Democracy and Civil War:
The Case of Colombia

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17 May 2016

Word Count: 6,532

Abstract

We argue that scholarship on the Colombian civil war can fertilize the research program on political violence in two ways. First, the Colombian case demonstrates that the emerging scholarly research agenda on electoral violence should expand to incorporate a broader focus on democratic institutions. In the context of an ongoing civil war, democratic reforms in Colombia had a substantial impact on the dynamics of wartime violence. Second, it showcases an overlooked danger of decentralization that, if implemented under the wrong conditions, can facilitate the capture of democratic institutions by political and criminal armed groups. These insights have important implications for the study of wartime democratic governance and state-building relevant both for the ongoing peace talks between the Colombian government and the FARC, and for cases beyond Colombia.

1. Introduction

The Colombian civil war and its "multiple violences" (Sánchez 2001) has coexisted with democratic politics for decades. The war and the scholarship surrounding it can push the emerging research program on electoral violence in new directions. We argue that current research overlooks key ways in which democratic institutions can be undermined by civil wars while at the same time fuel new forms of political violence, and that previous work has primarily focused on electoral violence at the expense of other implications for democratic governance. We draw on Colombia's experience and several generations of scholarship that, we argue, elucidate the conditions under which wartime democratic reforms as well as decentralization are likely to foster an escalation of violence and ultimately undermine democratic participation and representation.

The Colombian civil war is an extreme case in terms of its duration, and its variation in violence and institutional reforms over the last fifty years allows us to generate insights that are relevant for other civil wars and policymakers contemplating democratic reforms. While electoral violence has attracted much needed scholarly attention (e.g., Staniland 2014), the analyses tend to focus on electoral violence as isolated events rather than linked to broader democratic governance and forms of civil war violence. Moreover, while some attention has been devoted to the relationship between elections and post-conflict institutions (e.g., Flores and Nooruddin 2012), or on democratization as a trigger of conflict (e.g., Cederman, Hug and Krebs 2010), we focus on the implications of democratization and elections while

conflict wears on. With a few exceptions (e.g., Staniland 2015), these implications remain underexplored. The Colombian experience sheds light on two. First, policy choices in Colombia that aimed to ameliorate grievances and end the conflict by deepening and enhancing democratic institutions led to the escalation of violence during the war. Second, armed groups and their allies co-opted democratic institutions for their own purposes, undermining both the representation of ordinary citizens and their opportunities for meaningful participation.

In addition to the theoretical and conceptual questions the case raises, it also points to important policy implications. Beyond the question of when to introduce elections (e.g., Brancati and Snyder (2013)), the Colombian case reveals the dangers of holding competitive elections at any time during a civil war. Asking civilians to participate in public, political decisions in an unstable environment puts them at grave risk of suffering violent retribution by armed actors. Without protection for both citizens and politicians, both are likely to either recur to the assistance of armed actors with the capacity to protect, or to opt not to participate in democratic institutions at all.

These insights are also relevant for Colombia's ongoing peace talks with the FARC, in which political participation is a key pillar. As of January 2016, peace negotiators have agreed to several measures that reflect the country's previous missteps, but successful implementation of a democratic transition from the war will require additional steps if our analysis is correct. Specifically, the government must find a way to marginalize re-

gional political elites and armed groups with an interest in resisting democratic measures to incorporate former insurgents into the political process. Otherwise, these elites and armed groups could recur to violence and once again undermine democratization and even peace.

The article proceeds in four sections. First, we discuss the implications of the armed conflict for democratic institutions and governance. Second, we draw on the Colombian case to consider the conditions under which democratic institutions are likely to lead to the intensification of an ongoing war, and the conditions under which they are less likely to endanger citizens and politicians. The final section concludes.

2. Civil Wars and Democracy

As a policy matter, elections are frequently promoted by international agencies as a priority in an effort to transition from war to post-conflict (Autesserre 2010). Overall, 58 of the 130 civil wars listed in Kalyvas and Balcells (2010) experienced a competitive election, compared with 72 that either held no election or one that was considered non-competitive by Hyde and Marinov (2012).

