

4-20-2021

Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Peru and Colombia

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Recommended Citation

Shane, Reagan (2021) "Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Peru and Colombia," *Global Tides*: Vol. 15 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/globaltides/vol15/iss1/2>

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Introduction

A report published by the RAND Corporation in 1980 began, “Historians almost certainly will label the 1970s the decade of the terrorist,” noting that over the course of the 1970s the trend in the use of terrorist tactics around the world had been “unmistakably upward” (Jenkins). The report went on to predict that terrorism would continue during the 1980s “as a mode of political expression, of gaining international attention, and of achieving limited political goals” (Jenkins). And indeed, this is precisely what occurred over the next two decades.

Latin America in particular was a hotspot for terrorism. The region produced some of the most well-known terrorist groups outside of the Middle East, including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and Shining Path (SL) in Peru. Such groups exemplified the era’s Third Wave terrorism: typically based on leftist ideologies, Third Wave terrorists espoused rebellion against “decadent” and unequal societies (Feldmann & Perälä, 2004), combining guerrilla warfare tactics with terrorist operations in pursuit of political and economic change.

Governmental counter-terrorism efforts increased in kind and were known for their brutal, repressive nature. The success of those counter-terrorism efforts varied from country to country and administration to administration. In the case of Shining Path, Peruvian president Alberto Fujimori’s counter-terrorism strategies and laws were initially hailed as a paragon of how to counter terrorism and effectively dismantle terrorist groups. However, they were later recognized to have been inhumane and unjust, a brutal crackdown that failed to address the root issues. In Colombia, initial military responses also led to human rights violations, but certain elements of the Colombian responses addressed political factors at play as well: throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the government and FARC repeatedly signed peace treaties, but each treaty eventually fell apart. FARC has lasted longer than Shining Path, but many of its factions have

been transformed into a political party. Thus, the Peruvian and Colombian governments' approaches yielded two different results.

Understanding why specific strategies succeeded or failed against particular groups can improve understanding of the past and inform today's counter-terrorism efforts. Unfortunately, there is no reason to expect that terrorism will someday disappear entirely, as it is a cost-effective "weapon of the weak" (Enders & Sandler, 2012). While Fourth Wave terrorism has brought religious motivations to the forefront of terrorist organizations, studies find that other factors initially tied to Third Wave terrorist groups still motivate individuals to participate in terrorist acts or join terrorist groups (Moghaddam, 2005; Bhatia & Ghanem, 2017). In other cases, government "overreactions" and oppression have simply added to insecurity and violence and even prompted individuals to join terrorist groups (McCulloch, 2003; United Nations Development Programme, 2017). Therefore, understanding counter-terrorism strategies and terrorist goals from the past can inform counter-terrorism decisions today.

Additionally, Enders and Sandler (2012) predict that domestic terrorism will continue to dominate transnational terrorism in terms of the number of incidents. While "terrorism" in popular culture evokes images of transnational attacks by groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda, domestic attacks—which are addressed differently—will continue to be more common. This means analysis of past methods of handling domestic terrorism will be useful moving forward.

Accordingly, this paper investigates the counter-terrorism strategies employed against Colombia's FARC and Peru's Shining Path, analyzing the effectiveness of those strategies. It first explores the rise of each group and their respective goals, organization, and tactics. It then analyzes what counter-terrorism strategies governments implemented and those strategies' short- and long-term effects. It finds that military strategies have only been somewhat effective

depending on the terrorist organization's structure and have resulted in human rights abuses. While negotiation can be impractical if a group's ideology is dependent on the destruction of the government, peace talks and negotiation processes have shown promise. However, they are often undermined by the military or administration. In all, the possibilities for negotiation demonstrate the importance of considering multifaceted counter-terrorism strategies.

General Note on the Demise of Terrorist Groups

General studies on factors leading to the decline of terrorist groups identify multiple elements. Audrey Cronin (2006) summarizes the general trends that have been recognized:

There are at least seven broad explanations for, or critical elements in, the decline and ending of terrorist groups in the modern era: (1) capture or killing of the leader, (2) failure to transition to the next generation, (3) achievement of the group's aim, (4) transition to a legitimate political process, (5) undermining of popular support, (6) repression, and (7) transition from terrorism to other forms of violence. (17-18)

In Latin America, counter-terrorism efforts have often revolved around the military-oriented options listed, such as (1) the capture and killing of the leader and (6) widespread repression. More recently, however, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of non-military efforts in effective counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency strategies, since military efforts do not address many of the terrorism risk factors such as political instability (Debarre, 2018; Schumacher & Schraeder, 2018). Moreover, military responses can lead to civilian abuse that foments further terrorism and invokes questions of morality (Carr, 2003; Choi, 2011). Understanding the relationship between military and non-military counter-terrorism strategies is critical to properly evaluating past strategies and planning successful future ones.

