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Trends. Colombian Rebels and Elite Interests: Rights and Wrongs on Human Rights

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Colombian rebels, paramilitary forces, and military and law enforcement personnel are but some of the groups accused of human rights violations by many governments and non-governmental organizations. These violations usually include kidnappings, torture, destruction of governmental and proprietary infrastructure, summary executions, and other types of murder. The common, public response of diplomats, governmental officials, representatives of non-governmental human rights organizations, and journalists is to focus on the tragic consequences of these violations in isolation from the larger sociopolitical context in which they occur.

However, in the larger context, the rebels' have a significant point in asserting that the common, public response is largely a reflection of elite interests. Sure, part of this assertion is merely a rhetorical counter to verbal attacks and perception management efforts by those critiquing the rebels on human rights criteria. But another part of this assertion rightly casts attention on an important phenomenon: the usual subjects comprised by the construct "human rights" distract from the discriminatory, exploitive, coercive, and subjugating powers of political authorities. These powers often maintain and even increase the disparity between very small numbers of people who have a great deal and large numbers of people who have very little. And this disparity can be considered an egregious human rights violation. Thus, the common, public response as characterized by something labeled an "international movement for human rights" may well be supported by the very people who would have much to lose if "human rights" cast a wider and more appropriate net. Much as international drug traffickers may work with law enforcement personnel against competitors for their own advantage, human rights violators will work with various human rights organizations to protect their own advantageous violations. In addition, some of these violators who work with human rights organizations may be unaware of their own violations--at times terming them the just desserts of free markets or God's Will--even as they commit them.

Unfortunately, the rebels' very legitimate contention is severely weakened by the motives of a number of their leaders. These motives currently seem to be characterized as complexes of needs for personal power, material gratification, and hegemony over others--as if they seek only to take the place or join the club of the very elite whom they castigate.

It would then seem that to supporters of a broad cornucopia of human rights for all, the myriad sides to the Colombian conflict may all be in the wrong. (See Ardila, R. (1996). Political psychology: The Latin American perspective. *Political Psychology*, 17, 339-351; Cohn, J. (1998). Violations of human rights in children and adolescents. *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine & Health*, 10, 185-192; Davenport, C. (1999). Human rights and the democratic proposition. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 43, 92-116; Forero, J. (July 10, 2001.) Rights group lists abuses by guerrillas in Colombia. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Silove, D. (1999). The psychosocial effects of torture, mass human rights violations, and refugee trauma: Toward an integrated conceptual framework. *Journal of Nervous & Mental Disease*, 187, 200-207.) (Keywords: Class, Colombia, Human Rights, Torture.)