Popular Protest and Human Rights Activism

We have had very tough times in Barranca and in the whole country, and the feeling of unity seems farther and farther away . . . but we have also been capable of coming together as a people during tough times, of being strong in the face of this, building movements that we can identify with and support.

Yolanda Becerra, president of the Organización Femenina Popular

Introduction

Most Latin American human rights movements in the late twentieth century were born in response to the repression of social movements. As the Peruvian activist and sociologist Carlos Basombrío Iglesias writes: “Latin American human rights movements have emerged almost exclusively as responses to abuses by the state.” At the start of the 1980s, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Brazil, Haiti, Paraguay, and Bolivia were ruled by right-wing military dictatorships. Guatemala was on the verge of a period of genocidal state terror. Peru had just emerged from a period of left-populist military rule, only to be plunged into a guerrilla conflict that would claim tens of thousands of lives. One of just a few formal democracies in the region, Colombia was governed by the repressive legal regime known as the National Security Statute that gave extraordinary powers to the security forces, while curtailing the rights to freedom of movement and assembly. One of Colombia’s leading human rights organizations, the Comisión Colombiana de Juristas, estimated that no fewer than eight thousand people were legally
prosecuted under the National Security Statute during President Turbay’s term in office between 1978 and 1982, most of them by court martial.3

Human rights movements cannot be viewed as simple axiomatic responses to political repression. The advent of human rights in Barrancabermeja must be understood with respect to a long history of popular movement struggle around civil and political rights dating back to the early twentieth century. Human rights represented the outcome of the direct violence perpetrated by state agents on organized communities of activists, and a clash of worldviews. For twenty-three out of twenty-five years between 1958 and 1990, Colombia was governed under the terms of extraordinary legal measures that concentrated power in the hands of the executive, restricted the activities of trade unions and progressive political parties, and empowered the military to suppress popular protest when it was interpreted as allied with or supportive of Marxist subversion.4

The ascendancy of human rights activism in Barrancabermeja during the 1980s is closely linked to the onset of a state-sponsored dirty war against popular movements, in a region with strong presence of national government and military authorities.5 The term “dirty war” gained currency among activists, journalists, and scholars across Latin America after it was adopted by the military junta that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983.6 Junta spokespeople had argued that they had no choice but to carry out a “dirty war” of covert operations in order to defeat the shadowy guerrilla groups that posed a threat to Argentina’s national security.7 However, Argentinian rights groups pounced on this notion, stating that the “dirty war” against the guerrillas was in fact cover for an undeclared war on social movements. The use of the term has been defined by many scholars with reference to official forces’ specious portrayal of a war on political opponents as a war between belligerent forces. But the phrase has long since entered the vernacular of human rights activism as a condemnation of covert operations, generally. In Colombia, the term has mainly, although not exclusively, been used by activists. The Comisión Andina de Juristas published a 1988 report alleging that national security forces were using “dirty war” tactics under the guise of counterinsurgency.8 An Americas Watch researcher touring Colombia in 1988 documented threats against members of the UP political party by a death squad calling itself “Guerra Sucia.”9

In Colombia, as elsewhere in Latin America, the turn to human rights took place during the late Cold War, as popular movements sought to change the behavior of abusive states. Guerrilla groups also expanded during this period, although the concurrence of violent and nonviolent movements such as existed in Barranca was distinctive. Unlike human rights defenders in Buenos
Aires, activists in Barrancabermeja were confronting the problem of a dirty war in a geographically isolated conflict zone, and they did so through mass mobilization. The decision by a diverse coalition of Barranca-based activists to establish a human rights committee in 1987 was a deep-seated refutation of state-sponsored violence, as well as an attempt to maintain the space for social movements to continue their work. It was a radical impulse, but one that drove the everyday business of social change. Régulo Madero—a former CREDHOS president and former elected representative of the Patriotic Union (UP)—says that in the 1980s many Barranca activists saw a link between human rights and the struggle to radically transform Colombian society: “Many people saw it up close, they touched it. They lived it. I think we got ahead of the facts. Many of the social movements and human rights movements in this country, not just in Barrancabermeja, sympathized with this, and so in large part one of the goals of the social movement was to overthrow the state, albeit with words instead of guns.” Human rights activism was a new means of mobilizing ordinary citizens and challenging political and economic power. Madero’s suggestion that many activists sought to overthrow the state, “albeit with words,” hints at a profound disillusionment with traditional politics. The fact that some people in Barranca looked toward a revolutionary horizon did not prevent the city’s civic-popular movement from making claims on the state. Writing in 1989, community organizer Juan de Dios Castilla argued that “even the most radical” popular organizations in Barranca sought to influence government policies on social, economic, and security issues.

CREDHOS is exceptional in the history of human rights organizing in Latin America because it was established by frontline activists in an area of armed conflict. This chapter aims to better understand the onset of the dirty war and the growth of human rights activism in Colombia through the late 1980s from the perspective of Barranca-based social activists. Due to the presence of armed groups in the city and surrounding region, Barranca’s popular movement was subject to direct and indirect pressures that shaped the way in which human rights would be debated for years to come. While the worst abuses were being committed by military and paramilitary forces, during this period we also get a glimpse into how guerrilla groups’ actions contributed to the volatility of relations between citizens and public authorities, and exposed rifts within Barranca’s civic-popular movement.

Under extreme circumstances, CREDHOS brought a coalition of social and political movements together for the purposes of exposing human rights violators, advocating on behalf of victims and their families, and calling on the state to protect its citizens, while addressing deeper social and economic inequalities. By utilizing the language of human rights, Barranca’s civic-popular
movement rendered the political violence being committed by state and para-state agents in Barranca apparent and legible to ordinary citizens within and beyond the Magdalena Medio. This chapter begins with the interconnected stories of the 1985 murder of the former guerrilla commander Ricardo Lara Parada, the 1986 murder of the UP senator Leonardo Posada, and the 1987 murder of the teenager Sandra Rondón, leading directly to the establishment of CREDHOS.

