

Did Covid-19 Change Armed Group Governance? Evidence from a Survey of Local Security Authorities in Colombia

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As the Covid-19 pandemic began, initial reports suggested that armed groups would seize the opportunity to expand their control over territory and civilians. However, drawing on an original survey of local security officials responsible for monitoring armed group behaviour in Colombia, we find little evidence of significant shifts in the presence or behaviour of political or criminal groups. Contrary to prevailing expectations, we also find that armed group governance is common in areas contested by multiple groups. Our findings shed new light on armed group adaptation to shocks, and challenge the assumption that territorial control is a prerequisite for governance.

Keywords: armed groups, Colombia, Covid-19, governance, pandemic, territorial control.

During the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic, scholars and media outlets raised concerns that armed groups would take advantage of the disruptions it caused to expand their control of territory and civilian life (e.g. Angelo, 2020; Barnes and Albarracín, 2020; Idler and Hochmuller, 2020; Furlan, 2020). Emergencies are thought to create power vacuums that provide armed groups with the opportunity to demonstrate their credibility and legitimacy in comparison to the state (Furlan, 2020; Koehnlein and Koren, 2021). In Rio de Janeiro's favelas, for instance, drug traffickers enforced quarantines and distributed soap and hand sanitiser (Berg and Visori, 2020; Brancoli, 2020). Meanwhile, in Colombia, armed groups threatened violence against those who defied government stay-at-home orders (InSight Crime, 2020).

Despite these and other anecdotal reports, we have a limited understanding of whether and how armed groups changed their behaviour towards civilians during the pandemic. Several studies examine the effects of pandemic-related restrictions on political violence, by both armed groups and the state (Berman et al., 2020; Bloem and Salemi, 2021; Grasse et al., 2021; Ide, 2021; Koehnlein and Koren, 2021; Mehrl and Thurner, 2021). However, this work does not explore changes in dimensions of governance beyond violence. One exception is Newman, Saikia, and Waterman's (2023) study of the impact of Covid-19 on rebel offensives, recruitment, and governance, but it focuses exclusively on armed groups in north-east India that lack territorial control. Breslawski (2022) also provides a descriptive analysis of how actions armed groups have taken in response to the pandemic vary by armed group characteristics. Related research on other types of crises has examined the conditions under which rebels collaborate with the state for disaster mitigation (e.g. Walch 2014, 2018), but does not address changes in armed group behaviour towards civilians.

Did the Covid-19 pandemic alter patterns of armed group governance? We use an original survey of local security officials in areas of Colombia contested by multiple armed groups to shed light on this question. Due to the sophistication of the country's illicit economies and the persistence of armed

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group competition, Colombia is a particularly valuable case to examine: the risk that armed actors might ‘make a power grab’ during the pandemic was thought to be ‘especially acute’ (Angelo, 2020: 3; see also Gomez 2020; Idler and Hochmuller, 2020; Zulver, 2020). It is also a case in which both political and criminal armed groups have sought to govern civilian populations. Criminal groups are typically distinguished from political ones on the basis of their aims: while political groups may be involved in illegal markets to fund their activities, they ostensibly seek to achieve political ends such as regime change, policy change, or secession, while for criminal groups the economic benefits reaped from control of illegal markets may be ends in themselves (for more on the dynamics of criminal governance, see Lessing, 2021). We choose to survey local security officials, leveraging a unique source of information on the behaviour of armed groups. While their voices are rarely represented in discussions of armed group governance, such officials are particularly well positioned to describe changing patterns of armed group behaviour given their responsibility for combatting armed groups and/or mitigating the negative consequences they generate.

The results of our survey, however, suggest that the pandemic provided fewer opportunities for armed groups to expand control than initially feared. We find little evidence that the presence of political or criminal armed groups in surveyed communities expanded since March 2020 (when Colombia’s lockdown occurred), or that the form and extent of governance changed substantially in response to the pandemic. For example, in response to the pandemic, some armed groups imposed restrictions on movement to prevent the spread of Covid; however, such restrictions tended to be adopted by groups that *already* regulated behaviour prior to the start of the pandemic (that is, prior to March 2020). We likewise find few changes in the extent of economic support, dispute resolution, or extortion in which armed groups engaged. By presenting new data on changes in armed group governance in response to the pandemic, this article contributes to our understanding of how adept armed groups are at adapting to such challenges. While the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic may appear unique, broad-based shocks such as natural disasters, recessions, and others may have similar effects on armed group behaviour (Lipsy, 2020).

