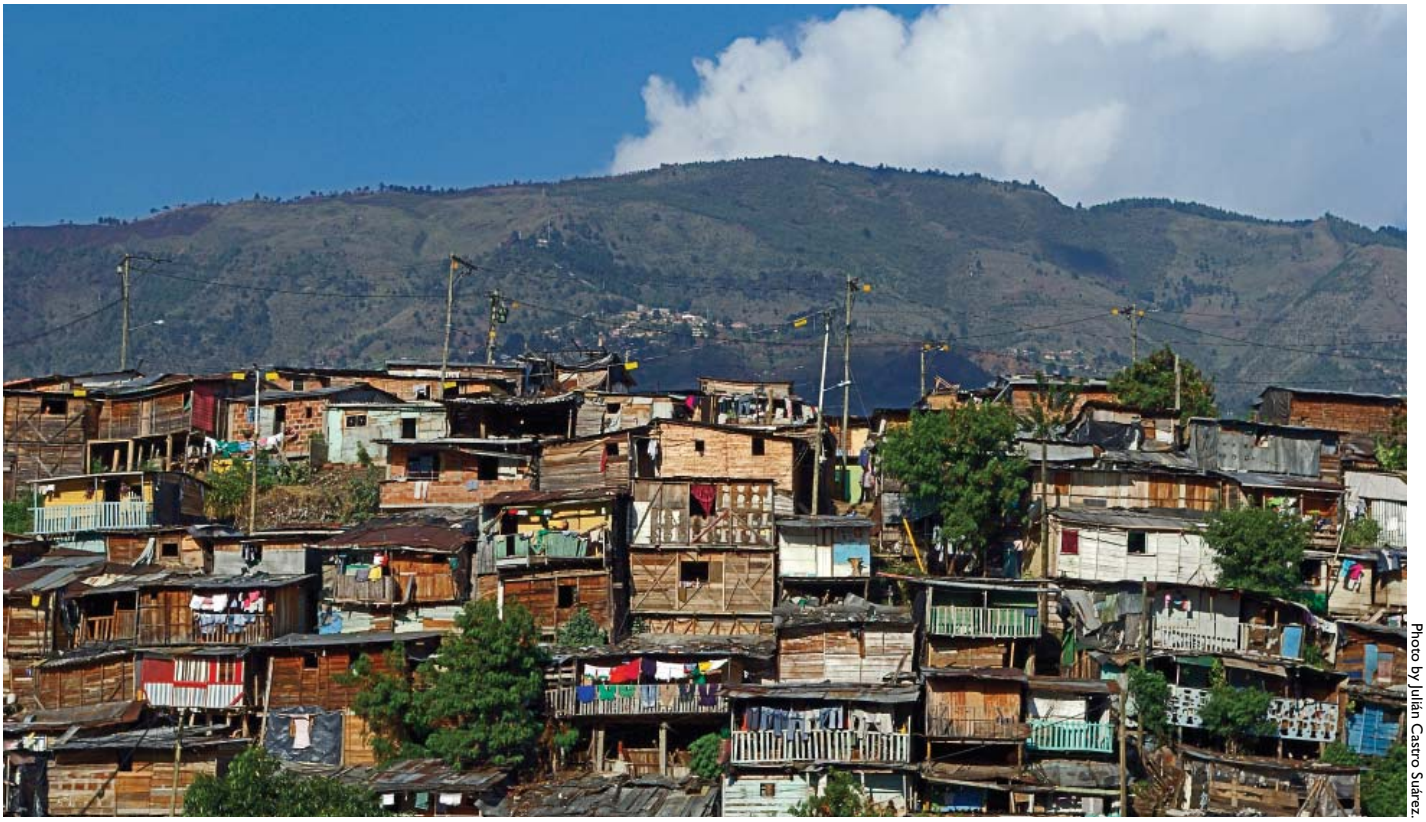

Photo by Julián Castro Suárez.

A Medellín *comuna.*

COLOMBIA

Paramilitaries at the Polls

By Benjamin Lessing

"The fighting here was intense, house by house." My guide walks me over to a lookout and gestures to the shanty-covered hillside rising in front of us. The scene looks vaguely cubist — a haphazard assemblage of brick dwellings and the narrow, odd-shaped passageways between them. He points to a cul de sac far below, the only relatively open space in view. "From there up to the radio tower there are no streets, just these little stairwells and catwalks. It took us two weeks, and many lives, to take the tower."

