

The Personalist Leadership Style of Fabio Vásquez: A Case Study on the Origins of the ELN

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Abstract: This article examines the personalist leadership style of Fabio Vásquez, a founding member of the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), the Colombian guerrilla group. Personalism, as a theoretical framework for understanding Latin American leaders, has primarily focused on traditional political practices, emphasizing the tensions and conflicts among formal institutions, political parties, and personalist politicians. While these studies provide valuable insights, they overlook leaders who operate outside conventional political structures who also rely on personalist strategies to attract and retain followers. This article seeks to bridge this gap by presenting a case study of Vásquez's leadership style. In an era marked by the resurgence of populism and renewed interest in the effects of personalism on conventional politics, this article argues that examining personalist leadership within revolutionary insurgent groups that reject conventional party politics is necessary for a thorough understanding of the phenomenon. In particular, it offers a comprehensive overview of how Vásquez's personalist strategies shaped the ELN's early insurgency, ultimately revealing the strengths and vulnerabilities of such leadership within revolutionary movements.

Keywords: personalism; Fabio Vásquez; ELN; leadership; Colombia; Latin America; ritual



Citation: Sánchez Sierra, J.C.; Vergaray, A.R. The Personalist Leadership Style of Fabio Vásquez: A Case Study on the Origins of the ELN. *Societies* **2024**, *14*, 188. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc14090188>

Academic Editor: Gregor Wolbring

Received: 23 June 2024

Revised: 28 August 2024

Accepted: 30 August 2024

Published: 19 September 2024



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1. Introduction

The personalist leadership style of Fabio Vásquez, a founding member of the Colombian guerrilla group Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), provides a compelling case study of unconventional authority in Latin American political history. This article examines Vásquez's leadership from 1963 to 1974, a period when his personalism was most pronounced. A man of the people, Vásquez offered rural followers an alternative to the clergy, law enforcement, and formal party politics. While personalism as a theoretical framework has primarily focused on tensions among formal institutions, political parties, and personalist politicians, this article expands its scope by examining Vásquez's leadership style outside conventional political structures, exploring how he maintained authority through grassroots organizing, ritual, and armed struggle. Initially celebrated as a charismatic leader, his influence eventually waned, compelling him to maintain loyalty through strong authoritarian tactics. In an era marked by rising populism and renewed interest in personalism's effects on conventional politics [1–4], studying Vásquez's revolutionary leadership offers insights into how personalist strategies shape insurgent movements that aim to uproot state-sanctioned institutions [5]¹.

Studies on personalist leaders within and outside Latin America have largely been limited to examining party politics within traditional political structures [6–12]². This emphasis is understandable, given the state's dominance and the wealth of data available in conventional institutions. Social scientists, in particular, find the abundance of data in these settings highly valuable for conducting research. That focus, however, is a limitation in the literature this article seeks to address by examining Vásquez's revolutionary leadership,

which offers insights into how personalist strategies shape insurgent movements that challenge the foundations of the state. It is incorrect, however, to claim that studies that examine personalist leaders within political parties are concerned solely with conventional political practices. After all, if political actors working through existing electoral and institutional frameworks is considered the conventional path, personalist leaders bypass, or at minimum, challenge those frameworks by exploiting the legitimacy gained through their personal traits. In particular, these leaders shape and challenge legal and political norms as they navigate the conventional political organizations they seek to reshape. Still, examining revolutionary movements that originate outside conventional political organizations—in this case the origins of the ELN's revolutionary insurgency—sheds light on how personalist leadership manifests outside the institutional laws and norms of the state. Originating from within the state yet pursuing distinct aims, the geographical focal point for such movements remains local. In the case of Vásquez's leadership tenure at the ELN, it focused on remote rural areas. After all, it is in localities that revolutions often begin, requiring leaders to navigate within informal social institutions.

Before beginning the case study, a note on why and how we use personalism as a conceptual anchor in this article. Personalist leadership, which falls within the broader rubric of personalism, is a contested concept, both in terms of its meaning and uses. Why not instead use charismatic or populist forms of leadership as conceptual frames? What use does personalism bring when other concepts better capture a leader's style? Indeed, certain scholars highlight charisma or populism, sometimes using personalism as a subordinate concept and at other times suggesting a personalist leader is charismatic or populist. In this work, we follow Kostandinova and Levitt [13] in their attempt to bring conceptual clarity to personalism, stating that it is characterized by two key features: a dominant leader and a weak organizational structure. The leader is dominant in that his authority is based on personal attributes rather than deriving from a formal role, allowing him to make decisions with little to no input from others. The organizational structure is weak in that the collective in question is weakly organized, with goals and structures that are poorly defined. That in turn results in a lacuna that can be filled by a personalist leader. While Kostandinova and Levitt focus on party politics in their paper, they also suggest their definition extends beyond conventional politics [13] (p. 502). Their definition is useful, as it highlights the real possibility that a leader may have a personalist form of leadership without being charismatic or populist. Although these concepts may overlap (e.g., a charismatic leader can also be a personalist leader), in other words, they need not do so (i.e., a personalist leader need not be charismatic or populist).

Is a personalist leader necessarily authoritarian? In the literature on personalist leadership, personalism is often associated with authoritarianism, and for good reason. A personalist leader typically makes decisions with little to no input from others and operates within a weak organizational structure. These characteristics are indicative of authoritarian tendencies that coincide with authoritarian tactics. However, these traits and tactics alone are necessary but insufficient to constitute authoritarianism. Consider a scenario where a leader adopts a personalist style in response to a state of emergency within a weakly organized structure. It is debatable whether such a leader can be deemed authoritarian if her ultimate aim is anti-authoritarian, such as seeking to restore peace and reinstate democratic order. There is a spectrum of authoritarianism that can manifest in personalist leadership, ranging from mild to strong authoritarianism. Strong authoritarianism represents the extreme end of this spectrum, where authoritarian traits and tactics are so pervasive and blatant, it is undeniable.

This framework works especially well to describe personalist political leaders that have been the mainstay in Latin American politics. These leaders have been described by various names in different contexts, the "Strong Man", *caudillo* in Latin America, and the "Big Man" in Africa. In the case of Fabio Vásquez, we will see how he initially exhibited charismatic leadership, couched in mild authoritarianism, but lost much of that allure over time, which then necessitated a stronger authoritarianism that reached its zenith

during the tail end of his time at the ELN. In other words, what began as a largely non-coercive leadership style based on Vásquez's charisma and reinforcing rituals, morphed into a command and control style held together by violence. While his charisma and authoritarian tendencies varied over time, ultimately, his personalist leadership style was a constant throughout his time as a leader of the ELN. Consequently, it is our contention that personalism best captures Vásquez's leadership style.

In the following case study, we examine the evolution of Fabio Vásquez's leadership style within the context of the early ELN. Section 2 discusses Vásquez's charismatic leadership during the formative years of the ELN from 1963 to 1967. We will explore how his rural background, grassroots organizing, and ritual practices played a pivotal role in shaping the revolutionary identity of the ELN and consolidating his dominant position within a loosely structured organization. Section 3 analyzes how Vásquez maintained his personalist leadership despite waning charisma from 1967 to 1974. In this period, Vásquez increasingly relied on strong authoritarian tactics, including purges and strict internal justice codes, to suppress dissent and reinforce loyalty. Lastly, the case study concludes by examining the role rituals played throughout his tenure as leader of the ELN. It shows how rituals solidified Vásquez's authority and legitimacy by reinforcing hierarchy, fostering emotional bonds with the leader through collective experiences, and creating a sacred aura around his persona—attributes that, over time, fostered a cult-like reverence, ultimately becoming a double-edged sword. While his personalism allowed for rapid mobilization, it simultaneously created internal divisions that undermined his legitimacy and fractured the ELN's cohesiveness. This analysis will offer a comprehensive understanding of how Vásquez's personalist strategies, deeply intertwined with ritual practices, shaped the ELN's early insurgency, revealing both the strengths and vulnerabilities inherent in such leadership within revolutionary movements.