This article also contributes to broader debates about the conditions under which armed groups govern (Arjona, 2016; Arias and Barnes, 2017; Barnes, 2017; Florea, 2018; Stewart, 2018; Lessing, 2021; Loyle et al., 2023; Waterman, 2023). Research on armed group governance has tended to focus on areas of monopolistic control (e.g. Pérez-Cardona et al., 2022). Because incomplete territorial control can shorten time horizons and increase uncertainty, it can be costly for armed groups to invest in governance in such areas (e.g. Arjona, Kasfir and Mampilly, 2015; Arjona, 2016; Felbab-Brown, Trinkunas and Hamid, 2017). However, our results suggest that armed groups engage in a wide range of governance activities, including taxation, the provision of economic benefits, dispute resolution, and regulation of civilian behaviour, even in areas where they lack monopolistic control. These findings are consistent with the idea that returns to governance may be higher in contested areas, as this allows armed groups to leverage competitive advantages to enhance territorial control or secure long-term access to territory with important resources (see Arias, 2006; Lee, Walter-Drop and Wiesel, 2014; Berti, 2018; Wolff, 2015; De Bruin et al., 2023). In what follows, we describe the context of our survey, discuss its design and limitations, and then present the results. We conclude with a discussion of potential reasons why the pandemic did not appear to alter armed group governance to the extent expected.

Context: Contested Municipalities in Colombia

For nearly 60 years, conflict in Colombia has pitted the government and affiliated right-wing paramilitaries against the large rebel armies of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army) and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN, National Liberation Army), as well as smaller insurgent groups, including the Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL, Popular Liberation Army). Despite a 2016 peace agreement with the FARC that led to the group’s demobilisation, numerous other armed groups – including FARC dissidents who have disavowed the agreement, other smaller rebel groups, neo-paramilitaries, and sophisticated criminal organizations – continue to compete for rents from illicit economies and

govern civilian behaviour across the country (Weintraub et al., 2023). Today, both rebels and armed criminal groups engage in a wide variety of governance activities, including adjudicating disputes, regulating access to public services, building roads, and providing health care services (International Crisis Group, 2017; Idler 2019; Blattman et al., 2021).

On 6 March 2020, the Colombian Ministry of Health confirmed the country's first case of coronavirus. Colombian authorities quickly imposed a highly restrictive and long-lasting quarantine to combat the virus's spread (Daniels, 2020). A nationwide quarantine was imposed on 24 March 2020, and extended until 1 September 2020, when selective reopening began to occur in municipalities with low case rates. Given the complete shutdown of the economy, local and national-level governments established programmes to smooth income shocks (Secretariat of Security et al., 2021). Despite these efforts, poverty in Colombia increased drastically in 2020 (Salazar Sierra, 2021).

In addition to its public health and economic consequences, the pandemic also impeded the state's capacity to respond to security threats. The national police were suddenly tasked not only with patrolling streets to prevent crime and carrying out criminal investigations: they also were charged with monitoring compliance with quarantine measures and, once the quarantine was lifted, with ensuring the use of face masks and preventing overcrowding in public and private spaces. At the same time, the police suffered significant personnel shortages stemming from Covid-19 exposure, reducing their ability to perform even the most basic policing functions:

according to figures from the National Police, as of September 2021, more than 51,000 police officers (from a total force of more than 130,000) had been infected with Covid-19, of whom 182 had died. This has resulted in personnel shortages and obligatory overtime, putting a significant psychological strain even on those who remained healthy. Administrative data on crime appears to show some shifts in criminal activities during the quarantine and the months following. For example, compared a 2019 baseline, Colombia experienced a 4.2 percent decline in homicides in 2020, but a 9 percent increase in 2021, particularly in rural areas, as quarantine restrictions were relaxed (Alvarado et al., 2020). Data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), which tracks events involving armed groups and violence against civilians, shows a similar pattern (Pellegrini, 2022). Demand for cocaine increased during and immediately following the pandemic, as did its purity, so the 2021 increase may also reflect increased competition for trafficking routes (UNODC, 2023). The imposition of quarantine measures also led to temporary declines in killings of social leaders, but these targeted killings increased again as the pandemic wore on (Castro et al., 2020). Yet violence constitutes only one form of armed group behaviour that the pandemic may have affected, and it is not clear that the pandemic would have affected armed group violence and armed group governance in the same way. A principal factor motivating the survey we present here is to better understand how armed group governance changed during this period.

