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ACCOUNTABILITY AMIDST FRAGILITY, CONFLICT, AND VIOLENCE: LEARNING FROM RECENT CASES

Editor Anuradha Joshi



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Civilian Action in Conflict Settings: The Case of Colombia*

Patricia Justino¹

Abstract This article analyses how social and political action among civilians during violent conflict may affect efforts to sustain peace and strengthen peace-building processes in the post-conflict period. The main argument advanced is that forms of social and political action that emerge in conflict settings – and their evolution and effects on societies in the post-conflict period – are shaped by interactions between civilians and armed actors that control territories during the conflict period. These pathways are illustrated through the case of Colombia and used to derive implications for other countries grappling with the fragility of post-conflict processes.

Keywords: social and political action, civilian resistance, armed groups, conflict, violence, Colombia.

1 Introduction

Social cohesion and strong civic engagement have been widely promoted as central to peace-building and state-building efforts in conflict-affected countries. Efforts to support social and political action in such contexts include the financing of civil society organisations, mechanisms to integrate ex-combatants into civilian life, and interventions to strengthen state–citizen accountability. These policies are based on the implicit assumption that violent conflict results in the destruction of civic structures. Consequently, improving the ability of civil society to act and cooperate will sustain peace and stability.

However, recent evidence has shown that the relationship between armed conflict and social and political action among citizens is more complex than this. First, it is not clear that armed conflict will always damage the social and political fabric of communities. In fact, recent empirical research has shown that exposure to violence may result in positive forms of civic engagement and social cooperation (Bellows and Miguel 2009; Blattman 2009; Voors *et al.* 2012). Second, it is also not clear that improving social and political action in conflict contexts will always result in positive outcomes, since social mobilisation at the

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community level may facilitate the outbreak or renewal of violence (Petersen 2001; Pinchotti and Verwimp 2007; Wood 2003).

The main purpose of this article is to advance the conceptual understanding of how social and political action within and between communities during violent conflict may affect efforts to sustain and strengthen peace-building processes in the post-conflict period. The main argument advanced is that forms of social and political action that emerge in conflict settings – and their evolution and effects in the post-conflict period – are shaped by interactions between civilians and armed (state and non-state) actors that control territories during the conflict period.

In contexts of violent conflict, power and authority are fragmented. Different political actors – insurgent groups, but also the state military and other armed actors – contest and sometimes win control of territories and populations, transforming social, economic, and political structures, organisations, institutions, and norms (Justino 2009, 2012, 2013; Kalyvas 2006; North, Wallis and Weingast 2009). These actors can adopt various strategies that range from attacking civilians, displacing them, and looting their assets, to capturing or creating new social, economic, and political institutions that advance war strategies (Arjona 2016; Arjona, Kasfir and Mampilly 2015; Mampilly 2011). At the same time, despite the control exercised by armed groups and the stress of living under the threat of violence, civilians can shape to some extent how these strategies are set in place through either engaging with or resisting armed groups (Arjona 2016; Gáfaró, Ibáñez and Justino 2014; Justino 2013; Kaplan 2017).

To illustrate how some of these mechanisms operate on the ground, this article explores how relations between armed political actors and civilians emerged and evolved in Colombia during the 60-year-long conflict and the implications of these various forms of social and political action for the ongoing (albeit fragile) peace process.

Colombia is a relevant case study for this analysis for several reasons. First, the length of the conflict and the enormous work done by academics and civil society to document conflict dynamics over this period allow us to analyse changes in social and political action, something that is rarely possible. Second, areas of Colombia were ruled by a variety of groups at different times with large variations in how they related to the local populations (Berry, Hellman and Solaún 1980; Mampilly 2011; Gáfaró *et al.* 2014). This enables the study to uncover the different factors that may shape social and political action under different political, economic, and social conditions. Third, Colombia is undergoing a peace process whereby the main guerrilla group (FARC) – which controlled over 40 per cent of Colombia's territory at various stages during the conflict – is negotiating a peace settlement with the government. We are therefore able to examine to some extent how patterns of social and political action play into post-conflict periods, which is of wider relevance.