That said, a comprehensive overview of the context surrounding the ELN and Fabio Vásquez is beyond the scope of this article. Specific details are intended for readers with familiarity of the region and nation. For those less familiar, we hope to ignite curiosity to learn more while ensuring the broader aims of the article remain clear. Consequently, readers with no prior knowledge of Colombia and its history would profit from focusing on the main theme of Vásquez's personalist strategies, delving deeper into our claims and citations that provide greater details as they see fit.

2. Origins and Consolidation: Fabio Vásquez's Early Leadership in the ELN

Fabio Vásquez Castaño was born in 1940 in a small town in the department of Antioquia, Colombia. By all accounts, he came from a modest background, living a rural lifestyle that typified the peasantry of that region. Vásquez's personal traits—his charisma, moral authority, and magnetism—were pivotal in shaping his leadership style. Taking account of his proximity to the people and their struggles during his childhood and youth is necessary to understand his eventual rise to leadership, a point we return to later.

A starting point to understand Vásquez's rise to leadership in the ELN is the training he received in Cuba. Before the formation of the ELN, the Brigada Proliberación Nacional José Antonio Galán—an early iteration of the ELN linked to a fellowship program in Cuba—served as the initial effort to implement the Cuban revolutionary insurgent strategy [14,15]³. The fellowship offered by the Cuban government did not include traditional subjects, as may be expected in a traditional academic context. Rather, the experience was predominantly in the field and in contact with the population throughout the island, where participants would learn ideological truisms alongside practical guidance for revolution. Vásquez participated in this fellowship and received ideological and military training in the years right after the Bay of Pigs. In 1963, he traveled from Cuba to Colombia with a clear mission: to organize a guerrilla war front following the *foco* premises he witnessed and learned from the Cuban Revolution. The *foco* theory—which posited that a small group of dedicated guerrillas, operating in rural areas and supported by the local population, can spark a broader revolutionary movement—aligned with the geographical and demographic

realities of the region that would eventually makeup the ELN⁴. The eventual decision to start insurgent operations at a specific area in Colombia took several months, in which discussions were held in La Habana and Bogotá, with strategic military support from former Cuban fighters eager to share their successes. In 1962, these fighters were filled with pride after defeating Fulgencio Batista's forces and stopping the US invasion at the Bay of Pigs [16]. The areas considered for guerrilla *foco* incubation were San Vicente de Chucurí in southern Santander, the Tensa Valley in Miraflores (Boyacá), and the San Lucas Sierra in southern Bolívar [16] (pp. 38–40) [17]. Every area had privileged characteristics for guerrilla warfare, including a rugged geography that allowed clandestine mobilization, struggles for land between peasants and landowners, and traditions of rebellion expressed in frequent episodes of violence and peasant dissent. As explained by Jaime Arenas, “the chosen area had mountains, thick jungle, water availability, and access for supplies, it was also close to several villages with peasants with former guerrilla experience that included cooperation with Liberal guerrilla groups” [14] (p. 42) [18]⁵. At this early stage, the ELN already counted on support from militants and *simpatizantes* (sympathizers), whose capacities were fundamental to reactivate political disobedience and to gain social support for the emerging guerrilla group. In addition to the lessons learned and practical guidance gained from the fellowship in Cuba, its significance is also linked to the mystic it would take on in later years, when Vásquez became leader of the ELN. The stories told about Vásquez's time in Cuba reinforced his sacred aura and elevated group morale, as they awakened hope and strengthened resolve at dark moments.

To comprehend the rise of Vásquez and the ELN, it is essential to examine the period after *La Violencia*, specifically the type of leadership fostered and how insurgent projects gained support in rural areas. *La Violencia*, a period of intense civil conflict in Colombia from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, was marked by brutal violence between the Liberal and Conservative parties. During this time, the state's presence throughout the territory was scarce or nonexistent, creating a void that insurgencies exploited. This lack of state control fostered the rise of guerrilla movements, as rural areas became hotbeds of resistance. Unlike earlier insurgencies that were rooted in the traditional Liberal and Conservative parties, or offshoots of conventional left-leaning parties, the new insurgent movements that emerged during *La Violencia* represented a different type of rebellion. These groups, including the ELN, drew their support from disenfranchised rural populations who—often victims of political strife and state-mandated repression—became disillusioned with the existing political structures and sought new forms of representation and leadership. The absence of effective state governance provided fertile ground for these insurgencies to grow and establish their influence in rural Colombia [19,20].

The case of Fabio Vásquez in the ELN portrays how allegiance and leadership crystallized in Colombia. We suggest that Vásquez organized the ELN by appealing to a growing discomfort with traditional political parties and the increasing mistrust for traditional left-leaning groups. He mobilized traditions of struggle and fostered alternative allegiance to forms of leadership that were obscured and prosecuted by the establishment. José Ayala [18] (p. 32)⁶ [21,22] and Heliodoro Ochoa⁷, two early ELN leaders alongside Vásquez, introduced Vásquez to the rural area of San Vicente de Chucurí. Shortly thereafter, it was decided that the Magdalena Medio region was better-suited to hatch the initial *foco*. Magdalena Medio is a region in central Colombia where the main river cuts across, reaching mid to low altitudes; it is characterized by a thick tropical jungle and a flooding savanna with sparse human dwellings since colonial times. The area was chosen by the ELN due to the scarce presence of the state and institutions. It was a municipality where anti-government peasant revolts in 1929 rejected land appropriation by landowners and supported protests of oil industry workers [14] (pp. 130–131) [20] (pp. 27–46). These events burdened the region's dwellers with a reputation for being a pro-communist hotbed.

In the late 1950s, peasants were engaged in organizing political struggles after a wave of disenchantment swept across social groups that saw their plight endangered after *La Violencia*. By the early 1960s, San Vicente de Chucurí and the surrounding municipalities

had a strong political affinity to political leaders with ideological dissonances, such as the bipartisan elite's arrangement—Frente Nacional—and the Partido Comunista Colombiano (PCC—the Communist Party of Colombia). The PCC was considered an illegitimate political representative of the peasants after their decision to participate in parliamentary elections despite peasant repression and harsh treatment to its militants. Its move to traditional party politics left a vacuum for unconventional forms of leadership among the peasantry that Vásquez and ELN would eventually occupy.

The leadership of Fabio Vásquez combined several characteristics that privileged his contact with influential community leaders. He endured *La Violencia* in his homeland of Quindío, where his father—a Liberal leader and owner of an average-sized coffee farm—was killed by “pajaros”, conservative factions, and his family was displaced. He also had a brief experience with bandits in an attempt to avenge the death of his father. His brothers, Manuel and Antonio Vásquez, encouraged him to avoid further contact with Guadalupe Salcedo's guerrilla strategies, which they saw as short-sighted and sporadic. They believed that the revolution should be pursued by creating a cohesive political group, insisting it was necessary to direct their efforts towards a more organized and strategic approach [18] (p. 27). Fabio's previous experiences earned him political recognition and high esteem for the personal sacrifices he made while supporting his family. He managed to care for his family while completing his education, which led him to become a school teacher and a renowned union leader [14] (pp. 22–23)⁸.

Fabio Vásquez also knew most Liberal leaders in other provinces, which enabled the group to count on support from networks in a wide geographical range⁹. He was acquainted with peasants' perceptions of Bogotá's arrogance towards provinces, which was endured during the harshest days of *La Violencia*, and how the urban politician's disregard cynically evaporated in times of elections. In other words, he understood the co-optation of peasant organizations to benefit the elites, and how those elites ignored their claims for peace and property rights [23,24]¹⁰.

