

## CHAPTER II

### TWO COMPETING NATIONALISMS: DEVELOPMENT OF THE COLOMBIAN POLITICAL PROCESS TO 1930

On June 16, 1921, intendant Nicanor Restrepo Giraldo of the Chocó province, sent a telegram from the provincial capital Quibdó to President Marco Fidel Suárez in Bogotá:

Most Excellent President:

Majority inhabitants Istmina, by popular subscription initiated last year, monument destined to honor memory distinguished citizen General Rafael Uribe Uribe and, in accordance with the Municipality, chose to place it in public plaza. Said Monument is finished, and soon to be erected. At last minute, parish priest, believing plaza belongs to the Church, opposed openly, and Municipality claims plaza as its property. Although official complaint is not to be appealed to this office, according to provincial legislation, I do desire you intervene, for both parties. Small legal complaint can become conflict, if Superior Authorities do not intervene in finding solution; Press has aggravated situation, and emotions are running high. I beg you, your Excellency, to impose your highly valued influence, with the Parish Priest, with the end of not presenting obstacles to the erection of monument. In equal sense I have sent a message to the Reverend Apostolic Prefect, who is currently in Bogotá. For my part, I will continue to maintain impartial, conciliatory, and, if necessary, energetic conduct. Your Servant, Nicanor Restrepo Giraldo<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> “Excelentísimo Presidente. Mayoría habitantes Istmina, por suscripción popular iniciaron desde año pasado, monumento destinado honrar memoria esclarecido ciudadano General Rafael Uribe Uribe y, de acuerdo con Municipalidad, escogieron Plazuela pública, para levantarlo. Dicho Monumento está terminado y próximo a colocarse. Ultima hora, Cura Párroco, creyendo Plazuela pertenece Iglesia opónese, abiertamente, y Municipio alega su propiedad. Aunque Querella no es apelable este Despacho, según legislación Intendencial, sí deseo intervenir arreglo, entre ambas partes. Pequeño pleito puede volverse conflicto, si Autoridades Superiores no intervienen su solución, pues, Prensa halo agriado y ánimos están exaltados. Ruego, Su Excelencia, interponga sus valiosísimas influencias, ante Cura Párroco, fin no obstaculice obra. En igual sentido héme dirigido Reverendo Padre Prefecto Apostólico, Quién siguió ésa. Por mi parte, observaré conducta imparcial, conciliadora y, en caso necesario, enérgica. Servidor, Nicanor Restrepo Giraldo” Nicanor Restrepo Giraldo, Documentos relacionados con la erección de un busto de Gral. Rafael Uribe Uribe en la ciudad de Istmina (Quibdó, Chocó, Colombia: Imprenta Oficial, 1921) p. 5-6. This pamphlet is part of the Helguera Collection of rare Colombian and Latin American imprints, housed at Vanderbilt University (henceforth Helguera Collection).

While the surprisingly well-documented incident in Istmina in 1921 would seem minor given the many nineteenth-century civil wars between Colombia's two traditional parties and the partisan bloodletting which would rip apart the Colombian countryside twenty-five years later, it nonetheless illustrates how the parties maintained separate traditions, symbols, and heroes that can best be compared to two competing nationalisms within the same nation. That the disagreement over a monument in Istmina occurred during a time of relative peace between the parties further illustrates how the conflicting nationalisms made it difficult for moderate national and regional party leaders to maintain the peace in the long run: any attempts at bipartisan cooperation at the national level were continually challenged by political confrontations and violence on the local level. The incident in Istmina, to which we will return toward the end of this chapter, also reveals how more intransigent Liberal and Conservative politicians took advantage of partisan differences, including the competing nationalisms, in order to discredit internal party rivals and further their own agendas and political careers. These two nationalisms served as the rhetorical basis upon which a discourse of elimination was grafted in the years leading up to *La Violencia*.

By the twentieth century, party allegiances were cemented by the collective experience of triumph, persecution, and civil war—stories handed down generation after generation strengthened fealty to one party or the other. Despite the changes in Colombia's economy and society in the first decades of the twentieth century, the traditional parties survived by being able to adapt their structure and platforms to modern realities.

To understand the context of political rhetoric from the 1930s and 40s, it is necessary to briefly examine the political traditions in Colombia and how they are rooted in the nation's geography, colonial and nineteenth-century history, and socio-economic development.

### Political, Social, and Economic Processes in Colombia to 1930

Colombia's geography has always been a source of its wealth, while at the same time it has hindered all attempts at establishing a central administration—the government has never had an effective presence over all of the territory. The Andes, which splits into three ranges (*cordilleras*) in Colombia, offer a vertical climate for the cultivation of just about any crop in its slopes and valleys, while at the same time dividing the country into distinct regions which have difficulty communicating with each other overland. East of the Andes lay vast plains called the *llanos*, which extend into Venezuela. Southern Colombia is mostly rainforest, part of the Amazonian system; and thick jungles are also found along the Pacific coast. Along the Caribbean is a tropical coastal plain, interrupted by a small but high mountain range near Colombia's northernmost point.

The vast majority of Colombia's population has always lived in the Andes. Even today, four of the five largest cities are located in the mountains, including the capital Bogotá in the center of the eastern *cordillera* (at 8,600 feet), Bucaramanga in the northern part of the eastern *cordillera*, Medellín in the central *cordillera*, and Cali in the southwest, these last three all at lower and more comfortable elevations than the capital (the fifth city, Barranquilla, is the major port city on the Caribbean).<sup>2</sup> In the sixteenth century, after first establishing settlements on the Caribbean coast, the conquering

---

<sup>2</sup> Bushnell, Colombia 1; and Safford and Palacios 1-4.

Spanish encountered the agriculturally-based Muisca nation high in the fertile Andean plateaus near present-day Bogotá.<sup>3</sup> Taking advantage of the land, labor, and cooler climate, the colonizers established their administrative center there in 1538. Other major Spanish settlements founded at this time were mainly in the mountains of southern Colombia, including Pasto, Popayán, and Cali. Most of these areas were dedicated to agriculture, based on the *hacienda* system in which large landowners used the labor of the indigenous or the *mestizos* (those of mixed European and indigenous descent).<sup>4</sup>

In the first years of the Spanish conquest, gold was found in western Colombia, especially near Santa Fe de Antioquia, providing the colony with its major export. Shipping gold back to Spain led to the fortification of the city of Cartagena on the Caribbean coast, which also became the most important Spanish *entrepôt* in the Americas for the slave trade from Africa.<sup>5</sup> Transportation inland from the Caribbean coast took weeks by pole boat via the Magdalena River, then by mule over difficult mountain trails, to reach the Andean towns and cities.<sup>6</sup>

The Spanish called the region New Granada, and for most of its colonial history it remained a backwater, especially when compared to Mexico or Peru. During the wave of administrative reforms instituted by the Spanish Bourbons in the late eighteenth century, the colony was reenergized to a degree when Bogotá became the capital of a new

---

<sup>3</sup> Margarita González, El resguardo en el Nuevo Reino de Granada (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional, 1970) 7-11.

<sup>4</sup> Germán Colmenares, Historia económica y social de Colombia (1973, Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1999) 11-19, 54-68, 109-174.

<sup>5</sup> Jorge Palacios Preciado, Cartagena de Indias. Gran factoría de mano de obra esclava (Tunja: Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia, 1975); Colmenares, Historia económica 19, 175-190, 267-359; and Germán Colmenares, Historia económica y social de Colombia, Tomo II, Popayán: Una sociedad esclavista, 1680-1800 (Bogotá: Editorial La Carreta, 1979) 14-20.

<sup>6</sup> Jorge Orlando Melo, "La evolución económica de Colombia, 1830-1900," Nueva Historia de Colombia, (henceforth NHC) Vol. 2, ed. Alvaro Tirado Mejía (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, 1989) 74-75; Colmenares, Historia económica 385-404; and Safford and Palacios 35-40, 44-49.

viceroyalty for northern South America. This did not always have a positive effect: a tighter colonial administration also meant more rigorous application of tax laws that had been ignored by local administrators for decades; the Revolt of the Comuneros, the largest tax revolt to ever take place in the Spanish colonies, broke out in 1781 in the provinces north of Bogotá. Although the revolt eventually failed without much bloodshed, it gave locals their first sense of autonomy from Spain, while it forced colonial officials to begin paying more attention to the region.<sup>7</sup>

A scientific expedition led by José Celestino Mutis (1732-1808) was centered in Bogotá from 1784 to 1808, gathering information on plant and animal species. Bogotá had already become a center of learning in the colony after colleges and universities were established there in the late sixteenth century. During the early colonial period, these educational institutions mainly prepared men for the priesthood, but by the end of the seventeenth century laypersons studying law outnumbered the religious. The express purpose of the scientific expedition was to search for other marketable products in the region, but it also had other unintended consequences. A number of local students worked closely with Mutis in his research, which introduced them to the values of enlightened scientific investigation. Many of these students went on to become leaders in the independence movement.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> This region, centered around the small city of Socorro, was an important manufacturing center for cotton cloth, sold to the other regions throughout New Granada. The protest, initiated by women in the market places, came in reaction to sales taxes on basic goods. Spanish authorities were able to negotiate a way out of the crisis with the 10,000-man army of artisans and peasants that reached the outskirts of Bogotá; when authority was reestablished, dozens of ringleaders were either executed or exiled. John Leddy Phelan, The People and the King: The Comunero Revolution in Colombia, 1781 (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1978) 6-9, 20-31, 44-45; and John Leddy Phelan, El pueblo y el rey: la revolución comunera en Colombia, 1781, trans. Hernando Valencia Goelkel (Bogotá: Carlos Valencia, 1980) 291-298.

<sup>8</sup> José Antonio Amaya, Real Expedición Botánica del Nuevo Reino de Granada, 1783-1983 (Bogotá: Biblioteca Nacional, 1983) 6-16, 29-30.

Social conditions in colonial New Granada were similar to those in the rest of Spanish America, with a hierarchy based on race. The first murmurs of independence from Spain often began at the top<sup>9</sup>--native born colonists of European descent (*criollos*), who often controlled the local economy, grew increasingly frustrated with an administration dominated by Spanish-born officials. Travel to Europe by members of the *criollo* elite brought Enlightenment ideas into the mix. New Granada followed the pattern seen in the rest of Spanish America during the years of the struggle for independence: after Napoleon toppled the Spanish government in 1808, cities and towns set up juntas that declared their loyalty to the deposed king, Ferdinand VII. These juntas pointedly included *criollos* in their leadership, giving locally-born notables their first collective experience of political leadership. As the situation in the mother country did not change, various juntas took the step to declare outright independence; by 1813, this process was almost complete. However, in New Granada as elsewhere, the newly independent states soon fell into civil war, and most were quickly reconquered when Ferdinand was restored to power in Spain after the final defeat of Napoleon in 1815. Not surprisingly, geography influenced the cause of civil conflict in New Granada, where centralists fought for a single unified government in Bogotá against federalists, who wanted power shared among various autonomous provinces. New Granada was reconquered within a year, many of its leaders executed.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> The process of Mexican independence was the exception to this pattern, beginning with an indigenous revolt in 1810; still, the initial catalyst for even this insurrection came from a small group of *criollo* conspirators. Eric Van Young, *The Other Rebellion: Popular Violence, Ideology, and the Mexican Struggle for Independence, 1810-1821* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> The period from 1810 to 1816 is called *la Patria Boba* in Colombia—the “foolish fatherland.” Javier Ocampo López, *La patria boba* (Bogotá: Panamericana, 1998).

