

# **RADICALISATION AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE: THE COLOMBIAN CASE**

## **SPEECH BY THE VICE PRESIDENT OF COLOMBIA, DOCTOR FRANCISCO SANTOS CALDERÓN, AT THE FIRST CONFERENCE ON RADICALISATION AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE.**

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Dear Friends:

I'd like to open my remarks by congratulating all those who have promoted and launched the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence.

There is absolutely no question in my mind that the world needed this.

The greater understanding we have of why a person chooses to travel down this dark road, from political activism to setting a bomb off somewhere, the better we will be able to defuse the phenomenon of radicalisation. The better we will be able to design strategies to effectively counter it. And the more effective our efforts will be as we focus on root causes rather than symptoms.

### **GENERAL CONTEXT**

All of us here today understand that the persistence of radicalisation and political violence is one of the most important challenges facing democratic nations in the twenty-first century.

Violence affects state capacity to protect the rights of citizens. It can curtail democracy and seriously affect democratic participation. And it forces the investment of resources to fight violence at the expense of other, more pressing social and economic needs.

It is therefore vital to understand the root causes of political violence, the factors that enable its continuation, and the strategies required to defeat its various forms.

### **TYPES OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE**

Let's begin by differentiating between the various manifestations of radicalisation and uses of violence in order to obtain a more precise picture that will allow us to properly examine the different phenomena.

Some analysts argue that violence used for the purpose of imposing political objectives has **three modes**:

- 1. Violent actions by masses or sectors**
- 2. Organized and sustained actions against institutions**
- 3. Terrorism**

- **Violent political action** by a sector or sectors of a given society can be seen here in the developed countries in the anti-globalisation movement, which has led to violent face-offs with authorities. It is now common for G8 meetings to be preceded and accompanied by manifestations that have degenerated into disturbances and the destruction of public property.

We have seen this type of violence on our continent. We saw it in the overturning of democratically elected presidents Fernando de la Rúa and Rodríguez Saá in Argentina, Sánchez de Losada in Bolivia, and Bucaram and Gutiérrez in Ecuador. Through the use of violent blockades on public roadways and other violent methods one sector of society was able to impose its political agenda. Independently of how justified these movements might or might not have been or how wrong the actions of these leaders might have been, for the purposes of our discussion it is important to include this expression of violence and analyse it carefully.

Of course, it can be symptomatic of deficiencies in spaces for democratic participation and decision-making. Or it can point to groups that are interested in destabilization. But whatever the reason for this type of violence, we must devote attention and analysis to it, because today it is one of the ways that a segment of the population can seek to use violence to impose its point of view or pressure for a particular political outcome.

Furthermore, it is not a secret to anybody that for radical groups in Latin American, including the Colombian terrorist groups ELN and the FARC, insurrection and mass uprisings are objectives for destabilising and overthrowing democratic governments.

- **Organized and sustained violence against state institutions, and terrorism.**

Continuing with this framework for analysis there are two other types of violence exercised for the purpose of reaching political or at least apparently political goals: organized and sustained violence against state institutions, and terrorism.

It is not easy to differentiate between them, nor are they normally seen in their pure form. Usually we find terrorism used by organized violent groups and support by terrorism of organized groups or political projects. Even though some terrorist groups are not organized for the purpose of obtaining political power but rather to terrorize the public, its very common that mind like political actors in society capitalize their work.

One difference between these last two manifestations of violence can be found in their relationship to territory. While organized violence needs bases for its operations and to maintain its forces, terrorist organizations do not have such a tight relationship to territory. Other difference relates to the importance given to the methods used for recruiting and maintaining their social bases. And one more has to do with their organizational structure: complex and hierarchical in one case, and networked in the second case. But let us not be deceived as to a fundamental point – what is most common is to find symbiotic, manifestations of the two of them in a single case, cooperation and integration, or transformation of one into the other.

These distinctions can be useful for achieving greater precision in analysis and understanding. And can even go further if we add other variables such as their motivations, ethnic, religious, or geopolitical, or their level of presence and its corresponding dynamics, either incipient or chronic, for example.