Vásquez was an appealing leader to the peasants due to his personal attributes and experiences, embodying a strong personalist leadership style. Nicolás Rodríguez Bautista (Gabino), one of the main leaders following Vásquez's exit from the ELN, described Fabio as “a man with great magnetism. He had a career in commerce, was well-structured, fought against the ‘worms’ in Escambray, was in Cuba during the events of Playa Girón, and had spoken to ‘El Ché’... He told us these stories, but without boasting, without grandiose eloquence. He was a man with moral authority for conducting a group” [17] (p. 112). His quiet charisma was evident in his ability to maintain solid bonds with students and teachers leading political agendas in Bucaramanga and in his constant dialogue with his brothers Manuel and Antonio Vásquez, as well as Victor Medina. These figures were intellectual and political leaders of the growing student movement in Bogotá at Universidad Nacional de Colombia. Additionally, he bolstered collaboration and close friendships with leaders of the Union Sindical Obrera (Workers Syndical Union, henceforth USO) and unionized teachers in Santander.

Starting in the late 1950s, Fabio Vásquez became a supporter of the movement led by Antonio Larrota, and the character of his political activism changed dramatically after Larrota's assassination in 1961, an event that he claimed as the touchstone in the radicalization of the popular movements in Santander and Bogotá [25]. This personalist approach helped him integrate different social groups, enhancing his authority through personal connections and moral leadership rather than formal roles. The bonds that were eventually forged replaced institutionalized ranks and lineages deriving from traditional parties. By the early 1960s, he had become an opposition leader engaged in constant social interactions, without electoral interest, and increasingly critical of the PCC [26]¹¹.

Vásquez had an attractive personality that helped to enroll peasant leaders in political action, without leaving aside the communities that saw him grow as a leader. He was regarded as a man of the people, an outspoken and sharp-tongued visionary that could interpret peasant's ambitions and frustrations and translate them in a discourse that ex-

pressed the rural condition in terms of dignity and radical transformation. “We get used to the eloquent personality of Fabio: he was funny, making gracious jokes, poking the other, making “*chistes verdes*” [jokes with sexual content], he was all the time playing around with us, he used to go and work with the peasants on the fields, in that moment all this was definitive”. The peasant’s predicament included the elite’s perception of their life and culture as prone to barbarism. Instead, Fabio Vásquez gained the local population’s allegiance with the reactivation of historical legacies of struggle. The ELN’s *guerrilleros* discovered a common bond with the heroic past and saw this bond as encouragement for the possibility of overcoming adversity and as reinforcement of the responsibility for the continuity of their struggle: “we are a continuation of Simon Bolívar, Gaitán and here we are going to set the first stone, and then the next generations should come and look and afterwards decide what they can do. We did our part” [18] (p. 42).

In this context, while the region promotes anti-establishment insurgencies, the role of *guerrilleros* and peasants was to recover the dignity and honor necessary for revolutionary activity. It was a validation of traditions of struggle that exalted “the skillful action of the *guerrillero* that hits, avoids the enemy, hits again, will always be validated. It was for our indigenous populations rebelling against the Spanish; it was for the slaves escaping their masters; José Antonio Galán used this method of fight in the Comuneros’ struggle as well as Bolívar’s forces that had a large guerrilla group; and the guerrillas during *La Violencia*, it is the same story. Then, we gather a historical legacy, every time more and more framed within a political project” [17] (pp. 136–137). Insurgent warfare became a highly regarded activity; each individual could claim to have moral values which the elite had stripped from them through discourses of segregation, the undermining of non-urban cultures, and political initiatives consolidated by communities engaged in the culture of the land. Fabio Vásquez reactivated such legacies, reestablishing the legitimacy of insurgent struggle as morally correct in defense of peasant’s rights to land and a normal life. Belonging to a guerrilla group became an attractive alternative for a disenfranchised youth barred from education and productive rural labor. The region of San Vicente de Chucurí experienced a blockade due to their links to Liberal guerrillas and bandits who refused to lay down their arms during negotiations with the government of Gustavo Rojas Pinilla [27].

The rural communities had a history of being attracted to leaders who could refocus their political anxieties and keep alive their legacy of political struggle. Leadership in such communities, however, was a perilous business that manifested in the commonplace assassinations of political leaders since the late 1930s. Assassinations were especially prevalent in regions where radical dissent fostered organized responses to violence. The politics of *magnicidio* at the local level was predominant in Santander, not including the traumatic period in 1958–1961 when repression was used to contain social uproar and student radicalization¹² [28]. For that matter, one of the harshest critics of the early ELN—Jaime Arenas, a student movement leader who joined the group after Camilo Torres’ death, and who defected from the rural front of struggle to find death at the hands of a squad in Bogotá in 1971 after a trial for treason—explained how Fabio Vásquez was an accurate paradigm for local communities in order to consolidate leadership. He “belonged to a humble and laborious family with peasant roots. No matter how weak his health was, his will made him overcome pain. With determination and enthusiasm, he advanced the armed struggle to a level of contagiousness that rapidly earned him trust” [14] (p. 22–23). Consequently, he quickly blended in with the locals, and received their approval, respect, and confidence, which developed into loyalty and obedience.

The notability reached by Vásquez in the 1960s was represented in authority at both the local and international levels. His leadership involved forging connections with leaders abroad who supported the group by providing training, arms, and supplies. His brothers constructed a political platform that consistently kept the project away from the factionalism within left-leaning organizations of the epoch. By the time of the Cuban Revolution, Manuel and Antonio Vásquez had represented the Colombian student movement at international summits and engaged in acrimonious debates with the JUCO (Juventud Comunista

Colombiana—the Colombian Communist Youth) since 1958, when the Unión Nacional de Estudiantes Colombianos (National Union of Colombian Students, UNEC) [29–31]¹³ became a battleground for student allegiances at universities and public schools. Fabio Vásquez’s authority, particularly in relation to the PCC, was established through his effective interactions with various left-leaning and Liberal groups across both rural and urban areas of Colombia. Additionally, his ability to deliver tangible results—such as organizing mobilizations, strongly supporting union demands, and providing clandestine logistical backing for political raids in Bogotá and Bucaramanga—further cemented his leadership and influence [32–34]¹⁴. In other words, Fabio Vásquez was surrounded by political leaders who were building more resilient organizations to confront the challenges posed by the endemic divisionism within the international left. As a result, Vásquez’s political leadership was strengthened at both the local and regional levels, increasing his influence among representatives of innovative tendencies in revolutionary warfare across Latin America [27] (pp. 48–50).

Fabio Vásquez also distanced himself from urban debates and solidified peasant allegiances by politically steering their communal organizations. He leveraged evidence of bipartisan alliances within the Frente Nacional and the PCC’s failure to create a broader, functional, and cohesive peasant movement. Vásquez argued against the overestimation of the working class as the primary revolutionary actor. Over time, his strategy proved flawed. According to a former ELN militant, the internal crisis was triggered by this initiative and the underestimation of urban work and its associated classes. Elevated by a war-like conception, they conflated a part with the whole, leading to a sectarian and romanticist class analysis of the left. This analysis suggested that poverty and the hostile environment made the peasantry the most revolutionary and least conformist class. The rural nature of the revolutionary struggle emphasized the importance of the peasantry and overestimated their role, resulting in the neglect of the working class and petty-bourgeois sectors (students, professionals, white-collar workers, etc.). While peasants do play a central role in guerrilla warfare due to its rural setting, concluding that they are the most revolutionary class was a mistake [35].