2 Social and political action in conflict contexts: a conceptual discussion

The complex interactions between armed groups, civilians, and state actors, and the forms of social and political action that result from them and shape them, remain under-researched. This is in part because understanding the social and institutional dynamics and legacies of armed conflicts implies understanding interactions not only between governments and armed groups – the type of inquiry that has so far dominated the study of civil wars and political conflict – but also between these competing warring factions and the civilian population. For a long time, civilians have been largely portrayed in studies of violent conflict as victims and passive agents. Only recently have scholars started to analyse how processes of violent conflict may be shaped by the choices, preferences, and behaviours, not only of elites and states, but also of civilians living in conflict areas (Arjona 2016; Justino 2013, 2016; Kalyvas 2006; Kaplan 2017).

Recent literature on armed conflict has started to analyse in detail how armed groups behave in conflict areas. Such groups control local populations in various ways including violence and predation, but also formal rules of governance (Mampilly 2011). Several factors explain why armed groups behave in either more predatory or conciliatory ways towards local populations in different conflicts, and at different times during the same conflict. These factors include the need to raise revenue, exercise political authority, control territory, win hearts and minds, strengthen organisational structures, and gather information (Kalyvas 2006; Mampilly 2011, 2015; Weinstein 2007). Weinstein (2007) argues that armed group behaviour is shaped by their initial endowments: armed groups with external financing and access to resources may be more likely to behave in predatory ways.

In contrast, armed groups that are dependent on local populations for economic survival and manpower may adopt forms of rule and collaboration and attempt to establish social order. For instance, Sánchez de la Sierra (2015) shows that in the Democratic Republic of Congo armed groups rule, govern, and adopt state-like behaviour when they are able to tax particular commodities, allowing them longer time horizons to plan and rule. Kalyvas (2006) argues that armed groups may attempt to govern and establish order when this offers some advantage over opposing groups (including the state military) by ensuring local population support and territorial control.

How do civilians respond to these strategies? Civilians tend to leave (or are made to leave) their communities when armed groups approach. However, although many civilians are killed or displaced during armed internal conflicts, many stay during the outbreak of conflicts and carry on with their lives (Engel and Ibáñez 2007; Moore and Shellman 2004). Generally, civilians are more likely to stay in areas of conflict and engage with armed groups when they are economically vulnerable (Justino 2006, 2009), and when armed groups offer protection against violence committed by opposing factions (Kalyvas and Kocher 2007).

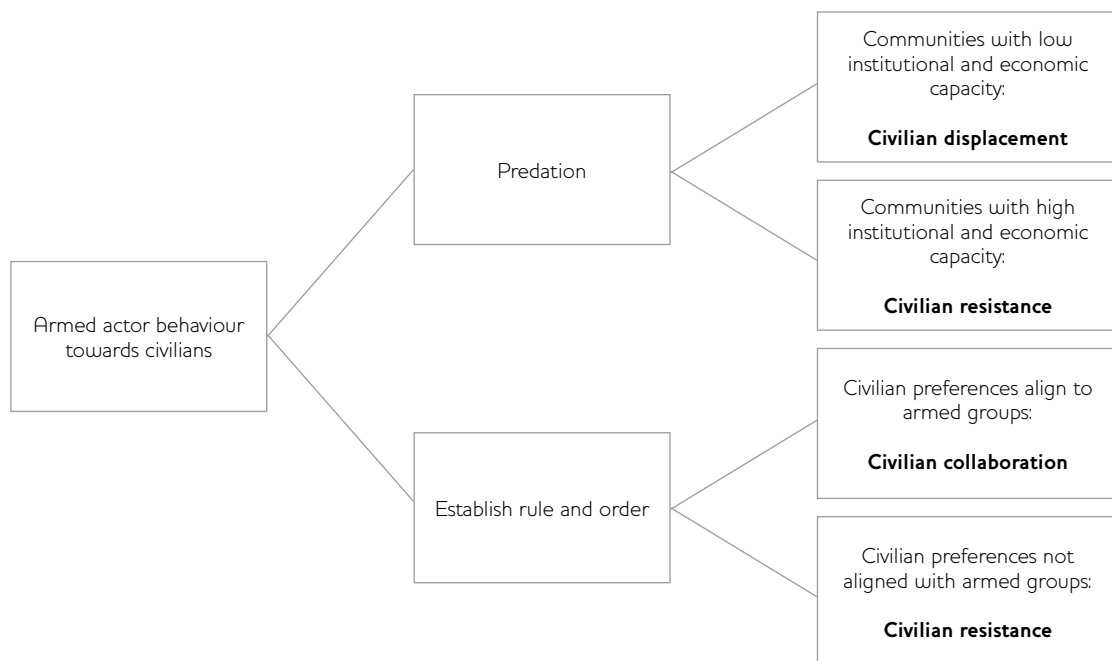
Civilians that are able to fend for themselves economically and in terms of security provision may also stay in conflict areas, when their interests match those of armed groups, or where they have the capacity to resist the arrival and dominance of armed groups over their communities (Justino 2009).