I have no doubt that this Centre will increase through research the level of understanding of this phenomenon with all its variables and how it relates to the process that an individual has to go through to go from political debate to the use of violence to impose his ideas.

My purpose in exploring these distinctions has been to highlight the importance of not overlooking any expression of violent action against institutions and society, and the importance of not jumbling them all together. Of course, at times these distinctions are purely academic; the reality is that terrorism is increasingly characterized by using all types of violence.

And it is also certain that one type of violence can transform into another. In the case of Colombia, we have argued for multiple reasons that the violence in our country is a clear expression of terrorism because it attacks a legitimate democratic government that is increasingly perfecting its democracy. Terrorism in my country is targeted at the public more than our institutions.

## **THE CASE OF COLOMBIA**

This leads me of course to our experiences in Colombia. Let me share a few thoughts about what we have lived and learned over the years.

The main result of the violence exercised by guerrilla groups throughout many decades in the name of their political ends, combined with the state's weakness in confronting that violence, was the emergence of paramilitary groups.

The paramilitary groups obtained a not insignificant level of support from several sectors of society and experienced a growth rate greater than that of the guerrilla movement during the decade prior to the current administration.

Both guerrilla and paramilitary groups evolved into organizations financed by drug trafficking and both acted against the civilian population with a total disregard for human rights. Rather than seeking support from the people, they subjugated them using terror tactics.

We have now learned that when the state is absent from a territory, as happened in many parts of our country, there is a risk that violent organizations will be strengthened and that others will emerge to combat them, spiralling into a vicious cycle of bloodshed. This ends up creating a situation where the consequences for civilians worsen, institutions weaken, the justice system collapses, corruption increases, and criminal activity grows unchecked.

### **Democratic Security Policy: The Colombian Strategy Against Political Violence**

This unbearable situation hit its peak in the early part of this decade. However, the Colombian people, fed up, took action.

With the full backing of the Colombian public and the cooperation of friendly countries, in 2002 we developed an integrated strategy that is committed to democratic legality and human rights. Its goal is to guarantee rule by democratic institutions everywhere in the nation.

Called the Democratic Security Policy, its core principles are: control of our national territory, fighting all forms of criminal behaviour, strengthening our democratic institutions, protecting civilians, and absolute transparency in our state actions.

It is an integral strategy because it attacks all expressions of violence equally without falling into the trap of cultivating terrible allies in a fight against a supposed common enemy.

It is integral because it builds the armed forces and police while simultaneously strengthening government institutions and services, including comprehensive rural and urban social development policies.

Its integral because it fights not only violent organizations but also the drug trafficking that finances those groups. It engages in battle against drug trafficking at every link of the chain, from the eradication of crops and fighting the mafias to offering support for peasants to grow alternative crops.

The outcomes are integral as well. We have increased troop mobility, intelligence capabilities, and the standing force, but we have also reduced poverty by 9 percentage points in 4 years and we are working on reaching 100% universal coverage for health and education by 2010.

We have also established an Integrated Action Centre. Here, the various state agencies can integrate their efforts so that their interventions are coordinated and sustained in priority zones. This allows us to use resources more efficiently and make sure territorial recovery is irreversible since the state action is not exclusively military.

We have spared no effort to bolster the judicial system, the political party system, security guarantees for opposition parties, separation of powers, and transparency in government actions.

We have fought these illegal groups steadfastly, but with a serious disposition toward dialogue, and offering generous demobilization programs for those who abandon their ranks.

### **The Results of Our Democratic Security Strategy**

The results speak for themselves: from being a territory unsafe for its citizens, our territory is now unsafe for criminals.

Before 2002, a third of our municipal centres had no presence of civil or police authorities and elected mayors had been expelled by the illegal groups from their towns; today those institutions are present in every municipality and urban centre and the mayors are back governing their people.

Since 2002, kidnapping has been reduced by 85%. Murder is down 45%. Assaults on towns have gone down by practically 100%. Terrorist acts have been reduced by 75%. Hectares planted with illicit crops have gone down more than 50% and 43,000 people have demobilized from the illegal groups, either collectively or individually.