The framework of rural resistance progressively evolved into a well-organized network of self-defense mechanisms integrated by a common perception of resistance as a legitimate motivation for irregular warfare. The liaisons were based on person-to-person communication to build trust and create a stronger position against the central committees of both the PCC and Liberal Party. Without bashing the political work made by regional structures of the PCC involved in the peasant’s occupation of land taken by landowners during *La Violencia*, the peasant communities layered the social foundations for the ELN detached from their institutionalized opposition’. By 1960, it was already clear that the MRL was moving from a radical political platform into an alliance with Frente Nacional. In fact, peasants linked to Fabio Vásquez in San Vicente de Chucurí rapidly galvanized their alliances and took the initiative to start insurgent attacks, which drew attention and took the dispersed leftist sectors involved in peasant protests and the student movement in Bucaramanga by surprise [27] (pp. 38–40). The subtle work of Fabio Vásquez was, however, a process of natural construction of both relations of authority and obedience in rural areas. He understood the rural universe better than over-theorized students and urban JUCO militants sent to the countryside in commissions to organize support for the PCC [22] (Chapter 2) [25] (pp. 268–274).

The allegiance bestowed by Heliodoro Ochoa and José Ayala to Fabio Vásquez broke the mistrust for an outsider that led certain followers to question Vásquez’s legitimacy. Progressively, Vásquez became a role model. Couple that with his great capacity for work in the fields and his undertaking of simple tasks that peasants considered degrading for their leader. Although it might have seemed as a form of sacrifice, Fabio Vásquez was nurtured in precarious conditions, making hard labor and discipline everyday routines of a normal life [18] (p. 42) [36]. His attitude stimulated a sense of togetherness that urban political leaders—particularly from the PCC and the JUCO—were unable to build.

Consider also his physical attributes. Vásquez's tall build was something strange among peasants in Colombia, which made him rather attractive for young peasants, who saw him initially as a stranger, and also for women, who were overrepresented after the significant prosecutions and assassinations of male peasants during *La Violencia*. Noting his physical characteristics—such as his height, lighter skin tone, or mustache—is not trivial; these traits played a significant role in establishing his legitimacy by highlighting his distinction from his followers.

Finally, since *La Violencia*, leaders of peasant organizations were prosecuted and assassinated, rearing a generation of youth without a clear bond to leaders, even within the familial sphere. The father figure in the rural setting was neither weak nor lacking in leadership; rather, it was often nonexistent. It was common that families were led by widows of *La Violencia*, and peasant leaders were isolated or placed on check by military authorities [37]. The case of Nicolás Rodríguez is representative:

“My father, and other leaders of the region thought it was right to follow Fabio's plan developing the armed struggle, and they helped him in many ways doing political work. (My father contributed by giving advice, discussing with Fabio and other companions preceding phenomena that happened in the region, the historical legacy and social basis there, the Liberal struggles and other difficulties during *La Violencia*. My father for example, in that epoch (1948–1956) had to abandon the area, he was prosecuted for a long time, and they kept him in jail for cooperating with Rangel's guerrilla” [18] (p. 33).

For the peasant youth, most memories were of epic feats of heroes from the past, transmitted through oral narratives. Fabio Vásquez represented the contemporary corollary of their struggle during a moment of intense pressure from the military. His presence offered an opportunity for innovation in storytelling, as it was no longer clandestine or reserved for the intimacy of their inner circles. The austerity of the daily sessions for narrative remembrance refreshed their hopes and memories of episodes that disrupted their lives, connecting Vásquez's traumatic youth experiences with those of rural *guerrilleros*. He was a peasant who shared their predicament, understanding the political codes and mourning rituals used by peasants to remember their people. They shared a hatred for the elites—their enemy—and reactivated memories and legacies of struggles many thought were dormant¹⁵ [38–41]. For Vásquez, the sole act of remembrance was a burden they could bear together, and having a leader with similar experiences encouraged the community of San Vicente de Chucurí to take action. To the peasants, Fabio Vásquez likely embodied the materialization of their expectations.

In summary, Vásquez was a leader capable of alleviating the wounds left by *La Violencia* on the peasants' self-conception. His ability to resonate deeply with the peasantry, stemming from his shared experiences and understanding of their struggles, solidified his status as a pivotal figure in the early ELN. His personal sacrifices, charismatic appeal, and moral authority created a strong bond with the rural communities, transforming their historical legacies of struggle into a collective identity and purpose. This approach not only restored a sense of dignity among the peasants but also fostered a renewed sense of revolutionary zeal. In this period, Vásquez's personalism was mildly authoritarian, where his individual attributes and grassroots connections overshadowed formal structures, all the while avoiding reliance on brute force, violence, and/or overt manipulation. Curiously, a revolutionary movement that championed the need for violence to reach its revolutionary ends was able to temper the use of violence and force within its ranks. This approach laid the foundation for the ELN's early consolidation and growth, standing in contrast to the strong authoritarianism that would later come to characterize his time at the ELN.

3. Waning Charisma and Authoritarian Tactics (1967–1974)

Vásquez's personal leadership style initially helped consolidate the group's efforts. The revolutionary morale during the early years of the ELN was based on several elements that gave consistency to Vásquez's leadership. First, it entailed the individual capacity to maintain at any cost the revolutionary vow NUPALOM (Ni un Paso Atrás, Liberación o

Muerte/No step back: freedom or death). Second, it involved the requirement of sacrifices to prove commitment to the revolutionary cause. Finally, it implied preserving the personalist leadership of Fabio Vásquez as a guarantee of unity and success. Over time, however, his frequent absences and the growing autonomy of different factions led to increased internal criticism and conflict. This divide was exacerbated by the different priorities and approaches of urban and rural members, leading to a struggle over the direction and strategy of the ELN.

A tipping point in the leadership and future of the ELN occurred during the Colombian military's Operación Anorí (Operation Anorí) in October 1973. This coordinated offensive, which included air strikes that isolated ELN forces and severed their supply lines, decimated the group. The operation triggered significant shifts in leadership, ultimately leading to the departure of Fabio Vásquez. Although the exact date of Vásquez's departure remains unclear due to the clandestine nature of communications, it is evident that a rethinking of leadership roles began in 1973, with both Vásquez and those within the ELN unequivocally recognizing his departure by 1974.

This section explores how Vásquez's personalist leadership, characterized by his strong, centralized authority, eventually faced challenges from within the organization, as differing opinions and strategies emerged. This internal opposition underscores the complexities of leading a revolutionary group with a diverse membership and the inherent difficulties in maintaining a cohesive strategy and direction.

From its early days, the ELN was composed of a significant number of urban *simpatizantes* operating in semi-clandestine structures and urban *guerrilleros* involved in the rural areas due to increasing pressure from the national army in cities across Colombia. These urban members contributed to the group's intellectual activities, logistics, propaganda, and creation of ideological documents. Despite their substantial contributions, tensions arose between the urban and rural factions, exacerbating internal divisions¹⁶. The urban *guerrilleros'* different priorities and approaches often clashed with those of the rural members, leading to a struggle over the direction and strategy of the ELN. This divide highlights the intricate challenges of unifying a revolutionary group with such diverse components.

The ELN's consolidation in the rural area of San Vicente de Chucurí was significantly influenced by the close relationship between the peasant community and the group's hierarchy. More than the rugged geography, it was the support of the peasantry that provided a crucial hideout for the ELN after operations or during attacks by the national army [42]. Fabio Vásquez's strong leadership and his charismatic influence among the peasants and supporters were pivotal in this dynamic. His ability to connect with the community fostered a sense of loyalty that became the main condition for belonging to the ELN during its formative years. This influence grew into practices resembling a cult, where loyalty to Vásquez was paramount, and any opposition to his leadership was seen as a threat to the hierarchy and the insurgent *foco* itself. As Vásquez's personalist leadership style faced challenges, the group's strategy and direction became points of contention, highlighting the inherent difficulties in sustaining unity within a diverse membership. Despite these challenges, he was able to maintain a semblance of unity among a growing and sprawling organization, which at times even manifested as a strong bond between urban and rural elements.