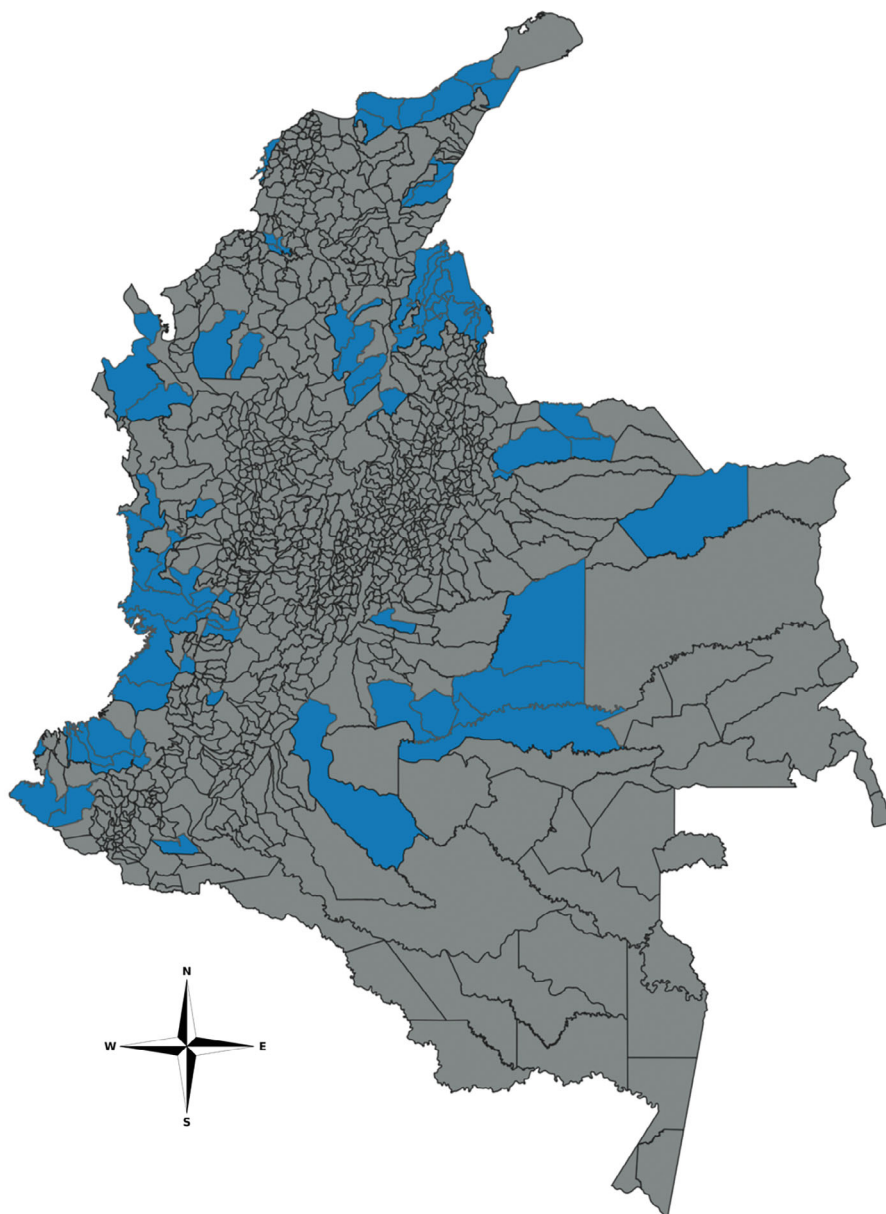
Survey Design

The survey was conducted in July and August 2021 and was designed to reach local officials responsible for security-related issues in municipalities contested by multiple armed groups. These municipalities include strategic trafficking routes and areas of coca cultivation, key points for exploitation or smuggling of natural resources (such as mining or oil), or local markets for the commercialisation and sale of psychoactive substances. While scholarship on armed group behaviour has largely assumed that armed group governance is only feasible where such groups have consolidated their control over territory (e.g. Pérez-Cardona et al., 2022), such areas are 'neither ungoverned nor ungovernable' (Risse and Stollenwerk, 2018: 406); indeed, it is precisely in contested areas where armed groups may have the strongest incentives to fill governance gaps to produce gains over rivals (Idler and Hochmuller, 2020; Lee, Walter-Drop, and Wiesel, 2014; Wolff, 2015; Arias, 2006). To minimise risk of exposure to Covid-19, the survey was conducted online with follow-up by telephone.

Figure 1 shows in blue the geographic distribution of the universe of 103 contested municipalities in Colombia in which multiple armed groups operate. We count as 'contested' municipalities those in which two or more armed groups have been present roughly since the peace agreement was signed between the FARC-EP and the Colombian government. We code armed group presence based

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Figure 1. Municipalities in Colombia with Multiple Armed Groups Present since the Peace Agreement ('Contested' Municipalities). Blue Denotes Contested Municipalities.



on datasets from the Colombian National Police, the Colombian Attorney General's Office, and the non-profit organisation Fundación Ideas para la Paz (FIP). The advantage of these datasets is that they include indicators of armed group presence based on fieldwork and criminal investigation, rather than violence. We include armed groups that have had sustained presence over some stretch of territory, while excluding street gangs that may control a set of city blocks or even a whole neighbourhood but are relatively fixed in a circumscribed geographical space. The groups covered include political armed groups, among them the ELN, EPL, FARC dissidents, as well as criminal groups such as paramilitary

Table 1. Characteristics of Survey Respondents

	N	Percent
Position		
Police commander	38	20.1%
Chief of staff	47	24.9%
Dispute resolution authority	56	29.6%
Human rights ombudsperson	48	25.4%
Length of time working in the municipality		
<1 year	40	21.2%
1–2 years	60	31.7%
3–5 years	18	9.5%
6+ years	71	37.6%
Respondent lives in the municipality in which they work		
Yes	174	92.1%
No	15	7.9%
Gender		
Male	136	72.0%
Female	53	28.0%

Source: original survey of local security officials in Colombia.

successor and drug trafficking organisations. We excluded neighbourhood gangs in urban centres that control only very small tracts of territory, such as *pandillas* in Cali or *combos* in Medellín.