Who Fired the First Shot in the Dirty War?

There have been many politically motivated homicides in Barranca’s short history, but few as significant or as confounding as the murder of the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) cofounder Ricardo Lara Parada. The late 1980s was a period of rapidly escalating violence by military, paramilitary, and guerrilla forces. Competition between armed actors for influence in Barranca had serious consequences for social activists. Lara Parada’s assassination on November 14, 1985, in Barranca by members of the ELN marked the start of the dirty war period within the city. Ricardo Lara’s murder was a violation by the guerrillas of Barranca’s autonomous civic-popular movement. It also revealed ideological contradictions and cleavages within and between the country’s main guerrilla groups that would trouble local social movements for more than a generation. The ELN had purged its ranks of “traitors and sapos” before, most brazenly in the early 1970s under the leadership of Fabio Vásquez Castaño. But Lara Parada’s status as a local hero makes his case stand out.

The story of Ricardo Lara Parada’s rise to prominence, capture, exile, return, and murder is a parable, symbolizing the tragic arc of many Barranca activists’ aspirations to build a pluralist civic-popular movement. Lara Parada’s story reflects the pressures under which social movement initiatives are subject in times of war. To his friends, such as the law professor Jairo Vargas León, Lara Parada was the personification of Barranca’s exuberant activist culture. In this passage he likens Parada to Salsa singing great Ismael (El Sonero Mayor) Rivera: “[Lara Parada] was profoundly humanist, he expressed solidarity with the people, he was joyful like no one else I know, of a singular charisma, at times naïve, unaware and without fear, an advocate for diversity, an interpreter of the heterogeneity in our society, convinced that it was important to put a person’s humanity above political ideology, anonymous poet, frustrated accordionist and life of the party [rumbero]. The many melodies he created are still resonating in the hearts of barranqueños. Ricardo Lara: el sonero mayor.”

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Many activists remember the larger-than-life Lara Parada as the first victim of the epidemic of violence that would consume the city in the late 1980s. One longtime community organizer and Barranca resident recalled: “After the assassination of Ricardo Lara Parada, it was as if they had opened the floodgates to kill and kill.”

Lara Parada was an idealist who gave up civilian life to pursue the cause of a new revolutionary movement that claimed direct links to a regional history of popular radicalism. Born in Barranca in 1940 the son of an oil worker and union activist father, Lara Parada left his hometown in 1960 to study at the Universidad Industrial de Santander (UIS) in Bucaramanga. While attending the region’s most important public university, Lara Parada became a leader of the Juventudes Movimiento Revolucionario Liberal, a regional youth wing of the Liberal Party that drew inspiration from the experiences of the Comuna de Barranca uprising in 1948 and the guerrilla campaigns led by Rafael Rangel during La Violencia in the 1950s. While at the university Lara Parada met and worked alongside several cofounders of the ELN insurgency, including his future nemesis Fabio Vásquez. Lara Parada would play a key role in building the ELN. He was trained in guerrilla tactics with five other student activists in Cuba in 1962. Lara Parada also helped to establish the precursor to the ELN, the Brigada Pro Liberación José Antonio Galán, named after the popular nationalist leader of the eighteenth-century Comuneros revolt. On January 7, 1965, he participated in the ELN’s first military action, the armed seizure of the town of Simacota.

Lara Parada’s military career was fraught and ended amid accusations that he had betrayed the guerrillas’ cause. In 1967 Lara Parada was chosen to lead the Frente Camilo Torres Restrepo and became a member of the ELN’s Central Command. In 1968 he was promoted to the rank of deputy national leader. However, Lara Parada lasted just one year in that position, replaced by Fabio Vásquez. Like other young and idealistic students who joined the guerrillas in the 1960s, Lara Parada had little military training. He was recognized for his political intelligence and communications skills, but this did not compensate for his deficiencies in terms of battlefield acumen. The ELN historian Milton Hernández writes:

Ricardo Lara Parada demonstrated a total lack of aptitude as a member of the ELN Central Command; his irresponsibility led to the annihilation of the Frente Camilo Torres Restrepo; which was one of the worst blows to the ELN in 1969. That annihilation provoked a profound personal crisis in Lara Parada, forcing Fabio Vásquez Castaño to relieve him of his command. . . . In November 1973, at the time of the worst moment in our
history, caused by the events of “Operación Anorí,” that we were only beginning to understand, he deserted our ranks in what constituted a profound act of cowardice.17

Implicit in Hernández’s critical view of Lara Parada is that the young barran­queño lacked discipline and was too soft for serious guerrilla work. Lara Parada was captured along with eighteen other ELN guerrilla fighters on November 25, 1973, in Nechí, Antioquia, during the final days of the Anorí disaster. The commanders of the army’s Medellín-based IV Brigade were thrilled by Lara Parada’s detention, apparently convinced that he would provide intelligence regarding the ELN’s network of urban supporters and the whereabouts of the group’s leadership.18 Reeling from their historic defeat at the hands of the Colombian army in 1973, leaders of the ELN speculated that Lara Parada had willingly surrendered to authorities and then traded information for favorable treatment.