Even so, the early instrumental relationship between Vásquez and the urban elements contributing to the ELN decayed over time. Victor Medina, leader of the student movement was initially an urban operative who coordinated logistics and political support, faced increasing threats from the authorities. In 1964, he entered the rural warfront as his last option to avoid prosecution by authorities. As Vásquez was preparing the insurgent *foco* for its first action, he introduced Medina as the second in command. However, Vásquez's frequent trips abroad to raise funds and represent the group left Medina unable to complete the traditional rituals of entrance and initiation, which impaired his integration as a revolutionary leader. This absence, coupled with the *foco's* exposure to the army's operations, further strained the internal dynamics, leading to an atmosphere of suspicion and exclu-

sion. Internal meetings, initially intended for discussing outcomes and mistakes during insurgent actions, evolved into sessions for reinforcing loyalty to Vásquez and addressing internal tensions. The lack of a cohesive political apparatus within the ELN, combined with an intense focus on survival and tactical issues, hindered the group's ability to engage in meaningful political debate and strategic development.

During the period from 1967 to 1974, Vásquez increasingly relied on authoritarian tactics, including purges and strict internal justice codes, to suppress dissent and reinforce loyalty. His initial charisma, marked by a mild authoritarianism, gave way to a more coercive (strong) form of authoritarian leadership, as he faced challenges to his standing as leader. This shift was marked by the implementation of "insurgent justice", where strict internal codes were enforced through rituals that reinforced Vásquez's personalist authority. For example, the execution of Victor Medina, who was accused of betrayal, highlighted the severe internal justice practices that Vásquez used to maintain control. Such measures created a climate of fear and mistrust within the ELN, further exacerbating internal divisions. Leaders such as Jaime Arenas and Ricardo Lara Parada, who defected and were subsequently executed, exemplify the harsh consequences of dissent within the ELN.

Vásquez's prolonged absences from the rural warfront created a leadership vacuum, leading to more frequent internal meetings where criticism and validation of allegiances became common. His distrust of *guerrilleros* who had not started with him during the early days of the ELN fostered a divisive environment. The tension between urban and rural members, exacerbated by differing priorities and approaches, led to significant internal strife. The revolutionary morale depended on the capacity of each militant to express subordination to the leader and detachment from public life, which was maintained through rituals and strict codes of conduct enforced by Vásquez. "There was no time for other thoughts, neither for love, recreation, or leisure" [43]. The ultimate goal was to gain a place in the ELN's pantheon beside a historical character and the satisfaction of principles imposed by the leader. The following excerpt captures this aspiration in its expressed admiration for Heliodoro Ochoa, a loyalist to Vásquez, who was executed by *fusilamiento* [execution by firing squad] in 1969, organized by Juan de Dios Aguilera, whose bid to usurp power from Vásquez created a schism within the ELN:

"Heliodoro Ochoa asked not to be blindfolded and to be allowed to give the instructions to the death squad ordered to accomplish the final decision of his *fusilamiento*. In the middle of such a stressful situation, a comrade made a shot by mistake and Heliodoro asked him to act with more serenity. (...) it was a tough moment, very painful especially because he was left with the idea that revolutionary justice was unavoidable. There were tears and anguish. The story of Heliodoro Ochoa instructing the death squad left a legacy of dignity, bravery, and serenity"¹⁷

[18] (pp. 97–98)

This anecdote underscores the extreme expectations placed on ELN members and the severe internal justice that characterized Vásquez's leadership. Such intense commitment and discipline were crucial for maintaining the internal cohesion and revolutionary fervor within the ELN.

As Vásquez's charisma waned, his leadership increasingly depended on fear and strict enforcement of internal codes of conduct. The reliance on strong authoritarian tactics created a climate of fear and mistrust, further dividing the group and undermining the cohesion necessary for a successful revolutionary movement. Despite these challenges, Vásquez's personalist leadership style remained central to the ELN's identity, shaping the group's evolution during this turbulent period.

4. Cult of Personality and Ritual Practices in the ELN

The relationship between rituals, cult formation, and power is pivotal in understanding the internal dynamics of the ELN and the personalist leadership of Fabio Vásquez. Power and ritual practices have a reciprocity that explains a wide range of questions related to the mechanics of cult formation within the group. By exploring rituals as part of a constructive relation involving power and knowledge, we can better understand how Vásquez's leadership maintained its influence over the ELN members. Rituals and cults serve as methodological anchorages to understand power relations, regime transformation, and the revolutionary substitution of political/religious regimes. Rituals also solidify a personalist leader's authority and legitimacy through the reinforcement of hierarchy, the fostering of emotional bonds with the leader through collective experiences, and the creation of a sacred aura around the leader. The emphasis in what follows is on informal rituals within the ELN that are pre-institutional in nature—informal and pre-institutional because the rituals evolved over time and were not precisely recorded and followed.

Consider the initiation ritual of baptism that, symbolic and personal, solidified belonging to the group and bonded members with both the group and the leader. Mixing elements of Catholicism, the ritual involved a literal baptism into the ranks of the ELN. Baptism held special significance when performed by Fabio Vásquez. Part of the ritual involved adopting a new name as a revolutionary identity, symbolizing a movement from a civil identity given by the nation-state (i.e., birth certificate) to a new revolutionary identity given by the ELN—a movement from sin to rebirth. Vásquez initially controlled incorporation and provided each militant with a *nom de guerre* within the ELN, marking their new role in clandestine life¹⁸.

“Everyone was given the name from that moment on, there was a list. A boy named *Ciro* became ‘*Conrado*’, *Jorge* was ‘*José*’, *Pedro Gordillo* was ‘*Parmenio*’. He named me ‘*Norberto*’... -Forget about your usual name and use now the name of war. Fabio then gave us a discourse, that we were the continuity of *Bolívar* and *Galán*’s struggles. I got the goosebumps!”

[18] (p. 42)

This renaming ritual was a symbolic burning of past identities, representing a complete break from previous allegiances and a total commitment to the revolutionary cause. This act was crucial for creating a unified and devoted group identity, emphasizing personal sacrifice for the collective mission. Such rituals were not merely acts of compliance but powerful demonstrations of loyalty and submission to the leader's authority. By participating in these rites, members publicly reaffirmed their dedication to the leader and the cause, reinforcing the leader's control and the internal hierarchy of the movement. The initiation ritual, which included adopting a new name and undergoing symbolic trials, served as a platform for direct exchange with the leader, consolidating the transmission of revolutionary values and reinforcing the hierarchical structure within the group. This ritual emphasized the symbolic importance of adopting a new name, signifying a complete transformation of the individual's identity and aligning them fully with the revolutionary cause of the ELN. It ensured that each member was fully integrated into the group's social and ideological fabric, highlighting the importance of personal sacrifice and transformation in the service of the collective mission. The mystic significance attached to these rituals not only highlighted the personal sacrifice required but also bound the members to the leader through a shared sense of revolutionary commitment and identity, fostering an environment where obedience and loyalty were paramount¹⁹ [22] (Chapters 4–6).

From a theoretical perspective consider that an understanding of ritual and cult formation moves beyond the traditional functionalist and conflict approaches. Rather than seeing cult and rituals as solely part of a control process based on solidarity or as a result of power inequality, it is more useful to consider them within the contexts of consolidation and opposition. Consolidation involves the creation of a particular group that leads the

process of internal cohesion and social support to its ideology or faith, while opposition relates to forming groups that challenge established systems of control or belief.

In the case of the ELN, the clandestine nature of the group significantly influenced its cultural production. This required an intimate relationship between the leaders and the forms of knowledge prevalent among the peasant and poor communities in Colombia. The early rituals and cult practices of the ELN reflected those used by peasants, emphasizing oral narratives and personal memories of traumatic experiences during *La Violencia* to gain support and create common bonds.

