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Mahecha Alzate, Manuela

UNIVERSITÉ DE GENÈVE
GENEVA SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
Department of History, Economics and Society

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Manuela Mahecha Alzate (Université de Genève)

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Department of History, Economics and Society, University of Geneva, UniMail, bd du Pont-d'Arve 40, CH-1211 Genève 4. T: +41 22 379 81 92. Fax: +41 22 379 81 93

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Abstract

This paper investigates the power dynamics shaping Colombia's economy since the 2000s, marked by concentrated growth in the extractive, financial, and service sectors. We resort to the Dominant Social Bloc (DSB) concept, derived from Bruno Amable and Stefano Palombarini's neorealist approach to institutional change. The DSB is defined as a coalition of dominant social groups benefiting from institutions and public policies in exchange for providing political support.

This study identifies the DSB in Colombia from the 2000s onwards by examining how the social groups favored by the country's growth patterns during this period have provided political support. Adapting the neorealist approach to Colombia, the study incorporates factors like drug trafficking and armed conflict. The findings reveal that the DSB in Colombia since the 2000s includes economic conglomerates, guilds, Multinational Corporations (MNCs), landowners, drug traffickers, paramilitaries, and recipients of government subsidies.

Key words: Dominant Social Bloc, Political Support, Extractivism, Concentration, Violence.

JEL: A12, B41, B52, E02, O54.

Resumen

Este artículo investiga las dinámicas de poder que han moldeado la economía colombiana desde los años 2000, caracterizada por un crecimiento concentrado en los sectores extractivo, financiero y de servicios. Recurrimos al concepto del Bloque Social Dominante (BSD), derivado del enfoque neorrealista de cambio institucional de Bruno Amable y Stefano Palombarini, y definido como una coalición de grupos dominantes que se benefician de las instituciones y políticas públicas a cambio de proporcionar apoyo político.

Este estudio identifica el BSD en Colombia desde los años 2000 en adelante, al examinar cómo los grupos favorecidos por los patrones de crecimiento del país durante este período han brindado apoyo político. Adaptando el enfoque neorrealista a Colombia, el estudio incorpora factores como el narcotráfico y el conflicto armado. Los hallazgos revelan que el BSD en Colombia desde los años 2000 incluye conglomerados económicos, gremios, corporaciones multinacionales, terratenientes, narcotraficantes, paramilitares y beneficiarios de subsidios gubernamentales.

Palabras clave: Bloque Social Dominante, apoyo político, extractivismo, concentración, violencia.

[1] Competing interests: The author declares none.

Introduction

Understanding power dynamics is essential for unraveling the establishment of socioeconomic orders within specific contexts. These dynamics reveal who influences policy formulation and norms. Similarly, shifts in these dynamics can indicate crises within existing structures and transitions toward new ones. In unequal societies, entities with economic, cultural, or political power can leverage it to sway decision-making processes, perpetuating or consolidating their dominance. The social uprising in Colombia, which began on November 21, 2019, and intensified on April 28, 2021, exemplifies a crisis within the existing power structure, warranting an examination of the latter.

This paper presents an overview of a chapter from my doctoral thesis[2], aiming to identify and characterize the composition of the Dominant Social Bloc (DSB) in Colombia before the 2019 social uprising. The concept of the DSB, derived from Bruno Amable and Stefano Palombarini's neorealist approach to institutional change, refers to a coalition of dominant groups that benefit from institutions and public policies in exchange for providing political support (Amable and Palombarini 2008). This work seeks to demonstrate how economic, social, or cultural power translates into political power within this framework. Given that the neorealist approach originated in and was designed for European countries such as France and Italy, it is important to consider that in its adaptation to the Colombian case, factors such as the country's integration into the international capitalist system, the armed conflict and drug trafficking could influence the formation of the DSB.

To identify the DSB in Colombia before the social uprising, the first step is to examine the prevailing socioeconomic dynamics and observe the favored social groups. An exhaustive analysis of this is provided in Mahecha Alzate (2024), who shows that, since 2002, Colombia's economic growth has primarily and simultaneously relied on the extractive, financial, and service sectors, following the boom in international oil prices and the investor confidence policy of former President Álvaro Uribe. This led to business and land ownership concentration, benefiting the largest companies, including economic groups and Multinational Corporations (MNCs), as well as landowners. Moreover, the extractive and the financial sector's growth advantaged armed groups and drug traffickers. Additionally, this period saw an increase in public spending on social protection and a reduction in poverty and income inequality[3], leading to some subaltern groups[4] also benefiting from this growth pattern.

Considering that the DSB is not only defined as the groups favored by institutions, this work examines their political support to Álvaro Uribe's government from 2002 to 2010. To this end, press reports from newspapers such as El Tiempo and El Espectador, as well as Semana magazine and La Silla Vacía website, are consulted. These sources contain information about mechanisms of political influence used by some groups, including their connections with high-ranking officials in the judiciary, executive, and legislative branches, as well as instances of interference in politics through corruption, lobbying, or intimidation. Additionally, this paper briefly analyzes these groups' expectations and opinions regarding Uribe's governance. This work consists of four sections. Following this introduction, the neorealist approach and various methods of measuring political influence are succinctly outlined. Section three presents each benefited group, while the final section outlines the conclusions.

Measuring Power and Political Influence in Colombia

Scholars from sociology, anthropology, political science, and economics have employed concepts like the elite, the power bloc, and the DSB to scrutinize power dynamics and identify who influences decision-making processes within societies. These concepts share common elements, such as referring to individuals or groups wielding economic capital, knowledge, social networks, or coercive means to

[2] This thesis analyzes the social uprising in Colombia since November 21, 2019, as a manifestation of a political crisis resulting from the fragmentation of the prevailing Dominant Social Bloc (DSB).
[3] Note that income inequality is different from wealth inequality.
[4] This refers to social groups, who occupy a subordinated position in the social structure. That is, because of their limited economic or political power, they might be subject to exploitation by dominant groups.

influence decisions. However, they differ in application and outcomes. This section critically examines their utility in the Colombian context and the rationale for prioritizing the DSB analysis.

Pearce & Velasco (2022) defined the elite as individuals, families, and networks that have the capacity to decide, reproduce, challenge, and transform the domination principles[5] in a society. In this sense, they characterized the Colombian elite between 1991 and 2022, as a bloc composed of the oligarchic elite[6] (national economic groups), the technocratic elite[7] (finance ministers, directors of the national planning department, and the board of directors of the central bank), and the political elite (presidents, ministers, congress members, and high supreme court judges).

The problem with this definition and its application is that it does not make a qualitative distinction between those who make decisions and those who exert influence, thus ignoring the relationships between the latter two. Likewise, it is not clear how these groups impose the principles of domination. In other words, those who possess economic or cultural capital will not necessarily use it to influence the implementation of a certain measure. Hence, it is not only sufficient to find the groups with the capacity to decide on the principles of domination, but also how these groups relate to each other and to the decision-makers.

In contrast, the concept of the power bloc from Antonio Gramsci not only considers the capacity of some actors or groups to define the domination principles, but also the confluence of interests among them, and their coordination to exercise domination. Franco (2009), Pardo (2013), Estrada (2006), Sankey (2013), Herrera (2022), and Tauss et al. (2019) outline that the power bloc in Colombia in recent decades is composed of monopoly capital (MNCs and economic groups), business associations representing the interests of different economic sectors, right-wing political parties, landlords, paramilitaries, and drug traffickers, whose main interests at the time of the consolidation of the growth pattern in 2002 were the concentration of capital and land, and the flexibilization of the labor market.