Following his detention by the military, Lara Parada embarked on a circuitous journey back to Barrancabermeja, during which he would all but shed his past connection to the ELN. Lara Parada spent the next five years in La Picota prison in Bogotá before being released and exiled to Central America. He traveled to Panama in 1978, where he had made personal contact with the left-leaning Panamanian president Omar Torrijos through a mutual friend, the novelist Gabriel García Márquez. One year later, Lara Parada moved to Nicaragua to work on behalf of the newly formed Sandinista revolutionary regime. In 1980 he was employed as a bodyguard for the Sandinista minister of the interior when he received a visit from the Movimiento 19 de abril (M-19) guerrilla leader Jaime Bateman. Lara Parada secretly returned to Colombia in late 1981, this time to the southern department of Putumayo, to work with the M-19. In 1982 he journeyed to Bogotá as a participant in peace talks involving the FARC, M-19, and the government of President Belisario Bentancur.19 Lara Parada had joined the process despite his belief that the Betancur government was untrustworthy. For their part, the ELN denounced the negotiations and had refused to participate. Negotiations ultimately soured, violence in the countryside escalated, and the M-19 remained at arms. Lara Parada, however, was granted amnesty for having played a role in the process, and returned to civilian life.

Despite everything, from allegations of incompetence and treachery, and the time he spent in exile, Lara Parada was enthusiastically received upon his return to Barranca. He very quickly became caught up in the romantic of the civic-popular movement. Visiting his hometown in May 1983, Lara Parada was asked by friends to give an impromptu address to an assembly of the
Coordinadora Popular, convened in the final days of the *paro cívico* that would define the lives of many talented young popular leaders. It was Lara Parada’s first public appearance in the city. Encouraged by the warm welcome from the activist community, and impressed with the achievements of the civic-popular movement, Lara Parada decided to stay. He planned to open a bookstore that he hoped would become a hub for radical intellectuals, activists, and students.

His first political involvement was to join the small but growing campaign to establish a new public university in Barranca. Lara Parada planned to connect with members of Coordinadora Popular involved in developing spaces for the arts. Many of his new comrades worked with the Casa de la Cultura, a community center where socially engaged poetry readings, music events, and theater performances were organized. Dozens of people passed through the Lara Parada household to talk about the civic-popular movement, *paros cívicos*, and recent violence in the countryside. Within the first month he had abandoned his idea of settling into a life of debate, poetry, and *tertulias* and decided to get involved in local politics.

Lara Parada launched his new activist career in Barranca by establishing a regional political party with strong ties to local social movements called the Frente Amplo del Magdalena Medio (FAM). Jael Quiroga remembers the FAM as a reflection of its charismatic leader: “The FAM was cheverísimo, it was macondiano. . . . It was not dogmatic, or disciplined for that matter, totally undisciplined, I loved it!” Despite its apparent intemperance, the FAM achieved a great deal in a short period of time. Not only did it elect city councillors, but it also helped to organize public protests, participated in Coordinadora Popular de Barrancabermeja coalition work, and helped to articulate a regional vision of political, social, and cultural development. The FAM message touched on all of the major issues being raised by the Coordinadora Popular and *campesino* groups. Indeed, the FAM was perhaps the first attempt to reframe the civic-popular movement struggle in Barranca in regional terms. In their campaign literature, the FAM stated: “We simply take up the struggle developed by the people during *paros cívicos* and by *campesinos* from the region in defense of the land and the right to life.”

The FAM stood for peace processes and demanded the “dissolution of paramilitary groups” by the state, which would become a major tenet of human rights activism in the years to come. In March 1984 the FAM ran its first slate of candidates in Barranca’s municipal elections, with plans to run candidates in other municipios around the region. Despite FAM supporters’ fears that they would be stigmatized as “subversive” because of Lara Parada’s involvement, and despite the presence of a well-funded Liberal Party, the FAM made a breakthrough. Two FAM candidates were elected in Barranca. For the first time since the 1940s, the Liberal Party was reduced to minority status on the municipal council.
The ELN has maintained that while the decision to assassinate Lara Parada was justified, the timing may have been ill-advised. In September 1983, at a national gathering commemorating the tenth anniversary of the defeat at Anorí, ELN guerrilla commanders named a squad of assassins to travel to Barranca and execute Lara Parada. But the plan was not carried out for two more years. Lara Parada was gunned down on the streets of Barranca in November 1985. The alleged betrayal he had committed in 1973 had evidently not faded from memory. His rise to prominence as a spokesperson for the M-19 guerrillas and his ambitions as a political leader may have been too much to ignore. There may also have been concerns around his association with Barranca activists working for rival leftist factions, namely the Communist Party and Patriotic Union. The ELN has denied that the murder of Lara Parada was intended as an attack on the FAM in particular, or as a message to the city’s social movements, or their rivals for that matter. The ELN has nonetheless admitted that it “acted without considering the political context at the time, appeared disconnected from the conjuncture and caused a strong polemic at the national level.”

The killing of Lara Parada drove a wedge between factions of the left in Barranca, and gestured toward armed groups’ encroachment on civilian organizing spaces. Those sympathetic to the ELN may have been at pains to explain the rationale behind the killing. Those sympathetic to the FARC rallied behind Lara Parada’s memory, and within two years the orphaned FAM entered into an official alliance with the political wing of the FARC, the Patriotic Union. According to Irene Villamizar, a founding member of CREHOS and long-time activist with the Pastoral Social, the murder of Lara Parada by his former comrades anticipated an increase in guerrilla actions that ran counter to Barranca’s tradition of pluralist social protest:

When the guerrillas began to take control of the paros cívicos, many leaders were afraid. If [the guerrillas] had behaved differently, in a more civilized way, the history of Barrancabermeja would have been very different from what it is now. I am totally convinced that the death of Ricardo Lara Parada changed everything. The ELN killed Lara Parada, and that intolerance, that thinking that the armed struggle was going to lead to liberation . . . the guerrillas just were not capable of seeing the very important role that Ricardo Lara was playing. This changed the struggle in Barranca. Because until that time, everyone, ELN [elenos], FARC [faruchos], right wing, left wing, whatever . . . we could listen to one another and tolerate one another. But the death of Lara Parada brought out the differences between us. In spite of all of this, and I think again that the Church plays a big role, we were able to join together, organize ourselves and defend our lives. But we lost leadership.
The battle for Barranca that unfolded in subsequent years might have been less complicated had the guerrillas not attempted to constrain social movement initiatives. While such conjecture may not be demonstrable, the Lara Parada murder has been remembered in this way. The activist Jesuit priest and long-serving Pastoral Social director Eduardo Díaz observed in a 1990 interview: “I think that the death of Lara Parada was one of the gravest political errors. In Barranca there has always been political confrontation, but the death of Lara Parada broke the barriers down, opened the floodgates.”