As the ELN's power and influence grew, its rituals and cult practices institutionalized, or at least approximated a kind of institutionalization, acting as symbolic exchanges that reinforced the group's hierarchical structure and the separation between leaders and followers. This institutionalization served as a protective mechanism, safeguarding the cult and rituals from internal and external threats and maintaining the group's stability. Extreme actions, such as the elimination of heterodox leaders, further entrenched power imbalances, fostering an environment of intimidation and strict obedience rather than promoting ideological understanding or other forms of enlightenment²⁰ [44–46].

This protective mechanism was particularly crucial as the ELN faced significant internal strife and external pressures. To address this, the group quickly resorted to sessions of internal criticism as a practice necessary to reestablish bonds of confidence. Tensions between urban and rural members (*urbanos* and *rurales*) grew, and the crisis was further exacerbated by a scarcity of supplies, anxiety over new military operations, and sorrow for *guerrilleros* who had fallen in the initial actions [47–49]²¹. It was believed that the crisis could be resolved through a constructive approach to rivalries: "In most cases, due to the nature of the organization and its need to establish itself and survive, it was not possible to create spaces for political debate; that is, critical issues were silenced in favor of certain practical operational activities. And when some political contradictions were addressed, they were not analyzed with the necessary depth, nor were conclusions and corrections reached. Often, they were dealt with in a top-down manner because of the support the "chief" [Fabio Vásquez] had "²² [16] (p. 58). An example of this was the reluctance to embrace alternative sources of legitimation exhibited by urban *guerrilleros*, such as their close relationship to unionized leaders, student movements, and other *guerrilleros* from urban or semi-urban settings.

By addressing the tensions and frictions within the group through rituals of internal criticism, Vásquez aimed to reinforce his control and maintain the group's unity. However, this approach often led to increased suspicion and exclusion, particularly towards those who were not part of the initial rural framework, further complicating the internal dynamics of the ELN. *Guerrilleros'* obedience to codes of conduct was rooted in the belief that the rural worldview was superior and more revolutionary, closely tied to the sacrifices made during *La Violencia*. Such a legacy of sacrifices was a source of moral examples that solidified in peasant revolutionary values. The *nomes de guerre* assumed by the three brothers were revealing:

"Fabio Vásquez adopted the name 'Alejandro' (no doubt it was after Alexander the Great), Manuel Vásquez was 'Geronimo' (honoring the indigenous chief), and Antonio, the youngest, used the pseudonym 'Emiliano' (after Zapata). This aspect highlighted the transcendental representation of a revolutionary caste as the kin rebuilding the new society, though for the *urbanos*, such historical linkages were less clear, limiting Fabio Vásquez's influence among them".

[50]

This aspect highlighted the transcendental representation of a revolutionary caste as the kin rebuilding the new society, though for the *urbanos*, such historical linkages were less clear, limiting Fabio Vásquez's influence among them. The *urbanos* lack of historical linkages to the revolutionary past was a contributing factor in Vásquez's increasing distrust towards those who had not started with him during the first march in July 1964. *Guerrilleros*

without kinship ties to the initial rural framework received subtle or explicit disregard from the leader. This explains the progressive decay of renowned leaders such as Jaime Arenas, Ricardo Lara Parada, and Victor Medina. The first two died after they defected from the ELN, at the hands of “commissions” sent to avenge their betrayal. The latter, Victor Medina, died after an internal *consejo de guerra*²³ that ordered his *fusilamiento*, which was a painful decision made by the majority of the *guerrilleros* under the direct influence of Fabio Vásquez. Medina’s sentence was driven largely by resentment toward his rapid rise to power, which provoked hostility among his judges and the rural ELN *guerrilleros* of the early *foco*. This exclusionary purge, fueled by Vásquez’s distrust, consolidated his control over the ELN. The guerrilla’s chief acted as the ultimate controller of the insurgent liturgy.

Internally, rituals for revolutionary sublimation bolstered moral principles, fundamental in the construction of allegiance to Vásquez’s authority. His leadership determined the early application of norms and mechanisms of justice as a ritualization of revolutionary commitment and obedience. *Guerrilleros’* obedience to codes of conduct and practices envisioned to consolidate the internal hierarchy, based on the assumption that the rural worldview was better and more revolutionary as it was necessarily articulated to the sacrifices experienced during *La Violencia*. Such a legacy of sacrifices was a source of moral examples that solidified in peasant revolutionary values. In other words, the peasant vanguard solidified mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion based on the perceived moral superiority of the rural lifestyle. This moral dimension was in opposition to values and lifestyles proper of urban settings. The characterization of the ELN’s moral framework was made more explicit during this process.

Discipline in the ELN was enforced through a vague corpus of norms and codes. Although evidence of a disciplinary code in the ELN is elusive, the sources we found show that there existed both tacit and explicit rules. The group submitted to the warfare notions of the Cuban Revolution, and its leaders became worshiped as deities: their experience was the example, the truth, the law. Even before the death of Ernesto “El Ché” Guevara, his motto “Ni un paso atrás” was highlighted as analogous to José Antonio Galán’s cry of war “Lo que ha de ser que sea” (what has to be, has to be). The last is a motto about the inevitability of violence during radical political transitions. Since both the Comunero rebellion and Cuban Revolution echoed a tradition of struggle, the ELN’s call for justice and upheaval combined their cries of war to make the motto of the ELN, NUPALOM. The motto makes explicit the main and most radical rule that individuals have to comply with in order to belong to the group: once you are in, you cannot escape the call of revolution. In the 1960s, the commitment to the revolutionary cause of the ELN was centered on this indeclinable vow, and the implacability of revolution to anyone betraying the principle:

“In the guerrilla code defection was contemplated as a betrayal, so a defector had to be *fusilado*. I said at the beginning that we took probably too literally the slogan: ‘No step backwards, freedom or death’. This means that if you defect, and stay out of the guerrilla, there is no other option but to comply with the condemnation”.

[18] (p. 68)

“We took the motto ‘freedom or death’ too literally, No step backwards, freedom or death, from here nobody can leave, we all knew it: If I weaken in my commitment hit me in the head, I did commit myself and this is seriously, this is not fucking around, here we are going to die, here we came to fight, nobody can slip away and show the ass”.

[18] (p. 42)

Although the norm was of general application, its effect on the ELN differed within the organization. Its enforcement was a concern for mid-rank cadres and commanders, as it risked depleting the group’s strength. It was also, however, a strategy for low-rank *guerrilleros*, who instrumentalized it in their attempts to climb within the hierarchy.

“That moralist attitude of considering revolutionary performance through the lens of heroics impeded a ‘normal’ life, because in warfare the conception of heroics leads to the abandonment of family, friends, job, everything. . . as a decision of absolute detachment and surrendering to the very dynamics of insurgent war and life. All that sacrifice was justified by the assumption that the triumph was close, despite all the talk about the Prolonged Popular War”.

[18] (p. 187)

Only by showing these characteristics could a *guerrillero* display his capacities to the leader.

When the ELN was minimally engaged in fighting, everyday interactions became the primary way for members to gain recognition. In the absence of frequent combat, where revolutionary ideals could be demonstrated through acts of bravery, the significance of daily tasks grew. Activities such as cooking, guard duties, and the proper handling of supplies took on new importance for symbolically consolidating authority and reinforcing the group’s internal hierarchy.

During exercises, the burdensome mobilization of kitchen utensils and other daily chores became moments to exploit both the commitment of the militants and their allegiance to the internal hierarchy. These tasks also tested the capacity of a cadre or leader to command obedience. Fabio Vásquez’s intense agenda and frequent absences meant he could not constantly interact with all parts of the growing organization. As a result, middle-ranking cadres, known as *responsables*, often exploited the principle of obedience for personal gain. By enhancing the vertical hierarchy, daily routines exacerbated intragroup strains, placing urban members (*urbanos*) at a disadvantage due to their natural struggle with enduring clandestine hardships.

