

Origin and evolution of the Communist Party of Peru – Shining Path (1980–1992)

During the Cold War, Latin America saw the emergence of what was known as the Latin American New Left, inspired by the success of the Cuban Revolution (1959) and a revolutionary praxis that was, by extension, disruptive and violent towards the political status quo of the continent, breaking away from the old dogma of accumulating electoral strength of communist-inspired party formations. It would go through different stages and modulate very heterogeneous ways of conceiving the conquest of political power, harbouring more than a hundred armed movements and guerrillas which, with the exception of Cuba and Nicaragua (1979), in most cases would move between military defeat and, only in some cases, political negotiation with their respective governments.

As a result of the above, the Communist Party of Peru – Shining Path (PCP-SL) was an armed organisation whose embryonic seed can be found in the Sino-Soviet split of 1962. This event forced the the former Communist Party of Peru (PCP), created by José Carlos Mariátegui in 1928, had to split into the PCP-Unidad, with a pro-Soviet majority, and the PCP-Bandera Roja (PCP-BR), with a pro-Chinese orientation and strongly influenced by the Maoist revolution. Among its main supporters was a young philosophy professor at the National University of San Cristóbal de Huamanga (UNSCH), Abimael Guzmán, who would eventually become known as “President Gonzalo”.

From the mid-1960s onwards, and following two trips to China in 1965 and 1967, taking advantage of the turmoil and neglect that was taking place in the province of Ayacucho, the original structure of *Bandera Roja* (Red Flag) and, specifically, the group known as the *Fracción Roja* (Red Faction), became increasingly radicalised and purged under the leadership of Guzmán¹. It also took advantage of its growing area of influence, which was boosted by student protests and the deep-rooted structural violence in the poorest region of the country. Little by little, the seeds of what would become Sendero Luminoso in 1970 were consolidated, thanks in particular to the instrumentalisation of an idea of armed, violent and anti-democratic revolution whose revolutionary subject was the Indian-peasant-*Quechua-speaking*, albeit in the service of the working class and never for any indigenous emancipation project². The key was to put an end to a Creole and capitalist

¹ DEGREGORI, Carlos I. *El surgimiento de Sendero Luminoso. Ayacucho, 1969-1979*, Lima, Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 1990.

² RÍOS, Jerónimo. “Sendero Luminoso: Una apología de la violencia”. *Revista de Cultura de Paz*, 2 (2018), 277–294.

state, with a feudal and colonial base, which was theorised and founded on the local educational institution and stirred up by an unshakeable, internalised historical hatred.

What began as a few dozen completely radicalised individuals, and since the late 1970s, staunch devotees of the *thanatophilic* messianism evoked by Guzmán within the PCP-SL, would end up becoming more than 1,000 armed men—as part of the People's Guerrilla Army—and thousands more militants and acolytes of a popular revolution characterised by terrorism and a certain degree of territorial control, but which never resorted to conventional forms of armed confrontation³. Guzmán, thanks to the work of his first wife and number two in the PCP-SL, Augusta La Torre, 'Comrade Norah', would (self-)elevate himself, from the early 1980s onwards, as the fourth sword of communism, placing himself on the same level as Karl Marx, Vladimir I. Lenin and Mao Tse-Tung⁴.

In other words, Guzmán theorised about the need for a violent revolution, which would last for decades and leave hundreds of thousands of deaths, based on a kind of orthodox, uncritical and unthinking dogmatism, in which Mariátegui's former path was personified in favour of the unquestionable Abimael. After its first armed action on 17 May 1980, when ballot boxes were burned in the Ayacucho municipality of Chuschi, the day before Peru returned to democracy, the Shining Path's revolutionary terror spread rapidly throughout numerous municipalities in the mountainous corridor of the provinces of Ayacucho and Huancavelica.

While the weak local institutions representing the state were easily supplanted by popular committees, curfews and the imposition of Shining Path rules of conduct, there were hundreds of acts of terrorism, especially against the country's energy and financial infrastructure. On the other hand, between 1981 and 1983, the state faced serious difficulties in identifying and confronting the Shining Path enemy, leaving a vulnerable segment of the civilian population caught in the crossfire, immobilised by political violence that ultimately claimed nearly 70,000 lives⁵.

Even though between 1983 and 1987 the number of deaths and disappearances intensified, and the framework of political violence and terrorism on the part of Shining

³ AZNAR, Federico. *La guerra. Teoría para comprender los conflictos del siglo XX*, Madrid, El Viejo Topo, 2024.