When the guerrillas established a military presence in Barranca in the mid-1980s, there began a violent contest over the urban territory that the civic-popular movement had fought to keep safe for public protests. The record shows that gunfire was rarely exchanged between the guerrillas and security forces. Rather, the struggle between the two sides over the city’s diverse zones was played out mainly in the shadows. Before the close of the decade, there were hundreds of paramilitary attacks on alleged guerrilla sympathizers, including social activists, members of legal political organizations, and young people from the popular barrios. National Police continued to carry out spot checks, raids, and arrests of ordinary citizens. But the guerrillas also initiated what some activists in Barranca would come to view as a misguided military occupation of civilian spaces, most significantly the paro cívico. Over the course of the next decade, the city would be carved up by both state and non-state armed actors claiming to control its main avenues, intersections, and plazas. As we shall see, the civic-popular movement was directly implicated in this contest, asserting its sovereignty, and the importance of maintaining space for nonviolent forms of social protest.

With deep roots in the Magdalena Medio, the ELN guerrillas enjoyed widespread but not unconditional support among poor urban and rural people. The way in which the guerrillas were perceived by progressive social movements was complicated by serious ethical concerns. One Bogotá-based activist, who worked as a “fixer” for journalists seeking interviews with ELN leaders in Barranca during the 1980s, maintains that the guerrillas were sincere in their desire to contribute to processes of change. However, she notes that while the guerrillas coveted popular support, they never recognized the tenuousness of the relationship between the civic and military struggles. Indeed, the question of whether or not it was a good idea to combine “all forms of struggle” was not debated as such.

This was the 1970s and 1980s, the period of revolutionary fervor in Latin America. I mean, even the Catholic Church! There were all sorts of reasons for this fervor, in the sense that change was absolutely necessary in terms
of improving peoples’ lives, and that revolutionary struggle involving arms was legitimate. In terms of my own experience, it was very much about the discourse that it was a peoples’ revolution, it was not about ten thousand guys in arms taking power. It was about building a base of support for revolutionary change. That was the discourse. I think questions were raised internally . . . but there wasn’t a questioning yet about the validity of the revolutionary struggle. . . . It didn’t make sense to ask them at that point.²⁸

In the mid-1970s the ELN had recast itself as a popular movement. The group abandoned the *foquista* approach, which maintains that the guerrillas should constitute a political vanguard for others to follow. The establishment by ELN supporters of the group ¡A Luchar! in 1985 as a national political organization was emblematic of this shift.²⁹ Some Barranca activists joined ¡A Luchar! for the same sorts of reasons that others joined the UP. The Lara Parada case demonstrated that there were fundamental contradictions between violent and nonviolent means of achieving social justice.

The murder of Ricardo Lara Parada laid bare some of the unique challenges inherent to social movement organizing in the midst of armed conflict. From the ELN’s point of view, Lara Parada had committed an unpardonable offense. Members of the UP took the opportunity to take over Lara Parada’s movement, the FAM. The assassination was therefore a divisive event, after which all armed actors extended their reach. To many barranqueño activists working for social change today, Lara Parada’s murder would come to represent the opening of a dark chapter in the city’s history and the realization of their own vulnerabilities. The Coordinadora Popular would ask the guerrillas to restrain themselves during social protests. As violence increased, human rights became the main discourse the civic-popular movement.

The Advent of Human Rights Activism

The specific genesis of the Regional Committee for the Defense of Human Rights (CREDHOS) in 1987 can be linked to a sequence of murders that brought clarity to Barranca’s social movements on the issue of political violence. The first of these events was the slaying of the respected community organizer and UP congressman Leonardo Posada on August 30, 1986. Riding a long wave of support for radical politics coming out of Barranca, Leonardo Posada was a popular figure who embodied the *mística* of the Colombian oil capital. Posada was also one of the first prominent urban activists to publicly
denounce violence against campesinos in the Magdalena Medio. Massacres in the countryside had shocked many urban activists but did not immediately compel them to action. The killing of Ricardo Lara Parada had been deeply distressing, but it was viewed at the time as somewhat of an anomaly. Indeed, the guerrillas would kill no other prominent activist figures during this period of time. One CREDHOS cofounder describes the awakening that many individuals experienced following Leonardo Posada’s murder, as a city once considered to be a haven for social activists became a dangerous place: “Previously, deaths occurred all over the Magdalena Medio, but not in town. Barranca was a city that took in campesinos displaced by the violence, but then death appeared on the street corners of the city, everywhere. . . . The violence convinced us to look for a way of fighting for human rights.”

Each subsequent death referenced the violence that had come before it, added to the overall impact, and proved unifying. The campaign of paramilitary attacks that began with the murder of Leonardo Posada, and culminated with the murder of Sandra Ronón, set new forces in motion.

Leonardo Posada was already one of the brightest stars of the Colombian left before he moved to Barranca. He was raised in Barrio Quiroga, a working-class neighborhood in central Bogotá that had been the site of one the first major state-led urban renewal projects in Colombian history. Posada was exposed at an early age to the type of city politics that was being debated in Barranca, including the unequal development of housing and infrastructure. Posada’s parents were both active members of the Communist Party of Colombia (PCC). While studying at the National University in Bogotá during the 1970s, Posada immersed himself in a bohemian world of student politics, poetry, and late nights listening to tango music. He became a prominent organizer with the national directorate of the Communist Youth (JUCO). He was promoted to the Central Committee of the PCC in 1980. That same year, party officials asked Posada to relocate to Barranca in order to work with the city’s popular movements.