However, in contrast with many Latin American countries, the result of the long independence struggle in New Granada was a government led by lawyers rather than military men. In northern South America, the Venezuelan Simón Bolívar led the final liberation of the colonies from the Spanish. In 1819, New Granada became the first colony to be partially liberated by Bolívar, after an impressive campaign that took his army across the *llanos* and over the Andes to surprise the Spanish. He immediately established a central administration in Bogotá with himself as president to govern “Gran Colombia,” which in time would include present-day Panamá, Venezuela, Ecuador and Colombia. Convinced that only the final defeat of the Spanish in South America would guarantee independence, Bolívar led his armies north into Venezuela and then south into Peru, leaving his vice president, General Francisco Paula de Santander, in charge of the Gran Colombian government.<sup>11</sup>

Santander, from the northern New Granadan town of Cúcuta near Venezuela, had trained as a lawyer in Bogotá, but had proved himself a capable battlefield commander under Bolívar. Santander scrupulously followed the letter of the law in his administration of Gran Colombia (a constitution was written in 1821); still, he faced the rise of separatist movements in Venezuela and Ecuador.<sup>12</sup> Bolívar returned to New Granada in 1826, upset with the near-dissolution of Gran Colombia; after reassuming the presidency, he established a dictatorship in 1828—Santander led the opposition. Since many New Granadan military leaders were captured and executed during the Spanish *reconquista* in 1816-1817, most senior army officers were of Venezuelan descent. After a series of intrigues and revolts, the Venezuelans, including Bolívar, left Bogotá in 1830; military

---

<sup>11</sup> Tomás Polanco Alcántara, Bolívar, vida, obra, y pensamiento (Barcelona: Bustamante Editores, 2002) 100-134.

<sup>12</sup> David Bushnell, The Santander Regime in Gran Colombia (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1954) 26-44.

rule was discredited after that, and university-trained lawyers dominated the government, although a military background often helped in getting elected president.<sup>13</sup>

The conflicts and debates of the independence period had many long-term consequences for Colombia. Since the end of Bolívar's dictatorship in 1830, elected civilians, rather than professional soldiers, have almost exclusively governed Colombia; military regimes have only ruled briefly in Colombia's history (1854, 1861-1863, and 1953-1958), an atypical record in Latin America.<sup>14</sup> Elected civilian government, however, has never been a guarantee of peace—a fact that is underscored by the political violence that accompanied nearly every electoral contest from the 1840s through the 1950s, as well as by the frequent civil wars between the two traditional political parties during the nineteenth century.

The break up of Gran Colombia during the independence period highlights the geographical problem of maintaining a central government in the region—the issue of federalism vs. centralism dominated political debates through the 1880s. As noted earlier, throughout its history, the Colombian government has at best maintained only a tentative control over much of its territory. It has been difficult for the central government in Bogotá to provide even a basic administrative structure for citizens in far-flung parts of the country, let alone to suppress distant revolts and uprisings.

Although the Liberal and Conservative parties emerged in the 1840s, their origins also lie in the struggle for independence. They were somewhat based on the split between Bolívar and Santander, and each party claimed one or the other as their “spiritual father”: the “Liberator” for the Conservatives, the “Man of Laws” for the Liberals.

---

<sup>13</sup> J. León Helguera, “The Changing Role of the Military in Colombia,” *Journal of Inter-American Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (July 1961): 351-353; Polanco 166-221; and Bushnell, *Santander* 58-75.

<sup>14</sup> Safford and Palacios 386-387.



However, this, like many generalizations made about the parties, is too simple an explanation for their differences. Within the parties, there were factions that split over the issues of centralism versus federalism, and free trade versus protectionism; politicians from both camps came from all social classes and engaged in all kinds of economic activities.<sup>15</sup> The most consistent ideological division between the two parties was related to the position of the Church in Colombian society, with the Conservatives in support of a wider role for the clergy and the Liberals in favor of a degree of separation of Church and State.<sup>16</sup> As we shall see, the issue of the Church was a key part of the political rhetoric of the parties in the 1930s and 40s. Conservatives in particular would resurrect the anticlerical actions of nineteenth-century Liberal governments as proof of the real motives of reformers in the Liberal administrations from 1930 to 1946.

In practice, electoral democracy in the nineteenth century did not improve the lot of the vast majority of Colombians. As in most of Latin America, the new republic contracted a huge loan with banks in London soon after independence; since no economic miracle appeared to increase revenues, servicing the debt became the major government expense. The government could do little but maintain the most rudimentary government and army—infrastructure improvements were few, and other public services were left to private philanthropy, especially under the auspices of the Church.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Helen Delpar, Red Against Blue: The Liberal Party in Colombian Politics, 1863-1899 (University, Ala.: U of Alabama P, 1981) 14-42.

<sup>16</sup> Frank Safford, "Social Aspects of Politics in Nineteenth-Century Spanish America: New Granada, 1825-1850," Journal of Social History, 5, no. 3, (Spring 1972): 344-370.

<sup>17</sup> As elsewhere in Latin America, the most solid revenue was found in the customs houses. José Antonio Ocampo and Eduardo Lora Torres, Colombia y la deuda externa (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1988) 12-22. For the Mexican case, see Michael P. Costeloe, The Central Republic in Mexico, 1835-1846: Hombres de Bien in the Age of Santa Anna (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) and Barbara Tenenbaum, The Politics of Penury: Debts and Taxes in Mexico, 1821-1856 (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1986). State monopolies over certain commodities were also important. In Colombia, the tobacco monopoly provided a

Still, proposals to improve the lot of less fortunate Colombians sparked acrimonious debate between the two parties. Beginning with Santander, public education was promoted as a way to build a good citizenry, but the most ambitious projects remained only on paper for lack of funds. Nevertheless, debates over proposed curriculum—Liberals wanted to introduce progressive methods and books while Conservatives demanded that the Church run the schools—led to violent protests and civil conflict from the 1820s through the 1870s,<sup>18</sup> flaring up again in the 1930s.<sup>19</sup>

The governments did ameliorate some of the suffering endured by the lower classes, but sometimes created new problems. As in other Latin American republics, the dismantling of the institution of slavery began with manumission laws issued shortly after independence. Outright abolition was finally declared in 1850 by a Liberal government, without too much opposition.<sup>20</sup> Afro-Colombians, particularly along the Caribbean coast, have been solid Liberal Party voters ever since.<sup>21</sup>

Indigenous communities generally suffered under republican legislation. In a pattern seen throughout Latin America, laws that sought the break-up of colonial

---

key source of government revenue. Luis F. Sierra, *El tabaco en la economía colombiana del siglo XX* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional, 1971).

<sup>18</sup> Jaime Jaramillo Uribe, "El proceso de la educación en la República," *NHC* Vol. 2, 223-225, 227-232.

<sup>19</sup> Aline Helg, *La educación en Colombia 1918-1957: una historia social, económica y política*, trans. Jorge Orlando Melo and Fernando Gómez (Bogotá: CEREC, 1987) 161-166.

<sup>20</sup> Margarita González, *Ensayos de historia colombiana* (Bogotá: La Carreta, 1977) 182-333; and Francisco U. Zuluaga R., *Guerrilla y sociedad en el Patía: una relación entre clientelismo político y la insurgencia social* (Cali: Universidad del Valle, 1993). Many communities of escaped slaves had existed throughout the colonial period, particularly along the Pacific coast in what is now the Department of Chocó, but also in important pockets in the upper Cauca River valley and inland from the Caribbean. Hermes Tovar Pinzón, *De una chispa se forma una hoguera: esclavitud, insubordinación y liberación* (Tunja: Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia, 1992).

<sup>21</sup> Afro-Colombian devotion to the Liberal Party can also be traced to the racism of nineteenth and twentieth-century Catholic missionaries, especially those from Spain, who were motivated by stories of priests saving savage Indians, supposedly untouched by European vices, and were not too interested in ministering to the African population. The missionaries in the Chocó considered the Afro-Colombians as already contaminated by their contact with western materialism. Francisco Gutiérrez, *Informe que el Prefecto Apostólico del Chocó rinde al Ilustrísimo y Reverendísimo Arzobispo de Colombia, como Presidente de la Junta Arquidiocesana de Misiones, 1919-1923* (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 1924) [Helguera Collection] 156.

*resguardos* (autonomous reservations) were ostensibly promoted to make Indians into yeoman farmers; in reality, they served to provide unscrupulous merchants and *hacendados* with a means to buy up cheap land. *Resguardos* ceased to exist in the highland regions north of Bogotá, while indigenous holdings were greatly reduced in southern Colombia.<sup>22</sup> The transfer of Church lands to a radical Liberal government in the 1860s had a similar result: these properties were quickly bought up by those who had ready cash, instead of being distributed to create a class of small farmers.<sup>23</sup>

Small farms were more typical of the process known as the “Antioquian colonization,” which began in the 1840s. Colonists occupied the generally uninhabited mountainous land in the area between the Magdalena and Cauca rivers, staking claims land for homesteads and establishing their own towns.<sup>24</sup> The Antioquians, known as *paisas*, are still known for possessing an entrepreneurial spirit—rooted in the artisanal nature of placer gold mining in their region, which put ordinary peasants in the money economy early in the colonial period.<sup>25</sup> *Paisas* also tended towards solid Catholic marriage and large families in order to maintain the economic integrity of their farms and

---

<sup>22</sup> Juan Friede, *El indio en la lucha por la tierra: historia de los resguardos del macizo central colombiano* (Bogotá: Instituto Indigenista de Colombia, 1944); Glenn Thomas Curry, “The Disappearance of the *Resguardos Indígenas* of Cundinamarca, Colombia, 1800-1863,” PhD diss., Vanderbilt U, 1981; Nils Jacobsen, “Liberalism and Indian Communities in Peru, 1821-1920,” *Liberals, the Church, and Indian Peasants: Corporate Lands in Nineteenth-Century Spanish America*, ed. Robert H. Jackson (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico, 1997) 123-170. Another result of this process in Colombia was the general tendency for the indigenous to vote for the Conservatives. For instance, the indigenous leader Manuel Quintín Lamé, who sometimes fought for rights to indigenous lands through armed resistance in the first half of the twentieth century, was a Conservative. Luis Carlos Fajardo Sánchez, Juan Carlos Gamboa, and Orlando Villanueva, *Manuel Quintín Lamé y los guerreros de Juan Tama* (Madrid: Nossa y Jara Editores, 1999) 102. Since the indigenous never amounted to a very large plurality, especially when compared to *mestizos* or Afro-Colombians, this phenomenon had less electoral importance than the extensive Afro-Colombian support for the Liberals.

<sup>23</sup> Fernando Díaz Díaz, “Estado, Iglesia y desamortización,” *NHC* Vol. 2, 209-219; Hubert Millar, “Liberal Modernization and Religious Corporated Property in Nineteenth-century Guatemala,” *Liberals* 95-122.

<sup>24</sup> James J. Parsons, *Antioqueño Colonization in Western Colombia* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1968). Originally, most of the area was considered part of Antioquia, becoming the Department of Caldas in the early twentieth century. Caldas was in turn broken up into three departments in the early 1960s: Risaralda, Quindío, and Caldas. Safford and Palacios 248; and Ortiz 25.

<sup>25</sup> Ann Twinam, *Miners, Merchants, and Farmers in Colonial Colombia* (Austin: U of Texas, 1982).

other enterprises as well as creating a cheap source of labor; their devotion to the Church led them to lean towards identification with the Conservative Party (although there were frequent and important exceptions). The region that they settled provided for only the most basic subsistence farming until the late nineteenth century, when it was discovered that it was ideal for raising coffee.<sup>26</sup>

Although elections were held throughout the nineteenth century, property and literacy requirements generally limited suffrage to a select few. These laws allowed for the participation of urban artisans—a brief flurry of political activity surrounding this class ended with the short-lived government of General José María Melo in 1854.<sup>27</sup> After this period, the artisans were included as voting blocs within the traditional parties, although they exercised a great deal of independence in the early twentieth century by supporting socialists and populists for public office.<sup>28</sup>

Non-voters were included in the political process in other ways: attending political rallies, participating in armed gangs at election time, or being recruited by the partisan armies during the various civil wars. These arrangements were not without reciprocity: party bosses (*gamonales*) mediated between their clients and the government. Although few political offices were available for spoils, property disputes, arrest warrants, and other various governmental actions could go the way of an active party member if their party was in power.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Marco Palacios, *El café en Colombia, 1850-1970: Una historia económica, social y política*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 1983) 337-340.

