Colombian State Failure:
The Global Context of Eroding Domestic Authority

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Introduction

Globalization is arguably the most significant development within world politics at the start of the twenty-first century. Not surprisingly, it is highly contested both as a concept and as an empirical reality (Clark 1999; Scholte 2000; Rosenau and Czempiel 1992; Held 1995). With the exception of some realist stalwarts however (Waltz 1993; Mearsheimer 1994), there are few who would dispute that world order is undergoing a process of considerable change, with profound implications for the sovereign state that lies at the heart of the Westphalian model. How the diffusion of practices, processes and knowledge related to the growing interconnectedness among societies within all spheres of public and private life has affected the state is, nevertheless, a matter of some debate. Outlyer positions are well represented by Krasner (1999) who argues the state, while never living up to the Westphalian ideal, has remained largely immune to these global transformations, and by Strange (1996) who concludes that globalization is increasingly eclipsing the state.¹ Most views occupy a middle range where it is recognized that new global forces have resulted in a reconfiguration of the state that involves some demise of sovereignty, yet stops far short of issuing the state’s death warrant.²

Challenges to the state and sovereignty take many forms and originate at both the external and internal level. Democratization, economic liberalism, and new technologies “can devolve power away from central state institutions and undermine the state’s ability to control its borders” (Cusimano 2000: 14), as well as constrain the regulatory and administrative capacity of the state. New global security frameworks internationalize internal security problems and shift part of the responsibility for the provision of security to global actors. The increasing scope of global organizations and transnational groups limits the state’s capacity to control its political, economic and social spaces.

If the processes related to the new global order have had serious consequences for state competence and autonomy, they have also, however, impinged on the less tangible and more elusive aspects of statehood such as authority and legitimacy. Growing “fragmegration”, increasing power of the market, and a shrinking of territoriality as the basis of political organization not only affect a state’s capacity to govern, but also affect a state’s authority to govern.³ New rules and institutions related to global governance generate spheres of authority outside the state, potentially undermining the authority on which domestic rule rests. Changing global economic and technological conditions may also affect traditional sources of authority by introducing new performance criteria (Rosenau 1990, 1997). Nevertheless, the thesis that sovereignty is eroding rarely takes into account the issue of authority (Thompson 1995; Litfin 2000). If authority is indeed the essential element of domestic order (Hurd 1999), exploring this

¹ For the related debate over the role of the state, either as the agent of globalization or as a passive player that adapts to globalizing structures, see Clark (1999).
² Scholte (1997, 2000) adopts the to my view unsatisfactory position that globalization has resulted in the death of sovereignty as a norm even while the state persists.
dimension of statehood is critical to a fuller understanding of how global political restructuring destabilizes states and challenges sovereignty.

This task is particularly crucial in weak and failing states on the global periphery that are more vulnerable to external pressures. With limited capacities and strategies to respond to changing global processes, the pressures that globalization places on sovereignty, autonomy, and performance can be particularly destabilizing. The imperatives of global economic competitiveness, an expanded role for multilateral organizations, changing security parameters, and new human rights norms encroach not only relatively more on weak states’ autonomy and capacity, but also on what are often already precarious structures of authority (Adams et. al. 1999). In failing states wracked by sociopolitical crises and violent internal conflict, degraded central government authority may exacerbate security emergencies at the same time it reduces policy options and erodes the legitimacy of the state.

The analytical starting point of this paper is the relationship between the post-Cold War global order and the erosion of the authority component of state sovereignty. I explore these issues in the case of Colombia, a weak state that has become increasingly debilitated during the last decade. The steady worsening of Colombia’s already dismal security environment appears to go in lock step with the deterioration of state power and problem-solving abilities. I have elsewhere argued that the impairment of the Colombian state is the permissive cause of its security crisis, and have suggested how international developments have contributed to the weakening of the state’s autonomy and capacity (Mason 2000). Here I am interested in how new features of world order and governance have legitimated nonstate actors in the Colombian jurisdiction, undermining its domestic authority and contributing to the state’s overall weakening.

This essay is a first stab at identifying links between globalization and reduced state authority that are relevant to wider research on the global context of state failure and internal security emergencies. It starts with a discussion of the concept of authority as one of the key components of sovereign statehood and its consideration in the conceptualization of state strength or weakness. The paper next identifies how globalization and new forms of global governance may be serve to erode the exclusivity principle on which domestic authority rests. It continues with an overview of the security crisis in Colombia and the nature of Colombian state failure. The fourth section proposes how the authority structures in Colombia have been altered by global processes related to human rights and its internal conflict. The paper concludes with an assessment of this preliminary analysis and suggests lines of research related to these issues.

State Strength and Authority

There is a wide array of concepts, terms, and labels within the security literature that attempt to grapple with the empirical phenomenon of Third World states that do not exhibit the qualities commonly associated with advanced, industrialized, western – that is, strong - states. Much of the dissatisfaction with the failed or weak state category is precisely due to it being defined by “what it isn’t, rather than what it is” (Clapham 2000: 1). In spite of important differences in underlying assumptions, attributes, and definitions, these multiple approaches attempt to conceptualize various degrees of “stateness” found in the global South related to its
power, functions, and performance. The weak state (Buzan 1991; Holsti 1996; Migdal 1988; and Thomas 1989), quasi-state (Jackson 1987, 1990), failed state (Mazrui 1995; Herbst 1997 and 2000; Helman and Ratner 1993; Sorensen 2000), fragile state (Sorensen 2000) failing state (Brock 2000) and collapsed state (Zartman 1995) constructs all can be thought of as positions along a continuum of “stateness”, with the strongest and weakest examples in the international system situated at each extremity. Pinpointing a state’s location on this continuum is somewhat problematic, however, given the lack of precise categories and analytical variables related to the degrees of weakness or failure.4

Not surprisingly, attempts to determine the relative strength/weakness of states begin with a definition of the state. In spite of a plethora of competing concepts, political science and I.R. scholars have generally stressed the empirical attributes of statehood derived from Weber’s definition: a sovereign entity with a monopoly on the legitimate use of force over territory, population, and activities within a defined jurisdiction.5 The instrumental capacities of the state related to its extractive, regulatory and redistributive functions dominate this view of statehood, in which state strength is largely measured in terms of its coercive power (Migdal 1988; Huntington 1968). This view of the state is highly persuasive. Tilly (1990) attributes the consolidation of the European state to its capacity to establish centralized power, control, and extraction so as to be able to successfully engage in war. In his analysis of state failure on the periphery, Ayoob suggests that the fundamental coercive capacities of the central government are as crucial to the state making enterprise in the contemporary Third World as they were in early Europe (1995, 1996). That is, juridical statehood requires empirical statehood. States thus defined “fail” when they no longer are able to perform these basic instrumental functions (Zartman 1995) related to internal order and extraction.

This interpretation suffers from various weaknesses, however. It conflates the conceptually distinct components of state and central government, creates a somewhat artificial separation of state and society, and can misrepresent the strength of the state actor from the international perspective. This de facto view of sovereign statehood is further limited by marginalizing the issue of state authority, or else equating it with power and control.