The transition to community-based activism in the small city suited Posada, and like many other barranqueños he became concerned with the widening circle of violence consuming the region. Posada was a founding member and spokesperson of the Coordinadora Popular coalition. He participated alongside Ricardo Lara Parada in the regional movement FAM and served three terms as a municipal councillor before running for national office. Posada was strident in his views and a captivating public speaker. While the notion of a human rights movement had not yet taken shape, Posada spoke openly at protest rallies about state-sponsored attacks on campesinos and called for the dissolution of MAS death squads. In a 1995 interview with longtime
social activist Ubencel Duque, one Barranca resident recalled Posada’s early attempts to draw attention to the human rights crisis: “I remember that one day Leonardo Posada took it on himself to retrieve dead bodies from the river, because he could not accept that in Barranccabermeja we were so indifferent to what was happening all around us.” In 1986 he was elected to the House of Representatives as a candidate from the Department of Santander on behalf of the UP.

Leonardo Posada’s standing as an elected official was not enough to protect him. He was gunned down in Barranca on August 30, 1986. The murder was carried out just a few days before he was scheduled to move to Bogotá to begin his work in Congress. In the previous week, threatening graffiti had appeared in Barranca calling for Posada to leave town, signed by MAS paramilitaries, “Fuera communistsas, fuera Leonardo Posada.” He had started taking precautions, avoided sleeping in the same bed two nights in a row, but otherwise worked tirelessly to prepare himself to represent the Magdalena Medio on the national political stage. It was 6:00 p.m. Leonardo Posada came out of a meeting and walked into the warmth of his last Saturday night in Barranca. Before he could take even a few steps, he was shot multiple times at close range by a gunman riding on the back of a motorcycle. According to reports, the assassin paused briefly, was exhorted by the driver to finish him off, and then unloaded several more shots. Nobody was ever charged with his murder.

Like many of Barranca’s martyred popular leaders, Posada is remembered not only for his leadership qualities but also for his love of life. In 1987 the main commercial street in central Barranca was named after Leonardo Posada. A sign was put up, inscribed with lines from the poem “Winds of the People Carry Me” by Spanish anti-fascist writer Miguel Hernández: “Singing I await death / for there are nightingales that sing / above the guns / and in the midst of battles.”

One close friend in Barranca remembered him with a few lines of verse: “Leonardo, el viejo man, salsero, bolerista, man of a thousand and one tertulias, he was a man who came into your life unexpectedly, those of us who loved him, and those who hardly knew him.” Posada was regarded in activist circles as a gifted organizer, charismatic speaker, and rumbero. In his last interview with a local journalist, Posada said: “I want them to sing boleros at my grave.” A paro cívico was organized by members of the PCC and UP in Barranca, and an estimated ten thousand people attended Posada’s funeral in his hometown of Bogotá.

The murder of Leonardo Posada augured poorly for the UP in the Magdalena Medio, as it did for popular movements in general and the wider population. Hundreds of UP militants were killed or disappeared across Colombia in the first few years of the party’s existence. The departments of
Santander and Antioquia, ground zero for paramilitary repression, accounted for approximately one-third of all attacks on the UP. On the evening of April 23, 1987, three prominent Barranca-based social activists and five other people were injured by the explosion of a hand grenade thrown into the busy Monte Blanco ice cream shop located in the central Barranca neighborhood of La Campana. At the time, most people in the city were either gathered in their homes or in public places watching Colombia win the South American youth soccer championship. César Martínez, Alirio Traslaviña, and Miguel Castañeda were the intended targets. Martínez, a city councillor and member of the Patriotic Union, lost his legs as a result. Traslaviña, the president of the Magdalena Medio Peasant Coordination who had helped to lead the 1985 marcha campesina to Cartagena, was rushed to the hospital unconscious. Castañeda, a UP organizer, suffered serious wounds to one of his legs. Five other people, including two children, were injured by shrapnel. It was the first time that such a reckless attack had occurred in a public place in the city, spreading fear among the general population.

The Monte Blanco incident was met with a spontaneous and angry paro cívico, led by local UP and PCC members, but with broad participation.

Figure 5. Meeting of the Unión Patriótica political party in Barrancabermeja, late 1980s. Courtesy of Foto Estudios Joya.
Within six hours of the attack, barricades of burning tires and scrap wood were set up in front of the As de Copas, the convenience store at the edge to the city center that had served as a gathering place for demonstrators since the 1970s. Longtime PCC activist David Ravelo remembers how quickly the protests unfolded.

I was at home, not far from the San Rafael Hospital. . . . It was about 7:30 or 8:00 p.m. We met just outside the hospital and said that we had to do something, because this just cannot go on any longer. . . . At about 10:00 p.m. we all got together at a strategic spot known as the As de Copas, on the way out of Barrancabermeja. We blocked the road, more people came, the police came. . . . A couple of guys with guns showed up, we figured it was the security forces, threatening, and the people just jumped on them, burned their motorcycle. Because the people were furious. At 10:00 a.m. the mayor of Barranca, a Liberal mayor, called [UP municipal councillor] Ismael Jaimes and myself, and we went down to City Hall. And while we were talking to the mayor, the police descended on the barricades, and the people were dispersed. They used tear gas, fired shots into the air. And by the time we got back we found that the police had overturned the pots [of sancocho], and the protestors were radicalized. We had only occupied the one spot, the As de Copas. After that, though, the thing spread to the entire city. The entire city was paralyzed, all because of the aggression against the protestors who had been at the barricades.39

Hundreds of ordinary citizens joined the barricades, demanding an end to political repression and other human rights abuses. They seized the moment to denounce Barranca’s persistent contaminated water and other social problems. In the aftermath, UP and other municipal councillors sat down with the mayor and regional military authorities to negotiate the release of thirty protestors who had been detained by police.40 The paro ended within twenty-four hours, and a tense calm came over the city. There would be no mass meetings in the Parque Infantil, no delegations to the capital, and no immediate plans to organize another paro cívico.

