Conflict, violence and democracy in Latin America

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In the current global turmoil of jihadist violence and democratic failures in large parts of the Middle East, Asia and Africa, political instability no longer plagues Latin America. All regimes —except Cuba— sanction democracy, at least formally, and the continent's oldest insurgency, the FARC (The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), is negotiating peace with the Colombian government to bring five decades of armed conflict to an end.

And yet, Latin American democracies are still facing serious challenges as an array of conflicts between citizens, state forces and non-state armed organizations threaten rule of law, human rights, political participation and the very legitimacy of the state, its regime and its institutions.

One of the central challenges to democracy is violence. Guerrillas and paramilitaries in Colombia, transnational drug traffickers in Mexico and Central America, as well as smaller armed groups in places like Jamaica and Brazil have victimized hundreds of thousands of rural and urban citizens. According to the UN, Central America is now tied with Southern Africa as the world's most violent region.[1] The number of deaths due to the Mexican drug war now trails closely behind the number of deaths caused in the Afghanistan and Iraq civil wars. Strongly similar to the current Syrian refugee crisis, the migration of a million Central Americans into the US since the early 2000s and the internal displacement of more than six million in Colombia have been triggered to a great extent by violence. Many democracies in the region have had to deal with a real threat to public order and had to address the multiple legacies of large-scale victimization.

Despite its magnitude, violence is not the only challenge that these groups pose. Many of them have controlled territories, established them-

[1] See http://www.unodc.org/documents/gsh/pdfs/2014_GLOBAL_HOMICIDE_BOOK_web.pdf [accessed 10 September 2015].

selves as de facto rulers, created informal institutions and provided public goods. In many countries, they have also coopted different state agencies, not only in small towns and villages, but also at high levels of the administration. As non-state armed actors come to play these crucial roles and permeate many realms of local life, they transform the political, economic and social landscape of many communities as well as create new and complex challenges for both authorities and residents.

The region also confronts problems that arise from violent conflicts among citizens and between citizens and state forces. For example, violence against women, unionists and activists is still prevalent in many countries. As long as organized groups cannot safely participate in politics, representation is in jeopardy. Likewise, different agents of the state, especially its security apparatus, often rely on illicit means to address problems of public order. Together, these different forms of victimization hinder citizens' trust on the state and the law.

This special issue of *Política y Gobierno* explores some of these conflicts and their impact on the functioning of democracy. Some of the papers focus on the links between organized violence and specific aspects of politics: How do armed organizations affect democratic outcomes? How do political processes, in turn, shape the dynamics of organized violence? Other papers turn to specific sources of conflict that pose challenges to democracy, proposing new ways to conceptualize them or disaggregate them; these papers advocate a more nuanced understanding of specific types of conflicts in order to better understand their impact on political outcomes.

First, Harbers, Jaffe and Cummings take on a critical aspect of everyday life in Latin America: the relevance of informal governance by non-state armed actors. By exploiting a rich dataset with individual information on political patterns and preferences over legal *vs.* non-legal institutions, the authors caution us about considering informality and public institutions as substitutes. Citizens resort to both depending on their goals and they do not seem to find an irresoluble trade-off between legality and informality. More research on this line is necessary if we want to derive sound policy implications that help governments strengthen legal institutions and increase social trust.

Second, the papers by García on Colombia and Trejo and Ley on Mexico show us that violence may trump politics. García investigates the impact of guerrillas and paramilitaries on the vote in Colombia. His article finds that in areas controlled by paramilitary groups, voters with a previous pref-

erence for minority parties steadily switched in favor of the candidate endorsed by these organizations. In contrast, rebels did not try to rig the election in the areas where they held the upper hand. This finding has several implications. First and foremost, it questions the legitimacy of electoral results in areas where non-state armed actors operate. At the same time, it calls for further research into the mechanisms by which voters change their minds: is it all about coercion? Or are these groups transforming political preferences by other means? The difference between guerrillas and paramilitaries also invites new research on the strategies adopted by different types of armed organizations. To what extent can we treat political armed organizations as one category, even when their political goals differ? Furthermore, given the similarities between the paramilitaries in Colombia and for-profit armed groups in countries such as Mexico and El Salvador, is the logic behind illegal governance and electoral behavior similar across different contexts?

Trejo and Ley also deepen our understanding of the links between violence and operating democracy by investigating how governments can exploit internal threats to debilitate political rivals. The authors argue that in the face of the unprecedented threat posed by drug traffickers in Mexico, president Calderon only offered help to those municipalities where members of his party, the PAN (Partido Acción Nacional), were holding office. In contrast, by short-circuiting the inter-governmental channels of cooperation, non-PAN districts, especially PRD (Partido de la Revolución Democrática) were ones, targeted as crime-controlled areas and their authorities arbitrarily prosecuted. In this finding, Trejo and Ley's article brings to the forefront yet another way in which organized violence can impact the quality of democracy. At the same time, it shows how specific attributes of democratic systems can negatively affect policy making decisions on security.

Other papers advance our understanding of conflict and violence within democratic settings by proposing more nuanced conceptualizations of key phenomena. The paper by Krook and Restrepo highlights a new threat against women in politics and calls for a new concept in order to address it. Rather than subsuming threats against female candidates into the larger field of sexual violence, the authors convincingly argue that gender-biased political violence jeopardizes the sheer basis of democracy by denying women the right to run without disadvantage against their male counterparts. This paper calls for more research on the indirect effects of violence on politics and democratic processes.

These papers are supplemented by two pieces that further stress the importance of crafting concepts and disagregating phenomena on the basis of sound theoretical priors. The research note by Medel and Somma investigates patterns of protest in Chile during the democratic period. Relying on a rich dataset, they disaggregate protest events by type, finding that different groups resort to very different protest tactics. Their paper reminds us of the importance of carefully conceptualizing actors, tactics and context in the study of contentious politics.

Finally, Zavaleta, Alvarado, Kessler and Zaverucha contribute to this volume with an encompassing literature review on the interactions between police forces and the youth in Latin America. Once a forgotten surrogate of political regimes, the behavior of police forces is gaining momentum in studies on state legitimacy because as officers of the law they are often the public face of legality. As most regimes in the region have become democracies, citizens, activists and scholars have come to realize the stark differences in the ways police forces behave across countries. This essay focuses on the interaction between the youth and the police and calls for more research on cooperation between them. It also highlights the central role that both formal and informal interactions with the police play in shaping citizens' perception of the law and the rule of law, as well as the legality, legitimacy and efficacy of the police. Further research should explore the long-term effects that different types of interactions between police forces and the youth have not only on the youth's perceptions, preferences, and behavior, but also in those of their communities.

The papers included in this special issue investigate several ways in which violent and non-violent conflict impacts the functioning of democracy. Some offer new ways to conceptualize specific forms of conflict; others investigate the effects of political processes on conflict dynamics; and others explore the ways in which conflict impacts different aspects of democracy.

Although the volume cannot pretend to be exhaustive, we nonetheless hope readers will find its content inspiring enough as to encourage them to raise new questions about the links between conflict, violence and democracy in Latin America. As editors, there would be no greater reward. PG