The notion of the power bloc is linked to that of hegemony[8], since consensus is necessary to exercise dominance. According to Herrera (2022), the power bloc mentioned before could not attain hegemony, so it had to resort to violence. Conversely, Tauss et al. (2019) argue that former president Álvaro Uribe, who was elected in the first round in 2002 and then reelected in 2006, launched a populist, religious, and nationalist discourse that managed to create a political movement called *Uribismo*, who was endorsed by large sectors of the subaltern groups. Therefore, to have an idea about the power bloc it is necessary to know the political demands of each group within it, how these are complementary, and the mechanisms they use to exercise dominance over other groups, such as violence or manipulation of public opinion through the media.

The concept of the power bloc resembles that of the DSB, with the latter drawing inspiration from the former. However, the DSB offers a more nuanced understanding of the distinction between political actors and civil society[9], highlighting the divergence between those who wield influence and those who make decisions. That is, social conflict is managed by political actors who design institutions to meet the demands of a DSB, a coalition of dominant social groups that reciprocate by providing political support (Amable and Palombarini 2008).

Due to power disparities, each group within the DSB has a different capacity to provide political support and therefore each group benefits from the political strategy in a different manner. This implies that certain groups within the DSB may perceive themselves as subordinated. Table 1 presents a typology of the social groups comprising the DSB based on different dimensions of domination. While all groups derive varying degrees of benefit from the political strategies of political actors, some are advantaged

[5] Domination principles are the features that define the power and influence of some agents.
[6] This refers to individuals and groups, who through their concentration of economic capital, exercise political influence.
[7] These are the public and private organisms with the capacity to decide over economic policy.
[8] Hegemony refers to political domination based on consensus rather than on force. This can be achieved by the adoption of a dominant world view.
[9] This is a distinction made by Gramsci. Civil society is defined as private organisms such as schools, churches, clubs, journals, etc. In contrast, political society refers to public institutions that exercise dominance, such as courts, police, and the army.

(I) or disadvantaged (i) by prevailing institutions[10], and others are hegemonic (H) or ideologically dominated (h) (Amable and Palombarini 2023).

Groups categorized in cell 1 are dominant in all dimensions. Those in cell 2 hold a weak ideological position and are thus susceptible to challenge and oppose changes proposed by hegemonic groups. Cell 3 encompasses groups that are not favored by current institutions; however, their ideological dominance enables them to validate proposals for institutional change. Finally, groups in cell 4 are both institutionally and ideologically dominated (Amable and Palombarini 2023).

Table 1: A Typology of Socio-political Groups in the DSB

	H	h
I	1. Dominant and self-confident groups	2. Contested and conservative groups
i	3. Reforming dominant groups	4. Contested and marginal dominant groups

(Amable and Palombarini 2023, 948); A capital letter signals dominance in one dimension: I is for institutions, H for culture and ideology (hegemony)

For the Colombian case, Misas (2019) argued that at the top of the most recent DSB lie MNCs and national economic conglomerates operating in the oil, mining, energy, communication, financial, health, retail trade, and construction sectors. Misas also explained that the prevailing socioeconomic dynamics could not have been put in place would it not be for the confluence of interests between these groups and the regional elites related to violent and criminal activities. Nevertheless, he was never clear on whether these latter groups were part of the DSB. This may have been because he only considered legal mechanisms of political pressure, such as statements from business associations regarding political reforms, leaving outside violence and crime.

Comparing the concepts of elite, power bloc and the DSB shows that the DSB offers a more comprehensive understanding by considering the convergence of interests among dominant social groups and their influence mechanisms. However, its application to the Colombian case still has limitations because of the lack of recognition of the nature of certain groups, for example, illegal ones, and the variety of political influence mechanisms they can exert. For this reason, it is crucial to delve into different approaches to measure political support.

One common approach involves examining electoral polls. Barrera et al. (2021) analyzed political support for Uribe during the 2002 and 2006 elections using post-election surveys. They suggested that primarily low-income, and low-educated groups supported Uribe. In this sense, these groups would be considered as central in the DSB, but is this really the case, especially when these groups were not the main beneficiaries of socioeconomic dynamics? A limitation of this approach lies in its failure to fully capture power relations, as voters may have been pressured through violence or the media. Moreover, there are other mechanisms of political influence that can be much more effective than voting, such as the financing of political campaigns or the cooptation of political positions. Therefore, the need for an approach that explicitly delineates power relations and the direct influence exerted by social groups arises.

The revolving door mechanism and social network analysis have been used to explore the interconnections between dominant groups and political actors (Carrero 2013; Duque 2020; Galichini 2019; Nercesian 2020; Restrepo 2011). These approaches have the advantages of showing more directly the influence of certain groups and power differences, as agents more closely related to political actors

[10] A group within the DSB that finds itself disadvantaged by existing institutions is one whose political demands are in some level addressed by institutions. However, these institutions do not fully align with their interests. This underscores a crucial difference between political demands and underlying interests, where the former often serve as expressions of the latter. For example, while a group may be interested in the end to the armed conflict in the country, their specific demand, such as the extermination of the adversary, may not effectively achieve the broader interest of conflict resolution.

are likely to exert greater influence. However, these approaches fall short in explicitly illustrating the convergence of interests among different groups. Furthermore, they are confined to observable relationships, overlooking covert connections. Another mechanism of political influence is presented by López de la Roche (2014) and Rodríguez (2010), who underscore the sway of public opinion through media ownership.

An ideal approach to understanding the political influence exerted by certain groups would involve first-hand knowledge of the discussions and the nature of the relationships between dominant groups and political actors through interviews, fieldwork or document review. However, much of this information is difficult to access. Fortunately, journalistic and academic investigations often explore these relationships, and members of dominant groups frequently make public statements to influence public opinion. Therefore, this work predominantly relies on press releases, public documents from governmental agencies, entities representing dominant groups, and academic research.

The press sources analyzed include the most widely circulated newspapers in Colombia: El Tiempo and El Espectador. The former was owned by the Santos family from 1913 to 2012, whose members have been active in Colombian politics, then it became the property of an economic conglomerate (Casa Editorial El Tiempo 2024). El Espectador has been critical of several governments and has denounced crimes related to drug trafficking and paramilitarism. Since 1997 it has been owned by an economic conglomerate (Grupo Valorem 2024). This study also uses reports from the magazine Semana, which, until 2020 when it became the property of an economic conglomerate, had been critical of the governments in power and uncovered several scandals such as *parapolitics* or Odebrecht in Colombia (El Espectador 2020). Finally, La Silla Vacía is a web portal that reports on Colombian politics and power dynamics (León 2009).

The DSB before the Social Uprising of 2019 in Colombia

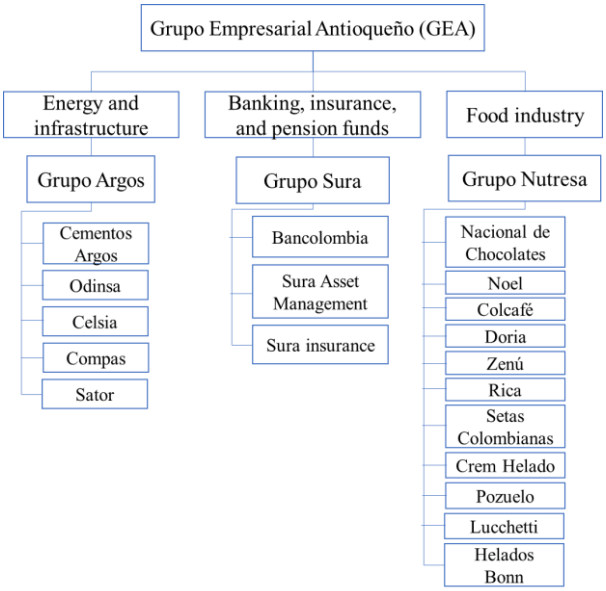
The following examines each of the groups that benefited from socioeconomic dynamics before the social uprising, identified in Mahecha Alzate (2024) and that match the results of the literature on the elites, the power bloc, and the DSB in Colombia in recent years: national economic conglomerates, guilds representing the interests of different economic sectors, MNCs, landlords, paramilitaries, drug traffickers, and subaltern groups. Some of these entities are organizations, not social groups. Thus, we focus on their leaders and top managers. For simplicity, these groups are referred to by their organization names.