The indignation felt by many activists in the wake of the Monte Blanco attack animated a series of increasingly spontaneous protests in the days that followed. The very next week, traditional May Day celebrations turned into another citywide paro cívico, with union-led marchers setting up barricades and blocking the flow of goods and transportation. In an effort to quiet May Day protests, Mayor Rafael Antonio Fernández declared a curfew, as well as a temporary prohibition on alcohol sales and on the bearing of arms.41 The army and police mobilized to keep people off the streets from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. May Day protestors in Barranca were labeled “extremists” by the
national press. May Day in Barranca had always been a platform for the expression of a variety of grievances. A major cultural event in the calendar of the local labor movement, May Day typically involved a march through the streets of the city and a rally in front of the national headquarters of the USO. Celebrations—including stirring speeches, live music, refreshments, and sancócho—were well attended by union members, other activists, and their families. The mayor of the city and the bishop would often attend, and dignitaries might be invited to join in singing the Internationale. National union leaders would travel to the city from Bogotá, and the full gamut of local social and political groups would be present. However, the mood of the 1987 May Day demonstrations reflected the deepening anxiety felt by many participants. The traditional party atmosphere was dampened by strict security measures, replaced by fear and anger.

A major transformation was taking place in the politics of protest in Barranca. The focus was now squarely on the issue of political violence, and the ordered rituals of the paro cívico had given way to spontaneous outbursts of popular anger and mourning. Whereas previous paros cívicos were carefully choreographed events, preceded sometimes by weeks of negotiations between social movements and the national government and requiring extensive planning on the part of activist groups, in the late 1980s there was a tendency for human rights protests to be convened without preparation, in response to specific events. Along with shifts in the discourse and form of paros cívicos was a change of purpose. The historian Alejo Vargas observes: “There was a transformation in terms of the demands, the mechanisms of organization, which started to become quite spontaneous, and also in terms of objectives. . . . It was no longer about winning tangible demands but rather to express protest and disagreement in the midst of a social environment that was starting to become chaotic.”

The concomitant radicalization of the paro reflected the rising tide of frustration and an increasingly unstable mix of revolutionary politics. As Vargas suggests, protestors’ actions demonstrated a rejection of the state itself, in light of paramilitary activity and consistently high levels of impunity for crimes being committed in the region. It was through this volatile process that human rights was introduced as a new paradigm of social activism.

Anguish and Popular Protest in the Aftermath of Violence

As street protests become less constrained, and citizens came together to denounce the dirty war being waged on the streets of Barranca, the
term “human rights” was used as a rallying cry. The protest denouncing the killing of Leonardo Posada was well attended by Barranca residents. However, Posada’s murder did not seem to indicate that ordinary people in the city would become targets. The attack on UP members at the Monte Blanco ice cream shop was more alarming in this regard. It was carried out in a public place frequented by children and families, and several bystanders had been injured. While peasants had been killed simply because they lived in areas of guerrilla influence, similar dynamics had not yet been present in the city. The killing of Sandra Rondón revealed that this was about to change.

The massive *paro cívico por la vida* organized to denounce the murder of the teenager Sandra Rondón differed significantly from the protests triggered by the murder of Leonardo Posada and the attack at the Monte Blanco ice cream shop because it explicitly and exclusively focused on human rights. Sandra Rondón was a fourteen-year-old high school student whose only involvement in current events in Barranca was having been witness to the April 23 attack on UP members at the Monte Blanco ice cream shop. Rondón was killed on May 2, 1987, while walking with her sister on their way to church. She was neither a political activist nor a displaced peasant, and she had no links to the Patriotic Union or other leftist movements. Her murder was committed in a central Barranca neighborhood, just a few minutes’ drive from army barracks, the oil refinery, and city hall. The *paro cívico* engaged a wide swath of *barranqueño* society, gained the support of national political leaders and editorialists, and brought the fears and tensions present in Barranca to the attention of the rest of Colombia. On Tuesday, May 5, Sandra Rondón was buried. Thousands of mourners gathered in the Parque Infantil, the square located next to Barranca’s Roman Catholic diocese that was often the site of popular assemblies. The huge crowd accompanied Rondón’s funeral cortège on foot as it made its way to the old municipal cemetery a few blocks to the east.

The second day of the *paro cívico por la vida* reflected rising tension. In the Primero de Mayo neighborhood, a major center of activism since it was established by organized land invasion in 1975, protestors attacked symbols of power. A group of individuals vandalized a police station and attempted to do the same to a Mormon church. That same afternoon, thousands participated in a silent vigil and march that wound through the streets of the city, led by Father Gabriel Ojeda, the parish priest for the neighborhood of Torcoroma where Sandra Rondón’s family attended church. At the end of a prayer for the murdered teenager, Father Ojeda passed the microphone to representatives of the *comité del paro*, who urged those assembled to abstain from acts of anger or violence. Defying the *comité del paro*, ELN members made an appearance on 28th Street, near the barricades at the As de Copas. They were armed and carried...
a banner bearing the name of the group. One eyewitness recalls people disperse.

Soon afterward, some of the people who had dispersed returned to the barricades, and a few even applauded the muchachos from the ELN. The first ever paro cívico por la vida ended forty-eight hours after it began, on the evening of May 7, with a large and emotional assembly in Parque Camilo Torres.