<sup>27</sup> Melo was supported by Bogotá's artisans. David Sowell, *The Early Colombian Labor Movement: Artisans and Politics in Bogotá, 1832-1919* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1992) 94.

<sup>28</sup> Mauricio Archila, *Cultura e identidad obrera: Colombia, 1910-1945* (Bogotá: CINEP, 1991) 209-268.

<sup>29</sup> John D. Martz, *The Politics of Clientelism: Democracy and the State in Colombia* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997) 35-54; and Jorge Pablo Osterling, *Democracy in Colombia: Clientelist Politics and Guerrilla Warfare* (Oxford: Transaction Publishers, 1989) 159-166.

By the mid-nineteenth century, different regions were already leaning towards one party or the other; we have seen that the Caribbean coast was overwhelmingly Liberal while Antioquia tended to be Conservative. The southernmost highland region, along the border with Ecuador, was also a Conservative redoubt, based in the historically pro-clerical city of Pasto.<sup>30</sup> The other regions, stretching from the upper Cauca River northwards through Bogotá and the present-day departments of Huila, Tolima, Boyacá, Santander and Norte de Santander up to the Venezuelan border, were more or less divided evenly between Liberals and Conservatives. Few towns were divided, however; most were dominated by a single party, the trim on the whitewashed houses either being red (for the Liberals) or blue (for the Conservatives). Longstanding disputes between municipalities soon took on a political hue, as neighboring villages supported rival parties. These differences could make a difference in regional and national elections—we shall see how politicians manipulated these patterns of political affiliation in order to commit electoral fraud in the first half of the twentieth century.

The period of civil unrest in the 1850s gave way to Liberal domination of the central government under an exaggeratedly federalist constitution from 1863 to 1886. It was under these administrations that unused Church lands and urban properties were seized in order to provide revenue for the government—this was part of a wave of similar anticlerical legislation throughout Latin America at this time. The separation of Church and state was emphasized in other ways: under Liberal governments divorce was legalized, civil marriage was instituted, and a liberal curriculum was introduced in the

---

<sup>30</sup> Because of its pro-clerical and royalist tendencies, Pasto was one of the last cities to be included in the new republic during the independence period. Armando Montenegro, Una historia en contravía: Pasto y Colombia (Bogotá: Malpensante, 2002).

public schools (which directly caused a Conservative uprising in 1876).<sup>31</sup> The clergy fiercely opposed being forced to declare obedience to the national government; this position led to the exile of Colombia's chief prelate, Manuel José Mosquera, the archbishop of Bogotá in 1852, and the arrest and exile of another Bogotá archbishop, Antonio M. Herrán, in 1861.<sup>32</sup> These “crimes against the holy faith” were emphasized in Conservative political rhetoric in the 1930s and 1940s, especially in response to an effort by Liberal governments to introduce modern methods in the public school system and to rescind decades-old leases held by religious orders for state-owned school buildings.

The hyper-federalism of the 1863 constitution led to chaotic relations among the nine states that made up Colombia at this time. Although the Liberals remained in power in Bogotá, Conservatives controlled a few states—most consistently the wealthy state of Antioquia. The executive was purposefully made weak—presidential elections were held every two years according to a “one-state-one-vote” electoral college system, and presidents were not allowed to succeed themselves. The constitution could be amended or changed only by the consent of all of the states—an impossibility given the political climate.<sup>33</sup>

This system resulted in governmental disorganization and ineffectiveness as well as continued economic underdevelopment. It was finally changed by the administration of Rafael Núñez, who was elected as an “Independent” Liberal with Conservative support in 1880 and again in 1884; an unsuccessful “Radical” Liberal uprising in 1885 led him to

---

<sup>31</sup> William Elvis Plata Quezada, “De las reformas liberales al triunfo del catolicismo intransigente e implantación del paradigma romanizador,” Historia del cristianismo en Colombia: corrientes y diversidad, ed. Ana María Bidegain (Bogotá: Taurus, 2004)[henceforth Cristianismo] 240-251; Enrique de Narváez, Los mochuelos; recuerdos de 1876-1877 (Bogotá: Minerva, 1928) 254-260; and Manuel Briceño, La revolución (1876-1877): recuerdos para la historia 2nd ed. (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 1947).

<sup>32</sup> Alvaro Tirado Mejía, “El Estado y la política en el siglo XIX,” NHC Vol. 2, 169-170.

<sup>33</sup> William Marion Gibson, The Constitutions of Colombia (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1948).

declare the constitution null and void. A new constitution was written in 1886—with some modifications, it remained the law of the land until 1991.<sup>34</sup>

The 1886 constitution was in many ways the polar opposite of the 1863 document. The Núñez administration was proclaimed the “Regeneration.” A Radical Liberal when he was a young man,<sup>35</sup> Núñez came under the influence of positivist ideas and by the 1880s felt that his country needed to be more organized and structured in order to avoid further civil conflict and to set Colombia on the road to “progress.” Positivism was then a major influence among elites across Latin America, influencing government policy in many countries (most notably in Mexico under Porfirio Díaz<sup>36</sup> and among the republicans in Brazil<sup>37</sup>). Positivists abandoned liberal idealism and embraced a more pragmatic but authoritarian approach to administration. In Colombia as elsewhere in the region, political pragmatists felt that the Church should become an institution that would help unify the nation and control the masses; thus Núñez and the Conservatives reversed much of the anticlerical legislation—divorce again became illegal,<sup>38</sup> and the schools were placed under Church tutelage. A strong central government was set up in Bogotá and presidents subsequently held six-year terms with the possibility of reelection.

Presidential power was extended into the departments (which the states were now called):

the president appointed departmental governors, who in turn appointed the mayors of the

---

<sup>34</sup> Safford and Palacios 244-245.

<sup>35</sup> He was excommunicated by the Church for his role in facilitating the appropriation of Church lands in the 1860s; he also took advantage of new laws and divorced his first wife and remarried. Delpar 50-51; and James William Park, Rafael Núñez and the Politics of Colombian Regionalism, 1863-1886 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1985) 248.

<sup>36</sup> Charles A. Hale, The Transformation of Liberalism in Late Nineteenth-Century Mexico (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989).

<sup>37</sup> The motto on Brazil’s flag, *Ordem e Progresso* (Order and Progress) comes from the basic tenets of positivism. Renato Lemos, Benjamín Constant: vida e história (Rio de Janeiro: Topbooks, 1999).

<sup>38</sup> Safford and Palacios 246-247. Núñez’ devotion to the cause of “Regeneration” affected his personal life: by revoking divorce legislation, his second wife technically became his concubine. His first wife died soon after the end of legalized divorce, so he was able to rectify this situation with a church wedding. Delpar 50-51; and Park 248.

municipalities under their jurisdiction. By means of this highly centralized constitution, the Conservatives who supported Núñez came to power and controlled the presidency from 1886 to 1930. By appointing party members all along the executive hierarchy, Conservatives controlled the ballot box and thus the legislative branch as well. The Liberals would have none of it: a minor uprising in 1895 was followed by a much more serious civil war in 1899; this three-year conflict was known as the “War of a Thousand Days.”<sup>39</sup>

Even at the time, outside observers wondered what agitated the Colombians so much: there was not a lot of revenue at stake to be divvied up by the victors of any civil conflict. Economically, the country was in a shambles for most of the nineteenth century, and not only because of frequent unrest. Gold placers in Antioquia had petered out by the mid-nineteenth century; Colombian investors instead took advantage of any crop that seemed to have promise as an export. A series of booms began with tobacco in the 1840s, and included indigo, cotton (during the U.S. Civil War), and quinine in quick succession until the 1880s. Most local merchants and *hacienda* owners who invested in these booms looked upon them as get-rich-quick schemes, without making the proper capital investments to maintain quality and quantity—boom soon became bust. At the same time, investment in industry and railroads was very small (even by Latin American standards), while continual unrest and disorganization discouraged international investors.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Carlos Eduardo Jaramillo, “Antecedentes generales de la guerra de los Mil Días y golpe de estado del 31 de julio de 1900,” *NHC* Vol. I, 65-88.

<sup>40</sup> José Antonio Campo, *Colombia y la economía mundial, 1830-1910*, 2nd ed. (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1998) 203-300, 347-389.



The economic situation slowly began to improve in the 1880s with the planting of coffee on a large scale and the rise of coffee consumption in Europe and North America. Coffee also changed the attitudes of Colombian investors: coffee was not only profitable and an ideal crop for mountainous Colombia, but planters needed to wait four to five years for coffee bushes to begin to produce beans—it forced a capital investment. Huge coffee plantations were first founded in northern Colombia along the Venezuelan border, but bushes were soon planted on large tracts of land in the lower tropical climates near Bogotá and in Antioquia.<sup>41</sup> In the region between the Magdalena and Cauca rivers, small farmers found coffee to be a particularly lucrative crop—Colombia’s tropical location allows coffee bushes to produce beans twice a year, providing enough revenue for a small holder to survive.<sup>42</sup>

The rise of the coffee economy is also seen as a catalyst behind the War of a Thousand Days. The government had taxed coffee exports and raised transportation rates on the Magdalena River, measures which planters vigorously opposed. Liberals hoped to find support for their uprising from a faction of the Conservative Party that was based in Antioquia and was closely linked to coffee interests. However, these Conservatives stayed loyal to their own party, and Liberal armies were defeated by 1900. A guerrilla war raged on in parts of the country for two more years, until nearly 100,000 were killed.

---

<sup>41</sup> Salomón Kalmanovitz, *Economía y nación: Una breve historia de Colombia* (Bogotá: Siglo Veintiuno, 1985) 175-193 and 330-333.

<sup>42</sup> Brazil’s coffee region, by contrast, is just far enough south to produce only one harvest a year (and to occasionally suffer from freezes). Large plantations have thus been the norm in Brazil’s coffee industry. Edmar Rocha and Robert Greenhill, *150 anos de café* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Salamandra Consultoria Editorial, 1994).

In 1902, peace treaties were signed by the leaders of the last Liberal resistance on the Caribbean coast, and, significantly, in the Department of Panamá.<sup>43</sup>

The United States, anxious to begin constructing a canal in Panamá, played a role in negotiating an end to the war in that region—indeed, the treaty was named “Wisconsin” after the U.S. battleship upon which it was signed on November 21, 1902. However, when the Colombian Senate hesitated to approve a canal treaty that was overly generous to U.S. interests, the U.S. backed a separatist rebellion in Panamá in 1903. The new Panamanian government immediately approved the canal treaty. Nearly twenty years would pass before the U.S. would reimburse Colombia for the loss of Panamá.<sup>44</sup> The issue would continue to add to the polemic between the parties in the 1930s, especially during the debates over Colombia’s neutrality before and during the Second World War—Conservatives found no reason to support the “gringos,” who had stolen their land, instead of the Germans, who had done nothing against Colombia.

After the civil war and the loss of Panamá, members of the political elite were more receptive to resolving their differences peacefully—the obvious success of coffee had also encouraged a desire to avoid conflicts that would damage the economy. The defeated Liberals did not offer a candidate in the 1904 election, but instead supported the Conservative Rafael Reyes, a former general and entrepreneur who had served as a diplomat during the recent conflict. Reyes pointedly included Liberals in his government in a show of bipartisan unity. Like Núñez, Reyes was directly influenced by Porfirian Mexican positivism; while the Liberal Núñez tried to alleviate social and political conflict

---

<sup>43</sup> Charles W. Bergquist, Coffee and Conflict in Colombia, 1886-1910 (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1986) 103-224.