When civilians stay in areas of armed group control, they can adopt various strategies of collaboration with or resistance to those groups. In doing so, civilians engage in social and political actions whereby they exercise their agency in a variety of ways (Bouvier 2006; García Durán 2006; Petersen 2001; Wood 2003). Many endure the presence of armed actors by obeying their rules while carrying on their daily lives. Some may participate voluntarily in armed groups or support them through local forms of clientelism, patronage, kinship, and other informal links, or the formation of new alliances and relations. In particular, local populations may seek physical and economic protection from the controlling armed groups, especially when the state is weak, inadequate, or abusive, or when there is danger of being attacked by opposing factions (Goodwin 2001; Justino 2009; Kalyvas and Kocher 2007). In these cases, civilians may decide to initiate forms of social and political action that facilitate alliances, and political and economic relations with local powerful actors (Sarmiento Anzola 1998). Some may even actively support and participate in the groups and their war activities, particularly when there is a strong alignment of preferences and beliefs between civilians and armed groups, along economic, ethnic, religious, or political lines. In many of these cases, the armed groups may themselves be part of the community or represent them in a particular wider social struggle, as Wood (2003: 18–19) has shown in relation to peasant communities in El Salvador.

Civilians may also choose to resist by refusing to comply with the actions or to accept the presence of armed groups in their midst. Resistance can take several forms, use violent or non-violent means, and be more or less covert (Bouvier 2006; García Durán 2006; Petersen 2001; Wood 2003). Open, violent resistance methods include armed self-defence groups, such as the Kamajor in Sierra Leone or paramilitary groups in El Salvador, Peru, and Colombia (Brockett 1990; Wood 2008). Covert resistance methods include forms of veiled opposition, described by James C. Scott as the 'weapons of the weak' (Scott 1985); for example, acting as informants to opposing factions, undermining the activities of the groups, or forming hidden resistance groups (Arjona 2016; Petersen 2001; Wood 2003; Funes 1998; Fumerton 2001). Resistance can also be limited to certain specific actions taken by armed groups, which Arjona (2015) defines as 'partial resistance'.

Resistance may lead to substantial gains in terms of civilian autonomy and ability to conduct their lives and access livelihoods (Kaplan 2017). However, negotiating with armed groups and resisting some of their advances also has substantial costs including the risk of death, injury, displacement, or ostracism, when armed groups act to repress resistance

Figure 1 Patterns of civilian agency in conflict contexts



Source Author's own.

(Kalyvas and Kocher 2007; Kaplan 2017). In the specific case of Colombia, Arjona (2016: 305) reports how communities with high capacity for collective action were specifically targeted and victimised by armed groups, particularly when the areas were strategically important, but also using 'violence as a measurement tool' to establish the strength of local collective action.

Local communities exhibit very different capacity to resist armed groups or engage in collective forms of social and political action. This capacity has to do largely with the strength of local institutions (Arjona 2016), their economic capacity (Justino 2009), and the ways in which social cooperation emerges in different communities (Justino 2015, 2017a). As argued in Kaplan (2017: 9), 'social cohesion affords civilians greater changes to overcome fear, break the "law of silence" and revive communication, and implement collective strategies for protection'. The capacity of communities to organise can also be supported by external actors such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international donors through technical and financial assistance (Kaplan 2017).