The survey firm we worked with, Sistemas Especializados de Información (SEI), sought contact information for all four officials in each of the 103 municipalities in our universe: police commanders, chiefs of staff, dispute resolution authorities, and human rights ombudspersons. Telephone numbers and email addresses were obtained by consulting institutional web pages and contacting national-level institutions. Officials were first contacted by email, with follow-up by phone to encourage participation. Informed and voluntary consent was sought and obtained from all participants via the online survey. Table 1 shows characteristics of our survey respondents.

Our final sample consists of 189 respondents across 84 municipalities: 38 police commanders; 47 chiefs of staff; 56 authorities in charge of dispute resolution; and 48 human rights ombudspersons. This represents a response rate of 46 percent. The officials we survey have significant experience in their communities: average time spent in the municipality where they currently work is 7.5 years, with a standard deviation of nearly 9.5 years. Ninety-two percent also live in the municipality in which they work, and the average time spent in their current job is 4.3 years, with a standard deviation of 6.1 years. Two-sample *t*-tests comparing means between those who worked in their current municipality for fewer than two years and those who worked there longer suggest no differences in responses to questions regarding pre-pandemic armed group activities.

The security officials we interview have disparate professional responsibilities. Police commanders are responsible for overseeing all law enforcement activities within a given municipality, including organising police patrols and managing police personnel, investigating crimes (in conjunction with the Attorney-General's Office), and building community relations. Chiefs of staff are housed within the mayor's office, and are responsible for ensuring the effective implementation of municipal authorities' public policy priorities. Officials in charge of dispute resolution (*inspectores de policía*) are likewise municipal bureaucrats, and seek to maintain civility and ensure that local disputes such as land boundary disagreements, debts, or rumours do not escalate to produce violence (Blair et al., 2022). Finally, the human rights ombudsperson investigates complaints of human rights violations, monitors the human rights situation in a given municipality, and provides legal assistance to victims of human rights abuses at the local level.

There are important limitations inherent to our survey, which we sought to mitigate where possible. First, to gauge changes in armed group governance before and after the start of the pandemic, given that we ask respondents to recall experiences in the past, responses may suffer from recall bias (Hipp et al., 2020). However, research on recall bias suggests that recollections around major events are

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likely to be more reliable and vivid than those about more ordinary times, particularly when respondents are surveyed within three or fewer years of the event occurring, as we do here (Brown and Kulik, 1977; Wright et al., 1998). As a result, we expect recall bias to be minimal. Moreover, to the extent that it is more difficult for respondents to recall the behaviour of armed groups further back in time, we would anticipate higher rates of 'no' or 'don't know' responses to questions about the pre-pandemic behaviours; however, that was not the case. Second, we have a small number of respondents per municipality in some locations: for example, in 23 municipalities we have only one respondent; in 22 municipalities, two respondents. There may be contextual, municipal-level factors that influence the number of respondents in each municipality. However, in municipalities with only one respondent, we do not have a preponderance of any one kind of official, which could have introduced systematic biases; in these municipalities, there are four police commanders, eight municipal authorities in charge of dispute resolution, eight human rights ombudspersons, and three municipal chiefs of staff.

Third, these officials may have incentives to withhold or misrepresent information related to armed groups, for a few reasons. Respondents' professional job security (particularly for the police) may depend upon achieving material advances against insurgent groups and organised crime, creating incentives to underreport armed group governance behaviours. Respondents may believe that by inflating the threats posed by armed groups in their areas they might attract additional resources to help fight these groups. They may also be concerned that providing any information at all would put their own security at risk. If some security officials that we interviewed actively collaborate with armed groups, they might also be reluctant to offer accurate information about those groups.

Finally, having conducted our survey online could potentially introduce biases. For example, if internet access is limited, potential respondents may not be able to provide their answers. While we acknowledge that online surveys in Latin America may demonstrate biases (Castorena et al. 2023), these are of greatest concern for reproducing representative online samples, which was not our intention with this survey.

While these concerns cannot be fully eliminated, we take several steps to reduce risks to respondents and mitigate social desirability bias. First, we requested that the survey firm not provide data to us regarding respondents' municipalities, and we emphasised to respondents prior to the start of the survey that such information would not be retained. Second, we explicitly ask respondents not to discuss armed groups by name. Instead, we prompt respondents to tell us first whether any groups primarily engaged in criminal activity have been present in the past three years. The survey specifies that we are asking about criminal groups with some level of organisation and sophistication, rather than smaller street gangs (such as *combos*), and emphasises that when referring to criminal groups we are *not* asking about insurgents or guerrillas. Where multiple criminal groups are present, respondents are asked to think about the most important one, and to respond to questions about this group, without referring to it by name. We then ask the same set of questions about political armed groups. In describing political armed groups, we specify that we are asking about groups such as FARC dissidents, the ELN, or the EPL. While this means we only track changes in behaviour among the groups that respondents perceive as the most important of each type in their municipalities, and that we cannot combine our survey with secondary administrative data, in making these design choices we sought to prioritise respondent safety and reduce incentives to withhold or misrepresent information. We ask separate questions about the behaviour of rebel and criminal groups because the extent and forms of governance such groups deploy are likely to differ. However, we do not necessarily expect the pandemic to affect these groups' governance behaviours in different ways.