Economic Conglomerates

Among the most prominent economic conglomerates in Colombia there are the "big 4" or the "cacaos"[11]: Grupo Empresarial Antioqueño (GEA), Organización Luis Carlos Sarmiento Angulo (OLCSA), Organización Ardila Lülle (OAL), and Grupo Santo Domingo (GS). The cacaos have diverse holdings across different economic sectors, yet they focus on sectors where they have a comparative advantage (Rodríguez-Romero 2011; Silva-Colmenares 2020). Their structure in 2018 is displayed in Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3, and Figure 4[12]. Some of their CEOs have been ranked among the wealthiest persons in Colombia and globally[13]. Their economic power has drawn significant media attention, making them influencers of public opinion. An emblematic case was their support for former president Ernesto Samper during his political scandal in the late 1990s[14] (Rettberg 2003, 57).

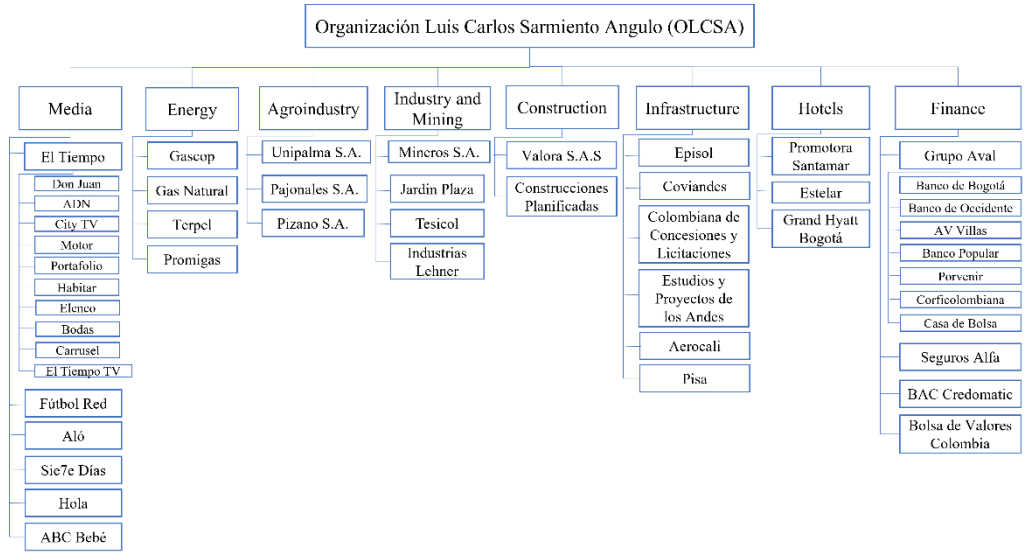
[11] Cacaos is a Colombian popular expression to refer to rich people.
[12] These figures only show their investments in Colombia, and foreign investments that are known in Colombia.
[13] This is notably the case for Luis Carlos Sarmiento Angulo and Julio Mario Santo Domingo.
[14] Ernesto Samper's political campaign, which led him to the presidency in 1994, was accused of having received money from drug trafficking, this was known as "*proceso 8000*".

Figure 1: Structure of GEA in 2018[15]



Own elaboration; data from (Silva-Colmenares 2020, 117–19)

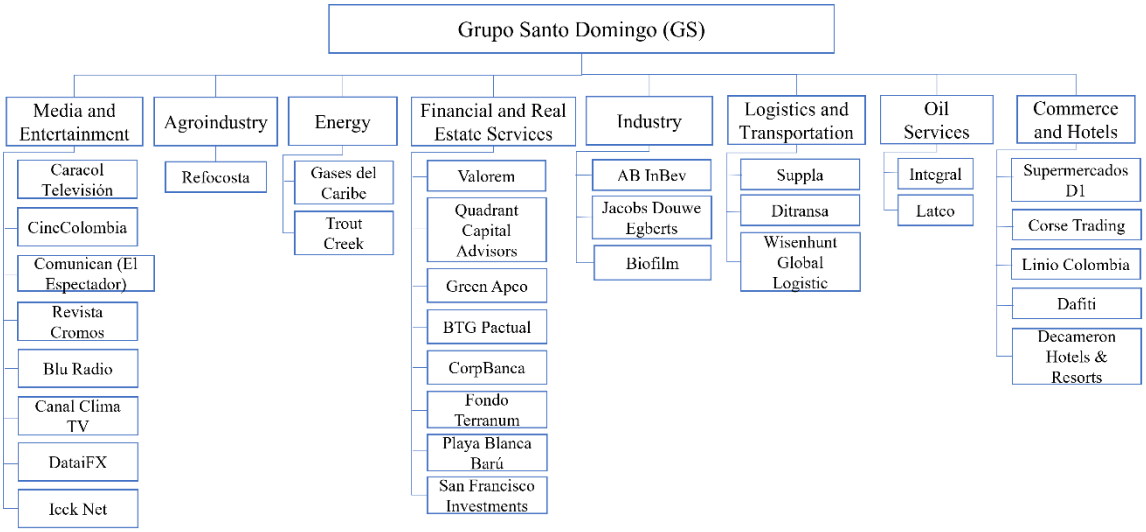
Figure 2: Structure of OLCSA in 2018



Own elaboration; data from (Silva-Colmenares 2020, 142–43)

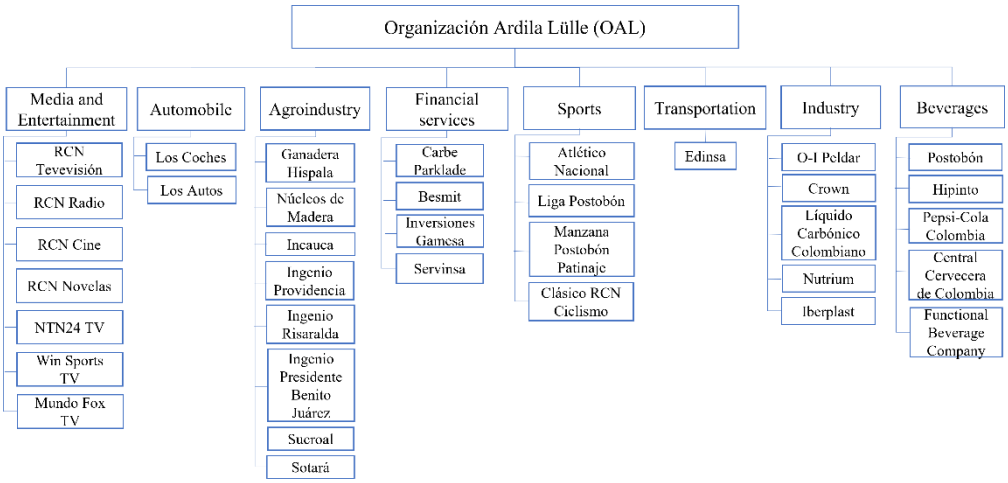
[15] In May 2023, Grupo Gilinski acquired the majority shareholding of Nutresa.

