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MEASURING THE COLOMBIAN “SUCCESS” STORY*

Midiendo la historia “de éxito” colombiana

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the evolution of state capacity in Colombia. Drawing on the general debate regarding the conceptualization and measurement of the state, the piece tracks the record of the Colombian state in the last decade. The article posits that, contrary to the conventional wisdom, the strength of the Colombian state has increased only marginally in the last 10 years. This improvement derives from important gains in two of Michael Mann’s (1986) infrastructural power dimensions –territorial reach and bureaucratic capacity. Lack of substantial improvements in Mann’s third infrastructural dimension– autonomy vis-à-vis non-states actors– and setbacks in the state legitimacy dimension make the gains in state capacity modest rather than robust.

Key words: Stateness, Infrastructural Capacity, Legitimacy, Colombia.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la evolución de la capacidad del Estado colombiano. Siguiendo el debate general relativo a la conceptualización y medición del Estado, el artículo mide el récord del Estado colombiano en la última década. El argumento principal es que, contrariamente al pensamiento convencional, la fortaleza del Estado colombiano ha incrementado sólo marginalmente en los últimos diez años. Los progresos derivan de mejoras apreciables en dos dimensiones de la noción de poder infraestructural de Michael Mann (1986) –capacidad burocrática y penetración territorial. Ausencia de progresos substantivos en la autonomía del Estado en relación a actores no estatales, la tercera dimensión de penetración del concepto de poder infraestructural de Mann, y retrocesos en la legitimidad estatal hacen que el fortalecimiento general del estado sea más bien modesto.

Palabras clave: Estatalidad, capacidad infraestructural, legitimidad, Colombia.

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In their analysis of the state of democracy in the Andean region in the early 2000s, Bejarano and Pizarro (2006) argued that the Colombian state was “besieged”. Taking advantage of a demilitarized zone (Zona de Despeje) –granted as a goodwill gesture by the administration of Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) to start peace negotiations– the main guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) flexed its military and financial muscles. FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN), another, smaller guerrilla group, routinely kidnapped people either in collective operations, or through so called *miraculous fishing*, operations whereby people were randomly snatched at road blocks across the country. Explosive attacks on highly visible, symbolic places carried out by guerrillas were also commonplace. Violence rose sharply with the inception of Plan Colombia, a multipronged military initiative sponsored by the United States designed to buttress the capacity of the Colombian state to confront violent non state challengers. The overall sense of insecurity was exacerbated by the violence unleashed by geographically organized paramilitary groups¹ that collaborated with the state in counterinsurgency efforts but that wreaked havoc on the civilian population (Cubides, 1999, 2001; Richani, 2007). This situation prompted a humanitarian crisis of great proportions characterized by the uprooting (internally and abroad) of approximately 6 million Colombians (IDMC, 2012).

In 2002 Colombians elected Alvaro Uribe, a former Governor of Antioquia, by a landslide. A hardliner who believed that the solution to Colombia’s long conflict resided in the military defeat of guerrillas, Uribe implemented the so-called *Democratic Security Policy*. Uribe increased military spending significantly, declared a state of emergency granting special powers to the executive and the security forces (surveillance, prosecution, establishment of special of rehabilitation and consolidation zones), and created a vast network of civilian informers (Aronson and Whitfield, 2005: 236). Uribe opened peace negotiations with the United Self-Defences of Colombia (AUC), confederation of scores of paramilitary organizations geographically dispersed across the country. As part of the *Santa Fe del Ralito Accords*, paramilitaries agreed to demobilize their forces –estimated at approximately 30,000 combatants. The Colombian Congress later approved the so-called *Peace and Justice Law*, which, in exchange for confessions and reparations (for victims), offered amnesty for medium-and low-ranking soldiers and light sentences for paramilitary commanders (Guembe and Olea, 2003). Improvements in security had a positive effect on the economy, prompting steady economic growth and a boom in foreign investment (ECLAC, 2010).

