

Humiliated Militias

Humiliated Militias: Investigating the Humiliation Narrative in Informal Militia Formation

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Abstract

This paper investigates the role of the humiliation narrative in motivating the formation and action of informal militias, using the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) as a case study. While existing scholarship tends to view informal militias through strategic, economic, or institutional lenses, this paper focuses on the subjective affective and emotional motivations of informal militias. Drawing on the framework of Homolar and Löfflmann (2021), which conceptualizes humiliation as a discursive mechanism rooted in nostalgia and grievance, I analyze the speeches and writings of AUC leader Carlos Castaño Gil. I argue that Castaño's rhetoric transforms feelings of betrayal and national decline amongst Colombians into motivation for extralegal violence. The AUC's self-conception as defenders of a sacred and humiliated fatherland illustrates how narratives of loss and imagined past greatness mobilize individuals into informal militia participation. This paper concludes by calling for comparative research to assess the generalizability of the humiliation narrative in motivating informal militias and suggests future research on pathways for mitigating violence through the disarmament of grievance-based affective narratives.

Keywords: informal militia, humiliation narrative, Colombia, United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia, populism

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Millions of people around the globe are marred by civil war. From the conflicts in Ethiopia, Sudan, Yemen, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and many more, civil war profoundly affects the lives of many. As Jentzsche et al. (2015) notice, “most studies tend to approach civil wars as bilateral conflicts [with] the state on one side versus the rebels on the opposite side” (p. 755), which ignores the nuance that informal militias introduce. Carey et al. (2013) find that the “probability of civil war is just over 2.5 times greater in countries with informal” (p. 256) militias, showing that the underlying conditions of countries that form them are systematically different from countries that do not. Mitchell et al. (2014) show that informal militias commit agent-centred violence, violence that can easily be committed without the state, and Carey et al. (2015) show under what government structure an informal militia will be used. Despite all this valuable knowledge, the subjective motivations of informal militias are relatively unknown. Sanín (2008) demonstrates that the similarity hypothesis, the claim that all non-state actors “are more or less the same” (p. 4) regarding strategic challenges, including those of motivation, is false; but still, there is little research on what positively affects informal militias' subjective motivations. This study seeks to address this gap by finding that the humiliation narrative described by Homolar and Löfflmann (2021) plays a central role in subjective informal militia motivation, as seen through a case study of the United Self Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC). For this paper, the term informal militia refers to a non-state armed group aligned with state goals but with no recognized official legal status. A rebel group is an armed group fighting against the state.

Why the AUC

I chose to focus on the AUC because it offers an especially rich, explicit, and well-documented case (Wilson, 2025) of a humiliation-based narrative leading to militia formation. Unlike other informal militias whose motivations may be more fragmented and therefore more complex to elucidate, the AUC's leadership, particularly through the writings and speeches of Carlos Castaño Gil, articulate a coherent ideological framework grounded in themes of loss, shame, and restoration (García, 2008). In this manner, the AUC provides valuable insight into how narratives of personal and collective humiliation can be weaponized into informal militia mobilization. This makes the AUC uniquely suitable for investigating the subjective motivators of militia formation.

The AUC also stands out for its dual nature: while claiming to be a defensive force protecting the Colombian state, it operated informally and sometimes in opposition to official government channels (Carey, 2013). The AUC's informal and autonomous nature, a nature in which militias fight the government and rebels simultaneously (Magid & Schon, 2018), is important because it rules out the motivation stemming from governmental authority. If people were simply motivated by governmental authority, they would join the official government. This ambiguous status highlights that informal militias form around a perceived vacuum of state authority or legitimacy, which prompts the question: what motivates informal militias to form and act? I find that informal militias are motivated through humiliation as "the key discursive mechanism" (Homolar & Löfflmann, 2021, p. 1). Studying the AUC allows me to explore how such narratives are not only felt but also turned into politically salient forces.

Why the Humiliation Narrative

I ground my analysis of the subjective motivations of militias in the framework developed by Homolar and Löfflmann (2021) because it offers a productive way to understand

how the affect of humiliation, nostalgia and shame drives political mobilization outside of the typical state-rebel dichotomy. The authors' conception of humiliation as not a static emotional state but a discursive mechanism that turns personal or collective loss into a mobilizing narrative of grievance, bound with a fantasy of past greatness is ideal for my paper because I find the same causes and motivators behind informal militia motivation in the AUC. This framework allows me to interpret emotional rhetoric not simply as an epiphenomenon, but as a strategic resource for the mobilization of an informal militia.

Using this particular notion of nostalgic humiliation helps me move beyond simplistic explanations of militia violence like the similarity hypothesis rooted in economic or territorial motives as noted in Sanín (2008). Instead, I can explore how affective narratives, create the emotional conditions for persistent informal armed organization.

