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Social mobilisation in Colombia's extractive industries, 2000–2015

Gonzalo A Vargas

Interdisciplinary Centre of Development Studies, Universidad de los Andes, Carrera 1 No. 18-A-10, Bogotá, DC, 117111, Colombia

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses protests about the extractive industries in Colombia from 2000 to 2015, unveiling seven different "streams of contention" involving different participants, motives and targets. Protest events often reflected underlying socio-environmental conflicts, but others were sparked by frustrations over wages and a lack of economic opportunities for locals. Despite some signs of diffusion and coordination, social mobilisation linked to the extractive industries appeared to be fragmented during this period: protesters often focused on narrow, localised demands and were unlikely to build coalitions. The article draws attention to how using protest events as the unit of observation of social mobilisation can improve our understanding of its actors, motives, and targets.

1. Introduction: the extractive industries and social mobilisation in Colombia

The global surge in the price of commodities that commenced in the 1990s has fuelled investment in mineral exploration worldwide (Humphreys, 2016; Erten and Ocampo, 2013). Nowhere was this more visible than in Latin America: as Bebbington and Bury (2013) explain, "while global investment in mining exploration increased by 90 percent [from 1990 to 1997], in Latin America it increased by 400 percent" (p. 16), which helped to alleviate the budgetary constraints of the region's governments and provided a foundation for bolstering economic growth. But in most Latin America countries, national authorities failed to implement counter-cyclical policies, which led to rapid deindustrialisation and to a painful macroeconomic adjustment when prices fell (Ocampo, 2017).

The environmental impacts of the extractive industries at the local level are well-documented (O'Rourke and Connolly, 2003; Bridge, 2004; Brain, 2017; von der Goltz and Barnwal, 2019) and their contribution to poverty reduction has been heavily scrutinized (Gamu et al., 2015: 174). Despite claims that such impacts could be curbed through institutional reform or managed through "socially responsible behaviour", social conflict and mobilisation linked to the extractive industries, and the policies and companies linked to this space, appear to have intensified since the turn of the century. Latin America is no exception (Bebbington and Bury, 2013; Conde, 2017; Conde and Le Billon, 2017).

Colombia is far from being a leading global producer of oil and minerals. In fact, overall, the extractive industries have made a growing but modest contribution to the Colombian economy—around seven per cent of GDP in the last 15 years (DANE, 2018). However, during the late 2000s and early 2010s, their importance to the country's foreign accounts was palpable (see Fig. 1). Oil production fuelled economic growth and the share of oil rents in the government's income rose from 0.8 per cent of GDP in 2003 to 3.3 per cent in 2013, leading to a temporary reduction in the public deficit (Toro et al., 2016). Subnational governments also shared in the windfall: roughly half of the royalties paid by oil and mining companies to the national government were redistributed to subnational governments and, under the current system put in place in 2012, non-producing regions also received a considerable amount (Helwege, 2015). Following an international trend that goes back to the late 1980s (Warhurst and Bridge, 1997), Colombia reformed its Mining Code in 2001, simplifying its regulations, reducing the legal risks associated with new investments, confining the state to a regulatory role and, thus, barring government's direct involvement in mining projects. There was a visible increase in the number of mining concessions granted, from roughly 200 per year in the 1990s to over 1000 per year in the second half of the 2000s (Roldan, 2013). During the rush, some companies were granted valuable concessions within natural reserves and protected areas, while others paid bribes to speed up the process (Semana, 2011). In the oil sector, official statistics show a steady increase in the number of new exploratory wells drilled, from 35 in 2005 to 131 in 2012 (Agencia Nacional de Hidrocarburos, 2012), followed by a sharp decrease in exploration activity after the price fell, from 113 new wells in 2014 to only 21 in 2016 (Ministerio de Minas, 2018).

Social unrest in Colombia, measured by the number of protest events, has escalated since the mid-1990s, with the latest "protest cycle" beginning in 2010 and peaking in 2013 (Cruz, 2017). However, grievances related to extractive industries seem to be marginal: less than three per cent of all the protests recorded in the country from 2000 to 2015 were directly related to the extraction of oil and minerals (Cinep, 2012; Garcia, 2017). Even at their peak, in 2013, they

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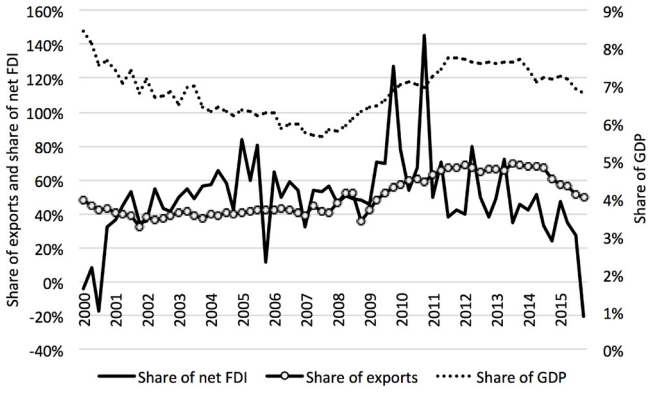

Fig. 1. Contribution of oil and mining to GDP, net FDI and exports in Colombia. Note: Share of net FDI can be over 100 per cent due to negative outflows from other sectors. Source: Author based on data from Banco de la Republica (Colombia's central bank) and National Department of Statistics.

