

Paramilitarism and Colombia's Low-Intensity Democracy*

WILLIAM AVILÉS

Abstract. In the late 1980s and early 1990s political liberalisation, including the reduction of the military's institutional prerogatives, occurred in Colombia despite the increasing strength of an internal insurgency. Why would Colombia's national political elite weaken the institutional role of the armed forces in the context of an escalating internal war? What was the role of paramilitary groups, which were responsible for the vast majority of massacres and political violence against suspected unarmed civilians, during the 1990s? This paper argues that the elite civilian politicians who dominated the Colombian state promoted formal institutional changes, but tolerated paramilitary repression in order to counteract a strengthening guerrilla insurgency. These civilian leaders represented a modernising elite focused upon co-opting political opposition and establishing neoliberal economic reforms, thus constructing a Low-Intensity Democracy.

Between 1958 and 1991 elected civilian authorities governed the Colombian state, while the armed forces enjoyed institutional and political independence to fight criminal 'bandits' and guerrilla insurgents on their own terms.¹ During the 1980s the threat against Colombia's political regime escalated, with guerrilla insurgents increasing in size and effectiveness.² The escalation of political violence, coupled with increasing levels of drugs-related violence against the police and judicial sectors of the state, threatened Colombia's 'democracy'. Indeed, Larry Diamond and Juan Linz argued as early as 1988

William Avilés is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Nebraska, Kearney.

* The author would like to thank Richard Avilés, George A. Gonzalez, Soleiman Kiasatpour and Kenneth Fernandez, as well as the anonymous JLAS reviewers, for their helpful comments and suggestions.

¹ E. Blair Trujillo, *Las Fuerzas Armadas: una mirada civil* (Bogotá, 1993); Francisco Leal Buitrago, *El oficio de la guerra: la seguridad nacional en Colombia* (Bogotá, 1994).

² The Colombian state has been engaged in a counter-insurgency war against different guerrilla armies since the 1960s. That counter-insurgency war intensified during the 1980s and reached unprecedented proportions in the 1990s, as guerrilla forces increased their manpower and military capabilities. The principal guerrilla opponent of the Colombian state has been the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). FARC has increased its membership from 1,200 in 1981 to over 18,000 in 2002. For these figures, see Camilo Granada and Leonardo Rojas, 'Los costos del conflicto armado, 1990–1994,' *Planeación y Desarrollo* 4 (1995), p. 125; Centre for International Policy, 'Information about the Combatants' (2002), <http://ciponline.org/colombia/infocombat.htm#AUC>.

that Colombia's 'democracy cannot long survive such increasing ungovernability'.³

Despite Colombia's increasing political and social violence, the electoral regime survived and even initiated a series of institutional reforms during the late 1980s and early 1990s, with a new constitution in 1991 and electoral laws that formally made Colombia more 'democratic'. In addition, civilian supervision and direction over the behaviour and operation of the armed forces was expanded, reducing the institutional role and responsibilities of the military, contrary to what would be expected given the country's domestic instability.⁴ These political changes coincided with an expansion in the role of right-wing civilian militias, popularly referred to as paramilitary groups, in the repression of the armed opposition.⁵ Paramilitary groups were responsible for the vast majority of massacres and political violence that occurred during the 1990s, a political violence that cost Colombia an average of 3,000 to 4,000 civilian lives a year during that decade.⁶ Human rights activists, political leaders on the left, trade unionists and the peasants perceived to be supporting the guerrilla insurgency represented the vast majority of these victims.

Why did the national authorities expand civilian authority over the military in the face of an increased internal security crisis? Why did these same democratic reformers tolerate and facilitate paramilitary repression following these reforms?

In the context of escalating internal violence the political reforms reflected the agenda of a modernising sector of Colombia's political elite, a transnational elite intent on integrating the country into the global economy. This process involved not only neoliberal economic reforms, but political change concomitant with a Low-Intensity Democracy, a democratic regime promoted internationally as a necessary complement to the spread of free

³ Larry Diamond and Juan Linz, 'Introduction: Politics, Society, and Democracy in Latin America,' in Larry Diamond, Juan Linz and Seymour Martin Lipset (eds.), *Democracy in Latin America* (Boulder, 1988), p. 27.

⁴ William Avilés, 'Globalisation, Democracy and Civil-Military Relations in Colombia's Neoliberal State,' unpublished PhD dissertation, University of California, Riverside, 2001; Eduardo Pizarro, 'La reforma militar en un contexto de democratización política,' in Francisco Leal Buitrago (ed.), *En busca de la estabilidad perdida: actores políticos y sociales en los años noventa* (Bogotá, 1995), pp. 159–208.

⁵ I use the term 'paramilitary' to describe these actors because of the established and continuing support that they have received from the Colombian armed forces in the last two decades. For further discussion of this issue see Mauricio Romero, *Paramilitares y auto-defensas, 1982–2003* (Bogotá, 2003), pp. 36–7, and Fernando Cubides, 'From Private to Public Violence: The Paramilitaries,' in Charles Bergquist, Ricardo Peñaranda and Gonzalo Sánchez (eds.), *Violence in Colombia, 1990–2000: Waging War and Negotiating Peace* (Wilmington, 2001), pp. 127–49.

⁶ Winifred Tate, 'Disastrous Plans to Fuel a War,' *Colombia Bulletin* (Winter 2000), p. 10; Human Rights Watch, *War Without Quarter* (New York, 1998).

markets. However, the continuing threat of an armed insurgency led the same modernising elite to tolerate and/or facilitate paramilitary repression. Due to the changed international context and the desire to 'modernise' the state politically, Colombia's transnational elite exerted greater efforts to limit the state's *direct* participation in repression in exchange for a more subdued and *indirect* role. What actually occurred in Colombia was the privatisation of repression, whereby the responsibility for persecuting individuals and communities with suspected sympathies for the guerrilla movement was in large part shifted to private groups of armed civilians. This reflected not only the internal dynamics and strategies of counter-insurgency warfare, but also the changing composition of political elites within the national state and the international context in which they operated. International pressures for democratic reform, the global integration of the Colombian economy, and the emergence of a transnational elite within the Colombian state are all factors that help to explain the concurrence of democratic civil–military reforms with the escalation of paramilitary repression.⁷

Literature Review

Analyses of Colombian civil–military relations and political violence in the 1990s have emphasised the role of domestic political elites, the armed forces, and the structure of specific state institutions in shaping public policy and state behaviour. Policy-making is normally conceptualised as an institutionalist process, taking place within the confines of the nation-state. For example, John Dugas concludes that democratic reform in Colombia, specifically the 1991 constitution, reflected the co-opting strategies of political elites facing increasing domestic alienation and opposition to the existing regime.⁸ Francisco Leal Buitrago argues that the civil–military reforms of the early 1990s reflected a greater willingness amongst military leaders to accept a diminished role.⁹ Although both Andrés Dávila and Eduardo Pizarro discuss the changes in Colombian civil–military relations, neither explains specifically why they occurred when they did, other than representing the general democratic reform process symbolised by the 1991 constitution.¹⁰

⁷ This argument is elaborated further in William Avilés, *Global Capitalism, Democracy and Civil–Military Relations in Colombia* (Albany, NY, 2006).

⁸ John Dugas, 'Structure and Agency in Explaining Democratization: Insights from the Colombian Case' (Indiana University, Macarthur Scholar Series, Occasional Paper no. 3, August 1994).

⁹ Leal Buitrago, *El oficio de la guerra*, pp. 135–7.

¹⁰ Andrés Dávila, *El juego del poder: historia, armas y votos* (Bogotá, 1998). Eduardo Pizarro, 'La reforma militar en un contexto de democratización política,' in Leal Buitrago (ed.), *En busca de la estabilidad perdida*, pp. 159–208.

With respect to the escalation of political violence and the deterioration of the conflict that followed the reforms of the early 1990s, Ana María Bejarano and Eduardo Pizarro conclude that Colombia suffered a ‘partial collapse of the state’. The state was weakened by the multiple assaults from *narcotraficantes*, paramilitary groups and guerrilla armies. In addition, they argue that the political reforms of the mid-1980s and early 1990s contributed to the ‘extreme atomization of political representation’ weakening the legitimacy of the democratic system.¹¹ Bejarano and Pizarro conclude that Colombia qualifies as a ‘besieged democracy’, a competitive political system unable to establish the rule of law necessary for a consolidated democracy. Nazih Richani argues that the economic benefits for the various actors involved in Colombia’s conflict have contributed to the construction and maintenance of a ‘war system’, in which the continuation of war is profitable for multiple groups [the army, paramilitary groups and guerrillas].¹² Andrés Dávila stresses the importance of historically embedded relations between civilian authorities and military leaders. The military’s autonomy in fighting the internal war persisted, despite the reduction in the military’s institutional prerogatives, as a result of this institutional history.¹³ Others have emphasised the consequences of poorly conceived ‘institutional reform’ and/or the lack of appropriate ‘state power’ or ‘state presence’ in analysing the continuing political violence and threats to the ‘democratic’ regime.¹⁴

These analyses, while contributing to our understanding of Colombia’s complex politics, paint an incomplete picture of political violence and change in the country. They generally focus upon the domestic balance of power between the state and illegally armed actors and/or the political machinations of party and domestic economic elites. The degree to which civilian authorities within the national government have actively contributed to the privatisation of this violence, rather than simply being victims of a deteriorating social and political situation (or actors who were too weak to prevent disorder), has also not been adequately addressed. Finally, the international context is rarely integrated into these analyses, except for the

¹¹ Ana María Bejarano and Eduardo Pizarro, ‘From “Restricted” to “Besieged”: The Changing Nature of the Limits to Democracy in Colombia,’ (University of Notre Dame, Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies, Working Paper no. 296, April 2002), p. 14.

¹² Nazih Richani, *Systems of Violence: The Political Economy of War and Peace in Colombia* (Albany, NY, 2002).