All of this despite the fact that our geography includes 540,000 square kilometres of jungle – more than twice the land mass of the United Kingdom (241,590 sq km – *CIA World Factbook*) with deficiencies in communications infrastructure, and limited budget resources.

The commitment of our people has played a role of similar importance. They have provided political backing for state institutions, offered information on criminal activity, and our wealthiest citizens made contributions in the form of special tax payments to finance security for the people and the state.

We are aware of the challenges still facing us and of the potential pitfalls. But we believe that this experience has some value for those interested in this larger struggle of all democratic nations.

The Colombian people are optimistic again. The economy is booming with growth over 6 percent, unemployment is down from 17% in 2002 to one digit, and in the last election voting increased by 30 percent. Foreign investors are pouring in.

Today no one believes that our institutions are in danger of being defeated and violent organizations have lost not only every chance of success, but also the little credibility they might once have had.

And one cannot forget that we were facing the most powerful, best financed, and most experienced terrorist threat in the entire western hemisphere.

## LESSONS LEARNED: RISK FACTORS FOR RADICALIZATION

I truly believe that although Colombia is still a work in progress, we have been largely successful in the fight against political violence, and therefore I think we can draw some lessons about the factors that enable violence to evolve toward greater radicalisation and terrorism.

- **The first and foremost factor is weakness and lack of legitimacy in state institutions.** More than any other argument related to objective causes or perhaps favourable conditions on the ground, it is state inefficiency and disconnect from the population that feeds the escalation of violence. Because this factor's importance is so self-evident, I'd like move on to discuss a second factor that, in the case of Colombia, is of extreme concern.
- **The second factor that nourishes terrorism is the encouragement terrorists feel when sectors of the international community are timid in their condemnation, weak in the fight against them, provide aid or are openly sympathetic.** I cannot tell you how demoralizing it can be sometimes for the people of Colombia to watch some European NGOs or even members of certain parliaments to silently watch while we suffer from indiscriminate attacks, bombings, kidnappings, forced recruitment of minors, displacement, and assassinations

Some groups in developed societies apparently assuage their feelings of guilt by campaigning on behalf of these armed groups promoting the romantic image of freedom fighters struggling for justice. Politicians who believe themselves to be progressive try to legitimise the actions of these groups by alleging social inequalities or government failures.

And what about the millions of us who exert ourselves each day to improve our institutions, overcome poverty, and give our children a better future? Must we put up with such outrageous treatment?

Although we are obligated to meet international commitments in defence of democracy, we often feel alone in the fight to defend our democracy.

As long as people perceive that there are first and second-class democracies and likewise for terrorists, it will not be possible to rid the world of violence. In this globalized world there must be no fertile ground or hiding places for terrorists, their assets, or their supply lines for provisions.

- **Yet another factor that stimulates violence is financial independence.** It allows groups to depend on no one, either internally or externally. They can then breach all ethical barriers and the success of their cause becomes the only objective. The end justifies the means.
- In our continent, we also believe **distorted ideological arguments** have promoted radicalisation, ideologies that have transformed and taken on new forms. From axioms such as 'violence is the midwife of history,' or 'armed

struggle is the chief form of struggle.'; we see a new rhetoric that has absolute contempt for reform and legality and tries to justify the use of violence with the argument of the perversity of the free market system or free trade.

## **THE RADICALIZATION OF THE FARC**

All these factors I have mentioned converged in our country at some point or another. And we have learned our lessons at a very high cost in Colombia.

Colombia lived through an irony: even as the Berlin wall fell, and negotiations were taking place for conflicts in Central America, and a true democratic revolution was taking place in Colombian institutions, the FARC guerrillas, once labelled by other guerrilla groups as the least radical and most reformist, was transformed through a process of radicalisation into the cruellest and bloodiest guerrilla group that has existed on the American continent.

How was this possible? First, precisely because of the financial capacity they achieved through kidnapping and drug trafficking, providing them at times with resources of over 500 million dollars per year.

Second, it was possible because of the absence of the state in many areas of the nation. Third because it lost the little popular support it had and last but certainly not least, it was made possible by the international support offered by naive sectors or radicalised activists abroad.

