

# El Salvador



## and the struggle for peace

### *From guerilla and civil war to new forms of violence*

*Violence was a fire which swept over the fields of El Salvador; it burst into villages, cut off roads and destroyed highways and bridges; it reached the cities and entered families, sacred areas and educational centres; it struck at justice and filled the public administration with victims; and it singled out as an enemy anyone who was not on the list of friends.*

*The victims were Salvadorians and foreigners of all backgrounds and all social and economic classes, for in its blind cruelty violence leaves everyone equally defenceless.*

*(Truth commission report, 1993)*

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Bsc Thesis*

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## Basics about El Salvador



Size:	20.720 sq. km
Population:	6,7 million (est. July 2005)
Government type:	Republic
Capital	San Salvador
Land boundaries:	Total: 545 km Border countries: Guatemala and Honduras
Climate:	tropical; rainy season (May to October); dry season (November to April); tropical on coast; temperate in uplands
Terrain:	mostly mountains with narrow coastal belt and central plateau
Land use:	arable land: 31.85% permanent crops: 12.07% other: 56.08%
Ethnic groups:	Mestizo 90%, white 9%, Amerindian 1%
Religion:	Roman Catholic 83%, other 17%
Languages:	Spanish, Nahua (among some Amerindians)
Population below poverty line:	36.1% (est. 2003)

Source: CIA world fact book ([www.cia.gov/factbook](http://www.cia.gov/factbook))

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 *Background to the thesis*

One of the most powerful conflicts to affect Central America in the 1980s was that in El Salvador (1980-1992), resulting in the death of more than 80,000 citizens. The 1992 Peace Accords are widely recognised as having put an end to the twelve-year war, but have been accused of failing in their mission to bring an end to violence and to build a new and more equal society. Within Latin America, El Salvador stands out as one of the most violent countries. Random criminal violence and highly visible gang activity have contributed to a situation where fear and insecurity still characterise everyday life for many citizens. This has exhibited itself through a sharp rise in street crime, a growing gang culture and high levels of domestic violence. These 'new forms of violence' are often seen separately from El Salvador's historical and social context. In this thesis I will highlight these 'new forms of violence', specifically the emergence of youth gangs '*maras*', and will put them in a historical and social context of guerrilla, civil war, poverty and social exclusion. I'll try to explain why this rise of youth gangs isn't just a random phenomenon, but is rooted in a history of violence, poverty and exclusion.

Chapter one will be a more theoretical background chapter which will elaborate on the definitions and categories of violence and the implications of violence for society. Chapter two will try to give a comprehensive, though brief introduction in El Salvador's history of violence and the peace process of the civil war. Chapter three will focus on the emergence of post-war violence and specifically discuss the mara phenomenon. Chapter four will try to give a comprehensive explanation of post-war (gang) violence in El Salvador and chapter five will give a conclusion.

## 1.2 *Definitions and categories of violence*

### 1.2.1 *Definitions of violence*

Though on first hand it may seem clear what is meant with 'violence', nothing is less true. 'Given its complexity, multiplicity and chaotic nature, violence is slippery and escapes easy definition' (Moser, 2004: 8). In this thesis I will stick with a common used definition of violence according to Keane (1996) 'violence as the use of physical (and psychological) force, which causes hurt to others in order to impose one's wishes'. Other definitions are broadened by highlighting issues as material deprivation and symbolic disadvantage. 'Underlying these definitions, however, is the recognition that violence and power are inextricably interrelated' (Moser, 2004: 9). Violence can be seen as a power struggle; imposing ones wishes on another. During times of repression violence and fear is commonly used to maintain the contemporary power relations.

Definitions of violence often overlap with definitions of conflict and crime, though important distinctions have to be made. Not all violence leads to conflict and not all conflicts lead to violence. Conflicts over scarce resources for example can be solved peacefully through negotiations without the use of violence. Crime can be the laundering of money, tax-evasion or the illegal dumping of chemicals, which not necessarily includes violence. The relationship between the three does

exist, but is complex and varies for each situation. In this thesis the Salvadorean story will unmistakably be full of all forms of conflict, violence and crime and will illustrate the complexity of their interrelatedness very well.

### 1.2.2 Categories of violence

Violence can be categorized in multiple ways. Violence can be classified to whether it is physical, psychological or sexual in nature. It can be classified in terms of victimization, for instance, violence against elderly, women, men or children. And classification in terms of perpetrators such as governments, drugs cartels, gangs and individuals might be an option as well. So, there are numerous possibilities to categorize violence, though the one that I will use is that of Moser and McIlwaine (2004). They categorize violence according to whether it is political, economic or social in nature:

Category	Definition	Manifestation
Political	The commission of violent acts motivated by a desire, conscious or unconscious, to obtain or maintain political power.	Guerrilla conflict; paramilitary conflict; political assassinations; armed conflict between political parties; rape and sexual abuse as a political act, forced pregnancy/sterilization
Economic	The commission of violent acts motivated by a desire, conscious or unconscious, for economic gain or to obtain or maintain economic power.	Street crime; carjacking; robbery/theft; drug trafficking; kidnapping; assaults, including rape occurring during economic crimes.
Social	The commission of violent acts motivated by a desire, conscious or unconscious, for social gain or to obtain or maintain social power.	Interpersonal violence such as spouse and child abuse; sexual assault of women and children; arguments that get out of control.

Table 1 Categories of violence (Moser, 2004: 60)

Their argument is that the diversity of violence needs to be ‘systematized in an overarching, or ‘umbrella’ typology in order to analyse it in the right way’ (Moser, 2004). They base these categories on the result of research for ‘the local perception on violence’ in Guatemala and Colombia. The typology identifies political, economic and social violence as the primary motives of violence. The table they made also summarizes some of the common types of violence for each category.