Former president Uribe has been credited by many, Colombians and foreigners alike, with presiding over a major overhaul of the Colombian state that has greatly enhanced the latter’s capacities (Fukuyama and Colby, 2011; Rangel, 2005). This work discusses the process undergone by the Colombian state in the last decade in order to ascertain

¹ Following Cubides paramilitary groups as: “irregular forces of the state, extralegal organizations that have taken the law into their own hands and that, in their struggle against guerrillas, replicate guerrilla methods step for step”. (2001:131-2). Within this rubric one finds myriad groups that support the central state’s effort to eradicate guerrilla groups including private armies set up by landowners, cattle ranchers, drug and emerald traffickers; sicario gangs; urban militias; and members of former self-defense groups.

whether Uribe's is really a success story and, more fundamentally, whether Colombia achieved what many states cursed by violence and armed conflict (e.g., Afghanistan, Haiti, the Central African Republic, Iraq, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo) have been unable to attain; namely, the recovery of the state's capacity to successfully deliver public goods and the improvement of its image as a rightful bearer of power in the eyes of its population. The analysis also touches upon an important issue raised by Pablo Policzer (in this volume) concerning the ability or lack thereof of Latin American states to adapt to changing patterns prompted by contemporary challenges.

Drawing on the discussion on the conceptualization and measurement of the state prepared by several participants in this special issue,² I will assess the condition of the Colombian state in the last decade. In so doing I attempt to respond to two related questions: (i) how strong /weak is the Colombian state nowadays; and (ii) has the Colombian state really strengthened in the last decade. The answer to these questions, in conjunction with the work by other authors looking into concrete cases (Baranyi, Maillet, Vargas Culler, in this volume), will help determine where Colombia stands in relation with other states in the region. My analysis draws from studies positing that state weakness/strength should not be conceptualized as a dichotomous variable (Holsti, 1996, Rotberg, 2004; Le May 2010) but instead as a continuum with *ideal types* at its extremes. These authors argue that states travel along this continuum moving towards or away from the extremes according to a complex chain of sociopolitical and economic events shaped by domestic and external conditions (Holsti, 2004). In this continuum strength/weakness depends on the Weberian conception of institutional capacity on the one hand and on a more *Durkheimian* dimension related to a state's legitimacy (Le May, 2010), which Durkheim referred to as a state's *moral authority* (Durkheim, 1984; see also Giddens, 1986)

My main contention is that, contrary to many contemporary accounts, a careful assessment shows that Colombia is not necessarily the success story proclaimed by some pundits and scholars. The strength of the Colombian state, I argue, has increased only marginally in the last decade: this improvement derives from important gains in two of Michael Mann's (1986) infrastructural power dimensions –territorial reach and bureaucratic capacity. Lack of substantial improvements in Mann's third infrastructural dimension - autonomy vis-à-vis non-states actors– and setbacks in the state legitimacy dimension make Colombia's progress modest rather than robust.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section traces the development of Colombia's institutional capacity according to the template presented by Hillel Soifer. Subsequently, the strength of the Colombian state is assessed in terms of its legitimacy. Brief conclusions are provided in the last and final section.

² Discussions derive from exchanges at the conference *Stateness in Latin America: Conceptual Challenges* held in Santiago in March 2012. See <http://www.statenessinlatinamerica.com/>

A CONTEMPORARY ASSESSMENT OF THE COLOMBIAN CASE

In the introduction of this special issue it is stated that the classical literature on the state is the logical starting point for conceptualizing and measuring the state. As stated above, states ought to be conceived according to two criteria: infrastructural power and legitimacy. With regards to the first, in a modern interpretation of Weber's classic argument, Mann (1986) argues that states ought to be measured according to their infrastructural power (i.e., the ability of the state to exercise authority [effectively] and implement its policies across its sovereign space). As Giraudy (in this volume) reminds us, Mann's conceptualization of infrastructural power can be conceived according to three criteria: (a) territorial reach (i.e., the capacity of the state to penetrate evenly the territory it claims to administer); (b) autonomy vis-à-vis non-states actors (i.e., ability/capacity to exert political control independently from non state actors); and (c) bureaucratic capacity (i.e., the existence of a competent, professional and resourceful bureaucracy capable of enforcing the rule of law and implementing public policy). The second dimension of stateness, legitimacy, is ideational. Buzan explains that legitimacy is related to the *idea* of the state, an abstract but critical component of statehood, related to a state's sense of purpose (1993: 69). Holsti conceives legitimacy as citizens' attitude towards the state, in particular "whether they withhold or grant the 'right to rule' to those who act in the name of the state" (2004: 56). State legitimacy derives from two fundamental pillars: rightfulness and efficacy (Le May, 2009).

Participants in our conference engaged with the classical literature and suggested ways to conceptualize stateness in an effort to further an understanding of this social phenomenon. My analysis attempts to measure Colombia's capacity by drawing on Hillel Soifer's concept paper (in this volume). Relying on Mann's (1986) seminal work, Soifer suggests a concrete way of assessing infrastructural power. His template measures state capacity according to three dimensions: security, service, provision, and extraction.³ My analysis turns now to examining the indicators proposed by Soifer.