What is authority? Weber’s famous definition of authority as “power wielded legitimately” refers to the belief that a rule or actor or institution ought to be obeyed, versus has to be obeyed. As a mode of social control, legitimacy functions by motivating compliance in the sense that the control or power exercised is considered rightful. Those addressed by a rule obey it from an internalized sense of moral obligation, not because of a “simple fear of retribution or by a calculation of self-interest” (Hurd 1999: 387). Authority refers to a relationship of command and compliance that is recognized as being right and legitimate both by the agent who controls and by the one who obeys (Caporaso 2000; Arendt 1968). That is, both accept the right to rule by the holder of power. In a political context, authority “represents a fusion of power with legitimate social purpose” where members of the polity feel obliged to obey rules because of a belief in their normative validity and superiority (Ruggie 1982: 198). The state and its institutions are authoritative then when the body politic recognizes its right to rule and

4 Spanger (2000) provides a helpful synthesis and critique of the various concepts related to state weakness, fragility, failure, and collapse, and a discussion of the process versus threshold approach to state failure and collapse.
voluntarily submits to its power. Where there is no authority, citizens do not accept the state’s rules and institutions as rightful, and the operative mechanism of compliance becomes fear of the state’s power to punish or incentive structures. Indeed, Arendt argues that “authority precludes the use of external means of coercion”, and that “where force is used, authority itself has failed” (1968: 93).

The basis on which a state may claim a legitimate right to rule has varied widely throughout history. Divine sources historically legitimated social orders and rules, with religious doctrine and leaders being the earthly manifestation of God’s authority. While this religious claim to authority was effectively replaced during the European Enlightenment by secular moralism and modernity, the political authority of many Islamic states still derives fundamentally from religious ideas (Beetham 1991). Traditional sources of authority may also include heredity principles and the sanctification of the past, where power is legitimated on the basis of lineage and cultural tradition respectively. Ethnicity and national identity validated the processes of national self-determination and state-building during the twentieth century to replace imperialism’s illegitimacy, and continues to be a source of political authority today.

Political authority resting on consent is a central feature of modernity (Beetham 1991; Arendt 1968; Litfin 2000). The governed’s consenting to the rules of social order is indeed what democracy is all about. Rules, institutions and power are legitimated by “mechanisms of consent” (Holsti 1996: 86) that permit the expression of the will of the people through elections and representation in democratic systems. While Western analysts are fond of claiming that democracy is the purest form of authority because the people confer legitimacy on the state through expressed consent, democratic processes are not the only methods for consenting to political authority (Caporaso 2000). Many non-democratic political arrangements are also authoritative by virtue of implied consent to the organizing principles of the polity (Beetham 1991: 90-99). Consent can also be granted by the monopoly of the working class, revolution, or power sharing arrangements. But regardless of the underlying principles, a government’s claim to authority is considered legitimate to the extent that the governed have granted their consent.

A key element in modern political systems founded on these consensual principles is the use of performance criteria for determining consent. Democratic elections are one method for evaluating the performance of governments, even while the electoral practices themselves legitimate the underlying constitutional principles of democracy. More broadly, current sources of political authority increasingly involve performance criteria as a crucial component of recognizing authority (Rosenau 1997). Modern domestic authority structures contain an element of problem-solving effectiveness, where the authority of the state, not just the government, is directly related to its capacity to satisfy needs and reach goals. The compliance of the citizenry with state rules and directives depends upon the system’s ability to provide benefits, increasingly related to internal order and the production of wealth (Litfin 2000: 121). Litfin suggests that the performance criteria according to which the contemporary state is increasingly judged are related to a broader process of modernization characterized by a belief in the authority of Western science. Scientific authority and modern political authority share the claim to superior knowledge, evidenced by replicable experiments and by the achievements of modernity and industrialization respectively (Litfin 2000: 129-130).
Along with the intertwined, yet conceptually distinct, concepts of autonomy, control and territory, authority—regardless of its source—figures as one of the pillars of sovereignty (Caporaso 2000; Litfin 2000). A state’s external authority derives from other states’ recognition of its right to exist and represent the population within its territorial jurisdiction. Internally, a state’s authority rests on the citizenry’s belief that the state’s institutions ought to be obeyed and that the power wielded by the state is legitimate. At the intersection of these two domains of authority is the assumption shared by state actors that the sovereign state authority structure is final and exclusive (Krasner 1999; Caporaso 2000; Wallensteen 2000). External actors are essentially barred from the domestic sphere of authority, even if external influences penetrate the state with frequency. Substate actors are also subordinate to the authority of the state, even if citizens are loyal to them. For the sovereign state in the Westphalian order, the claim to exclusive authority functions to protect its political space from external actors, consolidate its position as the sole legitimate controlling entity, and maintain internal stability. This facilitates performance of its instrumental functions related to order and extraction. The authority of the state also establishes a context within which civil society and public institutions interact and reinforce the normative dimension of the state, contributing to the effectiveness and continuity of the political system (Beetham 1991). As an essential element of sovereignty and statehood, authority is central to a determination of state strength and weakness (Holsti 1996: 82-98).

Scholars concerned with the relevance of traditional definitions of the state for questions of statehood and security in the Third World have attempted to broaden the power-based view of the state. Buzan’s (1991) model of state strength/weakness, one of the most widely used in security studies, makes an important contribution in this regard by including both instrumental and non-material attributes of statehood. Disaggregating the state into its component parts of central institutions, physical base, and ideas or organizing principles creates a more conceptually accurate image of the state’s complexity, and allows for a more analytically precise determination of “stateness”. Buzan incorporates authority in his definition of the state with his “idea” of the state concept, which can be thought of as an organizing principle around which society coheres, and which functions as the glue that binds together the public and private halves of the nation-state. Consensus regarding the underlying principles and purpose of the state is essential to its legitimacy, serving as a “mechanism for persuading citizens to subordinate themselves to the state’s authority” (Buzan 1991: 83). Holsti (1996) expands on Buzan’s “idea” of the state by introducing the twin concepts of vertical and horizontal legitimacy with the objective of more precisely identifying the nature of state authority. Vertical legitimacy most closely approximates political authority, referring to those principles on which the state’s “right to rule” (Holsti 1996: 84) is founded, and the belief in the legitimacy of these principles by the citizenry. Loyalty to the ideas and institutions of the state, and acceptance of the state’s coercive power, is directly correlated to the state’s authority where “commands are obeyed not simply out of fear or self-interest, but because they are believed in some sense to have moral authority” (Barker 1991, quoted in Holsti 1996: 87). Horizontal legitimacy deals with the strength of civil society as expressed by the level of cohesion, acceptance and tolerance among different groups and communities within the polity. Both dimensions of legitimacy are closely connected, in that compromised vertical authority may erode societal strength. Diminished horizontal legitimacy, in turn, may lead to ruptured societies within which loyalty to the state is eroded and violence replaces compromise and negotiation.
Strong states tend to exhibit a coherent identity and consensus with regard to the legitimacy of the state and its public institutions. In states where there exists broad agreement on the state’s right to govern and there are strong legitimacy sentiments that the body politic directs to the state, strength is enhanced. Unopposed extraction of resources, high rate and low cost of compliance, ease of mobilization of the population, and little opposition to the fundamental principles of the state all contribute to strong performance, or help maintain internal cohesion even when performance is poor. Weak states, by contrast, are more likely to be characterized by an organizing principle that is loosely held or widely contested. States whose populations do not accept the legitimacy of its power, or obey largely out of fear of reprisal or punishment, have an authority deficit that can not always be compensated for by central power or repression. Classically defined “strong” states that rule through fear and coercion are in fact regimes with powerful central governments yet a very weak state authority. (Holstii 1996; Beetham 1991).