In essence, Vásquez’s personalist leadership within the ELN was deeply intertwined with the rituals and cult-like practices that he fostered. These elements not only reinforced his authority but also created a unique internal culture that both unified and divided the group. As the ELN evolved, these rituals became a double-edged sword, providing cohesion and a sense of purpose while simultaneously breeding suspicion and exclusion among its members. The cult of personality around Vásquez, coupled with the stringent codes of conduct, served to solidify his control but also sowed the seeds of internal discord. As Fabio Vásquez’s image increasingly lost legitimacy, the ELN *guerrilleros* favored more flexible positions regarding ideological matters, discipline, and internal treatment of opposition. Charisma within the ELN transitioned to being represented by Camilo Torres, whose name, virtues, and surrender to the revolution became a rule of thumb synthesized in rituals and commemorations that only became central in the early 1980s. In other words, the moral backbone of the ideal *guerrillero* was embodied in the attitudes of Camilo Torres and subsequent ELN leaders who refashioned the internal structure after Fabio Vásquez was decommissioned from political and logistical tasks. These new leaders, including Nicolás Rodríguez Bautista (Gabino) and Manuel Pérez, heralded the features that Fabio Vásquez dismissed and fostered narratives of his heroism in clear antagonism with Vásquez. This dispute, whether evident or not, represented the key transition for the epic of revolutionary struggle.

In light of those values and under the shadow cast by Vásquez, the ELN built rules that helped cohesion and set the group to transition from an early stage of leadership competition where personalistic attitudes grasped internal control. Such rules helped the ELN navigate stronger conditions, facing challenges represented by military operations, ideological disputes, and transformations related to territorial control and administrative interference at the local level. Despite these rules, the strong authoritarian tendencies discussed in Section 3 would eventually lead to the weakening of Vasquez’s effective leadership at the helm of the ELN.

5. Conclusions

This study highlighted the unique challenges and dynamics of Fabio Vásquez's personalist leadership during the formative years of the ELN. Examining personalist leadership within a revolutionary context offers a distinct perspective to studies that examine personalist leadership in political parties and post-revolutionary dictatorships. Personalist leaders working within party politics operate within established institutions, sometimes leaving certain roles intact, challenging others, and occasionally upending existing structures. This context provides a framework within which personalist leaders can maneuver, leveraging both their personal attributes and the formal roles afforded by the political system. In contrast, revolutionary leaders like Fabio Vásquez must create and maintain institutions from informal sectors without legal and/or politically sanctioned precedents, presenting distinct challenges in legitimacy, authority, and organization. This angle is also distinct from studies that explore post-revolutionary dictatorships led by personalist leaders. Most notably, personalist leaders navigating a dictatorship operate on a much larger scale compared to leaders managing an insurgent revolutionary movement [51].

Vásquez's leadership of the ELN exemplifies the complexities faced by personalist leaders outside conventional political structures. His ability to mobilize support relied heavily on personal charisma and grassroots connections rather than established political roles. This study reveals how Vásquez's personalist strategies evolved over time. Starting off with a mild authoritarianism, couched in charismatic leadership, to a strong authoritarianism that bred internal divisions and mistrust. Both strategies were crucial in shaping the ELN's early insurgency, highlighting the double-edged nature of personalism in revolutionary movements. While limited to the ELN's formative years, this case study opens avenues for further research into the nuances of personalist leadership in unconventional settings, providing a deeper understanding of how such leaders navigate the intricate balance of authority and cohesion in the absence of established political frameworks.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, A.R.V.; methodology, J.C.S.S.; formal analysis, J.C.S.S.; investigation, J.C.S.S.; resources, J.C.S.S. and A.R.V.; writing—original draft preparation, J.C.S.S.; writing—review and editing, A.R.V. and J.C.S.S.; All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: These authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ In this article there are conceptual intersections with Colgan and Weeks [5]. In particular, they discuss the role of revolutionary leaders noting that, "Revolutions are unlikely to succeed unless they are led by a charismatic, forceful, risk-tolerant, politically savvy, and ambitious leader, and these are precisely the types of individuals most likely to create personalist dictatorships" [5] (p. 185). Their focus, however, is on the relationship among revolutions, the emergence of personalist dictatorships, and subsequent international conflicts. It explores how post-revolutionary regimes that become personalist dictatorships are more prone to initiate international conflicts due to the nature of their leadership and lack of institutional constraints. Our analysis of the ELN focuses on the internal dynamics and leadership style of Fabio Vásquez within a specific revolutionary/insurgent movement. It is more about the personalist leadership style and its implications within the ELN rather than its impact on international conflict.
- ² See Lioy [12] for a survey of the literature from a global perspective.
- ³ Among the 27 students that traveled to Cuba, about eight members were separated to receive strenuous training; the small group included Victor Medina Morón, Roberto Reina, Espitia, Ricardo Lara and Martinez. See Castaño [15] (pp. 59, 64).
- ⁴ The *foco* strategy or *foquismo* was theorized by Regis Debray after the victory of Cuban rebels in 1959 based on small groups of armed rebels whose high revolutionary consciousness will help to spread dissent against the ruling regime sparking general insurrection. These armed rebels launch guerrilla warfare in attacks characterized by aiming at strategic points of the establishment in order to destabilize it. The *guerrilleros* will be the vanguard of this type of insurrectional mobilization that takes place initially in rural areas, spreading afterwards to urban settings. For a critical assessment of focalism in the ELN, see Arenas [14] (pp. 173–178).