⁴ RONCAGLILO, Santiago. *La cuarta espada: la historia de Abimael Guzmán y Sendero Luminoso*, Madrid, Debate, 2007.

⁵ COMISIÓN DE LA VERDAD Y RECONCILIACIÓN. *Informe Final de la Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación en el Perú*, Lima, CVR, 2003.

Path moved towards a gradual defeat, this was largely due to the improved counterinsurgency response by the state and greater civil-military collaboration. With the PCP-SL focused almost entirely on Lima between 1988 and 1992, there was a leap forward, with the violent structure seeking to increase its activism and notoriety in the capital, exponentially increasing the number of armed actions⁶. This gamble would prove to be directly proportional to the improved capabilities of the state, both in terms of police and military forces and intelligence. In fact, thanks to this, and after more than 35,000 deaths directly attributable to Sendero, its entire leadership, including Abimael Guzmán himself, ended up being arrested during Alberto Fujimori's government in September 1992⁷.

The Communist Party of Peru – Shining Path after the arrest of Abimael Guzmán (1992–1999)

Shining Path was one of the most violent armed groups of the so-called Latin American New Left. It carried out daily acts of violence with the utmost radicalism, which even led to very difficult relations with other guerrilla groups of the time, both outside Peru and with the Túpac-Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA)⁸.

From the end of 1992, once Guzmán had been captured, the process of decomposition of the former effectiveness of the Shining Path accelerated. This was particularly pressing in the city and forced the *reterritorialisation* of any hint of violent activity, in order to occupy areas that were more hostile to the state's response and, by extension, more inaccessible. This was the case with the country's two main coca-growing enclaves, which, incidentally, offered a certain degree of security for the illicit income from the drug trade: the Upper Huallaga Valley (VAH) and the Apurímac, Ene and Mantaro River Valley (VRAEM). This process is also taking place in parallel with a sharp weakening of Shining Path identity among those who belonged to the organisation after 1992. It also coincided with a civilian population that was increasingly collaborative with the security forces—at the height of

⁶ Wills, María Emma. "Peru's Failed Search for Political Stability (1968-2000)". *Crisis State Programme LSE*, (1), (2003): 1-38.

⁷ RÍOS, Jerónimo. *Historia de la violencia en Perú, 1962-2015*, Madrid, Sílex Ediciones, 2024.

⁸ RÍOS, Jerónimo y GARCÍAS DE LAS HERAS, Mariano. *Guerrillas in Latin America. Cycles of Political Violence, State Responses and Transnational Developments*, Berlín, Springer, 2026

Fujimorism—and a legislation of repentance, aimed at favouring Shining Path demobilisation, and the greater difficulty in carrying out terrorist actions⁹.

The Shining Path's strongholds, fragmented territorially in the northern and southern Andes, were also frustrated by the impossibility of continuing to preserve the people's war in Peru as it had been validated at the Third Meeting of the Central Committee, organised in Lima before the “capture of the century”. The reason lay in Guzmán's apparent willingness to collaborate, which was a far cry from the violent dogmatism he had displayed prior to his capture. So much so that the new Shining Path structure, led by ‘Comrade Feliciano,’ did not know whether to frame the change in ‘President Gonzalo's’ discourse as the result of possible torture or as crude manipulation by Fujimori's propaganda machine. The truth is that, with fewer members and fewer resources, they had to coexist with an organisation that was less ideological and more porous in the face of the state's anti-terrorist actions¹⁰.

The secrecy surrounding the identity of Shining Path leaders had been shattered, and their methods of recruitment and violent action had to be reconsidered due to infiltration by Peruvian intelligence, the Shining Path's own mistakes, and the work of the security forces, which continued to deal significant blows to the Shining Path organisation in the capital between 1992 and 1995.

Along with the dismantling of Sendero's urban apparatus, by the mid-1990s, its architecture of ‘generated apparatuses’ had also been dismantled, which had been nourished by members and supporters from certain sectors affiliated with the PCP-SL: the *Diario* newspaper, the Association of Democratic Lawyers and *Socorro Popular* (Popular Relief) – the latter, for Guzmán, even more important than the Lima Metropolitan Committee¹¹. Therefore, the spatial reconfiguration of the Shining Path stronghold, as a means of survival, would end up being conditioned by its continued presence in the inhospitable VAH and VRAEM regions, even more so due to the strategic arrests of Shining Path members involved in actions against the Southern Zone Committee, organised in Arequipa, or the Northern Regional Committee.