Globalization and Eroding State Authority

Among the multiple developments related to the transformation in world order and the increasing vulnerability of states to global processes, two have been particularly salient to the erosion of state authority: a deterioration in the exclusivity principle of sovereign state authority, and a shift toward performance criteria as a basis of authority. Both tendencies may be highly correlated and mutually reinforcing.

The prevalence of the state sphere of authority is a hallmark of the Westphalian international order. For many, shared recognition among state actors that there is no authority superior to that of the state is what constitutes the modern decentralized system of states. Thus for Krasner, who essentially equates Westphalian sovereignty with authority, the exclusion of external actors from domestic authority structures is the central feature of the international institutional arrangement. State authority sits at the crossroads of the international and national domains: it defines the Westphalian world model, and designates domestic political authorities as the final source of power and control within a specific territory.

The authority principle as it operates internally both legitimates the state’s mode of domestic social control, and functions to buttress the divisions between authoritative jurisdictions. That is, there is a close relationship between domestic authority structures and external authority. Implicit in the citizenry’s recognition of the state’s right to rule is that other rules and entities are non-authoritative. While multiple authority structures can be found in most domestic systems, the state’s political authority to validate and enforce rules of social control related to the use of force, conflict resolution, the administration of justice, and extraction is monopolistic. Non-state actors, institutions, and rules, both domestic and foreign, may exercise influence within society, but the power of these agents is not legitimated. Krasner (1995) is right

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6 Krasner distinguishes between four different types of sovereignty: Westphalian sovereignty refers to the exclusion of external actors from domestic authority configurations; international legal sovereignty refers to the mutual recognition between states; interdependence sovereignty refers to the capacity of a state to control transborder movements; and domestic sovereignty refers to the “organization of public authority within a state and to the level of effective control exercised by those holding authority”. See Krasner 1995: 9-25.

7 Beetham (1991: 129) observes that the principle of popular sovereignty can coexist with other legitimating principles, such as heredity or theocracy. More informally, local governments, religious communities, and civil organizations are examples of legitimate bodies that represent alternative loci of authority.
when he argues that violations of Westphalian sovereignty or a loss of interdependence authority are not always related to reduced domestic authority. Transgressions of the rule of nonintervention do not necessarily erode the legitimacy of domestic order, even though it may constrain and limit that rule. Rather, it is the incapacity of the state to maintain exclusivity within the domestic jurisdiction that may result not only in the weakening of its external sovereignty, but also in an erosion of its internal sovereignty or authority. Internal state authority is undermined when the state can not exclude nonstate actors from domestic spheres of authority and when these actors are recognized as legitimate and authoritative by the body politic.

One of the most marked occurrences of the post-Cold War world order is the upsurge in the activities and the scope of influence of non-state actors. Governments are now considered to be just one actor among many on the “multi-centric” world stage (Rosenau 1997), sharing the limelight with IGO’s, advocacy and service NGO’s, transnational corporations, representatives of global civil society or the “third sector”, as well as both legitimate and criminal subnational and transnational groups. All of these actors share a growing influence and involvement within the domestic domain and along the “domestic-foreign frontier” (Rosenau 1997). The activities of many of these organizations are effectively border-blind, reflecting the transnationalization of global issues such as terrorism, the drug trade, public health concerns, and pollution. The expansion of transworld institutions, multilateral regimes, and global laws also reflects a general shift from the state toward mechanisms of global governance.

The fusion of individual national economies within one global economic structure has prompted a growing regulatory role of multilateral economic institutions such as the IMF and the WTO. Changing global norms related to human security and responsibility for the provision of security in the post-Cold War period have resulted in a new role for regional organizations and the United Nations in peacekeeping, conflict resolution, and humanitarian interventions within state jurisdictions. The Criminal Tribunals for Yugoslavia and Rwanda, and movement toward the establishment of a permanent International Criminal Court with extensive jurisdictional and enforcement powers reflects the growing reach of global legal institutions. NGO’s and the third sector are helping to transform both the public and private sectors within nations: they set agendas, mobilize constituencies, and influence national governments. New global actors also include a wide variety of substate and transnational political actors such as guerrilla groups or national liberation movements, as well as criminal organizations.

Significantly, these nonstate actors affect global politics and domestic structures, and reinforce the “pluralist paradigm” of global order with a particular view of their own role and that of the state (Clark 1999: 3). On the one hand, the ongoing practices of these non-state actors culminate in their increasing acceptance as global players and in some cases in the legitimacy of their involvement in what were previously considered domestic affairs. At the same time, the expanded activities of transnational organizations necessarily call into question the primacy of the state both in international relations and within the domestic sphere. Rosenau (1997: 229) illustrates this dynamic with the following example: “every time a national election is supervised by impartial observers brought in from abroad, for example, the norm that affirms such an intervention in domestic affairs is reinforced, making it harder subsequently for authoritarian regimes elsewhere to prevent such intrusions and easier for their opponents who fear repression to appeal successfully for outside supervision”. Whether one prefers the constructivist emphasis
on state socialization and identity formation by the meanings inscribed by particular practices and interactions (Wendt 1999), or liberalism’s inclusion of the transnational transmission of ideas in its theory of domestic preference formation (Moravscik 1997), the repeated practices of these nonstate agents are creating a new normative framework of world order. This global system is characterized by an erosion in state-centrism, the pervasive participation of global actors in every facet of international life (Rosenau 1997) and the growing acceptance on the part of states and societies that these actors are legitimate interlocutors within domestic contexts.

The ramifications of this organizational explosion for state authority are significant. The formation of new norms related to the legitimacy of transnational organizations with domestic constituencies can be viewed as a transgression of sovereignty’s exclusivity principle. This goes way beyond a deterioration in state power to exclude external actors and processes from the internal domain. Multinational corporations, the World Bank, and the transborder flow of migrants all challenge the state’s ability to regulate and control, but do not in and of themselves compromise its sphere of authority. What I am referring to are normative changes related to the recognition that entities other than the state have the right to act authoritatively within a domestic context. New principles related to the provision of security and protection of human rights by the international community clearly signify an erosion in the rules acknowledging the exclusive authority of the state. Likewise, NGO’s now “assume authority in matters that, traditionally, have been solely within the purview of state administration and responsibility” (Clark 1995: 508). External multilateral authorities also increasingly intrude on domestic legal orders (Caporaso 2000). This growing legitimacy of external actors, which can include nonstate actors as well as other sovereign states, within domestic domains appears to be undermining state authority to the extent that a belief in their right to be involved represents a “serious threat or challenge to the rules of power” involving sovereignty authority (Beetham 1991: 168).