<sup>44</sup> Richard L. Lael, Arrogant Diplomacy: U. S. Policy Toward Colombia, 1903-1922 (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1987) 25-37, 121-124, and 169-170.

by initiating a *rapprochement* with the Catholic Church, the Conservative Reyes moved to end constant bickering with the Liberals by offering positions to them in his administration. However, when the Colombian congress hesitated to implement Reyes' program of institutional and infrastructural changes, he suspended the legislature and instituted a mild dictatorship, albeit with some bipartisan support. Opposition to Reyes came to a head when he attempted to regularize the Panamanian situation with the U.S. in 1909; bipartisan street demonstrations in Bogotá were soon followed by Reyes' quiet resignation.<sup>45</sup>

The Reyes administration signaled an end to the frequent interparty civil conflicts that had plagued Colombia since the 1840s; Reyes' resignation reopened the political system to civilian politics. Under the bipartisan coalition that ousted Reyes, the Antioquian Conservative Carlos E. Restrepo was selected to serve as the first president under a reformed constitution. A constitutional reform reduced presidential terms of office to four years, without the possibility of immediate reelection (although presidents could seek the office again in a later election). The highly centralized appointment system for executive offices remained in place, although the minority party was offered a proportion of governorships and mayoralties. One-third of the seats in congress were also guaranteed for the minority, even if they received less than one-third of the votes cast. The Conservative Restrepo also continued Reyes' tradition of appointing Liberals to cabinet positions and to diplomatic posts—this tradition continued under the Conservative governments that followed.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> Bergquist 221-222, 225-246; and Humberto Vélez, "Rafael Reyes: Quinquenio, régimen político y capitalismo (1904-1909)" *NHC* Vol. I, 192-212.

<sup>46</sup> Bergquist 251-256; and Jorge Orlando Melo, "De Carlos E. Restrepo a Marco Fidel Suárez. Republicanismo y gobiernos conservadores," *NHC* Vol. I, 220-221, 224-225.

Despite the political transformation after 1910, Conservative administrations were still rooted in the political traditions of the nineteenth century. After the Conservatives returned to power in 1886, a concordat was signed with the Vatican which helped strengthen the Church's hold over education and social life throughout most of the country. In many isolated villages, the local priest also became an important political figure, almost invariably supporting the Conservative Party.<sup>47</sup> Through 1930, the archbishop of Bogotá made the final selection of official Conservative presidential candidates, who were then proclaimed in every pulpit in the country.<sup>48</sup> Such traditions made the Conservative Party less able to address the problems of a society that was beginning to industrialize, urbanize, and organize.<sup>49</sup>

After 1886, the government also granted certain foreign Catholic missionary orders enormous control and influence in the under populated regions of Colombia. As a result, foreign clergy (especially from Spain) were often the only priests and nuns that had contact with far-flung indigenous groups on the Pacific coast, the eastern plains, the Colombian Amazonia in the south, and the Guajira desert in the north.<sup>50</sup>

Well into the twentieth century, Latin America was still considered “mission territory” for certain Catholic religious orders; for instance, Colombian Jesuits fell under

---

<sup>47</sup> Abel 75-90; and Eduardo Posada-Carbo, “The Limits of Power: Elections Under the Conservative Hegemony in Colombia, 1886-1930,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* Vol. 77, Issue 2 (May 1997) 269-272. For the Department of Boyacá, see José David Cortés, *Curas y políticos: mentalidad religiosa e intransigencia en la diócesis de Tunja, 1881-1918* (Bogotá: Ministerio de Cultura, 1998) 177-194.

<sup>48</sup> Abel 33-34.

<sup>49</sup> Carlos Uribe Celis, *Los años veinte en Colombia: ideología y cultura* (Bogotá: Ediciones Aurora, 1985) 75-94.

<sup>50</sup> Gutiérrez 156; and *España: Estudio geográfico, político, histórico, científico, literario, artístico y monumental*, 4th ed. (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1942) 773.

the jurisdiction of Spanish superiors until their own province was established in 1924.<sup>51</sup> Orders based in Europe sent priests, friars, and nuns to staff schools, parishes, and missions throughout the region. French Dominicans had frequent contact with their Colombian brethren; Frenchmen were even named the provincials of the order in Colombia in the mid-1940s.<sup>52</sup> Jesús Fernández, a Spaniard who was worldwide head of the order of Augustinians Recollect in the late 1920s, was previously active in Colombia for several decades.<sup>53</sup> Ideas from Catholic Europe were especially felt in Church-run schools. For instance, Spanish priests had an overwhelming influence on the young Laureano Gómez, future leader of the Conservative Party in the 1930s and 1940s, when Gómez was a student at the Jesuit Colegio San Bartolomé in Bogotá at the turn of the century.<sup>54</sup>

As peasants moved away from subsistence farming and into raising coffee as a cash crop, they, along with the middlemen involved in the growing coffee trade, created a market for industrial goods. Factories producing a variety of foodstuffs and household items sprang up in cities throughout Colombia; Medellín, near the heart of the major coffee-producing areas, became the center of the textile industry.<sup>55</sup> With industrialization came urbanization; the building trades provided jobs while brick and cement factories were established and expanded. Colombia's transportation infrastructure also improved in order to serve the coffee economy, providing jobs in the construction and operation of

---

<sup>51</sup> Daniel Restrepo, La Compañía de Jesús en Colombia: compendio historial y galería de ilustres varones (Bogotá: Imprenta del Corazón de Jesús, 1940) 330.

<sup>52</sup> Ariza, Alberto E., Los Dominicos en Colombia, Tomo II, (Bogotá: Ediciones Antropos, 1993) 1331-1335.

<sup>53</sup> "Ilustre Visitante," Veritas [Chiquinquirá] 21 Aug. 1937: 1; and Eugenio Ayape de Agustín, Fundaciones y noticias de la Provincia de Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria de la Orden de Recoletos de San Agustín (Bogotá: Editorial Lumen Christi, 1950) xvi.

<sup>54</sup> Henderson, Conservative Thought 31.

<sup>55</sup> Kalmanovitz 235-249; and Palacios 339-340.

railroads.<sup>56</sup> Bogotá, for instance, was finally linked to the Magdalena River by rail in 1909.<sup>57</sup>

In the 1920s, ordinary laborers on the larger coffee plantations began demanding rights to the land of their absentee landlords in order to establish their own small coffee farms. This agrarian unrest played an important role in government debates and legislation in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>58</sup> Communists and populists sometimes agitated in favor of land reform, with some local successes.<sup>59</sup> The chaos of *La Violencia* provided opportunities to occupy unused land of members of the opposite party or to buy it at cut rate prices.

The coffee industry, from farms to ports, was almost exclusively in Colombian hands—wealthy large-scale planters and exporters from both parties united to form the National Coffeegrowers Federation (*Federación Nacional de Cafeteros*—Fedecafé) in 1928. Fedecafé provided its members—even the small holders—with a well-regulated market, as well as extensive information on the improvement of crops.<sup>60</sup>

With the political and economic climate increasingly more stable, foreign investment also increased in Colombia in the early twentieth century, particularly in mining, oil, and bananas. In Colombia, as in most Latin American nations, the government owns subsoil rights: debates in Congress about the handling of mining and oil leases were frequent. Both U.S. and British firms made bids; by the 1930's, Standard Oil was dominant in petroleum, while the British were more involved in gold and

---

<sup>56</sup> Kalmanovitz 235-241.

<sup>57</sup> Bergquist 236.

<sup>58</sup> Palacios 341-430.

<sup>59</sup> Michael F. Jiménez, *The Many Deaths of the Colombian Revolution: Region, Class, and Agrarian Rebellion in Central Colombia* (New York: Columbia U, Institute of Latin American and Iberian Studies, 1990); and Pierre Gilhodés, "La cuestión agraria en Colombia (1900-1946)," *NHC* Vol. III, 315-322.

<sup>60</sup> Bergquist 259.

emerald mining.<sup>61</sup> As in Central America, the United Fruit Company (UFCo) of Boston established banana plantations on the Caribbean coast.<sup>62</sup>

Certain rural regions only indirectly felt the increase in foreign investment and the burgeoning coffee economy. This included the highland areas in southern Colombia and north of Bogotá, which were traditionally dominated by large landholdings where peasant renters and sharecroppers grew potatoes, corn and wheat, or raised dairy cattle.<sup>63</sup> Ranches for beef cattle existed on the Llanos, but this region, along with the jungles in the south, was sparsely populated and largely outside of the national economy (and to a great extent, outside of direct government control).

Colombian labor organizers found the workers in foreign-owned industries particularly ready for unionization. These labor agitators were often connected with the small Revolutionary Socialist Party, established in 1919—its members were frequently artisans and middle class intellectuals who had read a bit of Marx. Labor organizing had a particular effect among banana workers attached to the United Fruit Company in the Santa Marta region on the Caribbean coast. A major strike against the UFC in 1928 resulted in a deplorable massacre of dozens of strikers in the town of Ciénaga, one of the major politically symbolic disasters that contributed to the end of the Conservative “hegemony” in 1930.<sup>64</sup>

As members of the opposition party, Liberals were in a better position than the Conservatives to channel societal unrest into political action, despite labor and socialist agitation organized outside of the hegemony of the two traditional parties. In general, the

---

<sup>61</sup> Kalmanovitz 253-255.

<sup>62</sup> Catherine LeGrand, “El Conflicto de las bananeras,” *NHC* Vol. III, 183-218.

<sup>63</sup> Kalmanovitz 327-329.

<sup>64</sup> Judith White, *Historia de una ignominia: la United Fruit Co. en Colombia* (Bogotá: Editorial Presencia, 1978) 73-102; and LeGrand 183-218.

Liberals benefited from increased urbanization of Colombian society, successfully organizing in new worker *barrios*. Peasants, recently uprooted from traditional rural life, were more receptive to the new ideas they encountered in the city; more importantly, they were upset with the inability of Conservative governments to meet their needs.<sup>65</sup>

Socialism was discussed and even promoted by a few Liberals as early as 1904;<sup>66</sup> the right of agitators to proclaim their ideas was defended by even more.<sup>67</sup> In the 1920s, some Liberals still advocated an uprising as the only way to break the Conservative grip on power, which was maintained by electoral fraud and the threat of violence. These “War Liberals” even entered into talks with would-be Marxist revolutionaries, but stayed on the sidelines when a socialist uprising was actually attempted and quickly repressed in the mountain slopes west of the Magdalena River in July 1929.<sup>68</sup> During this same time, Liberals in Congress led by Jorge Eliécer Gaitán were investigating and vociferously condemning the massacre of banana workers in Ciénaga from the previous year.<sup>69</sup> In the 1920s it was obvious that leftist reformers could find a home in the Liberal Party. These trends favoring the Liberals would come to a head in the presidential election of 1930,

---

<sup>65</sup> Archila 209-295. Young Conservatives and militant Catholics were influenced by right-wing activism in Europe at this time, and began offering a paternalistic alternative for addressing social problems. Although they received a cool reception by traditional Conservative leaders in the 1920s, their agitation would continue to animate the Colombian right through the 1930s and 40s. María Teresa Cifuentes Traslaviña and Alicia Florián Navas, “El catolicismo social: entre el integralismo y la Teología de la Liberación,” Cristianismo 321-353.

<sup>66</sup> In 1904, prominent Liberal leader and former rebel general Rafael Uribe Uribe spoke positively on the application of socialism in Colombia. Melo, “De Carlos E. Restrepo” 222-223; and Martha Cleveland Child, “Politics, Revolution, and Reform: The Liberal Challenger to the Colombian Status Quo: Rafael Uribe Uribe (1859-1914),” MA thesis, Vanderbilt U, 1969. Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, who organized a populist movement that nearly took power in the mid-1940’s, titled his law thesis from 1923 “Socialist Ideas in Colombia”. Richard E. Sharpless, Gaitán of Colombia: A Political Biography (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1978) 42-51.