Political violence is inspired by the will to win or hold political power, as for example guerrilla or paramilitary conflict or political assassination. This type of violence is often associated with (civil) wars, though it can be committed during ‘peace time’ as well. Economic violence is motivated by a material gain or to obtain and maintain economic power. It refers to street crime such as mugging, robbery, drugs-related violence and kidnapping (for ransom). ‘Social violence is motivated by the will to get or keep social power and control. Much social violence is gender-based, both inside and outside the home, including domestic violence and child abuse. It can also refer to ethnic violence, territorial or identity-based violence associated with gangs’ (Moser, 2004: 61).

Savenije states that violence can be symbolic as well, especially in relation with gang violence this is something to bear in mind. 'Since violence can be used to send a message to a broader audience than the immediate victims, and in this respect violence has a more symbolic character' (Savenije, 2004: 160). Although Savenije mentions symbolic violence separately I see it as a part of social violence and will not make a separate category for it.

By categorizing violence the ability increases to address violence in a more appropriate way. For instance, ending political violence in countries dominated by guerrilla campaigns may require both a negotiated peace that addresses guerrilla political motives, as well as job creation for demobilized combatants (Moser, 2004). Joining a guerrilla movement may have therefore political as well as economic motives, and only on this way all motives behind such guerrilla membership can be tackled. Leading violence back to the roots and address those is favoured above addressing violence as a consequence.

This example shows the interlinking of the categories as well. Categorization by its very nature may be static, Moser argues that this 'threefold typology is conceptualized as a continuum with important reinforcing linkages between different types of violence'. With other words; social, economic and political violence are overlapping and interrelated. Almost every form of violence is an interlinking of above mentioned categories. Moser therefore speaks about the 'multiple complexity of daily violence'. The distinction in political, economic and social violence will also be used in chapter four to analyse the underlying causes of (gang) violence in El Salvador.

### **1.3 Implications of violence for society**

#### **1.3.1 Society of fear**

Violence and fear are closely related. In a society with high levels of violence, fear is often omnipresent. The other way around is often true as well; in a society of fear, often the crime levels are high. Violence produces fear and therefore fear is like an index for violence, it refers to violence like smoke refers to fire. Although their close relatedness they have their differences as well; 'violence is an objective phenomenon that one can describe and quantify, whereas fear is subjective reaction against any threat' (Restrepo, 2004: 172). Restrepo argues that fear can lead to an impoverishment of social capital, because people retreat to the security of their own homes. This impoverishment of social capital ruins existing networks and leads to an isolated society. Further Restrepo argues that the deeper impact of violence and fear lies in the undermining of hope and that they foreshorten the horizons of individual and collective futures. The people tend to live on daily basis and are afraid to look ahead, because seen the past, the future doesn't look promising. It is clear that both the levels and types of endemic daily violence especially in poor urban communities impact drastically on people's well-being in terms of their livelihood security, and the functioning of local social institutions' (Moser, 2004). Violence often erodes the governance capacity of formal institutions with particular implications for human rights violations and impunity rates. When judicial, educational, health, media and security institutions are unable to function appropriately and transparently, this can reduce even further

the existing unequal access to such institutions and lead to a higher feeling of insecurity (ibid.).

### *1.3.2 Escapism*

The fear of violence often leads to diverse forms of escape or flight. People get tired of living in an environment polluted with violence and try to get away from it. The most obvious form of flight is changing one's place of residence, either within the country or abroad (Restrepo, 2004: 183). A lot of people don't have the possibility or don't see the effect of this and choose for other forms of escapism. It are often the people in the urban marginalized areas that have to deal with violence the most, and don't have the opportunities to deal with it by changing their place of residence. They just don't have the financial means and have to deal with it in other ways. Especially 'young urbanities try to alley anxiety about the future through vain attempt to reduce the perspective of time to the present, and to dilute it with some form of artificial stimulus' (ibid.). This results in an increase of alcohol, sex, drugs and violence. In countries with endemic forms of violence there is an eagerness to 'exhaust the possibilities of existence in an eternal present, forgetting the past and ignoring an uncertain future that will perhaps never come' (ibid.:184). Alcohol, sex and drugs give you short term pleasure and also involvement in gangs can lead you away from the daily routines. The result of these massive forms of escapism on national level is not very clear, though it's for sure they are not beneficial for the country. Further on in this thesis I do discuss the formation of gangs in the case of El Salvador and its implications for society. In short: it is clear that all attempts to evade violence have their origin in a firm will to forget: to forget the past, to deliberately deny the future, and to flee from the present.

## **2. The historical context**

A historical perspective is needed to understand the problem of the contemporary Salvadorean society. In this chapter the history from the civil war until the formation of the truth commission will be covered.

### **2.1 Tensions**

Long-standing tensions between El Salvador's capital-owning elite and its impoverished masses reached a breaking point in the late 1970s amid a severe economic downturn. Mounting popular frustration and increasingly violent military repression triggered the outbreak of civil war that spread to all corners of the country (FOCAL, 2000). The conflict became a Cold War battleground as the United States provided military funding and training to the Armed Forces of El Salvador (FAES), while leftist rebels united under the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) received support (perhaps only ideological and not even military) from Cuba, Nicaragua and the Soviet Union. The twelve-year conflict left nearly 80,000 dead and one million displaced out of a population of just over five million. The FAES and paramilitary groups linked to the state were responsible for massive human rights violations as death squad killings, forced disappearances and torture became routine. The FMLN, meanwhile, sought to destabilize the

country by assassinating key public officials, kidnapping business leaders and foreigners, and attacking the country's infrastructure (FOCAL, 2000).

### *2.1.1 Corrupted elections*

In 1964 for the first since 1931 free local and parliament elections were organised. Napoleón Duarte became the capital's mayor on behalf of the PDC (Christian Democratic Party). In 1972 Duarte also became a candidate for the presidential elections, but when he became on the winning hand all communication channels to outside were stopped and colonel Molina was declared as the winner (Borgh, 1998: 21). Obviously fraud was in this election, because according to the counting of the PDC itself Duarte got a majority voting. This election fraud was a clear signal to the Salvadorean citizens that the ruling military clique of influential colonels and big landowners did not accept a changing of the status quo. This was confirmed in the presidential elections of 1977 again; a coalition led by the PDC won the elections, but the power remained in the hands of the military *junta*. As a reaction ten thousands of PDC supporters protested for days on *Plaza Libertad* in the centre of San Salvador and asked for justice. What they got was hard reaction of the paramilitary groups which led to numerous deathly incidents.