However, and despite the scholarly attention on electoral violence, less consideration has been given to the broader context of these events. With the case of Colombia, we focus on two: how democratic institutions can shape civil war dynamics; and how, in turn, democratic governance is influenced by civil war contexts. Beyond the time immediately before

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and following an election, holding elections can set in motion longer-term trends in ongoing civil wars, such as an escalation of violence through repression and insurgent retaliation, the formation of new cleavages and alliances, and increased polarization. Democratic institutions beyond elections can also influence armed group behavior. Capture of democratic institutions is facilitated in particular by decentralization measures intended to improve government accountability. Colombia's experience over several decades illuminates these processes and serves as a depressing warning: the improvement of democratic institutions can lead to the escalation of civil wars and, ultimately, to the deterioration of those same institutions.

2.1 Elections and War Dynamics in Colombia

Civil war in Colombia has co-existed with democratic politics since the country's independence. While the mid-20th century civil war La Violencia sparked democratic retrenchment, such as the 1953 coup and decades of a shared power arrangement between the two traditional parties, the contemporary civil war led instead to democratization efforts. The groundwork for institutional change began in 1982, when the Betancur administration started peace negotiations with multiple insurgent groups. Betancur viewed the war in part as a reaction to exclusionary political institutions (Eaton 2006). At the same time, the group that emerged as the primary negotiator with the government - the FARC, until then a relatively marginal group (Chernick 1988) - demanded mechanisms for legal political participation. These demands and the government's diagnosis led to institutional

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changes in Colombia's democracy that favored improved participation and representation.

In 1985, the Colombian government adopted two democratization reforms. First, it approved a new political party, which would represent a leftist alternative to the two traditional parties in competitive politics. Second, it amended the constitution to allow the direct election of municipal mayors (*alcaldes*).

The new political party was the Patriotic Union (Unión Patriótica), founded by the FARC. The party would be the legal political arm of the FARC, while the Communist Party of Colombia (PCC) would continue to operate clandestinely. FARC leader Jacobo Arenas conceived of the UP as filling a gap in the "war on all fronts" strategy, which called for the FARC to pursue revolution through violent and non-violent means, including elections. In addition to the party's origins, the approval of the Patriotic Union was notable because until then, competitive party politics had been dominated by the two traditional parties: the Liberals and Conservatives.[1]

The new electoral law was another departure from the existing system: rather than governors appointing mayors, citizens would elect them directly beginning in 1988. While these changes were laudable for the advances they represented in terms of democratic ideals, they had unforeseen and terrible consequences.

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[1]Other political parties competed in past elections, but were effectively marginalized.

2.1.1 Exposing Voters and Candidates

Beginning in May 1985, all fronts of the FARC were ordered to organize the UP in their area through *"Juntas Patrióticas"* (JPs), small groups that engaged in political mobilization of the population (Dudley 2006, 60).[2] The mobilization led to several victories in the first elections that the party contested in 1986. It won three senate seats, six congressional posts, 19 departmental representatives, and 351 local council members in 187 cities (Giraldo 2001, 23). The presidential race was contested by Jaime Pardo Leal, who won 4.5% of the vote, an unprecedented margin for the left (Bushnell 1993; Giraldo 2001).

The participation of the UP in the electoral process led to two new forms of violence: assassinations of candidates (known as the 'Dirty War'), and the collective targeting of UP sympathizers (Steele 2011). UP leaders and candidates were almost immediately targeted by narco-traffickers and paramilitaries. Narcotrafficker Rodríguez Gacha - aka, the 'Mexicano' - and his private militia were particularly ferocious, apparently as the result of a dispute with the FARC over the taxation of coca. Between 1986 and 1988, 550 UP members were reported killed, including its director, two senators, two congressmen, and 45 local councilmen and mayors (Giraldo 2001). Pardo Leal was assassinated in October 1987 (Post 1987). The assassinations of UP leaders and candidates led many others to go into exile, or hiding in cities.