I. COLOMBIA IN THE SOIFER SCALE

Security

Security represents a critical component of the infrastructural capacity of any states. Most authors indeed deem it as the most relevant public good (Rotberg, 2003; 2004). In

³ Soifer's *analytical groundwork* is purposefully restrictive in that it leaves aside the provision of social services, regulatory activity in the economy, and state intervention in the economy. Limiting the scope of the discussion, he points out, will help to distinguishing more aptly among states and avoiding confusing causal and constitutive relationships (1). He also underscores the need to come up with a measure that captures variation in the level of stateness within states and therefore recommends combining information on the overall (national) level of stateness alongside "the extent" of stateness in any local contexts across the country (3). Additionally, cognizant of the need to capture the relationship between state and society (Migdal, 2001), he proposes a measurement that weighs the real capacity of the state by controlling for its reach according to the population. The problem with this last measure is that lack of population in a given territory may be the result of the state's failure to extend its reach.

his discussion of how to measure security, Soifer suggests three indicators: crime rates, lynching rates, and the use of private security.

Crime rates:

Colombia has seen a sharp decline in some crime statistics in the last 10 years. Homicide rates have plunged from approximately 28,000 in 2002 to 15,459 in 2010 (33.4 per 100,000 inhabitants). This rate is less than half of that of Honduras (72 per 100,000, the highest in the region and the world) and significantly lower than countries like Guatemala, El Salvador and Mexico (United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, 2012). While statistics show improvements, there has been a relapse in homicide rates in several metropolitan areas (Cali, Medellin, Bogota) linked to an upsurge of gang related violence (UNHCHR, 2009). Kidnappings have seen a sharp decline from 1,442 in 2003 to 213 in 2009, still among the highest in the world. Other indicators have seen an upward trend including physical assaults 32,534 in 2004 to 55,117 in 2009; sexual violence (rape and sexual assault) 4,350 in 2003 to 7,652 in 2009; and theft (robbery without force) from 55,079 to 94,254 (United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime 2012). Violence is not evenly distributed in Colombia; some metropolitan centres and some sensitive rural areas characterized by the heavy presence of non state armed groups experience a disproportionate share of violence.

Lynching:

There are no reliable statistics on *lynching* in Colombia, only anecdotic evidence pointing out that this practice is rather rare. By analogy, one could claim that another practice, social cleansing,⁴ could be used as proxy. It also constitutes private violence with high symbolic overtones. While there is no reliable aggregate data on it, this practice is unfortunately frequent in the Colombian scene (UN Commissioner on Human Rights, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 1994).

The Use of Private Security

While Soifer does not define this concept exactly, private security is generally conceived as a broad notion including different layers of private action that supplement state action in the realm of security. Several authors including Davis (2006) and Pansters (2012) have illustrated the extension and relevance of this phenomenon in Latin America. In his typology on violent actors in Latin America, Koonings (2001) argues that agents relying on “extra legal violence” to buttress the political status quo are a category in themselves. This group is comprised of non-governmental actors with diverse links to the state –Koonings speaks of a “murky symbiosis”– such as paramilitary groups,

⁴ Social cleansing refers to the killing of people deemed worthless or a danger to society and therefore considered disposable. Homicides are carried out to “clean out” cities from a criminal or unsightly population. Victims include street children, drug addicts, cardboard collectors, homosexuals, vagrants, thieves, and prostitutes (Human Rights Watch, 1994).

death squads, rural self-defense forces, urban vigilante groups, and private security services. While we lack detailed statistics, the use of private security is widespread in Colombia. It includes neighbourhood surveillance (*serenazgos*), private security escorts (bodyguards) and an extensive reliance of sophisticated private security schemes to protect the operations of local and foreign companies working in industries including manufacturing, mining, farming and cattle, services, transport (Vranckx, 2010). In the Colombian case, moreover, Soifer's conceptualization of private security ought to be linked to *paramilitarism*. Authors studying the origin of this phenomenon underline how paramilitary groups emerged as a reaction to the state's failure to control violent leftist challengers in rural areas (Cubides, 1999; Richani, 2006; McDougall, 2009).

