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The emergence of widespread violence and murders of Human Rights defenders in the South Pacific Boundary of Colombia

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Abstract

The peace agreement reached by the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia in 2016, has triggered an enormous phenomenon of murders of human rights defenders (HRDs). The ongoing debate on this phenomenon has centred on the question of who is responsible for these murders. This political violence has concentrated notoriously in the South Pacific region, a territory populated mainly by black and indigenous populations. In this region, the armed conflict and the homicides of HRDs arose fifteen years before the signing of the peace agreement. This study seeks to understand the emergence of widespread violence and murders of HRDs in this boundary of Colombia in the 2000s.

Humanitarian reports have analysed the armed confrontation that took root in this Colombian territory, employing approaches based on the rational-choice theory and the research agenda promoted by the dominant institutions of development. These reports point out the relation between the vast migration of coca crops and the predatory behaviour of the armed groups settled in this region, as the main driver to explain the violence that appeared in the 2000s. Nevertheless, these studies do not critically assess how the historical legacies and the complex environments of development promoted by the state, contribute to explaining the growth of the illicit crops, the rates of political murders and the empowerment achieved by the armed groups.

In contrast, this study employs the cultural pluralism framework and institutionalism theories to identify reasons why the political, economic and social progress have been delayed in this territory and why the struggles emerged and persisted. I focus on understanding the problem of violence in development, exploring the role of the state, history, and identity vectors involved in the context of this armed conflict. The evidence addressed in the analysis discloses why the institutions of the state support specific groups while disallowing others. The study argues that the violence and murders of HRDs emerged since the elites of the country, promoted environments of vulnerability that allowed the outbreak of the confrontation and disputes between armed groups and ethnic communities that led to the homicides of their social representatives. The findings of this case study suggest the need to move the understanding of violence in this territory beyond the narrow technicist interventions based on governance systems, weak institutions, and individualist approaches. This analysis serves as a basis for future researchers interested in addressing the concerns about the widespread violence in the South Pacific region and the enormous phenomenon of murders of HRDs in Colombia.