¹³ Andrés Dávila, *El juego del poder: historia, armas y votos* (Bogotá, 1998).

¹⁴ Ronald Archer and Matthew Shugart, ‘The Unrealized Potential of Presidential Dominance in Colombia,’ in Scott Mainwaring and Matthew Shugart (eds.), *Presidentialism and Democracy in Latin America* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 110–59; Angel Rabasa and Peter Chalk, *Colombian Labyrinth: The Synergy of Drugs and Insurgency and its Implications for Regional Stability* (Santa Monica, 2001); Alfredo Rangel Suarez, *Colombia: guerra en el fin del siglo* (Bogotá, 1998); Bejarano and Pizarro, ‘From Restricted to Besieged,’ p. 5.

policy pressures imposed by the United States government or the impact of international drug trafficking. Deborah Yashar argues that scholars 'need to *analyse* democratic politics in the context of *state-society relations* by evaluating the reach of state institutions and assessing the broader social forces that surround, support, and oppose the terms of democracy's new institutions'.¹⁵ However, the assessment of 'broader social forces' can not simply stop at the nation's borders, but must include an analysis of the changing international context that structures state behaviour and influences the organisation of nation-states.

Contemporary global capitalism does not consist only of the decentralisation of capitalist production and the diffusion of neoliberal economic policies, but also the transformation of nation-states.¹⁶ As William Robinson argues, the 'nation-state is neither retaining its primacy nor disappearing but becoming transformed and absorbed into this larger structure of a transnational state'.¹⁷ A transnational state is a set of institutions (based nationally and supranationally) which operates in order to advance the interests of transnational corporations, with national states becoming 'components' of a larger economic and political project. The United States has played (and plays) a central role in the construction and strengthening of this transnational process by linking free market economic reforms to its 'drug war', the 'war on terrorism' and/or through 'democracy promotion'.¹⁸ Democratization occurs within the limits of capitalist globalisation and the interests of transnational corporations, a process that has been facilitated by the emergence of a 'transnational elite'.¹⁹ Jorge Dominguez and Richard Feinberg refer to these individuals as 'technopols', 'technically skilled and politically savvy leaders who held key positions during critical periods of

¹⁵ Deborah Yashar, 'Democracy, Indigenous Movements, and the Postliberal Challenge in Latin America,' *World Politics* 52: 1 (1999), p. 79. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁶ William I. Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, U.S. Intervention, and Hegemony* (New York, 1996); William Robinson, 'Beyond Nation-State Paradigms: Globalization, Sociology, and the Challenge of Transnational Studies,' *Sociological Forum* 13: 4 (1998): pp. 561–94; Leslie Sklair, *Globalization: Capitalism and its Alternatives* (3rd edition, New York, 2002).

¹⁷ William Robinson, 'Social Theory and Globalization: The Rise of a Transnational State,' *Theory and Society*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2001), p. 158.

¹⁸ J. Patrice McSherry, 'Preserving Hegemony: National Security Doctrine in the Post-Cold War Era,' *NACLA-Report on the Americas* 34: 3 (2000), pp. 26, 34; Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy*.

¹⁹ Robinson writes that membership in the transnational elite includes '... the politicians and charismatic figures of public life and the mass media, along with select organic intellectuals, who provide ideological legitimacy and technical solution for this new global order', William I. Robinson, 'Neoliberalism, the Global Elite, and the Guatemalan Transition: A Critical Macrosocial Analysis,' *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, vol. 42, no. 4 (2000), p. 90.

change'.²⁰ Throughout Latin America these 'technopols' worked to 'foster freer politics and freer markets' during the 1980s and 1990s.²¹

The civilian leaders that came to power in Colombia in the late 1980s and early 1990s and that have continued to rule (as of 2005) have promoted a political regime that simultaneously worked to co-opt and repress political opposition while internationalising the economy. These political and economic changes were conducted, in part, to create a welcoming business environment for transnational corporations. Civilian state authorities that promoted these policies tolerated and sometimes facilitated paramilitary repression to counteract a guerrilla insurgency that rejected repeated efforts to integrate them into the political process. The combined strategies of democratisation and paramilitary repression reflected the agenda of an elite committed to integrating Colombia's economy into capitalist globalisation, establishing the conditions for a Low-Intensity Democracy.

Low-intensity democracies are largely procedural democracies that allow political opposition, greater individual freedoms, a reduced institutional role for the armed forces, and a more permeable environment for the investments of transnational capital.²² This type of 'democracy' is viewed favourably by transnational corporations, the US government, and international financial institutions for its ability to co-opt radical movements that challenge the dominant political and socioeconomic order, effectively obtaining the public's consent for capitalist globalisation. As Barry Gills, Joel Rocamora and Richard Wilson argue, 'the paradox of Low Intensity Democracy is that a civilianized conservative regime can pursue painful and even repressive social and economic policies with more impunity and with less popular resistance than can an openly authoritarian regime'.²³

The international legitimacy enjoyed by low-intensity democracies and the pressure to consolidate such a regime narrowed the choices of Colombia's reforming transnational elite, an elite already predisposed towards preserving democracy and maintaining civilian control. The overt use of military power or authority could not be relied upon to establish social control, implying that paramilitarism would play a key role in serving this purpose. Indeed, paramilitary groups replaced the armed forces as the leading source of human rights violations during the 1990s, generally accounting for about 70 per cent of political assassinations. Paramilitarism served a strategic goal in combating a strengthening armed insurgency, as well as legal

²⁰ Richard Feinberg, 'Foreword,' in Jorge Domínguez (ed.), *Technopols: Freeing Politics and Markets in Latin America in the 1990s* (Pittsburgh, 1997), p. xiii.

²¹ Domínguez, *Technopols*, p. 2.

²² Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy*; Barry Gills, Joel Rocamora and Richard Wilson, *Low Intensity Democracy: Political Power in the New World Order* (London, 1993).

²³ Gills et al., *Low-Intensity Democracy*, pp. 8–9.

political opposition to neoliberalism, in line with the requisites of a Low-Intensity Democracy. Civilian authorities weakened the institutional role of the armed forces in part in order to become more integrated in a neoliberal economic order, while tolerating or facilitating paramilitary repression of political and military opposition to this integration.

Paramilitarism, state repression and democracy in Colombia

Throughout the twentieth century Colombian politics has been synonymous with the electoral, and sometimes violent, conflict between the Liberal and Conservative parties. Their appeal, however, has declined in the last two decades, with growing rates of abstention being only one of the many indications of this decline. The historically elitist nature of these parties has also contributed to an increasingly alienated polity. Economic elites have traditionally enjoyed a significant degree of access and influence among Colombia's political establishment.²⁴ Colombian politics have also been associated with extraordinarily high levels of political and social violence related to the centrality of drugs trafficking, as well as a four-decade long internal war. The role of armed civilians as accessories to state repression and violence has been an important part of this history.

The state utilised local, private forces to assist in counter-insurgency strategies against Liberal guerrillas in the 1950s, during the period of *La Violencia*, and against left-wing guerrilla movements in the 1960s. Irregular forces were also organised by agrarian elites, such as cattle ranchers, and *narcotraficantes* in the 1970s and 1980s in response to a sense of insecurity in the face of guerrilla assaults, as well as to protect their social and economic power.²⁵

The use of civilians in the nation's internal defence was a legal part of Colombia's counter-insurgency for the two decades prior to the *formal* ending of this policy in 1989. The National Security Doctrine promoted in Colombia (and in the remainder of Latin America) by the United States during the Cold War resulted in a strategy that would orient Latin American militaries to focus on internal threats and suppress the possibility of 'revolutionary'

²⁴ Jonathan Hartlyn, 'Producer Associations, the Political Regime, and Policy Processes in Contemporary Colombia,' *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 20, no. 3 (1985), pp. 111–38; Jonathan Hartlyn, *The Politics of Coalition Rule in Colombia* (New York, 1988); Daniel Pécaut, *Crónica de dos décadas de política colombiana* (Bogotá, 1989); John Peeler, 'Elite Settlements and Democratic Consolidation: Colombia, Costa Rica, and Venezuela,' in John Higley and Richard Gunther (eds.), *Elites and Democratic Consolidation in Latin America and Southern Europe* (New York, 1992), pp. 81–112.

²⁵ Mauricio Romero, 'Paramilitary Groups in Contemporary Colombia,' in Diane Davis and Anthony Pereira (eds.), *Irregular Armies and Their Role in Politics and State Formation* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 178–9.

change. In 1962, for example, an American military advisor, General William Yarborough, led a US Army Special Warfare team to assess Colombia's counter-insurgency strategies and recommend changes. Yarborough concluded that the Colombian army should 'select civilian and military personnel for clandestine training in resistance operations ...', and that they be used 'to perform counter-agent and counter-propaganda functions and as necessary execute paramilitary, sabotage and/or terrorist activities against known communist proponents'.²⁶ According to Michael McClintock, 'the framework of the doctrine developed by the end of 1963 would provide the foundation of counter-insurgency and unconventional warfare into the 1990s'.²⁷ Prior to the 1980s, the use of paramilitary actors complemented an aggressive response on the part of the Colombian armed forces to multiple forms of social and political resistance.

For example, trade union violence, an intensification of the guerrilla war and a resurgence of political protest coincided during the 1970s. Rather than seeking political reform in order to open up the political process or reduce the role of the armed forces within the state, the response of President Julio César Turbay-Ayala (1978–1982) to this social agitation was to use his emergency powers under a 'state of siege' to decree a national security statute. This restricted civil rights and expanded the powers of the armed forces 'to arrest, interrogate and try civilians for crimes of subversion, and to govern large regions of the country'.²⁸ In 1980 over 8,000 Colombians were detained for 'political reasons', and the vast majority tried in military courts. During this same period human rights organisations documented a noticeable increase in forced disappearances and allegations of torture at the hands of military officials, as the state continued to meet political and social challenges with repression.²⁹ The failure of this overt state repression to quell this resistance contributed to the pursuit of different strategies in the decades that followed.

