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Background To The Recent Violence In Colombia

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Valdes * The bloodshed in Colombia today revolves around drugs, power and class. The media in the United States and elsewhere has paid much attention to the assassination of Liberal Party presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galan, at the behest of the Medellin drug cartel. The Liberal Party, however, is a fairly recent target of this murderous violence. Many of the drug traffickers' previous victims were prominent leaders of the Union Patriotica, a leftist coalition that opted for electoral politics over guerrilla warfare. Between 1985 and 1987, most of the 11,000 persons killed in Colombia were leftists. As an opposition party, the Union Patriotica claimed that neither Liberal nor Conservative party administrations were seriously committed to ending the drug trade. The military, rightwing death squads, and the "narcotraficantes" collaborated in attacks on the left.

The current situation is different. The Medellin and Cali drug cartels have apparently decided that after wiping out the electoral left as a viable political force, they should move to the center stage of national politics. But to do so they confront the vested power of a traditional landowning class tied to coffee exports. The real struggle taking place in Colombia today can be summarized as cocaine versus coffee interests. The cafetaleros (coffee interests) have monopolized the Liberal and Conservative parties for over 40 years. At one point, Medellin cartel chief Pablo Escobar was a Liberal party senator. He broke with those interests, and then made himself the richest man in Latin America. It seems that Escobar has decided that he should make a political comeback. The narcotraficantes have economic power, and enjoy some social prestige. They dominate significant portions of the mass media, entertainment, productive industry and sports. For instance, they own Atlantico del Norte, Colombia's most important soccer team. The drug cartel leaders also exercise much influence over municipal and local governments. They own judges, politicians and journalists. Their interests are defended by lawyers and bankers. They build hospitals and homes for the poor and donate money to the Catholic Church. Escobar owns fleets of antique cars and planes, dozens of race horses, and even private zoos. Only one thing has been denied to the leading circle of narcotraficantes: direct political power at the national level the necessary instrument to legalize their ill-gotten gains. The traffickers wish to gain access to the highest levels of Colombia's social, economic and political elite. Over the years they have gained the support of politicians, editorialists and others to call for the legalization of their wealth. Apparently, this effort has been insufficient. Less than a month ago, with the assistance of rightwing groups and some military personnel, the Medellin and Cali cartels launched a far right political coalition called the National Reconstruction Movement (MORENA). MORENA's regional base is the Magdalena Medio, an area closely tied to the cocaine economy. At a recent rally attended by about 5,000 supporters, MORENA leaders said the party would run candidates for legislative seats and 42 mayoralties in the 1990 elections. Considering the narcotraficantes' enormous wealth and their notorious strong-arm methods, it is no wonder that traditional Liberal and Conservative leaders were alarmed. The alarm was sounded by Liberal candidate Galan just before he was killed. This is the backdrop for the present confrontation. The clash between the cafetaleros and the narcotraficantes has taken on interesting dimensions thus far. Shortly after the government began seizing the property of drug cartel members, the cartel responded by bombing banks owned by the National Association of Coffee Growers. Since then, every day the media reports on new attacks against economic targets.
This destruction and confiscation scenario is not random. Each side is trying to damage or eliminate the economic resources of the other. Some attacks are highly symbolic in nature. For instance, liquor stores owned by members of the traditional oligarchy or by the government have been blown up. One of the most luxurious social clubs that had denied membership to some of the Medellin traffickers was attacked with grenades. An important question at this juncture is where the violence will end, or to what extent both sides are willing to risk lives and material destruction. In an Aug. 29 interview with Liberation (published in Paris), Escobar said that the cartel was ready to negotiate its position in Colombian society, or to defend itself if necessary, by engaging in civil war. Civil wars are not new to Colombia. From 1948 to 1958, Liberals and Conservatives battled one another and produced one million casualties. The Liberals were then permitted to participate in politics and become part of the Colombian establishment. In its Aug. 31 issue, Colombia's largest daily newspaper, El Tiempo, reported that 60% of respondents in a recent survey said they believed the government could not win the war against the cocaine bourgeoisie. If history is to serve as a guide, then we can expect much bloodshed. The rulers of Colombian society do not have a track record of power sharing with new socioeconomic sectors. The narcotraficantes' incorporation into national elites or civil war seem to be the only two options left for Colombia at present. In time, some of the children of the Medellin and Cali cartel leaders could be integrated into the Colombian ruling class via marriage or partnerships. This process is a long-term one, and will not forestall a civil war, nor bring an end to the drug trade. What should be explored is the degree to which the cartel leaders wish to join Colombia's power elite, and therefore, what they are willing to give up or offer in exchange. Would the drug traffickers collaborate in cutting off cocaine supplies? Are they willing to end the traffic if their wealth is legalized? Could these criminals be transformed into the responsible businesspersons they claim they want to be? Mario Ochoa Restrepo, father of some of the leading members of the Medellin Cartel has notified the Pope, Colombian President Virgilio Barco, and Spanish television that the Ochoas are willing to negotiate in exchange for immunity. The communiqué said that the family's wealth is respected, they would act to end the traffic. President Barco has reportedly rejected the Ochoa patriarch's offer. An end to the war between the so-called narco bourgeoisie and the nation's "legitimate" bourgeoisie, peaceful or otherwise, is not in sight. * Associate Professor of Sociology and LADB director, University of New Mexico.

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