Thus what has been described as a “power shift” (Mathews 1997) away from the state – up, down, and sideways – to suprastate, substate, and nonstate actors as part of the emergent world order also involves a relocation of authority (Rosenau 1990, 1997, 1998). Although I would be reluctant to treat authority as a zero-sum commodity in which the increasing authority of certain NGO’s, for example, necessarily entails a corresponding reduction in state authority, I would nevertheless suggest that in many contexts citizens have indeed shifted their loyalty sentiments to new global actors. In this sense the state competes with alternate spheres of authority within the domestic domain. The rules of domestic order no longer exclusively involve the state, but rather include global institutions, NGO’s, and substate actors as legitimate and authoritative entities. Both the new legitimacy of nonstate actors with societies, and new domestic and global ordering principles that do not exclude external actors from the domestic sphere, are suggestive of an erosion in state authority.

The unfolding of this change in the parameters of authority occurs on multiple levels. The expanding role and legitimacy of many public and private institutions continues as a part of the post-Cold War political, economic, social and territorial global restructuring. This macro level trend has been complemented at the domestic level by the substitution of performance criteria for traditional sources of authority (Rosenau 1997; Litfin 2000; Kittrie 1995). The legitimacy of the power exercised by the state is increasingly unbundled from tradition and inertia, and coupled to the ability of the state to solve problems, provide welfare, and establish
order. Citizens evaluate state institutions according to their effectiveness and comply with rules as a sign of approval of central government performance. It has been argued that the performance criteria of legitimacy related to the consent of the governed and economic prosperity has been a prominent feature of the post-world War II state Litfin 2000: 121). Rosenau attributes this shift in modern structures of authority to the constraining effects of globalization, the expanded analytic skills of citizens, and recent technological advances among other reasons (1997: 61-77). This is particularly evident in the case of economic globalization, where for many states the shift from a national economy to global markets has brought economic loss and widespread social dislocations at the same time that state capacity and autonomy to respond to such a crisis have been reduced. But whatever the source, that constituencies routinely link compliance with performance is indicative of a weakening of domestic authority structures and has precipitated the transfer of loyalty to entities believed to be more instrumental to the achievement of those goals. This relocation of authority to nonstate, suprastate and substate actors involves a complex process of global restructuring which has permitted a more active role by many of these actors at the same time that it has impinged on state control and autonomy. This dynamic has exacerbated the state’s deteriorating effectiveness in confronting challenges at the same time new global actors are perceived as being more capable of addressing acute internal crises.

This trend toward performance criteria of state legitimacy not only suggests an erosion in the unconditional obedience associated with other sources of authority, but also could be taken as evidence of the lack of legitimacy of domestic institutions and rules. The decrying of the loss of authority, or a systemic “authority crisis” as part and parcel of modernity reflects this development (Arendt 1968). That is, linking legitimacy to the government’s competence and the effectiveness of the domestic political and social order indicates that compliance may be more motivated by self-interest and not by a belief in the rightfulness of the rule or institution. If obedience and respect for the law are contingent upon the benefits the state is able to provide, positive incentives are required to generate compliance. According to Hurd (1999), this implies that the locus of power is prima facie illegitimate (1999: 400-401). There is no recognized “right to rule”, only the choice to comply as determined by the payoff structure. Domestic societies organized according to the performance principle would appear to be weaker and less stable than those where central power is believed to be legitimate. “A social system that relies primarily on self-interest will necessarily be thin and tenuously held together”, where members are constantly evaluating the costs and benefits of compliance and defection according to the benefits provided (Hurd 1999: 387). Beetham goes so far as to equate the self-interested calculation of compliance with domestic rules and institutions with the “attributes of the criminal”, where there is no notion of common social interest and legitimate power (1991: 27).

The new framework of global order can seriously compromise the sovereignty of weak states. Problems of state performance may erode confidence in a particular government, but there is no inherent reason why the underlying rules of authority would not persist. The growing legitimacy of nonstate actors as competent authorities within the domestic jurisdiction may exacerbate already precarious authority relationships however, further undermining state strength. In failing states with acute internal political emergencies, the inability to generate confidence in state authority can be disastrous. The total collapse of domestic authority, where coercive force is insufficient to maintain power, provides dramatic evidence for the importance
of legitimacy to state strength, the obedience of the citizenry, and internal order (Beetham 1991: 28).

The Colombian Crisis

Colombia manifests all of the attributes of the security plight afflicting many states in the post-Cold War global south: reduced security and welfare for large sectors of the population, violent competition among contending subnational groups, heightened vulnerability to external processes and threats, and less central government capacity to maintain order (Mason 2000). Most importantly, Colombia manifests what has been identified as the common denominator of these complex political emergencies - a dynamic in which the state has experienced a crisis of governance that ranges from serious impairment to outright collapse (Holsti 1996; Cliffe and Luckham 1999; Job 1992; Zartman 1995). Indeed, state weakness and diminished sovereignty within the Third World have been persuasively linked with the majority of internal violent conflicts in the second half of the twentieth century, and especially since the eclipse of Cold War geopolitical security concerns (Holsti 1992, 1996). Colombia is no exception.

Although for obvious reasons state failure and the breakdown of internal order are frequently conflated, they are conceptually and empirically distinct (Spanger 2000). This section will first provide an overview of the security crisis in Colombia, and then discuss the nature of Colombian state failure.

Colombia’s Security Emergency

Colombia’s current security crisis can be traced to the 1950’s when partisan violence following a polarizing political assassination engulfed the country. Traditional political competition in Colombia between Liberals and Conservatives took on a vicious intensity between 1946 and 1957 in rural areas where poverty, marginalization, agrarian conflicts, and economic motives served to heighten the mayhem and violence. To put an end to a decade of merciless violence and economic hardship during which 200,000 lives were claimed, Liberal and Conservative leaders settled on a power sharing arrangement in which, in an interesting twist on modern democracy, the two leading parties agreed to alternate the presidency and to share all elective and appointive positions. Political reconciliation, internal order and economic growth were achieved, yet bipartisan rule by its very nature provided for the institutional exclusion of third parties from political power.