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[2]Not all JPs were organized by the FARC, however: many emerged spontaneously (Dudley 2006, 60, 51, 64). The UP was presented to the public as a mechanism for the guerrillas to enter legality, and to demobilize altogether (Dudley 2006, 28).

The second form violence that resulted from the formation of the UP, the expulsion of UP sympathizers from their communities, was different from the selective assassinations. As paramilitary groups formed, particularly in the Puerto Boyacá region, they targeted known Communist Party sympathizers for exile or death. As the groups evolved, "The typical mode of action consisted of penetrating regions by force where the guerrillas had influence and committing selective massacres that terrorized the population and provoked forced displacement" (Reyes Posada 2009, 88). After the start of local mayoral elections, this model evolved and expanded with the emergence of new, vulnerable targets: UP sympathizers. A brutal example took place in the Magdalena Medio municipality of Segovia in 1988. Despite years of selective killing around Segovia, guerrillas still retained a presence in the municipality. A group of paramilitaries arrived in Segovia where "names of people were replaced by names of blocks" that displayed yellow and green banners - the colors of the UP (Dudley 2006, 123-124). Pamphlets were circulated, warning citizens to leave or die. In all, 43 people were killed (Dudley 2006, 124). It was the first massive targeting of UP supporters - not just leaders or candidates. The paramilitaries employed this form of violence - political cleansing, the expulsion of a collectivity of civilians from a territory - and spread to other municipalities as well (Romero 2000; Steele 2011).

Political cleansing had a lasting, if less recognized impact on the war. Selective targeting in the Dirty War effectively undermined the UP's ability to contest elections. However, it did not affect the military capability of the

FARC. The Catholic organization Pastoral Social, for example, documented that in one town, paramilitaries targeted the leaders of unions, most of whom also belonged to the UP; this, however, did not prevent incursions by the FARC or the ELN (Pastoral Social 2001). Vargas (2009, 19) notes that even though the paramilitaries successfully killed leaders in Yondó, it was not until they entered the area between December 1996 and January 1997, killed 7 residents and gave a deadline for others to abandon the area, that they were able to neutralize the FARC. The expulsion of UP supporters deprived the FARC of its civilian base, and tipped the local balance of power in favor of the incoming paramilitaries and their political patrons. Though the FARC was not destroyed - it withdrew to other, more remote regions and amassed its forces into military fronts (Echandía 2006) - it was forced to sever its long-cultivated ties to civilian groups in the targeted regions. As a mode of conquest, political cleansing was highly successful for the paramilitaries.

For its part, the state opened elections to the UP, but failed to protect its supporters and candidates. The military claimed that it could not protect the FARC's supporters, even though the UP officially broke from the FARC in February 1989 (Giraldo 2001, 19). Years later, The Commission on Human Rights (CIDH) of the Organization of American States agreed to investigate state complicity in the violence against UP members in response to a petition brought by family members of the victims.

2.1.2 Forging Alliances

UP voters not only attracted the attention of paramilitary groups; they also incensed local politicians who had previously enjoyed power through appointment rather than electoral competition. The new, local elections led to alliances between counterinsurgents and politicians (Romero 2003).

Local elections were important for the FARC, given its pockets of isolated support that would not aggregate to much clout at the national level (Shugart 1992, 136). Indeed, the was most successful at the municipal level, where it won 15 mayoral posts, and had representation in 105 more through local coalitions (Giraldo 2001, 25). In effect, the UP enjoyed some share of political power in more than a tenth of the municipalities of the country. The party also won more than 400 local council seats (*concejales*) (Cepeda Castro 2006).

These victories represented the first time that third-party mayors existed. As a result, politicians who had relied on the traditional system of clientelism and patronage were challenged. These regional elites became the "sore losers" of democratization who sought to disrupt and resist the new competition.