During the 1980s and 1990s political elites engaged in various efforts at reforming the state and negotiating with the armed opposition, without

²⁶ Human Rights Watch, *Colombia's Killer Networks: The Military-Paramilitary Partnership and the United States* (New York, 1996), p. 12.

²⁷ Michael McClintock, *Instruments of Statecraft: U.S. Guerrilla Warfare, Counter-Insurgency, and Counter-Terrorism, 1940–1990* (New York, 1992), p. 228. The influence of the US military would be a constant for the remainder of the twentieth century, with Colombia sending more troops to the School of Americas than any other country in Latin America: see Doug Stokes, *America's War on Terror* (London, 2005), p. 5.

²⁸ Nationaal Centrum voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking (NCOS), Samen Anders Gaan Ontwikkelen (SAGO), Terre des Hommes et al., *Tras los pasos perdidos de la Guerra Sucia: paramilitarismo y operaciones encubiertas en Colombia* (Brussels, 1995), p. 53; see also Blair Trujillo, *Las Fuerzas Armadas*, pp. 132–5.

²⁹ Gustavo Gallón Giraldo (ed.), *Derechos humanos y conflicto armado en Colombia* (Bogotá, 1991), pp. 13–15.

jettisoning state repression and, increasingly, paramilitary repression. Furthermore, the governments of the 1980s and 1990s confronted continuing political protest, civic movements, and a resurgence of leftist party activity. Important divisions emerged between regional and national political elites over negotiating strategy and democratic reforms. Mauricio Romero argues that paramilitary groups directly tied to regional political authorities, rural elites, and *narcotraficantes* emerged in the 1980s in part as a response to growing social and guerrilla movements, as well as to the various attempts to negotiate an end to the conflict.³⁰ According to Romero, the political reforms of the Betancur government in the late 1980s, which granted greater political rights and resources to local and regional governments, allowing the left to make electoral inroads on a local level, also contributed to increasing paramilitary reaction. By 1986 Betancur's peace process had collapsed and the progressive elimination of the most significant leftist party, the Unión Patriótica (UP), had begun.³¹ However, the armed forces continued to account for the majority of human rights violations during this period, and this was to change only after the reduction of a number of the armed forces' prerogatives, including the ending of their right to create 'self-defence' or paramilitary groups.

The emerging centrality of paramilitary organisations from the late 1980s reflected a general security need on the part of agrarian elites and *narcotraficantes*, whose interests coincided with the counter-insurgency objectives of the Colombian armed forces. Colombian military officers worked closely with paramilitary groups linked to *narcotraficantes* during the 1980s, assisting them in their land acquisition while displacing and terrorising perceived guerrilla sympathisers. Colombia's chief national prosecutor reported in 1986 that army officials used paramilitary groups as an 'armed front, as hired killers who could do unofficially what was not permitted officially'.³² Paramilitary repression would continue into the 1990s, with regional/local groupings forming a national confederation by April 1997. The transformation and growth of the paramilitary movement would take place both during periods of peace negotiations and periods in which the state escalated its military response against the insurgency (especially between 1993 and 1998). This coincided with the emergence of Colombia's transnational elite, an elite that would oversee an institutional and economic reform process to integrate the country into capitalist globalisation, while tolerating and

³⁰ Romero, 'Paramilitary Groups in Contemporary Colombia'.

³¹ Jenny Pearce, *Colombia: Inside the Labyrinth* (New York, 1990), p. 175. According to officials within the party between 1985 and 1992 it lost over 2,200 of its militants to paramilitary violence. See Human Rights Watch, 'Colombia: Human Rights Developments' (1993), http://www.hrw.org/reports/1993/WR93/Amw-02.htm#P103_70128.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 114.

facilitating paramilitary repression. The reforms implemented by this elite represented an ideological commitment to a set of neoliberal political and economic ideas. They also reflected increasing international pressures to establish democratic and human rights reforms.

Colombia's transnational elite and paramilitarism: the 1990s

Colombia's transnational elite, or 'technopols', were elected or appointed to key decision-making positions within the state during the late 1980s and early 1990s, and represented a distinct neoliberal and modernising shift in Colombian policy-making. Within the Barco government there existed a number of economic advisors and technocrats who had worked for international financial institutions or banks, who shared the philosophy that free markets and international competition were the key to development.³³ Individuals such as Rudolph Hommes (Minister of Finance during the early 1990s), César Gaviria (President, 1990–1994), Fernando Cepeda (special advisor to Presidents Virgilio Barco and César Gaviria), Luis Alberto Moreno (economic advisor to Gaviria) and Rafael Pardo (peace advisor to the Barco government and Minister of Defence during the Gaviria administration) were important representatives of this modernising elite, typifying the 'new right' of Colombia's politics, who identified with the defence of the individual and the market economy.³⁴ The weekly *Semana* described Gaviria's cabinet in the following way: 'They are the defenders of democracy first and foremost, with a civilian conception of society and a rejection of the use of violence to solve social problems ... [they are] ... anti-communist, anti-populist, anti-third worldism and anti-statist'.³⁵ These modernising technocrats were central to the development of plans to reform the country's politics in the face of the continuing challenges of social protest, guerrilla violence, and narcoterrorism.³⁶

The new constitution of 1991 was one response to these social challenges. The constitution reduced some of the advantages enjoyed by the two major political parties, allowed for greater judicial protections for human rights, and increased the number of political offices subject to direct elections.³⁷ The

³³ Fernando Cepeda, *Dirección política de la reforma económica en Colombia* (Bogotá, 1994): pp. 159–63. Former World Bank employees included Barco himself, Oscar Marulanda Gómez, economic advisor in the Ministry of Finance, and Miguel Urrutia, the director of the Monetary Board. Barco's Minister of Finance, Luis Fernando Alarcón, had previously worked for the Inter-American Development Bank. See Cepeda, *Dirección política*, pp. 151 and 159–63.

³⁴ *Semana*, 7 August 1990, p. 28; *Semana*, 15 October 1991, p. 34; see also Avilés, *Global Capitalism, Democracy and Civil–Military Relations*. ³⁵ *Semana*, 7 August 1990, p. 28.

³⁶ Consuelo Ahumada, *El modelo neoliberal* (Bogotá, 1996), pp. 175–218. See also Pearce, *Colombia*, pp. 154–63. ³⁷ See Dugas, 'Structure and Agency'.

peace process had been restarted and the Barco administration successfully re-integrated the M-19 in 1989, allowing them an opportunity to assist in the development of a new constitution.³⁸ The remaking of Colombia's politics also included a number of reforms in civil–military relations. The administration of César Gaviria (1990–1994) selected a civilian to head the Ministry of Defence in 1991, the first in forty years. Gaviria's government also created special civilian-led agencies with responsibility over the military's budgets, and enacted special human rights training and education programs for the armed forces. In September 1991 a civilian replaced the military head of the country's domestic intelligence agency, the Department of Administrative Security (DAS).³⁹ Also, a special unit was established within the civilian-led National Department of Planning with the sole responsibility of overseeing military spending.⁴⁰ Some accused the administration of making these changes under pressure from FARC and ELN leaders who had long demanded the expansion of civilian supervision and leadership over the armed forces.⁴¹ The Gaviria administration held negotiations with FARC and the ELN during the first two years of his administration, but by November 1992 they had broken down. FARC and ELN leaders demanded greater economic and social concessions from the government, believing that a role in rewriting the constitution was an insufficient incentive to lay down their arms.⁴²

The institutional and constitutional reforms took place within a regional context of democratic transitions throughout Latin America, with the United States actively pursuing 'democracy promotion' campaigns throughout the region.⁴³ US policy-makers argued that military aid to the security forces in the Andean region in 1989 was needed in order to 'defend democracy against the new slayers of the democratic dream – the narcotraffickers and drug cartels who poison our children ...'⁴⁴ This stated goal of promoting democracy was reinforced by the public pronouncements that US policy-makers made directly to military and governmental officials in Latin America, emphasising the importance of civilian control.⁴⁵

³⁸ Lawrence Boudon, 'Colombia's M-19 Democratic Alliance: A Case Study in New Party Self-Destruction,' *Latin American Perspectives*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2001), pp. 73–92.

³⁹ *El Tiempo*, 6 Sept. 1991, p. 11A.

⁴⁰ The Department of National Planning (DNP) is the central agency that oversees the country's national budget. ⁴¹ *El Tiempo*, 23 Aug. 1991, p. 8A.

⁴² Marc Chernick, 'Negotiating Peace Amid Multiple Forms of Violence: The Protracted Search for a Settlement to the Armed Conflicts in Colombia,' in Cynthia J. Arnson (ed.), *Comparative Peace Processes in Latin America* (Washington, DC, 1999), pp. 159–99.

⁴³ Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy*.

⁴⁴ *American Foreign Policy Documents 1989*, Doc. 438, pp. 678–81.

⁴⁵ President Reagan's Defense Secretary, Frank Carlucci, in a speech to the Interamerican Naval Conference, stated that 'our common security goal must remain a democratic Western Hemisphere' and that the 'military must never be part of the problem' (*American*

In 1991 the US Congress mandated that the Pentagon's International Military Education and Training (IMET) programmes, which had been established in 1976 to provide professional, leadership and management training for senior military leaders and mid-grade officers with leadership potential, should be expanded to focus on the needs of new democracies.⁴⁶ Congress dedicated \$1 million of IMET funds for training foreign civilian and military officials in respect for civilian control over military affairs, and promoting awareness and understanding of internationally recognised human rights.⁴⁷ Between 1990 and 1993 Colombia was the leading recipient of US military aid in all of Latin America; between 1984 and 1992 6,844 Colombian soldiers were trained in the IMET programme.⁴⁸ The emphasis on 'civilian authority' complemented the various human rights provisions included in anti-narcotics agreements, such as the 1990 Declaration of Cartagena, which required that all 'parties act within the framework for human rights'.⁴⁹ These external pressures for democratic reform complemented the need to legitimise the social order through institutional reform within the parameters of a Low-Intensity Democracy.