⁹ JIMÉNEZ, Benedicto. *Inicio, desarrollo y ocaso del terrorismo en el Perú: El abc de Sendero Luminoso y el MRTA ampliado y comentado*, Lima, Ediciones 2000, 2000.

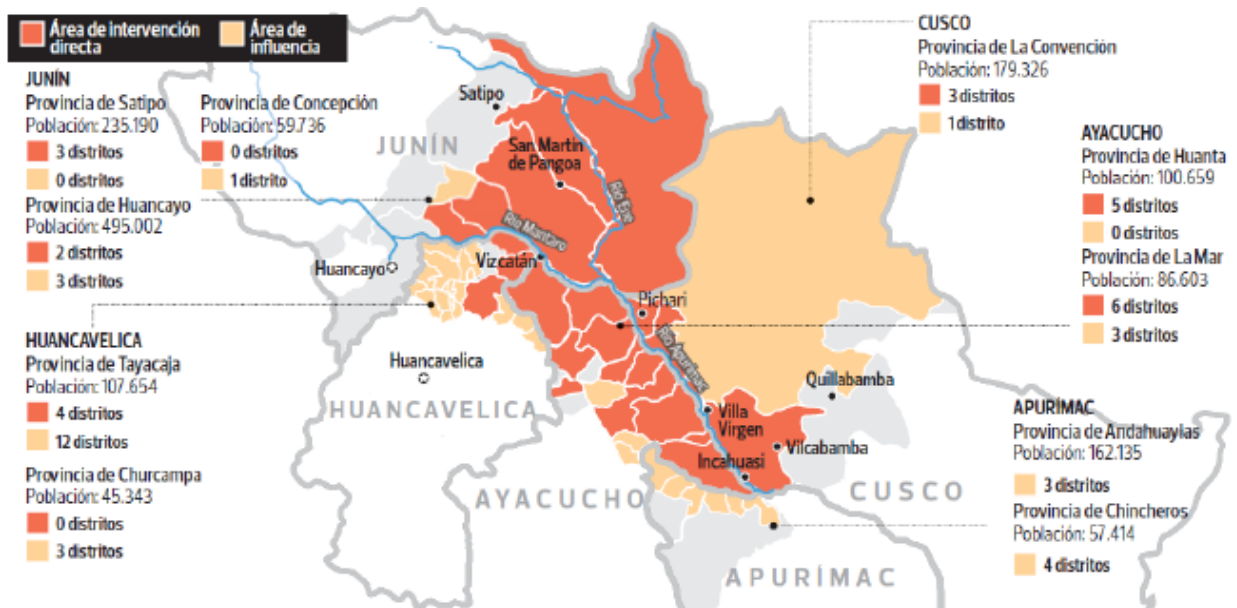
¹⁰ RÍOS, Jerónimo. “Sendero Luminoso: teoría y práctica en el ejercicio de la violencia política (1964-1992)”. *Cuadernos de Historia Contemporánea*, 47(2), (2025): 457-478.

¹¹ COMISIÓN PERMANENTE DE HISTORIA DEL EJÉRCITO DEL PERÚ. *En honor a la verdad*, Lima, CHEP, 2012.

The Communist Party of Peru – Shining Path at the turn of the century (1999–2012)

In 1999, under difficult operational circumstances, ‘Comrade Feliciano’ was arrested. He had become the organisation’s third-in-command and was the only senior Shining Path leader not arrested in the operation carried out in Lima against the PCP-SL leadership in September 1992¹². That same year, the terrorist organisation had to decide whether to continue with its violent project or, on the contrary, to abandon it. In other words, orthodoxy and revisionism ended up colliding. From this strategic antagonism, led by ‘Comrade Feliciano,’ “Proseguir” emerged, which, as its name implies, accepted as its starting point that the conditions that justified the ‘start of the armed struggle’ in 1980 were unalterable.

Map of Shining Path's area of influence in the VRAEM in 2013



Source: PCM (2013)

Starting from this context, in reality, meant distancing oneself from Guzmán's discourse, who, at that time, and after seven years in prison, accepted the unviability of any violent project and, with it, the need for a ‘political solution to the problems arising from the war.’ Close to this approach was the controversial Movement for Amnesty and Fundamental

¹² Ibidem, p. 262.