- 5 All translations from Spanish to English are ours. See also Harnecker, [16] (p. 39). José Solano Sepulveda was a *guerrillero* with Rafael Rangel during *La Violencia*; Hernán Moreno Sánchez was a renowned Liberal chief in the vereda—local administrative unit—where the organization ELN started'. [18] (p. 32). Jaime Arenas was a student leader and urban ELN militant who later endured a trial within the ELN that led to his execution. His case is addressed later in this article.
- 6 An important figure at the local level was José Ayala, who was a militant of the liberal guerrilla offshoot led by Rafael Rangel's group that connected both the Luque and the Camacho family. They maintained bandit's practices, and some guerrilla-like activities, mostly in the Robin Hood style.' [18] (p. 32). Local integration of political groups overlapped administrative units (*veredas*), familiar bonds, and relations based on labor and acquaintance. Rangel as well as Guadalupe Salcedo were liberal leaders who rebelled during the widespread rural violence in the late 1940s, and shaped different regional expressions of dissent towards the central party's leaderships and their decisions.
- 7 Heliodoro Ochoa was a particular case of commitment in the ELN. As a student raised in rural Santander and a respected school teacher, he abandoned urban life to fully commit to the group. His rejection of mundane life is often highlighted within the ELN as a model of how revolutionary values should seamlessly integrate into daily existence. See [14] (p. 130) [18] (p. 34).
- 8 Arenas' describes Vásquez as: "Son of a humble working family, with peasant roots, he had a strong character, a well-defined and attractive personality" [14] (p. 22).
- 9 For instance, Nicolás Rodríguez recalls how during the initial march in mid-1964, Liberal peasants hosted them, in most cases old friends and political allies of Fabio Vásquez, or at least acquainted "We stayed there throughout the day chatting with Mr. Gonzalez. He was very enthusiastic about having his sons in the guerrilla, which made him remember the days when he was a guerrillero with Rafael Rangel. Mr. Gonzalez spoke a lot with Fabio Vásquez that day" [18] (p. 51). In other cases, the movements of the groups depended on recommendations among neighboring peasants.
- 10 Regarding local political connections and political affinities that involve Fabio Vasquez and further liberal leaders, see Diaz Jaramillo, [23]. On the early effects of political disenchantment with the Liberal traditional party, see Pantoja García, [24] (pp. 349–379).
- 11 The PCC was constantly persecuted during this epoch, and its participation in elections was radically limited to arrangements with the traditional political parties. The arrangements with Liberals were perceived as a betrayal, and angered militants that either joined the MRL, or radicalized moving to the rural areas to create insurgent *focos*. Their success was very limited, and fostered a rejection to both Communist strategies for popular integration, and attempts for guerrilla groups formed by students without military experience. [18] (pp. 28–30); [16] (pp. 46–50). About the PCC's strategy since the 1950's see [26] (pp. 21–39). For an analysis in depth see [24] (pp. 354–360).
- 12 For an in-depth analysis of the politics of leader assassination, see Sanchez, J.C. "Worshiping Leadership" [28]. The trends of official violence show a clear correlation with the systematic assassination of political leaders at the local level. Since 2016, this process has escalated to alarming levels in Colombian society, dismantling social bonds and intimidating communities. This violence has led to forced displacement and the relocation of people into deplorable conditions in urban and suburban areas across the country.
- 13 The UNEC, integrated under the same umbrella Liberal and communist leaders of the student movement, was formed in 1957 during the 1st National Student's Congress, in the context of the assassination of a student in a protest against the dictatorship of Gustavo Rojas Pinilla in Bogotá. It is important to note that this early organization refused the intervention of the military and the church in the definition of university government, proclaiming university's autonomy. For a complete study of the 1950's in terms of political opposition to the Frente Nacional, and the wide range of political groups, see Archila [29] and Archila, Cote, & Auge [30]. For a detailed narrative of the epoch, and the formation of a dictator into a populist alternative due in part to the lack of leaders and minimal allegiance to traditional parties see: Ayala [31] (pp. 46–107).
- 14 In 1959–1961 the UNEC did not resist the ideological debates and internal disputes and tore it apart, scattering groups that were not under the JUCO-PCC umbrella. The radicalization of left leaning groups in the late 1950's can be considered an example of how weak allegiances within/among opposition groups reflected inherent factionalism, and how leftist parties never consolidated authority. See Archila [33] (pp. 25–53). The JUCO coordinated the FUN, leaving the Vásquez brothers as pariahs blamed for factionalism—in fact, the split resulted from the intolerance of the JUCO for groups that did not adopt the line of PCC of mass mobilization. Fabio López suggests that factionalism can be considered in a close study of political culture in Colombia, that he undertakes partially in, López [34].
- 15 See Arango [38] (pp. 65–82) for a good example of how these narratives were shared among peasants regardless of their political affiliations. Similar narratives compiled by the author in Arango [39]. See also, Molano [40,41].
- 16 For an updated account and analysis of the already extensive literature on the early years of revolutionary struggle, see Pantoja [22] (Chapters 2 and 3). See also, Medina [18] and Sánchez Sierra [28]. Most narratives and interviews used as primary sources for the research in this article are historically situated within the early years in the ELN, in part due to the ritualization of writing and narrative practices within the guerrilla.

- 17 Nicolás Rodríguez Bautista, who rose to become the top commander of the ELN after the death of its founder, Fabio Vásquez, shared the following account in an interview with Carlos Medina Gallego: “There was something significant in this trial: given the facts, they were interpreted by the condemned, particularly by Heliodoro Ochoa, as making merits for the death penalty (...) This attitude was recurrent in other executions, when the condemned ratified as valid the decision to apply the maximum punishment.” [18] (pp. 97–98).
- 18 For a study in the symbolic aspects behind naming rituals and revolutionary baptism, see Sánchez Sierra [36] (pp. 307–309).
- 19 Most of the historiography has romanticized the ELN, in part as a shadow cast by the weight of the dispute of heroic status and the legacy that constantly reestablishes the mystic and revolutionary values as necessary rules of engagement within the ELN.
- 20 Since the literature review proposed in 2002, the output of research has developed a diversity of views among leadership, cult formation, internal justice and the particular representations of revolution. See Sanchez Sierra [44]. An analysis of three forms of justice in the relation to local communities engages practices that the ELN deployed since the mid 1960s can be found in Aguilera Peña [45] (pp. 171–202). Another example is the approach to Camilo Torres as a transformative figure in particular changing forms of understanding revolution, as well as it provides key elements on cult formation, belief within revolutionary movements, in Sánchez Lopera [46] (pp. 241–258). From a comparative perspective, in a 2010 analysis of the ELN historical representations as discursive practices where past appropriation shaped morals, symbols and political imaginaries on revolution, see Sanchez Sierra [36] (pp. 285–323). Finally, with the use of a new corpus and interpretations on classical historical sources for the study of the ELN, Pantoja sheds light upon personal archives of Fabio Vasquez, as well as the perspective from the intelligence services in Colombia and the United states, in a work that confirms the personalist domination gained by the leader, providing insight on the very disputes that shredded the guerrilla group in the 1970s, in Pantoja [22]. A complete balance of these among several other works of significance is already due; however, A review of the literature on Fabio Vasquez’s leadership confirms how personalistic leadership in the ELN had a heavy cost of several leaders such as Camilo Torres, Victor Medina, Jaime Arenas to name those closest to alternative leadership in extreme conditions of a *foco insurreccional*.
- 21 In the debate on ritual and institutional consolidation, Victor Turner suggest that a cult the occurs most commonly in early stages of power formation in a process that galvanizes specific moments instead of regular consolidated displays of power or commemorations of its trajectory and transitions, namely due to the fact that the transition from a liminal context to stable recreations that shape representations of the political and morality that goes beyond personalist support as it rely more in collectively institutions agree upon by a community; in other words, ritual tends to be ephemeral and its reproduction depends on the leader and their capacity to reproduce the ritual phase in everyday life [47]. Institutionalization becomes a protective mechanism that distances followers from leaders, mediating their relation in order to avoid aggression. The follower consecrates the veneration in a cult-like behavior. It is a mystic link, based on a progressive knowledge of the system of belief, its disclosure. Knowledge is administered, and also institutionalized via stages of enlightenment. There are power feedbacks, which sustain a social order based on distance, allegiance and restrictions of knowledge and language [49]. Those who want to transit to another stage place themselves into transit/passage, in processes highly ritualized. Rituals of passage, baptisms, funerals, liturgies based on a common doctrine, all are elements that constitute cult and solidify power relations informed/mediated by knowledge. The mechanisms of critique to the faith can be also part of the above mentioned safety valves. They can help the group to incorporate innovations that can consolidate the social support and incorporate changes in time. The processes of critique can also become part of the cult, as a form to celebrate the capacity of the regime to transform itself without using repression [49].
- 22 About vertical obedience, “One of the mistakes that led to the crisis was the personalistic direction. Among other things, the appointed superior responsible is always responsible for any other group, and the same for its subordinates. . . everything was too vertical. Fabio was the one that decided. And when he was not present, it reproduced a top down schema, pure vertical obedience. The principal cadres gave their opinions, but it was the responsible who decided everything” [17] (p. 130).
- 23 A Consejo de Guerra was an internal trial used to assess and punish misconducts or possible betrayals from militants in the ELN. The origin of its use in the ELN is not clear, but after Simacota’s siege several peasants were assassinated by the group, making it its first *fusilamiento* death squad on record, at least on the information studied for this research. For this case, it is very likely that the decision was taken by Fabio Vásquez, after consulting other *guerrilleros*. However, the consejos de Guerra seems to have become a mechanism to resolve crises, and they resemble quotidian meetings and assemblies used to maintain the cohesion in the warfront. Medardo Correa offered an interesting description of one in 1971–1972, and also the emotional reactions the decisions caused, particularly in relation to the motto NUPALOM (*Ni Un Paso Atrás, Liberación o Muerte*, No step back, freedom or death). “Transformed the assembly into a revolutionary trial, we moved to the defendant’s seat six or seven people linked to the conspiracy against revolution. They received pressure to accept the charges, telling them that my confession was exemplary. One of the incriminated in an emotional outburst swore for all the revolutionary martyrs that never crossed his mind the idea of abandoning the armed struggle, and in a brave move asked me publicly if I recall any proposition for defecting” Correa [43] (p. 133).

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