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In Colombia's contentious political system, stable democratic institutions that sustain regular elections and citizen participation have endured despite an unyielding war against ordinary people, the state, and the economic infrastructure. Such levels of violence together with the failure to effectively alleviate the needs of a significant portion of the population have produced an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Social movements have formed in this context and react to it. They contest incomplete democratization and economic marginalization while demanding the rights of diverse categories of people. Colombia is culturally, regionally, and economically diverse, and with 47 million people, it is the third largest country in Latin America. It is an upper middle-income country with a poverty level of 37% in 2012—down from 50% in 2002—and high wealth inequality with a GINI coefficient of 0.54, down from 0.57 in 2002 (DNP 2013).

Social protests in Colombia have been understood as a reaction to the absence of political representation and centralization of power (Santana 1983; Leal 1991), leaving people no other option than to organize and protest to impact politics (Urrutia 1969). Social movements are also motivated by international events such as the Cold War and the Cuban Revolution (Archila 2003a), or by dependent economic relations with capitalist countries (Pécaut 1973) that weaken Colombia's economy and inspire nationalist

movements. Movements have also responded to widespread material necessities, all made worse by class contradictions and wealth concentration (Gilhodes 1970; Zamosc 1989), and by widespread collective beliefs that something is unjust and immoral (Archila 2003b).

This chapter draws on previously published work where I have generally argued that social contention results from the fact that citizens have obtained enough rights and capabilities to organize, yet tend to experience the loss of acquired benefits, whereas the state has developed uneven capabilities to implement policies, offer security, and protect human rights (Velasco 2007, 2011). Here, I differentiate Colombia's social movements from other forms of contentious politics, present protest cycles in the backdrop of regime change, and offer a broad description of the actors, motives and types of actions behind social movement struggles.

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### Contentious Politics in Colombia

Social movements constitute one type of contentious politics, or public, collective actions such as protests or revolutions. Politically marginalized or economically excluded categories of people, as well as groups who seek to influence authorities, resort to disruptive political mechanisms to change public attitudes about an issue or transform politics in general (McAdam et al. 2001). In addition to social movements, contention in Colombia includes guerrilla and paramilitary actions. However, guerrillas and paramilitaries are

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violent, seek to overthrow the regime and/or defy constitutional limits (Almeida 2008). In contrast, social movements are the open and peaceful struggles for social change of ordinary citizens.

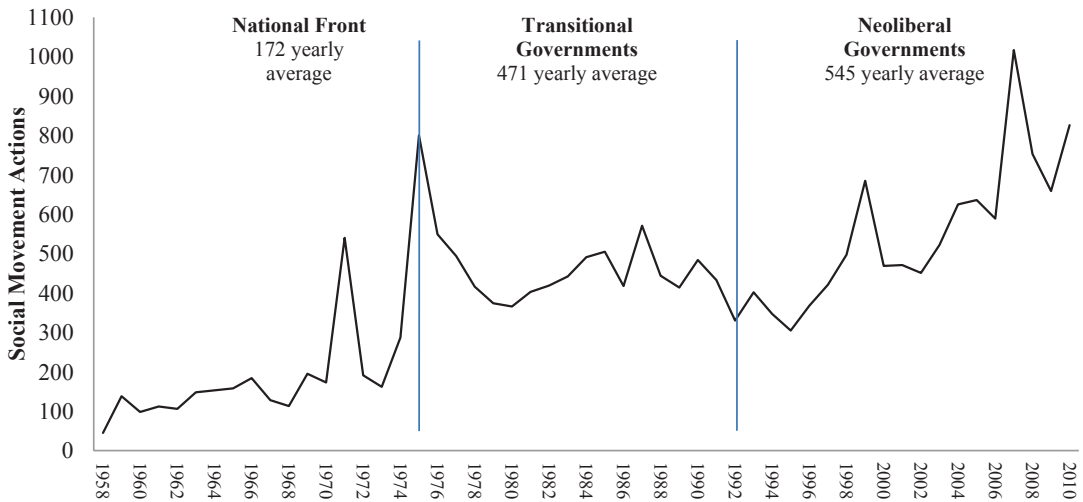
The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) is the oldest and largest guerrilla organization whose origins date back to the self-defense groups formed to protect peasant lives and lands from landowner-sponsored private militias during *La Violencia*, a period of political party violence between 1948 and 1958 (Bushnell 1993). By 1964 the FARC had emerged as a communist guerrilla force seeking land reform and to overthrow the oligarchic regime. The National Army of Liberation (ELN) and the Popular Army of Liberation (EPL) also appeared around this time, whereas the April 19 Movement (M-19) formed in the 1970s. They emerged in different parts of the country, represented programmatic and ideological differences, but openly espoused the combination of all forms of struggles to achieve their aims (Pizarro 1992). Guerrillas financed themselves by extorting and kidnapping regional landowners or other wealthy groups. In the late-1980s after the government increased openings for political participation, most of these groups lost ground as a political alternative to a closed, oligarchic regime. The M-19 demobilized and became a political party in the 1990s, whereas the EPL and ELN were eventually weakened militarily. The FARC sustained itself through kidnappings, taxing drug trafficking, and controlling some local economies.