Figure 3: Structure of GS in 2018



Own elaboration; data from (Mueses 2015, 55; Silva-Colmenares 2020, 211–12)

Figure 4: Structure of OAL in 2018



Own elaboration; data from (Silva-Colmenares 2020, 283–84)

Given their economic power, and the fact that their investment decisions are affected by the political environment, the cacaos are keen on influencing politics through various means:

- **Campaign financing:** All Cacaos financially supported Álvaro Uribe's 2002 campaign, with GS contributing the most (Moreno 2006; Semana 2008).
- **Think tanks and Lobbying:** GEA and OLCSA have think tanks to disseminate research and lobby policy makers (Carrero 2013; Muñoz 2013). GS and OAL have appointed executives to attend congressional debates and lobby, especially to influence taxation policy (Rettberg 2003; Rodríguez-Romero 2011).
- **Revolving door:** Top executives from GEA and OLCSA have held top government positions, see Table 2.
- **Close relationship with political actors:** Top executives from OLCSA and OAL had close friendships with presidents and ministers (Semana 2002; Suárez 2021, 441).
- **Associations to guilds:** Cacaos hold significant influence within guilds due to the affiliation of their companies and their financial contributions (Eslava and Meléndez 2010).

- **Media Ownership:** Except for GEA, Cacaos own major media outlets[16], allowing them to shape public opinion (López de la Roche 2014; Rodríguez 2010).

Table 2: Revolving Door between OLCSA and GEA Top Executives and the Colombian State

Name	Function in the conglomerate	State function	Period
Jorge Alberto Uribe	GEA Top Executive	Minister of Defense	2003-2005
Jorge Humberto Botero	Board of directors of Bancolombia	Minister of Commerce, Industry, and Tourism	2002-2007
Nicolás Echavarría Mesa	GEA Top Executive	Ambassador to Belgium and Luxembourg	2003
César Gaviria Trujillo	Partners with Grupo Aval in the Peruvian company Gascop	President of Colombia	1990-1994
Álvaro Uribe Vélez	Board member of JP Morgan Chase, shareholders of Grupo Aval	President of Colombia	2002-2010
Alberto Carrasquilla Barrera	Board of directors Banco de Bogotá	Minister of Finance	2003-2007
			2018-2021
Sonia Sarmiento Gutiérrez	Corporate affairs director of Grupo Aval and daughter of Luis Carlos Sarmiento Angulo	Ambassador to Unesco	2009
Néstor Humberto Martínez Neira	Legal advisor of Grupo Aval	Minister of Justice	1994-1996
		Minister of the Interior	1998-2000
		Government Minister	2014-2015
		General Prosecutor	2016-2019
Fernando Carrillo Flórez	Legal advisor of Grupo Aval	Minister of the Interior	2012-2013
		General Attorney	2017-2021
Angela María Orozco	Legal advisor of Grupo Aval	Minister of Foreign Trade	2002
		Minister of Transportation	2018-2022

Own elaboration; data from (Restrepo 2011; Suárez 2021, 441; Villamil 2021)

Considering the cacaos' various mechanisms of political influence, it's important to examine their political expectations during Uribe's presidency. Their diversified portfolios positioned them favorably for economic liberalization, unlike companies focused on a single sector. They aimed to concentrate on non-tradable goods sectors, immune to foreign competition, and pursued the acquisition of public companies in communications, energy, and infrastructure. Additionally, they advocated for financial market liberalization, privatization of pension and healthcare systems, and flexible labor contracts (Misas 2019, 126). Moreover, in light of the escalating armed conflict at the end of the 1990s, the cacaos expected improvements in security conditions to safeguard their investments and stimulate economic growth. Consequently, they publicly supported Uribe's policy of democratic security (Muñoz 2013; Presidencia 2002; Restrepo 2011).

The cacaos forged alliances with other social groups to consolidate their dominant position. They aligned with international capital to distribute and commercialize the products of MNCs (Rodríguez-Romero 2011, 328; Silva-Colmenares 2020, 45; Suárez 2021, 450–57). They also did business with landlords to have access to lands that later would be used for extractive projects. In fact, GEA and OLCSA have been accused of occupying land, which had previously been subject to forced displacement by armed groups (Duzán 2013; El Espectador 2011; Las Dos Orillas 2017; Misas 2015), while GS and OAL have faced allegations of financing paramilitary groups (Osorio 2023; Semana 2007). Additionally, as major employers in Colombia, the cacaos wield significant influence over the country's workforce.

The cacaos are part of the DSB due to their political influence and alignment with the growth regime. Moreover, their expectations are considered legitimate, since they relate to other social groups not only through economic activity (being employers, suppliers, customers, or partners) but also as public opinion makers. Thus, their economic, social, political, institutional, and ideological dominance qualifies them as "the dominant and self-confident groups" in Table 1.

Guilds

In Colombia, the largest companies usually affiliate with guilds, and due to their size, they are the major contributors. Guilds represent the interests of a specific economic sector to the government. However,

[16] OLCSA owns El Tiempo, the largest circulation newspaper in Colombia. GS own El Espectador the second largest circulation newspaper and Caracol TV, the most viewed TV channel in the country. OAL owns several radio stations and RCN, the second most viewed TV channel in the country.

because of the financial influence wielded by these large companies, guilds often end up prioritizing the interests of the largest companies within each sector (Eslava and Meléndez 2010).

There are different types of guilds. Firstly, there are sectoral guilds, which represent a very specific productive subsector such as palm oil or metal production. Secondly, there are umbrella guilds, which group together different guilds from the same sector; for example, Sociedad de Agricultores de Colombia (SAC) brings together more than 20 agricultural production guilds. Thirdly, there is a super-umbrella guild, Consejo Gremial Nacional (CGN), that brings together guilds from different sectors and aims to be the voice of the entire private sector (Eslava and Meléndez 2010).

Since the early twentieth century, guilds have wielded considerable influence in shaping public policies. Prominent examples include Federación Nacional de Cafetereos (FNC), the SAC, and Asociación Nacional de Empresarios (ANDI) (De Lombaerde 2000; Junguito 2019). Nevertheless, in recent years, guilds have lost much of their influence. Firstly, economic diversification and the proliferation of numerous guilds have diminished their representational power. Secondly, the largest companies have acquired so much power that in some cases they prefer to act alone without the need for guild intervention (Rettberg 2003).

Despite experiencing a decrease in power, guilds still maintain a level of influence due to the enduring relevance of their viewpoints within public opinion. As part of their political influence strategies, guilds disseminate academically rigorous documents and host seminars or congresses, inviting high-ranking government officials and members of the press to discuss pertinent issues related to their economic sector and the country, and to propose policy recommendations. Additionally, guilds actively engage in lobbying efforts to advocate for the interests of their respective sectors (Junguito 2019; Misas 2019; Semana 2006a). Additionally, due to guilds' historic influence on public policies formulation, some guild leaders occupied political positions during Uribe's administration, see Table 3.

