

Political and Collective Violence: Comparing Colombia and Peru

A Comparative Analysis of Insurgency, State Response, and Conflict Resolution

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: POLITICAL VIOLENCE

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Introduction

Political and collective violence presents one of the most significant challenges to democratic governance and state stability. While insurgent movements often emerge from grievances related to political exclusion, inequality, or ideological conflict, the trajectory of these movements is shaped by the interaction between armed organizations, state institutions, and government responses. Comparative analysis provides an opportunity to examine not only why violent conflicts emerge but also why similar conflicts can produce markedly different political outcomes.

Colombia and Peru experienced prolonged internal conflicts during the late twentieth century that profoundly influenced their political development. Colombia's conflict evolved into a decades-long struggle involving multiple insurgent organizations, paramilitary groups, narcotics trafficking, and repeated attempts at negotiated peace. Peru, by contrast, confronted a more centralized insurgency led primarily by the Shining Path and the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA), with the conflict ending largely through aggressive counterinsurgency operations rather than negotiated settlement. Although both countries faced significant human and political costs, each government's institutions, leadership decisions, and security strategies shaped the course of violence in distinct ways.

This comparative analysis examines the origins of political violence, the escalation of armed conflict, state responses, and the processes that ultimately reduced large-scale violence in Colombia and Peru. By comparing these cases, the paper argues that while insurgent movements may emerge under comparable structural conditions, the evolution and resolution of political violence depend largely on state capacity, institutional adaptation, and the strategic choices of both governments and armed organizations.

Origins of Political Violence

Although Colombia and Peru both experienced prolonged internal armed conflicts during the late twentieth century, the origins of political violence differed in important ways. In both

countries, insurgent organizations emerged amid widespread social inequality, limited state presence in rural regions, and dissatisfaction with existing political institutions. However, Colombia's conflict developed through multiple competing armed groups pursuing different ideological and political objectives, while Peru's violence became concentrated around a small number of revolutionary organizations employing increasingly extreme tactics.

In Colombia, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) emerged in 1964 following years of rural conflict and political exclusion that followed *La Violencia*. Rooted in Marxist-Leninist ideology, FARC sought to overthrow the Colombian government through prolonged guerrilla warfare while establishing control over isolated rural territories. The National Liberation Army (ELN), founded the following year, also embraced revolutionary socialism but drew greater inspiration from the Cuban Revolution and liberation theology. The presence of multiple insurgent organizations with differing strategies contributed to a conflict that became increasingly fragmented and protracted over several decades.

Peru experienced a different pattern of insurgent development. Its rise was facilitated by persistent rural poverty, the exclusion of Indigenous communities, weak state authority in the Andean highlands, and growing disillusionment with Peru's return to democratic rule in 1980. The Shining Path (*Sendero Luminoso*), founded under the leadership of Abimael Guzmán, pursued an uncompromising Maoist ideology that rejected democratic institutions and emphasized revolutionary violence against both the state and civilian populations. The Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) later emerged as a separate leftist insurgency but never approached the organizational strength or influence of the Shining Path. Unlike Colombia, where several armed actors competed for influence, Peru's conflict became dominated by a single insurgent organization whose ideological rigidity and indiscriminate violence increasingly isolated it from the broader population.

Comparing these cases illustrates that similar structural conditions, such as inequality, weak state presence, and political grievances do not necessarily produce identical forms of political violence. Colombia's fragmented insurgent landscape created a prolonged and evolving conflict involving multiple actors, whereas Peru's violence centered on a highly centralized revolutionary movement whose strategic choices shaped both the intensity of the conflict and the state's eventual response. These differing origins established the foundation for the distinct trajectories that followed in each country.

Escalation and the Dynamics of Violence

As insurgent organizations matured, political violence in both Colombia and Peru expanded beyond isolated guerrilla operations into sustained campaigns that targeted state institutions, security forces, and civilians. Although each conflict intensified through different organizational structures and strategic choices, both demonstrated how prolonged violence can erode public trust, weaken democratic institutions, and complicate government responses. The escalation of conflict reflected not only the growing capabilities of insurgent groups but also the evolving relationship between armed organizations, state authority, and civilian populations.