Finally, we also test whether different types of respondents answer questions about armed group behaviour in different ways. To the extent that respondents face incentives to withhold or misrepresent information on armed groups, despite the precautions taken, we would expect these incentives to be strongest for the police, since they are directly tasked with combating such groups, and for officials who have worked in their municipalities for longer periods of time. However, responses to questions on armed group behaviour do not vary in consistent ways by respondent type or, as noted above, by length of time in the municipality.

Table 2. How Respondents Describe the Municipalities Surveyed

	N	Percent
Have you heard about drug cultivation or refinement in this municipality?		
Yes	91	48.1%
No	79	41.8%
Don't know/no response	19	10.1%
Have you heard about international cocaine trafficking from this municipality?		
Yes	28	14.8%
No	132	69.8%
Don't know/no response	29	15.3%
How would you rate the security situation in this municipality?		
Very bad	12	6.3%
Bad	39	20.6%
Neither bad nor good	69	36.5%
Good	68	36.0%
Very good	1	0.5%
What would you say is the biggest problem facing this municipality today?		
Poverty and unemployment	69	36.5%
Armed conflict	47	24.9%
Problems of coexistence	20	10.6%
Petty crime	10	5.3%
Drugs and drug trafficking	9	4.8%
Corruption	9	4.8%
Deficiency in health services	9	4.8%
Low coverage or quality of education	4	2.1%
Impunity and lack of justice	3	1.6%
Housing deficit	2	1.1%
Other	4	2.1%
Don't know/no response	3	1.6%

Source: original survey of local security officials in Colombia.

Findings on Armed Group Governance

We begin with descriptive findings about the municipalities surveyed (Table 2). As expected, our sample includes municipalities featuring illicit economies: 48 percent of respondents indicate that their municipality features either drug cultivation (where coca is grown) or refinement (where it is turned into coca paste and refined into cocaine), whereas 15 percent of respondents report the presence of international drug trafficking in their municipalities (where cocaine is exported to external markets). When asked about the major problems facing their communities, 37 percent report that poverty and unemployment is the core problem. Approximately 25 percent believe that armed conflict is the core problem, whereas 11 percent signal that problems of 'coexistence' – such as disagreements between neighbours – are the biggest problem, perhaps because these disputes frequently escalate to violence (Blair et al. 2022). Only 5 percent point to petty crime, while another 5 percent signal drugs and drug trafficking.

What does armed group presence and governance look like in these municipalities? We asked respondents how many armed groups were active in their municipality in the prior year. As shown in Table 3, 24 percent of respondents reported the presence of no armed group; 21 percent the presence of one armed group; 35 percent the presence of two armed groups; and 20 percent respondents the presence of three or more armed groups. Of those who indicated the presence of two or more armed groups, 68 percent of respondents indicated that these armed groups competed for territorial control and illicit rents in their municipality, 12 percent said they did not compete, and another 20 percent said that they did not know or would not respond to this question. When asked about cooperative relationships between non-state armed groups, only 10 percent reported cooperation, 47 percent said there was no cooperation, and a large proportion – 43 percent of respondents who had reported

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Table 3. Armed Group Presence in Municipalities Surveyed

	N	Percent
How many armed groups have been active in the municipality in the last year, since the pandemic began?		
No armed groups	46	24.3%
1 armed group	39	20.6%
2 armed groups	66	34.9%
3+ armed groups	38	20.1%
In the last year, would you say that there has been competition between the armed groups in this municipality?		
Yes	71	68.3%
No	12	11.5%
Don't know/no response	21	20.2%
In the last year, would you say that there has been a cooperative relationship between the armed groups in this municipality?		
Yes	10	9.6%
No	49	47.1%
Don't know/no response	45	43.3%
Did the FARC-EP ever have a presence in this municipality?		
Yes	128	67.7%
No	61	32.3%
If yes, for how long did they have a presence?		
<5 years	17	13.3%
5–10 years	24	18.8%
11–20 years	45	35.2%
>20 years	42	32.8%

Source: survey of local security officials in Colombia.

the presence of two or more armed groups – said that they either did not know about cooperative relationships among armed groups or would not say. Most respondents (68 percent) reported that the FARC-EP had a presence in their municipality at some point in time; of these, more than 60 percent reported that the FARC-EP was present for eleven or more years.

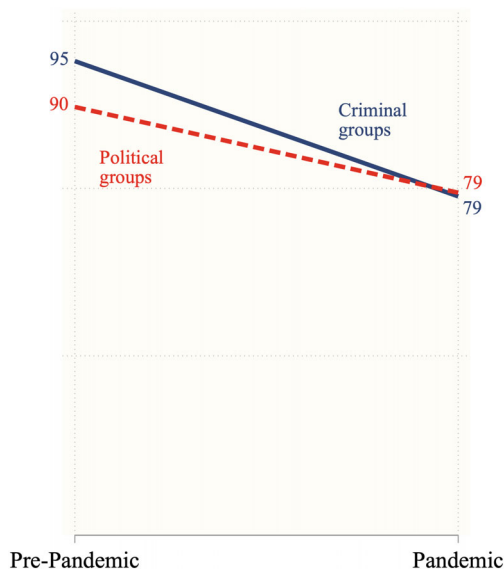
Turning to the core questions of interest, about changes in armed group behaviour during the pandemic, the results suggest, first, that armed groups did not expand territorial presence within previously contested municipalities during the pandemic. Indeed, the shift was towards *less* territorial control rather than more. Figure 2 shows the percent of respondents who reported the presence of at least one criminal or political armed group prior to and after the start of the pandemic.