How has this phenomenon evolved in Colombia in the last 10 years? As indicated above, in 2003 former President Uribe opened formal negotiations with the AUC. Since of peace talks between the Colombian state and AUC started, hundreds of paramilitary leaders have been imprisoned and fourteen top commanders were extradited to the United States.⁵ The state has stressed time and again that the demobilization process was a "resounding success" as it achieved the neutralization of a formidable force. While many paramilitary groups were effectively neutralized and several of its leaders were arrested and/or extradited to the U.S., paramilitarism persists. Several independent reports underscore that paramilitary activity remains in place, fuelled by groups that either refused to participate in the peace talks or emerged anew. Most of these new paramilitary groups are linked to drug trafficking and organized crime. Colombian authorities refer to these groups as Emerging Criminal Groups (*Bandas Criminales Emergentes*, Bacrim). It is estimated that 8,000-10,000 armed paramilitary personnel operate in 24 of the 32 Departments of the country. Among the most important groups are the Urabeños, los Rastrojos, los Paisas, the Colombian Anti-terrorist Revolutionary Army, Renacer, New Generation, Los Machos, the Águilas Negras, and those of Magdalena Medio. Guerrillas, for their part, have redoubled activities including extortion, robbery and drug trafficking (HRW, 2010, OAS, 2009). In February of this year, after security forces killed the leader of los Urabeños, the group staged an armed strike that shut down three departments of the country's Caribbean coast for two days (BBC, 2012).

Service Provision

Service provision of public goods represents another crucial dimension of the infrastructural capacity of the state. In order to measure service provision, Soifer suggests three indicators: census administration, national identity registration and voter registration and vaccination.

⁵ The most important include Salvatore Mancuso, Diego Murillo (alias Don Berna), Rodrigo Tovar (alias Jorge 40), Ramiro Vanoy (alias el Cuco) and Hernán Giraldo (alias Pablo Sevillano).

Census:

Colombia carried out a national census in 2005. The state covered more than 95% of the school age population and was able to reach all but 3 of the country's 1119 municipalities (Puerto Rondón, Caruru and Mapiripana), an impressive 99.74% of the total population. In another 4 municipalities, the census only covered 60% of the area (Departamento Nacional de Estadísticas de Colombia, 2005).

Voter registration national identity cards:

The Colombian national voter registration includes 29.47 million out of a population of about 45 million, clearly an under-registration. According to LAPOP, 79% of respondents had valid identity cards in 2010; the number was slightly lower in 2009 75% (Latin American Public Opinion Project, 2012).

Vaccination:

According to UNICEF, rates of vaccination for Colombia in 2010 were: BCG 88%; DPT1 96%; DPT 3 88% Polio 88% Hepatitis B3 88%; Small Pox 88%, Tetanus 79% (United Nations Children Fund, 2012).

Extraction

The extractive capacity is the third pillar of Mann's state infrastructural power notion. Soifer suggest two indicators to measure extractive capacity: tax collection and the share of the population working in the formal sector of the economy.

Tax collection:

Colombia has seen a steady increase in its capacity to collect taxes. It doubled its tax collection from 10% of GDP in 1990 to 20.45% in 2005 (Gomez and Martner 2007). This number dropped to 16.5% in 2008. However Colombia trails several other Latin American countries including Chile and Brazil that show a much higher tax collection capacity (ECLAC, 2012).

Workforce:

On the other hand, the percentage of people working in the informal sector reached 58% in 2006, one of the highest in the region (Peres Rokhas, 2010).

Analysis:

The scores for the indicators on state capacity suggested by Soifer show that Colombia's stateness level is rather mixed. With respect to security, despite improvements, particularly in the control of leftist insurgents, substantive problems persist. Paramilitarism and drug

trafficking remain colossal problems. While crime rates have diminished substantially, they are still extremely high. The extensive use of private security reflects state weakness. A very important and often forgotten point is one raised by Eaton (20012) concerning alternative forms of contestation: Colombia faces multiple, simultaneous forms of non-violent contestation, particularly those of indigenous groups and other social sectors. The unresolved grievances of these groups represent an additional security challenge because they have the potential to become violent. Insofar as extraction and provision capacities are concerned, Colombia displays a mixed record common to countries with a medium-high level of human development: while state capacity exists, it is generally uneven and, in some respects, frankly deficient, particularly tax collection, voter registration, and the massive level of informality of the working force. It is also uneven in terms of territorial distribution.

II. LEGITIMACY

As pointed out before, a critical dimension of the statehood is legitimacy. Legitimacy derives from at least two sources: rightful claims to power and effectiveness and fairness in the delivery of public goods and services (Rotberg, 2004) (e.g., security, control borders, develop infrastructure, provision of basic social services, collect taxes, regulate markets) throughout its territory. In this section, I attempt to address the question of legitimacy for the Colombian case by assessing the country's record on three dimensions: security; trust in the political system and bureaucracy; and human rights record.