Rights (MOVAREF), which was, *de facto*, the political arm of a negotiated solution and which, as an armed expression, maintained proximity to the Shining Path stronghold in the Upper Huallaga Valley (VAH). Opposing both would be the VRAEM faction, following the capture of ‘Feliciano,’ led and transformed by the Quispe Palomino clan¹³.

As will be detailed below, the hostile, peripheral jungle conditions of the VRAEM provided an ideal space for what would eventually be renamed the Militarised Communist Party of Peru (MPCP). Led by brothers Víctor and Jorge Quispe Palomino, and without ‘Feliciano’ as a possible successor, they pushed for greater distancing from the Shining Path leadership imprisoned in Callao. They believed that all of them, especially Guzmán, had betrayed the legacy and the revolutionary cause. In this way, they invoke, not without distortion, the figure of Mariátegui and a false democratic fervour, as revealed by the words of Jorge Quispe, alias ‘Comrade Raúl’, in 2010:

(...) our revolution is not a copy of the Chinese revolution. Being a Marxist today means democracy, uniting and listening to the people (...) Above all, we, as members of the Party, agree that Gonzalo should be eliminated for the enormous damage he has done to humanity. Because he has ruined, let's say, the leadership of a revolution that could have been in a different position in this fight against the enemy¹⁴

This MPCP, a perfect evocation of a clear post-Senderismo movement, continued to resort to Marxist rhetoric at the turn of the century, although it was devoid of any hint of a political project and strongly associated with illicit businesses operating in and from the VRAEM. Similar to some criminal groups in Colombia, such as Los Pelusos in the Catatumbo region, in 2015, before the killing of ‘Megateo’, the coca business was used by the Quispe Palomino clan to involve the civilian population, protecting and encouraging illicit cultivation. It also organised its transport, although it gave priority to its presence in the processing and distribution links, in collaboration with both local and foreign cartels.

On another note, the insurgent approach that the VRAEM faction has been advocating since the early 2000s would involve questioning the tactical approach led by Guzmán with regard to his revolutionary enterprise. Thus, moving from the Ayacucho and Andean periphery to the centre of Lima – which, in reality, happened because of its military defeat in 1987 – meant that the MPCP had to abandon the competitive advantages offered by

¹³ DÍAZ, Daniela. “El Perú y sus múltiples Sendero Luminoso”. *Relaciones Internacionales*, 24(49), (2015): 51-75.

¹⁴ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qezdjTwHn3I>

the jungle, which, incidentally, were more in line with the group's Maoist inspiration. In this regard, read the following words from 2010, by 'Comrade Raúl':

Mariátegui founded our party with the aim of carrying out the revolution. But Mariátegui died in 1930 and the process for which it was established was already being diverted. In 1980, Gonzalo [Abimael Guzmán] began the armed struggle. Our party had become militarised, but from the outset there had been deviations. Gonzalo's left-wing opportunism led to right-wing opportunism, capitulating in 1992 because the people were already persecuting them and they had no choice but to surrender. Gonzalo planned his capture and developed policies in collusion with the state and the CIA, revisionist policies with the Peace Agreement. In 1999, Feliciano capitulated on 14 July, and for the Party, this represented the purging of Gonzalo's revisionism. From 1999 onwards, the revolution has been developing within our Party with Party members¹⁵

“Comrade Artemio” and the strategic importance of the VAH (1999–2012)

In opposition to the VRAEM group, since the capture of “Feliciano,” led by the Quispe Palomino clan, another offshoot of Shining Path has emerged, operating in a second theatre of operations, also jungle-like, peripheral and coca-growing, known as the VAH. Important military operations have been carried out in this region since the mid-1990s, although the PCP-SL has been present there since the previous decade.

Even during the leadership of Abimael Guzmán, the regional committee led by 'Comrade Artemio' had settled in this area. Since the early 1990s, some reports from the National Directorate Against Terrorism (DIRCOTE) have counted more than 500 attacks and 1,000 deaths—mostly of police and military personnel—attributable to this offshoot of Sendero. In fact, the Peruvian state sophisticated a large part of its counterinsurgency operations against the new post-Abimael Shining Path in the VAH rather than in the VRAEM. This involved both an intensification in the number of police and military operations and the search for new forms of counterinsurgency, involving the civilian population in various intelligence, social control and reward activities. As a result, between 2006 and 2010, important figures associated with the new PCP-SL, such as 'Comrade Clay,' 'Comrade JL,' 'Comrade Julián,' 'Comrade Piero' and 'Comrade Rubén,' were arrested or killed.