Local elites anticipated the electoral threat early on. In the first UP congress, in November 1985, the party denounced an effort in the Senate by "official" Liberals to prevent UP participation in the elections or to "annul its vote," and a military presence in areas of influence meant to "repress the thousands of Colombians from joining the new political project" (Esguerra 2009, 68). A UP report from Urabá notes, "The [UP's] imminent invasion

of local power, in detriment to the caciques of the traditional parties that considered the mayoral office their personal turf, unleashes the ire of the politiqueros who believe that the time has come when Communism will snatch their perks from them" (Reiniciar 2006, 73). Carroll (2011, 43) argues that an elite backlash "sponsored and largely carried out by politically displaced elites" and the military emerged where an armed insurgency had a presence, a social movement existed, and democratic reforms led to electoral gains for such movements.

The emergence of paramilitaries in some areas - especially in the beginning - can be traced to the overreach of guerrilla groups, generating sufficient resentment over "revolutionary" taxes and kidnapping (Gutiérrez Sanín 2003). However, the *expansion* of the paramilitaries in the late 1980s was facilitated by the alliance between traditional party leaders and the paramilitary groups, in order to stave off the UP or win back local political seats.

New, local allies allowed the paramilitaries to establish a presence in communities (Gutiérrez Sanín 2003), rather than just launch strikes against visible leaders. The two democratic reforms - the legalization of the UP, and the introduction of local elections - enabled the counterinsurgency to spread across the country.

In Colombia, it is difficult to imagine the emergence of the national-level paramilitary organization AUC in 1997 without these democratic reforms: the small regional groups would not have conquered so much territory. More generally, the democratic reforms led to two effects: an intensification

of the conflict through endangering civilians and fostering new alliances between politicians and armed groups. Ultimately, the latter alliance led to the undermining of the same democratic institutions by armed groups.

2.2 The Capture of Democratic Institutions

Soon after the unification of the AUC, the group's leaders realized that they could take further advantage of the previous democratic reforms for their own ends. Following the adoption of the new constitution in 1991, Colombia embarked on a process of political, fiscal and administrative decentralization. At the time, such steps were hailed as a means to make the government more accountable, efficient, and responsive to citizens' needs (Bejarano 2001). Rather than bringing the institutions closer to the people, however, the reforms brought the institutions closer to the armed groups. The armed groups did not miss their opportunity.

Decentralization, including elections at the local level, not only endangered civilians and altered the course of the civil war. It also provided an opportunity for armed groups to capture local and even national state institutions (López 2010; Acemoglu, Robinson and Santos 2013). The armed groups had political and material incentives to capture institutions. The paramilitaries sought recognition as a political group in order to gain eligibility to favorable amnesty laws. Materially, the Barco and Gaviria administrations each promoted fiscal decentralization that entailed the transfer of resources from the center to the municipalities, as well as a greater share of royalties from natural resources. Administrative decentralization

increased responsibility for expenditures at the local level, including education, health care, irrigation, public housing, water treatment and sewage (Eaton 2006, 545). The increased funding enticed armed groups to target the municipalities, and may have contributed to the spread of the armed groups' presence (Sánchez and del Mar Palau 2006).

Armed groups influenced politics to gain access to resources that began flowing to municipalities as the result of decentralization. In some instances, groups coerced voters to elect favored candidates (or, in the case of the FARC after 1997, to abstain from voting) and candidates to run for office or not. Another form of engagement was cooptation: armed groups offered to support a politician's campaign in exchange for future benefits. Some of these arrangements were attractive to politicians, because the backing of armed groups helped them side-step the traditional party hierarchies. With changes in the minimum vote share requirement for political party recognition, armed groups and their collaborators formed new, third parties (Acemoglu, Robinson and Santos 2013). Finally, in some instances, politicians sought out the paramilitaries rather than the other way around (López Hernández 2010).

One of the main ways armed groups sought municipal influence was through *Juntas de Acción Comunal* (JACs) - Community Action Committees, which existed in small rural hamlets throughout the country. Additionally, the guerrillas figured out how to pressure mayors and councils following decentralization "[...] to obtain things: rents but also political and strategic objectives [...]" (Gutiérrez Sanín 2010, 16). Beginning around 1997,

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paramilitaries also engaged local politics (Gutiérrez Sanín 2010, 16). Alias El Alemán (Fredy Rendón Herrera), the commander of the paramilitary Elmer Cárdenas block in the Urabá region, organized mobile units of injured combatants to visit JACs, make notes of public works projects that needed attention, and eventually, promoted particular candidates for local council and mayor (Verdad Abierta 2011).

