Targeted Violence Against Social Activists
Characteristics, Causes, and Transformations

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Abstract:
The last ten years have seen an emerging debate about targeted violence against social activists, with a focus on the killings of human rights defenders, environmental activists, and representatives of civil society organizations broadly speaking. Whereas violence against civilians in (civil) war contexts is an established field of study, research on this type of violence – which is being observed mainly outside of conventional armed conflict settings in countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Honduras or the Philippines – is much less developed and rather fragmented. In this TraCe Working Paper, we bring together existing data and research to identify what we know – and do not know – about the targeted, lethal violence against civil society activists, including its characteristics and causes. In doing so, we also discuss the question of whether and to what extent this phenomenon can be considered as reflecting a transformation of the (violent) repression of civil society actors. Throughout the paper, we draw on cross-national and comparative research on the one hand, and existing studies on the specific case of Colombia on the other, since this is the case for which the best data and most systematic and in-depth research exists. In this paper, though, we are not interested in analyzing the recent wave of assassinations of social activists in Colombia per se, but in discussing insights from Colombia as relevant contributions to the broader, comparative debate.
Table of Content:

1. Introduction 4

2. Major Trends in Research on the Killing of Social Activists 5
   2.1 The Ongoing Emergence of a Research Field 5
   2.2 Data Generation and Collection 6
   2.3 Characteristics 8
   2.4 Causes 9

3. The Question of Transformation and Future Research Challenges 12

References 14
1. Introduction

Since 2012, international NGOs have started to raise awareness of a worrisome phenomenon: the killing of activists who fight for human rights, land and the environment (Global Witness 2012; Front Line Defenders 2013). According to Global Witness, in the decade between 2012 and 2021, 1,733 land and environmental defenders were assassinated worldwide (2022: 16). Looking more broadly at human rights defenders, Front Line Defenders reports the killing of 403 activists in 2022 alone (2023: 9).

In response to such alarming news, in recent years, scholars have also taken up the issue, beginning to investigate the spatial patterns, the temporal dynamics, the causes as well as the consequences of this specific form of targeted, lethal violence directed against social activists.³ Research on the killing of human rights defenders, environmental activists, and representatives of civil society organizations broadly speaking is, however, still at an initial stage and rather fragmented. This TraCe Working Paper brings together existing data and research on the phenomenon in order to identify what we know – and do not know – about the targeted, lethal violence against social activists, its variation across space and its evolution over time.

In the following, we start by summarizing the emergence of the research field (2.1) and taking stock of existing data (2.2). Further sections discuss what existing scholarship tells us about the characteristics (2.3) and the causes (2.4) of the phenomenon. In the conclusion, we discuss the question of whether the current patterns and trends in the killing of social activists signal an ongoing transformation in the forms of violence against civil society actors and identify challenges for future research (3.). Throughout the paper, we draw on cross-national and comparative research on the one hand, and existing studies on the case of Colombia on the other. We do so because Colombia is the case for which best data and most systematic and in-depth research is available. In this paper, though, we are not interested in analyzing the recent wave of assassinations of social activists in Colombia per se, but in discussing insights from Colombia as relevant contributions to the broader, comparative debate.

Before we begin, we want to briefly clarify our concept of ‘social activists’ as well as the type of violence we are talking about. As will be seen below, existing reports and studies use different concepts. In the global debate, the most often used term is ‘human rights defenders’ (HRDs) or a specific subtype of HRDs that advocate for human rights related to land and the environment (‘land and environmental defenders’). Notably, this category of (human, or environmental and land) rights defenders goes beyond civil society actors, and includes lawyers, judges and also public officials and politicians that seek to protect human, environmental and/or land rights activists or support their claims.³ Conceptually, this implies an important difference: Our concept of social activists is both more specific – it only includes individuals who are involved in civil society organizations and social movements – and broader – it does not restrict the type of involvement to human rights advocacy. Empirically, though, there is a huge overlap between the two categories, given that most HRDs (killed) are social activists and (almost) all activism is somehow related to human rights. While the HRD category is politically important, given its recognition in the UN context (see 2.), we think ‘social activists’ is the more precise concept for academic purposes. In the Colombian context, the term ‘social leaders’ (líderes sociales) is often used, which is close to our focus on ‘social activists,’ given that the ‘leading’ role is understood quite broadly. Finally, there is a somewhat separate debate on the killing of journalists (see, e.g., Asal 2018; Bartman 2018).