Colombia's transnational elite also developed and implemented a number of neoliberal economic policies that opened the country up to greater investments from transnational corporations, privatised state-owned enterprises, deregulated labour markets, and lowered tariffs on imported goods. During the Barco administration pressures for economic liberalisation came from the World Bank and US trade representatives as well as Colombian exporters.⁵⁰ George Bush's Andean Initiative of 1989 committed over \$2 billion for Andean countries (Peru, Bolivia and Colombia) to support their

Foreign Policy Documents 1988, Doc. 424, pp. 701–2). Secretary George Schultz, in a speech in Bolivia, argued that 'we must expand our military assistance programs to those countries where the direct cooperation of the defense establishment with civilian agencies is essential' (*American Foreign Policy Documents 1988*, Doc. 91, pp. 220–1).

⁴⁶ Thomas Carothers, 'Taking Stock of U.S. Democracy Assistance,' in Michael Cox, G. John Ikenberry and Takasha Inoguchi (eds.), *American Democracy Promotion: Impulses, Strategies and Impacts* (New York, 2000), p. 189.

⁴⁷ Federation of American Scientists Defense, 'US International Security Assistance Education and Training.' Available at <http://www.fas.org/asmp/campaigns/training.html>, accessed 15 January 2001.

⁴⁸ Ruth Coniff, 'Colombia's Dirty War, Washington's Dirty Hands,' *The Progressive* (May, 1992), p. 20.

⁴⁹ Colletta Youngers, 'Collateral Damage: The U.S. 'War on Drugs' and Its Impact on Democracy in the Andes,' in Jo-Marie Burt and Philip Mauzeri (eds.), *Politics in the Andes: Identity, Conflict and Reform* (Pittsburgh, 2004), p. 135.

⁵⁰ Cámara de Comercio de Bogotá, *La apertura económica en Colombia: agenda de un proceso* (Santa Fé de Bogotá, 1991), p. 29. See also Carlos Juárez, 'Trade and Development Policies in Colombia: Export Promotion and Outward Orientation, 1967–1992,' in Lowell S. Gustafson (ed.), *Economic Development Under Democratic Regimes: Neoliberalism in Latin America* (Westport, 1994), pp. 51–79.

'war on drugs', but was contingent upon the opening and restructuring of these economies along neoliberal lines.⁵¹ The economic reforms of the Barco and Gaviria governments were coupled with a campaign to weaken labour and popular movements through presidential decrees and articles in the new constitution, which made it easier to ban strikes in specific industries. In fact, government spokesmen frequently charged labour leaders with terrorist acts when they engaged in social protest.⁵²

The economic consequences of the neoliberal economic strategy fell negatively upon Colombia's rural and urban poor. Ahumada and Andrews' analysis of the consequences of the neoliberal model in Colombia concludes that:

Colombia's high rate of unemployment [20 per cent by 1999] is a direct consequence of the opening of the economy, which has brought about the bankruptcy in the productive sectors of the country. The elimination of employment opportunities in the agrarian sector, aggravated by the weakening of the role of the state and the elimination of most of the agrarian institutions, has worsened the prevalent climate of violence, forcing more and more agrarian workers to abandon their traditional crops and engage in drug production or join either the irregular guerrilla armies or the paramilitaries.⁵³

The country's manufacturing sector declined by 22 per cent in the ten years following beginning of the economic opening. The subsidised agricultural exports of the industrialised world, together with a collapse of coffee prices, severely weakened the agrarian economy, exacerbating rural poverty in particular.⁵⁴ Land ownership by the end of the 1990s was extreme, with 56.9 per cent of holdings covering only 2.8 per cent of productive land, while 0.3 per cent of holdings covered 60 per cent of the productive land.⁵⁵ Between 1997 and 2000 the Gini Coefficient for income distribution increased from 0.54 to 0.59: the income of the richest decile of the population increased by over 20 per cent to reach 58 per cent of total national income between 1992 and 1997.⁵⁶ By 1997 only Brazil had a higher level of economic inequality than

⁵¹ Doug Stokes, *America's Other War: Terrorizing Colombia* (London, 2005), p. 85.

⁵² Ahumada, *El modelo neoliberal*, pp. 223–37.

⁵³ Consuelo Ahumada and Christina Andrews, 'The Impact of Globalization on Latin American States: The Case of Brazil and Colombia,' *Administrative Theory and Praxis* 20: 4 (1998), p. 462; See also Consuelo Ahumada, *¿Qué está pasando en Colombia? Anatomía de un país en crisis* (Bogotá, 2001).

⁵⁴ David Moberg, 'Stuck in the Middle: Colombia's Labor Movement Faces Economic Assault,' *In These Times*, May 26, 2003, p. 10.

⁵⁵ Julio Enrique Soler B., 'Globalisation, Poverty and Inequity,' *Social Watch Annual Report: Colombia* (1997) http://www.socialwatch.org/en/informeImpreso/pdfs/colombia1997_eng.pdf.

⁵⁶ Alberto Yepes Palacio, 'Five Years of Constant Reversals,' *Social Watch Annual Report: Colombia* (2000), http://www.socialwatch.org/en/informeImpreso/pdfs/colombia2000_eng.pdf.

Colombia in Latin America.⁵⁷ Finally, between 1995 and 2000 Colombia's ranking on the United Nations' Human Development Index declined from 57 to 68, with overall poverty increasing from 55 per cent to 60 per cent of the population.⁵⁸

Paramilitarism exacerbated this inequality. Agrarian elites such as cattle ranchers and other large landowners, as well as the *narcotraficantes*, consolidated their economic and social power in the countryside. The Colombian sociologist, Alejandro Reyes, argued that 'one-third of the 800,000 refugees [by 2004 there were almost 2 million] lost their lands at the hands of paramilitary groups, who appropriated [them] as booty in the war in order to reconstruct a social base submissive to great haciendas. Buying cheaply where there were guerrillas, bringing in private security, and appraising the property became an enormous business ...'⁵⁹

Colombia's transnational elite, at the forefront of the country's formal democratisation and economic reform, tolerated and facilitated the paramilitary repression of legal and illegal organisations that opposed reform. The United States, while rhetorically condemning human rights violations during the 1990s, would repeatedly support those actors most directly connected with paramilitary repression. Political reform within the parameters of Low-Intensity Democracy was initiated and maintained by elites that allowed or promoted state and para-state repression as a necessary complement to economic and political change.

Anti-paramilitary policy and Colombia's transnational elite

In 1989 the Colombian government established a series of anti-paramilitary measures, two years after the government's own statistics showed that paramilitaries were responsible for more civilian deaths than guerrillas.⁶⁰ The government's anti-paramilitary response consisted of a series of presidential decrees establishing criminal penalties for the formation or operation of such groups, and requiring the approval of the president before any type of self-defence group was established (Decree 815 of 1989 and Decree 1194 of 1989).⁶¹ A commission was established to study the paramilitary problem

⁵⁷ Gary Hoskin and Gabriel Murillo, 'Colombia's Perpetual Quest for Peace,' *Journal of Democracy* 12: 2 (2001), pp. 32–45.

⁵⁸ Alberto Yepes Palacio, 'Adjustment Produces Redistribution that Favours the Financial Sector,' *Social Watch Annual Report: Colombia*, (2002): http://www.socialwatch.org/en/informeImpreso/pdfs/colombia2002_eng.pdf.

⁵⁹ As cited in Cubides, 'From Private to Public Violence,' p. 133.

⁶⁰ Harvey F. Kline, *State Building and Conflict Resolution in Colombia, 1986–1994* (Birmingham, AL, 1999), pp. 75–6.

⁶¹ Policies in Colombia have been implemented during ordinary and extraordinary periods, the latter referring to a 'state of siege' (1886 constitution) or 'state of internal commotion' (1991 constitution). During a 'state of siege' or 'state of internal commotion' presidents

(Decree 813 of 1989), and the administration proposed the organisation of a special police force dedicated to the elimination of paramilitary groups (Decree 814 of 1989).

An advisory and coordinating commission was constituted to help to direct and oversee the government's paramilitary policy. The Minister of Defence, the Minister of Justice, the head of the government's domestic intelligence agency (DAS), the General Commander of the Armed Forces and the Director of the National Police were members of the commission. However, the majority of the commission had either voiced support for paramilitary organisations or headed institutions that contained sectors with strong relationships with paramilitaries.⁶² Over the subsequent decade the advisory commission rarely met.⁶³

The anti-paramilitary decrees that removed legality from self-defence groups placed no strict regulation over existing groups, only restricting the formation of new ones.⁶⁴ Those responsible for social order at the time, the country's civilian Justice Minister (José Manuel Arian Caizos) and Defence Minister (Gen. Rafael Samudia), openly expressed support for 'private justice' groups (i.e. paramilitary groups) prior to the 1989 decrees. Arian Caizos would later become the head of a banana growers association, an industry with close links to paramilitary forces.⁶⁵ The special anti-paramilitary police force was mostly assigned to investigating and raiding drug laboratories and the offices of drug trafficking organisations, not directly attacking paramilitaries.⁶⁶ Paramilitary groups increased their numbers in the last year of the Barco administration, escalating their massacres of peasants, leftists and trade union activists.⁶⁷

The Gaviria administration and paramilitarism, 1990–1994

In his inaugural speech as president César Gaviria stated: 'We shall vigorously oppose the paramilitary groups ... channelling all the efforts of

can rule by decree, which suspends existing law, but does not overturn it. The 1991 constitution placed a 90-day time limit and required a vote of the Senate to extend it for another 90 days. For most of the last fifty years Colombia has been governed under different periods of 'states of siege' or 'states of internal commotion'.