accounted for only 5.3 per cent of all protests nationwide (based on data from Cruz (2017) and Garcia (2017)). Pérez-Rincón (2014) mapped 72 socio-environmental conflicts that occurred in Colombia from 1956 to 2011 (only 17 prior to 2000), of which roughly 60 per cent were related to the extraction of fossil and mineral resources. Some of these struggles aimed at the preservation of nature, others were set off by the appropriation of environmental services and, especially, of resources such as water, soil and landscape (Pérez-Rincón, 2014: 264, 293). Roa (2012) counted 104 "social struggles" from 2000 to 2011 related to labour rights, disaster mismanagement and breaches to fundamental liberties and rights in the coal and gold mining sectors. Garcia (2017) studied protest events related to mining from 2000 to 2015 and, echoing Cruz (2017), described a "protest cycle" specific to the mining sector, with a steady increase in mobilisation in the 2000s followed by a short-lived rise in 2013.

In this article I make three points. The first is methodological: I argue that using protest events as the unit of observation increases the descriptive and analytical accuracy of our understanding of the actors, motives, and targets of social mobilisation in the extractive industries. It can reveal long-term trends and it allows us to test hypotheses generated by case studies. Second, I show that rather than a single "wave" of protest events in Colombia from 2000 to 2015, there were seven, relatively independent, "streams of contention"—a term borrowed from the literature on social movements (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007). Each stream raised a different type of claim, mobilised different participants, targeted different organisations, and had its own dynamics. Although the claims raised often reflected socio-environmental conflicts, claims for distributive justice (Perreault, 2006) were just as important. More generally, the claims staked by protesters were diverse and could not be categorised simply as "for" or "against" resource extraction or the industry as a whole.

Third, social mobilisation to stop specific extractive projects in their early stages and to vindicate artisanal mining showed signs of geographic diffusion and coordination. But other streams of mobilisation, under different banners, rarely galvanised support *across* social groups, places or classes. Despite sharing similar concerns with other regions within the country (e.g. protecting headwaters), they often remained localised and rarely shifted scale. In this sense, social mobilisation about the extractive industries appeared to be just as fragmented as social mobilisation in Colombia as a whole (Archila, 2003; Robinson, 2016).

In the following section I briefly describe the framework, methods and data sources employed in the analysis. In the third section, I describe seven streams of contention that reflect the main types of claims raised by protesters and are indicative of socio-environmental as well as distributive conflicts. In the fourth section, I argue that the limited diffusion and coordination seen in social mobilisation about the extractive industries is consistent with the level of fragmentation and parochialism already observed by students of Colombian politics. The final section synthesises my findings and puts forward a research agenda.

2. Analysing mobilisation through protest events analysis

The analysis that follows employs the framework developed by Tilly and Tarrow (2007) to describe and explain "contentious politics", a term that encompasses several forms of collective action aimed at "making claims bearing on someone else's interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programmes" (2007: 4). Contentious politics involves a wide variety of phenomena, including social movements, which these authors define as "sustained campaigns of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise that claim, based on organisations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities" (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007: 202). While "social mobilisation" can be defined in very broad terms (e.g. Rogers et al., 2018), in this article I use this concept to refer to such performances, regardless of whether they are repeated, sustained, or not. Salient among them are social protests, which Hanna et al. (2016: 219) define as "strategic forms of action designed to influence decision making, either directly or by influencing public opinion via the use of the media and the internet". In pluralist democracies, protest events signal the existence of unresolved social conflicts: they are a "telling indicator for problems which are neither registered nor dealt with in an adequate manner" (Rucht et al., 1999). Furthermore, protest events are more than epiphenomena: they shape the course and viability of specific projects and also have the potential to modify public and government agendas, opening windows for policy and institutional change (Bebbington et al., 2008: 903-6).

In this article I focus on protest events that involve the gathering of participants in public spaces to raise claims related to the extractive industries (oil and mining) which occurred between January 2000 and December 2015. The main source of information used is *Cinep's* Social Struggle Database, a protest event database that covers protests occurred in the country since the 1970s and which has been an essential source of information for students of social movements in Colombia. The database records the date, location, and organisations of protest events based on reports from the media and social organisations and includes a memo field with a brief description of the specific issues raised in each protest. To complement this database and ensure the correct coding of events, I also gathered over a thousand news articles printed or published on-line by national and local newspapers. Although the resulting dataset is quite informative, some variables such as the age, gender, and ethnic belonging of protesters were impossible to ascertain; indeed, as readers may figure, the mere attempt to collect such data during a demonstration would cause fear or raise suspicion among participants.

I chose the year 2000 as the initial cut-off point because at the time sectoral FDI flows were comparatively low (see Fig. 1), and also to see whether key sectoral reforms introduced in 2001 and 2003 had triggered sectoral social mobilisation. The final cut-off point was determined by the availability of data when the project started. It is worth noting that *Cinep* (Centre for Popular Research and Education) is an independent, non-profit organisation founded in 1972, which aims to promote democracy, peace and human rights through advocacy and research.

To improve the consistency and accuracy of the data, I first checked the database content and structure to ensure all the events were recorded following the same rules. Then I recoded the protests according to the claims raised, the claimants and the targets or objects of claims, that is, the public authorities, companies or groups whose actions were demanded, approved or rejected by protesters. In the rest of the article, I use the term "protest event" to refer to a public performance in which

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