### *2.1.2 Awakening and repression*

The eyes of the citizens were opened and they became conscious of the type of government they were dealing with. A continuous growing protest was visible throughout El Salvador and especially in rural areas. The normal rural apathy and passive behaviour rapidly changed, due to influence of the church as well, and farmer protest groups rapidly grew (Borgh, 1998: 22). Together with this awakening came also the repression. Striking and protest was answered with fire and leading figures, as priests, trade-union leaders and protest leaders were eliminated, often in horrible ways. Paramilitary groups as ORDEN played a major role in the repression. They had a network of citizens in rural areas which were in contact with local military groups (ibid). Information about suspected leaders and activities were passed to the military groups and their policy on these matters was harsh and cruel. Though the answer on protest was repression, this didn't decrease it, repression actually only fuelled the protest and consciousness of the citizens.

### *2.1.3 Rise of guerrilla*

Once Che Guevara mentioned that El Salvador was too crowded and had too little desolated areas for obtaining a strong guerrilla force (Borgh, 1998). Nothing of this seemed to be true, because El Salvador's guerrilla became one of the most successful guerrilla movements of Latin America. Already in the early 70's the first guerrilla groups arose, like the *Fuerzas Populares de Liberación Farabundo Martí* (FPL, People's Liberation Forces) and the *Ejército Revolucionario Popular* (ERP, People's Revolutionary Army). Later on other smaller guerrilla movements arose as well. What they had in common was a disagreement with the status quo and a planned overthrow of El Salvador's military *junta*. The guerrilla movements consisted of a military force and a civil force trying to unite different popular movements. In the growing environment of fear and repression the guerrilla obtained a lot of support. After the second deception of election fraud for example, the guerrilla got a boost by getting new members who lost confidence in

the legal system to change the status quo. Especially the murder on Archbishop Romero in March 1980 led to a high number of new guerrilla members. This murder can perhaps be seen as the most important trigger in joining the guerrilla and perhaps as well for the war itself. After the death of Romero the different guerrilla movements united in October 1980 in what is known as the *Frente*. Although each movement had its own policy and structure they agreed upon the formation of the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN, Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) to unite their powers and put away their disagreements.

## **2.2 War**

Although the leader of the PDC, Napoleón Duarte became president of El Salvador in December 1980, the tension and fear still grew rapidly. Major Roberto D'Aubuisson, one of the hardliners of elite and military man, erected the so called death squads and spread fear and death. He is considered to be the main perpetrator behind the assassination of the Archbishop as well. It didn't take long before the death squads became established in the regular armed forces as well. And because of American military and financial support the army obtained an important role. The actors in the civil war, government, army, guerrilla and the US all that their own policies and did not subject themselves to the rule of others. The war did not only consist out of bullets and guns, but for a major part it consisted of the battle for the minds and heart of the citizens (Borgh, 1998: 27). Major atrocities were done by the army, as for example the massacre of a large group of refugees trying to cross the Sampul-river and the complete massacre of the village El Mozote. The killing of four Dutch journalists and several nuns got worlds attention, but no one intervened. In an attempt to seize power the FMLN tried to take over the capital, but due to lack of strategy and munition they failed. The revolution they expected did not come and the civil war, which was going to take more than ten years, became a fact.

## **2.3 Road to peace**

In 1989 the FMLN tried again to seize power and occupied several parts of the capital. It again didn't last long and the counter offensive of the army and death squads was as bloody as every time. Six Jesuit priests of the Central American University were killed and the army was held responsible. This incident again showed that there was a choice between an endless war or negotiations. The guerrilla could have continued for several years more and so could have the army. It therefore seemed the conditions for peace were in place. The army and the guerrilla had reached a military stalemate, the international community was increasingly critical of state-sponsored human rights abuses and the end of the Cold War had weakened anti-Communist justifications for continued American military assistance (FOCAL, 2000). Also when the pro-business political party ARENA (Nationalist Republican Alliance) came to power in 1989, the Salvadoran elite pushed for peace as well, since nothing is as disruptive for an economy as a war.

After the failure of early negotiation attempts, both sides appealed to the United Nations to act as mediator, resulting in the establishment of the United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador (ONUSAL) in 1991. They succeeded in leading the parties towards a final agreement formally signed on January 16, 1992 (FOCAL, 2000). Government figures published on the eve of the final truce in El Salvador estimated the direct damage of the war at US\$329 million and indirect damage at US \$708 million. They calculated the cost of reconstruction needs at US \$1,826 million (Dunkerley, 1993: 12). In addition, the last decade has seen a series of natural disasters that have had adverse effects on the country's development. The widespread devastation caused by Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and, more intensely, the earthquakes of January and February 2001, effectively cancelled-out infrastructure and economic reconstruction since the end of the war. It was the poor who felt the extent of these disasters most acutely and the situation for a large part of the society was by the UN described as most precarious (ibid.)

#### **2.4 Truth Commission**

The Truth Commission, which was authorized to investigate the massive human rights violations of the civil war, was established through the peace agreement of 1992. While conducting its work, the investigative body received more than 22,000 complaints of extrajudicial executions, torture and forced disappearances that had occurred between January 1980 and July 1991 (FOCAL, 2000). Ninety-five percent of the violent acts documented were found to have been committed by the military, government security forces and death squads. Intimidation, death threats, executions and disappearances were found to be common tools used against opposition voices, human rights activists and suspected rebels. In addition, the judicial system was found to be "incapable of fairly assessing and carrying out punishment" (TC report, 1993). Since the Truth Commission had no authority to prosecute or punish offenders, they were limited to making recommendations. However, the recommendations made in its report met with stiff criticism (FOCAL, 2000). Many of those accused retained high-level positions in various government offices. The day after the report was made public on 15 March 1993, Salvadoran President Alfredo Cristiani announced his intention to ask the National Assembly to pass an amnesty law which would favour everyone named in the report. This to disagreement of all people involved in the commission. The signal it gave to the citizens is that of 'legal impunity', the facts are there, but the will to do something about it is not present. Perhaps because it was a time to forgive and forget, perhaps because the perpetrators were just too influential, in both ways it leaves unsatisfactory feelings with the 'ones staying behind'. The Salvadorean citizens, who spent twelve years in a war full of atrocities, wanted to see the guilty ones accused of a war in which more than 80.000 people died. It is easier said than done to forgive and forget if you lost your loved ones.