The two principal guerrilla movements that today threaten internal stability - the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) with loose Marxist roots and the Cuban-inspired National Liberation Army (ELN) founded on liberation theology principles - have their origins in this period of violence and political monopolization. The persistence of entrenched economic, social, and land disparities during the 1960’s and 1970’s were seized on by the leftist revolutionary movements that had a series of grievances against the rules of the political game in Colombia that were stacked in favor of the landowners, the economic elite, and the political oligarchy. With political platforms that ranged from revolution to promoting social justice, the

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8 Much of this brief historical account is taken from Bushnell (1993) and Palacios (1995).
guerrilla groups were able to consolidate their presence in remote mountainous and rural areas where central government presence had always been nominal and achieve legitimacy among the discontented and disenfranchised. Government strategies to counter the subversives’ agenda were arrogant, inept and counterproductive, consisting largely of clientelist policies to control the rural vote. Efforts by the FARC in the mid-1980’s to convert themselves into a conventional political party were greeted by a “systematic campaign of extermination” orchestrated by large landowners in collusion with paramilitaries and with the tacit support of the government. (Shifter 1999: 15). This experience spurred a massive, and largely successful, retrenchment effort.

By the end of the 1990’s the FARC had achieved significant territorial expansion, with 15,000 soldiers under arms in 60 fronts distributed around the country. Current peace talks with the guerrilla group are effectively stalled, with many questioning the group’s real interest in negotiations. Doubts stem not only from their capacity for military action, but also from their direct attacks on villages, parasitic and predatory policies toward the civilian population (Rangel 2000), widespread violations of international humanitarian law, and their involvement in criminal activities. Revenue from the drug trade alone, estimated at $US 400 million per year (Bagley 2000: 14), provides a steady source of income that finances their organization and their military campaigns.

The violence, criminal behavior, and systematic corruption related to the production and trafficking of illegal drugs during the last two decades is a crucial part of the insecurity story in Colombia. The illegal drug business generates high levels of violence and criminality in both rural and urban areas, partly finances the guerrilla organizations, and threatens to disable state institutions and the legal economy. This “volatile mix” of armed insurgents and drug trafficking poses a direct challenge to the state and wrecks havoc with internal stability (Shifter 1999: 15). The state’s seeming inability to solve this complex problem of drug related criminality and the growing strength of the guerrilla has spawned paramilitary forces that are now pervasive in virtually every region of the country. Evolving from state-sanctioned rural self-defense units in the 1980’s, paramilitaries combat the insurgents with a combination of military action and political influence. The 7,000 person strong paramilitary movement is responsible for the majority of atrocities committed in the internal war with strategies that are particularly brutal and highly pernicious.

Defenseless against the widespread violence and human rights abuses committed by all participants in the internal conflict, much of Colombian rural society lives in what might be described as a Hobbesian state of nature. Estimates put the number of deaths each year as a result of the armed conflict at 3,500, two thirds of which are civilian. In some cases the state’s armed forces, and the paramilitary groups they tolerate or even support, represent a direct threat to individual security in the militarized war on drugs, in counterinsurgency campaigns, and in struggles with the guerrilla to control strategic territory. In others, the central government’s inability to protect its civilian population has exposed the individual to guerrilla violence, attacks on villages, forced conscription, extortion and kidnapping as these groups seek to consolidate territorial control and finance their war on the state. The high levels of violence in the rural areas are directly associated with the narcotics industry, as different factions of the guerrilla and paramilitaries fight between and among themselves to win the lucrative right to tax the cultivation and transportation of drugs. Colombia’s internal refugee population that flies
“incursions, massacres, death threats or land seizures” (Bagley 2000: 21) by both the paramilitaries and the guerrilla faces abandonment by the state and deplorable living conditions. Extreme poverty, few economic alternatives, and lack of access to basic services, health care and education compound the suffering of individuals, families and communities. In some parts of the country environmental degradation further jeopardizes the security of the Colombian citizen as chemical drug eradication efforts contaminate soil, crops and ground water. Coupled with the upsurge in violence, criminality, and corruption related to the production and trafficking of cocaine and heroin, at the start of the millenium Colombia is awash in widespread violence and human rights abuses.

The country’s worsening internal situation also threatens to degrade regional security. Neighboring states are increasingly being directly affected by the insecurity and violence in Colombia, and by the government’s inability to curb the conflict and control its borders. Not only are refugees displaced by the political violence, drug eradication programs, and lack of economic opportunities crossing international borders in growing numbers, but also the Colombian guerrilla and paramilitaries routinely operate, make incursions, or seek refuge, in foreign territory in the border regions. This activity is widely expected to multiply once the Plan Colombia is in full force, the fear being that a U.S.-backed military assault on the drug business and the guerrilla-paramilitary violence it will provoke will inevitably result in an exodus of civilians, guerrilleros, and cocaleros.

Colombian State Failure

The definitional problems associated with the plethora of approaches to the failed state concept are abundantly evident at the moment of trying to locate a state on the continuum of state strength/weakness. Cases of outright collapse may be easier to define than those that require conceptualizing degrees of weakness, fragility, or failure. While it is clear that Colombia tends toward the weaker side of the strong/weak construct, it is still far from the failed state extreme, where states such as Lebanon, Somalia and Sierra Leone, whose central governing functions effectively ceased, would be located. Colombia is also stronger than countries such as Yugoslavia and Congo, weak states whose internal conflicts have resulted in military interventions by external actors. Still, Colombia’s longstanding and worsening civil conflict suggests that it is probably closer to the weaker pole than it was twenty years ago, and continues to edge in that direction even while other Latin American states jeopardized by internal conflicts and armed insurgencies have successfully reversed the same trend.

The definition of stateness that I employ in this analysis uses a combination of the Buzan (1991) and Holsti (1996) state strength schema discussed above that includes: institutions, territory, the idea of the state, and authority. A strong state would be one in which: 1) government institutions related to the provision of security, law, justice, and basic services are functional and effective; 2) control over territory and population groups is highly consolidated; 3) there is a broad consensus with regard to the core identity, meaning and purpose of the nation; and 4) government power is sufficient to repel challenges to its authority and the force exercised in the name of the state is considered legitimate.
All the component parts of the Colombian state exhibit significant weakness. Government institutions are notoriously corrupt, inefficient, exclusionary, and ineffective. The extreme levels of political corruption from the drug industry have only exacerbated the historical patterns of oligarchic politics and patron-client principles of the political parties (Bagley 2000). Corruption and intimidation resulted in the virtual collapse of Colombia’s system of justice in the 1990’s when police, military, and judges were routinely bought off (Bagley 2000). The country’s legal system neither provides justice systematically, nor has been able to curb the recent explosion of lawlessness and violence (Pardo 2000: 76). The democratic political system is non-functioning in many jurisdictions due to insurgent and paramilitary threats and terrorism, and at the national level is hampered by clientelism, corruption and poor public accountability. 60% of the Colombian Congress is estimated to have received illicit contributions to their campaigns during the 1990’s to buy cooperation on issues such as extradition (Bagley 2000). The provision of basic public services has been seriously eroded by the deep and devastating economic recession and by the recent fiscal adjustments imposed by the I.M.F. The central government can no longer guarantee electricity for vast areas of the country, unable to effectively protect the energy infrastructure from guerrilla terrorism. Likewise, public control of certain major highways is precarious as the guerrilla regularly blocks passage of commercial and private vehicles. One of the main ground routes in the country between Bogotá and Medellín, the country’s second largest city, is routinely occupied by the ELN. Of crucial importance is that the police and military are incapable of maintaining public order and providing security for the civilian population either in urban centers or rural regions. The government’s defensive military strategy that increasingly prioritizes protection of the regime and urban centers has left large regions of the country to fend for themselves. For acts of both omission – the inability to protect its citizens from the depredations of criminals, the guerrilla, and the paramilitaries –, and commission – the human rights violations committed by the armed forces -, the Colombian government has effectively lost its monopoly over the legitimate use of force.