Table 3: Revolving Door between Guild Leaders and the Colombian State

Name	Political position	Period	Guild
Roberto Junguito	Minister of Finance	2002-2003	President Association of Coffee Exporters 1988-1991
			President of SAC 1983-1985
Carlos Gustavo Cano	Minister of Agriculture	2002-2005	President of SAC 1990-1991
	Director of the Colombian Central Bank	2005-2023	
Gabriel Silva	Minister of Defense	2009-2010	President of FNC 2002-2009
Sabas Pretelt de la Vega	Minister of Interior and Justice	2003-2006	President of FENALCO 1988-2003
	Colombian Ambassador to Italy	2006-2010	President of CGN 2000-2003
Fabio Echeverri Correa	Manager of Uribe's presidential campaigns	2002, 2006	President of ANDI 1974-1991
Jorge Humberto Botero	Minister of Commerce, Industry and Tourism	2003-2007	Legal director of ANDI 1986-1990
			President of ASOFONDOS 1994
			President of ASOBANCARIA 1998-2000
			Executive president of FASECOLDA 2012-2019
Martha Pinto	Minister of Communications	2002-2006	President of CAMACOL 2009-2011
Óscar Iván Zuluaga	Senator	2002-2006	Board of directors FENALCO and FEDEMETAL 1992-2001
	Minister Counselor to the President	2006-2007	
	Minister of Finance	2007-2010	

Own elaboration; data from (Cubilledo 2013; Junguito et al. 2015; Semana 2003)

Guild's support for the government of Álvaro Uribe is evident in the favorable opinions expressed by guild leaders in public events and the media. For instance, the presidents of CGN, ANDI, SAC, Federación Nacional de Ganaderos (FEDEGAN), Federación Nacional de Cultivadores de Palma de Aceite (FEDEPALMA), and Federación Nacional de Comerciantes (FENALCO) have praised democratic security, emphasizing its success in enhancing the country's security situation (El Tiempo 2003b; 2005; Rettberg and Landínez 2013). This underscores security as a crucial political demand of the guilds.

Guilds are part of the DSB, because they benefited from Uribe's security policy while providing political support through public declarations and close ties with the branches of power through the revolving door. However, their declining influence and fewer political leverage mechanisms compared to the cacaos imply that guilds hold a less influential position within the DSB. Consequently, guilds are situated in a lower tier among "the dominant and self-confident groups" as depicted in Table 1.

MNCs

Since the 2000s, MNCs in Colombia have increasingly concentrated their operations in the extractive sector, primarily dominated by companies from the US, UK, and Canada. These corporations wield immense economic power, often exceeding that of many states, exemplified by their sales volumes equating to or exceeding the GDP of entire nations (Tamayo 2004, 21). Owned by influential global groups of investors and financiers, MNCs exert complex political pressures. On one hand, these groups convey their interests to their respective states, which, in turn, exert pressure the Colombian state. On the other hand, these groups' interests are also channeled by international institutions such as the Economic Development Corporation, the World Bank, and the IMF, as well as private foundations, research centers, and policy forums, such as the Heritage Foundation and the Fraser Institute (Sankey 2013).

Moreover, MNCs exert political influence locally over Colombian political actors through mechanisms like lobbying, financing political campaigns, and the revolving door (Orrego 2017, 62). For instance, in 2006, senior executives from Anglo Gold Ashanti and former president Álvaro Uribe reached agreements after regular meetings, wherein Uribe committed to easing regulatory obstacles imposed by the Ministry of Environment in mining regulations (Cuervo 2012, 141). The revolving door between top executives of MNCs and high-ranking officials in the Colombian state underscores their intertwined relationship and is displayed in Table 4.

Table 4: Revolving Door between MNCs' Top Executives and the Colombian State

Name	Political Position	Period	Entreprise
María Consuelo Araújo	Minister of Culture	2002 - 2006	President Gran Colombia Gold Company 2011
	Minister of Foreign Affairs.	2006 -2007	
Claudia Jiménez	Director of the Presidential Program for State Reform	2002	Executive director of the guild "*Sector de la Minería de Gran Escala*" 2011
	Ambassador of Colombia to Switzerland	2006 - 2009	
	Minister Counselor to the Presidency	2009 - 2010	
Julián Villaruel	Director of Ingeominas	2005 - 2007	Operational director Anglo Gold Ashanti 2008
María Margarita Zuleta	Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Justice	2002-2003	Legal Vice President Glenncore 2005-2012
Hernán Martínez	Minister of Energy and Mining	2006-2010	President of Intercol (ExxonMobil) 1990-2006
			Board of Directors Medoro Ressources 2011
			Director Pacific Coal Ressources 2012
Leyla Rojas	Deputy Minister of Potable Water and Basic Sanitation	2006 - 2010	Legal director of MPX 2010
Luis Guillermo Plata	Minister of Commerce, Industry and Tourism	2007 - 2010	President CornerStone Group
Jaime Bermúdez	Ambassador of Colombia to Argentina	2006 - 2008	President Lazard Bank
	Minister of Foreign Affairs	2008 - 2010	President Kelhill Group

Own elaboration; data from (Orrego 2017; Osorio 2011; Sankey 2013; Semana 2011)

To understand the political expectations of MNCs, it is imperative to delve into their association with the armed conflict of the country. Their growing presence in the extractive sector, often overlapping with conflict zones, forces MNCs to coexist with armed groups. As illustrated in Map 1 and Map 2, resource extraction areas frequently coincide with areas of conflict. In territories under *guerrilla* control, attacks on MNCs infrastructure were commonplace. To mitigate such threats, MNCs resorted to paying taxes to guerrillas and acquiescing to their demands, which included building schools and roads, investing in hospitals, and subcontracting with guerrilla-owned companies. Additionally, guerrillas kidnapped MNCs' executives to pressure for ransom, creating tension between these two groups (Richani 2005).

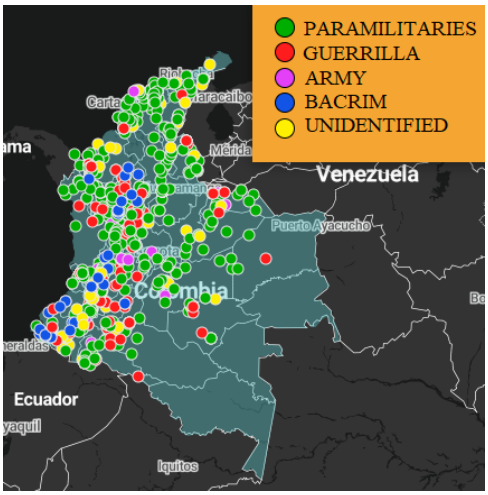
The relationship with paramilitaries differed significantly. Paramilitaries did not directly target MNC infrastructure; instead, they used violence to facilitate MNC activity. This included forcibly displacing communities residing in resource-rich areas, paving the way for future extraction projects by MNCs and national companies. One example includes a paramilitary group occupying a gold mining region to

"cleanse the area and hand it over to multinational corporations because they will provide jobs and improve the region" (Richani 2005, 122). Furthermore, reports suggest targeted murders of union leaders from companies like Coca-Cola, Texas Petroleum, British Petroleum, Nestlé, and Fenosa by paramilitaries (Morales 2020).

Considering this, MNC's primary political expectation was improved security to ensure minimal disruption, particularly guerrilla attacks. Additionally, MNCs lobbied for the removal of restrictions on foreign investment (Misas 2019). Álvaro Uribe's political strategy of tackling guerrilla groups to improve security and attract foreign investment, materialized in the democratic security and investor confidence policies, resonated well with MNCs. This is evidenced by the support expressed by MNC representatives after Uribe's election in 2002 (El Tiempo 2002). Similarly, during his administration, MNC representatives praised the government's success in improving security (El Economista 2009; El Tiempo 2009).