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³ A previous version of this paper was presented at a TraCe workshop at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) in February 2024. The authors thank the participants and, in particular, Laura Guntrum and Annika Elena Poppe for helpful comments, questions, and suggestions as well as Santiago Moncada for research assistance.
³² See Albarracín et al. (2023a, b); Butt et al. (2019); Krain et al. (2023); Le Billon and Lujala (2020); Menton and Le Billon (2021); Middeldorp and Le Billon (2019), Scheidel et al. (2020)
³ At the same time, the concept of social activists still requires further conceptual development and can present some challenges when applied empirically. In Colombia, for example, the term líderes sociales is used differently by the government, international organizations, NGOs, and local communities. This has led to considerable disagreements about claims of protection and the classification of cases of violence, among other issues. Like with any social scientific concept, defining who social activists are can have implications beyond social scientific work – for example, on the distribution of resources and the focus of protection – and therefore will likely be contested.
2. Major Trends in Research on the Killing of Social Activists

2.1 The Ongoing Emergence of a Research Field

The first trend to highlight is the very emergence of a research field that is still in the process of taking shape. Of course, violence against civilians in civil war and post-conflict settings (Boyle 2014; Kalyvas 2006, among others) as well as the violent repression of protest in peace times (Carey 2010; Davenport 2007b, among others) are far from new research topics. Yet, it is only recently that scholars have started to explicitly tackle the issue of selective, lethal violence targeted against individual representatives or leaders of social organizations and movements. In terms of academic contributions, we identify two sets of studies in this regard. First, there is a small, but growing set of studies, including cross-national comparative ones, that focus on the killing of human rights defenders. This set, in particular, includes research from the perspective of political geography and political ecology that focuses on ‘land and environmental defenders.’ Second, the recent wave of assassinations of ‘social leaders’ in Colombia has attracted increasing academic attention. This set of studies stems mostly from political science and focuses, in particular, on subnational variation.

Academic research on the lethal violence against human rights defenders, in general, and against land and environmental defenders, in particular, has directly emerged from the data collection and advocacy work of international NGOs such as Front Line Defenders and Global Witness, as well as from the debates within the United Nations (UN). In 2012, Global Witness published its first report – *A hidden crisis* – with data on the number of “people killed […] defending their human rights or the human rights of others related to the environment, specifically land and forests” (Global Witness 2012: 2), and since 2014 the organization has published annual reports on lethal violence against what it calls “land and environmental defenders.” Starting in 2013, Front Line Defenders has been publishing reports with annual data on the killings of HRDs around the world. In contrast to Global Witness, Front Line Defenders looks at HRDs more broadly, without a focus on environmental and land issues.

Normatively, a key reference point of these NGO activities is the 1998 UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, which led to the appointment of a UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Human Rights Defenders in 2000, which the then newly established Human Rights Council converted into a Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders in 2008 (Spannagel 2023: 79). Since 2015, the UN – or, more precisely, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) – has also collected data and issued reports “on cases of killings of human rights defenders, journalists and trade unionists” (Lawlor 2020: 8).

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* In contrast, in his classic study *From Mobilization to Revolution*, Tilly defined repression more broadly as “any action by another group which raises the contender’s cost of collective action” (Tilly 1978: 100).

* The assassination of representatives of non-state groups has mostly been studied with a focus on the “decapitation” of terrorist organizations, criminal groups or insurgencies. In contrast, Clifford Bob and Sharon Erickson Nepstad (2007) analyze the targeted killing of social movement leaders, but they focus on assassinations that are at least “state-sponsored” and, thus, conceptualize it as an “extreme” form of state repression (Bob and Nepstad 2007: 1374).

* For a brief overview of the literature on the targeting of civilians in civil wars, see Prem et al. (2023: 321-322). On the case of Colombia, see, amongst many others, Carroll (2011), Idler (2019), Moreno Leon (2017), and Steele (2017).


* The reports can be found here: [https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/global-analysis](https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/global-analysis). Since the 2019 report (published in January 2020), the data on HRD killings is provided by HRD Memorial, an initiative by a network of national and international human rights organizations, including Front Line Defenders (Front Line Defenders 2020: 4-5). See also the website: [https://hrdmemorial.org](https://hrdmemorial.org).

* The data is available from the UN’s SDG Indicators Database (Indicator 16.10.1) at [https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/databank/database](https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/databank/database).
The global dataset compiled by Global Witness and, hence, the specific phenomenon of lethal violence against land and environmental defenders has attracted most academic attention. In their 2020 article "Environmental and land defenders: Global patterns and determinants of repression," Philippe Le Billon and Päivi Lujala point to a "growing body of scholarly literature" that has started to study "the persecution of environmental defenders to better understand risk factors" (Le Billon and Lujala 2020: 2).

As we will discuss below, the main concern of these studies is with the characteristics (spatial patterns, contexts and victims) and the causes of the killing of land and environmental defenders.11 Most recently, and going beyond the specific issue of land and environmental defenders, Matthew Krain, Amanda Murdie and Abigail Beard have updated data from Landman (2006) and combined it with the Front Line Defenders data to assess the determinants of the killings of HRD (Krain et al. 2023).

The second strand of research, which focuses on the case of Colombia, has similarly emerged from the activities of civil society organizations concerned with the violence against human rights defenders and what in the Colombian context became to be dubbed ‘social leaders’ (líderes y lideresas sociales). In 2009, Somos Defensores, a platform of Colombian human rights NGOs, published data on attacks against human rights defenders between 2002 and 2008, which included numbers of killings (Somos Defensores 2009). Since 2010, the organization has released annual reports, which present data on the assassination of HRDs in Colombia.12 In its 2016 annual report, and even more strongly in the annual report for 2017, Somos Defensores raised attention to the significant increase in the assassination of HRDs, which accompanied the final phase, signing, and then implementation of the peace agreement with the FARC-EP (Somos Defensores 2017, 2018). In this context, other Colombian organizations – most importantly, INDEPAZ (2017) – as well as the Ombudsperson’s Office (Defensoría del Pueblo) also started to collect, analyze and publish annual data on the assassination of ‘social leaders’ and/or HRD (see INDEPAZ 2017, 2023; Defensoría del Pueblo 2020). In its annual report to the Human Rights Council for 2017, the OHCHR in Colombia, based on its own data, also showed itself “extremely concerned at the increase in killings of defenders, including social and community leaders” in the country (OHCHR 2018: 3).