Establishment and Evolution

Both Shining Path and FARC began as leftist groups espousing the goal of fighting social inequality and economic injustice resulting from imperialism, government corruption, or the elite. They did, however, have important structural differences that contributed to the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of specific counter-terrorism responses. Despite using guerilla warfare tactics, SL functioned more as a hierarchical cult centered around the person of Abimael Guzmán. FARC, on the other hand, exhibited a community-based structure, using guerilla warfare but gaining local support through social services rather than coercion.

Marxism and Social Revolution in Peru

Establishment

SL was founded by Abimael Guzmán in the 1960s in Ayacucho, a city in the Andes mountains. Guzmán was a philosophy professor-turned-radical whose interest in Marxism and Maoism formed the foundation of SL ideology. In particular, these ideologies influenced the group's end goal of revolution through violent conflict. As a result, even though the Peruvian government's official campaign to overthrow the Peruvian government did not truly begin until 1980, the early ideological influences laid the foundation for inevitable violence between the government and SL. This inevitably was notable in one of Guzman's speeches at the beginning of the official revolution: Guzman said, "Triumph is ours. The masses will win. The peasants will rise, and the proletariat will lead it... The future lies in guns and cannons! The armed revolution has begun! Glory to Marxist-Leninist-Mao-Zedong Thought!" (Starn, 2005). SL's focus, therefore, was the establishment of a new proletariat-led state formed through armed struggle.

SL spent its early years recruiting among rural communities for two reasons. First, Guzmán was able to indoctrinate students through the selection of radical faculty at the University of Huamanga. Those students would then carry SL's message and ideals to their villages, often becoming teachers themselves (McCormick, 1990). Second, many of those who could sympathize most deeply with the message of marginalization, inequality, and the need for social revolution were indigenous, Quechua-speaking groups that lived in rural, poverty-stricken villages. Despite this early focus on rural communities, Shining Path's network grew to include both rural peasants and the urban unemployed through the use of propaganda targeted at those experiencing the greatest suffering and injustice under the democratic government (Council on Hemispheric Affairs, 2008).

During these early years, Guzmán focused on expanding the group's network and cultivating its image and ideology. This included establishing himself as the near-mythical leader. While few recruits ever saw Guzmán in person, he maintained an image of genius and power encapsulated in new members' oaths of loyalty: they swore unconditional surrender and devotion to Guzmán, Shining Path, and the world proletariat revolution (McCormick, 1990; Starn, 2005).

Early tactics revolved around propaganda and spreading the revolution's message. In addition to individual recruitment efforts, SL began forming "front groups" that were distinct from SL in name but closely associated. These groups allowed SL to take advantage of the same democratic society and its freedoms that it sought to undermine (McCormick, 1990). However, the group's foundational goal of overthrowing the Peruvian government and instituting a new societal order meant that tactics quickly devolved into terrorist acts.

Evolution

May 17, 1980, marked the beginning of Shining Path's campaign to overthrow the government when members bombed polling stations in peasant villages and spent the next few months attacking "state symbols" such as police stations and national development projects (McCormick, 1990). A 1987 report commissioned by the U.S. Department of State noted that SL became "singled out for its simple ruthlessness. Murder, dynamite bombings and arson are the instruments of political violence. Few terrorist groups in modern times...have employed high-order violence with the same determination, lack of discrimination, and widespread effect" (McCormick). The basic strategy was to use violence to make democratic institutions look weak, prevent citizen participation in local government, destroy the economy, and undermine social services (Council on Hemispheric Affairs, 2008). By doing so, SL would drive both the population and government to desperation, theoretically resulting in a capitulation to SL's demands for an entirely new regime.

The increasing violence appeared in SL's evolving ideology as well. One of its main principles became the "quota," the expectation and willingness to give up one's life when the party demanded it (Starn, 2005). As the stakes increased, the leftist group turned on other leftists who did not fully support the cause: "Any person believed to be sympathetic to the government or to even slightly disagree with Shining Path's fundamental beliefs was a candidate to be...kidnapped, tortured and/or murdered" (Council on Hemispheric Affairs, 2008). As the organization began to resemble a death cult rather than a political organization, support among indigenous groups and other citizens decreased (McCormick, 1987; Council on Hemispheric Affairs, 2008). But as support declined, fear of the increasing violence surged.

