



NO MÁS ILEGALIDAD

ARMED CLIENTELISM, illegal groups behind the 'throne'

By Ángela Constanza Jerez
Photos Juan Ramírez
Alberto Sierra

Colombia is not free of a phenomenon that other parts of the world are well used to, one in which legislators and criminals join together to share out the spoils of power. Politicians and mafias working as allies get votes through coercion.

In June 2005, the magazine *Semana* published an explosive interview with Vicente Castaño, the creator of different paramilitary fronts and the leader of their consolidation and expansion to the corners of Colombian territory. Among the many revelations he delivered were his striking claims that “more than 35 percent” of the representatives of Congress were his friends and that paramilitaries expected to “increase this percentage of friends” at the next election.

“There is friendship with politicians in zones where we operate. There are direct relations between commanders and politicians, and alliances are formed that are undeniable. The self-defence forces advise many of them, and there are many commanders whose friends are candidates for corporations and many mayor’s offices,” underlined the figure who was known as the strongman of paramilitarism in Colombia.

Parapolitics, as this phenomenon is known, is a palpable example of armed clientelism; it is a concept that Jorge Gallego, professor at the Universidad del Rosario’s Faculty of Economics and doctor in Political Science from New York University, analyzed and suggested studying in more depth so that Colombia’s government, institutions, and society in general is prepared to prevent it.

“This is a more prevalent phenomenon than we think, and for this reason we cannot ignore it. If, in this postconflict dynamic, the state does not achieve territorial control in zones where armed groups are present, we will have armed clientelism, almost certainly not at the level of parapolitics but there will certainly be mayor’s offices, governors, and councilors allied to armed groups that will plunder the finances of municipalities and departments,” he affirms.

The premise of armed clientelism, as the professor explains, is the political relation between patrons (candidates) and cli-

ents (voters), mediated by an illegal armed group that controls a territory. Rather than buying votes, giving food or offering other sweeteners to voters, it employs a more effective tool for achieving votes: the coercion of violence, of arms.

“In traditional clientelism what happens is the politician gives goods and services to the client, in other words the voter, in exchange for political support, which usually includes the vote. Often in traditional clientelism there is an important figure we call the intermediary or broker,” explains Gallego.

“In big countries and vast elections it is almost impossible for the politician to have direct communication with all voters, so this brings in community leaders, town councilors, and local action committees. That is the traditional clientelist network. What I am exploring is the phenomenon in which this intermediary is not an ordinary individual but an armed group, the illegal element, the mafioso, and that is what I call armed clientelism,” explains Professor Gallego.

NOT JUST COLOMBIAN

The phenomenon is not exclusively Colombian. Evidence exists of similar situations involving parapolitics in US cities such as Chicago, New York, and Kansas, recorded at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, areas where politics was permeated by gangs and neighbourhood mafias.

In New York, for example, Tammany Hall was the name given to the political machinery of the US Democratic Party, an influence-peddling network or political clientelism that played a crucial role in city politics. It helped immigrants, mainly the Irish, to participate in US politics from 1790 to 1960. But in numerous instances that network also achieved votes through alliances with city mafias.

“What surprised me,” explained Professor Gallego, “is that the phenomenon of armed clientelism still exists in present-day Chicago. I found an article in a 2011 issue of Chicago magazine which documents problems with mafias and gangs in the south of the city. These are very ethnic gangs, made up of Latinos and African Americans. Serious accusations have been made against council candidates and local governments, which form alliances and give them access to contracts.”

Mafias in the south of Italy formed alliances with politicians. In Kingston, the capital of Jamaica, the union of politicians with gangs is well known. And the case of militias in Brazilian favelas is documented, these originating as

VOTE



If, in this postconflict dynamic, the state does not achieve territorial control in zones where armed groups are present, we will have armed clientelism, points out Jorge Gallego, professor at the Faculty of Economics.

EVIDENCE EXISTS OF SIMILAR SITUATIONS INVOLVING PARAPOLITICS IN US CITIES SUCH AS CHICAGO, NEW YORK, AND KANSAS, RECORDED AT THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY AND THE BEGINNING OF THE 20TH CENTURY, AREAS WHERE POLITICS WAS PERMEATED BY GANGS AND NEIGHBOURHOOD MAFIAS.



self-defence groups to combat drug traffickers, later forming alliances with former police or armed forces candidates.

The researcher points out that one of the conditions or structural elements allowing for the appearance of armed clientelism is shared ideology between the armed group and the politician, and this has been observed in Brazil and Colombia.

Other reasons are related to state legal capacity and partisan voter identification. In the former case, the weakness of the justice system allows it to be appropriated by the illegal groups. “If the judges are corrupt, and if the organs of control, above all at local level, are weak, it becomes more tempting to go over to the armed group. This is why the Comptroller’s office, the attorney general’s office, and other bureaus are the first to be captured,” he clarifies.

More studies on this subject: “I was a little surprised that the subject wasn’t studied more in depth when it has permeated our society. So I set out to understand under what circumstances it is feasible for armed clientelism to consolidate and emerge from traditional clientelism.”

Through programmatic politics: “Armed clientelism is a far greater evil than its traditional form. We would all like to live in a state in which politics is carried out programmatically, where candidates communicate their proposals, their ideological position, their perception of how to design state policies, with citizens receiving these messages and mulling them over, but we are a long way from that ideal world.”

Brother of corruption: “In Colombia, and in general in the developing world, it is conventional practice for there to be an interchange of gifts and favours during elections, and these run from candidates forming alliances with economic groups to finance their campaigns up to alliances with illegal groups, with mafias. In exchange, they offer access to public resources, contracts, public posts, and they weaken the legal and security sides. This is when the plundering comes. For this reason clientelism and corruption are brothers together.”

With regard to partisan voting, what the facts show is that when parties are weak and there is a lack of voters with strong party identification, neither ideology nor political programmes hold sway; personal interests, such as economic motives, take priority. This is somewhat less common in strong democracies.

Finally, there is a fourth condition, namely the financial capacity of parties, the funds they can rely on to buy votes. “If a clientelist machine is strong and has resources to buy votes, or if the votes are not expensive, the party can be based on these traditional clientelist strategies; but if it is not strong in resources, if buying votes is difficult, and if it is expensive in a region, it is better to rely on coercion as an unchallenged mechanism,” argues the academic.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

With this knowledge of political, social, and economic factors fomenting a genesis of armed clientelism, Professor Gallego’s recommendation is one mentioned in different studies on the causes of the conflict: achieve state presence to provide services and hold the monopoly on violence.

“The model shows that the first condition for armed clientelism to emerge is the existence of an illegal armed group in control of a district. So, the first prescription to stop this happening is that armed groups do not have that control. It is difficult to achieve, but a large part of what applied in Havana was down to bringing the state into the regions, as territories that were historically forbidden. We also need competent legal bodies, ones with legal capacity, avoiding the capture of officials delegated to the comptroller’s and attorney general’s offices.”

The researcher swells the list of actions to combat this evil by underlining the importance of carrying out reforms of the party system with the aim of creating sufficient incentives to force internal purges. “Think in terms of more thorough institutional and electoral re-engineering, journalism that continues to ensure accountability—such as that used to reveal the existence of parapolitics—and, definitively, citizens must be made aware so they do not allow themselves to be bullied and do not sell their vote.” ■