<sup>67</sup> Gerardo Molina, Las ideas liberales en Colombia 8th ed. (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1989) 176-186.

<sup>68</sup> Archila 253; Gonzalo Sánchez, Los bolcheviques del Líbano (Tolima): crisis mundial, transición capitalista y rebelión rural en Colombia (Bogotá: ECOE, 1981).

<sup>69</sup> Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, 1928: la masacre en las bananeras (Bogotá: Ediciones los Comuneros, 1972).



when Liberals would take advantage of a split in Conservative ranks and win the presidency for the first time in nearly 50 years.

### Two Competing Nationalisms

Despite all of the social, economic, and political changes in Colombia in the first decades of the twentieth century, the traditional two-party system was able to maintain itself. Cooperation between Liberal and Conservative politicians in the overthrow of Reyes in 1909 and the institutionalization of power-sharing arrangements in the constitutional reforms of 1910 strengthened the party system. As noted, Conservative presidents also consistently appointed Liberals to positions in their cabinets and in the consular and diplomatic corps in order to further solidify power-sharing arrangements. As we shall see in a later chapter, the vertically-organized party system also provided a means for social outsiders, such as Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, to rise to important political positions in their parties and in the government.

However, the rhetoric of the two parties changed little, especially during the frequent elections. The government maintained an election schedule that had changed little from the advent of the 1886 Constitution through the first years of *La Violencia*. Odd-numbered years were especially busy, with up to three separate election days: departmental assemblies were elected in February or March; voters went to the polls again in May to elect representatives for the lower house of the national congress (the *Cámara de Representantes*—the Chamber of Representatives); and in October, municipal elections took place for town and city councils. Presidential elections occurred every six years until the constitutional reform of 1910, when the term of office was shortened to

four years.<sup>70</sup> Newly-elected departmental assemblies chose senators for the upper house of the national congress—the popular election of senators only began with another constitutional reform in 1945. Suffrage was restricted to men above the age of twenty-one; and literacy and property requirements applied for voters in national elections (for president and representatives to the Cámara), but these restrictions were often overlooked in practice and were lifted entirely in 1936 (after which departmental assembly and Cámara elections were held on the same day).<sup>71</sup>

Until the 1950s, elections were interrupted only by the War of a Thousand Days and the years of the Reyes dictatorship; politicians and party leaders had many opportunities to whip up the party faithful, and felt obligated to maintain acrimonious debates even during the every-other-even-year when there were no elections. Both parties chose to abstain from elections at different times, protesting a lack of guarantees of safety and fairness on the part of the party in power—the Liberals applied this tactic in the late 1920s, and the Conservatives in the mid-1930s. This did not lessen the importance of elections, as it simply heightened the competition between factions of the same party—certain elections for the Cámara, for instance, often served as a way for rival aspirants to measure their support among the party's rank and file for the following year's presidential election.

---

<sup>70</sup> Initially, presidents were elected indirectly; the 1910 reform also established the popular election of presidents. Melo, "De Carlos E. Restrepo" 222-223. For the time period covered in this dissertation, presidential elections were held in 1930, 1934, 1938, 1942, and 1946.

<sup>71</sup> Women did not receive the right to vote until 1955: Conservative politicians wanted to "shield" women from the hurly-burly of politics, while Liberals, more importantly, felt that the clergy held too much sway over women, believing that even the wives, sisters and daughters of Liberals might vote with the Church and the Conservatives. Magdala Velásquez Toro, "Condición jurídica y social de la mujer," *NHC* Vol. IV, 48-57. This argument was similar to that of French radicals—women did not vote in France until 1945. Steven C. Hause and Anne R. Kenney, *Women's Suffrage and Social Politics in the French Third Republic* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984).

Since the parties had to rally voters with such frequency, political rhetoric in Colombia took on an exaggerated importance, especially when compared to the rest of Latin America (and even to the United States). It is within this atmosphere of constant electioneering that conspiracy theories could be hatched and repeated in order to get the party faithful to the polls to defeat the other party. However, for now we will consider the two separate party-based nationalisms, which served as the rhetorical basis in Colombian politics. These antagonistic nationalisms within the same country provided a discursive framework for the transmission of the conspiracy theories in the 1930s and 1940s, which in turn contributed to inspiring the eliminationist violence that broke out after 1946.

It must be emphasized that Colombian peasants and workers—the overwhelming majority of the country—had their own reasons to continue to support one party or the other beyond the obvious ones of family tradition and shared struggle with other members of the same political grouping. An event like the War of a Thousand Days may have left foreign observers wondering what Colombians were fighting over, given that there was so little government revenue in dispute; even those who may have seen the turn-of-the-century civil war as a fight to end taxes on coffee exports had to have expressed surprise that so many militants were willing to give their lives for the Liberal or the Conservative party. The rank and file looked beyond issues concerning revenue and socio-economic policy; for them, party identification served many other purposes on the local level. It serves repeating that the parties were not class-based, but were vertically organized—local *gamonales* (political bosses) offered their clients a degree of protection and favor in land disputes, the levying of taxes, and the application of laws. In

a town with a Conservative majority, a Conservative might be favored over a Liberal in a decision on the ownership of a field, while in a Liberal municipality, a Liberal might be forgiven for his part in a barroom brawl while his Conservative counterpart would go to jail. On the departmental level, a Conservative administration would have favored the building of a road to a Conservative town rather than to a Liberal locale. Given the highly centralized executive branch under the 1886 constitution, the importance of which party was in power in Bogotá increased, since the president chose departmental governors who in turn chose the local mayors. Into this mix came the frequent elections, in which clients served their *gamonales* not only by voting but also by threatening members of the opposite party, even in other nearby municipalities. Again, within this structure was a discursive framework buoyed by certain rhetorical tropes in favor of one party and against the other.

If we are to consider the partisan rhetoric in Colombia as two competing nationalisms, we need to also examine the traits of nationalism as a discursive phenomenon. Nationalistic fervor is similar to that of religious belief;<sup>72</sup> the emotional attachment that Colombian Liberals and Conservatives had to their parties was very much like that of the followers of any faith. Indeed, politicians openly described the attraction of the parties as “mystique.” Sacrifice is another important aspect in constructing nationalism.<sup>73</sup> Colombia’s nineteenth-century civil wars provided the heroes and martyrs for the nationalistic discourse of the two parties, emphasizing the sacrifices made by all in the name of Liberalism or Conservatism in the past. Stories were handed down generation after generation, strengthening fealty to one party or the other; party militants

---

<sup>72</sup> Anderson 5.

<sup>73</sup> Anderson 7.

recounted certain battles and gave homage to particular heroes in the partisan press. Not only did this reinforce the separate nationalisms represented by the two parties, but it also inspired the continued use of arms in defense of each party's honor, so that nearly every contested election resulted in a number of deaths.

The two separate partisan-based ideas of “nation” competed with one another in other ways as well. Public civic rituals, such as parades on holidays and erecting monuments in public plazas, were important to strengthening the idea of “nation” throughout the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; in Colombia, these rituals were based more on the local party in power rather than on a nationalist consensus of all citizens. As already mentioned, by the mid-nineteenth century, most towns and cities leaned heavily towards one party or the other. When one of the two parties was dominant in a particular municipality, local decisions as to which color to use on houses and which hero was to be honored with a monument in the public square were easier to make. However, local circumstances still led to conflicts in certain municipalities, even if one party dominated. These local conflicts were reported all over the country in the partisan press, strengthening a sense of outrage and victimization towards the deeds of the opposite party.

### Red vs. Blue

Perhaps the most basic difference between the competing nationalisms is found in the party colors—red for the Liberals and blue for the Conservatives<sup>74</sup>—a difference that

---

<sup>74</sup> It almost goes without saying that Colombia specialists from the United States are alarmed by the “red state-blue state” divide that has been promoted in the U.S. media since the 2000 presidential election, although the colors represent the opposite political affiliations than they do in Colombia. Kevin Drum,

is employed up to the present. In small towns throughout Colombia, one can easily identify the predominant party by the color of the trim on the whitewashed houses. Newspapers in the 1930s and 1940s, when they could afford special ink, used red and blue to emphasize certain news items, especially on their front pages—the Conservative El Siglo and the Liberal El Liberal of Bogotá were two newspapers which most frequently employed the colors. Blue banners and red flags were carried by the party faithful in marches and waved at rallies—and politicians and party militants employed their party’s colors in their ties. Even today, cookies with red sprinkles produced in rural and neighborhood bakeries are called *liberales*.

This simple means of party identification was very much a part of the partisan *mística* (mystique). *Mística* was a word employed by the political leaders themselves in the 1930s and 1940s to describe what motivated the rank and file to unquestioningly put their faith in the party, obey directives from party committees, and blindly vote for the lists of candidates promoted by party leaders. Confidence in a politician was measured by their party affiliation more than the individual’s personal merits, and the parties were strongly identified with their color.

One can see how both *mística* and the party colors were understood by politicians in the 1940s—even with a bit of cynicism—in an article appropriately titled “La mística de los colores políticos” (“The Mystique of Political Colors”) by party activist and journalist Jorge Padilla<sup>75</sup> in early 1945.<sup>76</sup> Padilla described the use of colors and their significance for Colombian voters, and was candid in admitting that

---

“Political Animal: Red State, Blue State,” Washington Monthly 13 Nov. 2004. 27 May 2005 <[http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/archives/individual/2004\\_11/005156.php](http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/archives/individual/2004_11/005156.php)>.

<sup>75</sup> Padilla was typical of the professional politicians in Colombia of the time (the phenomenon of professionalism in Colombian politics will be addressed in the next chapter). Padilla received a law degree

Among the Colombian masses, the question of colors has penetrated so deeply that it would not be an exaggeration to think that the greater part of the participants in the civil wars of the last century were motivated by the sentimental pressure of the red or the blue.<sup>77</sup>

He added:

In any other country in the world, a citizen that is active in a party has concrete, grounded, and economic reasons for doing so. The triumph of their party means a determined legislative program that would orient their country in a determined direction that would affect their personal life in a determined way. In Colombia, no. The masses are large sentimental blocks that do not have the slightest notion of what the parties mean. To be liberal is to have a liberal idea of the State. To be conservative is to have a conservative idea of the State. To be socialist is to have a socialist idea of the State. How many Colombians can distinguish between one and the other concept, between one and the other idea, between one and the other policy? It is frequently the case that a Colombian professes a particular party for the simple reason that his father supported that party, and even the majority of the citizens of the two great collectivities which politically divide the Republic only understand, love, and defend the color, the political color.<sup>78</sup>

Padilla's analysis is striking, and goes far in explaining how the colors had captured the imagination of the party rank and file. He also shows the degree of cynicism in which professional politicians held even their own party's rank and file: they felt that an uneducated peasant did not bother to grasp great political ideas, and was instead

---

in the late 1930s in Bordeaux, France, where he also published his dissertation (Les conflits collectifs du travail en Colombie [Bordeaux: Imprimerie E. Drouillard, 1941]). Padilla served in a variety of government positions, both in Bogotá and abroad (as a diplomat in France, Denmark, and Cuba). He became a *gaitanista* and was one of the four men who were accompanying Gaitán to lunch at the moment of his assassination on April 9, 1948. Oliverio Perry, Quién es Quién en Colombia, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Bogotá: Oliverio Perry, 1970) 304-305.

<sup>76</sup> Jorge Padilla, "La mística de los colores políticos," Batalla [Bogotá] 19 Jan. 1945: 3.

<sup>77</sup> "En las masas colombianas la cuestión de los colores ha penetrado tan profundamente que no sería exagerado pensar que la mayor parte de las gentes que fueron a las guerras civiles del siglo pasado lo hicieron bajo la presión sentimental del rojo o el azul."