In reaction to the expansion of guerrillas, paramilitaries were established in the 1980s to provide protection to landowners and, arguably, to cover for the state's incapacity to contain subversion (Romero 2000). Paramilitaries used terror to keep in check entire population and to reclaim—without any constitutional limitation—parts of the country's territory for the state or for local elites. Paramilitaries may be catalogued as contentious actors because they do not enjoy support from all state elites, they contradict pluralist or inclusive state policies, and their actions are unconstitutional. During the 1990s, both guerrillas and paramilitaries were responsible for gross human rights violations.

In comparison, social movements generally make claims by way of symbolic, public, communal, and, more often than not, nonviolent actions (Archila 2003a). Depending on the context however, social movements incite government repression producing episodes of violence. Though contentious in nature, social movements reject the deliberate and premeditated use of violence to achieve their aims and use formal institutional channels of representation in combination with informal mechanisms (e.g., protests) to make their claims. Given Colombia's context of contention, social movements go to great lengths to label themselves as examples of "social," "civic," or "civil" struggles to signal to detractors that they are not guerrillas.

Social movement associations are more likely to connect to the political opposition organized in programmatically and ideologically diverse parties such as the Communist Party, the M-19, the Independent and Revolutionary Worker's Movement (MOIR), the Indigenous Social Alliance, among others (Archila 2003b). In the early 2000s Colombia's atomized left founded the Polo Democrático Alternativo to unify an opposition, organize a congressional voting block, and aggregate votes (Gutiérrez 2006). As an association of different political groups, the Polo tried to gather intellectuals, opposition parties, and a broad spectrum of social movement delegations. Though the Polo has enjoyed electoral success in some regions and in Bogotá, the party has not been able to overcome a number of sectarian divisions, including those pertaining to the relationship between the "democratic" and "insurgent" left. The most current division of the Polo gave rise to a new left current known as *Progresistas*.

Given the state of politics in Colombia, ambivalence about rejecting armed conflict as a way to produce political change is not only criticized by the democratic left but seen with suspicion by the violent right who believes that the left practices "double militancy" by supporting both civic and armed left factions. This ambivalence endangers entire collectivities as happened to the Patriotic Union, a leftist party formed in the 1980s whose ranks were filled by some FARC militants, and was consequently targeted by



**Fig. 20.1** Social movements and political regime in Colombia (1958–2010). (Sources: Protest data 1958–1975 (Archila 2003b); 1975–2010 (CINEP 2013))

paramilitaries who assassinated about 3000 UP followers (Delgado 2008; Duque 2012). Some parties on the right also have demonstrated links to violent paramilitary groups and use coercion to force constituencies to vote for their preferred candidates. They have also been responsible, as discussed below, of persecuting and assassinating social movement activists.

### Social Movements and Political Regime (1958–2014)

Social movements are contained by broader political dynamics affecting the resources available to organize collective action (Jenkins 1995). This section considers the main developments in Colombian politics between 1958 and 2014, and divides these developments into three political regimes: The National Front (1958–1974), the Transitional Period (1975–1990) and the Neoliberal Period (1991–2014). This political history has a great deal of relevance in analyzing the determinants of social contention. Figure 20.1 summarizes social movement actions against the different political regimes and demonstrates that contention has followed an increasing tendency over time.

During the National Front's less democratic rule, contentious actions averaged 172 per year, with the exception of 1971, when 540 events were recorded as a result of widespread land invasions carried out by peasants. At the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, the number of protests increased as social discontent with restricted democracy spread. The Front brought to power a coalition of Liberals and Conservatives who represented coffee growers, industrialists, and landowners (Palacios 2001) and precluded political institutions that favored the interests of subaltern groups (Archila 1995). Party elites shared government to conciliate interparty fighting that led to numerous civil wars, prevent the independent organization of the opposition and stem populist economic measures (c.f. Kline 1995). Not surprisingly, Colombia's four main guerrilla groups formed during this time.