### 3. Emergence of post-war violence

#### 3.1 New forms of violence

Post-conflict, post-authoritarian transitions are commonly accompanied by widespread violence, violence that infuses new versions of insecurity into everyday life and violence that 'refashions views of the past through shifting historical consciousness' (Schouten, 2005). More and more theorists point to a privatizing or depoliticizing of violence corresponding to globalization. Such violence is an obstacle toward democratization. Human-rights discourse, with its focus on states, has only recently begun to confront issues of citizen insecurity in a transnational, globalizing era (Schouten, 2005). Schouten's article is titled '*more deaths after an armed conflict*' and is based on research by the *small arms survey* in Geneva. She explains that often after a war the state fails to disarm the population and in an environment of insecurity and power vacuum violence erupts. Although Schouten writes her article with a general perspective, her article makes sense for the situation in El Salvador as well.

Although the peace accords of 1992 are generally seen as a success in ending the civil war, it has proven to be ineffective in stopping new forms of violence (Savenije, 2004). While the ONUSAL was successful in addressing politically-motivated human rights violations, a new threat has risen out of the ashes of the war: urban violence, keeping fear and insecurity at the centre of life in El Salvador (Montgomery, 1995). Fear of assaulting, alcohol and drugs related violence, robberies, domestic violence and gang violence are seen as the 'new' threats for society. Efforts to build a meaningful peace and implement developmental progress have been hampered by these continuing levels of violence. The post-war violence became a severe problem and the levels of crime after the civil war were tremendously high; the rise of homicides for example after the end of the civil war was just shocking.

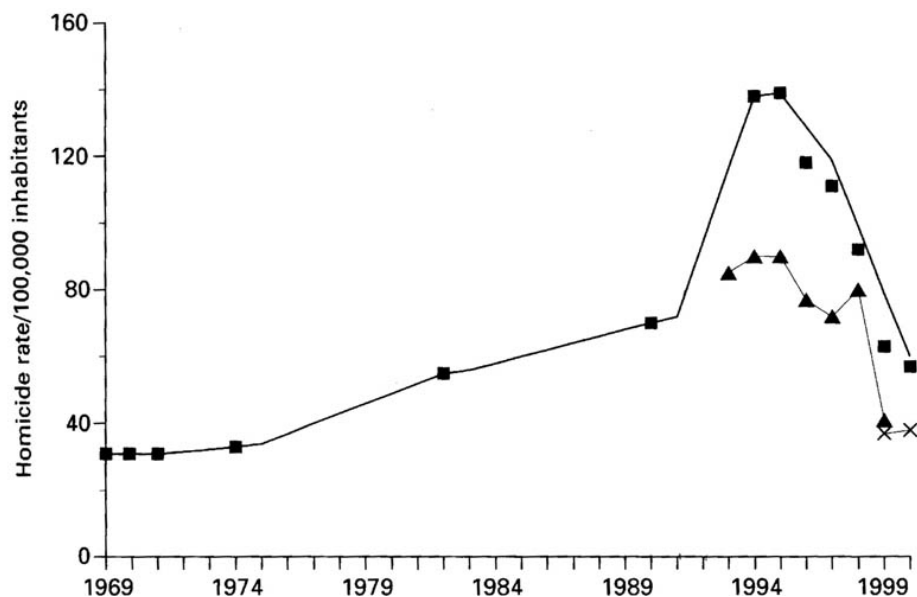


Fig. 1 illustrates the high rise of homicides after the end of the civil war.

According to *figure 1* of the Pan-American Health Organisation, the homicide rate per 100.000 inhabitants increased from 30 in 1969 to 69.8 in 1990. Research undertaken during the 1990s estimated that anywhere between 6000 and 8000 murders occur each year in El Salvador, a country of just over 6 million inhabitants. One observer has argued that the 1990s will have seen more violent deaths than the war years (Ramos, 1998). Thereafter there was a considerable increase between 1991 and 1995, which are the first few years after the civil war (Savenije, 2004: 156). In 1995 the homicide rate was 140, the second highest in the world after Colombia. After 1995 there was a steep decline in the period between 1996 and 2000 (*ibid.*). Despite this decline the homicide rate remains high; today an average of eight people a day is murdered in El Salvador on a population of 6.2 million, what makes it the highest rate in the region. Guatemala may have a higher average of 14 deaths a day, though with a significant larger population (Bermúdez, 2005). It is important to note that the visibility of certain crimes affects social reaction and the ensuing social panic. Common violent crimes involving firearms include: homicides, rape, armed robbery and extortion. See Table 2

<b>Crime</b>	Homicide	Injury	Rape	Kidnapping	Extortion	Robbery	Mugging
<b>2003</b>	1517	3461	740	8	197	3337	7505
<b>2004</b>	1796	2855	568	0	216	3363	6972

*Table 2 Crime figures from January to August. 2003 and January to Aug. 2004 (PNC – National Civil Police – data; table compiled by Hume, 2004).*

### **3.2 Maras**

One of the most alarming and eye-catching processes is that of the enormous growth of youth gangs 'maras'. They have become visibly present in most marginalized neighbourhoods, 'which they consider their territory and which they defend against members of other gangs' (Savenije, 2004: 165). Largely made up of young men from low-income neighbourhoods, maras have become synonymous with terror and insecurity. The groups are heavily armed and use knives and firearms in their activities. The emergence of these youth gangs and their continuing level on the path of organized crime is perhaps the most alarming process in contemporary El Salvador. This mara phenomenon is though not something specific for El Salvador, but for the whole Central American region. In Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and more recently in Mexico these gangs form a serious treat for a stable society. The total amount of members is unclear, but a number around the 10.000 in El Salvador is a realistic estimation (Ramos, 1998).