While 95 percent of respondents reported that at least one criminal armed group was active in their municipality prior to the start of the pandemic, only 79 percent reported that the most important of these was still active today (paired *t*-test, clustered by municipality, $p=0.002$). Respondents also reported a decline in the presence of political armed groups – 90 percent pre-pandemic to 79 percent since the pandemic began ($p=0.033$). Interestingly, municipalities from which armed groups withdrew do not appear to differ in terms of drug cultivation or trafficking compared to municipalities in which they remained. Respondents were, however, more likely to report that criminal groups withdrew from areas that featured a higher number of armed groups in the past year: for example, in twelve of the nineteen cases in which respondents reported that criminal groups withdrew, they did so from municipalities where two or more armed groups remained.

We also asked questions about specific components of armed group governance, including: whether armed groups in the area provided financial support or work to residents; made people pay taxes (extortion); created rules to regulate behaviour; or mediated disputes. In areas with more than one criminal group active, we again asked respondents to think about the most important one in responding and asked whether, to their knowledge, each group had engaged in each type of governance activity both prior to and after the start of the pandemic. We then repeated the same questions for political groups.

Interestingly, we do not find that armed groups were less likely to engage in governance in areas of greater competition between groups. Figure 3 illustrates the rates at which respondents

Figure 2. Shifts in Armed Group Presence during the Pandemic. % Who Say That Each Type of Armed Group was Present in the Municipality.



report that criminal and political armed groups engage in each type of governance activity by the number of armed groups active in the municipality, along with 95 percent confidence intervals. It shows that whether armed groups govern does not vary significantly by the extent of armed group competition. When we compare rates of governance in municipalities in which one group is present to those in which more than one group is present, we find no evidence that local competition is associated with lower rates of governance. Twelve percent of criminal groups that faced no competition within the municipality provided economic benefits, compared to 31 percent of criminal groups in areas where two or more armed groups were present ($p=0.040$). However, there are no statistically significant relationships between dispute resolution, taxation, and the creation of rules to government behaviour and local armed group competition ($p=0.347$, $p=0.554$, and $p=0.564$, respectively). Likewise, for political groups, dispute resolution, economic support, taxation, and regulation of behaviour do not differ based on whether one or more groups are present ($p=0.826$, $p=0.222$, $p=0.664$, and $p=0.640$, respectively). In other words, while much existing scholarship has emphasised territorial control as a prerequisite for armed group governance, the local officials in our survey are just as likely to report armed groups engaging in governance in municipalities in which multiple armed groups were present as they were in municipalities in which only one group operates.

Turning to changes in armed group governance over time, we find that while respondents report modest declines in most types of governance behaviours for both political and criminal armed groups, in almost all cases these declines are not statistically significant when compared to the pre-pandemic period (Figure 4). In reference to criminal groups, similar percentages of respondents report that they resolve disputes prior to and after the start of the pandemic (39 percent pre-pandemic vs 36 percent during the pandemic, paired t -test $p=0.441$), make people pay a tax (66 percent vs 63 percent, $p=0.449$), and create rules to regulate behaviour (52 percent vs 49 percent, $p=0.526$). The one change that is statistically significant at conventional levels is the provision of economic benefits such as jobs or financial assistance by criminal armed groups, which is lower rather than higher after the start of the pandemic (37 percent vs 25 percent, $p=0.040$). Likewise, respondents reported that compared to the pre-pandemic period, the most important political group in their municipality engaged in similar rates if dispute resolution (39 percent pre-pandemic vs 34 percent during it, $p=0.327$), economic support (20 percent vs 19 percent, $p=0.754$), extortion (51 percent vs 48 percent, $p=0.395$), and regulation

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Figure 3. Armed Group Governance, by the Extent of Competition in the Past Year. % Who Say the Most Important Armed Group of Each Type in their Municipality.