In response to these reports and based on the different datasets provided by state, non-state and international organizations, scholars from political science and peace and conflict studies have started to systematically study the targeted violence against social activists. The focus, here, has been on the recent wave of assassinations in the context of the peace process with the FARC-EP. The main aim of this literature is to understand the overall increase in this specific type of violence, specify how it is related (or not) to the peace process, and explain the spatial distribution of the killings.13 We will come back to this below (2.3, 2.4).

### 2.2 Data Generation and Collection

In this section, we briefly present and critically discuss existing quantitative data. Table 1 summarizes global data on the killing of land and environmental/human rights defenders.14 Obviously, the three datasets report diverging numbers, which is unsurprising given that they cover only partially overlapping phenomena. A comparison of the Global Witness data on the killings of land and environmental defenders with the numbers of assassinations of HRD as reported by Front Lines Defenders suggests that a significant share (between 44% and 70%) of the violence targets social activists whose focus is on land and environmental issues. In terms of trends over time, the Global Witness data suggests an increase between the 2012-2014 period (around 100 assassinations annually) and the years since 2015 (around 200 assassinations), but with important fluctuations. When also including the numbers reported for the years between 2002 and 2012, Global Witness data “points to a sharp rise in annual killings between 2009 and 2015” (Le Billon and Lujala 2020: 6). As Le Billon and Lujala note, this increase coincides “with the primary commodity boom”, but possibly also reflects “increased reporting” (ibid.).15

Table 2 summarizes the different numbers reported on the assassinations of HRD and/or ‘social leaders’ in Colombia, including both Colombia-specific and global datasets.

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11 Key publications include Butt et al. (2019); Le Billon and Lujala (2020); Menton and Le Billon (2021); Middeldorp and Le Billon (2019); Scheidel et al. (2020).
12 Available at https://somosdefensores.org/informes-anuales/.
13 Key publications include Albarracin et al. (2023a, b); Avila (2020); Gutiérrez Sanín et al. (2020); Prem et al. (2022); Wescot (2021).
14 Another dataset that explicitly focuses on targeted killings is the Global Assassination Monitor. This dataset, however, specifically looks at contract killings and currently covers the years 2019 and 2020 only (Kaysser and Oliveira 2021).
15 The numbers reported by Krain et al., who combine data on the subcategory “summary execution/murder” as included in Todd Landman’s dataset on violation acts against HRD between 1997 and 2003 (Landman 2006), with an update of this data for 2004-2010 period as well as data taken from the Front Line Defenders reports for 2014-2020, suggest a dramatic increase since the mid-1990s: first gradually until 2015, then dramatically between 2015 and 2017 (Krain et al. 2023: 7). Still, this trend – at least in its so pronounced shape (from 0 killings in 1997 to over 300 in 2017) – is almost certainly an artefact of improvements in data collection. On the one hand, the (original and updated) Landman dataset seems hardly comparable to the Front Line Defenders reports for 2014-2015 and the over 300 killings reported for later years most likely reflects – at least, to an important extent – improved reporting and coverage. As seen in Table 1, increases between 2015 and 2017 as reported by both Global Witness and the OHCHR are much more modest.
Again, the numbers diverge and, in part, significantly. This again is partially due to different definitions and operationalizations of the category of victims, but also to different approaches to the question of whether individual killings are clearly due to the activism of the respective victim.\(^18\) Still, overall, the data shows an important increase in the number of assassinations of social activists (‘social leaders’ and/or human rights defenders) in the context of the finalization, signing and implementation of the 2016 peace agreement. When it comes to older numbers, however, the data reported by Somos Defensores and INDEPAZ, respectively, shows an important difference: While according to Somos Defensores the recent wave of assassinations goes way beyond everything that was observed since 2010, data reported by INDEPAZ suggests a significant reduction in the targeted violence against social activists since 2010 (and, more precisely, since 2003), a trend being reverted in the final phase of the peace negotiations with the FARC-EP, but without reaching the levels recorded in times of open civil war.\(^19\) For both Somos Defensores and INDEPAZ, the quality of this more historical data is difficult to evaluate. Be this as it may, when looking at more recent years, the different sources all show a peak of the violence in 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic,\(^20\) and continuously high levels throughout the following years. Finally, the datasets of Global Witness and Front Line Defenders show that cases from Colombia represent an astonishingly high share of global killings (between 15


\(^{18}\) This divergence in the numbers presented by different datasets reflects similar trends observed in other records of violence, like homicide statistics (Ball and Reed Hurtado 2016). Statistical models can take advantage of the biases inherent to any effort of recording data on violence to estimate the universe of cases for any form of violence, as it was done, for example, for the case of social leaders in Colombia (Rozo Ángel and Ball 2019) or genocide in Guatemala (Ball and Price 2018). However, these estimation methods require multiple independent sources of records of violent events, which are not frequently available.