National Front governments used states of siege to suppress independent civil society organizing (Archila 2003b) and criminalized strikes in the economically strategic sectors of communications, social security, and oil (Londoño 1989). However, they passed economic modernization measures and enabled peasants and workers representation in corporatist organizations controlled by the government, which would later serve as platforms for independent association.

Disgruntled Conservative rural elites, however, particularly opposed the agrarian reforms of the Liberal Alberto Lleras (1966–1970) and supported the Conservative Misael Pastrana (1970–1974), who disassembled the agrarian reform and secured the power of rural elites over peasants (Silva 1989). This counter-reform explains the peak of protests in 1971 when peasant land takeovers peaked.

Protests reached an average of 471 during the Transitional governments, when the Front had officially ended, yet many of its institutions remained in place. Only in 1986 would a government form after competitive elections (Kline 1995). Transitional governments tend to pass political reforms that failed to assuage popular demands, yet raised high expectations. The 1975 crest coincides with the beginning of a new administration that promised increased political participation and socioeconomic reforms, but failed to comply. This government confronted the unprecedented wave of social uprising with repression of activists, but also passed beneficial economic reforms. The Liberal Julio César Turbay (1978–1982) then reduced protests by increasing repression and passing the 1978 Security Statute that included severe measures to detain, interrogate, and prosecute civilians suspected of subversion or drug trafficking but which were used to pursue any civil opposition (Archila 2003b). The Conservative Belisario Betancur (1982–1986) enabled local elections and initiated peace talks with guerrilla groups, but his reforms were limited by poor economic performance and increasing violence. International pressures, such as those coming from the United States' strict antinarcotics policies, exacerbated the problem. At the same time, a politicized and increasingly active citizenry continued to pressure for social change and political liberalization.

This period ended with a generalized sense of political crisis which most political groups believed could only be addressed by drafting a new constitution. The 1991 Constitution replaced the 1886 conservative document and liberalized the economy and democratized politics. It was negotiated by the traditional parties along with representatives from social movements and members

of the opposition in a constituent assembly. The constitution promised a Social State under the Rule of Law following principles of economic and political democracy favoring participation by different social actors (c.f. Garay 2002). Protests declined after its ratification in the short term, but subsequent governments experienced a higher number of protests than prior administrations.

Hopes were high that the constitution would produce a more inclusive and democratic political system, but this was in part discouraged by market reforms that increased inequality (Garay 2002) and government failure to attenuate the effects of armed conflict. In the 1990s people generally protested neoliberal austerity measures designed under International Monetary Fund guidelines to rationalize fiscal spending by increasing indirect taxes, cutting social programs, privatizing utility companies, increasing public utility rates, and reducing the budgets of local administrations (Ahumada 2000). Meanwhile protests against violence, displacement, and human rights violations continued unabated.

Social contention was at its highest during Alvaro Uribe's government (2002–2010), an administration that concentrated power and increased repression. Elected by Colombians tired of guerrilla abuse, Uribe enjoyed high approval ratings and was expected to pacify the country at any cost. He amended the Constitution to allow for his reelection, merged several ministries, and was involved in a confrontation with the Supreme Court of Justice, the body in charge of investigating relations between the government, members of congress, and paramilitary groups that led to the arrest of 32 congressmen who forged alliances and even planned crimes against humanity with paramilitary forces (Valencia 2007).<sup>1</sup> His government was tainted by high-level corruption, as well as massive human rights violations including the military's practice of showing results in their anti-insurgency war by killing civilians and passing them as guerrillas or staging mass detentions of innocent people accused of sub-

<sup>1</sup>“Corte pide investigar a funcionarios del Gobierno por intentar deslegitimarla.” *El Espectador.com*, agosto 14, 2008.