Barranca residents rose up in protest on numerous occasions during the late 1980s in response to politically motivated killings carried out by military and paramilitary forces. Between the murder of Sandra Rondón in April 1987 and December 1988, nine paros cívicos were staged to denounce political violence in the city. The broad appeal of these demonstrations for human rights was without precedent. The uprising known as La Comuna de Barranca that took place following the murder of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán on April 9, 1948 was improvised in response to a specific event. The oil workers’ strikes in the 1970s had been triggered by particular grievances. There had been pockets of turmoil within the paros cívicos for public services and infrastructure of 1975, 1977, and 1983. Rioting and other expressions of frustration were part of the dynamic in each case, as were mass arrests and other repressive actions on the part of security forces. Nevertheless, social protest in Barranca had been built on consensus between the diverse social, labor, and political groups that made up the city’s civic-popular movement. Sustained state-sponsored violence in the 1980s would give impetus to social movement activists to organize collectively around human rights principles. The severity of the violence would eventually erode the foundations of the civic-popular movement itself and make way for the military and paramilitary to increase their power. But in the meantime, the same organizations and communities that had converged around the Coordinadora Popular gained a sense of focus to confront the state directly about political violence.

Human rights activists forced the Colombian government to recognize that political killings were on the rise in the country’s most important industrial center. Moving beyond the acknowledgment of the problem would be an entirely different issue. In May 1987 the Colombian Supreme Court announced the creation of a Tribunal Especial de Instrucción, a judicial commission charged with investigating human rights crimes. The murder of Sandra Rondón was the main catalyst behind the initiative. However, expectations and pressures on the Tribunal Especial were heavy, and no one was willing to serve on it. Three of the country’s top jurists turned down the offer. One recused himself for personal reasons, and another said he believed that the Tribunal Especial would interfere with ongoing peace negotiations. Eduardo
Umaña Luna—the esteemed defender of political prisoners and one of the most prominent figures in Colombia’s nongovernmental human rights movement—also declined the position. Some observers suggested that the whole enterprise was dangerous and naive. Others pointed out that because the Tribunal Especial was not mandated to prosecute crimes committed by the Colombian security forces, its ability to combat impunity was very weak. The impact of this disappointment was to reinforce the belief held by many social activists that the Colombian state remained unwilling to directly address the armed forces’ role in human rights atrocities.

Human Rights and Revolution

Popular movements in Barrancabermeja and across the Magdalena Medio region had to reconcile human rights with longstanding political and social struggles. In Colombia in the 1980s, progressive academics, trade unions, campesino movements, and the Catholic Church arrived at human rights activism on distinct paths. Different registers of human rights discourse were being used by local activists, elected officials, rebel groups, and even the Colombian military. Just as political violence was the impetus for people to organize collectively around human rights, the sustained pressure suffered by social movements in the Magdalena Medio fuelled ideological and tactical debates that were not easily resolved.

The first major test of the consensus for human rights in Barranca occurred when the agenda of the campesino movement collided directly with the agenda of the civic-popular movement. In early June 1987, just three weeks following the paro cívico por la vida, Barranca became the focal point of a massive regional campesino strike. Tens of thousands of peasants from the departments of Cesar, Bolívar, Santander, Norte de Santander, and Arauca marched on major cities on June 8. It was an ambitious protest that had been months in the planning. In the lead-up to the paro del nororiente, some peasant groups expressed fears that the paro cívico por la vida unnecessarily raised political tensions and insecurity in the region. Some argued that the paro cívico por la vida was a distraction from the historic class struggle being waged by campesinos. Others suggested there would simply not be enough momentum to carry out both protests. On the other side of the argument, there were concerns around the more militant agenda embodied by the paro del nororiente, which shut down the rural economy across five departments and was denounced as “subversive” by national politicians. Barranca-based social and trade union activist Jairo Chaparro recalls: “Here in Barranca the paro del nororiente was different than
other paros. It did not have the same support and the Bishop said that the movement had a hidden agenda. Business owners were pissed off [andaban cabreros]. Ecopetrol and other companies in the city paid for small planes to drop pamphlets denouncing the protest. . . . In the lead-up to the protest there was a brutal psychological war, brother [viejo man]. Raids, people taken out of their homes and the like. It was heavy, extremely heavy. . . . It was a confusing and frightening protest.”

Notwithstanding unresolved differences of opinion, and the fact that the paro del nororiente was being stigmatized, both protests were carried out. The paro del nororiente required a high level of coordination among campesino participants and between the campesinos and their urban counterparts. During the paro del nororiente, more than a thousand campesinos arrived in Barranca on June 9, 1987, and occupied a church in the Barrio Palmira, where they would stay for five days. On the second day, the city’s commerce and transport was shut down because of protests organized by civic groups in solidarity with the peasants. Local urban movements took advantage of the opportunity to underscore their perennial demands for investments in the city’s physical and social infrastructure. Protestors set up barricades at the traditional entry points to the city, and a solidarity march was carried out by the Coordinadora Popular de Barrancabermeja. As army helicopters flew overhead, violence broke out between some of the demonstrators and police. In a press release the Coordinadora Popular condemned the behavior of the police, whom they accused of acts of intimidation against a peaceful march for which the mayor’s office had given a permit.