<sup>78</sup> "En cualquier país del mundo el ciudadano que milita en un partido tiene razones concretas, terrestres, económicas para hacerlo. El triunfo de su bando aparece una determinada legislación que orienta al país en determinada dirección afectando a su vez la vida personal en determinada forma. En Colombia no. Las masas son grandes bloques sentimentales que no tienen una cabal noción de lo que significan los partidos. Ser liberal es tener una idea liberal del Estado. Ser conservador es tener una idea conservadora del Estado. Ser socialista es tener una idea socialista del Estado. ¿Cuántos son los colombianos que podrían distinguir entre una y otra concepción, entre una y otra idea, entre una y otra política? Es demasiado frecuente el caso del colombiano que enfila en un partido por la sola razón de que su padre militó en él, y más numeroso aún el del ciudadano que de las dos grandes colectividades que dividen políticamente la República sólo entiende, ama y defiende el color, el color político."

simply motivated by one color or the other. Padilla betrays how politicians employed rhetoric as a political tactic, knowing which buttons to push with their party supporters in order to gain their support on election day. The party colors were an important part of this rhetoric, both in speech and in displays; they were longstanding elements of the separate party nationalisms. Padilla continues his article with less cynicism and more flourish, emphasizing the nationalistic importance of the colors: “National politics oscillates between frontiers of red and shores of blue”, red symbolically appearing in the battles of the civil wars, “in the sword of Mosquera, in the gallop of Uribe Uribe, in the sound of the hoarse voice of Herrera” (all major Liberal figures) while blue appears “in the smiling image of the Virgin of Lourdes and the frozen mouth of General Fernández” (here the Liberal Padilla emphasizes the Conservative-Church relationship alongside the name of a notorious Conservative police chief from the War of a Thousand Days).<sup>79</sup> He goes on to make a negative reference to the last decades of Conservative rule before the Liberal victory in 1930:

Red flower of the peasants fallen before government rifles and blue smoke of the censers that fly in the cathedrals over bishops and between the top hats of ministers, judges, military officers, and men of State.<sup>80</sup>

Padilla expresses the importance of the colors and of *mística* in the creation of the concept of “nation,” admitting that “Upon this irrational and confused, ardent and battling, intransigent and generous *mística* we must build the greatness of the

---

<sup>79</sup> Aristides Fernández was responsible for public order in Bogotá, and jailed many Liberals without trial; he also used Liberal civilians as hostages on occasion, in order to pressure the rebel forces to release Conservatives. Bergquist 176-192.

<sup>80</sup> “Roja flor de los campesinos caídos al golpe de los fusiles del gobierno y humo azul de los incensarios que vuela por las catedrales sobre la faz de los obispos y entre los sombreros de copa de los ministros, de los jueces, de los militares, de los hombres del Estado.”



nationality.”<sup>81</sup> But, since Padilla was a Liberal writing in the official magazine of the national Liberal Party directorate, he continues by stating,

The red flag that has passed from hand to hand since the times of Santander until the days of [Alfonso] López [Liberal president in 1945], is the appropriate ambition of a justice which has an animal soul of pure flame and a moving body of a both conquered and victorious banner.<sup>82</sup>

Padilla comes back to his overall theme in his last sentence, and effectively illustrates the importance of red and blue to militants of both parties: “The political colors that can appear as the most superficial of Colombian vanities are in truth the deepest, richest, and most meaningful of its historical realities.”<sup>83</sup> The Liberal writer exaggerates in his superlatives, but captures the sense in which the colors were an intrinsic part of creating two competing nationalisms within the same country.

#### Who is a National Hero? The Case of the Bust of Rafael Uribe Uribe

In the first decades of the twentieth century, homage to party heroes and martyrs became more frequent in Colombia with marches, speeches, and the raising of statues. Partisan political acts that recognized heroes and martyrs from the nineteenth-century civil wars could often cause conflict in certain municipalities, and were often deliberately organized to specifically challenge and offend members of the opposite party. This is seen in a particular incident in the small mining town of Istmina, in the province of

---

<sup>81</sup> “Sobre esa mística irracional y confusa, ardorosa y batalladora, intransigente y generosa, debe edificarse la grandeza de la nacionalidad.”

<sup>82</sup> “La bandera roja que ha venido saltando de mano en mano desde los tiempos de Santander hasta los días de López, es la propia ambición de la justicia que tiene alma animal de llama pura y cuerpo móvil de trapo vencido y victorioso.”

<sup>83</sup> “Los colores políticos que pueden parecer la más superficial de las vanidades colombianas son en verdad lo más honda, la más rica y la más significativa de sus realidades históricas.”

Chocó on the Pacific coast, in 1921. When the Liberal majority decided to erect a bust of party leader General Rafael Uribe Uribe, who had been assassinated seven years before, they faced stiff opposition from both reactionary Conservatives who ran a local newspaper and from the Spanish missionary priests who administered the local parish. It was a case of conflicting party-based nationalisms: whose heroes were to be honored, and where? The priests and the Conservatives appealed to the intendant of the province, Nicanor Restrepo Giraldo, a moderate Conservative who desired political peace; he in turn appealed to the Apostolic Prefect, Santiago Gutiérrez, a Spanish cleric in charge of missionary activities in the Chocó, as well as to the moderate Conservative who was then serving as president in Bogotá, Marco Fidel Suárez, thus making this matter of national concern.

At the beginning of this chapter appears the text of the desperate telegram sent to the president by Chocó's intendant at the height of the crisis. The Liberals of Istmina in 1921, like many of their copartisans throughout Colombia, chose to honor Rafael Uribe Uribe as their hero with a bust in their main plaza. Uribe Uribe was one of the leading generals in the losing Liberal army in the War of a Thousand Days. A prolific writer and active politician, Uribe Uribe was involved in encouraging the Liberals to revolt in the years leading up to the civil war. However, Uribe Uribe also cooperated with Conservatives in restoring peace. The former rebel general held various diplomatic posts in the conciliatory government of Conservative Rafael Reyes, elected in 1904. After the overthrow of Reyes in 1909, Uribe Uribe favored a partisan government with a loyal opposition, and formed his own "Liberal Block" against the "Republicans," as the bipartisan anti-Reyes coalition was known. The first Republican president was

Conservative Carlos E. Restrepo (1910-1914); despite the fact that the Republican candidate in 1914 was a Liberal, Uribe Uribe and his “block” supported the opposition Conservative candidate, José Vicente Concha, who won by a large margin. The new administration began just as the First World War broke out in Europe; Colombia, like other countries dependent on exports, suffered an immediate blow to its economy. When jobs became scarce, the new government was blamed; in the Republican press and on the streets, Uribe Uribe was excoriated for his role in Concha’s victory. Two unemployed artisans assassinated Uribe Uribe while he was entering the capitol building in Bogotá on October 15, 1914.<sup>84</sup> Because of his complicated political maneuverings, Uribe Uribe was not only a “martyr” for true Liberals, but also a Liberal leader who was acceptable to some Conservatives—but by no means all Conservatives. The Liberals of Istmina were confident that a bust of Uribe Uribe would not offend the moderate Conservative intendant Nicanor Restrepo Giraldo, but they knew that it would upset the more intransigent Conservatives in Istmina, along with the reactionary Spanish missionary priests who ran the local parish.

After the Reyes government and the constitutional reforms of 1910, a degree of political cooperation between politicians of the two parties, called *convivencia* (“living together”), was established. *Convivencia* was very much an elite phenomenon that occurred in Bogotá or in a few departmental capitals—rarely did Liberals and Conservatives cooperate or even intermingle on the local level, where one or the other party usually dominated. Still, one can witness how *convivencia* operated in the Chocó in 1921—the intendant was a Conservative, but he appointed a prominent local Liberal,

---

<sup>84</sup> Eduardo Santa, Rafael Uribe Uribe: el caudillo de la esperanza, 4th ed. (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Cultura, 1974) 313-314; Bergquist 227; and Melo, “De Carlos Restrepo” 233.

Emiliano Rey, as the mayor of Istmina, where the vast majority of the inhabitants were Liberals.

Still, in small towns like Istmina, party allegiances were cemented by the collective partisan experience of triumph, persecution, and civil war, which were celebrated in various civic acts, such as that organized by the Istmina Liberals in 1921. These actions were also aimed at challenging members of the minority party in a locale—the erection of a bust of Uribe Uribe in Istmina was meant to provoke local Conservatives, who were more partisan than the intendant, and the Spanish missionary priests, who were even more opposed to all things “liberal” than most Conservatives. Uribe Uribe offended the sensibilities of these Conservatives and churchmen because he had written “the only Colombian volume to appear on the Holy See’s index of prohibited books,”<sup>85</sup> a work entitled How Colombian Political Liberalism is not a Sin, published in 1912.<sup>86</sup> In this book, Uribe Uribe attempted to respond to accusations made by intransigent parish priests and bishops throughout Colombia during these years, when the Liberals were returning to civilian politics and once again participating in the congress and the government.

Debates over the issue of the role of the Church in Colombian society had been the cause of several civil wars and rebellions in the nineteenth century, and it still stirred powerful passions in the first decades of the twentieth. Conservative politicians, with the support of local and national clergy, frequently claimed that the Liberals were bent on putting the Church under its heel and destroying religion in Colombian society—and they backed up their assertions by citing the anti-clerical policies of nineteenth-century Liberal

---

<sup>85</sup> Fray Mora Díaz, El Clarín de la Victoria (Tunja, Colombia: 1942) 125.

<sup>86</sup> Rafael Uribe Uribe, De cómo el liberalismo político colombiano no es pecado (Bogotá: El Liberal, 1912).

governments, as well as the official condemnations of liberalism by the Church hierarchy at home and abroad.<sup>87</sup> Liberals, for their part, claimed that religious fanatics controlled the Conservative Party and would reverse any cultural progress achieved in Colombia if given the chance.

The missionary priests in Istmina, like so many clerics from Spain at that time, were also reacting to the violent anticlericalism in their own country—many of the missionaries arrived in Colombia shortly after the “Tragic Week” in Barcelona in July 1909, when churches were burned and priests were killed by radicalized mobs. For the Spanish missionaries in Istmina, any inkling of anticlericalism on the part of Colombian Liberals was to be roundly condemned in defense of the Church.<sup>88</sup> Although the Spanish parish priest of Istmina, Virginio Belarra, never explicitly stated his opinions about Uribe Uribe in telegrams to the intendant of Chocó, he was so agitated by the intention of local Liberals to erect a bust of the condemned Liberal leader that he claimed that the plaza chosen for the monument, which had been in public use for years, was actually the property of the local church. His superior, the Apostolic Prefect Francisco Gutiérrez, supported his priest. Gutiérrez did not mince words when referring to Uribe Uribe, claiming that the bust would inspire attacks against the Church and its clergy, since Uribe Uribe was an “enemy of the Church.”<sup>89</sup>

The fact that Spanish Catholic missionary priests were at work in a remote area of Colombia, a Catholic country, may seem odd at first. However, Colombia lacked priests who were specialized in setting up missions, and the Chocó was definitely mission

---

<sup>87</sup> Pope Pius IX specifically condemned Colombian Liberals in an encyclical in 1863. Pius IX, “Incredibili Afflictamur,” *Colección completa de Encíclicas Pontíficas 1830-1965*, 4th ed., Vol. 1 (Buenos Aires: Editorial Guadalupe, 1965) 152-154.

<sup>88</sup> Gutiérrez 156; and Raymond Carr, *Spain, 1808-1939* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966) 483-485.