\(^{19}\) This historical timeline documented in INDEPAZ (2023: 6) suggests that the numbers of assassinations of social leaders have been much higher in the early 2000s (2002: 1,649; 2003: ~1,900; 2004: 1,151; 2005: 884; 2006: 627; 2007: 829; 2008: 649; 2009: 595).

\(^{20}\) As Somos Defensores notes, the pandemic and the restrictions imposed by the Colombian government in response left local communities and individual social activists “even more unprotected and exposed to violence”, while also increasing “impunity” (2021: 91).
and around 50% in recent years). This, on the one hand, suggests that Colombia is indeed a particularly dangerous place for social activists. On the other hand, however, it is probably also due to the much more advanced monitoring and reporting on this phenomenon.

### 2.3 Characteristics

When analyzing the killing of social activists, a first important qualification is that this form of individually targeted and lethal violence represents but one type of a much broader range of violent threats and attacks that social organizations and movements and their individual representatives face. Killings, in this sense, are usually regarded as the “tip of the iceberg”: “for every defender murdered, thousands more face direct violence, threats and psychological intimidation, and more invisible cultural and structural violence, or ‘slow violence’” (Butt et al. 2019: 3; see also Le Billon and Lujala 2020: 5-6; Navas et al. 2018: 655). Given that killings are the most visible and best documented form of violence, studies mostly focus on this specific topic, but the assumption is that the characteristics and causes identified will also be useful to better understand the broader phenomenon of repressive violence. Still, such generalizations should be taken with a grain of salt and killings of social activists considered a “partial indicator” of overall levels of repression only, “given that other forms of repression may be more intense in some countries than others” (Le Billon and Lujala 2020: 6).

In terms of countries, available data and existing studies show that lethal violence against social activists is a widespread phenomenon that is, however, concentrated in a limited number of countries. Front Line Defenders, for the 2019-2022 period, reports killings of HRD in 57 countries. According to the Global Witness data for the 2012-2021 period, reports killings of HRD in 57 countries, the Philippines, 270; Mexico, 154; and Honduras, 117. Further countries in the top-10 include for Front Line Defenders (2019-2022): Ukraine (50 killings, all in 2022), Brazil (48), Guatemala (45), Afghanistan (41), and DR Congo (21), for Global Witness (2012-2021): Guatemala (80), India (79), the Democratic Republic of Congo (70), Nicaragua (57), and Peru (51). According to the most recent reports, 22% (Front Line Defenders 2023: 14) or 36% (Global Witness 2023: 10) of the victims were indigenous activists.

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Relatedly, representatives of indigenous communities are disproportionately affected by this type of violence (Front Line Defenders 2023: 14; Global Witness 2023: 10; Scheidel et al. 2020: 10). More generally speaking, victims mainly include members of marginalized populations and/or discriminated social groups as well as individuals who defend the rights of such populations and groups (e.g. lawyers and journalists). According to the Global Assassination Monitor, members of local communities, including “religious community leaders, scholars, activists, as well as cultural workers”, are the main target group (Kaysser and Oliveira 2021: 37).

Much less is known about the perpetrators, reflecting the high degree of impunity that usually characterizes this type of lethal violence (Butt et al. 2019; Le Billon and Lujala 2020: 6; Kaysser and Oliveira 2021: 55; Knox 2017: 10; Middeldorp and Le Billon 2019: 327). As Middeldorp and Le Billon emphasize:

> “Whereas both states and corporations have directly instrumentalized their own security organizations to exert deadly repression, notably in the context of public protests, more insidious forms of repression – including targeted killing – are generally conducted through intermediaries including...”

21 For the broader category of HRDs, killings in Colombia as recorded by Front Line Defenders (2019-2022) by far exceed those of the other hotspots (607 vs. 129 in Mexico, 94 in the Philippines, 92 in Brazil, and 79 in Honduras). When looking more specifically at land and environmental defenders, absolute levels of violence in Brazil (342) and Colombia (322) are roughly equal (Global Witness, 2012-2021), followed by the Philippines (270), Mexico (154), and Honduras (117). Further countries in the top-10 include for Front Line Defenders (2019-2022): Ukraine (50 killings, all in 2022), India (48), Guatemala (45), Afghanistan (41), and DR Congo (21), for Global Witness (2012-2021): Guatemala (80), India (79), the Democratic Republic of Congo (70), Nicaragua (57), and Peru (51).