#### *3.2.1 Foreign involvement*

The maras have a history that precedes the peace accords. Already in the early 1990s, two years before the accords, there was a growing number of youth involved in these gangs (Savenije, 2004). Though their number might have been significant, their influence wasn't; these gangs claimed different neighbourhoods and were too scattered and disorganised to form a real treat (*ibid.*). It lasted till

1992, after the accords, when these youth gangs got a new 'boost'. El Salvador was considered 'safe' after the peace accords and therefore it was easier for the United States to send people back. Whereas youth gangs are seen as a national security problem in the United States they began to deport thousands of gang members back to their home country, resulting in an explosion of gang violence in El Salvador. Arguing that the US might have been legally right, the fact is that they acted morally wrong. In a society just recovering from the scars of at least 12 years of violence, they should have known that such a decision would be an attack on the fragile stability in the country. It is at the same time contradictory to destabilize a society like that, which they before tried so hard to stabilize.

### *3.2.2 Formation of super-gangs*

The growth of new gang members didn't lead to an explosion of new gangs, but had the reverse effect that Salvadorean gangs became parts '*clikas*' of one of the two super-gangs (Savenije, 2004). These super-gangs 'Barrio 18' and Mara Salvatrucha ('MS 13') had their roots in Los Angeles, with their names referring to the streets of origin. The Mara Salvatrucha began in Los Angeles in 1980. Hundreds of thousands of Salvadoreans had fled to America to escape the brutal civil war back home. There their displaced children banded together and led to the formation of what is known as MS 13 (Bermúdez, 2005). This polarization of gangs led to an increase of 'professionalism' and identity forming. The ways of financing the gangs became more diverse and besides petty crime robberies, drugs dealing and other criminal activities became more important. Savenije mentions though that the organisational capacities of these gangs have not to be overestimated. The transition from gangs to super-gangs led to an increase of encounters with deathly consequences. One of the causes is the relatively easy access to small arms and light weapons (SALW) in El Salvador, 'what made the Salvadoran gangs better armed and more deadly than their US counterparts' (Hume, 2004: 13). By gang members, protection against rival gangs is the principal justification given for the existence and growth of their gangs (Savenije, 2004: 166). Violent encounters with rivals take place when gangs accidentally meet each other, or they are planned in advance. Violence aimed at other gangs is not simply about to protect or occupy a territory; with violence a higher end is served. It's therefore crucial to understand the aspects of identity and symbolic violence in these confrontations (Ibid.).

### *3.2.3 Identity and symbolic aspects of violence*

The rules of a mutual gang war are not like in conventional warfare; youth gangs for example do not have the capacity to take possession of hostile territory (Savenije, 2004) and therefore the objectives of encounters is uneasy to grasp as an outsider. It's the symbolic aspects and identity involved in these violent encounters that counts. 'Killing or harming a member of a rival gang simply because he is a member of a rival gang, without knowing him personally, makes sense only if the symbolic aspects of these violent acts are brought to the foreground' (Ibid.: 167). According to Savenije you should look behind the isolated acts of violence. Killing or harming a rival gang member is equivalent to damaging the gang as a whole; its reputation, status and honour. An accidental meeting is therefore enough to provoke and justify an attack (Ibid.). 'It is not important who

gets wounded or killed as long as he is related to the rival gang, although the symbolic value of an attack and the harm caused are higher when the victim is an important gang member or leader. The territories of gangs are mostly the neighbourhoods in which most members live, where they grew up, went to school, played and fought together. It is 'their neighbourhood' in the sense that they share the same experiences and identity. It is not a resource that one can possess and which other gangs can take. Therefore the violent relationship cannot be explained as an inter-group conflict over resources as for instance territory' (ibid.). Gangs can win 'points' by harming or killing rival gang members. The aggressor who kills gains points, for himself and for his gang, in a game much greater than the actions of individual gang members' (ibid.). The game is about achieving a reputation as the dominant, most courageous and dangerous gang. Violence serves as a means to achieve this goal.

Individual members serve this greater goal, though at the same time fight for personal recognition in their gang; a position of status and respect. Especially for youth from marginalized areas, these gangs give them an identity and respect that would otherwise be impossible for them to obtain (Popkin, 1999). Gang members identify themselves with tattoos, bandanas of a certain colour, military-style haircuts, secret code words and hand signals. Often youngsters are tattooed from top to toe with marks belonging to their gang. To join, a would-be gang member must go through initiation rites, which usually involve violence among members or against outsiders (Bermúdez, 2005). In a documentary by the BBC (2004) a member says: "the majority here have killed people. It's basically a requirement to be in the gangs". The cost of these forms of belonging can be high since rival gang members can attack you and since a couple of years government forces are highly active as well and can catch you since being a gang member is forbidden. The only place you're relatively safe is in your own territory under the protection of your fellow gang members. Despite these dangers for the majority the benefits outweigh the costs; they rather have the rush of danger and gain a reputation, than being left on the edge of society – marginalized and ignored (Popkin, 1999: 34).

#### *3.2.4 Relationship with their 'neighbours'*

Gangs often treat their neighbourhoods as their kingdom where they make the rules. They may ask for a contribution when residents enter or leave the neighbourhood or demand a 'war tax' from the owners of small shops (Savenije, 2004: 168). The relation the gangs have with their neighbourhood is often one based on fear and intimidation. They threaten and intimidate residents (so they don't contact the police), they sell and consume drugs, commit petty crimes, etc. The spread of fear in the neighbourhoods serves the purpose to rule their territory. Crimes as theft against their neighbours are of little material influence, but of major symbolic influence. They show who controls the area and who have to be obeyed; it's to impose and reinforce their power. Calling the police when gangs are fighting, consuming drugs or commit other crimes is therefore out of the question. No one can complain openly about the crimes and violence caused by the gangs without coming into serious conflict with them (ibid.: 169).