Overall, the exercise of agency by civilians appears to depend on two key factors. The first is the behaviour of local armed groups (including rebel groups and state authorities). The second are local socioeconomic characteristics. Figure 1 illustrates in a static way the choices faced by civilians in conflict-affected areas depending on the strategy of the armed actors in that location at that time, recognising that these

may evolve and change as the conflict progresses, and different social, economic, and political dynamics unfold.² In situations of predatory behaviour, civilians (that have not been killed or displaced) may be more likely to either obey or move given the high threat of violence. In situations where armed groups decide to rule and establish order, civilians will resist if they have the institutional or economic capacity to do so (Arjona 2016; Boix 2008), or they will obey and collaborate if their interests align with the armed groups or they do not have the institutional or economic capacity to resist (Justino 2009; Arjona 2016). This framework predicts that forms of social and political action among civilians to resist armed groups thus occur in two settings: communities with high institutional and economic capacity and communities where civilian interests are at odds with those with armed groups. The next sections explore these two factors in the case of the Colombian conflict.

3 The Colombian case

Colombia has been characterised by profound forms of social and institutional transformation as a result of decades of armed conflict (Gáfaró *et al.* 2014). With origins in fighting that erupted in the 1940s between the two main political parties, the Liberal and Conservative parties (Sánchez and Meertens 2001), the conflict was the result of centuries of disagreements over the organisation of Colombian society and polity, and led to over 200,000 deaths between 1948 and 1958. Violence subsided with the formation of the National Front, a political settlement that ensured power-sharing between the two main parties, but which did not accommodate the demands of peasant organisations and other left-wing political movements.

Peasant organisations that emerged during the period of *La Violencia* (1948–58) turned into left-wing guerrilla groups during the early 1960s. The strongest guerrilla group was the FARC, which grew from 850 combatants in 1978 to more than 16,000 in 2000 across 66 fronts (Kaplan 2017). The second guerrilla group was the National Liberation Army (ELN), formed in 1962. The ELN had about 4,500 combatants in 2000 but undertook almost the same number of kidnappings and attacks as the FARC (*ibid.*). In later years, the emergence of the illegal drug trade intensified the conflict by providing resources to left-wing guerrilla groups, and promoting the creation of private armies led by paramilitary groups for the protection of drug barons and large landowners.

The expansion of paramilitary groups grew after a failed peace process with the guerrilla groups in the 1980s, and led to an intensification of the conflict and to greater violence during the 1990s (Sánchez and Chacón 2006). These groups were united in 1997 under the umbrella of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) and became heavily involved in the illegal drug trade and in brutal forms of violence against civilians. Levels of violence started to drop in the early 2000s, as a result of Colombian government military intervention under President Uribe and the demobilisation of paramilitary groups in 2003. More recently,

in 2016, the FARC and the Government of Colombia signed a historical peace agreement that is expected to finally herald the end of the conflict.

The Colombian conflict has been characterised by large levels of displacement: more than 7 million people have been displaced, second only to the recent conflict in Syria.³ However, many communities have remained in areas where armed groups have been present and conflict ongoing (Engel and Ibáñez 2007), exercising various forms of agency (Arjona 2016; Kaplan 2017). The presence of different armed groups and their strategic objectives influenced local social relations and organisations due to their imposition of norms of behaviour and economic and political regulations (Gáfaró *et al.* 2014). These strategies debilitated many social networks and community organisations.

Some communities adapted to the presence of either the FARC or the paramilitaries. Others have supported the FARC or paramilitary groups through a variety of ways (Arjona 2016). In some areas, community organisations became a protection against violence, while in others armed groups faced open civilian resistance. Resistance also took non-violent forms with communities creating new, apparently non-political, organisations, such as sports, religious, and cultural organisations, to avoid being targeted (Gáfaró *et al.* 2014). There has been, therefore, a long tradition of social and political action during the conflict in Colombia, with large variation in strength and the nature of actions undertaken by different social groups across the country and across time (Bouvier 2009; Kaplan 2017). The sections below discuss the role of key groups and organisations in these forms of social and political action.