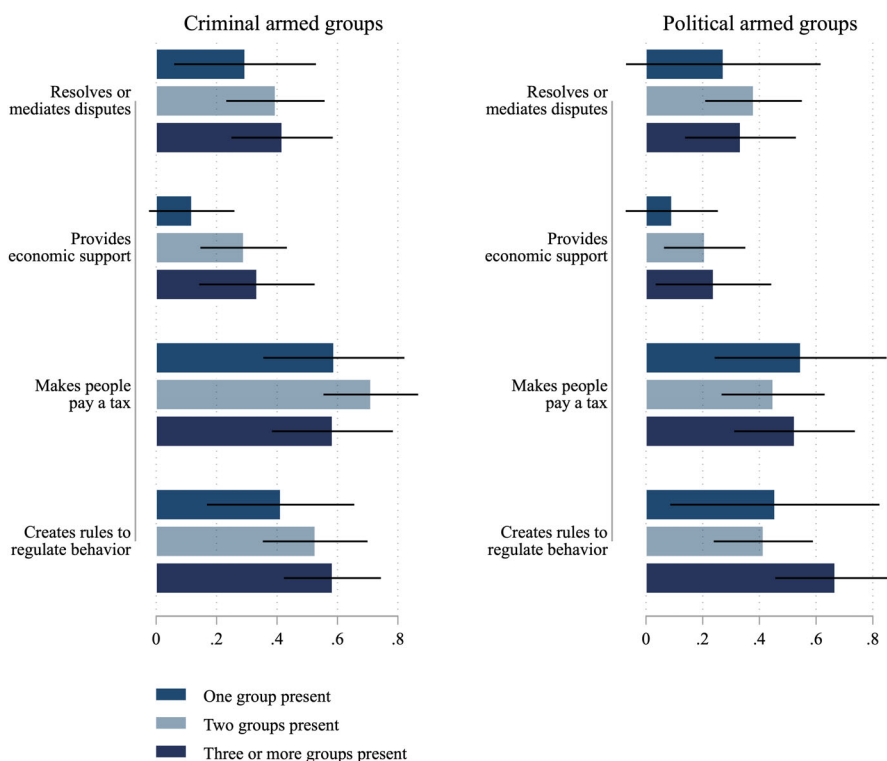
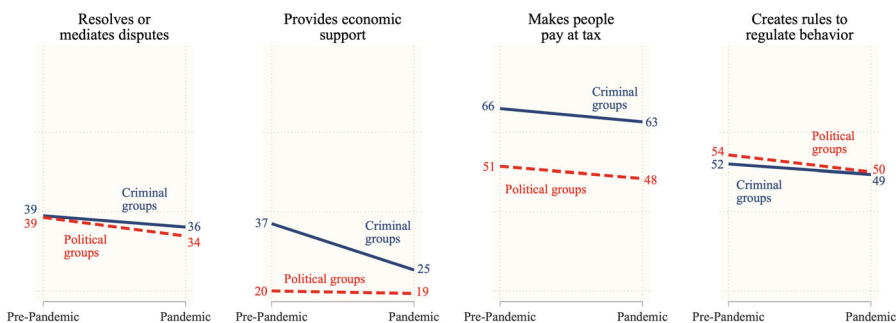


Figure 4. Shifts in Armed Group Governance during the Pandemic. % Who Say the Most Important Armed Group in their Municipality.



of behaviour (54 percent vs 50 percent, $p = 0.392$). In all cases, the changes in governance by political armed groups were substantially smaller and not statistically significant at conventional levels.

In analysing change in governing behaviour over time, we have thus far dropped from the analysis groups that are not present during both time periods. This reflects our central interest in exploring how armed groups that were in the area before and after the start of the pandemic might have changed their behaviour in response to it. However, an alternative approach would be to re-code governance variables as 0 where a group left a municipality after the pandemic began. Here we draw attention to the fact that some armed groups abandoned territory during the pandemic and therefore did not offer services to citizens because they had no meaningful opportunity to do so. When we recode governance variables to 0 where a group was reported as *not* being present, declines in the percentage of

municipalities in which criminal armed groups provided dispute resolution, extortion, economic support, and established rules are all statistically significant at the 0.05 level. For political groups, declines in extortion also become statistically significant ($p = 0.027$), but changes in other types of governing behaviour are not statistically significant.

In short, then, the survey provides no support for the idea that armed groups expanded their dispute resolution, extortion, public goods provision, or regulation of civilian life during the pandemic. If anything, the results suggest that armed groups *reduced* their control over civilian life in important ways. In many municipalities, the most important criminal and political armed groups that had been present left; groups that did remain either did not change their governance or stopped engaging in some forms of governance that they had previously provided.

While we find no evidence that armed groups' likelihood of regulating behaviour increased since the pandemic began, there were some changes in the content of the rules armed groups established to regulate civilian behaviour. In both time periods, the most reported behaviours were restrictions on movement, curfews, and resolving problems of 'coexistence', such as outstanding debts between neighbours, problems of domestic violence, and brawls. Across both the pre-pandemic and pandemic periods, several individuals reported that armed groups imposed a monopoly on alcohol and drug sales: residents could only purchase these goods from them or approved businesses. However, responses about rules put in place after the start of the pandemic also emphasised measures purportedly intended to prevent the spread of Covid-19, including restrictions on inter-municipal travel, as well as preventing entry of unknown individuals into a town (e.g. 'prohibitions on entry by people coming from cities', 'entry and exit controls', 'people not from the area cannot enter'). Some respondents indicated that these rules were specifically 'to avoid contagion by Covid-19' or 'to prevent the spread of Covid-19', while one described them as undertaken 'with the excuse of Covid-19'. In other words, while armed groups that did not create rules to civilian behaviour prior to the pandemic did not start doing so after it began, those groups that had already been regulating civilian behaviour introduced new restrictions on movement.

