituto Colombiano de Reforma Agraria (Colombian Agrarian Reform Institute).

INCORA was created in 1961 through Law 135. Some regarded its creation and its potential role in land redistribution as an effective counterinsurgency tool , as it may have contributed to defuse social and political tensions related to the inequality in land ownership.

Although INCORA’s resources were significant (for instance 140 million USD was the average annual budget in the late 80s), most was spent on bureaucracy (the administrative cost of transferring land was about 50 % of the total land reform budget in the early 90s) and it had very little impact on the ground.

Nor were these resources allocated in an equitable way to really target rural poverty: the World Bank reports that in 1994 the lowest quintile and the highest quintile of the rural population benefited to the same extent from these programs.

In this period, an estimated 200.000 families had no farm land, while 750.000 families did not have enough land for an adequate living.

The structure of the land ownership remains highly concentrated and as a result also underutilized : low productivity livestock production covers 35 % of land in Colombia (while only 13 % is considered suitable for this use). By contrast, crop farming, with higher productivity rates only takes place in 4 % of land (while 16 % of Colombian land would be suitable).

Small land is also often of poor quality and peasants have difficulties getting access to credit and as a consequence to seeds, fertilizers and other assets which could improve the production. Most peasants are caught in a poverty trap, a cycle where the small size of the land limits profits, but they cannot buy more land because of the same too limited profits.

Other more recent phenomena have contributed to an even higher concentration of land: on the one side the use of land to launder money that was acquired by drug lords; on the other the massive forced displacement of peasants due to the conflict. Moreover the two processes are often related.

According to some estimates, drug lords have purchased more than a million hectares of the best land, but most of it is underutilized as pasture or are not utilized at all.

On the other hand, reports show that 70 % of the forcibly displaced people (more than three millions persons in total, over 1.000 per day in 2002) have lost their land, which is often occupied or bought cheaply by drug traffickers or other estate land owners.

Displacement is also significantly more pronounced in areas where political violence coincides with violence associated with land ownership.

So the conflict has its roots in the unequal distribution of the land, and in turn the conflict itself, through the displacement of peasants, contributes to the aggravation of such a phenomenon.

General recommendations

When analyzing the current conflict, and when trying to prevent one of its worse manifestations, which is internal displacement, it is important to keep the historical perspective into account.

This paper focuses on some of the main events characterizing Colombian history since the colonization period and it highlights how the issue of the land has very often been the main reason for tensions and conflicts.

Even today, some illegal armed groups, such as the guerillas, claim to fight mainly for a more equal distribution of land while others, such as the paramilitaries, do in turn mainly protect the interest of landowners.

The conflicts at the local level which produce displacement may not always be directly related to strategic military reasons, but more often to an economic interest in evicting by force peasants from the land.

Understanding these dynamics can help predict the strategic moves of the illegal armed actors and therefore design a more effective prevention and protection strategy.

The main recommendation of this paper is that all the actors involved in Colombia in preventing or mitigating the impact of the armed conflict (be them state actors or non governmental organizations ; national or international), must be constantly aware of the root causes of the conflict and of how these can influence its current dynamics and prospects for solutions.

Conclusion

The Colombian conflict has deep and complex roots which are mainly related to the land issue. Since the time when the system of collective property of land by indigenous peoples was destroyed by the colonization process, the phenomenon of concentration of land in the hands of a limited number of elite families has only increased.

Most attempts to address the issue, either by the authorities through limited land reforms, or by peasants movements through political and social pressure, have generally

backlashed through the reaction of landowners which often generated in turn an even stronger concentration of land.

In the current context, the situation of land concentration has been further complicated and worsened by the role played by drug lords, who purchase vast extension of land, in many cases land which had to be abandoned by peasants forcibly displaced through the violence of the illegal armed groups involved in the conflict.

The spiral of violence has become a cycle in which poor peasants not only do not improve their precarious situation, but in fact end up losing everything they owned, in particular the small plots of land, by being forced into displacement.

The odyssey of the poor farmer Siervo, described in the masterpiece of Colombian literature “Siervo sin Tierra “, is still reproduced daily in today’s rural Colombia...

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