3.1 Labour unions and peasant associations

The important role of labour unions during the Colombian conflict goes back to the period of *La Violencia* when they were associated with the emergence of a left-wing movement to protect workers against industrialists and large landowners. In the subsequent period, labour unions were largely eradicated by a series of regimes and leaders backed by the US, who feared working-class radicalism and a move towards communism (Kofas 2000). This significantly weakened the labour movement, with a lasting impact on the unions' role in combating powerful (and often violent) economic and social interests. However, their legacies remained, leading in some cases to effective resistance against the presence and control of armed groups in more recent decades (Arjona 2016; Kaplan 2017).

A similar process took place among peasant associations (Thomson 2011). In the 1920s, peasants organised and successfully resisted land grabs by powerful political actors, and mobilised to protest against low wages and poor working conditions. Some peasants formed 'self-defence' communities to protect themselves from eviction in the form of 'agrarian unions' or 'peasant leagues'. During the period of *La Violencia* in the 1940s, many peasants fled persecution and

joined existing armed resistance communities. In the 1960s, 'peasant resistance communities' formed during the period of *La Violencia* re-started their actions in attempts to retain control of areas threatened by displacement. These resistance communities were known as 'independent republics' since they were self-governing, and became targets of military attacks. Some of these communities became part of armed groups, such as the FARC, who took advantage of the ready formation of group capital to begin supporting small-scale farmer groups with land claims and to start a campaign to politicise peasant (*campesino*) groups (Vallejo 1986). Other *campesino* groups were given money and training by the government as 'self-defence groups', while others resisted outside interference (Thomson 2011).

Arjona (2016) documents one such example in the municipality of Viotá in the Cundinamarca department, which was the site of one of the strongest revolutionary agrarian movements across Colombia between the 1930s and the 1950s. In response to slavery-like working conditions, peasants working in large *haciendas* in Viotá organised and demanded better conditions and the re-organisation of land tenure systems. Soon the municipality became the centre of communism in Colombia. Arjona (2016) discusses how the success of this movement, the institutions it created (notably, mechanisms to guarantee property rights, forms of dispute adjudication, and self-governing institutions) and the resulting increased institutional capacity for collective action was followed, years later, by effective resistance by self-defence groups against the control of the FARC and paramilitary groups.

3.2 The role of Afro-Colombian and indigenous groups

Afro-Colombian and indigenous groups played important roles in resistance and social and political action against the civil war and armed groups. Colombia's population comprises several ethnic groups, with Afro-Colombians comprising around one quarter. According to the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC), there are also over 100 indigenous groups across the country, comprising around 3 per cent of the total population. Both Afro-Colombian and indigenous groups have been heavily affected by the conflict due to their dependency on land, often coveted by armed groups (Arjona 2016; Troyan 2008). Indigenous groups were particularly active during the conflict in rescuing kidnapped victims, resolving local conflicts, and protesting against the presence and actions of armed groups (Kaplan 2017).

Several studies have documented the role of these groups during and in the aftermath of the conflict. For instance, Baumeister (2007) looks at how indigenous groups in Bajo Atrato, Chocó used their sense of identity to build strong social networks and organisational structure, which ultimately they used for resistance against repression and violence. At the national level, this structure comprised the ONIC, a federation of local regional councils. At the regional level, *cabildos mayores* became institutions through which indigenous communities were officially recognised as groups and interacted with each other. At the

community level, *cabildos locales* were formed within communities using traditional structures of authority. Baumeister's (2007) study shows, in line with the predictions in Figure 1, that the creation of a strong organisational structure has been key in enabling resistance to armed groups, especially to forced displacement. This was done through a community-led approach that reports human rights violations at the local level, and exercises pressure on government institutions. The ONIC has also formed links with international organisations. Although they were still heavily targeted and affected by violence throughout the conflict and much remains to be done, some important achievements by these communities have included the reclaiming of indigenous land, the protection of heritage and culture, the creation of local security mechanisms, and the organisation of protests against violations of their human rights (Hernández Delgado 2009; see also Arjona 2015).