22 According to the most recent reports, 22% (Front Line Defenders 2023: 14) or 36% (Global Witness 2023: 10) of the victims were indigenous activists.
Based on Global Witness data, and focusing on only those killings of land and environmental defenders for which perpetrators are recorded, calculations by Le Billon and Lujala show that “a third were directly perpetrated by government authorities”, 15% by “hitmen”, 13% by criminal gangs/organized crime, and 9% by paramilitaries and landowners, respectively (2020: 7). Generally speaking, states, criminal groups, and private companies are the three categories of actors most frequently mentioned as driving, if not necessarily carrying out, the targeted assassination of social activists (Kaysser and Oliveira 2021: 40; Le Billon and Lujala 2020: 7; Middeldorp and Le Billon 2019: 328-329). With a view to the state, and focusing on contract killings, Kaysser and Oliveira identify four types of state involvement:

“On the first level, assassinations are carried out by criminal groups or other non-state actors, but they are tolerated by the state. On the second level, assassinations may be carried out by state officials in collusion with organized crime. [...] On the third level, assassinations may be conducted by representatives of the state without a specific direct order but in the context of a public policy of reprisals against a group of individuals. On the fourth level, a direct order for an assassination may be given by high-level state officials.” (Kaysser and Oliveira 2021: 22)

In general terms, existing data and studies suggest that lethal violence against social activists in the current context is a phenomenon that is mostly decentralized (observed at the subnational level) and informal (performed by non-state actors).

In order to illustrate these characteristics, we briefly summarize what is known about the assassination of ‘social leaders’ in contemporary Colombia. This, as emphasized, is the case for which most data exist – even if, as will be seen, there are also still many things we simply do not know. In Colombia, this type of violence tends to impact historically marginalized groups. Between 2016 and 2019, according to INDEPAZ, members of peasant organizations and indigenous communities represented 33.6% and 24.3% of the cases, respectively.23 Regionally, violence against social activists in Colombia is heavily concentrated in regions historically affected by armed conflict and, unsurprisingly, with a significant presence of non-state armed actors and illicit economies, such as the regions of Norte del Cauca, Tumaco (Nariño), Catatumbo (Norte de Santander), Bajo Cauca, and Urabá. This violence is also characterized by a high level of impunity and lack of information about the perpetrators: 78.1% of the cases had unknown perpetrators, while 17.4% of the cases were attributed to the violent action of non-state armed groups (insurgents, paramilitaries, and organized criminal groups), and 4.5% to state forces.24

2.4 Causes

As seen, available data should be treated with caution. Nevertheless, when combining the few existing comparative studies on global patterns and research on the specific case of Colombia, we can identify five sets of potential causes, or five preliminary explanations. These explanations highlight (1) the dynamics of armed conflict; (2) the logics of criminal, including post-conflict, violence; (3) the dissent-repression link; (4) socio-environmental conflict; and (5) the role of political institutions and elites. Importantly, these five sets of causes should not be regarded as competing explanations. Rather, the different causes identified can be expected to coalesce in varying configurations. Just as our study on the case of Colombia suggests that there are different configurations of local conditions that contribute to the assassination of social activists (Albarracín et al. 2023b), entire countries may also combine, in different ways, the following sets of causes.

First, the targeted killings of social activists can be seen and explained as a specific form of violence against civilians that occurs in contexts of armed conflict. Generally speaking, in the context of the current debate on civic space restrictions around the globe, scholars have emphasized that the dynamics of armed conflict pose both indirect and direct threats to civil society actors (Borgh and Terwindt 2012: 1076; Wolff 2023: 178-179). Indirectly, social activists obviously suffer from the lack of protection and the prevalence of violence that characterizes war zones; but armed groups may also deliberately target social activists as part of their strategies to secure collaboration and deter defection on the part of potential constituencies (Kalyvas 2006: 12-13). Based on ten years of data collection, Global Witness (2022b: 24-25) identifies violent conflict as one of the key context factors that enable and drive threats and attacks against land and environmental defenders. In a similar vein, Front Line Defenders

23 Further groups include civic associations (10.6%), local citizen committees (Juntas de Acción Comunal – JAC) (10.1%), groups engaged in coca-substitution efforts (9.1%), Afro-Colombian associations (7.6%) as well as trade unions (5.9%) (Albarracín et al. 2023b: 141-142).

24 Interestingly, Brazil – a country with no recent experience of armed conflict – exhibits similar patterns of victimization: Land rights activists and indigenous communities are a frequent – if not the most frequent – target of assassinations. Like in Colombia, the perpetrators of most of these cases remain unknown and impunity tends to be the norm (Albarracín et al. 2024).
(2023: 17) emphasize “violent conflict and crisis settings”, noting that HRDs, in such contexts, are engaged in “protecting vulnerable communities, ensuring humanitarian access, delivering humanitarian support, documenting human rights abuses and advocating for change” (see also Kaysser and Oliveira 2021: 57-58). Also, the statistical analysis by Krain et al. (2023) suggests that the presence of an armed conflict increases the likelihood that HRDs are killed.

Still, whereas violence against civilians is a common theme in all civil wars, research suggests that armed actors use selective violence against individual civilians only under specific circumstances, namely when they have the capacity and the need to deter defection, that is, collaboration with rivaling armed groups (Kalyvas 2006). For the case of Colombia, for instance, Annette Idler has argued that “community members are exposed to selective, rather than general, violence” in local contexts characterized by “unstable short-term arrangements” between rivaling non-state armed groups; violence, in such contexts, is particularly meant “to deter whistle-blowers” (Idler 2019: 57). Moreover, while not all protest behavior by civilians elicits violent repression by armed actors, violent responses to organized contentious behavior depends on the target of the protest, the pre-existing relationship between communities and the armed group, as well as the level of territorial control of the armed group (Moreno León 2017). In any case, this explanation of the assassination of social activists obviously applies to a specific subset of cases only, namely those countries with ongoing armed conflicts.