¹⁵ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qezdjTwHn3I>

‘Artemio’, who initially disagreed with Abimael Guzmán's initial conciliatory positions once he was captured, realigned himself with the position of a possible, albeit impossible, peace agreement with Fujimorism. However, he justified this by saying that the ‘armed struggle’ would continue as long as MOVADEF's demands for amnesty, pardon and political openness were not met. In other words, highlighting the clear divergence between the followers of Sendero in the VRAEM and those in the VAH. In fact, months before his arrest, ‘Artemio’ referred to the Quispe Palomino clan in these words:

My position is one of dissociation, repudiation, rejection and condemnation of this mercenary group in the VRAE, led by these two mercenaries [the Quispe Palomino brothers] [...] They have generated an anti-leadership, anti-party, anti-Maoist, anti-Gonzalo thought, anti-revolution and anti-people position. We do not agree with their position at all¹⁶.

As part of the counter-terrorism operations carried out in the VAH between 2010 and 2012, priority was given to locations such as the municipalities of Puente Chino, Pumahuasi, Angasyacu and Tocache. The greatest success was the arrest of “Artemio” himself, who, like “Feliciano” before him, was betrayed by some of his fellow militants. This led to his conviction and life imprisonment on charges of terrorism, drug trafficking and money laundering. This was no trivial matter, not only because it marked a turning point in the state's improved control over illegal activities in the VAH, but also because, symbolically, it meant the fall of the last remaining member of the former Central Committee of the Shining Path. This, together with the proliferation of new forms of crime associated with drug trafficking and other illegal practices, such as deforestation, would lead to further arrests of the short-lived successors to ‘Artemio’, such as ‘Comrade Freddy’ and ‘Comrade Brony’¹⁷. This would also consummate the highly dependent drift towards the drug trade that Shining Path tried to minimise during the 1980s and which ended up being equally notorious in other guerrilla groups in the region, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP) or the National Liberation Army (ELN) of Colombia.

¹⁶ See the interview with ‘Artemio’ conducted by journalists Gustavo GORRITI and Romina MELLA, available at: <https://www.idl-reporteros.pe/sendero-y-el-narcotrafico/>

¹⁷ In this regard, it is worth highlighting the impact of operations such as ‘Caudillo 2014’, which would result in the dismantling of the last remaining leaderships, as was the case with ‘Comrade Ítalo’ and ‘Comrade Yoel’.

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Since 2012, therefore, it can be said, and this is attested to by reports from the Ministry of the Interior, DIRANDRO and the Joint Command of the Armed Forces, that the Shining Path's presence in the VAH has disappeared, with no sign of continuity. This fact does not, however, imply the disappearance of other residual expressions of organised crime that, in the past, even confronted *Sendero* for control of the profits from illicit business or simply operated as clans of peasants converted to drug trafficking, which is the main criminal attraction in the region. Such was the case, among others, of the Gabino, Mashico and Braulio clans in Aucayacu, with their chemical products business and coca base stockpiling, and their control of the drug routes to Tingo María or Tocache; the Chalis in Aguaytía and Padre Abad, controlling laboratories and logistics for cocaine shipments to Brazil and Bolivia; or the 'Pepe Calderón Monteza' clan in Yanajanca or 'Miguel Villegas' clan in Pucayacu, also involved in drug transport and local extortion.

Map of land routes for drug shipments from the VAH



Source: IDL-Reporters (2012)

The Militarised Communist Party of Peru and the Quispe Palomino family in the VRAEM (2012-2026)

At the same time as the Peruvian state was attacking the Shining Path faction of the VAH, the VRAEM had been consolidating its position since the beginning of the last decade as the main threat to national security, largely as a result of organised crime originating from the Quispe Palomino clan. As previously noted, between the mid-2000s and the early years of the following decade, this post-Shining Path faction organised itself thanks to the strong roots of Víctor Quispe Palomino ('Comrade José') in the Ayacucho region, where he was a prominent member of the Shining Path in the 1980s. Alongside him, the core group was made up of Orlando Borda (alias 'Comrade Alipio') as head of armed operations, Jorge Quispe Palomino (alias 'Comrade Raúl') as ideologue, and Marco Antonio Quispe Palomino (alias 'Comrade Gabriel') as political leader. Together, they formed a Central Committee that operated primarily in three clearly defined areas of influence in the VRAEM: the northern region, bordering Junín; the southern region, which reaches Cuzco via Vilcabamba; and the central region, which includes the Ayacucho jungle in the province of La Mar. This is a hostile geographical area covering 12,000 km², ranging in altitude from 500 to 3,000 metres, where there are up to 500 settlements with a population of more than 100,000 out of a total of half a million people living in the entire region. Extreme poverty levels are also found there, reaching up to three times the national average.