The weaker the support from the Colombian people, the weaker this guerrilla group became in military terms. The greater the citizen support for legitimate institutions, and the better those institutions functioned, the less territorial space that was left open for the guerrilla groups. And while all this was happening, drug trafficking funds came to their rescue, together with the political oxygen provided by those sectors of the international community I have mentioned.

In their strategy they have held no weapon in reserve. They have attacked the legitimacy of the state to project a positive image on anyone opposed to it. They have lied and presented as justified actions the kidnapping of women, children, and civilians for decades. This goes on to this day, lest we forget the painful hypocrisy a few days ago when they released two hostages who were held for 6 years while immediately kidnapping six more people, including a Norwegian citizen.

They have used poverty as an excuse to wipe out the ethical conflicts of using violence in the midst of a democratic regime. They have painted state efforts to regain legitimacy as government complicity rather than an example of serious action taken by the Colombian state against those who break the law.

## **THE RADICALIZATION PROCESS IN COLOMBIA**

The fight of those terrorist groups has always had an axiom, the combination of the forms of struggle. Since its creation they have had one leg in legality and

one in illegality. From the Communist Party and its Youth League that served as recruiting tool and logistical support for the Farc, or the penetration of peasant movements, unions and social organizations by the ELN, this strategy has helped them create the fertile ground where they recruit their members.

Study groups in universities, are used by them to pick and choose between those who are more inclined to use violence. And infiltration of some indigenous groups has allowed them to gain more foot soldiers. Both the ELN and the Farc also use displacement for their purposes. In the mid-1990's an attempt to rise up coca-growing peasants against the state, and to link that uprising with territorial control in marginalized zones of the country where state presence was weak, backfired after the peasants got tired of the confrontation and returned to their parcels where they had lost crops.

Spain is now leading in a process to make illegal organizations that defend the use of violence. That case and others suggest the importance of a discussion by this Centre about the use of freedoms. Can we accept the use of freedom of expression with absolutely no responsibility to democratic institutions?

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In conclusion, it is my sincere hope that you will receive these remarks as contributions from the earned experiences of a country and a people who are making progress in strengthening their democracy while in the midst of a confrontation against interconnected crime and violence. We have become a laboratory with a wealth of experiences in this field that may perhaps be of some use to you.

I would like to reiterate the importance of a joint global fight against drug trafficking, the sale of chemical precursors, arms trafficking, and illicit funds. All of these phenomena are intimately related. Drug traffickers need organized bands to protect their operations. Violent groups receive weapons from drug traffickers or buy them on the black market with drug funds. And the funds must circulate to keep all these groups sustained, growing, and well supplied.

Colombia has insisted on the principle of shared responsibility. Our efforts will be sterile if the operations of all these types of criminals are not at risk in other parts of the world. Those who believe that the actions of drug traffickers have no effect on intensifying violence are mistaken. They are also mistaken those who believe that violence in countries on the periphery will not extend to developed countries or affect their interests.

We are also concerned about tolerance, permissiveness, and inaction in response to the activities of groups who believe in violence. Some countries' legislation is quite permissive relative to these activities. Colombia believes that all freedoms must be fully protected, but that those freedoms must be exercised with respect for human rights, democracy, and peaceful coexistence.

We do not believe that freedoms can be used to violate the rights of other persons or to employ violence to destroy democratic governments. These attitudes only strengthen those whose ambition is to use violence rather than strengthening the exercise of freedoms on our planet.

The wealth of debate produced in the working groups and the thoughts shared here by the speakers have allowed us to explore other aspects such as cultural and religious factors in the process of radicalisation and increased violence.

After the 50 million dead of the Second World War, the world's nations dedicated efforts to building a planet at peace and with citizens in full exercise of their rights. Six decades later the dangers persist and there is no certainty that future generations in many parts of the world will experience those conditions.

But it is possible. It requires determination by all leaders and intelligent and effective action to make sure each human being can reach his goals and follow his interests, and to make sure he will not turn to violence against others as his first option for doing so.

Thank you very much.