Large areas of the country have no central government presence and no police protection as drug producers, guerrilla forces, and paramilitaries violently vie for control of strategic regions. The state’s 1999 forfeiture of sovereign rights over a demilitarized area the size of New Jersey as a supposed concession to further peace negotiations with the FARC was in fact recognition of the guerrilla organization’s de facto jurisdiction. The FARC is considered to have a controlling presence in about 200 municipalities throughout the country where they have effectively replaced the state’s provision of law, order, and social services (Rangel 2000: 580). With negotiations currently underway regarding the withdrawal of the state’s presence from another demilitarized zone with the ELN, little pretense is made that the national government controls what is legally Colombian territory. Within this vacuum of law, order and physical presence of the state, para-institutional groups that compete directly and violently with the state for political authority thrive, leading to a steady retreat of the state (Orjuela 1998). The strategies of the guerrilla, paramilitaries and self-defense groups, and narco-mafias to essentially replace the state and control territory, markets, and political structures increasingly resemble “warlord politics” (Reno 1990), where political violence and violent conflict resolution have effectively replaced the state of law.

Within society there is little consensus on the unifying idea of Colombia. Historical regional and class differences are now overlaid by the fracturing of civil society along the
guerrilla/paramilitary, negotiation/elimination fault line. Sectors of civil society actively, and in many cases violently, contest the legitimacy of the claims of other social groups and the fundamental organizing principles of the state. The state’s persistent incapacity to adopt the reforms necessary to be able to rule by consensus and to generate belief in the moral authority of its rule has been a leading factor in the growth of armed challenges to the state. The breakdown of law and order spawned by the pervasive guerrilla and criminal activities has exacerbated the state’s loss of legitimacy at the same time its capacity to regain control has deteriorated. The trust, reciprocity and accountability that constitute vertical legitimacy have been eroded by corruption, worsening economic disparities, clientelism, and a political system that works for very few. In short, in Colombia the functions required of states are poorly and sporadically performed, central government control is non-existent in many jurisdictions, social cohesion is poor, and the fundamental rules of social order and authority are violently contested.

**Authority Structures in Colombia**

Much of the scholarly work on weak states has been concerned with identifying the determinants of their failure. Reflecting the dramatic upsurge in political crises since the ending of the Cold War, two trends have dominated this literature. The first identifies an incomplete state-making process as part of the colonial legacy as a leading cause of the Third World security predicament, as exemplified by the total government collapse in Somalia and Liberia. The survival of many newly independent states with little to show in the way of empirical statehood was largely attributed to postwar support for juridical statehood in Africa by the international community (Jackson 1987, 1990). The collapse of Cold War structures revealed the internal fragility and insecurity of many of these “quasi-states”, which were for the first time permitted to sink or swim on their own. Another focus has been on the ethnonational dimension of weak states and internal conflict. The fragmentation of Yugoslavia is illustrative of the inherent weakness of multinational states unable to reconcile, or suppress, the competing political, economic and cultural claims of its minority groups (Zartman 1995; Gurr 1996; and Brown 1996). The withdrawal of superpower presence and support resulted in the transformation of many weak states into failing or outright failed states as ethnic and nationalist antagonisms boiled over. This dynamic is particularly evident in Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Balkans, or in what Ayoob refers to as the new Third World (1996: 37).

That the reduced capacity of the Colombian state, and the attendant deteriorating security conditions, fit neatly into neither of these historical patterns suggests the need to expand the causal mechanism of the existing weak state framework. Although Colombia has never been a strong state according to the definitions discussed above, all the dimensions of state strength have experienced a sharp deterioration since the early 1990’s. Domestic explanations for this progressive weakening abound. Poorly implemented constitutional reforms, the persistence of discriminatory institutions, a well-established armed insurgency, and the thriving illegal drug industry all tell an important part of the story. But the blurring of the lines along the domestic-foreign frontier that continues to take place as part of the transformation in world order also makes states increasingly vulnerable to international processes. As in many other countries, new norms, institutions and actors related to global governance have impinged on Colombia’s power, control and autonomy, contributing to a weakening of its strength defined in terms of capacity (Mason 2000). This reduced capacity for governance and problem-solving, coupled with the
loosening of territorial parameters, leads to a growing receptivity by civil society to new global actors perceived as more competent and credible. A more complete analysis of how global reconfigurations contribute to state weakening should consider its effects on authority as well as on power. The generation of alternate spheres of authority that compete with that of the state is one of the most prominent features of the new world order. I argue that in the case of Colombia global processes have acted to erode state capacity and authority at the same time that legitimacy sentiments are being displaced. External actors routinely intrude on Colombia’s sovereign authority structures, and nonstate actors at both the domestic and global levels are increasingly considered authoritative entities that compete with or substitute for the state. This development strongly suggests a weakening of the principle of final and exclusive authority on which domestic order, state sovereignty, and indeed the Westphalian model, rest.

In order to highlight the erosion of Colombia’s authority structures, I explore the extent to which nonstate actors might be considered “authoritative” agents within Colombian society. Although there are many ways the authority issue could be approached, I propose that the presence of nonstate actors whose directives and power are viewed as legitimate by civil society, and where this recognition of the binding authority of alternative agents involves nonrecognition of state authority, implies a situation of fundamental change in the parameters of Colombia’s authority structures. This is a very exploratory line of argument. Nevertheless, I hope that the following discussion shows how we can begin to probe the issue of changing authority relations as an essential component of state weakness and failure.

Authority Shifted Downward

One of the developments most suggestive of this dynamic in Colombia is the postulation of substate actors such as paramilitaries and the guerrilla not only as military competitors but as legitimate social and political representatives. While it is true that Colombia’s leftist armed insurgents have largely squandered the legitimacy they previously enjoyed with the middle class by their criminality and predatory activities against the civilian population that include authorship of the highest kidnapping rate in the world, they maintain a certain credibility still with the poorest of the rural poor. In certain remote areas where they are credited with providing economic opportunities and fulfilling basic functions of the state such as security and justice, they are viewed as the local authority. In fact much of their appeal in destitute, rural areas lies in their minimum wage policy. And of course in “Farclandia”, the demilitarized zone turned over to the FARC for the purpose of advancing negotiations, the guerrilla organization is the de facto sovereign authority that effectively meets all the requirements of statehood save international recognition. Bogotá insists that the demilitarized zone exists at its pleasure, and that the state therefore remains the sovereign power over this area. Such an affirmation is largely rhetorical, however, given that the central government’s administrative, legal, and police presence in the area is null, and that the Colombian armed forces would be hard pressed to regain control of the region.