Second, the assassination of social activists has been analyzed and explained as the consequence of the strategies of criminal groups that exercise de facto control over populations and/or compete over the territorial control of areas and corridors that are of strategic relevance for illicit economies. In their analysis of contract killings, Kaysser and Oliveira find that “the presence of criminal markets and illicit flows contributes to higher levels of assassinations” (2021: 11). This criminal dimension is particularly prevalent in Latin American cases, with “organized crime motives” being the main driver of contract killings in Brazil, El Salvador, and Mexico (Kaysser and Oliveira 2021: 71; see also Le Billon and Lujala 2020: 4). A similar argument has been made with a view to the current wave of assassinations of social activists in Colombia, with the surge in assassinations of social activists reflecting the peculiar reconfiguration and criminalization of armed actors during (attempted) civil war-to-peace transitions. Studies on the wave of assassinations of ‘social leaders’ in the context of the peace process with the FARC-EP have found evidence that relate this form of violence, at least partially, to the violent competition between armed actors over the control of illicit economies and resources in areas that had previously been controlled by the FARC-EP (Albaracin et al. 2023a, b; Prem et al. 2023). In line with these different Latin American experiences, Le Billon and Lujala note: Existing case studies indicate that “a recent history of armed conflicts and/or high homicides rates” increases the likelihood of killings of environmental and land defenders (2020: 7).

Third, the targeted killing of social activists can be seen, in more general and more explicitly political terms, as a specific manifestation of the dissent-repression link, as established in research on repression. In line with what Christian Davenport has called the “Law of Coercive Responsiveness,” the assassination of social activists can be understood as a response by a given authority that feels threatened by a given social organization or movement and responds with targeted violence to deter or demobilize the challenger (2007b: 7). Still, the general scholarship on state repression suggests that the targeted assassination of social activists is a rather unusual form, or at least a rarely studied one. Although repression of civil society activists can be the result of deliberate, direct action by states against civil society groups, for example to preempt monitoring that can lead to costly international sanctions (Bakke et al. 2020), it can also be decentralized and systemic. This logic is supported by the observation that part of the killings (here: of land and environmental defenders) results “from shootings or beatings by government armed forces, police, corporate security personnel or mobs and thugs during public events such as mass protests, occupation, and blockades” (Le Billon and Lujala 2020: 6; see also Middeldorp and Le Billon 2019: 328-329). The assassination of social activists, in this reading, is part of the phenomena or trends discussed as the “criminalization of protest” (Doran 2017) and the deliberate “shrinking” of civic spaces (Wolff 2023). In line with this argument, Krain et al. have found that HRD killings are more likely in countries with higher overall levels of repression, as well as with higher numbers of protest (2023: 9-10). Again, also with a view to the current wave of assassinations of social activists in Colombia, studies have

25 More specifically, the authors note that assassinations in El Salvador and Mexico are “closely linked to the drugs trade and extortion”, in Brazil with drug trafficking as well, but also with the “illicit trade in natural resources” (Kaysser and Oliveira 2021: 11).

26 In most studies that deal with (violent) repression of domestic dissent, the killing of individual activists or movement leaders is not analyzed as a separate phenomenon (see, for instance, Carey 2010; Davenport 2000, 2007a, b). When Christian Davenport, for instance, summarizes the forms of violent repression – “political imprisonment, physical torture, disappearance, and mass killing” (2007a: 79) –, he does not include the targeted or selective killing of individual activists or movement leaders. For an exception that proves the rule, see Bob and Nepstad (2007).

27 Statistically, Le Billon and Lujala also find “that countries with more mass movements (protests) are more likely to experience a higher number of environmental and land defender killings” (2020: 10). This, again, also points to the relevance of the dissent-repression link discussed above.
linked at least part of the killings to repressive responses by local elites to social movements and local communities that challenge their authority (Albarracín et al. 2023a, b; Ávila 2020; Gutiérrez Sanín et al. 2020). For instance, rural municipalities that exhibit a higher share of vote for leftist parties before the peace agreement – which, in Colombia, indicates the existence of powerful social movements that challenge local elites – tend to have a higher risk and frequency of assassinations of social leaders (Albarracín 2023a: 240).