We are in Comuna 13, one of Medellin's most notorious shantytowns, the day before the 2007 Colombian elections. My guide, an agent of DAS (the Colombian FBI), along with several of our police escorts, participated in the bloody 2002 military invasion of this neighborhood known as Operation Orión. Tomorrow we will return to watch the polls, but today we are getting a history lesson.

Invited by the Organization of American States to participate in its Electoral Observation Mission of Colombia's 2007 elections, I arranged to be assigned to Comuna 13. The story of this community over the last 20 years is a microcosm of the larger Colombian conflict, particularly with regard to the consolidation of paramilitary power. Infested early on by delinquent bands associated with Pablo Escobar's cartel, in the 1980s and 1990s the community increasingly became a hotbed of guerrilla activity due to its strategic location at the border between Medellín's urban sprawl and the forested sierra beyond. By the late 1990s, the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias Colombianas) and the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional) — Colombia's two main guerrilla groups — together with the smaller CAP (Comandos Armados del Pueblo), had formed a shaky alliance and divided up control over Comuna 13's neighborhoods. Meanwhile, with paramilitary groups expanding and consolidating under a few national umbrella organizations (first among them the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, or AUC), regional paramilitary leader "Don Berna" made a play to wrest control of Comuna 13 from the guerrillas, leading to innumerable armed clashes. In late 2002, with Medellín attracting international attention for its record-breaking rates of armed violence, the newly-elected president Álvaro Uribe Vélez ordered the police and army to secure the

neighborhood and cleanse it of armed groups.

Operation Orión involved 3,000 government troops and lasted close to a month — leaving 19 soldiers and 24 guerrillas dead — but it did effectively end the guerrilla occupation. Don Berna's paramilitaries — who suffered no losses — were subsequently allowed to fill the power vacuum and dominate the neighborhood. According to many accounts, including a CIA report leaked to the Los Angeles Times last May, this was intentional: paramilitary leaders helped plan and execute Operation Orión, allegedly working together with, at a minimum, top military commanders. Whether or not Uribe or his closest staff cooperated with paramilitaries remains one of the most hotly contested issues in Colombia today.

In Comuna 13, as in most of the areas they came to control, the rule of the paramilitaries was shockingly violent. Unlike the guerrillas, who usually target infrastructure, transport and other economic and military resources, paramilitary groups overwhelmingly victimize noncombatants. A full 70 percent of their armed actions between 1988 and 2004 were massacres of four or more defenseless civilians, according to CERAC, a Bogotá think tank that has compiled the most complete database available on the Colombian conflict. The brutality of the paramilitaries' attacks, nominally aimed at rooting out leftists and collaborators, have left countless communities scarred, terrorized and, all too often, displaced. But there has been a secondary casualty of paramilitary power, more difficult to measure but no less important: democracy itself.

Guerrillas and Paramilitaries: Two Distinct Threats

For anyone concerned with the roots and trajectories of Latin American democracy, Colombia has always been a standout case. Though often weak and highly circumscribed, some form of democratic government has ruled the country nearly without a break for over 100 years. Moreover, civilian rule has survived periods of extreme partisan violence as well as the half-century of guerilla warfare that has rendered part of the national territory beyond the control of the state. Deleterious as these episodes have been, the rise of the paramilitaries and their extraordinary expansion between 1996 and 2004 presented a new — and in many ways more dire — threat to Colombian democracy. While the demobilization process that Uribe initiated in 2004 has begun to roll back the paramilitaries' overt armed presence, their influence is still felt throughout the country. Accurately assessing the severity of the threat will require not only careful and creative empirical observation but also a nuanced understanding of the protean nature of paramilitary power.

It is easy enough to portray Colombia's plague of armed violence as essentially a three-way battle between the paramilitary groups, the guerrillas and the armed forces. The paramilitaries are frequently conceived of as the mirror image of leftist groups like the FARC: a parallel threat to state power from the other end of the ideological spectrum. As with any simplification, there is a grain of truth here: both paramilitaries and guerillas are sophisticated armed groups with well-developed hierarchies, a recruiting strategy that often targets the same pool of economically disadvantaged youth and internal economies that increasingly rely on profits from the drug trade. But this viewpoint glosses over crucial differences in the groups' objectives, their modus operandi and, perhaps most importantly, their linkages with society and the state.