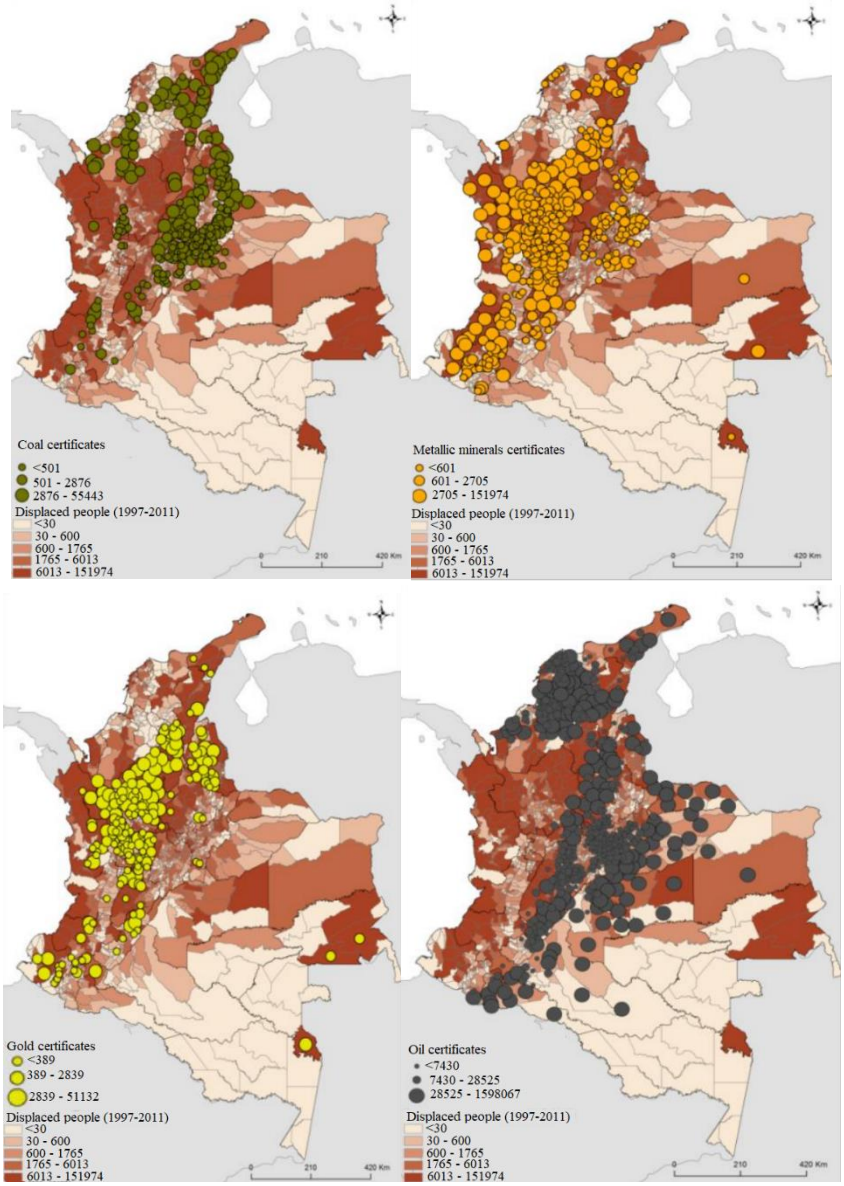
Because of MNCs political support mechanisms that even transcended national borders, they are part of the DSB. Moreover, MNCs expectations of security and increasing FDI in the country were deemed legitimate. Therefore, they can be characterized as holding a dominant position along with the cacaos in the "dominant and self-confident groups" in Table 1.

Map 1: Massacres between 1982 and 2012 by Alleged Perpetrator



(Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2014)

Map 2: Areas with Oil and Mining Exploitation Certificates and Affected by Forced Displacement, 1997-2011.



(Ruiz and Santana 2014, 19)

Landlords

Since colonial times, landowners have played a pivotal role in shaping Colombia's economic and political landscape, influencing the formulation of institutions and public policies (Alarcón 2019). Over time, particularly with the modernization of the economy towards industrial activities, the influence of landowners with extensive holdings has diminished, yet they continue to wield significant power in defining the country's agrarian structure.

It's noteworthy that contemporary landowners exhibit diverse characteristics, often having ties to paramilitary groups, drug traffickers, or large national and multinational corporations. Historical disputes over land distribution have at times escalated to violence, leading landowners to establish private defense groups like paramilitaries to protect their interests (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2018). Additionally, drug traffickers have purchased vast tracts of land to launder their assets, effectively becoming landlords (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2018, 72; Uribe 2009, 98). Furthermore, large corporations involved in extractive industries have also acquired extensive land, sometimes with the facilitation of paramilitary violence (El Espectador 2011; Semana 2006b).

Landowners leverage guilds to exert political influence, with influential bodies including SAC, FNC, FEDEGAN, and FEDEPALMA (Junguito 2019; Misas 2019). In addition, violence and crime have been employed to exert pressure, enabling landowners to sustain their influence despite diminishing political power in shaping the country's productive structure. Furthermore, the alignment of interests among major corporations, landowners, and paramilitary and drug trafficking groups regarding land concentration and extractive accumulation has facilitated the prominence of landowners within the DSB (Misas 2019). Notably, many landowners have held high-ranking political positions, exemplified by Álvaro Uribe, Colombia's president from 2002 to 2010, who stems from a family of cattle ranchers with extensive land holdings and advocated for the preservation of the existing land ownership structure. Table 5 underscores the revolving door between landowners and political actors, along with their association to criminal and violent groups.

Table 5: Revolving Door between Landlords and the Colombian State

Name	Political position	Period	Characteristics
Carlos Murgas Guerrero	Minister of Agriculture	1998	Owner of large landholdings cultivated with palm oil
Álvaro Araujo Castro	Congressmen	2002-2006	Owner of large landholdings. Son of a former Minister of Agriculture. Ties with paramilitaries
Mauricio Pimiento	Congressmen	2002-2006	Owner of large landholdings. Ties with paramilitaries
Alfredo Ape Cuello	Congressmen	2002-2006	Owner of large landholdings cultivated with palm oil and cattle farming
Álvaro Morón Cuello	Congressmen	2002-2006	Owner of large landholdings, cattle rancher and has ties with paramilitaries
Musa Besaile Fayad	Congressmen	2002-2006	Owner of large landholdings. Cattle rancher
Juan Manuel López Cabrales	Congressmen	2002-2006	Owner of large landholdings. Cattle rancher. His uncle was in a ministry. Ties with paramilitaries
Julio Manzur Abdala	Congressmen	2002-2006	Owner of large landholdings, cattle rancher and has ties with paramilitaries
Zulema Jattin Corrales	Congressmen	2002-2006	Owner of large landholdings. Ties with paramilitaries
Luis Eduardo Vives Lacouture	Senator	2002-2006	Owner of large landholdings, cattle rancher and has ties with paramilitaries
Jairo Merlano Fernández	Congressmen	2002-2006	Owner of large landholdings, cattle rancher and has ties with paramilitaries
Salomón Saade	Congressmen	2002-2006	Owner of landholdings. He was in the board of directors of the SAC. Ties with paramilitaries
José Gamarra Sierra	Congressmen	2002-2006	Owner of large landholdings, cattle rancher and has ties with paramilitaries
Alfonso Campo Escobar	Congressmen	2002-2006	Owner of large landholdings. Ties with paramilitaries
Trino Luna Correa	Governor of Magdalena	2003-2007	Owner of large landholdings. Ties with paramilitaries
Fuad Rapag Mattar	Senator	2006-2010	Owner of large landholdings, cattle rancher and has ties with paramilitaries

Own Elaboration; data from (Junguito 2019; La Silla Vacía 2013; Velasco 2014; Velasco, Duncan, and Lopera 2018)

Uribe's presidency, representing landowners' interests, enjoyed widespread support from this group, as evidenced by positive opinions from agricultural guild representatives as mentioned earlier. Landowners, benefiting from Uribe's political strategies, are part of the DSB, as they have also provided political support and have wielded various political influence mechanisms, including criminal and violent ones. However, their alliances and expectations for land accumulation render them illegitimate in the eyes of Colombian society, categorizing them as "the contested and conservative groups" in Table 1, Cell 2.