Afro-descendent communities have engaged in similar forms of resistance by forming networks of black communities across Colombia (Hernández Delgado 2009). Gains have been less visible than those among indigenous communities but, despite some institutional limitations and sometimes heavy loss of lives, these movements resulted in more formal recognition of their identity, heritage, and historical collective property rights, some gains in electoral representation in local councils, the reduction of the intensity of armed conflict in their communities, the prevention of forced displacement and return of some displaced communities to their land, and the establishment of 'community shops', which guarantee food security when armed conflict escalated and food was restricted (*ibid.*).

3.3 Peace communities

There is a long history of peace communities in Colombia; communities which have managed to organise peaceful resistance to armed groups during the civil war. Some either originated or gave rise to the peasant, indigenous, and Afro-Colombian movements discussed in previous sections. Naucke (2017) describes the well-documented case of San Jose de Apartado, where community members were successful in keeping armed groups at bay (see also Kaplan 2017). Two main historical factors shaped their ability to do this: the selective presence of the state, and the ability of the civilian population to politically and economically self-organise. The community of San Jose was formed by persecuted and displaced people during the period of *La Violencia*, who came to live on unoccupied land after being forced to migrate from other areas. They therefore came with shared experiences of displacement and disruption of social relations, all starting anew. These factors, alongside the physical isolation of the community and detachment from state institutions and social infrastructure, facilitated the development of strong social cohesion, local identity, and solidarity, and the consequent high levels of institutional capacity to resist.

Burnyeat (2013) describes similar community organisation and resistance in Uraba, Colombia through CAVIDA (Comunidad de

Auto-Determinacion, Vida y Dignidad) and its Humanitarian Zones in Cacarica. CAVIDA was formed by people living in refugee camps after being forcibly evicted by the paramilitaries, with the aim of reclaiming their land. The idea was to form a peaceful resistance movement, to 'claim justice, and denounce violations and corruption, aiming to transform the conflict and strengthen the peasant communities' (Burnyeat 2013: 438). Community members achieved their objectives by forming 'Humanitarian Zones', which made use of international humanitarian law to distinguish between combatants and civilians and demarcate safe spaces for civilians. Although peace communities became a target for armed groups, they were deterred from taking over the community in many instances due to support offered by high-profile international organisations. CAVIDA was legitimised by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which backed and used its networks with national and international NGOs to denounce violations and threats against communities by armed groups. Similar peace communities have been documented in the Middle Magdalena Valley, in the Oriente Antioqueno, in Montes de Maria, and in Putumayo (Bouvier 2009).

3.4 The role of women's groups

Women were disproportionately affected by the Colombian conflict, but also played important roles through a variety of social and political actions. McIlwaine and Moser (2001) discuss how the conflict has created extreme levels of fear, especially in communities affected by paramilitary and guerrilla activity, which has led to growing suspicion and a culture of silence, 'individualism', and 'lack of solidarity' which affected women in particular. Despite these adverse effects, similarly to other conflicts (Justino 2017b; Justino, Leone and Salardi 2015), the conflict in Colombia has afforded many women the opportunity to occupy local public and political roles in the absence of their male partners, organise themselves into groups supporting the search for relatives who have been disappeared, captured, or killed by armed actors, and to generally broaden their role in the community (Rojas 2009).

Villareal and Ríos (2006) discuss particular resistance movements to armed groups in Colombia led by women. Their study argues that women-led movements were easier to form in rural areas, due to small social groups and interaction between women, which gave rise to collective bonds and community projects. Most women's groups that emerged in these contexts were formed as channels for peace but had generally other overt purposes such as addressing discrimination, poverty, and exclusion. Examples of such movements include women's groups based around productive work, especially agriculture, which strengthened women's technical knowledge, as well as awareness of democratic rights and leadership skills. Other groups focused on creating employment and income for women. These groups have faced much resistance in patriarchal communities and among those worried about the safety of the community. As many of the women's groups go against dominant economic interests, and therefore receive threats, some have chosen co-optation or alliances with armed groups to be able

to continue their groups in some manner. However, overall, the strength of women's organisations has created a stronger social fabric, becoming a form of defence against violence caused by war and drug trafficking (McIlwaine and Moser 2001; Justino *et al.* 2012).