<sup>89</sup> Restrepo Giraldo 8.

territory—essentially a political, economic, and social backwater to the rest of Colombia.<sup>90</sup> In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, parts of the region contained extensive gold placer deposits, which were mined by enslaved Africans. Certain remote areas of the Chocó became havens for escaped and recently freed slaves, who formed settlements near indigenous communities that pre-dated Spanish colonization. As in colonial times, twentieth-century Catholic missionaries did not concentrate their efforts on the Afro-Colombian population, but rather on the indigenous communities, with the intention of organizing and “civilizing them.” In addition, the vast majority of Afro-Colombians historically supported the Liberals. The missionaries seemed to have been of the opinion that it was harder to fight the sins of the civilized (or, in their view, the semi-civilized) than to work with more “virgin” souls.<sup>91</sup>

The missionary priests were more than a little arrogant towards the residents of the Chocó, as was frequently lamented in the local Liberal press.<sup>92</sup> On the national level, certain Liberal politicians frequently presented the political activities of foreign missionary orders as an affront to national honor; more radical Liberals called for their expulsion. During these years in Quibdó, a pamphlet was published by the local Liberal paper entitled The Murderers of Christ, which specifically outlined, in their opinion, the various times that the missionaries and their Apostolic Prefect had acted outside of the realm of faith, attempting to interfere in local politics.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, only a few weeks before the crisis in Istmina, the Apostolic Prefect sent a letter to the local press against the

---

<sup>90</sup> For this reason, it was administered as a “province” (*intendencia*), rather than as a “department” (*departamento*). This designation made the legal and jurisdictional ties to Bogotá even stronger.

<sup>91</sup> Gutiérrez 156.

<sup>92</sup> Gutiérrez 55-63.

<sup>93</sup> The pamphlet was probably published between 1919 and 1924. Regrettably, I have not found the pamphlet and can only refer to the Apostolic Prefect’s version of it. Gutiérrez 57.

candidacy of Emiliano Rey for representative in the Cámara since “as a candidate of deeply liberal ideas, Emiliano Rey must be sustaining the errors condemned by the authority of the Church.” The Liberal press in turn proclaimed that Rey should be elected for the same reasons that inspired the Prefect’s condemnation, adding that

The Apostolic Prefect of Chocó, Spanish missionary, fully enters into the militant politics of Colombia; something a Colombian priest in Spain would not do, a subject of Don Carlos de Borbón does in our country.<sup>94</sup>

It is significant that the editorialist states that the Apostolic Prefect is a subject of “Carlos de Borbón” and not “Alfonso XIII”—the reigning king of Spain at the time. In the nineteenth century, traditionalist supporters of Carlos de Borbón, called Carlists, initiated rebellions and civil wars in favor of this line of the royal family and against the line of Isabella II, which was seen as more liberal. Alfonso XIII was from the line of Isabella II. Carlists, who were active well into the twentieth century and provided troops for Franco during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), envisioned an authoritarian society under the direction of a strong monarchy and a powerful Church. In depicting the Apostolic Prefect as from the Carlist camp, the editorialist in Quibdó was using a typical anti-clerical jibe from the period.<sup>95</sup>

The more moderate Conservatives were perhaps similarly offended by the arrogance of the foreign missionaries—one gets this sense from intendant Restrepo Giraldo, who, by the end of an exchange of telegrams with Istmina parish priest Father Belarra in July 1921, had to point out to the Spaniard

IF I PERSONALLY DO NOT DESERVE RESPECT AND CONSIDERATION, THE MAJESTY OF THE LAW THAT I REPRESENT DOES DESERVE THEM AND YOU,

---

<sup>94</sup> “El Prefecto Apostólico del Chocó, Misionero español, ingresa de lleno en la política militante de Colombia, lo que no hace un sacerdote colombiano en España, lo hace un súbdito de Don Carlos de Borbón en nuestro país,” *ABC* [Quibdó] 20 Apr. 1921: 1.

<sup>95</sup> Jackson 3-6.

AS A PASTOR OF SOULS, MUST BE AN EXAMPLE OF TOLERANCE AND CHARITY.<sup>96</sup>

Intendant Restrepo Giraldo was quickly able to hammer out a compromise between Church officials and the local Liberals over the issue of the bust: the municipality would recognize Church ownership of the plaza, while the Church would agree to the erection of the bust. This compromise received the seal of approval not only of President Suárez in Bogotá, but also of the Papal Nuncio, the Vatican diplomat in the Colombian capital—the issue of the bust in tiny far-off Istmina had indeed almost become an international incident.<sup>97</sup> Despite this agreement, differing accounts of the arrival of the bust of Uribe Uribe in Istmina extended the controversy. The Liberals, along with several prominent local Conservatives, sent telegrams to intendant Restrepo Giraldo expressing that the act was met with civility and good manners on the part of the local populace.<sup>98</sup> Father Belarra, however, told a different story in a brief telegram to the intendant:

Yesterday in reception Uribe bust there were shouts of “death to clergy, conservatism.” During night rocks thrown at convent. Take note.<sup>99</sup>

The Apostolic Prefect took the side of his priest in Istmina, while Restrepo Giraldo gathered testimonials from sixteen local Conservatives that stated that no such disturbances had occurred.<sup>100</sup>

---

<sup>96</sup> The capital letters are employed in Restrepo Giraldo’s own published account. “SI PERSONALMENTE, NO MEREZCO RESPETO Y CONSIDERACIONES, LA MAJESTAD DE LA LEY QUE REPRESENTO SÍ LOS MERECE Y USTED, COMO CURA DE ALMAS, DEBERIA DAR EJEMPLO DE TOLERANCIA Y CARIDAD.” Restrepo Giraldo 39.

<sup>97</sup> Restrepo Giraldo 6-21.

<sup>98</sup> Restrepo Giraldo 23-24.

<sup>99</sup> “Ayer en recibimiento busto Uribe hubo mueras Clero, conservatismo. Durante noche echaron piedras Convento. Tome nota.” Restrepo Giraldo 23.

<sup>100</sup> Restrepo Giraldo 27-31.



But not all Istmina Conservatives agreed. According to the Liberal mayor, Emiliano Rey, a faction of local Istmina Conservatives were fanning the flames of partisan strife over the issue of the bust in their newspaper Argos.<sup>101</sup> This group seemed to be both inspired by the intransigence of the missionaries as well as motivated by a desire to take the place of the more moderate Conservative leadership in the town. These Conservatives supported the priest's story, and further claimed that the Liberals, including the local chief of police, were conspiring against them. Led by Francisco Carrasco, they sent a telegram to Restrepo Giraldo stating

Are there guarantees [for the safety of Conservatives and the clergy]? We are preparing ourselves to repel any aggression. This is the voice of alert.<sup>102</sup>

The Apostolic Prefect later praised Carrasco as a "venerable old defender of the Church."<sup>103</sup> Restrepo Giraldo responded to Carrasco by pointing out that the previous intendant, who was Carrasco's own son, had appointed the police chief: "Is it that what yesterday was white, today is black?"<sup>104</sup>

Restrepo Giraldo tried to calm local passions by promising to attend the unveiling of the bust, accompanied by a picket of provincial police.<sup>105</sup> Still, Father Belarra would not let up, demanding guarantees from the local town council that there would be no anticlerical disturbances during or after the unveiling of the bust. The council was dominated by Liberals; its president responded to Belarra with the following:

A cold virus has not permitted the meeting of the council over which I preside, despite various calls that I made before falling into my own sick bed, because almost all members of the council have either come down with a bad cold, or a member of their

---

<sup>101</sup> Restrepo Giraldo 4-5.

<sup>102</sup> "Habrán garantías? Nos preparamos repeler cualesquiera agresión. Es voz de alerta." Restrepo Giraldo 25.

<sup>103</sup> Gutiérrez 48.

<sup>104</sup> Restrepo Giraldo 25.

<sup>105</sup> Restrepo Giraldo 36.

family has. For this powerful reason we have not been able to consider all of the conditions for the erection of the bust of Rafael Uribe Uribe...<sup>106</sup>

To say the least, Belarra was furious in relating this note to intendant Restrepo Giraldo. In the end, the local Liberals would not concede to Belarra's final conditions since they found them humiliating—they were not planning disturbances and were offended that Belarra thought that they were. The bust was not erected.<sup>107</sup>

This was not the last monument to Uribe Uribe that would cause a furor in Colombia. A large monument to the fallen Liberal hero in Bogotá was authorized by the majority Conservative congress of 1930 shortly after the election of Enrique Olaya Herrera to the presidency—the first Liberal president since the 1880s. Since Uribe Uribe was acceptable to some Conservatives due to his support for the Conservative presidential candidate in 1914, he was seen as a figure that could also unite the two parties. Olaya Herrera was fielded by his party in the last weeks of the campaign in order to take advantage of a split in the Conservative ranks between two candidates. Olaya Herrera had been part of the anti-Reyes bipartisan Republican coalition twenty years before, and enjoyed the support of certain important Conservatives, including ex-Republican Conservative president Carlos E. Restrepo, who held the most important position in Olaya Herrera's first cabinet. Authorizing the monument to Uribe Uribe was

---

<sup>106</sup> “La peste de la gripa no ha permitido la reunión de la H. Corporación que presido, a pesar de varias citaciones que hice antes de caer en cama, porque casi todos los miembros del H. Concejo o han sufrido la peste o han tenido miembros de familia enfermos. Por esta poderosa razón no se ha tratado aún sobre las condiciones pactadas para la erección del busto del ilustre colombiano Dr. Rafael Uribe Uribe...” Restrepo Giraldo 38-39

<sup>107</sup> Restrepo Giraldo 39-40; Gutiérrez 48. I have not been able to determine whether or not the bust was erected at a later date, although it is possible. Emiliano Rey, the Liberal mayor of Istmina in 1921, was appointed intendant of the Chocó after the Liberals won the presidency in 1930. Emiliano Rey, Informe al señor Ministro de Gobierno 1932-1933 (Quibdó, Chocó, Colombia: Imprenta Oficial, 1933) [Helguera Collection]. On the other hand, a fire that swept through a good part of Istmina in April 1922 was attributed by the priests to “God speaking” against the “licentious scandalous” life that they witnessed on the streets—the locals may have felt the same way and abstained from erecting the monument to Uribe Uribe. Gutiérrez 52.

a good will gesture by the congress towards the new president. However, the monument was not unveiled until 1939. By that time, partisan passions were inflamed to the point that the monument was condemned by many Conservatives, especially for its impropriety, since its central allegorical figure was a reclining nude male.<sup>108</sup>

Although Olaya Herrera pointedly included Conservatives in his cabinet, between 1931 and 1933 the appointment of Liberal governors in certain key departments encouraged Liberals in the provinces to use fraud and violence to successfully guarantee an electoral advantage over the Conservatives. A near civil war broke out in the contiguous region of the northeastern departments of Boyacá, Santander, and Norte de Santander, as newly appointed Liberal police and their civilian supporters massacred or displaced thousands of Conservative peasants, who in turn attacked the Liberals in their communities.<sup>109</sup> Governors and local mayors also antagonized provincial Conservatives and the Catholic clergy in many other ways—in a later chapter, we will examine how the issue of Church-run public schools became a flashpoint of conflict in many parts of Colombia while the Liberals held the presidency from 1930 to 1946.

However, local Liberal administrations also insulted Conservatives by using official powers and funds to raise monuments to Liberal heroes and martyrs. For example, in October 1936 the Liberal government of the southwestern Department of Cauca erected a monument to “The Martyrs of San Camilo” in the main square of Popayán, the departmental capital. The “martyrs of San Camilo” were a group of twenty unarmed Liberal civilians who were slaughtered by the notorious Conservative caudillo Julio Arboleda on the outskirts of Popayán while that city was under siege during a civil

---

<sup>108</sup> Mora Díaz, *El Clarín* 125-128.

