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Medellín's Strange Bedfellows Transform the City



Cornell University's Mary Roldán

Photo credit: Jebediah Koogler '10

9.24.06 - Medellín, the second largest city in Colombia, was once considered one of the most dangerous places in the world. Home to the infamous Pablo Escobar and his international drug trafficking ring, in the 1990s it had one of the highest homicide rates of any city outside of a war zone. Against all odds, Medellín has now become a safe and bustling economic center. Speaking at the Watson Institute recently, Mary Roldán, an associate professor of history at Cornell University, analyzed these changes and the factors that have led to Medellín's dramatic transformation.

Roldán, whose family is from Colombia, has extensively studied and written about Medellín. She describes the city's recent changes as dramatic. The local government has invested heavily in public works and social services. An improved transportation system, new parks, libraries, and better health services are some of the results of which it boasts. Medellín's economy has also improved, leading South America as the region's largest textile exporter.

It is not only the government that is bringing changes to Medellín, however. A paramilitary group, the apparent winner of years of violent turf war, has established its control over parts of the city. These paramilitaries, Roldán said, often act as the de-facto police force, ensuring public order and carrying out harsh punishments against those who defy their authority. As a result, homicides have dropped considerably. Medellín's murder rate is now comparable to both Detroit and Baltimore.

The relationship between the local government and the paramilitaries is uneasy at best, Roldán said. Yet it is their combined efforts that have led to many of Medellín's social and economic changes. A ruthless police force led by the paramilitaries and a visionary social program from local authorities has transformed the city from what it used to be.

This talk was the first in Watson's "Illicit Flows Speaker Series."

Submitted by Watson Institute Student Rapporteur Jebediah Koogler '10

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