### 3.2.5 State policy

Recently in El Salvador and Honduras, tough anti-gang laws make it possible to 'throw young people in prison for years merely because they belong to gangs, and police have been given broad powers of arrest, hauling young people in simply because they bear tattoos or communicate using certain hand signs' (Bermúdez, 2005). In an attempt to control the maras the government chose for the hard way. The initiative forms part of the "Super Mano Dura" (Super Iron Fist) policy that the Salvadoran government of Antonio Saca began to implement last year in 2004. Even soldiers began to patrol the streets of the capital along with the police, in 'anti-gang task forces'. The authorities said the new units are to be made up of three soldiers and two police officers. 'The function of the soldiers is to accompany the police for security, not to engage in law enforcement' (Bermúdez, 2005). There are numerous cases of murders though which are not investigated and where these 'task forces' are held responsible for. It's said the joint task forces track down their "victims" like hunting expeditions and that the new policy only made it more difficult for youngsters to step out. Also it made the work more difficult of groups that reach out to young people, because gang members who in the past were identifiable and therefore accessible to those engaged in social work and rehabilitation now hide themselves or at least their tattoos. The prison *Penal de Quezaltepeque* is overcrowded. In this prison where actually only two hundred people fit in seven hundred gang members are detained (Blanken, 2005). Perhaps the hard policy succeeded to bring a stop to the growth of the gangs, it didn't stop the violence (ibid.). Human rights organisations as Amnesty International say the increased repression is generating greater violence, and is pushing the youth gangs to develop more complex structures as a survival strategy. Some gang leaders have reportedly forged new links with the world of drug trafficking and organised crime, in search of protection from the police action (Bermúdez, 2005.).

It are the factors like social and economic marginalisation, family problems, school drop-out, under or unemployment and a culture of violence that push young people in these gangs and that have to be addressed. The 'Iron Fist' policy does not address any of these root causes, only the consequences. It is therefore clear to me that this policy is not sustainable and other state policies have to be found to address the mara problem. International development agencies as the Dutch Cordaid for example have sport projects and educational programmes to prevent youngsters of joining the maras. At the same time they support a clinic in which former gang member can let their tattoos be removed. By removing the tattoos they remove the visible affiliation with the gang as well, which lead to less prejudices and makes the finding of work more easy (Blanken, 2005).

## 4. Explaining the causes of violence

Violence is not easily to grasp in a theory of 'and suddenly it was there', it asks a more comprehensive approach. Explaining the causes of violence can not only be done from a single perspective. An economic perspective, for example, will explain the one half, while a social and political will explain the other half. This chapter will be based on the categories mentioned in chapter one and will try to

give a comprehensive explanation of the emergence of post-war violence in El Salvador, whereof the maras will be the main focus. Bear in mind as explained in the introduction, that these categories of political, economic and social causes are interlinked. It's therefore possible economic or political motives will somehow be discussed in the social paragraph and visa versa.

## **4.1 Political**

### *4.1.1 Post-war security vacuum*

Where the state is unable to offer security to its subjects, society tends to become submerged in violence (Restrepo, 2004). This was, to a certain extent, the situation in El Salvador. The country suffered for more than 12 years from the cruelties of the civil war. After the signing of the peace accords an agreement was made to reform the military as well as the police. The restructuring included a 70% reduction of the Armed Forces and a creation of a mixed police of former policemen and of former guerrilla members. In the meanwhile the security offered to the citizens was minimal. The argument that this post-war security vacuum is one of the main causes of the new violence is wide spread. Hume (2004:10) says that the failure of the government to address the need of security has led to an eruption of violence. Together with other factors as a weak police credibility, failure to disarm and a weak notion of citizenship this vacuum brought the country from one war in another, different in many ways, but as much as or even more severe than the civil war. Hereunder the different aspects of the post-war security vacuum will be elaborated.

### *4.1.2 A new security force*

One of the recommendations of the Peace Accords was the creation of a new National Civilian Police Force (PNC) to replace the old National Police, National Guard and Treasury Police. It was made up along the following lines: 20 per cent of posts reserved for ex- FMLN combatants, 20 per cent for members of the old security forces and 60 per cent civilians. The numbers of security agents were reduced drastically from 75,000 (including the army, the guerrillas, civil defence and the old police forces) to 6000. Initially this severely reduced new force enjoyed the support of the population, but has been detrimentally affected by a series of high profile cases, implicating agents in criminal activities in addition to a weak capacity for dealing with the high levels of crime and violence (Hume, 2004). Figures indicate that in 1996 and 1997 respectively, only 6.11 per cent and 8.17 per cent of murder cases were brought to trial (ibid.:15). This loss of public confidence is also reflected in the growing privatisation of the security apparatus: there are currently an estimated 70,000 private security agents in operation whereas the PNC has an active force of approximately 20,000 officers. Links have been identified between private security agents and petty criminals who are combining to take advantage of weak arms control to distribute SALW illegally (ibid.).

It can be said that the PNC is improving in addressing violence. In the years after the war they were thrown in the deep, but slowly they start climbing out. *Figure 1* in chapter 3 shows the homicide peak in the early 90s and the challenge

the new police force was facing. It shows the proliferation of violence, but also the significant steep decline after 1994. This decline can be ascribed to the consolidation of the new police force, though the challenge that still lies ahead of them is huge and asks much more than just experience. It asks a continuous commitment and an effective policy to address the new forms of persistent violence. The addressing of gang violence may be the most difficult challenge and the continuous harsh way of dealing with them shows governments despair. As many other organisation I doubt the success of this harsh policy, though at the same time understand the need of action. Violence doesn't stop through the barrel of a gun, neither does it by the strike of an iron fist.