But it is the paramilitary organization that, despite its brutality, is gaining an ever-increasing following as a legitimate source of authority in Colombia. Support for and financing of the paramilitaries that were originally based in the agrarian elite have extended to a broad swath of civil society that perceives the guerrilla to be the principal threat to domestic stability.
The state’s incapacity to protect people and property from guerrilla depredations justifies the formation of self-defense units and explains the growing credibility this organization has with the middle-class. “If the state cannot stop the guerrilla kidnappings, extortions and murders, pragmatic people will look to the AUC (The United Self Defense Forces of Colombia) as their saviors,” recently explained a lawyer who has defended several paramilitaries (Tamayo 2001). That the paramilitaries, like the guerrilla, finance themselves by taxing drug production and are responsible for the majority of atrocities committed against civilians is viewed as an unfortunate but necessary evil. Although the government officially avows any institutional relationship with the paramilitaries, links between the army and the paramilitaries are well-documented (Human Rights Watch 2000). The military actions against the leftist insurgents or suspected civilian sympathizers have had the tacit, and occasionally the tactical, support of the military. In addition, the political agenda of the paramilitaries, if a bit uncomfortably to the right to that of the Bogotá elite, was long viewed as being fundamentally consistent with that of the state.

Recent developments, however, support the thesis that the paramilitary organization and its charismatic leader Carlos Castaño are not only seen as being more competent than the state at resolving a long, bloody problem, but that they are becoming an independent, autonomous, and authoritative political actor in their own right. The symbiotic relationship between the paramilitaries and state appears to have ended, as each as evolved away from the policies and practices of the other. Castaño’s political discourse makes it clear that the paramilitary group he heads refuses to recognize the authority of the state and considers itself a viable alternative. In one controversial case, the paramilitaries have emerged as a key player in a broad based civilian movement against a state proposition to establish another demilitarized zone for the purpose of accommodating negotiations with the country’s second guerrilla group, the ELN. The vehement dissention by much of the local population in the region and the municipalities where the proposed guerrilla safe haven would be created has taken the form of massive protests and the blocking of main highways that connect the capital with the coast that cut through the area. Astonishingly, law-abiding citizens in the area, rejecting that the “national interest” may result in the state-sanctioned installation of the ELN in their territory, have opted for an alliance with a violent, illegal paramilitary organization against their own government. The self-defense groups are perceived by a majority of the local population as being more representative of not only their interests, but also their way of life, their community, and their values.

Of course, any evaluation of the supposed authority of the paramilitaries in Colombia must consider the motivation of the compliance with their policies and orders. A central impetus for the support that rural landholders and residents offer local paramilitary groups is clearly self-interest. Financial and logistical aid is rewarded with the highly valued benefit of protection against the guerrilla and common criminals. In the case of the population in Bolivar opposed to the new demilitarized zone, their strategic alliance with the paramilitaries is seen as furthering their local political interests. The extreme asymmetry of power between the paramilitaries on the one hand, and their local financiers, landowners, and peasant collectives on the other strongly suggests that compliance is also, at least in part, compelled. Social actors may go along with the paramilitaries because of the fear of reprisal. Indeed, one explanation for the terror and torture employed by the self-defense brigades is to convince people to obey them. How would we know then, if the support for the Colombian paramilitaries is motivated by pure self-interest, is coerced
by fear, or is best explained by the collective perception that the power exercised by them is fair, right, and legitimate? And does it matter?

With regard to the first question, the easy way out is that it is probably a fairly confusing mix of motives. Compliance with rules frequently begins with fear of punishment or a calculation of self-interest, but mutates into “independent bases of legitimacy” (Hurd 1999: 389). Indeed modern state structures of authority are a good example of how methods of social control can evolve. The Colombian paramilitary organization surely manifests all three dimensions. Evidence that compliance, whatever its origins, is partly motivated by a belief that the power represents a legitimate social purpose is necessary for an actor to be considered authoritative. Although we have no hard evidence of this in the case of the Colombian paramilitary groups, the growing acceptance of the group could be considered suggestive of a social internalization of the organization’s validity. On the one hand, in the face of a division of political purpose over the demilitarized zone between the central government and this irregular army, many actors have remained loyal to Carlos Castaño. In addition, there has been a sharp increase in favorable urban political opinion of the paramilitary group, even where there is no direct relationship that might be explained by coercion or self-interest. “A significant number of Colombians are betting on the paramilitaries” said a recent editorial in the daily El Tiempo (Tamayo 2001). The answer to the second question is a resounding yes – it matters a lot. If the paramilitary order is based primarily on coercion we would expect it to eventually collapse under the weight and cost of its own violence, threats and sanctions. If protection and self-interest is the primary source of loyalty, than the paramilitary social order is probably very fragile and likely to break down quickly once the payoff structure shifts (Hurd 1999: 387). If there is even a trace of legitimacy in the institution and its rules however, compliance with and loyalty to the paramilitaries will probably increase, and they may pursue a strategy of reducing their reliance on violence and coercion. In fact we can already see this in Castaño’s public relations offensive with the Colombian public during the last year. But most importantly, to the extent that the standards and values of the paramilitaries are internalized by some parts of civil society and they are recognized as a legitimate political actor and source of authority, state claims to exclusive authority are weakened.

Authority Shifted Up and Out

Developments related to post-Cold War security frameworks have significantly affected state-society and state-global relations in many Third World countries. Not only has the security referent shifted from the national level to the individual level, but the globalization of security now means that human security within strife-torn states is considered a legitimate concern of the international community, and that the responsibility for the provision of security now includes representatives of global civil society. While on the one hand it has been shown that new global security norms can contradict, and even undermine, juridical sovereignty (Ayoob 1996: 41-45), this global security dynamic has also affected domestic authority structures by increasingly legitimizing a role for members of the global human rights regime within domestic environments. The United Nations system, international organizations, regional structures, transnational advocacy coalitions, and both local and international NGO’s constitute an enormous global network of human rights actors whose issue is supraterritorial and whose jurisdiction is global (Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999). The activities of this global human rights
polity facilitate the fusion of domestic societies with global civil society (Scholte 2000: 278), contribute to the legitimation of global structures of governance, and challenge the exclusivity principle of state authority within the domestic domain.

