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ACLED Methodology for Coding Political Armed Groups in Colombia

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Background

The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)'s coverage of armed actors in Colombia presents a number of unique methodological challenges. A hazardous media environment persists in the country on a level comparable to those in Mexico or the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras), leading to similar journalistic limitations when reporting on specific actors. Colombia continues to rank as one of the most dangerous countries for journalists in the western hemisphere, in part due to the threat of violence by armed groups leery of exposure.¹

Colombia requires unique methodological considerations because of the types of groups operating within its borders. Violence in Colombia is split between criminal groups and armed groups with stated political goals. However, due to the reporting limitations mentioned above as well as the similar tactics, techniques, or procedures (TTPs) of both types of groups, it is difficult to distinguish whether a criminal group or a political armed group was involved in a violent event. This factor, among others, contributes to Colombia not being among the countries wherein ACLED interprets criminal gang violence to impact state stability and territorial control to the degree that warrants its classification as 'political violence' that is suitable for inclusion in the ACLED dataset (*for more information on that, see ACLED's [methodology primer on gang-related violence](#) and under what conditions ACLED collects such information*).²

Accordingly, ACLED has taken a more selective approach of excluding solely criminal activity. Specific criteria established within ACLED's data collection processes aim to, within reason, exclude violence committed by local criminal groups (i.e. 'criminal violence') while still capturing violence committed by armed groups with political goals (i.e. 'political violence').

Key rebel groups

The key armed rebel groups present in Colombia include the **ELN: National Liberation Army**, the **Gulf Clan**, as well as **FARC: Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia** dissident groups. Most of these groups originated from left-wing guerrilla groups and right-wing paramilitary groups. However, some groups like the Gulf Clan are now more generally involved in transnational drug trafficking to fund their wider activities.³ Where possible, ACLED codes the specific names of armed groups operating within Colombia.

¹ [Reporters without Borders, last accessed on 21 October 2022](#)

² Preliminary reevaluation of the country by ACLED late 2022 suggests that levels of criminal gang violence in Colombia are significant enough to merit further investigation in 2023 to establish if and how such violence in Colombia may be included in the ACLED dataset. For more on how historical data is added to the ACLED dataset, see [this primer](#).

³ Note that ACLED considers political actors engaging in violent criminal activity to fund their operations, such as kidnapping, to be political violence.

FARC: Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia dissident groups

In 2016, the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) signed a peace deal in which the FARC national organization was officially dissolved and transitioned into a political party. This political party is represented in the data as **FARC: Common Alternative Revolutionary Force** until 24 January 2021, after which it is coded as the **Comunes Party** to reflect the group's new name. However, several FARC sub-commanders refused to demobilize following the peace deal. Prior to the demobilization, FARC's organizational breakdown consisted of seven 'blocs,' each containing five or more 'fronts' with around 200 fighters. These 'fronts' form the basis of many dissident groups today who retain their organizational identity and territory of operation.⁴ Unspecified FARC dissident groups are coded using the catch-all **FARC Dissident: Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia Dissident Faction** primary actor, while specific dissident groups are noted by a slight variation in the actor name, e.g. **FARC Dissident - 1st Front: Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia Dissident Faction (1st Front - Armando Rios)**.

Unidentified armed actors

For many events in Colombia, source material do not contain specific information on the actors involved. In such cases, the **Unidentified Armed Group (Colombia)** actor is coded with an Interaction code of 3 when it can be reasonably assumed that the actor involved is a political militia or rebel group and not a strictly criminal group.

ACLEd uses the following parameters to distinguish the activity of politically-relevant groups from that of purely criminal groups: a) reports mention that armed groups are present and active in the area, b) reports mention at least three people are killed (e.g. massacres), or c) the actor in question has sophisticated explosive weapons (e.g. grenades, improvised explosive devices, landmines, etc.).⁵

Additionally, ACLEd also includes violent events carried out by unidentified actors when the victim of an event was targeted for apparent political motives. Therefore, in line with standard ACLEd methodology, when a person with a salient political identity (e.g. politician, prominent activist, journalist) is attacked by unidentified assailants, the event is included in the dataset. In Colombia specifically, farmers, indigenous people, and social leaders have also been frequent targets of guerilla and insurgent groups. As such, when they are targeted by unidentified assailants, the events are also treated as politically motivated and coded by ACLEd.

Unidentified armed actors operating in insurgent regions

ACLEd also codes events involving unidentified actors when the event happens in a region with a **significant presence of insurgent groups**, i.e. where it is clear that insurgent groups are

⁴ [CISAC, July 2019](#)

⁵ Under certain circumstances, the presence of sophisticated weapons is implied by the source rather than specified, such as when a group simply 'clashes' with police; these would be included. Further, non-lethal events such as abductions may also be included without specific reference to sophisticated weaponry.

responsible for most of the violence in the region.⁶ These regions include the following departments:⁷

Antioquia; Bolívar; Cauca; César; Chocó; Córdoba; Meta; Nariño; Norte de Santander; Putumayo; Sucre; Valle del Cauca; Vichada.

These regions are home to various insurgent groups fighting for control of strategic and resource-rich areas, including coca production areas, drug trafficking corridors, and mines. The demobilization of the FARC led to intensified clashes between these armed groups fighting for control of the territories left vacant.

Norte de Santander and Nariño are among the hotspots of clashes involving insurgent groups. The ELN, Popular Liberation Army (EPL), Los Rastrojos, FARC dissident factions (such as the 33rd Front), and the Gulf Clan are active in Norte de Santander. The ELN, Gulf Clan, and FARC dissident group Oliver Sinisterra Front are among the 18 armed groups active in Nariño.⁸

The Gulf Clan has a significant presence in Antioquia, Bolívar, César, Chocó, Córdoba, and Sucre. As the ELN expanded into Antioquia, Bolívar, and Chocó, feuds between the two groups, among the two largest insurgent groups in Colombia, have materialized. In César and Córdoba, groups such as the Pachenca and FARC dissident groups, among others, also challenge the Gulf Clan's presence. In Sucre, high levels of violence have been attributed to social control exerted by the Gulf Clan over local communities.

FARC dissident groups have reclaimed territory in departments such as Cauca, Meta, Putumayo, and Valle del Cauca. In Cauca and Valle del Cauca, these groups commonly clash with the ELN. Elsewhere, rival FARC dissident groups vying for territorial dominance also clash with one another. For example, clashes between the Gentil Duarte and Segunda Marquetalia groups have been recorded in Meta, while clashes between the Border Command and Carolina Ramirez have been recorded in Putumayo.

In Vichada, FARC dissidents groups and the ELN have fought over control of arms and drug trafficking routes across the border, as well as mobility corridors.⁹

⁶ The Ombudsman's Office of Colombia records the presence of the ELN in 22 departments and FARC Dissident Factions in 29 departments ([Defensoría del Pueblo, 9 December 2023](#); [Defensoría del Pueblo, 5 January 2023](#)). The presence of the Gulf Clan and affiliates was reported in 17 departments ([InSight Crime, 8 November 2022](#)). However, not all violence by unidentified actors in these departments can be duly attributed to these armed groups.

⁷ ACLED Researchers review evidence of insurgent group activity and update the list accordingly.

⁸ [El Tiempo, 17 August 2020](#); [InSight Crime, 11 January 2022](#)

⁹ [La Liga Contra el Silencio, 12 December 2022](#)