Communism and Self-Defense in Colombia

Establishment

FARC's roots can be found in *La Violencia*, Colombia's 1948-1958 civil war. *La Violencia* was "an explosive expression of peasant grievances and local conflicts" (LeoGrande & Sharpe, 2000) during which many peasants organized themselves into localized self-defense groups. Following the war, these self-defense groups transformed into local organizations based around particular ideologies, but they quickly began to face persecution by the new government. One such group was Manuel Marulanda's Colombian Communist Party-based group, which the U.S.-backed Colombian military attacked on May 27, 1964, in Marquetalia. In the months following the attack, Marulanda's community and surrounding communities formally organized and unified to "fight for better conditions for people in the countryside and to defend their followers from military abuses" (Farrow, 2018). FARC members firstly sought to protect themselves from the government. However, in a reaction against U.S. influence in the region and U.S. backing of the Colombian military, FARC also had ideological roots opposing "American imperialism" and influence in the country (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2019).

In 1966, FARC shifted its attention from mere survival to providing educational and medical services, developing training programs, and planning attacks. By offering social services that the government failed to provide, FARC grew in strength and support. In fact, "being a FARC member for many was a form of social activism" (Day, 2011), a sentiment echoed by the community at large. In many cases, FARC's state-like structure provided greater organization and services than communities had experienced from the government. FARC initially paid for these services (as well as training programs) through tax systems, kidnapping, and extortion of

politicians, soldiers, and elites. They quickly transitioned to more profitable activities and larger acts of terror that weakened public support for the group.

Evolution

The early 1970s saw the beginning of FARC's use of kidnapping and extortion of Colombians, while the late 1970s represented a transition into more aggressive kidnapping and ransoms. For example, in 1977 FARC made \$250,000 from the ransom of a Peace Corps volunteer, whom they held for three years (BBC, 2016). Later, in April 1983, FARC kidnapped a U.S. citizen in what the U.S. refers to as the first FARC terrorist attack against the United States (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2019). Throughout Colombia more generally, FARC fighters made everyone from politicians to priests victims of their attacks (Farrow, 2018).

The transition to narcoterrorism—participation in drug trafficking to fund terrorist activities—further harmed the organization's reputation. In 1982, FARC held an internal conference in which they “explicitly endorsed coca cultivation as a major source of revenue” (Day, 2011). A Library of Congress report (2002) estimates that 62% of FARC's income came from drugs by the 1990s (Berry, Curtis, Hudson, & Kollars). While the initial boost in income stemming from involvement in the drug trade improved FARC's ability to provide public services, the association eventually became a source of internal conflict and external criticism.

These changes in public support, however, did not result in FARC's demise. Terrorist attacks (along with intermittent peace talks that generally collapsed after a year or two) continued throughout the 1990s and through the 2010s, most often through kidnapping of off-duty soldiers or foreigners and bombings of civilians, state facilities, and foreign companies. In August 1996, FARC took 60 soldiers hostage after attacking the Las Delicias military base,

where they killed 54 and wounded 17 (BBC, 2016). In 1997, the organization kidnapped a U.S. oil engineer and his Venezuelan pilot in Venezuela, at which point the U.S. designated FARC as a foreign terrorist organization (BBC, 2016; Bureau of Counterterrorism, n.d.). In the 1998 Siege of Miraflores, they attacked a church, hospital, and military base and kidnapped 129 police officers (BBC, 2016). Further attacks have continued even through the 2010s, typically through kidnapping, hostage-taking, and bombings.

Counter-Terrorism and Short-Run Effectiveness

At the time of Shining Path prominence in Peru and the growth of FARC in Colombia, both countries were democracies. As a result, they faced a challenge common to democracies facing rising terrorism: the balance between responding too passively and responding too aggressively. Both countries—at least early on—tended toward harsh military responses that resulted in widespread human rights abuses and alienation of the public.

Aggressive Military Response

Peru

The Peruvian government's aggressive response escalated with time. In 1983, President Belaúnde (1980–1985) imposed martial law, suspending civil liberties and allowing police to seize suspected SL members for up to ten days without presenting charges (Schumacher, 1983; Associated Press, 1984). The suspension of civil rights resulted in significant abuses and made 1983 and 1984 years of terror. Some documents report decaying bodies floating down rivers in the Apurimac Valley daily with death tolls of over 1,000 (Starn, 2005). In 1985, President Alan Garcia assumed the presidency. Despite the change in leadership, terror prevailed: he, too, used

intimidation, torture, and random assassination to eliminate any citizens perceived as SL sympathizers—including many who were in fact *not* “sympathizers”.