Insurgents and paramilitaries both influenced public policy outcomes in municipalities, though in different ways (Shapiro, Steele and Vargas 2015). For example, while insurgent presence is associated with a decrease in land formalization, paramilitary presence is linked to a decrease in tax rates (which are set by municipal officials). At the same time, there appears to have been variation in how much particular paramilitary blocks engaged in municipal politics (Robinson 2013; Ronderos 2014; López Hernández 2010).

Starting in 2002, the paramilitaries turned to influence the national level (López Hernández 2010). Rather than hope that politicians would classify paramilitaries as political organizations (and therefore qualify for more lenient punishment), the AUC became more proactive (Verdad Abierta n.d.; Ronderos 2014). In 2001, it convened a meeting of politicians, where over 100 signed an agreement to collaborate on an electoral strategy that included supporting Alvaro Uribe's 2002 presidential candidacy. Over one-third of Congress eventually came under scrutiny for ties to the paramilitaries in what became known as the "Parapolítica" scandal.[3] Acemoglu,

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[3]In contrast, only 4% of the congress was investigated for ties to the FARC, compared to

Robinson and Santos (2013) find that the same politicians investigated also voted in favor of the Justice and Peace law, which extended political status to paramilitary groups, guaranteed lenient sentences for paramilitary leaders who demobilized, and protected them from extradition for drug trafficking, indicating a quid pro quo (see also Valencia 2007, 35).

In summary, insurgent and paramilitary groups reshaped democratic institutions through coercion of voters and candidates, community engagement, electoral coordination, and cooptation of politicians. While the paramilitaries engaged in all of those strategies, the insurgents were primarily focused on the first two.

Although decentralization has been suggested as a way to mitigate conflict (Lijphart 1977), and even to end it (Walter and Snyder 1999), in the context of the Colombian civil war, it failed. It even backfired: as Eaton (2006, 537) writes, "...the state now funds its own destabilization because armed groups on the left and right have been able to appropriate decentralized public revenues and to use these funds to further reduce the state's already limited monopoly over the use of force." Additionally, it transformed the war by incentivizing armed groups to target municipal institutions (Gutiérrez Sanín, Acevedo and Viatela 2007; Sánchez and del Mar Palau 2006).

35% to paramilitary groups (López Hernández 2010, 33).

3. Caveats: When does Democratization Work?

Colombia's experience suggests the ways in which successful democratic reforms can ultimately lead to worse wartime dynamics, and eventually even undermine democratic institutions. However, not all democratic reforms will inevitably lead to these dire outcomes. In this section, we consider the conditions under which reforms are less likely to lead to a deterioration of the war or democratic institutions, or both.

Several factors account for why the electoral reforms in Colombia led to the intensification of the war. First, electoral competition was extended to a political party which was tied to an armed group. Second, elections were held at the local level. Third, local politicians were not exposed previously to competitive elections, but rather were appointed to office through political connections. Fourth, the state had limited capacity or will to control counterinsurgent actors. And finally, Colombia experienced fragmentation on the counterinsurgent side with the emergence of paramilitary groups.

Importantly, it is the *interaction* of these factors that matters rather their individual impact. First of all, while most militant groups do not contest elections, the mere electoral participation of such groups does not necessarily lead to an escalation of political violence. Between 1970 and 2010, Matanock (2014) finds that there were 100 instances of non-state actors (not restricted to armed groups) that contested national legislative elections. Of those elections, 54 were peaceful (all after 1990), and only 23 were violent.Indeed, the opening of democratic institutions to armed non-state actors can be an important development towards conflict de-escalation and

peace. However, Colombia shows that under certain conditions, the participation of such actors can contribute to an escalation of violence against civilians.