We also do not see large shifts in the types of disputes armed groups resolved or the extent of taxes levied after the start of the pandemic. The resolution of debt disputes typically involved a commission levied against disputants: one respondent described how the armed group since the early 2000s had 'called on all parties to the dispute, listened to them, and imposed penalties of up to 1,000,000 pesos', or approximately a month's minimum wage (see e.g. Moss, 2021). Brawls are likewise typically met with fines enforced by the armed groups: one respondent noted that penalties ranged from 800,000 to 1,000,000 pesos. We find similarly limited changes in extortion when comparing the pre-pandemic and pandemic periods. Nearly two thirds of respondents reported extortion by the criminal group they had in mind across both periods; the median payment reported was 125,000 pesos, or ~14 percent of a monthly minimum wage, both during the pre-pandemic and pandemic periods. In rural Colombia, this sort of payment would impose a significant burden on small businesses. For political groups, the median payment reported was 30,000 pesos pre-pandemic and 100,000 during the pandemic; however, the difference in payments to political groups reported across the two periods is not statistically significant ($p = 0.268$).

Overall, then, our survey suggests the pandemic did not drastically alter patterns of governance by either political or criminal groups. Respondents were just as likely to report the presence of rebel and dissident groups during the pandemic as before its onset and less – rather than more – likely to report the presence of criminal armed groups. Moreover, the extent and forms of governance in which armed groups engaged remained quite similar before and after the onset of the pandemic. Those armed groups that provided public goods tended to continue to do so during the pandemic; those that had not done so beforehand did not capitalise on the pandemic to expand service provision or the regulation of civilian life. We also do not find statistically significant changes in armed group behaviour based on municipal features: municipalities where the FARC historically held control, for instance, saw similar patterns of pre- and post-pandemic governance compared to those that did not; those in which drug cultivation, refinement, and/or trafficking occur also did not differ systematically. These results suggest that armed groups were unable to take advantage of pandemic disruptions to expand control or were uninterested in doing so in ways that scholars and media outlets initially feared.

Discussion

As pandemics and natural disasters become more common (Marani et al., 2021), understanding how armed groups respond to them is crucial. The Covid-19 pandemic radically altered economic activity and labour market participation (Aaronson and Alba, 2021), transformed gender relations (European Commission 2021), eroded trust between citizens and local and national authorities (Aksoy et al., 2020; Devine et al., 2021), and helped to shore up authoritarian governments (Greitens, 2020). Armed groups also seemed eager to take advantage of quarantines in the early days of the pandemic. While many scholars of organised crime and rebel governance anticipated that armed groups would capitalise on the pandemic to expand their control or demonstrate their capacity to improve upon governance by the state (e.g. Furlan, 2020), we find little support for this claim in our survey of local security officials in Colombia. These findings are particularly striking given widespread expectations that Colombia was particularly ripe for the expansion of armed group power during the pandemic.

Why did the pandemic not result in more profound changes in armed group governance? We consider a few possibilities. The first is that the pandemic did not significantly interrupt armed groups' core businesses – even if the state shirked policing duties, given a spate of new public health-related responsibilities – so armed groups felt no need to adapt governance behaviours. For example, the supply of cocaine from Colombia has increased in the last two years, and the price of cocaine in Europe has reached all-time highs, prompting the development of new trafficking routes from Colombia, through Venezuela, and into Europe (Insight Crime, 2021).

While some kinds of economic opportunities might have dried up during lockdown (e.g. extorting restaurants, bars, and clubs), the pandemic may not have induced a broad-based economic shock for most armed groups, reducing their motivation to significantly change governing activities.

Another potential explanation is that armed groups in Colombia were *unable* to take advantage of new criminal opportunities that arose during the pandemic. Scholars tend to emphasise how armed groups are more agile than state authorities, yet path-dependent relationships between local communities and armed groups, combined with a locked-down, stationary population may have reduced armed group mobility and, with it, the ability to seek out new resource extraction and governance opportunities. Future work may productively explore which of these explanations is more plausible, and the extent to which these findings generalise to other contexts. Doing so could help those living under rebel and criminal group rule better anticipate and weather changes that could negatively affect their welfare. At the same time, it might help states decide when to confront armed groups, and when (and whether) to outsource governance activities to them.

Conclusions

This article drew upon evidence from a survey of local officials in Colombia to explore the extent to which Covid-19 changed pattern of armed group governance. Contrary to prevailing expectations, we found little evidence that armed groups would be able to capitalise on the pandemic to expand their control over territory and civilian life. In addition to insights into how groups adapt to shocks such as pandemics, this article also contributes to a growing body of research challenging the assumption that territorial control is a prerequisite for governance (e.g. Florea, 2018; Loyle et al., 2023; Waterman, 2023; Newman, Saikia, and Waterman 2023). We show that in areas of Colombia contested by multiple armed groups, both criminal and political groups are engaging in a wide variety of governance activities – including establishing rules to regulate civilian behaviour, demanding the payment of taxes, and providing services including economic benefits and dispute resolution to civilians in their territories. This was true both prior to the onset of the pandemic and after it. Understanding the conditions under which territorial control and armed group governance co-vary is a crucial task for future work.

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