In 1990, yet another change in leadership occurred as Alberto Fujimori assumed the presidency. That same year, an analyst at the RAND Corporation noted that many believed a coup might be the only way to defeat SL. He predicted that a coup would “result in an immediate crackdown on public demonstrations and a stepped up, unrestrained campaign against Shining Path,” noting that “organized violence” would initially decrease but that the repressive counter-terrorism actions taken by the military would lead to further violence and the “polarization of Peruvian society” (McCormick, 1990). Additionally, he recognized that for the counter-terrorism campaign to be successful, “the army would have to kill or incarcerate SL members and sympathizers at a faster rate than SL was generating them,” which would certainly raise ethical concerns (McCormick, 1990).

The predictions were strikingly accurate. In 1992, Fujimori performed an *autogolpe*—a self-coup in which he suspended Congress and effectively declared himself dictator. Ruling by command, he passed a series of extreme anti-terrorism laws, permitting the military to murder and assassinate those even remotely suspected of sympathizing with SL. Thousands of innocent citizens were arrested, judged in military courts, and sentenced to 20 years in inhumane prison conditions (Human Rights Watch, 1996; Starn, 2005). Fujimori also placed Vladimiro Montesinos, a member of the National Intelligence Service, as leader of extrajudicial death squads that massacred terrorists and civilians alike.

Disturbingly, the government’s extreme measures that persecuted innocent citizens seemed to be effective in neutralizing SL terrorist attacks. While SL terrorism had been increasing steadily throughout the 1980s, the capture of Abimael Guzmán and other leaders in

1992 (facilitated by the government's widespread oppression of citizens) largely debilitated SL and resulted in a prompt decrease in violence. SL regrouped relatively quietly under a new leader, Commandante Feliciano, and resumed violent attacks in 1995 (Feldmann & Perälä, 2004). However, Feliciano's arrest in 1999 effectively marked the end of SL's power. President Fujimori's antiterrorist program was, in the short run, "successful." With the world still unaware of the rampant human rights abuses that laid the foundation of Fujimori's antiterrorist program, many praised his strategy for dismantling a terrorist organization.

Colombia

From the beginning of the Colombian civil conflict in 1964, Colombian military organizations were the dominating force for dealing with insurgency and terrorist groups. Paramilitary death squads were formed in the 1980s and 1990s primarily in response to the growing violence perpetrated by terrorist groups. Many of these paramilitary groups were armed by the government, and all were brutally violent against confirmed terrorists and regular citizens alike. One such group was *Muerte a Secuestradores* (MAC), which originally formed to prevent kidnappings of the wealthy. MAC quickly became an extralegal extension of the army and eventually brought a halt to the 1999 peace talks with FARC by killing over 700 FARC members attempting to begin participation in the political process (Farrow, 2018). Such military-based increases in violence led to further fractionalization of society, which in turn fostered mistrust and greater violence.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, civilian executions climbed as "the army took on FARC rebels with renewed fury...to demonstrate progress to a frustrated public, and to its American financiers" (Farrow, 2018). Researchers found that approximately half of Colombian

commanders trained by the U.S. during this time period were in charge of units whose members committed extrajudicial killings or were eventually charged with another major crime (Farrow). Of course, a country that does not employ *any* force in responding to terrorist attacks alienates a public that feels unprotected and fosters further violence; the problem is when government force goes too far. A 1994 cable from American Embassy Bogota warns of “body count mentalities” among army brigades seeking to create “track records of aggressive anti-guerrilla activity” without oversight. A CIA intelligence report from the same year notes that Colombian security forces often used death squad tactics, assassinated civilians in guerrilla-associated areas, and killed prisoners (Farrow). In short, the pressure to beat FARC and other terrorist groups encouraged government forces to violate human rights in order to create an illusion of successful counter-terrorism activity.

The U.S. influence in this push toward violence is striking. Investigative journalist Ronan Farrow (2018) reports that in Plan Colombia, which was conceived between Colombia and the U.S. in 1998 and 1999 and signed in 2000, “Colombia wanted a 70-30 social-military split; the United States wanted the reverse. [Despite Colombian wishes,] the first year more than 70 percent of the funds went to military and police assistance.” The U.S. push for financing groups that demonstrated the most “progress” in fighting guerrilla and terrorist groups thereby exacerbated the violence.