Fourth, targeted killings are analyzed and explained as a form of violence that occurs in contexts of socio-environmental conflict and conflicts over natural resources in particular (Butt et al. 2019; Kaysser and Oliveira 2021: 39; Le Billon and Lujala 2020; Middeldorp and Le Billon 2019). In line with the disproportionate affectedness of ‘land and environmental defenders’ (see 2.3), a significant share of the violence seems to be related to socio-environmental conflicts. Based on a review of the relevant case study literature, Le Billon and Lujala conclude that “a high prevalence of conflicts around resource exploitation projects, as seen in Latin America” seems to constitute an important factor that makes killings of land and environmental defenders more likely (2020: 7).28 Butt et al. (2019) find mining and agribusiness to be the sectors empirically most associated with the killing of environmental defenders, but show that the national resource sectors (agriculture, mining and extraction, logging, poaching, water and dams) that appear as the most important drivers of violence vary between countries. For the Brazilian Amazon region, for instance, studies suggest that it is “the expansion of agrobusiness” and “the implementation of large public and private projects” in the name of “development” that are met with resistance on the part of indigenous peoples “who live on and in the land, forests, and waters” and, as a consequence, face violence, including assassinations (Santos 2021: 13; see also Machado et al. 2021).29 A statistical analysis reveals that higher levels of foreign direct investment, mineral rents and forest rents are empirically associated with higher number of killings (Le Billon and Lujala 2020: 10).30 All this also points to the role of (foreign) private companies in the violence against social activists.

Fifth, comparative studies that try to explain variation in the killings of social activists either between countries or, for the case of Colombia, between municipalities, point to a potentially important politico-institutional dimension. Targeted killings seem to be concentrated in political regimes that are hybrid, semi-democratic or competitive authoritarian. For the national level, a statistical analysis by Le Billon and Lujala confirms “the hypothesized curvilinear relationship” between regime type and violence:31 “strong autocratic and democratic countries tend to have fewer killings, and the number of killings is highest when the regime type takes the value 15 (score 5 on the polity2 scale) which commonly is thought to be the threshold for a democratic country” (2020: 10). In contrast, Krain et al. (2023) find a linear relationship between regime type and HRD killings, with more democracy being associated with higher levels of violence. But this finding may be due to the fact that they control for the effects of the quality of governance and the level of repression. In the end, their findings also suggest that the probability of HRD killings is “at its peak in democracies with low state capacity” (Krain et al. 2023: 13). In line with this study, Butt et al. (2019) also identify a weak rule of law as an important context condition.32

It is possible that data availability shapes some of these cross-national findings, since (partially) democratic regimes are more likely than authoritarian ones to allow for the systematic collection of data on violence against civic activists. However, in our analysis of subnational variation in (democratic) Colombia – in which the ability to systematically collect this data is less of a concern – we have found a similar curvilinear relationship to operate at the local level: Assassinations of ‘social leaders’ appear to be more likely and more frequent in municipalities that are characterized by “restricted, but still existing electoral competition” (Albarracín et al. 2023a: 240). Similarly, parts of the Brazilian Amazon region, probably, can also be considered as subnational spaces characterized, de facto, by a sort of competitive authoritarian rule in which the state and local state institutions facilitate, and sometimes actively partake in, violence against social activists (see, e.g., Santos 2021; Albarracín et al. 2024). Generally speaking, the politico-institutional context seems to contribute to targeted killings through two different types of

28 “Killings generally occur as part of escalating processes of disputed resource exploitation, social mobilization, and repression [...] with direct physical forms of violence being widely documented as part of land control strategies [...]” (Le Billon and Lujala 2020: 6)
29 Another much-discussed country in this context is Honduras and, in particular, the case of the assassination of indigenous leader Berta Cáceres (see, for instance, Kaysser and Oliveira 2021: 40; Middeldorp and Le Billon 2019; Middeldorp et al. 2016). Also for the case of the Philippines, studies identify targeted violence as a response to rural communities’ resistance to the expansion of agrobusiness and extractive industries (Dressler 2021; Dressler and Smith 2022).
30 Another study finds “mining and land conflicts” to be “significantly deadlier than other categories and the global average” (Scheidel et al. 2020: 5).
31 A similar curvilinear relationship between regime type and violence has also been found to exist in other fields. Most notably, if still controversially, studies on civil war onset suggest that political regimes that are neither fully autocratic nor fully democratic tend to be most prone to armed intrastate conflict (for an overview of the scholarship and a recent re-assessment, see Fjelde et al. 2021).
32 Global Witness also notes that countries with high corruption “witness more killings” (2022b: 25). In addition, corruption and impunity also benefits companies, which are directly or indirectly implicated in the violence against social activists (Global Witness 2022b: 26; see also Kaysser and Oliveira 2021: 40).
causal mechanisms. On the one hand, it is enabling the assassination of social activists. In the same vein, scholars have emphasized the role of (weak) state capacity as facilitating this form of violence (Prem et al. 2023). On the other hand, however, the curvilinear relationship between (national and/or subnational) regime type and assassinations has also been seen as pointing to the role of political elites that, frequently in alliance with armed and/or criminal groups, use violence in order to counteract what they see as a challenge to their (local) authority (Albarracín et al. 2023a). The argument, here, is that it is particularly under such politico-institutional context conditions that the repressive response to societal mobilization, as generally stipulated in the dissent-repression link, takes the shape of targeted, lethal violence.