#### *4.1.3 Failure to disarm*

The civil war brought a lot of guns and ammunition in the country. Hume (2004) says that 'one of the most notable legacies of the civil war has been the extreme militarization of society'. Personally I would like to add 'US sponsored', what makes it 'US sponsored militarization of society'. It was them after all who subsidised the armed forces which large sums of money. And it were these guns that were used for armed violence after the peace accords as well. Ex-soldiers, ex-guerrilla all had their own guns and since the supply was that big, it wasn't too difficult for others to buy one as well. It's like a vicious circle; the high amount of guns led to insecurity, which led to the demand of new guns in an attempt to address that insecurity.

At a conservative estimate, there are some 400,000 - 450,000 arms in the hands of civilians. Around 35.7 per cent (14,000) of these are legally held. This translates into 2 firearms for every ten adults (Ramos, 1998).

#### *4.1.4 Weak notion of citizenship*

State sponsored violence and brutality, which had been central to everyday life since 1932 and particularly acute in the late 1970s and throughout the war, has dramatically diminished citizens' notion of citizenship. In 1932 30,000 peasants were killed by government forces following a tentative uprising in what is known as *La Matanza* (the massacre). This event paved the way for a series of military dictatorships which lasted until the outbreak of war in 1980. The military acted as agents of repression for the economic elite and, in return, the military controlled the machinery of the state (Mason, 1999). Followed by repression and the election frauds of 1972 and 1977 the country disintegrated. Even after the peace accords continued impunity and violence have contributed to the erosion of democratic expectations, undermining confidence in a democratic political system. The continued pervasiveness of violence in the region, therefore, has been linked with weak notions of citizenship. Such notions cast doubt on the viability of the democratic project; to such a degree that Rotker claims that current levels of violence attest to an "undeclared civil war". He poses that current levels of violence are rooted in protest, albeit random and unorganised, against pervasive structural inequalities (Rotker according to Mason, 1999). According to Rotker and Mason this undeclared civil war clearly engages elements of fear and rage, but is no longer a question of planting bombs or hiding in the mountains to take up arms against a dictator or corrupt government. It deals instead with a

violence that resists a whole system, creating it in a more profound way, at the heart of its social relations (Mason, 1999).

## 4.2 Economic

### 4.2.1 Poverty & inequality

It is for a fact that there is a relation between poverty and violence. Violence is though not experienced by all members of society in the same way and it is often the poor who are more vulnerable to extreme violence. It is important to emphasise that poverty does not cause violence and not all poor people are violent (Hume, 2004). Moser (2004) argues that inequality is more influential than poverty in relation to violence. Although poverty and inequality may be related, I agree with Moser and will therefore focus on the issue of inequality as an underlying cause of contemporary violence.

Already for long time there existed a significant inequality. This inequality was sustained by a militarized and authoritarian political system that mainly served the interests of a small oligarchy linked to the agro-export sector. Attempts at economic modernization led to economic growth through industrialization and some diversification of agricultural exports in 1960s and 1970s, but did not lead to further redistribution of income and land. Large sectors of the population, particularly the rural poor, were further excluded economically (Savenije, 2004: 158). The rise of revolutionary movements in E Salvador is generally seen as a reaction to the 'institutionalized violence' that served the economic elites and which sustained the socio-economic inequalities.

Over a decade since the formal cessation of its political conflict, El Salvador remains one of the most unequal societies in the world, ranking 0.54 on the GINI index<sup>1</sup>, and over 40 per cent of its population live in poverty. (Human Development Report, 2001). Politically, society remains extremely polarised with both the left and right being regarded as the most extreme in the region. Though UN sources estimate that the proportion of the Salvadoran population living in poverty fell from 65.7 per cent in 1991 to 47.5 per cent in 1999, there still exists a huge gap between rural and urban living standards. In 1999 the average rural income represented only 40 per cent of the average urban income. Furthermore, figures from 1998 indicate that the poorest 10 per cent of the population have only a 1.2 per cent share of the country's income or consumption. This contrasts with the top 10 per cent who have 39.4 per cent (Human Development Report, 2001). As such, El Salvador remains one of the most unequal countries in Latin America. It is this context, characterised by inequality and a failure to change the pre-conflict economic class structure, which is one of the major underlying causes of violence in El Salvador.

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<sup>1</sup> The GINI index is used to measure inequality based on per capita income. The global average is 0.4 and the average for Latin American is 0.47 ([www.undp.org](http://www.undp.org)).

#### *4.2.2 Unemployment*

The end of the war left a huge inactive workforce. This was, at least in part, a result of the demobilisation of military groups, who received very little support for reinsertion into civil life, but it was exacerbated by the scarcity of sources of employment. Added to the massive circulation of arms and a historic lack of respect for the rule of law, this combination generates new spaces of armed violence. Also for youngsters work is difficult to find, especially for them in marginalized areas where the educational level is low and prejudices are high. Being an (ex-) member of a youth gang and having a visible tattoo even diminishes your chances to zero, since their tattoos scare people off. Shop owners and companies are not looking forward to have an (ex-) gang member as an employee often because they are seen as synonymous to theft and violence. With no work and often no money the chances to get involved in crime is high and from there on the step to a gang is small.

### **4.3 Social**

#### *4.3.1 Social exclusion*

Social exclusion is defined as the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society in which they live. Again this issue is interlinked with some others and draws back on an unequal class structure in which the marginalized are excluded from full participation. Violence and social exclusion have been central elements in Salvadorean history (Savenije, 2004). The peace agreement simply just did not address the social structure and this unequal structure is today still visible. People from marginalized areas are seen as less and are often treated as scum. This feeling of being left out creates an inner hatred against the existing structure and makes the choice for rebellion and violence easier.

#### *4.3.2 Normality of violence*

In situations as El Salvador especially the marginalized children are often raised in neighbourhoods with an atmosphere of violence. Being raised in such an environment makes you look different at violence. For many violence has become a 'normal' phenomenon. People get used to live in an environment of violence. 'There is a treat of violence, not only in the narrow streets of the neighbourhood, but also between the walls of the little houses or shacks' (Savenije, 2004: 163). Young children who are raised in a family with domestic violence and play in neighbourhoods with violence, just get used to the violence all around them. Violence is accepted and moral norms of right and wrong are diminishing. If everything is violent around you, why wouldn't you become violent as well? A decision to become part of a violent club of friends (referred to as gang) is therefore not always perceived as something wrong. The outsiders' perception on these gangs is therefore not necessarily shared from within.