In Colombia, violence became increasingly fragmented as multiple actors - including FARC, ELN, paramilitary organizations, and drug trafficking networks - competed for territorial control and political influence. Events such as the 1985 Palace of Justice siege illustrated the willingness of insurgent groups to directly challenge the legitimacy of the Colombian state, while the 1989 assassination of presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán demonstrated how political violence increasingly targeted democratic institutions and national leadership. As additional armed actors entered the conflict, civilians frequently became victims of kidnappings, assassinations, forced displacement, and indiscriminate attacks that blurred the distinction between political insurgency and organized criminal violence. The Colombian state responded through a combination of military operations, emergency security measures, and intermittent negotiations, but fragmented authority and the expanding number of armed actors limited the effectiveness of any single strategy.

Peru's conflict followed a different trajectory. Rather than multiple organizations competing simultaneously, the Shining Path became the dominant driver of violence through an uncompromising campaign designed to destabilize the state and intimidate civilian populations. Incidents such as the 1983 Lucanamarca massacre revealed the organization's willingness to employ extreme violence against rural communities, while government responses - including the 1985 Accomarca massacre and the 1986 El Frontón prison killings - demonstrated that state security forces also committed serious human rights abuses during counterinsurgency operations. As violence escalated, civilians increasingly found themselves caught between insurgent organizations and government forces, contributing to widespread fear and long-lasting social divisions.

Although both countries experienced escalating violence, the dynamics of each conflict differed significantly. Colombia's violence became decentralized and sustained through competition among multiple armed organizations, creating a conflict that proved difficult to contain through military action alone. Peru's violence, by contrast, remained largely centered on the Shining Path's hierarchical leadership and ideological extremism, making the conflict both intensely destructive and ultimately more vulnerable to disruption once key leaders were removed. These differing patterns of escalation shaped the strategic options available to each government and influenced the state responses that followed.

State Responses and Political Transformation

Government responses in Colombia and Peru were shaped not only by the severity of insurgent violence but also by the institutional choices and leadership strategies adopted in each country. Colombia combined constitutional reform, external security assistance, military pressure, and negotiation, while Peru increasingly concentrated political and military authority under President Alberto Fujimori. These contrasting approaches demonstrate how political institutions can either preserve democratic channels during conflict or become subordinated to executive power in the name of security.

In Colombia, the 1991 Constitution represented an effort to address political exclusion through institutional reform rather than relying exclusively on military force. Drafted after the demobilization of M-19, the constitution expanded political participation, strengthened individual rights, and created new opportunities for previously marginalized actors to enter formal politics. However, constitutional reform did not end the broader conflict because FARC, ELN, paramilitary organizations, and narcotics networks remained active. The government therefore continued to combine negotiation with increasingly forceful security policies. Plan Colombia, launched around 2000 with substantial support from the United States, expanded the state's military, intelligence, and counternarcotics capabilities. Under President Álvaro Uribe, the Democratic Security policy further increased the presence of security forces, sought to regain territory controlled by armed groups, and placed sustained military pressure on FARC. These measures strengthened state capacity and weakened the insurgency, but they also generated concerns about civilian harm, displacement, and human rights violations.

Peru's response became far more concentrated around executive leadership. After his election in 1990, Fujimori confronted an escalating insurgency, economic crisis, and widespread public distrust in existing institutions. In the 1992 self-coup, he dissolved Congress, suspended constitutional constraints, and reorganized the judiciary while expanding the authority of the executive and security forces. This concentration of power enabled the government to pursue an aggressive counterinsurgency campaign that combined intelligence operations, military action, emergency authority, and support for local self-defense groups. The capture of Shining Path leader Abimael Guzmán in 1992 severely disrupted the organization's command structure and accelerated its decline. Yet the effectiveness of Peru's counterinsurgency came at a significant democratic cost, including weakened checks and balances, human rights abuses, and the normalization of authoritarian governing practices.

The comparison reveals that political leadership and institutional design shaped both the effectiveness and consequences of state responses. Colombia strengthened its coercive capacity while retaining constitutional competition and leaving negotiation available as a path toward settlement. Peru achieved a more rapid disruption of its dominant insurgent organization, but Fujimori's government did so by weakening the democratic institutions intended to constrain state power. State capacity therefore mattered in both cases, but the political form through which that capacity was exercised influenced each conflict's longer-term democratic legacy.

Resolution and Democratic Legacy

The conflicts in Colombia and Peru declined through fundamentally different processes. Colombia moved toward a negotiated settlement after decades of military pressure, failed peace initiatives, and institutional adaptation, whereas Peru largely dismantled its principal insurgent organization through counterinsurgency and the capture of its leadership. These distinct endings reflected differences in the structure of the armed groups, the balance of power between insurgents and the state, and the political strategies available to each government.