A political party that represents, is sympathetic to, or in alliance with a party to the war is not a sufficient condition for the targeting of civilians. Yet support for such a party can serve as the basis of an inference about citizens' preferences and loyalties. If civilians are perceived to be loyal to a rival armed group, then they may become targets of violence. In order for this to occur, a second condition must be met: the elections have to be held at the local level and be territorially based to spur increased violence. This is particularly the case in wars in which the cleavage does not map onto an ethnic or sectarian identity, where without the information revealed by the elections, it would be difficult to infer civilians' loyalties at the group level. Local-level, territorial representation allows armed groups to judge the preferences of the majority of a neighborhood or small community based on the party affiliation of their elected representative. Higher-level territorial units, such as legislative districts or states, are too large to effectively target the supporters of particular parties.Without the simultaneous extension of elections to the local level in Colombia, the enemies of the FARC and the UP would have pursued assassinations of candidates. At the same time, targeting UP voters would have been much more difficult, and probably impossible on a large scale.

Local-level elections have also been held in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Algeria, Cambodia, India, and Peru in the context of ongoing wars. How-

ever, the elections were restricted to areas the government controlled in Afghanistan and Cambodia. In Algeria, the insurgent-affiliated FIS was barred from competing. In Bangladesh, India and Peru, the insurgent groups spurred electoral contestation and tried to enforce boycotts instead (while the army attempted to force civilians to vote). Only in Colombia, where insurgents were affiliated with a political party and elections were held at the local level, did widespread political cleansing emerge.[4]

In Colombia, an additional important condition was the limited electoral competition that preceded the reforms. The prior lack of competitiveness in the political system meant that the UP constituted a threat to the existing political elite, particularly at the local and regional levels (Romero 2003). The UP's open ties to an insurgent armed group – even once dissolved – made it easy for electoral competitors to deny the legitimacy of this new opponent. In contrast, in Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin's participation in elections was eventually endorsed by the establishment as a mechanism to achieve peace. The advocates of a similar transition in Colombia were overwhelmed by the regional elites' resistance to democratization and backlash against the UP (Valencia 2007; Romero 2000).

These elites are in a position to undermine future steps towards democratization in Colombia as well. In the ongoing peace talks between the FARC and the government, negotiators have already reached agree-

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[4]Importantly, the same mechanisms as outlined in this paper could occur in the case of elections at higher, i.e., supra-local yet still sub-national levels, as such elections might have the potential to expose voters' political loyalties as well. Moreover, while we have focused on legislative elections, executive elections could have the same effects in contexts where results are made public at a low administrative level.

ment on several aspects of a post-conflict transition with regard to political participation. First, former FARC members are free to participate in future elections, and the government has pledged to support the political party that the FARC creates in terms of security. There will also be an effort to expand voter registration and ease mechanisms for citizen participation (such as electronic voting). Designated zones that have historically been affected by the conflict will be "Special Transitional Constituencies for Peace" which will elect special representatives to Congress, in addition to their ordinary districts (El Tiempo 2013). Finally, a commission will also be conformed to oversee the incorporation and recognition of opposition parties. Several of these measures recognize the failures of past attempts to incorporate the FARC as a legal political party. And in contrast to the first elections contested by the UP, politicians have been engaging in competitive elections to win their local-level seats for more than two decades. As a result, additional competition should not upend the local dynamics as much as when they initially became competitive. At the same time, however, many local and national-level politicians have been able to manipulate elections in their favor through alliances with paramilitaries and their post-demobilization successors. That the FARC has insisted on extensive security measures in the peace talks shows that they are aware of the associated risks. In order for the state to truly protect political competition, and voters and candidates, it must marginalize the regional elites who might recur to violence to avoid democratization in their domains.

In addition to the political decentralization that led to local-level elec-

tions, the Colombian government also adopted fiscal and administrative reforms that devolved authority and responsibility to the municipal level. As we described, these changes prompted armed groups to attempt to appropriate municipal resources (often through the manipulation of elections). Without sufficient oversight for fiscal and administrative activity at the municipal level, or guarantees for the electoral process, the armed groups were able to penetrate local institutions and use them for their own benefit. Colombia's experience in this regard suggests that decentralization has to be weighed against the ability of the central government to monitor elections and fiscal activity.