⁶² Virgilio Barco, 'Paramilitares,' Decree no. 813 (19 April 1989).

⁶³ Javier Giraldo, *Colombia: The Genocidal Democracy* (Monroe, 1996), p. 94.

⁶⁴ Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), *Colombia Besieged: Political Violence and State Responsibility* (Washington, DC, 1989), p. 82.

⁶⁵ G. Palacio Castaneda, 'Institutional Crisis, Parainstitutionality, and Regime Flexibility in Colombia,' in Martha Higgins (ed.), *Vigilantism and the State* (Westport, 1991). p. 117.

⁶⁶ On the lack of implementation of Barco's reforms, see Americas Watch, *The 'Drug War' in Colombia: The Neglected Tragedy of Political Violence* (New York, 1990).

⁶⁷ In 1980 Colombia experienced 100 politically motivated killings; this figure surpassed 1,000 in 1985 and 4,000 in 1988. See Romero, 'Autonomía militar, paramilitares y autodefensas,' p. 60.

the Colombian state into dismantling these groups which, through drug-trafficking and extreme right-wing sectors, have become powerful criminal organisations responsible for massacres, assassinations of political leaders and all kinds of atrocities'.⁶⁸ The government focused upon the criminal prosecution of paramilitary members and the reduction of their sentences if they turned themselves in to the authorities. This policy was effective in reducing narcoterrorism against governmental institutions and leading politicians, but was ineffective against the paramilitary leadership. Leaders such as Fidel and Carlos Castaño (who headed a paramilitary group in the department of Córdoba), Ariel Otero (Magdalena Medio region) or Henry Pérez (Magdalena Medio and Urabá regions) remained free.

The government's focus was primarily upon certain drug cartels. In fact, the issue of paramilitaries did not appear in the original drafts of the proposed decree of September 5, 1990.⁶⁹ The country would have to wait until 1993 for the government to identify paramilitarism specifically as a security threat (separately from its relationship with drugs trafficking) that required a strategic plan of action.⁷⁰ Other policy initiatives of the Gaviria administration suggest that civilian authorities prioritised protecting the impunity of the armed forces and fighting a 'war against drugs' rather than the struggle against paramilitarism.

For example, in its war against the Medellín cartel, and specifically Pablo Escobar, the Gaviria government worked with paramilitary groups in an effort to kill or arrest the cartel leader. *Los Pepes* was a paramilitary group made up of former Escobar associates committed to destroying his organisation and assisting the national police in their pursuit of him. Fidel Castaño, the leader of paramilitary organisations in the department of Córdoba and a former security chief in the Medellín cartel, led *Los Pepes* against Escobar beginning in 1993.⁷¹ The group utilised tactics such as assassinations, bombings and torture against members of Escobar's organisation. They periodically provided information to the state, in particular the *Bloque de*

⁶⁸ Amnesty International, *Political Violence in Colombia: Myth and Reality* (New York 1994), p. 54.

⁶⁹ The then national security advisor, Rafael Pardo, commented, 'We returned to revise the text and add articles that also allowed for the surrender of paramilitaries ...' (my emphasis). See Rafael Pardo, *De primera mano. Colombia 1986–1994: entre conflictos y esperanzas* (Bogotá, 1996), pp. 265–6.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* See also Cubides, 'Los paramilitares y su estrategia,' p. 175.

⁷¹ Henry de Jesus Pérez, the leader of another paramilitary force, had actually begun to struggle against Escobar before 1993 as Escobar's war with the state directly affected his landowning allies and ranchers in the region where Jesus Pérez operated. His paramilitary organisation engaged in operations with the National Police and its searches for the cartel leader. See *Semana* (1991), pp. 16–17.

Búsqueda.⁷² This was a special army/police unit created to track down and arrest the leaders of the Medellín cartel. The *Bloque* reportedly received financing from the Cali cartel: Gustavo de Greiff, the Prosecutor General under Gaviria, stated that the '*Bloque de Búsqueda* was an instrument of Escobar's enemies not of the government'.⁷³ In fact, Fidel Castaño's brother, Carlos Castaño, claimed that after 1989 he had assisted the country's domestic intelligence agency (DAS) in its operations against the Medellín cartel. 'We were tolerated', Castaño stated, 'by the Attorney General, the police, the army, the DAS and even President César Gaviria Trujillo, who never ordered that we be pursued'.⁷⁴ The government of the United States was also aware of the relationship, but did little to end it, and continued to share intelligence and support the *Bloque de Búsqueda's* efforts to capture Escobar.⁷⁵ It prioritised the capture of Escobar over any competing concerns regarding state-paramilitary relationships. The US support for the *Bloque de Búsqueda* complemented its assistance in 'reforming' Colombia's military intelligence.

As part of its ostensible mission in fighting the 'drug war' the US military proposed a reorganisation plan for the military's intelligence structure, which was accepted by Colombia's civilian Defence Minister.⁷⁶ The plan centred on combating growing 'terrorism by the armed subversion'.⁷⁷ A series of 'intelligence networks' was created by the different branches of the armed forces which directly incorporated civilians or retired non-commissioned officers as agents to provide intelligence to the military high command in a specific region (continuing a history of the United States providing advice on the development of paramilitary groups). One of the networks became engaged in selective assassinations of trade union leaders, members of human rights groups, and members of the leftist political party, the Unión Patriótica.⁷⁸ The central intelligence brigade formed under this reorganisation, the 20th Brigade, would become the source of numerous assassinations and disappearances during the 1990s.⁷⁹

The continued linkages between the Colombian state and paramilitarism were further strengthened by the state's policy on military promotions and its inconsistent efforts at reforming military justice. Allegations and investigations of military officers and commanders involved with paramilitary

⁷² Mark Bowden, *Killing Pablo: The Hunt for the World's Greatest Outlaw* (New York, 2001), pp. 197–8.

⁷³ Patrick L. Clawson and Rensselaer W. Lee III, *The Andean Cocaine Industry* (New York, 1996) p. 177.

⁷⁴ See Mauricio Aranguren Molina, *Mi confesión: Carlos Castaño revela sus secretos* (Bogotá, 2001), p. 142.

⁷⁵ Bowden, *Killing Pablo*, p. 198.

⁷⁶ Human Rights Watch, *Colombia's Killer Networks*, p. 28.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 29–31.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 23–6.

organisations did not lead to their removal or prevent them from being promoted during the Gaviria administration. The career of General Ramón Emilio Gil Bermúdez is a case in point. Gil Bermúdez was named in a 1983 report by the Attorney General as one of the officers involved in assisting and working with MAS (*Muerte a los Secuestradores* – Death to Kidnappers), the first major paramilitary group – and one with direct links to *narcotraficantes* – in the 1980s. Ex-members of MAS stated that Gil Bermúdez ‘created and protected the group, directing its members to commit numerous assassinations and disappearances’.⁸⁰ Military courts investigated the allegations and absolved the officer of any wrongdoing.⁸¹ He was later promoted up the ranks, ultimately becoming the General Commander of the Armed Forces during the Gaviria administration, the next highest position to the Minister of Defence.⁸²

This support for military officers linked with paramilitarism corresponded with an escalation of the counter-insurgency war, as President Gaviria intensified military pressure in November 1992 after the breakdown of the peace process that he had initiated. Funds for the armed forces were increased, restrictions were placed on the mass media, and the armed forces engaged in a nationwide offensive to defeat the insurgency.⁸³

The Samper administration and paramilitarism, 1994–1998

The administration of Ernesto Samper (1994–1998), like the Gaviria government, maintained a neoliberal and formally democratic policy agenda, while tolerating and facilitating the repressive policies of paramilitarism. Samper’s government advocated the privatisation of major state-owned companies, increasing foreign investment, and the maintenance of a tight monetary policy.⁸⁴ The government promised to ‘continue with the “opening” [the economic policies undertaken by the Gaviria administration], but actually consolidate this process through a more aggressive strategy of internationalisation ...’⁸⁵ In 1997 Samper attempted to renegotiate the country’s oil contracts in an effort to increase foreign investment by about US\$4 billion.⁸⁶ Despite opposition from the oil workers’ union, which

⁸⁰ Organización Mundial Contra la Tortura et al., *Terrorismo de estado en Colombia* (Brussels, 1992), p. 146.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Human Rights Watch, *Colombia’s Killer Networks*, pp. 19–20.

⁸³ Francisco Leal Buitrago, *La seguridad nacional a la deriva: del Frente Nacional a la posguerra fría* (Bogotá, 2002), pp. 85–6.

⁸⁴ Brian McBeth, ‘Colombia,’ in Julia Buxton and Nicola Phillips (eds.), *Case Studies in Latin American Political Economy* (Manchester, 1999), pp. 147–9; Ahumada and Andrews, ‘The Impact of Globalization,’ pp. 461–4.

⁸⁵ Ahumada, *El modelo neoliberal*, p. 16.

⁸⁶ Steven Dudley and Mario Murrillo, ‘Oil in a Time of War,’ *NACLA Report on the Americas* 31: 5 (1998), p. 44.

Samper labelled a 'terrorist cartel', foreign direct investment increased between 1996 and 2002 as a percentage of the country's GDP (from 12 per cent to 23 per cent).⁸⁷

In response to paramilitarism, Samper proposed actively to enforce the 1989 anti-paramilitary decrees by establishing special human rights investigative units, and by bringing members of 'self-defence' and 'private vigilante groups' (i.e. paramilitaries) to justice. He also announced a \$500,000 reward for information leading to the capture of Carlos Castaño.⁸⁸ In December 1997 a special search unit of the National Police was proposed, through decree 2895, to seek out paramilitary squads and dismantle them.⁸⁹ The policy promises did not advance much beyond the rhetoric. The specific decisions of civilian authorities consistently worked to undermine their implementation. A central example was Samper's support for the CONVIVIR.