<sup>109</sup> Guerrero 110-214.

war in 1861.<sup>110</sup> To commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of this event, the Liberal departmental assembly first authorized the publication of a pamphlet titled The Martyrs of San Camilo (Popayán). Accusatory Chapter from Conservative History, printed by the official departmental press—obviously, both Liberal and Conservative taxpayers paid for this pamphlet, to the indignation of the Conservatives.<sup>111</sup> The day of the formal laying of the first stone of the monument, October 30, was declared a departmental holiday,<sup>112</sup> and an impressive parade was organized in Popayán. According to the official program, the parade was led by the Liberal departmental governor, the Liberal mayor of Popayán, and the local commanders of the National Police and the army regiment. These luminaries were followed by the departmental and municipal Liberal committees, the descendants of the martyrs, the survivors of the Battle of Los Chancos (a Liberal victory in the civil war of 1876), school children and workers' associations, and other citizens' committees and organizations, with the members of the National Police and the local army regiment bringing up the rear. No Church or Conservative groups are mentioned.

One needs to put such a display in context: Popayán is famous throughout Colombia for its annual Holy Week processions—devout local Catholic men dressed in purple robes carry images of Jesus' passion and of saints through the streets of the city; the police and the army regiment also take part. The city's Liberals finally had their own day in 1936, with an equally impressive parade. Popayán itself was the birthplace of several Colombian presidents and prelates, including nineteenth-century Conservative, later Liberal general and president Tomás Cipriano de Mosquera, responsible for taking

---

<sup>110</sup> Iván el Monteo, "Introducción: Don Julio, el Terrible," Los mártires de San Camilo (Popayán). Acusador capítulo de historia conservadora (Popayán: Imprenta Oficial del Departamento del Cauca, 1936) [Helguera Collection] 5-11.

<sup>111</sup> Los mártires

<sup>112</sup> Iván el Monteo 6.

real estate from the Church in the 1860s, and his brother Manuel José Mosquera, the archbishop of Bogotá who was forcibly exiled by another Liberal government in 1852.<sup>113</sup> Guillermo Valencia was another famous *payanés*, both as a poet and as an unsuccessful Conservative candidate for president (in 1918 and 1930); Valencia was certainly aware of the Liberal ceremony in his hometown in 1936, but was not invited nor inspired to write poetry about the “Martyrs of San Camilo.” The 1936 ceremony was meant to be a show of force by the Liberals, in order to put local Conservatives in their place.

Likewise, the ceremony in Popayán in 1936 can be seen in a larger national context. In 1934, Liberal Alfonso López Pumarejo won the presidency in an uncontested election—the Conservatives, still divided after the 1930 electoral debacle, chose not to field a candidate. Conservative leader Laureano Gómez, who had just begun his long dominance of the party, also believed in partisan government with a loyal opposition, much like Rafael Uribe Uribe in 1914, and was opposed to a government of both parties as instituted in 1930 by the Liberal Olaya Herrera. López agreed with Gómez in this idea; additionally, the two men had been friends since fighting against the machine politics of the Conservative Party as young legislators twenty years before—Gómez anticipated that López would curb the Liberal electoral fraud and violence that appeared in the provinces after 1930. However, López was elected by more votes than were cast in the 1930 election, as Liberals everywhere voted repeatedly and local election commissions reported exaggerated vote totals. This, in addition to other disagreements with the new all-Liberal government, led Gómez to declare in 1935 his party’s abstention

---

<sup>113</sup> The other Colombian presidents from Popayán were: Joaquín Mosquera (a brother of Tomás Ciprano and Manuel José, 1830-1831); General José María Obando (1830, 1853-1854), General José Hilario López (1849-1853), Froilán Largacha (1863) and General Julián Trujillo (1870, 1878-1880). Ignacio Arizmendi Posada, *Presidentes de Colombia 1810-1990* (Bogotá: Planeta, 1989) 65-66, 87-95, 117, 153-156.

from national and departmental elections as a protest for a lack of governmental guarantees for fair balloting.<sup>114</sup> Thus, the departmental assembly and local mayors of the Department of Cauca were all Liberals in 1936. As we shall see, this situation led to a certain radical ferment throughout the country as Liberals everywhere began enacting laws to specifically irritate local Conservatives and churchmen for similar injustices during the long “Conservative Hegemony” over the national government. The ceremony in Popayán in 1936 was very much a part of this type of legislation.

Electoral politics played an important role in the nationalistic commemorations of party heroes by Liberals. Since Uribe Uribe was killed on October 14, 1914, marches and ceremonies occurred on or near that day—conveniently, voters went to the polls in local elections in October on odd-numbered years. Thus, the commemoration was useful in galvanizing the party faithful for the elections. Another famous Liberal general from the War of a Thousand Days, Benjamín Herrera, was also honored by Liberals in public ceremonies. After the death of Uribe Uribe, Herrera became the leader of the Liberal Party, presiding over a radical national convention of Liberals in 1922, where he was declared the candidate for president (the only Liberal to run for the office in the 1920s—Liberals also applied the tactic of electoral abstention). Herrera lost amidst massive Conservative fraud, which continued into the 1923 legislative elections. He sent a formal complaint about the fraud and violence to the president in February 1924; a few days later, on February 29, the Liberal leader died of natural causes.<sup>115</sup> Since Herrera died on “leap-year-day,” he was commemorated in marches and ceremonies in early March—a

---

<sup>114</sup> Terrence Burns Horgan, “The Liberals Come to Power in Colombia, Por Debajo la Ruana: a Study of the Enrique Olaya Herrera Administration 1930-1934,” PhD diss., Vanderbilt U, 1983, 543-544, footnote 7.

<sup>115</sup> Molina 77-90.

time that coincided with electoral campaigns for legislatures on odd-numbered years, thus animating the party faithful in time for the polls.<sup>116</sup>

Homage to Uribe Uribe and Herrera united Liberals of all factions. For instance, in the march to their tombs organized in Bogotá in the 1944, opposing politicians within the party walked together, including Alfonso López Pumarejo (reform Liberal president from 1934 to 1938, and reelected president again in 1942); Eduardo Santos (moderate Liberal president from 1938 to 1942, who generally opposed the López administration); and Darío Echandía, who served as a minister in both López governments and acting president while López was in the U.S. from 1943 to 1944. The speakers included Carlos Lleras Restrepo and Carlos Arango Vélez—the first was a minister in Santos' government and the second ran unsuccessfully as a dissident Liberal against López in the 1942 presidential contest.<sup>117</sup> Uribe Uribe and Herrera were heroes for all Liberals.<sup>118</sup>

Monuments became sites of violent acts after 1946. Although the Uribe Uribe monument in Bogotá has remained, the same cannot be said for other statues of Uribe Uribe erected in other parts of the country. For instance, Uribe Uribe's bust in the city of Cartagena on the Caribbean coast was torn down and thrown in the mud on October 15, 1947. The date of this incident is important since Liberals across the country had recently gathered to honor the memory of the martyred Liberal leader. Additionally, municipal elections were held only ten days before amid violence and accusations of fraud by Liberals against the ruling Conservatives,<sup>119</sup> who had recaptured the presidency

---

<sup>116</sup> See, for instance, "Homenaje al General Herrera se realizará el domingo próximo," El Liberal 2 Mar. 1945: 1.

<sup>117</sup> "Homenaje al General Herrera se realizará el domingo próximo," El Liberal 2 Mar. 1944: 1.

<sup>118</sup> In his analysis of Gaitanismo, W. John Green claims that left Liberals held Herrera and Uribe Uribe as heroes of their wing of the party. Devotion to the two could be interpreted by different Liberals in different ways, but they were held in esteem by all. Green 81, 169, and 206-207.

<sup>119</sup> Villar 414.

the previous year when the Liberals split their votes between two candidates. Just like Liberals on the local level in 1931 and 1932, provincial Conservatives were trying to lock in their own electoral hegemony, but, influenced by the inflammatory rhetoric of the ensuing years, were increasingly bent on physically eliminating Liberals along with Liberal nationalistic symbols.

On September 30, 1949, another bust of Uribe Uribe in the majority-Liberal community of Urrao, located across the border from Istmina in the Department of Antioquia, was shot up by an armed Conservative gang and replaced with a statue of Our Lady of Fátima, by then the international symbol of Catholic anti-communism.<sup>120</sup> Again, it is important to note the date of this incident. The Liberals had been increasingly linked to international communism by Conservative leaders and Catholic clergy since the mid-1930s; this particular conspiracy theory found even more fertile ground after the anti-government and anti-clerical riots that followed the assassination of Liberal Party leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán on April 9, 1948. The Conservatives who arrived in Urrao to change who would be honored in the town's square had a very specific symbolic gesture to make, replacing a Liberal hero with the foremost Catholic anti-communist icon. Significantly, the symbolism of Our Lady of Fátima was not lost on the Liberal guerrillas who emerged during *La Violencia*: it was reported in late 1952 that after destroying most of the village of El Tigre in eastern Antioquia, armed Liberals then broke into its church and destroyed the image of Our Lady of Fátima.<sup>121</sup>

---

<sup>120</sup> The image of Our Lady of Fátima was making a pilgrimage throughout Colombia in late 1949. During a period of reconciliation in the 1950s, a new bust of Uribe Uribe was erected in Urrao. Roldán 236, 264. One of the messages of Our Lady received by the three children in Fátima in early 1917 concerned the consecration of Russia to her sacred heart. "The Consecration of Russia: The Request of Our Lord and the Analysis of this Request," The Fátima Network 20 Feb. 2005 <<http://www.Fátima.org/essentials/message/reqconsec.asp>>.

<sup>121</sup> Roldán 152-152, footnote 109, 344.



## Conclusion

After independence, Colombia's political history was marked by the competition and conflict between two vertically-organized political parties, the Liberal and the Conservative. These parties included members of all occupations and social classes, while one of the only consistent ideological differences concerned the relationship between Church and state. Enthusiasm for the parties, therefore, was often related more to their respective *místicas* than to ideologies. The frequent civil wars in the nineteenth century strengthened the emotional ties of party members to their party, and contributed to the development of two separate rhetorical traditions, which can be described as two party-based nationalisms. Especially following the War of a Thousand Days, the two competing party nationalisms, complete with competing symbols, heroes, and martyrs, provided the discursive terrain in which the tropes of conspiracy were added in the 1930s and 1940s. The two separate nationalisms also aided members of the opposite parties in distinguishing between friends and enemies; these distinctions became extremely important in choosing victims for elimination during *La Violencia*.

The two nationalisms persisted despite frequent cooperation between the leaders of both parties in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. This cooperation was particularly evident in the Republican movement that came after the overthrow of Rafael Reyes in 1909. Members of both parties united as Republicans, producing constitutional reforms in 1910 that guaranteed minority representation in the national congress and *de facto* minority appointments to the presidential cabinet and the diplomatic corps. Even

opposition to the Republicans in both parties essentially united to elect a Conservative as president in 1914.

The frequent elections provided opportunities to employ the rhetorical and symbolic tropes of party-based nationalisms to animate the rank and file—speeches, newspapers, pamphlets, ceremonies, and the erection of monuments were the means by which party traditions were repeated and maintained. We have examined in more detail the importance of the party colors and the erection (and destruction) of monuments in the discourse between the two parties, but we could cite many other examples of how these separate nationalisms were maintained.<sup>122</sup>

Still, we need to ask why the party rank and file so readily believed party leaders. In the next chapter, we shall examine how politicians presented themselves as professionals—experts with specialized knowledge who achieved the respect of the rest of Colombian society. As such, the rhetoric produced by the politicians was also respected and taken as articles of partisan faith.

---

<sup>122</sup> Among these were rival interpretations of Colombian historical events and general characters. For instance, a virulent debate broke out in the Colombian press in 1940 and 1941 over different books on Francisco de Paula Santander, Liberal hero (1940 was the centenary of his death). The various articles and books published by Liberals were met with a scathing indictment against the “Man of Laws” by Conservative Party leader Laureano Gómez. Laureano Gómez, prologue, Santander: el hombre y el mito by Guillermo Camacho Montoya (Bogotá: Librería Nueva, 1941).