Finally, the existence of paramilitary groups greatly facilitated both an escalation of violence as well as the exploitation of the conflict by those local elites who emerged as sore losers from the reforms.[5] The presence of armed groups available to political parties and politicians is not uncommon. Indeed, it has been documented no only in wartime but also in non-war and post-war settings. Examples include Cote d'Ivoire (Banégas 2011), Sierra Leone (Christensen and Utas 2008), and Pakistan (Staniland 2015).

Importantly, while the combination of these conditions has made Colombia especially vulnerable to the detrimental outcomes discussed, our study has implications for all cases that share at least some of the highlighted characteristics. For example — and most critically — subnational elections

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[5]We thank XXX (omitted to protect our anonymity in the review process) for raising this point.

can be problematic in conflicts where territorial control is contested, and where loyalties may be revealed, exposing voters and candidates to competing armed groups.

4. Conclusion

The enduring Colombian civil war has coexisted with democratic politics since its onset. As such, it provides valuable lessons that are relevant theoretically and in terms of policy. On one hand, the democratic reforms that Colombia adopted in an effort to end the war improved the quality of democracy in two dimensions. First, it enhanced representation by allowing a marginalized group to contest elections. Second, it improved participation by offering citizens the opportunity to decide who their local officials would be directly, rather than by appointing the officials from the center. On the other hand, however, as the reformed elections and institutions came closer to approximating democratic ideals, they triggered a frightening escalation in political violence, and ultimately enabled the warring parties to erode the same institutions the reforms were intended to improve.

The tragedy of Colombian democratic politics over the last thirty years demonstrates that without protection for citizens and politicians, true democracy is unattainable. Once violence is unleashed against certain types of voters and candidates, vulnerable voters understand that participating in elections is extremely risky and adapt their behavior. The understandable

reaction is to stop voting, or to falsify preferences (Kuran 1987). For candidates, apart from a few brave true believers, there is little incentive to stand for office. Both responses undermine the very notions of participation and representation that democracy should promote. In Colombia, the UP effectively ceased to exist in the early 1990s (though its legal status was not withdrawn until 2002). By the time the paramilitaries formed the AUC in 1997, the UP no longer contested elections. The FARC even barred participation in elections in the areas where it had influence.

The case of Colombia shows that violent elections are a small segment of contentious politics, and democratic politics, especially in civil war contexts. Beyond how violence affects elections, the elections themselves can lead to important shifts in the dynamics of civil war violence. Further, civil wars are environments that armed groups can exploit to penetrate democratic institutions. Both dimensions are crucial aspects of democratic politics beyond elections per se.

Colombia's experience can also inform choices for conflict resolution and post-conflict transitions elsewhere. What are the conditions necessary for credible, safe, and enduring democratic politics? We argue that the wartime and post-conflict reform of democratic institutions, while of great promise in many contexts, has to be initiated with particular consideration to vulnerable elements of the population. Especially where elections take place locally, where political elites have previously not been part of a fully competitive political process, and where cleavages are not "visible" or territorially demarcated, holding local elections can endanger the very

citizens the reforms were intended to include. Moreover, and especially under conditions of wartime decentralization, elections should be closely monitored to prevent the capture of democratic institutions by criminal and political armed actors ready and capable to exploit electoral windows of opportunity where state presence is weak.

Colombia has made political participation a pillar of the current peace talks with the FARC. Major opposition to the talks is led by politicians like former president Alvaro Uribe, who enjoys strong support by regional political elites who have resisted efforts to democratize in the past. As we have described, these elites were able to form alliances with armed organizations to target rivals' supporters. Though many paramilitaries have demobilized, several smaller, local groups still exist. They have threatened and killed victims' rights advocates and the leaders of organizations of internally displaced people who are seeking reparations and land restitution. Our analysis of past efforts to democratize suggests that these groups - the paramilitaries' successors and regional political elites - could again undermine future political participation and maybe even a broader peace framework. This time, the government must ensure that such organizations and politicians are kept in check and do not threaten the political, unarmed supporters of new leftist opposition parties and their candidates.

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