4 Outcomes and implications

Section 3 described some key forms of social and political action that have been undertaken by social groups and movements during the Colombian conflict. As discussed in Section 2, two key factors shaped variation in social and political action across the Colombian territory and at different periods of the conflict. The first was the behaviour of armed groups: those areas where armed groups tended to act in predatory ways saw more social movement resistance, by peasant and indigenous communities in particular (Arjona 2016). The second, and arguably most important factor, was the organisational capacity of civilians. Full resistance has only taken place in areas with high-quality pre-existing institutions (both legitimate and effective) (Arjona 2015).

The discussion in Section 3 suggested that communities in Colombia are also better placed to resist the influence of armed groups and maintain autonomy and self-rule when they are formed by members sharing common interests and high levels of internal cohesion, when community leadership is inclusive and able to exercise sufficient balance between support and pressure for resistance (even when interests are not homogenous), and when they benefit from high levels of social capital over time (Idler, Garrido and Mouly 2015; Kaplan 2017). In the case of peace communities, it is also important to note the role of external actors: support from national and international agencies allowed the successful community to build up civil society capacity and helped organise groups in support of peace (Idler *et al.* 2015).

After almost six decades of violent conflict, the government of Colombia and the FARC signed a historical peace agreement in 2016. Violence has been much reduced across the country, but pockets of violence remain in some areas due to the actions of neo-paramilitary groups (*bandas criminales*), members of the National Liberation Army (ELN), and small dissident groups within the FARC. There is some evidence of an increase in political and social action and engagement among Colombian citizens during the long peace process, particularly among the groups discussed above. Although early talks between the government and guerrilla groups barely involved civil society actors during the early- to mid-1990s, some civil society groups started to be involved in peace initiatives, with important roles for women's groups (Fernández, García Durán and Sarmiento 2004; Isacson and Rodríguez 2009).

In 1998, a Permanent Assembly of Civil Society for Peace (*Asamblea Permanente de la Sociedad Civil por la Paz*) was initiated that included indigenous and *campesino* leaders. After the collapse of the peace talks with the FARC in 2002, civil society organised the National Congress for Peace and Country (*Congreso Nacional Paz y País*). Civil society

has since had less influence on peace talks nationally, with authorities creating less space for them at the negotiating table (Isacson and Rodríguez 2009). However, civil society organisations now have some influence at the local level through the mobilisation of indigenous groups and women's organisations, discussed in the previous sections, which has contributed to increasing citizen participation in planning, governance, and conflict resolution (Delgado 2004).

What are the implications of these forms of social and political action for peace in Colombia, and more widely in post-conflict contexts? The remainder of this article explores how social and political action by citizens influenced the peace process and three areas of broad importance to future peace in Colombia and potentially in other countries emerging from conflict (peace and security, accountability, and empowerment) and one area where caution must be exercised (the potential rise of parochial politics). The mixed experiences of Colombian communities over the last almost six decades of conflict highlight the importance of security for the exercise of social and political action, but also the trade-offs faced by social and political action in either preventing or attracting further violence.

Security

Violent conflict creates fear and distrust among communities, and may also erode local social relations (Moser 1999). Participation in community action may then be greater in less conflictual areas. However, civilian collective agency during the Colombian conflict protected individuals and communities against exposure to violence in some instances. Communities that were able to ensure autonomy and retain sufficient levels of self-rule in relation to armed groups were able to keep violence away from the community, sometimes for the duration of the conflict (Kaplan 2017).

Social and political action during the conflict may have ensured less exposure to killings and destruction thanks to more effective patterns of negotiation with armed groups. This may, in turn, facilitate recovery in the post-conflict period in terms of better capacity for social organisation, and stronger political capital. It may also mean better access to economic resources where land and livelihoods were less destroyed, although some communities with a high capacity for collective action were also severely targeted by armed groups (Arjona 2016). Such targeting has continued; as the peace agreement with the FARC has progressed, unionists, human rights activists, and other civil society groups critical of the actions of armed actors have been frequently targeted and killed by one or other of these forces, including very recently (Bergquist, Peñaranda and Sánchez 2001; Bouvier 2009; Gutiérrez Sanín, Marín Jaramillo and Carranza 2017).⁴

Accountability

Huang (2016) argues that civil wars can result in democratic systems when they are characterised by substantial forms of civic mobilisation

which post-war powerholders respond to in order to maintain power. In reality, few civil wars result in truly democratic systems of governance. However, in some cases, gains can be made in terms of ensuring more public authority accountability towards civilian populations. This was the case in Colombia, where social and political action by civilians improved the accountability of government institutions towards civil society, which is now more involved in the peace process than ever before. Social and political action was also used to ensure the autonomy of civilian affairs in some communities and the greater accountability of armed actors in control of those communities during wartime through negotiations (Kaplan 2017).