The crisis conditions related to Colombia’s internal emergency have led to a dramatic increase in the presence and scope of external actors, international organizations and third sector entities in Colombia. Doctors Without Borders, the International Red Cross, Amnesty International, the U.N. High Commission for Refugees, the U.N. High Commission for Human Rights, and the International Organization on Migration have joined the long list of global development, economic and environmental organizations already present in Colombia. These newer representatives of the international community are generally involved in issues related to the construction of the peace process, humanitarian aid and protection, and human rights violations related to the internal conflict. That the Colombian government may consider some of these actors authoritative is suggestive of global political restructuring. But I am again interested in how political authority within Colombia has been relocated away from the state toward other entities. To the extent that Colombian civil society considers these global actors to be legitimate sources of authority regarding local issues, the Colombian state’s monopoly on domestic authority must be questioned.9

A large body of anecdotal evidence suggests that the authority of the Colombian state is being diluted as citizens reach out to NGO’s, international organizations, and even other states, perceived as being more responsive and legitimate than their own government. Displaced populations and victims of political violence now routinely bypass the Colombian government and attempt to take their appeals directly to the U.N. High Commission on Human Rights, the International Red Cross, and Amnesty International. In one widely-publicized episode, refugees fleeing paramilitary and guerrilla violence arrived in Bogotá and instead of seeking government aid camped out in front of the local office of the International Red Cross. Naturally they expected more in the way of help from the IRC, but this act is also symbolic of how citizens can transfer sentiments of respect and loyalty to new nonstate agents. One of the most important and influential of these local global actors is the Office of the U.N. High Commission for Human Rights. The local representative’s tireless denunciation of human rights abuses committed by the armed forces, the paramilitaries, and the guerrilla alike has earned the Office a reputation for fairness and impartiality that is not enjoyed by the government. The broad base of respect and support within Colombian society for the U.N. results in repeated calls by a wide range of members of civil society for the presence or involvement of the UNHCHR in local disputes or crises. In one of the most recent violent protests of about 6000 campesinos opposed to the government’s decision to establish the ELN demilitarized zone, the civic movement insisted on the presence of the UNHCHR’s representative Anders Kompass in the dialogues to temporarily end the stand-off with the state. This same civic group is also demanding a permanent commission of international observers as one of their conditions for considering the acceptance of the guerrilla safe-haven. In another incident, denunciations by the Colombian Office of the UNHCHR of military-paramilitary collaboration prompted recommendations to prosecute a number of army and police commanders. Although such activism may not be wildly popular, it

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9 The results of a 1999 poll showed that while only 24% of Colombians trust the state, 39% perceive NGO’s as legitimate actors. This compares with 62% trust in private enterprise. See Lemoine 2000: 30-35.
nevertheless shows not only a widening role by the U.N. within domestic jurisdictions, but also that the U.N. may function as an independent entity within domestic authority structures.

Representatives of the international community have also recently begun to participate in the peace process between the Colombian government and the FARC. While the FARC’s non-acceptance of the authority of the Colombian state is well-established, their change in policy regarding the participation of external actors in the negotiations is significant because it suggests a certain recognition of the U.N., the European Union, and other states as legitimate interlocutors within Colombia. The intention is to continue the internationalization of the peace negotiations with the involvement of multilateral organisms. Broad sectors of Colombian society are also clamoring for a decisive role by the international community to do what their own government seems incapable of - ending the internal conflict. A poll in late 1999 revealed that a majority of Colombians were actually in favor of a U.S. military intervention in their country (Bagley 2000: xx). This willingness to involve the international community in domestic negotiations may in large part be functionally motivated by the desire to get things moving and by a loss of confidence in the central government’s ability to achieve peace. Nevertheless, it also demonstrates how Colombian citizens consider the involvement of external actors in their internal problems to be legitimate.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to establish a link between global political restructuring and deteriorating domestic authority. I have focused on the specific aspect of the legitimacy of state power in my consideration of the weak and failed state construct. State failure is understood not only in terms of the incapacity to function and control, but also as a loss of authority. New global rules and institutions challenge state sovereignty by generating new spheres of authority that can weaken states’ exclusive right to rule and by the proliferation of global actors within domestic contexts whose ongoing practices lead to new norms and knowledge that alter domestic authority structures. Internal state authority is undermined when the state can not exclude nonstate actors from the domestic domain of authority and when these actors are recognized as legitimate and authoritative.

I have explored these issues in the case of Colombia, attempting to show how eroding state authority is an important part of the explanation for the failing trend of the Colombian state. I have suggested that Colombian state authority has deteriorated to the extent that new transnational actors routinely function within the domestic jurisdiction, and as the citizenry has redirected its legitimacy sentiments away from the state toward these competing agents. I think that there is ample evidence that the Colombian state is not able to exclude other actors from its domestic order, and that new international processes that validate global roles for many nonstate actors in the Colombian jurisdiction clearly abrogate the exclusivity principle on which domestic authority is based. Nevertheless, showing that Colombian society recognizes other internal and external nonstate actors as legitimate is more problematic.

With regard to the authority of nonstate actors, various issues recommend themselves. First, my claim that international organizations, NGO’s and the paramilitary are viewed as legitimate sources of authority in Colombia is plausible, but not proven. While this may be a
good starting point for any investigation, the authority of these actors would need to be measured for my argument to be convincing. The difficulty with this task takes us back to the underlying motivations of compliance. Compliance in and of itself is not evidence of the rightfulness of rules, because we don’t know why a citizen respects the institutions or regulation. Likewise, an appeal made to a nonstate institution may be more indicative of a belief in its capacity to respond than in its authority. This leads to a second issue, that of the source of an actor’s authority. The prevalence of performance criteria for evaluating a state or any other actor strongly suggests that these actors have no authority. Thus, when a refugee in Colombia makes a plea to the IRC it is because the organization is believed to more instrumental in satisfying the person’s needs, not because of its legitimate social purpose. Showing the authority of nonstate actors would require harder cases within Colombia, where compliance with powerful directives could not easily be explained by personal benefit or fear of reprisal. The risk of circular reasoning is also very present in this type of analysis, where the legitimacy of the state is measured against that of global actors. It may be too facile to conclude that just because civil society recognizes other actors as authoritative, the state’s authority is necessarily reduced. This would be a logical conclusion if two actors were in direct competition in a particular issue area. But the reconfiguration of the state that has occurred alongside processes of globalization may mean that certain functions of the state have been spun off to global institutions, in which case issue-specific actors do not compete with the state for authority.

In spite of these caveats, it is difficult to persist with the illusion that the legitimacy of Colombia’s institutions has remained unchanged. The shrinking of the Colombian state’s moral authority is a topic of daily conversation, which in and of itself strongly suggests that civil society’s loyalty and confidence in the state’s right to rule have weakened. Leaving aside the question over the possible conceptual contradiction of performance criteria as a source of authority, there is little doubt that the failure of the state to solve critical social problems, guarantee a minimal level of welfare, protect the civilian population, and end the internal conflict has chipped away at the authority relationship between state and body politic. In a vicious circle, the authority crisis in Colombia makes its coercive power less effective, further eroding internal order and resulting in less authority. This may make the body politic more susceptible to transferring its loyalty to other actors. At the heart of Colombian state failure is a profound loss of legitimacy. To the extent that Colombia maintains its dismal performance record and other actors are able to provide civil society what the state can not, we are likely to see a continued deterioration in centralized authority that threatens to push Colombia ever closer to the far point on the continuum of state strength/weakness.
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