Clear evidence of his activism were several violent incidents, including the ambush that claimed the lives of 13 members of the armed forces in Sanabamba (Ayacucho) in April 2009; and the kidnapping, in April 2012, of 36 hostages from the Swedish company Skanka and the Peruvian company *Construcciones Modulares*, both contractors for an international gas consortium, near the Camisea gas field in south-eastern Peru. Similarly, before the 2016 presidential elections, on 9 April, the same post-Shining Path faction in the VRAEM attacked a military patrol on its way to Matichaca (Junín), leaving ten soldiers and two civilians dead. In 2017, the main attacks by the MPCP took place again in the VRAEM, in towns such as Curumpiaria (Ayacucho), Luricocha (Huanta) and Churcampa and Tayacaja (Huancavélica), where dozens of members of the Peruvian security forces have also been killed.

In response to this armed harassment, various operations were carried out in the VRAEM between 2010 and 2019, with August 2013 being a key moment thanks to the deployment of the so-called 'Operation Chameleon,' which resulted in the killing of numbers 2 and 4 ('Alipio' and "Gabriel") of the post-Shining Path group. Although the group has continued to reorganise, albeit in an increasingly fragile manner, it has had to overcome the blows it has suffered, keeping 'Comrade Raúl' at the head of the military faction and 'Comrade José' at the head of the political faction. The former, however, was killed by the Armed Forces in an operation in January 2021, and the latter was seriously wounded in August 2022 as part of Operation Patriota.

The truth is that the group has been reducing its number of armed members from 500 to 350 over the last decade¹⁸ and, at present, it is estimated that there may be fewer than 50 armed men, mainly present in the Vizcatán del Ene – Llochegua – Mantaro Alto axis. This is thanks to a series of operations aimed at dismantling drug trafficking in the VRAEM and, specifically, dismantling a structure that has maintained connections, in the transnational organised crime chain, with the Mexican Sinaloa cartel or with the First Capital Command (PCC) and the Red Command (CV) in Brazil. The successes achieved after the aforementioned operations Camaleón (August 2013), Tenaz (October 2017) and Patriota (August 2022) are proof of this. In fact, the latter operation alone mobilised 36 military patrols, 14 helicopters and 12 bomber aircraft, which succeeded in killing around 15 members of the MPCP¹⁹

Currently, the VRAEM continues to be the main source of organised crime in the country, although post-Shining Path groups have significantly weakened their central position to the point of becoming marginalised and ostracised. Attacks and other violent acts have been declining due to a lack of resources and capabilities, although this group was still blamed in 2021 for the massacre in San Miguel del Ene (Vizcatán del Ene), which left 16 people dead, including women and children, and was attributed to the cell commanded by 'Raúl'²⁰.

¹⁸ NIÑO, César. "Post-senderismo, meta-seguridad y meta-violencia peruana en el caso VRAEM". *Araucaria. Revista Iberoamericana de Filosofía, Política, Humanidades y Relaciones Internacionales*, 22(43), (2018): 349-365. RÍOS, Jerónimo. "Una mirada territorial de la lucha armada: las FARC-EP y Sendero Luminoso". *Geopolítica(s). Revista de estudios sobre espacio y poder*, 11(1), (2020): 119-143.

¹⁹ See: <https://www.infobae.com/america/peru/2022/08/22/operacion-patriota-asi-fue-el-exitoso-operativo-militar-que-desmantelo-campamento-del-lider-terrorista-jose-en-el-vraem/>

²⁰ See: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-57235704>

As a result of all the above, in the last five years the MPCP has lost its status as a national insurgent organisation and now operates as little more than a small local drug trafficking gang, along with many others that are currently targeted by Peruvian security policy. It is estimated that the survivor 'José' may continue with a few trusted and close associates, operating in specific ravines in Vizcatán del Ene, Mantaro Alto and San Martín de Pangoa, but subject to constant change due to pressure from the VRAEM Special Command and the use of drones and special combat units. This is a reality that may sooner rather than later bring an end to the cycle of lethal violence that, through the proclamation of Shining Path, has left tens of thousands of deaths, wounded and missing in various ways.

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