Security

A critical aspect of legitimacy concerns the state ability to provide public goods such as security (Rotberg, 2004). Perceptions of security may derive from objective measures, statistics on crime and violence, and from more subjective aspects such as the perception of security of the population. As argued above, while the security situation in Colombia has improved several problems persist. The central state has had evident success in its counterinsurgency efforts against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).⁶ FARC has suffered several military blows in the last 5 years, which have not

⁶ In September 2007, Tomas Medina, also known as Black Acacio, commander of the FARC's 16th Front and the organization's principle operator for the production, transportation and marketing of drugs and thus key figure within FARC, was killed in the Department of Vichada, near the Venezuelan border. In 2008, a squadron of the Colombian Air Force (FAC) attacked a guerrilla camp situated on Ecuadorian territory located near the border with Colombia, killing Raul Reyes, second in the command structure of FARC. Reyes' death marked the first combat casualty of a member of the organization's Secretariat. Weeks after the death of Reyes, the FARC announced that its historic leader, Manuel Marulanda, '*Sure Shot*', had died of natural causes. In July 2008, the Colombian army freed 14 hostages held by FARC, including Ingrid Betancourt, former presidential candidate and three U.S. contractors whose plane had crashed in the jungle. In September 2010, moreover, the feared Military Commander of FARC, Alfredo Briceño, alias Mono Jojoy, was killed during an aerial bombardment. Last November, in turn, Alfonso Cano, Farc's top commander, was gunned down in south-western Colombia by a Colombian elite squadron (BBC, 2008; 2009; 2011).

only severely crippled its fighting capacity, but also demoralized its cadre. Security experts calculate the group retains 8,000-10,000 combatants, a marked decline from its 17,000 operatives in 2002 (International Crisis Group 2008, 2010). The effective strategy against the guerrillas has been partly successful as a result of an increase in the number of military and police effectives deployed on the ground. Uribe's administration incorporated up to 100,000 new military and police forces during the 2002-8 period (Pachon, 2010:329). Uribe's Democratic Security policy, in particular the deployment of the army in strategic routes across the country, has markedly improved connectivity across Colombia, which was severely imperilled during the 1998-2002 period. Colombian security forces have attained a reputation for being a successful force with substantial know-how combating illegal groups. As a result, Colombian forces are starting to train Mexican anti-narcotics special agents as a way to buttress their capacity to fight powerful cartels (Forero, 2011).

Despite many positive developments in the security realm, however, worrisome trends persist. The continuation of paramilitary activity and the emergence of new criminal syndicates (*Bandas emergentes*) compromise the autonomy of the state vis-à-vis non-states actors. The proliferation of private security and stubborn, high levels of common crime present a complex scenario characterized by the symbiotic relationship between political conflict and crime (Berdal, 2011). The capacity of a criminal gang such as the *Urabeños* to stage an armed strike in the Caribbean coast raises worrisome questions about the capacity of the Colombian state to control non-state actors.

How does the population perceive its security? According to a poll conducted by LAPOP (2010), 66% of interviewees believed security had improved. 83% responded that their neighbourhoods were either not at all or almost not afflicted by gang activity; while only 22% said they had been victims of a crime in the last year. In what seems a striking number 23% of those polled said a member of their family had been affected by internal armed conflict (LAPOP, 2010). This means that even though conditions have improved the population still remains concerned about their personal security and that the internal armed conflict still has an impact over at least one fifth of the population.

Trust in the political system and bureaucracy

Trust in the political system and its authorities is relatively low. Only 40% of interviewees indicated they had a great or moderate confidence in the government. Institutions such as the Congress and the Attorney General (*Procuraduría*) enjoyed even lower levels of trust. Elections also elicited a low level of trust, only 6.7% of people said they had great trust in them. More than 50% of those who responded said corruption was widespread in the country (LAPOP, 2010). Responses to these questions in 2001 show a relatively low variation; which means the general distrust in political institutions remains stable. While former president Uribe was and continues to be a popular politician, several scandals during his administration tarnished his presidency and seem to have had a negative impact on the perception of the legitimacy of the state apparatus. Scandals included the links between government officials and paramilitary groups; the eavesdropping by

the intelligence agency (Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad DAS) on journalist and opposition figures; and, most importantly, the clandestine executions by security forces of poor urban dwellers purported to be guerrilla operatives (*falsos positivos*). Colombia, on the other hand, ranks low in the transparency index 3.5 in a 0-10 scale (Transparency International, 2012). Although this score is average for Latin America, it reflects that corruption remains prevalent.