Negotiation

Peru

It is important to note that the Peruvian government was not necessarily opposed to negotiation with Shining Path. Presidents Belaunde and García both called for discussion during

their respective administrations (McCormick, 1990). In each case, SL stated that the end of the conflict would only come when the Peruvian government surrendered power entirely. In the words of Abimael Guzmán, “You sign [the documents of surrender] at the bargaining table” (as cited in McCormick). SL’s case demonstrates the importance of a group’s ideology. While SL appealed to social and economic issues facing those marginalized by the government for recruitment, the ideological core of the group was based on creation of an entirely new order. The foundation was not *just* a response to failures of the government; it inherently opposed the structure of the government, handicapping the ability of the government to negotiate. The situation sheds additional light on why a country or administration might feel driven to commit extreme human rights violations in the fight against a terrorist organization: if it cannot address the foundational issues with which the group is concerned, it may feel it has no other option in the face of escalating violence. Indeed, there might not be many other options.

Colombia

Unlike Shining Path, which demanded destruction of the state, FARC was largely “a political movement pushing socialist reorganization of the country” (Farrow, 2018). Reorganization is, of course, different than destruction. It implies that the government might be able to address the concerns leading the rebel group to call for reorganization. For this reason, Farrow notes that Plan Colombia’s “greatest successes . . . came only as the balance of military and civilian assistance evened, and U.S. and Colombian officials began to recognize the value of rebuilding the country’s long-suffering institutions” (Farrow, 2018). In other words, civilian assistance and rebuilding the country’s institutions helped address some of FARC’s grievances.

As a result, the ongoing call for discussion and negotiation lasted far longer than it did in Peru: “Every Colombian president since Belisario Betancur...has recognized the need to find a political solution to the insurgency” (LeoGrande & Sharpe, 2000) rather than a military one. In 1982, President Betancur began peace talks that led to the Uribe Accords and a ceasefire in 1984. The accords established the Patriotic Union (UP), a joint party made up of FARC and Colombian Communist Party members. The UP was successful, and its successful establishment has been encouraging for counter-terrorism efforts given that “transition to a legitimate political process” is one of the elements factoring into the decline of terrorist groups (Cronin, 2006). Unfortunately, Colombian army and paramilitaries undermined this success by assassinating UP leaders, including a presidential candidate (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2019). A second pass was made at peace talks in 1991, but the talks fell apart after about a year. In 1999, Colombian President Pastrana and FARC leader Marulanda announced the start of negotiations and large swaths of the country were demilitarized. However, in 2002, rebels hijacked a domestic flight, ending the 1999 negotiations. Overall, peace talks and discussions have met with apparent successes undermined by violence from government organizations or, in some cases, the rebels themselves. As a result, in the short-term Colombia’s negotiations at times appeared more successful than the military oppression in Peru and at other times far less so.

A notable challenge for the peace accords has stemmed from the structure of the organization. Unlike SL, FARC was not based around the leadership of one individual. On the one hand, this distinction contributed to the government’s ability negotiate with FARC, as military action against FARC leaders would be less effective. On the other hand, it meant some factions within FARC have continued—even through today, though to a minimal extent—to perpetrate violence despite broader ceasefires.

Long-Run Conclusions

In the short term, Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori was hailed as a hero who successfully dismantled a terrorist organization. In the long term, vast human right abuses surfaced, and Fujimori was convicted of ordering civilian massacres through death squads, among other charges (Cespedes & Wade, 2009). Frighteningly, despite the human rights abuses, his strategy did seem to work in that Shining Path never returned to its previous levels of “success.” In 2020, analysts found that “Shining Path no longer represents a serious threat for the Peruvian state” (InSight Crime, 2020). At the same time, the violence of the state resulted in rampant injustice for many civilians and caused as many deaths as the terrorist group itself, if not more.

In Colombia, FARC lasted longer, and some distantly connected fringe groups remain active as rebel groups. However, the incorporation of FARC into the political system and the signing of a peace deal in 2016 have been promising signs for the possibility of responding to terrorist groups without overt government repression. Admittedly, peace continues to be somewhat shaky, as there are still militant factions connected to the original FARC taking up arms. While some FARC members simply refused to demobilize, many of the violent factions are rising in response to a perceived government failure to fulfill promises in the peace treaty (Casey, 2019). Moreover, these challenges in the peace process are small in comparison with the massive civilian costs that preceded the treaty.

While it can be instinctual to respond to terrorism with greater force and violence, the results of a militarized response are often human rights abuses that can equal or surpass the original abuses perpetrated by the terrorists. While a group’s ideology may prevent negotiation efforts from succeeding, the consequences of unconstrained military action reinforce the

importance of pursuing multifaceted, government-wide approaches to counter-terrorism beyond mere force. Colombia's experience with FARC, though it is ongoing, suggests there is hope for the effectiveness of such approaches.

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