3. The Question of Transformation and Future Research Challenges

Academic studies and policy reports on the killing of social activists frequently suggest that the phenomenon at hand signals a change in the forms of (political) violence that reflects broader societal transformations. This argument comes in two versions. First, at the level of the individual country, research on the Colombian case relates the recent wave of assassinations of ‘social leaders’ to the multifaceted and contradictory transformations brought about by the peace process with and the demobilization of the FARC-EP guerrilla. In more general terms, the emergence of targeted, lethal violence against social activists can be understood as reflecting either a transition away from collective and/or indiscriminate forms of violence characteristic of armed conflicts or a specific form of escalation of repressive responses to dynamics of mobilization (or both shifts simultaneously).

Second, however, in the literature we can also find a more general argument that links the (supposedly) overall increase in the killings of social activists, and of land and environmental defenders in particular, to world-wide transformations in the context of socio-environmental changes. As mentioned, the Global Witness data suggests an upward trend in the years up to 2015 and, when incorporating older data (Global Witness 2014), the increase seems to occur in particular between 2009 and 2015. As Le Billon and Lujala note, this global surge in the killing of land and environmental defenders roughly coincides “with the primary commodity boom” (2020: 6). John Knox, similarly, identifies a “growing vulnerability” of environmental HRDs, which he traces back, inter alia, to the “[g]rowing demand for the extraction and exploitation of natural resources” (2017: 10). Yet, as emphasized above, there are important doubts as to quality of the data, in particular when it comes to comparing more recent (and more comprehensive) with earlier (and more fragmentary) data.

This said, existing research on the causes of contexts does suggest that we should observe an upward trend in the killing of social activists. First, as Global Witness puts it, “[t]he worsening climate crisis and the ever-increasing demand for agricultural commodities, fuel and minerals will only intensify the pressure on the environment – and those who risk their lives to defend it” (2023: 9). Second, recent trends in the global patterns of organized violence are characterized, inter alia, by an increase in what UCDP calls “non-state conflict”, which includes precisely cartel- or criminal gang-related violence as in the case of Mexico (Davies et al. 2023). Third, when it comes to political regimes, global indices and comparative studies have documented a global trend of “democratic backsliding” or “autocratization”, which, inter alia, has led to an increase in political regimes that are situated somewhere between closed autocracies and liberal democracies (Bartels et al. 2023) – the kinds of political regimes that seem to be particularly prone to targeted, lethal violence against social activists.

In sum, there are good reasons to assume that the killing of social activists is a phenomenon of increasing relevance and that it could worsen in the coming years. Still, whether this is really the case is a question that requires more research, based on better data that allows for meaningful comparisons across countries and over time. The same applies to the precise enabling conditions and drivers of this specific form of violence. Both large-N research and individual and comparative case studies are needed to more systemically assess the causal role of, and the potential interaction between, the different hypothetical causes. In addition, an important question is how the assassination of social activists as a specific (lethal, targeted) form of violence is related to other types of political violence that civil society actors face. Are these different forms rather characterized by substitutive or complementary relations? And, related to this: Do we see transformations in the forms of violence against civil society actors that imply shifts between targeted and indiscriminate, physical and non-physical, lethal and non-lethal forms? And if so, under which conditions? Finally, scholars should also pay more attention to the consequences of the assassinations: what are the effects of this form of violence on social activism, patterns of social organization and processes of mobilization? What are the broader implications for civic spaces and political participation? And to what extent do responses to the violence – on the part of civil society actors themselves as well as by states and international organizations – offer effective protection?

To conclude, the killing of social activists is a growing global concern that has recently received increasing attention from scholars from different approaches and research traditions, including political geography and ecology, state repression, and criminal governance. A key challenge in the study of violence against social activists is connecting these
studies and research results. This involves, initially, a conceptual challenge: what do we understand social activists to be? Who is included or excluded from this category? How does this type of violence relate to, and is different from, other forms of organized violence? Relatedly, it also involves a measurement and data gathering challenge: how do we decide that a given assassination of a social activist is due to his or her role as a social activist? How do we gather data from countries that limit or block human rights organizations or scholars from recording this type of information? How do we integrate existing, yet fragmented data sets (on individual countries, on different subtypes of activism)? Although data problems persist, better data sources are increasingly available to scholars. Conceptual issues, however, remain mostly unaddressed. Advancing an ontology of this violence is crucial to provide more robust theoretical frameworks that explain the underlying reasons for this violence and enable us to connect results of cross-national research, subnational quantitative analyses, and case studies.

Addressing these gaps in the current literature is crucial not only to offer better explanations, but also to provide more evidence-based policy recommendations to prevent this type of violence. This is important as prospects are daunting: The deepening socio-environmental crisis resulting from global climate change and processes of democratic backsliding across world regions provides a context that arguably both enables and drives this type of violence.

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Picture: picture alliance / NurPhoto | Sebastian Barros (edited)
Picture description: People are gathering and placing flowers on cardboard boxes that symbolize coffins during a
demonstration against the assassinations of peace signatories and social leaders at Bolivar Square in Bogotá, Colombia,
on February 20, 2024.

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ABOUT TRACE
What effects do global developments such as technologization and climate change have on political violence? How can
political violence be limited or legitimized by international institutions? How is it interpreted and conceptualized? Since
April 2022, these questions are addressed by the BMBF-funded research center "Transformations of Political Violence"
(TraCe), in which five Hessian research institutions work together with a variety of disciplinary perspectives.