Agrarian elites and sectors of the army had continued to support the use of civilian militias in counter-insurgency strategies, despite the 1989 decrees prohibiting this support. The Gaviria administration examined ways of utilising them. In February 1994 the government issued Decree 356, establishing 'special services of vigilance and security'.⁹⁰ The decree allowed anyone, with the approval of the Ministry of Defence, to 'provide for his or her own security' and was the basis for the creation of the *Servicios Especiales de Vigilancia y Seguridad Privada*.⁹¹

In September 1994, on the basis of Decree 356, the Samper administration authorised the creation of the Community Associations of Rural Vigilance (*Asociaciones Comunitarias de Vigilancia Rural* or CONVIVIR). These organisations would ostensibly be limited to a 'defensive function', supporting the armed forces with intelligence about local communities.⁹² The National Federation of Cattle Ranchers (FEDEGAN), along with seven other business associations, publicly supported the programme.⁹³

The first superintendent of the CONVIVIR associations was Herman Arias Gaviria. Arias Gaviria was the son of José Manuel Arias Carrizosa, the former head of the banana-exporting company, UNIBAN, which had been created by the Association of Banana Growers of Urabá (AUGURA), a

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁸⁸ US State Department, 'Colombia: Report on Human Rights' (1994).

⁸⁹ 'Samper defiende política de D.H. en fuerza pública,' *El Espectador*, 6 December 1997, p. 11-A. ⁹⁰ Richani, *Systems of Violence*, pp. 50–1.

⁹¹ Libia Pinto Rincón, 'Las Convivir: evaluación de su gestión' (Master's Thesis, Universidad Industrial de Santander and Universidad Nacional, 1998); *Alternativa*, 15 March–15 April 1997, pp. 9–16. ⁹² *El Tiempo*, 14 July 1997, 6A; *El Tiempo*, 17 Nov. 1996, p. 6A.

⁹³ *El Tiempo*, 14 July 1997, 6A; Inter-Church Committee on Human Rights in Latin America [ICCHRLA], 'One Step Forward, Three Steps Back: Human Rights in Colombia Under the Samper Government,' <http://www.web.net/~icchrla/Colombia/Pol-1Forward3Back-Oct97.html>.

coalition of independent banana producers.⁹⁴ AUGURA allegedly supported and worked with paramilitary units and army brigades in an effort to ‘pacify’ the banana growing region of Urabá, which involved frequent massacres and assassinations during the 1990s.⁹⁵ Samper would later appoint Arias Gaviria as National Security Advisor.⁹⁶

Within a year more than 500 CONVIVIR units were founded, with almost 10,000 armed men and little governmental oversight.⁹⁷ These units maintained a close working relationship with police and army commanders and were funded largely by wealthy ranchers.⁹⁸ In response to reports of abuses, evidence of linkages between the CONVIVIR and paramilitary groups, and international criticisms from the United Nations, the Samper administration suspended the creation of new associations and barred them from receiving military issued weapons.⁹⁹ However, the pre-existing CONVIVIR still maintained their legal status to operate and were finally abolished only in 1999.¹⁰⁰

The promotion of the CONVIVIR coincided with the relative lack of funding for efforts at breaking military-paramilitary linkages or weakening these forces. The special military force that Samper proposed specifically to seek out and destroy paramilitary groups never materialised, as the government made little effort to procure the necessary funds.¹⁰¹ This lack of resources for directly combating paramilitary groups corresponded with a lack of funds to investigate their violations of human rights. As Carlos Vicente Roux, an advisor to President Samper on human rights, stated, ‘We don’t have enough personnel or resources to process or to carry out investigations and to ensure investigation of cases and to provide protection of persons at risk ... There are still not enough resources to provide protection for political leaders, human rights activists, and trade union leaders who are threatened’.¹⁰² In fact, on several occasions Samper argued that human rights workers acted inappropriately in criticising the army. In an October 1995 speech he announced that he would prefer to see the armed

⁹⁴ *Alternativa*, 15 March–15 April 1997, pp. 9–10.

⁹⁵ NCOS et al., *Tras los pasos perdidos*, p. 51. For evidence of UNIBAN’s links with paramilitarism, see Pearce, *Colombia*, pp. 250–5. ⁹⁶ Dávila, *El juego del poder*, p. 184.

⁹⁷ Richani, *Systems of Violence*, p. 52; *Semana*, 1 Sept. 1997, p. 35.

⁹⁸ ICCHRLA, ‘One Step Forward, Three Steps Back’.

⁹⁹ The CONVIVIRs were responsible for the displacement of almost 200,000 peasants in the first two years of their existence: Forrest Hylton, ‘An Evil Hour: Uribe’s Colombia in Historical Perspective,’ *New Left Review* 23 (Sept./Oct. 2003), p. 88.

¹⁰⁰ Many of these security groups did not in fact disappear after 1999, but only became semi-clandestine and began to work more directly with the paramilitaries: Cubides, ‘From Private to Public Violence,’ p. 131.

¹⁰¹ Author’s interview with former National Security Advisor, 28 June 1999, Bogotá.

¹⁰² Carlos Vicente Roux, ‘Colombia: Human Rights and the Peace Process’ (Woodrow Wilson Center, Latin American Program, Working Paper Series no. 212, 1995), pp. 47–8.

forces fighting subversives in the mountains, rather than appearing in tribunals to face the 'baseless' accusations of their enemies.¹⁰³

The inability of these agencies to investigate and prosecute the various crimes committed by paramilitaries and the establishment of the CONVIVIR coincided with the unification of a number of different paramilitary groups into a larger force, the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC, United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia) in April 1997.¹⁰⁴ The development of a national organisation was accomplished with little resistance from the Samper administration. Carlos Castaño commented:

Among the self-defence forces, the government of Ernesto Samper will always be remembered well ... Samper was sending us messages that he would never persecute us, he sent us a message that we would not be pursued, he offered a million pesos as an award for my capture and he told me that this was his *obligation*. He stated that there would be no persecution against us and he complied, we never felt any.¹⁰⁵

The policy goals of promoting 'democracy' and fighting the 'drug war' often received the same level of rhetorical support from the United States. However, actual implementation and financial support consistently favoured fighting the drug war rather than promoting democracy. In their annual human rights reports the State Department accused Colombian military units of supporting paramilitary groups every year between 1993 and 1998. These public reports were complemented by congressional action, the most important example being the passage of the Leahy Amendment of 1996 (named after Senator Patrick Leahy). This prohibited the delivery of military aid to foreign military units in which there was 'credible evidence' that they had committed human rights violations (such as assisting paramilitary units).

US officials had difficulty in identifying units able to meet even the relatively modest provisions of the human rights restrictions. The United States attempted to avoid this difficulty by the financing of completely new battalions made up of soldiers and officers with no history of military-paramilitary linkages. However, these new battalions coordinated their efforts with army brigades that had been singled out for their links with paramilitary groups.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Interamerican Commission on Human Rights, 'Third Report on the Human Rights Situation in Colombia,' *Country Reports* (1999), Chapter Seven: <http://www.cidh.org/countryrep/Colom99en/table%20of%20contents.htm>.

¹⁰⁴ Human Rights Watch, *War Without Quarter: Colombia and International Humanitarian Law* (New York, 1998), pp. 106–9. By 1998 paramilitary fronts were present in the departments of Magdalena, Córdoba, César, Santander, Antioquia, Cundinamarca, Tolima, Vichada, Guaviare, Casanare, Boyacá and Meta.

¹⁰⁵ Aranguren Molina, *Mi Confesión*, pp. 175–6 (my emphasis).

¹⁰⁶ National Security Archive, 'Guerrillas, Drugs and Human Rights in U.S.–Colombia Policy, 1988–2002', *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 69* (2001), Government Documents 58–60, 62–63 and 67. See also Documents 69–70, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB69/>.

Furthermore, in vetting these military units for human rights violators the US government received a list from the Colombian Defence Ministry which included only those troops who had had *formal* charges made against them, rather than also including those where credible evidence of human rights violations existed.¹⁰⁷

Most importantly, US military aid dramatically increased by the end of the 1990s, with Colombia becoming the third leading recipient of US foreign aid in the world. In effect, through its support of the Colombian army, the United States government was indirectly assisting and aiding the largest perpetrators of political assassinations in Colombia, paramilitary groups. Symbolically and rhetorically the US government pressed different Colombian administrations to reduce the human rights violations of state actors and their support for paramilitary groups. However, actual military aid to the very actors committing, or aiding the commission, of human rights abuses ultimately increased, continuing the long history of US counter-insurgency aid to the Colombian state.¹⁰⁸ Formal democratisation and institutional reform, rather than actual democratic practice, fulfilled the conditions for increasing US military aid.

Paramilitarism in the Pastrana administration, 1998–2002

The Andrés Pastrana administration, like others in the 1990s, continued to rely upon a group of technocrats similar in their ideological orientation to the group that advised Gaviria.¹⁰⁹ Structural adjustment policies implemented in December 1999 met stiff resistance amongst sectors of civil society. State workers launched some of the biggest strikes to occur in the 1990s in protest at these policies.¹¹⁰ Also, like previous governments, Pastrana symbolically promised a struggle against paramilitarism while tolerating and facilitating their activities. The government cashiered over 300 army soldiers, ostensibly because of their links with paramilitary groups. However, Human Rights Watch discovered that only about thirty of this group had linkages with these organisations.¹¹¹ In February 2000 Pastrana announced the creation of the ‘Coordination Centre for the Fight against Self-Defence Groups’ which was to organise a campaign against paramilitaries. One year after its ‘creation’ the centre had yet to meet. Human Rights Watch concluded after three years that

¹⁰⁷ Doug Stokes, ‘U.S. Human Rights Monitoring in Colombia,’ *Z Magazine Online* (30 August 2003). www.zmag.org.
¹⁰⁸ See Stokes, *America’s Other War*, Chapter One.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Ambassador Luis Alberto Moreno, 13 July 2004.