A foundational difference between the AUC and the FARC is that the latter's declared mission (however implausible) is to overthrow the state and erect some kind of Marxist government in its place, while the former's raison d'être is to protect citizens (in practice, the richest and most powerful citizens) from the actions of the guerrillas — in particular the threat of kidnappings and the appropriation of property. Both the AUC and FARC engage in illegal activities, and both do things (such as enforcing social order and imposing taxes on residents) that only states are supposed to do, but only the latter does these things in order to bring on the collapse of the state. Paramilitaries, by contrast, are essentially defenders of the status quo. As a result, paramilitary–state relations are fundamentally unlike guerrilla–state relations. Notwithstanding any government rhetoric condemning paramilitaries and even the occasional symbolic repressive action, the interests of the paramilitaries and those of the state frequently overlap.

Of course, the interests of paramilitaries and the state also diverge: in order to survive and maintain their territorial dominion, the paramilitaries have had to keep the state weak in strategic, localized sectors. But in places where the state already lacked sufficient reach to establish a monopoly on the use of force, paramilitaries have usually been perceived as a bulwark against guerilla encroachment — and their long-term corrosive effect on state capacity has been largely ignored. Paramilitaries have often been able to present beleaguered state forces with a viable quid pro quo — in one case delivering corpses to an army battalion to be "legalized" and counted as official FARC casualties in exchange for freedom from persecution — that leave groups of officials better off at the price of the state's overall cohesion and long-term efficacy. The contrast with guerrillas could not be starker: where the FARC constitutes a direct, head-on threat to the state's control over the national territory,

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paramilitaries' apparent cooperation frequently masks an oblique attack, weakening the state from within.

Social Linkages and the Road to the Ballot Box

Cooperation between paramilitaries and the state has been facilitated by the specific types of social linkages paramilitary leaders enjoy. Many are former army or police officers; others come from social strata that permit them to maintain cordial relations with important members of society. As defenders of the status quo, including, centrally, the property rights of wealthy landowners and large corporations, paramilitaries have received the sympathy and frequently the largesse of these groups. In one infamous case, the Chiquita banana company made "security" payments of over $1.7 million to the AUC between 1997 and 2004, even after the AUC was designated a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the U.S. government in 2001 and Chiquita was advised to stop by the U.S. Justice Department in 2003. Such high-level connections mean that, although there is certainly a stigma attached to the paramilitaries, leading most elected officials to publicly denounce their activity, channels of cooperation among politicians, powerful economic actors and paramilitaries remain open.

The combination of these social linkages and overlapping interests has fomented what is perhaps the most sinister form of paramilitary power: its penetration into the electoral arena. While paramilitaries are certainly not the first group to practice clientelism in Colombia, they have intensified the traditional interaction between marginalized communities and powerful local patrons by essentially replacing the state in the areas they control. Through the threat and all-too-frequent practice of lethal violence against the residents of these areas, paramilitary leaders gained an invaluable bargaining chip when negotiating with state agents: the votes of millions of Colombians.

Rumors of cooperation between paramilitaries and politicians have accompanied the growth of paramilitary power over the last 10 years, but its true extent has only recently come to light in the wake of the "para-politics" scandal of 2006 and 2007. The public revelation of the secret Ralito Pact — a statement of solidarity and mutual protection signed in 2001 by the country's top four paramilitary commanders and more than 50 members of congress, governors, mayors and other public figures — set off a political avalanche; one year later, 15 congressmen are in jail, another 36 are under investigation and at least 300 separate cases have been opened by the Colombian Justice Department.