**Table 20.1** Actors, organizations, actions, and motives of social struggles. Colombia (1975–2010). (Source CINEP (2013))

Social actors	% of total	Organizations that called for collective action	% of total	Types of actions	% of total	Motives	% of total
Wage earners	27	Labor unions	29	Marches and mobilizations	38	Rights <sup>a</sup>	19
Urban residents	23	No information	27	Strikes	31	Government noncompliance	17
Peasants	16	Civic groups	12	Land invasions	10	Policies	16
Students	14	Students	10	Road blocks	9	Land/Housing	12
Victims of violence	6	Authorities	6	Takeovers of entities	7	Utilities/Infrastructure	11
Independent workers	5	Victims of violence	5	Riots and disturbances	4	Social services	7
Guilds	3	Guilds	3	Hunger strikes	0.4	Labor rights	7
Ethnic groups	3	Peasants	3	Civil resistance	0.3	Public authorities	4
Women and LGBT	1.5	Ethnic organizations	1.4			Solidarity	3
Prisoners	1	Peace and human rights	1.3			Environment	2
		Women and LGBT	1			Commemorations	1.5
		Others	1			Others	1
		Religious congregations	0.5				

Percentages based on 18,397 recorded events

<sup>a</sup> The rights category covers demands for life, liberty, personal integrity; political, economic, and social rights; cultural and ethnic rights; and adherence to International Humanitarian Law, the framework that regulates armed conflict.

version (Pachón 2009). As a result, polarization increased, and so did protests, which peaked at 1017 in 2007.

The current administration of Juan Manuel Santos (2010–present) has continued neoliberal economic policies—it has signed a number of bilateral free trade agreements contested by the labor and rural movements—and maintained antisubversive and security policies to weaken the FARC and contain the remnants of paramilitary groups. Ten years after President Andrés Pastrana’s (1998–2002) failed peace talks with the FARC, Santos is currently holding bilateral talks with a weaker guerrilla movement. Though there is widespread support by social movements for a negotiated end to war, indigenous organizations, and victims of violence, among others, are protesting their exclusion from the negotiating table (Restrepo and García 2012). Finally, this administration has faced a more vociferous environ-

mental social movement opposition, especially on issues of water, and small and large-scale mining (Delgado 2012).

## Who Protests, How and Why

Table 20.1 presents a snapshot of the social actors, organizations, actions, and motives behind the 18,397 events observed by the Center for Research and Popular Education’s (CINEP) Social Struggle Data Base, the most comprehensive source of information on Colombia’s social movements. According to this data, the bulk of movement claims centers on basic human rights, material demands and complaints against government policies or government inefficiency, including the violation of civil and political rights, and noncompliance with pacts or laws in force or agreements reached during previous negotiations

(CINEP 2013). Workers, urban residents, peasants, and students lead 80% of protests. However, other vocal political identities are emerging such as with women and ethnic groups who have gained rights but continue to be subjugated.

The labor movement was the most important contentious social actor the 1970s (Pécaut 1973; Moncayo and Rojas 1978) and continues to predominate, even if weakened by violence and a decline of unionization. In the 1990s for example, it became common practice to point to unions as mainly responsible for macroeconomic problems. Such accusations were ramped up just before a state-owned corporation was about to be liquidated. For example, President César Gaviria (1990–1994) took advantage of the fact that union members were a minority to paint them as part of an elite protected by labor laws and regulations to discredit their opposition to neoliberal reforms.<sup>2</sup>

As the neoliberal reforms moved forward, the foundations of the labor movement were undermined. The lowering of tariffs caused the bankruptcy of at least 25,000 factories (Valderrama 1998), reducing the industrial workforce and the number of unionized workers, which dropped from 16% of the economically active population in 1980 to less than 5% by 2010 (Vidal 2012). Violence by extreme right groups has also undermined unionization. Correa (2007) recorded the assassination of 2245 union leaders and activists between 1991 and 2006, whereas the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions found that between 1999 and 2005 a total of 1174 union members were killed around the world and 73% of all these assassinations occurred in Colombia (Vidal 2012).

State-sector unions, mainly in health and education, have retained capacities to negotiate sector-specific labor demands, whereas adverse conditions for the exercise of labor rights forced a change in activism (Archila 2012). Workers increasingly organized protests against human rights violations and neoliberal reforms, and reached out to groups and activists outside labor

to mobilize their claims. Conventional activism, such as strikes, assemblies, and collective bargaining to negotiate specific labor concerns, declined. Adverse conditions also prompted international alliances and lobbying efforts, helping postpone bilateral trade agreements with the USA and the European Union by highlighting Colombia's deplorable conditions for workers (Delgado 2007). Although labor groups generally object to trade agreements that will negatively affect employment, unions forced labor rights as a central point of negotiation in bilateral trade treaties. In alliance with other groups, labor reacted against each new government's neoliberal development plans and was especially critical of privatizations and cutbacks set to reduce fiscal transfers to finance municipal education and health budgets. Activists also mobilized against plebiscitarian measures to change the 1991 Constitution to allow the president's reelection—especially to allow the indefinite reelection of President Álvaro Uribe—and to deepen the market reforms. In sum, the labor movement is heavily invested in protesting human rights violations and has lost ground in collective bargaining capacities.