Human rights record

Arguably one of the best possible proxies available to measure levels of state legitimacy is a state's human rights record. Human rights represent widely shared norms about the right way to regulate the relation between the state and individuals (Donnelly, 2003; Forsythe, 2006). Human rights represent the "single most magnetic political idea of contemporary time" (Brezinsky, 1989: 256) and therefore states generally are hard pressed to abide by them, even if rhetorically (Gordon, 2004; Feldmann and Olea, 2005).

Several organizations monitoring the human rights situation in Colombia, non- and inter-governmental alike, concur that the situation is critical. In its latest annual report, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) that, serious human rights problems arising from internal armed conflict plague the country. It underscores that murders, kidnappings, massacres, indiscriminate attacks, forced disappearances, "social cleansing", and other serious offenses are regularly committed by both guerrillas and paramilitaries (2012). The *Political Terror Scale*, which measures international levels of human rights respect based on reports by Amnesty International, ranks Colombia at the worse end of the 1-5 scale.⁷ Colombia's appalling human rights record has remained stable over the latest decade (PTS, 2012).

The Justice and Peace Law in particular has been criticized for being too lenient with members of paramilitary groups thus creating condition for impunity.⁸ Impunity reflects poorly on a state that purports to advocate a definitive change in the way policy is designed and implemented, particularly in the realm of security. The recent passage of a *Victims and Land Restitution Law* represents a positive step towards redressing abuses perpetrated in the past, however.

CONCLUSIONS

This brief examination on the Colombian case reflects that despite some well publicized progress Colombia still has a lot of work to do to improve state capacity. The above

⁷ The PTS also uses as a source reports by the US State Department, which is generally less reliable than Amnesty's. With the data of the US state department Colombia also displays a critical record (4 in the scale).

⁸ Through this law, 1,800 former paramilitary members, mostly medium and low ranked cadre, were pardoned in exchange for their confessions. The negotiation with paramilitary groups and the discussion of a law on alternative sentencing for members of rebel groups fighting in Colombia generated major controversy. Human rights organizations, both Colombian and international, warned that the process was fraught with problems and could lead to the generation of a climate of impunity for those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity (HRW, 2010; Guembe and Olea, 2006).

analysis shows that Colombia registered improvements as a result of important gains in two of Michael Mann's (1986) infrastructural power dimensions, territorial reach and bureaucratic capacity. Lack of substantial improvements in Mann's third infrastructural dimension, autonomy vis-à-vis non-states actors, on the one hand and some setbacks in legitimacy derived from the persistence of a very worrisome human rights record on the other make Colombia's progress modest rather than robust. Human rights violations diminish the confidence in the state and its officials.

A particularly thorny issue is the difficulty in distinguishing between political violence and non-political, criminal behavior because multifaceted forms of violence arise simultaneously. Terrorist actions including extrajudicial executions, targeted assassinations, torture, death threats, and forced disappearances are pervasive. They coexist with several other pernicious manifestations of economically motivated crimes including extortion, burglaries, robberies, and theft, which oftentimes involve very high levels of violence. There is agreement that the internal armed conflict has a great impact on general patterns of violence. Nonetheless, a significant proportion of violence is unrelated to the armed struggle (Feldmann and Hinojosa, 2009).

Two factors may explain why Colombia is seen in such a positive light. For one thing, sanguine accounts extrapolate general trends from too short a period.⁹ A decade seems not an adequate period to assess whether conditions have really changed, particularly because state weakness derives from structural conditions that take time to mend. In this regard, it is important to remember that Colombia represents the world's longest active internal armed conflict (from 1964). Secondly, Colombia's image seems to have benefited from the worsening of security conditions in other cases in the region—Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Venezuela, Haiti. The acute surge of violence and the routinization of truly dehumanized practices in these countries make Colombia look in relative "good health". Rather than reflecting Colombia's progress in its level of stateness, however, this trend sadly suggests a sharp weakening of state capacity in fellow Latin American states.

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⁹ I borrow this interpretation from Kalyvas and Balcells (2011) who make exactly this point in their discussion on the interpretation of the effect of the Cold War on internal armed conflict. The authors show how uncritical extrapolations base on "an atheoretical exercise that hinges on the timing of observations" may distort reality (417).

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