Beyond the headlines, the rise of the paramilitaries has changed the face of Colombia's political system. From the 19th century until 1991, Colombia was ruled by what was perhaps the most entrenched two-party system in the Americas. Even the constitutional reform of 1991, intended to open up the political system to new parties, initially failed to dislodge the Liberals and Conservatives from their position as hegemonic political forces. But the 1998 election marked the beginning of their downward trajectory: after barely winning a majority of Senate seats between them in 1998, the two parties lost that majority in 2002, and by 2006 together controlled only 36 of 100 seats. In 1998, 28 smaller parties held 32 seats; by 2002 there were 44 parties holding 58 seats — many from departments with the strongest paramilitary presence. The ability to form a micro-party around a handful of novice candidates, as well as the increased autonomy of Liberal and Conservative incumbents from their party leadership, served the interests of paramilitaries, who require opportunistic politicians willing and able to trade policy concessions for votes. Thus the nature, timing and geography of this fragmentation, combined with the evidence now surfacing in the "para-politics" investigations, has led many analysts to see the collapse of Colombia's two-party system as fundamentally driven by the consolidation of paramilitary power.

The good news is that the worst may be over. A 2003 political reform has successfully reduced the number of political parties and made them somewhat more ideologically coherent. More controversial is the paramilitary demobilization initiated by Uribe in 2004. Though the AUC has been disbanded, many paramilitary leaders have been jailed and thousands of paramilitary rank and file have handed over their guns and entered "re-insertion" programs, critics argue that leaders retain control from prison while many groups continue to operate under new names with more localized leadership, frequently taking advantage of government payouts without truly demobilizing. The Uribe government has certainly succeeded in banishing the word "paramilitary" from the official lexicon: "*Paramilitarismo* no longer exists in Colombia" is the new party line, and the non-demobilized groups are now known strictly as "Criminal Bands." But how much has real paramilitary power been curtailed?

Turning the Corner?

The demobilization program in Medellín has been particularly well-funded and well-implemented. Armed violence plummeted under center-left mayor Sergio Fajardo (2004–08), and he remains highly regarded by both the public and a majority of analysts. Today, Medellín seems clean, safe and friendly — nothing like the terrifying images from the 2000 film "La Virgen de los Sicarios" ("Our Lady

Photo from AFP/Getty Images.

A Colombian soldier sorts weapons collected from a demobilizing paramilitary squad.

of the Assassins") or the days of Pablo Escobar. In Comuna 13 the atmosphere is one of wary tranquility: the war is over, but, my police escorts warn me — and by their very presence make clear — violent crime has not disappeared. Nonetheless, the overt armed presence of nationally organized paramilitaries is a thing of the past, making this an excellent place to use elections to study the dynamics of paramilitary power. Since elections give citizens the chance to make public choices between political alternatives, they offer a rich and compelling snapshot of the interests, preferences and power relations at play within a community. A fine-grained statistical comparison of results from the pre-demobilization (but post political reform) 2003 election, when the paramilitaries ruled openly, with the (still unreleased) final tallies from 2007 will, I believe, give us a better understanding of how paramilitary power functioned both at its height and in its current, ambiguous state.

On Election Day, I was able to observe the polling places firsthand, speak with officials and oversee the entire voting process. I saw no physical violence or armed coercion, and national observers with experience in the neighborhood confirmed that the situation had improved. In 2003, it had not been uncommon to see armed groups going door to door, waking up residents and forcing them at gunpoint into vans that drove them down to the polling stations. Nothing like that happened this time around. Inside the polling stations I saw only minor violations of protocol and nothing that looked like systematic intimidation. If there was armed coercion, it had become more circumspect.

The initial results were promising: of the 14 ex-paramilitary leaders who ran for local office in the *comunas* of Medellin, only one was elected. Moreover, the Colombia Viva party, which grew out of the disbanded AUC, received only 6,000 votes, as opposed to more than 20,000 four years ago. Nationwide, the number of undisputed mayoral candidacies (a good measure of intimidation from armed groups) fell from 25 to 11. In El Tiempo, the nation's largest newspaper, prominent paramilitary specialist Alfredo Rangel was confident enough to proclaim "The End of 'Para-politics.'" I prefer to await the results of my statistical research before passing judgment, but the early signs do give hope that Colombia, or at least Medellín, has turned a corner. Consolidating these advances, and ensuring that paramilitary power continues to wither, will be crucial not just for residents of Comuna 13 and communities like it, but for all Colombians. Only when even the most disadvantaged members of society can vote, organize, advocate and simply live their lives without fear of violent reprisals, will the promise of Colombian democracy be realized.

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