Peasant organization has declined over the years as a result of violence against leaders and associations, and counter-agrarian reform forcing peasants off their land (Corredor 1990). Between 2000 and 2008, about 385,000 rural families abandoned by force 5.5 million hectares or about 11% of Colombia's agricultural land, losing an estimated 12% of the country's gross national product (CODHES 2009). In all, more than 5 million people left their land between 1985 and 2011, or the equivalent of 10% of Colombia's current population (CODHES 2011). In addition, a 2012 Oxfam report warned that the free trade agreements signed by the government exposed unprotected small farmers to competition against subsidized US products, leading to an estimated 16% fall in their average incomes.<sup>3</sup>

These devastating conditions in the countryside explain the recent escalation of peasant

<sup>2</sup> "La oligarquía del overol," *Semana*, May 19, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Norby, Michael, Fitzpatrick, Brian. "The Horrific Costs of the US-Colombia Free Trade Agreement." *The Nation*, May 31, 2013.

protests. In 2013, a surge in protests culminated in a *Paro Nacional Agrario* (Agrarian National Strike) that positioned rural demands at the center of the government's agenda. The year began with a national mobilization of coffee producers demanding subsidies to cover losses from a steep decline in coffee prices. To assuage protesters, the government agreed to some subsidies. By June, peasants from the Catatumbo region in northeast Colombia, blocked roads and paralyzed all economic activities in protest of the national government's repressive coca eradication policies, stigmatization of the area's civilian population treated as FARC supporters, and lack of social investment. In August, the *Paro Nacional* began in the department of Boyacá, and eventually mobilized small farmers across the country, unifying grassroots groups—including indigenous organizations—and established organizations such as coffee, potato, and milk producers, among others. The *Paro* has received overwhelming support from urban Colombians, was joined by small miners, truck drivers, students and teacher unions, and produced public scrutiny of the aggregated effects of two decades of violent counter agrarian reform and neoliberal market reforms. As of October 2013, the *Paro* has ended after negotiations with the government, though critics argue that the promised subsidies and other benefits will not be a durable solution for structural problems in the countryside.<sup>4</sup>

Though they fail to register in the statistics, the protests of peasant coca growers warrant some attention. As USA demands for stringent control of coca production intensified in the 1990s, so did political repression in coca growing regions. Aerial fumigations also increased using glyphosate targeted at coca crops, but also affecting legal crops, forests, and water sources. In 1996 over 200,000 *cocaleros* rose up against the government demanding recognition as citizens,

<sup>4</sup> Sandoval, Héctor. "Manifestaciones atienden a modelo económico, entrevista a Mauricio Archila, investigador del CINEP." *Elespectador.com*, August 18, 2013. URL: <http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/economia/manifestaciones-atienden-al-modelo-economico-articulo-440855>.

not outcasts of the system (Ramírez 2001), and continued to demonstrate against the criminalization of their economic activity into the 2000s.

Proof of the high levels of violence affecting civilians is the upsurge of the "Victims of Violence" category, which was largely inexistent between 1975 and 1995, when analysts observed fewer than 25 events. But after 1996, CINEP recorded more than 1000 social movement events by such groups. Displaced persons, victims of state violence, and other victims of human rights violations largely demand the right to a safe return to their lands, compensation for lost properties, or fair treatment in the government's peace negotiations, such as the Justice and Peace Law of 2005 that negotiated the disbandment of paramilitaries but largely ignored the interests of their victims (Sarmiento 2008).