Narco-paramilitaries

Throughout our study period spanning from 2002 to 2019, paramilitary groups exhibited close ties with drug trafficking (De León-Beltrán 2014, 83). While not all paramilitaries were involved in drug trafficking, all drug traffickers had some affiliation with paramilitaries. Therefore, analyzing drug traffickers as part of the DSB is equivalent to analyzing paramilitaries, leading us to use the term narco-paramilitaries. According to Mahecha Alzate (2024), cocaine production and exports have increased since 2013, meaning that drug traffickers have also reaped benefits from growth patterns preceding the social uprising.

Drug trafficking and paramilitarism initially arose as distinct phenomena but eventually became intertwined due to the convergence of their interests. As mentioned earlier, the accumulation of large land holdings by drug traffickers led them to share with landowners the need to violently protect their properties, prompting drug traffickers to also establish private defense groups (Comisión de la Verdad 2022, 420). Subsequently, with the downfall of major drug cartels like the Medellín and Cali cartels,

these private defense groups co-opted the structures of drug trafficking, thus enriching themselves and becoming powerful armed groups, also known as paramilitaries[17] (Comisión de la Verdad 2022; De León-Beltrán 2014; Richani 2013).

Narco-paramilitaries employed violence and substantial illicit incomes to exert political pressure, ensuring influence over policies that favor their interests. They used tactics such as bribery and intimidation to co-opt law enforcement agencies, including the police, army, and the prosecutors' office, ensuring impunity and avoiding prosecution (Álvaro 2007; Semana 2005b). Additionally, they infiltrated high-ranking positions in local and regional politics, such as governorships or mayoralties, aiming to appropriate local budgets and use them as a means to launder their assets, as well as to legalize their illegal accumulation of land (Duque 2020; Garay et al. 2008; Medina 2008).

Furthermore, narco-paramilitaries extended their influence on the congress, which was known as the parapolitics scandal. Paramilitary commanders, Carlos Castaño and Salvatore Mancuso, claimed that paramilitaries controlled 35% of the congress (Comisión de la Verdad 2022; Semana 2005c). Through this influence, they sought to shape the justice and peace law of 2005, which provided a legal framework for the demobilization of paramilitary groups. This law aimed to grant favorable terms to paramilitary leaders, including reduced sentences, their security and reintegration into society (Garay et al. 2008). Between 2006 and 2016, the Attorney General's Office initiated 519 disciplinary proceedings against public officials linked to paramilitary groups. Of these, 40% are ongoing or referred, 17% were archived and 42% concluded, resulting in convictions of seventy-three congressmen (Semana 2016), underscoring the pervasive infiltration of paramilitary influence in legislative affairs.

Accusations also arose regarding connections between paramilitaries and the executive branch. Former paramilitary commanders claimed close ties to President Uribe, claiming financial and logistical support during his 2002 presidential campaign (El Espectador 2023; León 2010; Salazar 2010; Verdad Abierta 2010). It is worth noting that Uribe's democratic security policy, aimed at dismantling guerrilla groups, resonated with the counterinsurgency struggle of the paramilitaries. These connections suggest a deep-rooted infiltration of paramilitary interests within the highest levels of government.

Narco-paramilitaries can be considered part of the DSB that was formed in 2002, since their expectations aligned with Uribe's policies, particularly in safeguarding private property, facilitating the entry of MNCs, ensuring security, and combating insurgent groups. Their considerable economic resources, partly derived from involvement in drug trafficking, coupled with their coercive capabilities, afforded them a prominent position within the social structure, making their political support crucial. However, their illegal activities and inability to gain widespread acceptance in Colombian society, resulting in investigations and convictions for some members, indicate a lack of legitimacy in their objectives. Consequently, narco-paramilitaries cannot occupy a central place in the DSB but rather they may represent "the contested and conservative groups", as illustrated in Table 1.

Subaltern Groups

Although the subaltern groups have no economic or coercive power, nor have they been the major beneficiaries of the growth of the extractive, financial and service sectors, and the accumulation of capital and land, these groups provided broad political support to the Uribe government, reflected in his first round electoral victories in 2002 and 2006, as well as in his high popularity ratings, between 70% and 80% during his term (Invamer S.A.S 2021). Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the reasons behind this support and who exactly provided it.

Uribe's popular success is often attributed to his strategic communication approach, which resonated amidst a background of escalating armed conflict, a failed peace agreement between the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP) and the Colombian government under Andrés Pastrana, an economic crisis, and distrust in the political system during the late 1990s. Uribe advocated an anti-subversive strategy and rejected traditional politics (Forero Hidalgo

[17] Between 1997 and 2005, Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) was the largest paramilitary organization. Today, after a peace process with AUC in 2005, paramilitary groups are recycled in *Bandas Criminales* (BACRIM).

2012; Richani 2013, 186; Velasco 2017). This discourse resonated with most Colombians viewing insecurity as the paramount issue of the country and perceiving Uribe as the apt figure to address it.

To characterize the subaltern groups supporting Uribe, Barrera et al. (2021) found that most Uribe's voters were among the less educated, low-income, rural, elderly, and religious populations. These findings align with the increase in government subsidies, particularly through programs like *Familias en Acción*[18]. However, the efficacy of Familias en Acción in addressing the diverse needs of these groups remains questionable. Despite providing assistance to families in extreme poverty, the program failed to deliver comprehensive economic concessions, stable employment opportunities, or avenues for political participation (de la Torre 2005, 96). Consequently, beneficiaries of Familias en Acción may be categorized as "the reforming dominant groups" in Table 1, as while they benefited from the political strategy and their expectations were legitimate, their interests were not fully met.

Additionally, in rural areas where guerrillas controlled economic resources like oil and engaged in kidnappings and extorsions, the population provided political support to Uribe due to his democratic security policy's success in displacing guerrillas and reducing crime (Velasco 2017). Similarly, Christian groups openly expressed support for Uribe, although concerns were raised about religious intervention in politics and its compatibility with the secular state (Semana 2005a).

In conclusion, subaltern groups, including religious groups, low-income groups benefiting from subsidies and victims of the guerrilla in areas with economic interests provided political support to Uribe through voting and favorable opinions. The legitimacy and expectations of these groups vary, positioning them differently within the DSB. Low-income groups receiving subsidies might be seen as "the reforming dominant groups," driven by legitimate expectations for change. Conversely, religious groups' expectations may be considered illegitimate, placing them in the category of "the contested and marginal dominant groups." Characterizing rural populations proves challenging, their expectations are legitimate, and they benefited from democratic security such that they lack the incentive to propose institutional change, yet they lack the influence to be classified as "the dominant and self-confident groups." They may instead occupy a subordinate position within this dimension.

Finally, it is worth nothing that not all subaltern groups supported Uribe, nor did all of them benefit from his security strategy or from subsidies. Victims of the guerrilla in areas lacking economic interests were stigmatized (Estrada 2015), while groups such as unionists, peasants, teachers, left-wing political party members, students, ethnic minorities, and human rights organizations criticized Uribe's policies on armed conflict management and extractivism (El Tiempo 2003a).