Humiliation narrative as the Mechanism for AUC Motivation

The logic of applying the humiliation narrative to the motivations behind informal militias hinges on the disjuncture between a golden past, imagined or true, and a degraded present that I argue spurs action amongst the militia's members. The people that form the militias have an idealized conception of the country, and through this nostalgic contrast — the glorified memory of what once was, and the shame of what now is — are mobilized to achieve the memory in any way possible. In the case of the AUC, Carlos Castaño's rhetoric vividly performs this mechanism. He casts Colombia as a betrayed fatherland: once noble and now desecrated by both internal enemies and a failing state (Garcia, 2008). His repeated allusions to government abandonment, moral decline, and the desecration of national honor are narrative devices that transform private grievance into autonomous political justification. Through the nostalgic idealization of Colombia and the vilification of those who corrupted it, humiliation becomes a

mechanism through which informal militia leaders legitimize the usage of extralegal violence as a form of restoration. In this sense, Castaño's discourse doesn't simply echo a populist structure, it participates in the same mechanism of insecurity that channels nostalgia into concrete action.

The AUC's use of humiliation as a narrative is not incidental; it is the central mechanism through which its members are emotionally primed, ideologically aligned, and ultimately motivated to act as an informal militia. As most prominent leader of the AUC, Carlos Castaño's (Carey, 2013) speeches, interviews, and manifestos consistently frame the Colombian state as weak, corrupt, and complicit in the betrayal of its citizens (García, 2008). This sense of abandonment is not presented as a mere policy failure, but, as a moral offense, a humiliation that demands rectification. Crucially for the humiliation narrative, this humiliation is constructed through contrast: the Colombia of the present, fractured by guerrilla violence and political rot, and the imagined past in which order, honor, and national unity prevailed. The AUC narrative mobilizes this disjuncture by appealing to a collective memory of Colombia as a dignified, prosperous, and morally impeccable fatherland, an image that is in desperate need of restoring.

As García (2008) notes, Castaño's language is saturated with appeals to honor, masculinity, and dignity lost, representing both the AUC's belief in Colombia's prior greatness and the current humiliation. In one interview, Castaño declares, "The fatherland is falling to pieces, and the state is incapable of defending it" (García, 2008, p. 87), casting Colombia as a special and sacred place currently in a state of humiliation. Castaño goes on to say that "regardless of any shift in government, I am in a historic commitment, and I want one day to be able to say: father, I fulfilled my duty to you; I fulfilled my duty to my country. No matter what happens, I will not let the country down" (García, 2008, p. 81). His words show a deep emotional attachment to a national identity rooted in sacrifice and honor; a Colombia not just as a nation,

but as a legacy, a beautiful and great country, and a sacred space betrayed by guerrilla violence and state weakness. The AUC's self-image is thus one which is deeply committed to the ideal of a beautiful and strong Colombia, but one which is currently humiliated.

As Homolar and Löffmann (2021) lay out, this emotional framing leads to both a feeling of a victimhood and a strong “response that enables a radical departure from established domestic and international policy norms” (p. 1) which transforms political grievance into moral necessity. The AUC mirrors this mechanism as they see themselves as victims that need to act in violent ways to reclaim their imagined strength. In describing the AUC generally Castaño says, “Each of these offenses not only caused significant harm, but also exposed the victim's weakness, and for that reason, the victim sought a way to reclaim their honor” (Garcia, 2008, p. 93) By saying this, Castaño establishes that it is through the perceived unjust victimhood that the AUC must mobilize itself as an informal militia group rather than act through a normal, recognized path. In this way, the humiliation narrative works to collapse the boundary between emotion and action, mobilizing affect into organized extralegal violence.

This mechanism is evident in the affective structure of AUC propaganda, which often references an idealized Colombia and simultaneously laments its desecration. As Castaño often asserts, Colombia is not just at war, it is shamed (Garcia, 2008, p. 156). This rhetorical move reframes participation in the AUC as an act of redemption: to fight is to recover honor, to avenge humiliation, and to reclaim the lost fatherland. It is in this affective mentality that the militia draws its motivation. Far from being merely economic or situational (Sanín, 2008), the AUC's formation and persistence are deeply rooted in the affective logic of the humiliation narrative.

Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Directions

This paper has argued that the humiliation narrative plays a significant role in the formation and mobilization of informal militias, as illustrated through the case of the AUC's statements. However, this argument rests on a single case study. While this focused analysis has allowed for a deep dive into discourse and motivation, it necessarily limits the generalizability of the findings. Studying a broader range of informal militias—across regions, ideologies, and contexts—will likely yield more nuanced insights into how humiliation operates as a mobilizing force. Such comparative work could clarify whether the humiliation narrative consistently functions as a driver of militia formation, or if its effects are context-dependent.

There are two key avenues emerge for future research. The first involves expanding the empirical base by establishing the motivations of a wider set of informal militias. With this groundwork in place, scholars can begin to examine whether violence committed by informal militias motivated by humiliation differs systematically, in form, scale, or targets, from militias driven by other motivations such as economic gain or territorial control.

The second avenue is inter-disciplinary and forward-looking: if the humiliation narrative indeed plays a central role in mobilizing informal militia violence across the world, then what are the conditions under which it can be disarmed? Future research might investigate whether certain social, political, or psychological variables are associated with reduced levels of violence among informal militias expressing humiliation-based motivations. A statistically significant correlation here could not only contribute to theoretical understanding but also offer practical pathways toward conflict prevention and de-escalation.

Ultimately, this paper suggests that we must take the subjective motivations of informal militias seriously in the study of conflict and political science. Where humiliation festers, militias may follow, and the pervasive effects of informal militias on state consolidation and violence are

known. Recognizing this link could be an important step in understanding the dynamics of conflict better.

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