In the case of new political actors, women and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people (LGBT) merit special attention, though their actions hardly register. Their actions have expanded the meaning of civil rights and impacted public policy. In 2006, the Constitutional Court legalized abortion when the pregnancy is the result of rape, in the case of malformations, or when the mother's health is at risk, a rare victory for the feminist movement. In February 2007, the court ruled in favor of a claim filed by the organization Colombia Diversa, an NGO that backs the LGBT movement, and approved property rights for same-sex couples who have cohabited for at least 2 years.<sup>5</sup>

The information on the organizations calling for collective action (see columns 3–4 in Table 20.1) again underscores the leading role of labor unions, but also of civic groups and students, who were behind 29, 12, and 10% of the protests, respectively. The student category includes 50% university and 42% high school students whose protests primarily contest deterioration in the quality of education (including social services and infrastructure), and more recently, the privatization of higher education and increasing tuition (CINEP 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Hernando Salazar, "Colombia: derechos a parejas gay," *BBC Mundo.com*, February 8, 2007.

Civic groups have a long history in Colombia and represent urban or territorial actors with varied socioeconomic identities and organizational affiliations. These actors are normally associated with poor towns or neighborhoods where services are deficient or the government has failed to develop community infrastructure (Santana 1983). They are defined by using civic strikes that stop most socioeconomic activities as a peaceful mechanism to draw the government's attention to a communal problem.

The "authorities" category looks at departmental and municipal officials using protests to object the actions of armed actors or to pressure the central government. For example, in 2002 the mayors of 23 municipalities in Antioquia protested FARC guerrilla murder threats to force them out of their office, and against the government for failing to offer security,<sup>6</sup> whereas authorities in southern Colombia joined the general population in protesting coca-eradication policies that increased repression and militarization.<sup>7</sup> Protests by local authorities largely followed the enactment of decentralization laws in 1986, which handed over responsibilities to local administrations that often lacked the expertise or necessary resources to perform new functions.

Strikes, mobilizations, invasions, and road-blocks account for 88% of types of protest activities. In comparison, civil resistance hardly registers at 0.3%, yet constitutes the most important innovation in Colombia's history of contention. In 2001 people in several primarily indigenous towns in the Cauca department organized peaceful actions against armed groups operating in their region in a context of increased military harassment of the civilian population. At the time, the FARC had increased attacks in remote towns, killing or abducting policemen and using unconventional weapons to destroy the civil infrastructure.

In Cauca, the FARC have historically refused to accept indigenous people's autonomy and

their main organization, the Cauca Regional Indigenous Council, which was behind the most successful ethnic social movement in the country (Rodríguez et al. 2005). Since the 1980s, the FARC has antagonized and killed indigenous leaders, prompting the short-lived founding of an Indian self-defense group, the Manuel Quintín Lame Movement, to guard Indian leaders and reserves. Fed up with FARC attacks in the 1990s, indigenous civilians in four towns joined forces to stop them by surrounding the police in a humanitarian circle to save their lives.<sup>8</sup> They also made clear to the government that its military presence turned people and civilian infrastructure into FARC military targets. Civil resistance has developed into a strategy that includes a call for territorial autonomy, or territories of peace, where local people in high conflict areas have declared themselves neutral vis-à-vis the conflict (Bouvier 2009).

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## Conclusions

Colombian social movements are a testament to the country's complex history of illiberalism, incomplete democratization, and economic inequality. First, many of the participatory mechanisms approved by the 1991 Constitution, ostensibly designed to reduce conflict, continue to be meaningless as a result of government incapacity to put them into practice or to follow up on agreements reached. Second, the illiberal and violent practices of drug traffickers, guerrillas, paramilitaries, and some government elites have further contributed to the deterioration of many institutions and to the reduction of the rights of citizens. Finally, in the face of widespread economic and human insecurity, the government's policies of economic development, most recently following free-market principles, are seen as counter-productive as their end-results are wealth and land concentration. At any rate, social movement activism has increased as political

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<sup>6</sup> Leonardo Herrera, "Municipios, a la deriva y sin alcaldes," in *El Tiempo*, June 23, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> "Somos patriotas, pero no pendejos," in *El Tiempo*, July 9, 2002.

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<sup>8</sup> "Toribío salvó a sus policías," *El Tiempo*, July 13, 2002; Álvaro Sierra, "La guerra en el norte del Cauca," *El Tiempo*, May 10, 2005.



opportunities for participation improved, even if repression and violence attempts to deter popular mobilization.

In total, social movements widely respond to the effects of a state that has failed to impart justice, and which has, on occasions, actively participated in the violation of basic human rights. Movements generally defend expanding and redefining civil, political, social rights as well as communal rights, ranging from gender equality, the cultural rights of indigenous and Afro-Colombians, environmental well-being, and decent employment and land. In doing so, Colombian movements reflect a pluralist political culture seeking representation and as such, constitute a bedrock of democracy.

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