Much remains to be done to ensure that social and political action during the conflict results in more accountable government institutions, and the inclusion of civil society organisations in the peace process remains patchy. Some agreements to improve the inclusion of marginalised groups are also still being ignored in practice,⁵ while clarity with respect to the rights of farmers involved in illegal crop production, and of returning displaced populations remains limited.⁶ It is, therefore, important that social and political action in Colombia continues to strengthen as society moves firmly into the post-conflict period.

Empowerment

Social and political action during the Colombian conflict has arguably contributed towards the empowerment of traditionally socially excluded and economically vulnerable groups such as the Afro-Colombian and indigenous populations, rural communities, ex-combatants, and displaced women (Moser 2005). For instance, women involved in peace-building processes have reported raised self-esteem and reduced levels of fear, which in turn has allowed them to participate more in the peace process and to speak out against injustices, conflict, and violence (*ibid.*). Some of these women have taken up opportunities opened by the armed conflict in Colombia to build ‘strategic action and agency’. This in turn has meant that women’s collective action has helped shape the public agenda relating to the conflict (Domingo, Menocal and Hinestroza 2015; Pearce 2007). At the group level, several civil society organisations involved in social and political action during the conflict to resist armed groups and support peace tended also to strengthen their internal cohesion over time and thus increase their capacity to carry out their aims (Moser 2005). Even though the conflict closed down some spaces for social and political action due to fear and violence, some civil interactions continued to operate informally. Over the years, this process may lay the foundations for social change (Pearce 2007) through an increased ‘sense of citizenship’ among community members.

The pitfalls of ‘parochial’ politics

Despite some of the positive changes outlined above, it is important not to forget that the emergence of both guerrilla and paramilitary groups in Colombia (as in many other conflict-affected countries) had its origin in forms of social and political action in response to political

and economic changes. The FARC effectively emerged from the failure of the political system agreed after the period of *La Violencia* between the Liberal and the Conservative party to accommodate the demands of left-wing groups grounded on peasant associations and fighting for land rights. These peasant self-defence groups formed what was called 'independent republics' that provided important strongholds for the emergence of the FARC as a coherent guerrilla group fighting for the rights of peasants across Colombia (Kaplan 2017; Sánchez and Meertens 2001). The paramilitary groups that grew in strength throughout the 1980s and 1990s originated also from local self-defence groups that formed to protect the interests of large landowners against the attacks of the FARC and the ELN (Kaplan 2017; Sánchez and Meertens 2001). Given this history, it is important that local, national, and international peace efforts mitigate social, political, economic, and cultural differences in ways that prevent the emergence of divides along 'parochial' lines and specific group interests that may end up reigniting – rather than ending – the conflict.

Notes

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- 1 Patricia Justino, Professorial Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
 - 2 A dynamic version of this framework would take into consideration the fact that civilian responses (displacement, resistance, or collaboration) are likely to generate second order reactions by armed groups in terms of further predation/repression or the establishment of order. This could be formally modelled using a dynamic game theory model.
 - 3 www.internal-displacement.org/countries/colombia.
 - 4 Between 1999 and 2009, more than 1,000 trade union members were killed in Colombia, largely targeted by paramilitaries and right-wing groups (Arjona 2016).
 - 5 See, for instance, www.onic.org.co/comunicados-internacionales/2324-declaracion-politica-del-encuentro-binacional-indigena-y-popular-colombia-venezuela.
 - 6 See, for instance, www.reuters.com/article/us-colombia-drugs/at-least-six-die-during-colombia-protest-over-coca-crop-removal-idUSKBN1CB2I6 and Londoño and Mejía (2016).

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