#### *4.3.3 Search for identity*

Especially for youth from marginalized areas, this context of limited possibilities is of major influence in understanding the enormous growth of the maras. Youth who

are maltreated at home, who have no or low education with limited or no job opportunities and totally no opportunities to reach any form of status in the legal sense, wouldn't they just choose for this lifestyle as a form of escapism? Flee from their poverty; flee from their downwards vicious circle. In the gangs they at least they 'mean' something, they create an identity, can reach a certain amount of status and respect, have friends, and they are 'entertained'. The creation of this identity is connected with the symbolic acts of violence. These symbolic aspects of gang violence become clear once again when one considers that such violence not only 'punishes' but also serves as a reminder to others of what may happen to them if they do not respect the order imposed by the gang. The earning of points for them and their gang is like a realistic computer game of win and survive.

#### 4.3.4 *Escapism*

Related to poverty and inequality is the incapability to cope with poverty which lead to frustrations. 'Living continuously in situations of poverty, in shacks without basic services such as drinking water and sewage systems, in overcrowded areas, generates frustrations' (Savenije, 2004: 162). Besides the frustrations of everyday life as for instance lack of money, lack of quality food, lack of living space and lack of privacy there is the long-term frustration of not being able to overcome these problems. Berkowitz (1993) states that frustrations are related to the 'occurrence of impulsive and expressive violence, through the feelings of discontent that it generates'. By experiencing these everyday frustrations, violence can occur as a reaction of the incapability to cope with these frustrations. 'The residents recognize this phenomenon and call it *'el desquite'* (literally 'taking it off')' (Savenije, 2004: 163). It can result in domestic violence or in a form of escapism in theft, drugs and gangs. If you are raised in a marginalized family, perhaps in a single parent family, which has a hard time in securing its livelihood, poverty and inequality is all around you and life is just 'sucks', wouldn't you consider as well of using alcohol and drugs? Just in an attempt to forget your precarious position. Or wouldn't you consider joining a gang, which can provide you of 'meaning', an identity and friends? These are questions that are hard to answer, but they do make sense to me understanding the decision process of joining a youth gang.

## 5. Conclusion

In this thesis I tried to give a comprehensive view behind the contemporary forms of violence in El Salvador. I tried by analysing the history and social and economic aspects to explain the eruption of post-war violence and especially the emergence of youth gangs, *maras*. El Salvador is a post-war country and it is important not to underestimate the extreme consequences that over a decade of armed political conflict have had on the development of society. Violence in the post-war era cannot be analysed in isolation from its historical dimensions. This history of violence created an unstable society with high social and economic inequality, erosion of social networks, a massive circulation of arms, a weak notion of citizenship and a lack of social and economic alternatives for young people to contribute to a better future. In this situation the rise of gang violence isn't surprising. Gangs offer youngsters an identity and a status, that otherwise would be unobtainable for them. Especially youth of marginalized areas is vulnerable for becoming a member since their situation is often futureless and their alternatives are not existing or small. It must be clear that the mara problem is not just the cause of violence, but a result of violence as well. Maras are often seen as the perpetrators of violence, though they can and should be seen as the victims of violence. They are the victims of the marginalized and neglected society and the government failure to address the inequality and provide sustainable alternatives. Is it to blame them for joining an organisation where they can 'escape' from their precarious situation? Government policies therefore should be aimed at addressing the underlying causes of inequality, maleducation and proving 'identity' for the marginalized, rather than 'hunting them down' as the case seems now after the implementation of the *Super Mano Dura* (Super Iron Fist) policy. It's for sure that resolving the problem of violence will remain one of the toughest jobs for El Salvador's future.

## Executive summary

El Salvador has known a history of violence, with state repression, guerrilla movements and a civil war. This civil war (1980-1992) resulted in the death of 80,000 citizens and left at least a million displaced. In 1992 there was a peace agreement that put an end to the twelve-year war and systematic human rights abuses. Although this official peace, the accords have been accused of failing in their mission to bring an end to violence and to build a new and more equal society. Within Latin America, El Salvador stands out as one of the most unequal societies with high levels of violence. Contemporary criminal violence and highly visible gang activity have contributed to a situation where fear and insecurity still characterise everyday life for many citizens. This has exhibited itself through a sharp rise in street crime, a growing gang culture and high levels of domestic violence. These 'new forms of violence' are often seen separately from El Salvador's historical and social context, but they shouldn't. These forms of post-war violence are rooted in a history of violence and inequality. Terror and violence have both characterised relations between the state and society and shaped the formation and reproduction of society itself. Added to the massive circulation of arms, a historic lack of respect for the rule of law and a post-war security vacuum, this combination of factors has allowed other long-standing social conflicts/problems to be brought to the fore and generate new spaces for armed violence. Fear and mistrust work together to undermine social capital in many ways and create a vicious circle for the reproduction of violence. This thesis argues that continuing deep levels of social and economic exclusion, political authoritarianism and acute inequalities continue to shape Salvadoran society and keep violence in the communities.

Youth brought up in this environment of violence often seeks an escape in youth gangs '*maras*' which form again a serious threat for society. These gangs terrorize their neighbourhoods and continue on the path of organized crime. The government implemented a policy of zero tolerance and deals with it the hard way. According to human rights organisations and academics, this is not sustainable. They are not putting the effort in the causes, but in the consequences. Leading violence back to the roots and address those is favoured above addressing violence as a consequence. These often marginalized youth finds something in these gangs what they can't find in real life. There situation is often so futureless that prospects of a good and healthy future just don't exist. Joining these *maras* is a form of escapism, in search of an identity and status. This thesis will elaborate on the backgrounds of the emergence of these youth gangs and point out this is not an isolated phenomenon that can be tackled in an isolated way; it asks a broader approach.

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