¹¹⁰ Consuelo Ahumada, *Cuatro años a bordo de sí mismo: la herencia económica, social y política del gobierno de Andrés Pastrana* (Bogotá, 2002), pp. 224–6.

¹¹¹ Human Rights Watch. ‘The “Sixth Brigade”: Military-Paramilitary Ties and U.S. Policy in Colombia’ (2001). <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/colombia/>.

Pastrana's government had 'dedicated most of its time and energy to mounting a sophisticated public relations campaign that highlight[ed] its good intentions. But this campaign has yet to translate into effective action that address[ed] the sources of violence, particularly continuing ties between the military and paramilitary groups'.¹¹²

In response to the growing crisis that it perceived in Colombia the United States formulated Plan Colombia, a massive 'drug-war' package of \$1.6 billion over a two-year period.¹¹³ Plan Colombia was signed into law in 2000 to assist a larger US/Colombian counter-narcotics programme, with the vast majority of the 'aid' dedicated toward strengthening the Colombian army, the central force that supported paramilitarism throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The plan included a 'human rights waiver' which would allow the US president to waive human rights conditions in the interest of national security.¹¹⁴ President Clinton waived these conditions the first year that a decision had to be made, and President Bush's State Department has repeatedly concluded that the Colombian government has been meeting its human rights obligations despite extensive evidence to the contrary.¹¹⁵ The US plan called for a massive assault upon southern Colombia, where the bulk of the FARC forces were concentrated, with little attention to the paramilitary forces arrayed in the north. The Plan was ostensibly designed as an 'anti-drug war' strategy, yet Carlos Castaño stated that 70 per cent of all paramilitary funding derived from drug trafficking.¹¹⁶

Transnational corporations associated with extractive investments, such as the oil industry, played an active role in these developments. The vice-president of Occidental Petroleum personally lobbied for US assistance to Plan Colombia, emphasising Colombia's extensive oil potential and unexplored regions.¹¹⁷ Many of those areas lay in regions under guerrilla control in southern Colombia, such as in Caquetá, Vaupés and Amazonas, areas in which governmental control had to be established before exploration

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Russell Crandall, *Driven by Drugs: U.S. Policy toward Colombia* (Boulder, 2002), pp. 149–52.

¹¹⁴ Centre for International Policy 'The Contents of the Colombian Aid Package' (2001). <http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/aidsumm.htm>.

¹¹⁵ Washington Office on Latin America, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, 'Colombia Fails Rights Test: U.S. Releases Funds While Links Between Military and Paramilitaries Remain,' *Press Release* (10 September 2002).

¹¹⁶ Global Security Organization, 'United Self-Defense Forces/Group of Colombia (AUC – Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia),' Military Report. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/auc.htm>.

¹¹⁷ 'Testimony of Lawrence P. Meriage, Vice President, Executive Services and Public Affairs, Occidental Oil and Gas Corporation, Before the House Government Reform Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and Human Resources, Hearing on Colombia,' February 15, 2000, available at www.ciponline.org/colombia/021507.htm.

contracts could be signed.¹¹⁸ Occidental also contributed funds to various congressional campaigns between 1996 and 2000 in an effort to increase military aid to Colombia.¹¹⁹ The Bush administration would ultimately allow the Colombian government to use US aid in the counter-insurgency struggle and directly assist Occidental Petroleum in designating \$100 million to finance a special Colombian brigade to protect its central oil pipeline.¹²⁰ The US ambassador to Colombia, Anne Patterson, argued that the pipeline plan was ‘something we have to do. ... It is important for the future of the country, for our petroleum supplies and for the confidence of our investors’.¹²¹

Paramilitary Repression in the 1990s

The years between 1990 and 2002 represented a period of escalating political violence and paramilitary repression coinciding with and following a period of economic and political reform. Colombia’s democratisation through the reform of civil–military relations, a new constitution in 1991, and the expansion of electoral competition were insufficient to co-opt major sources of political opposition (such as the FARC and ELN guerrillas). From 1986 to 1997 the FARC doubled its numbers (reaching almost 20,000 members) and was registering a presence in almost 70 per cent of the nation.¹²² The response of civilian reformers was not to deepen democracy through the reduction of socio-economic inequalities, nor to jettison the neoliberal economic policies that exacerbated conditions conducive to the continuation of the insurgency, but to tolerate and facilitate the activities of paramilitary repression in lieu of a return to an authoritarian order. As Table 1 indicates, the increasing violations of human rights by paramilitary groups corresponded with a decrease in the number of *direct* violations of human rights committed by the armed forces.

A central consequence of this paramilitary repression was to reduce the space for the political activities of trade unionists, Communists, peasant

¹¹⁸ Grace Livingstone, *Inside Colombia* (London, 2004), p. 82.

¹¹⁹ See Hernando Calvo, ‘Colombia’s Privatized Conflict,’ *ZNET Online* (30 December 2004): www.zmag.org/content/print_article.cfm?itemID=6939§ionID=45, accessed March 11, 2005.

¹²⁰ Washington Office on Latin America reports that the pipeline programme was designed by Andres Sotó in 2001, a Colombian who worked for Occidental Petroleum at the time and would later become the Vice-Minister of Defence. See Washington Office on Latin America, ‘Protecting the Pipeline: The U.S. Military Mission Expands,’ *Colombia Monitor* (May 2003), p. 6.

¹²¹ Washington Office on Latin America, ‘Protecting the Pipeline,’ p. 4.

¹²² J. L. Zackrisson and E. Bradley, ‘Colombian Sovereignty Under Siege,’ *Strategic Forum* 112 (May 1997), pp. 1–4.

Table 1. *Share of responsibility for non-combatant deaths and forced disappearances*

	1993	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Guerrillas	28%	38%	36%	23.5%	21.3%	19.6%	16.3%
Security Forces	54%	16%	18%	7.5%	2.7%	2.4%	4.6%
Paramilitary	18%	46%	46%	69%	76%	78%	79.2%

Source: Reports of the Colombian Commission of Jurists, as cited on the Center for International Policy Website: <www.ciponline.org/colombia/index.htm>

leaders of popular organisations, and human rights activists, who were all (and continue to be) disproportionately targeted by paramilitary groups. Colombia has become the most dangerous place in the world to be a trade unionist, as almost 4,000 were assassinated between 1986 and 2003.¹²³ The National Union School concluded that nearly 80 per cent of the trade unionists killed between 1991 and 2002 were murdered for their labour activity. Most of these killings were attributed to paramilitary groups; Carlos Castaño admitted that 'we kill trade unionists because they interfere with people working'.¹²⁴ The assault upon the legal left was also reflected in the massive population of internally displaced during this period (over two million people by 2005), with forced migrations often taking place in regions of socially active citizens, especially in areas of farm worker, peasant and indigenous rights organising.¹²⁵ The United Nations reported that paramilitary groups caused two to three times more forced displacements than the guerrillas.¹²⁶

The regular use of massacres and selective assassinations by paramilitary groups have been effective in displacing thousands from profitable lands, but have also been an effective instrument in displacing and removing the guerrillas' presence from much of northern Colombia, especially along the coasts, transforming these territories into zones dominated by paramilitary forces. By the end of 2002 such forces had a presence in almost all of Colombia, evolving into what might be termed counter-insurgent armies, possessing a significant level of autonomy from the Colombian state and the ability to strike the alleged support base of the insurgency throughout the nation.¹²⁷

¹²³ International Confederation of Free Trade Unionists (ICFTU), 'Colombia: Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights (2001)' www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991213791&Language=EN, accessed 20 March 2004; Livingstone, *Inside Colombia*, pp. 12–13.

¹²⁴ As quoted by David Moberg, 'Stuck in the Middle; Colombia's Labor Movement Faces Economic Assault – Backed up by Deadly Force,' *In These Times*, 5 May 2003, p. 10.

¹²⁵ Mabel González Bustelo, 'Desterrados: Forced Displacement in Colombia,' in Alfredo Molano (ed.), *The Dispossessed: Chronicles of the Desterrados of Colombia* (Chicago, 2005), pp. 201–40.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ International Crisis Group, 'Colombia's Elusive Quest for Peace,' *Latin America Report*, 26 March 2002, p. 5. One 2002 study by a Colombian NGO concluded that paramilitary groups controlled 182 out of 1,098 municipalities in 27 of the 32 departments in the

Finally, paramilitary repression has allegedly helped to establish security and labour peace for certain transnational corporations through their selective assassinations of union leaders, or by reinforcing protection from guerrilla attacks for specific oil pipelines.¹²⁸

The emergence of globalising technocrats (a transnational elite) in the late 1980s and early 1990s was thus key to Colombian democratisation and economic liberalisation in the midst of escalating political violence. Like many of the neoliberal governments that have come to power throughout Latin America, Colombia's transnational elite has faced social and political opposition to the implementation of its neoliberal economic agenda.¹²⁹ The reduction of the public sector and the opening of Latin American economies to greater international competition (central to the neoliberal strategy) led to increasing social exclusion, inequality, and episodes of substantial resistance to these policies.¹³⁰ However, Colombia's elite has not only had to deal with the opposition of trade unionists and rural activists, but has also been challenged by an anti-neoliberal guerrilla insurgency that is independently funded and militarily effective at undermining state control. Political and formal institutional reform, within limits, were pursued in part to co-opt this opposition, but a 'dirty war' was also tolerated and facilitated by this elite for those armed and unarmed actors resistant to the establishment of a neoliberal order and the authority of the state.

Uribe, paramilitarism and changing international–domestic conditions

Due to the perceived growth in the strength and capabilities of the guerrilla insurgency, the Pastrana administration complemented Plan Colombia with continued increases in military spending. The US government demanded that the Colombian government commit more resources to the military, making military aid contingent upon this.¹³¹ US pressures for greater

country, with an active presence in key regions: see International Crisis Group, 'Colombia: Negotiating with the Paramilitaries,' *Latin America Report*, 16 September 2003, p. 14.