In Colombia, the weakening of FARC through sustained military pressure created conditions for renewed negotiations rather than outright military defeat. Formal talks began in 2012, and the government of President Juan Manuel Santos reached a comprehensive peace agreement with FARC in 2016. The agreement addressed disarmament, political participation, rural reform, illicit crops, victims' rights, and transitional justice, recognizing that the conflict

could not be resolved solely through security operations. This negotiated approach brought the country's largest insurgent organization into legal politics and substantially reduced one dimension of the armed conflict. However, the settlement did not eliminate political violence. ELN remained active, some former FARC members formed dissident groups, and criminal organizations continued to compete for territory, drug-trafficking routes, and local authority. Uneven implementation of rural reforms and security guarantees also left many communities vulnerable.

Peru's conflict declined more abruptly after intelligence-led operations captured Abimael Guzmán in 1992 and disrupted the centralized command of the Shining Path. Because the organization depended heavily on Guzmán's ideological and strategic leadership, his removal severely weakened its capacity to coordinate nationwide violence. The state's counterinsurgency campaign, assisted by local self-defense organizations and improved intelligence, further reduced the insurgency's territorial reach. This outcome resembled military and organizational defeat more than a negotiated peace, although Shining Path remnants continued to operate in limited areas and became increasingly connected to illicit economic activity. The decline of insurgent violence therefore did not resolve the authoritarian practices, institutional damage, or human rights abuses associated with Fujimori's government.

Truth and reconciliation efforts in both countries sought to address the legacies of violence, but they operated in different political contexts. Peru established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2001, and its 2003 final report documented abuses committed by Shining Path, state forces, and other actors while emphasizing the disproportionate suffering of rural and Indigenous communities. Colombia incorporated truth, justice, reparations, and guarantees of non-recurrence directly into its negotiated settlement through a broader transitional justice framework. In both cases, these mechanisms attempted to recognize victims and establish an authoritative record of violence, yet accountability, reparations, and public acceptance remained contested.

The outcomes differed because the conflicts presented governments with different organizational and strategic problems. Peru confronted a highly centralized insurgency that became vulnerable when its leadership was removed, allowing military and intelligence operations to produce a rapid decline in violence. Colombia faced a fragmented and adaptive conflict involving multiple insurgent, paramilitary, and criminal actors, making complete military victory far less attainable. Negotiation therefore became a more viable means of ending the state's conflict with FARC, even though it could not resolve every source of violence. The democratic legacy in

both cases remains mixed: Peru reduced insurgent violence while carrying forward the institutional damage of authoritarian counterinsurgency, and Colombia preserved a negotiated democratic pathway while continuing to struggle with implementation, territorial insecurity, and violence by armed groups outside the agreement.

Conclusion

Colombia and Peru demonstrate that political and collective violence cannot be explained by structural grievances alone. Inequality, political exclusion, weak state presence, and rural marginalization created conditions in which insurgency could emerge in both countries, but the organization of armed groups shaped how violence developed. Colombia's conflict became fragmented across multiple insurgent, paramilitary, and criminal actors, while Peru's conflict centered more heavily on the hierarchical leadership and ideological rigidity of the Shining Path. These organizational differences affected the duration of each conflict, the forms of violence used against civilians, and the strategies available to the state.

The comparison also shows that state capacity is not simply the ability to deploy coercive force. Effective state capacity includes territorial reach, intelligence, administrative competence, political legitimacy, and institutions capable of channeling conflict into nonviolent forms. Colombia gradually strengthened its security capabilities while preserving constitutional competition and creating opportunities for negotiation. Peru weakened its principal insurgency more rapidly, but Fujimori's concentration of executive power demonstrated how counterinsurgency success can coexist with democratic erosion and serious human rights abuses. Stronger coercive capacity may reduce insurgent violence, but when exercised without institutional constraints, it can also reproduce the insecurity and exclusion that governments claim to confront.

Ultimately, the two cases reveal that conflict resolution depends on both the structure of insurgent organizations and the political character of the state response. Peru's centralized insurgency proved vulnerable to leadership decapitation and military defeat, whereas Colombia's more fragmented conflict required a negotiated settlement with its largest armed organization. Neither outcome produced a complete break with violence: Peru continues to confront the institutional and social legacies of authoritarian counterinsurgency, while Colombia faces uneven peace implementation and continued activity by armed groups outside the agreement. The broader

lesson is that durable peace requires more than defeating or demobilizing insurgents. It also requires legitimate institutions, accountability for abuses, protection of civilians, and democratic governance capable of addressing the conditions that allowed political violence to emerge while adapting institutions to prevent its recurrence.

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