Conclusions

This paper analyzed the characteristics, expectations, and political influence of the groups favored by socioeconomic dynamics before the social uprising in Colombia of November 21, 2019. The aim was to determine whether these groups constituted a DSB as defined by the neorealist approach, a coalition of dominant social groups benefiting from institutions and public policies, providing political support in exchange.

The first step in analyzing the DSB was to review the political economy literature of Colombia over the last years regarding influential groups and power dynamics. This aimed to underscore the importance of applying the concept of the DSB compared to similar concepts. The second step involved examining press articles primarily from newspapers such as El Espectador and El Tiempo, the magazine Semana, and the webpage La Silla Vacía to gather information on how dominant social groups sought to influence politics.

It is important to highlight the limitations of the chosen methodology. Press sources, reports from various organizations, and even academic research is often biased and may lack comprehensive information, as

[18] This was a conditional cash transfer program, granted mainly to families living in extreme poverty. These subsidies were intended to enable these families to send their children to school, as well as to attend regular growth control appointments.

they rely primarily on testimonies, interviews with a limited number of individuals, or the procedures and outcomes of specific trials. It would be ideal to have access to the conversations and negotiations between political actors and members of dominant groups. However, due to confidentiality issues, this is not possible. Therefore, we must rely on the selected sources while acknowledging their limitations.

Despite the considerable effort to demonstrate the relationships and mechanisms of influence between dominant groups and political actors, we do not know the precise nature of these relationships. For instance, we do not know whether there are disagreements during their discussions or if it is an exaggeration to conclude that a member of a dominant group acting as a political actor will necessarily represent that group's interests. Nevertheless, the established policies and institutions were close to the expectations of these dominant groups.

The findings regarding the characterization of the DSB before the social uprising in Colombia are summarized in Table 6. The DSB, composed by the cacaos, guilds, MNCs, landlords, narco-paramilitaries, beneficiaries of state subsidies, victims of guerrillas in economically significant areas, and religious groups, was unified under the political strategy of democratic security and investor confidence, which successfully met the expectations of all these groups regarding the country's security and expectations of increased investment by cacaos, business guilds, and MNCs, as well as expectations regarding concentrated land ownership by agricultural guilds, landowners, and narco-paramilitaries.

Table 6: The DSB before the Social Uprising

Group	Characteristics	Expectations	Political influence	Relationships with other social groups
Cacaos	• Companies in different economic sectors. • Largest companies in the country. • Capital accumulation.	• Enter foreign markets. • Contracts with the state. • Agro-industrial projects. • Security.	• Revolving door with top positions at the executive, legislative, and judicial. • Political campaign financing. • Think tanks. • Owners of media. • Association with guilds. • Positive view of Uribe.	• Employers of the Colombian people. • Alliances with MNCs. • Alleged alliances with narco-paramilitaries.
Guilds	• Represent the interests of different economic sectors. • Most powerful guilds: ANDI and SAC. • Unity of guilds under CGN to represent the interests of the private sector.	• Security. • Business guilds: investment and economic growth. • Agricultural guilds: maintain landownership structure.	• Public statements. • Revolving door with top positions at the executive. • Lobbying the congress.	• Subordinated to local economic groups and landowners.
MNCs	• Present mainly in the extractive, service, and financial sectors. • Most of them come from the US, UK, and Canada. • Economic power that surpasses that of some states. • Owned by powerful global groups of investors and industrialists.	• A legal framework that encourages and secures their investments. • Profit from the extraction of energy commodities. • Security.	• Lobbying the U.S. Congress. • They convey their interests to international organizations, research centers and forums. • Lobbying the Colombian congress, ministers, and the president. • Revolving door with top positions at the executive. • Positive view of Uribe	• Employers of the Colombian people. • Alliances with local capital. • Alleged alliances with narco-paramilitaries.
Landlords	• Background in landownership structure from colonial times. • Owners of large land holdings. • Use of violence to defend land ownership. • They are cattle ranchers, entrepreneurs in the agroindustry or narco-paramilitaries.	• Maintain landownership structure. • Agro-industrial projects. • Security.	• Revolving door with top positions at the executive, and legislative. • Association with guilds • Positive view of Uribe.	• Alliances with MNCs and local capital in extractive projects. • Close ties with narco-paramilitaries. • Employ peasants.

Narco-paramilitaries	• Use of violence. • Enemies of the insurgency. • Network of alliances and interests. • Coopted drug trafficking structures.	• Defense of private property and capital. • Maintain the power structure. • Security. • Accumulation of wealth and land. • Fight the insurgency. • Political power. • Impunity.	• Collaboration with military forces. • Access to local and regional state apparatus. • Influence in the congress (parapolitics). • Influence in the security agency (DAS). • Influence in the judicial power. • Positive view of Uribe.	• Financed by MNCs and local companies. • Recruit Colombian people.
Subaltern groups	• Low-income groups receiving subsidies. • Rural inhabitants in areas where guerrillas exercised economic control. • Religious groups.	• Security. • Social values: authority and hard work. • Involvement of Christian religion. • Get out of poverty.	• Voting. • Public opinion.	• Employed by cacaos, MNCs, and landlords. • Victims of the armed conflict.

Own elaboration

Each group benefited to varying degrees. They also employed different mechanisms of political influence. Table 7 indicates the power position of the groups within the DSB. The cacaos and MNCs hold a prominent position due to being the primary beneficiaries of growth, employing diverse political influence mechanisms that extend beyond national borders, and having legitimate expectations. Landowners and narco-paramilitaries have also been major beneficiaries. At the same time, they exerted various political influence mechanisms, including illegal ones. However, their expectations are not legitimate, meaning that these groups cannot occupy a prominent position in the DSB and are thus ideologically subordinate.

Regarding the guilds, victims of guerrilla in rural areas with economic interests, low-income groups benefiting from subsidies, and religious groups, they had either fewer means to exert political pressure, or these did not allow for such proximity to political actors, so they occupy a subordinate position within the DSB. The business guilds are in a lower position than cacaos and MNCs, while the agricultural guilds are subordinate to the landowners and narco-paramilitaries. In the case of victims of guerrilla in rural areas with economic interests and low-income groups benefiting from subsidies, they differ from religious groups in that their expectations are legitimate. However, unlike victims of guerrilla, low-income groups have an incentive to mobilize for institutional change, placing them in a different position within the DSB.

Table 7: Characterization of the Groups within the DSB

	H	h
I	**1. Dominant and self-confident groups** Cacaos and MNCs. Business guilds. Victims of guerrillas in areas of economic interests.	**2. Contested and conservative groups** Landlords and narco-paramilitaries. Agricultural guilds.
i	**3. Reforming dominant groups** Low-income groups receiving subsidies.	**4. Contested and marginal dominant groups** Religious groups

Own elaboration

It is interesting to note that this DSB seems to be divided into two main subgroups, one predominantly associated with the urban sector and the central area of the country, and another with the rural and peripheral areas, having a more conservative orientation. We observe the importance of having the political support of this rural bloc linked to the peripheral regions, and how its dynamics helped to consolidate a growth regime that benefited the urban and central bloc.

While Uribe's political strategy achieved unity between these two blocs, the instability of this union began to emerge at the beginning of Juan Manuel Santos's government with the fall in international prices of commodities and Santos's initiative to change the approach to the armed conflict and initiate peace negotiations with the FARC-EP, thereby opposing these two subgroups. The analysis of the rupture of the DSB identified in this paper, and how this contributed to the social uprising will be addressed in my PhD thesis.

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