¹²⁸ Nazih Richani lists five companies that have allegedly benefited directly or indirectly from paramilitary assistance. These are the Drummond Coal Company, British Petroleum, Coca-Cola, Silver Shadow and Defence Systems Inc (the latter two are security companies). See Nazih Richani, 'The Interface Between Domestic and International Factors in Colombia's War System' (Netherlands Institute of International Relations, Working Paper no. 22, August 2003), p. 16.

¹²⁹ Duncan Green. *Silent Revolution: The Rise and Crisis of Market Economies in Latin America* (New York, 2003), pp. 39–40.

¹³⁰ Robinson, 'Global Crisis in Latin America,' pp. 146–7.

¹³¹ Ahumada, *Cuatro años a bordo de sí mismo*, p. 296–7; Arlene Tickner, 'Colombia and the United States: From Counternarcotics to Counterterrorism,' *Current History* no. 651 (2003), p. 85.

'sacrifices' on the part of the Colombian government intensified after September 11th with the 'global war on terror' (the FARC, the ELN and the AUC are all considered 'terrorist' groups by the US government).

The failure of Pastrana's peace process in February 2002, together with international pressure for an expansion of coercive strategies of social control, were key domestic and international variables underlying a shift to an overt military strategy against the guerrilla insurgency. Alvaro Uribe, elected in 2002, promoted this, while maintaining a neoliberal agenda that had already contributed to exacerbating social and economic inequality in Colombia.¹³² Between 2001 and 2004 military spending increased by almost 33 per cent, with overall spending nearing 3.5 per cent of GDP, as Uribe continued the trend begun by Pastrana to increase efforts to strengthen and modernise the armed forces.¹³³ Uribe also implemented a number of policies related to a 'Democratic Security' strategy. This included the creation of a network of a million informants throughout the country, as well as part-time 'peasant soldiers' that would assist the armed forces in its counter-insurgency strategy, thus returning to the CONVIVIR strategy of the Gaviria and Samper administrations.¹³⁴ The declaration of a 'state of internal commotion' soon after Uribe's inauguration permitted the creation of special 'rehabilitation zones', one consisting of parts of Bolívar and Sucre, and the other in Arauca.¹³⁵ The security forces were allowed the power to administer these zones. However, a year after they came into existence attacks against civilians and arrests of alleged guerrillas (many of whom were community leaders and trade unionists) were steadily increasing.¹³⁶ The government made 4,362 arbitrary detentions in the first year of Uribe's presidency, an increase over the 2,869 arbitrary detentions in the preceding six

¹³² Jason Hagen, 'New Colombian President Promises More War,' *NACLA Report on the Americas* 36: 1 (2002), pp. 24–9; Ahumada, *Cuatro años a bordo de sí mismo*, pp. 203–4; 285–92.

¹³³ International Crisis Group, 'Colombia's Borders: The Weak Link in Uribe's Security Policy,' *Latin America Report*, 23 September 2004, p. 4.

¹³⁴ The peasant soldiers receive three months of military training and reside in their home villages working in platoons of approximately 36 peasant soldiers under the command of career army officers (Latin American Working Group, 'The Wrong Road: Colombia's National Security Policy,' *LAWG Report*, July 2003. According to the Latin American Working Group, 'some of the military commanders currently leading peasant soldier battalions have been under investigation for collusion with paramilitary activity in the past' (*Ibid.*, p. 13).

¹³⁵ Gary Leech, 'Colombia Court Declares Rehabilitation Zones Unconstitutional,' *Colombia Journal Online*, 9 December 2002. www.colombiajournal.org/colombia143.htm.

¹³⁶ Human Rights Watch, 'Colombia: Human Rights Certification under Public Law 108–7,' p. 7, available at <http://hrw.org/backgrounder/americas/colombia-certification5.htm>. The measures utilised in the 'rehabilitation zones' were ultimately deemed unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court.

years.¹³⁷ Finally, the government began a ‘peace process’ with the leaders of the AUC in 2002, committing to their full demobilisation by the end of 2005.

The peace process with the AUC has been fraught with problems. For example, paramilitary members repeatedly violated a ceasefire that they agreed to in December 2002, and paramilitary units that allegedly demobilised continued to operate in their zones of influence.¹³⁸ The administration did successfully pass a ‘demobilisation law’ in June 2005, but Human Rights Watch concluded that the law ‘... gives paramilitaries almost everything they want’.¹³⁹ The law established a process to structure the demobilisation programme, establishing appropriate punishments and expectations upon those who demobilise. The new law, according to Human Rights Watch,

... does not ensure that paramilitaries confess their crimes, disclose information about how their groups operate, or turn over their illegally acquired wealth. Nothing in the law effectively disbands these mafia-like groups. Disarmed troops can be easily replaced through new recruitment and promises of high pay. Commanders convicted of atrocities or other serious crimes, such as drug trafficking, will get away with sentences little longer than two years, probably in agricultural colonies. When they re-enter society, their wealth, political power, and criminal networks will be intact.¹⁴⁰

According to one paramilitary fighter ‘The demobilization ... is a farce. It’s a way of quieting down the system and returning again, starting over from the other side’.¹⁴¹ The ‘demobilisation law’ ensures the potential use of paramilitary groups in the future, while continuing the expansion of the state’s formal military power.

Internationally, increasing military aid from the United States, as well as pressures to increase military spending, have played an important role in this shift, while US threats of extradition for narco-trafficking paramilitary leaders created an additional incentive to protect these actors from prosecution.¹⁴² The US ‘war on terrorism’ has created space for US allies throughout the world to pursue overt authoritarian methods in the establishment of state authority and the Uribe government aggressively advanced

¹³⁷ Heather Hanson and Rogers Romero Penna, ‘The Failure of Colombia’s “Democratic Security”’, *NACLA Report on the Americas* 38: 6 (2005), pp. 22–4.

¹³⁸ ‘AUC, Responsables de 1,899 Crímenes,’ *El País*, 26 November 2004.

¹³⁹ Human Rights Watch, ‘Smoke and Mirrors: Colombia’s Demobilization of Paramilitary Groups.’ *Human Rights Watch Report*, 17: 3 (August, 2005), p. 2.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, This law was even attacked by some of Uribe’s congressional allies, including Rafael Pardo, as going too far in its concessions to paramilitary commanders and soldiers.

¹⁴¹ As cited in *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁴² Between 2000 and the end of 2003 the US government provided approximately \$3 billion in aid for Colombia and the Bush Administration proposed an additional \$424 million in aid for the 2004 fiscal year: International Crisis Group, ‘Colombia: President Uribe’s Democratic Security Policy,’ *Latin America Report* 6 (Bogotá/Brussels, 2003), p. 12.

this agenda, mitigating the need for paramilitary forces.¹⁴³ Also, Uribe himself represents a merger of modernising and agrarian elites, maintaining a policy of neoliberal economic reform and civilian control, while actively shielding paramilitarism. Uribe appointed individuals with past links with paramilitary operations and activities to advisory positions within his presidential campaign (General Rito Alejo del Río), to his cabinet (Fabio Echeverri Correa), and as head of the armed forces (General Carlos Ospina Ovalle).¹⁴⁴ These appointments simply reflect Uribe's long history of support and linkages with actors or organisations associated with paramilitarism, including the CONVIVIR while governor of Antioquia in the late 1990s, or with *narcotraficantes* while mayor of Medellín in the 1980s.¹⁴⁵ These international and domestic factors have all contributed to the establishment of a demobilisation process that largely protects paramilitary leaders and allows them the legal capacity to consolidate their economic and political power in the regions that they control.

Conclusion

In the sixteen years after the Colombian government officially prohibited the development of paramilitary groups by the military in 1989, such groups simply grew in size and influence. This growth coincided with and followed a series of institutional changes that reduced the political prerogatives of the armed forces, despite the fact that they faced a more effective internal insurgency. The transnational elite that was at the head of these reforms addressed the failure of these political changes to co-opt and integrate strengthening guerrilla forces into the political process by tolerating and facilitating the violence of paramilitary repression, while maintaining formal institutional controls over the armed forces. Individuals sympathetic to paramilitarism were appointed to 'anti-paramilitary' commissions. Agencies established to investigate them were not adequately financed. Military officers were promoted in spite of their well-known connections to paramilitary organisations. The 'demobilisation' law actually failed to demobilise the paramilitary groups. The privatisation of repression was a necessary response

¹⁴³ This idea was already popular before 9/11, see Elizabeth Cohn, 'Bush "Realists" say Goodbye to Democracy Promotion,' *NACLA Report on the Americas* 35: 3 (2001), pp. 39–44.

¹⁴⁴ Forrest Hylton, 'Neoliberalism Colombian Style,' *Left Turn* #7 (October/November, 2002), www.leftturn.org/Articles/Viewer.aspx?id=326&type=M, accessed 15 February 2004; International Crisis Group, Colombia: Negotiating with the Paramilitaries,' *Latin America Report* 16 September 2003, pp. 8–9. See also Human Rights Watch, 'Colombia: Human Rights Certification Under Public Law.'

¹⁴⁵ *New York Times*, 2 August 2004, p. A6; *The Guardian*, 9 July 2003; *Newsweek*, 25 March 2002, p. 50.

to the international legitimacy accorded to democratic practices and human rights, which excluded a resort to overt state repression.

The Uribe administration has only partially shifted from this trend. The government has effectively immunised these forces from governmental and international prosecution, without dismantling them. Changes in the international context (the US 'war on terrorism'), and the greater role for agrarian elites in national policy-making, have been important to this apparent shift. The government has escalated an overt militarist strategy that increasingly allows the public security forces to re-establish the repressive role for themselves that paramilitary organisations played in the 1990s. However, the fact that the 'demobilisation' of paramilitary groups is more apparent than real leaves open the continued possibility that paramilitary forces could very well play a central role in state repression in the future.