Despite their capacity for joint action, local movements were unable to stop the advance of paramilitarism. In the late 1980s it seemed nobody was untouchable, not even priests. A major setback for the civic-popular movement was the departure from Barranca of Father Eduardo Díaz after seventeen years at the head of the Pastoral Social. Díaz left in April 1987, just prior to the murder of Sandra Rondón, due to death threats and an attempt on his life. Barranca’s Bishop Juan Francisco Sarasti publicly supported Díaz and his work with Pastoral Social, but it was not enough to convince Díaz to stay. Díaz would describe his departure from Barranca as “very painful.” Other activist priests linked to the diocese of Barrancabermeja would be attacked in the coming months. In April 1987 Javier Álvarez, a member of the De La Salle Order of teachers, was assassinated in northeastern Antioquia, a few kilometers from Barranca. Álvarez, a lay missionary, had spent more than a decade working in campesino communities in the Magdalena Medio. In May 1987 Father Bernardo López was murdered in the department of Sucre. Four years earlier, Father López had been a key witness in helping judicial authorities identify
and investigate the activities of the paramilitary group MAS. In September 1987, Father Bernardo Marín was forced to flee his parish in the Magdalena Medio because of his condemnation of paramilitaries.

Also in September it was announced that Eduardo Díaz was one of thirty-three social activists on a list of people slated to be killed by MAS paramilitaries. This would precipitate his departure from Colombia.

The silencing of progressive voices augmented the power of armed movements. On October 11, 1987, Patriotic Union chief Jaime Pardo Leal was murdered in the countryside just west of Bogotá. The previous year, Pardo had won 328,753 votes as UP presidential candidate in the largest show of voter support for any left-wing candidate in Colombian history to that point. His death sparked a four-day *paro cívico* in Barranca. It was unlike any *paro cívico* that the city had experienced in the past. From the very first day, armed men joined the protest in the name of both the FARC and the ELN. For the first time in the city’s history, there was combat between the guerrillas and the army in the streets of the city during a popular protest. The guerrillas set up checkpoints on the outskirts of the city and patrolled the streets of the north-eastern and south-eastern *barrios*. Army reinforcements were sent from Bucaramanga. It was a remarkable moment of shared fury that united *milicianos* from the ELN and the FARC. It was also a key turning point that saw the rise of the guerrillas at the expense of civil society.

Independently of the strategies adopted by local social movements, the guerrillas had seized the initiative. Through the middle of the 1980s, the guerrillas, most notably the ELN, had established themselves among the residents of the popular *barrios*. As one Barranca activist said in an interview: “the guerrilla came in saying ‘we have come to fight for the same thing, you can count on our support,’ so there was a feeling among the people, that we are protected, but nobody ever said that we are allied with the guerrillas, that we are *elenos*.”

Toward the end of the 1980s, as the circle of military and paramilitary repression closed in on Barranca, the guerrillas would make increasing use of the *paro cívico* as a tactic of the armed struggle. As we shall see in the next chapter, it was during this time that the *paro armado* or “armed strike” was invented. It would be misleading to separate the history of the guerrillas in Barranca from the history of all other political and social forces. The origins of the guerrillas can be traced through the history of the city. It is nonetheless crucial to differentiate between *convivencia*, *simpatía*, and *militancia*. These terms reflect different levels of interaction with the guerrillas, ranging from forbearance to sympathy and direct involvement. As human rights activists have long argued, it is one thing to live in a city or rural area where the guerrillas are present, another thing to identify with the goals of a revolutionary movement,
and quite another to carry a weapon. The line between violent and nonviolent struggles was intentionally blurred by paramilitary attacks on legal groups such as the UP, but also on the civilian population. As the violence escalated, the guerrillas made use of the *paro cívico* in order to demonstrate their solidarity with the popular movement, and to increase their own influence. Human rights activism thus emerged at a time when the civic-popular movement’s social bases were in play.

### Conclusion

The decision by Barranca activists to take up the cause of human rights arose out of a rapidly evolving crisis. During the late 1980s, counterinsurgency forces opened an urban front in Barranca. At the same time, the guerrillas began to consolidate their presence in the city. While the ELN and FARC expressed some of the same frustrations with traditional politics held by the general population and the civic-popular movement, the rebels’ actions contributed to the militarization of the city. There had never before been a moment of such fervor mixed with such fear for Barranca’s civic-popular movement. Record numbers of people took to the streets in response to political killings, and protests became increasingly spontaneous. In conversation with historian Alejo Vargas in the late 1980s, Ezequiel Romero, long-serving municipal councillor in Barranca on behalf of the Communist Party and former trade union leader, said: “It is part of the culture of the people of Barrancabermeja. So much so that when something violent occurs, if they kill a leader, the city automatically stops. Before, you had to go into the neighborhoods and organize people into committees.”

Sudden outbursts of grief, anger, and frustration reflected a fundamental change in the relationship between social movement organizing and popular protest.

The decision on the part of Barranca activists to organize a human rights committee in late 1987 was an attempt to channel popular indignation into collective civic action. Notwithstanding the strong historical ties to both of Colombia’s main guerrilla groups among many citizens of Barranca, the civic-popular movement had hitherto maintained its autonomy and maintained space for broad-based popular protest to take place. Anchored by the Coordinadora Popular civil society coalition, the nascent human rights movement inherited a commitment to challenging structures of power, not simply protecting lives. Jairo Chaparro reflects on the legacy of the protests of the late 1980s: “Our culture of fraternity and solidarity, our culture of the *paro* could be felt on every street corner, in every house, in all of its strength. That will
never end.” The challenge would be to carry out an agenda of human rights protection in a context of increasing complexity, tension, and violence.

As we explore in greater detail the impact of the human rights turn in Barrancabermeja, we should not underestimate the contribution that frontline activists have made to our understanding of political violence. Human rights activists in Barrancabermeja and elsewhere successfully challenged the deniability of war crimes, even as armed groups engaged in acts of subterfuge. This may prove to be the most important contribution that human rights activists have made to the understanding of armed conflict. This insight has allowed scholars to undertake a deep revision of the historical record. Human rights activists have successfully challenged the fiction that Colombia’s decades-old armed conflict is fundamentally a clash between belligerent armies. Because of the efforts of groups like CREDHOS, no discussion of the Colombian conflict can overlook the ways in which armed groups target civilians.