

Filling the gap: the *Colombo arabes* emergence as political actors in Barranquilla and the Caribbean region

Llenando el vacío: la irrupción de los Colombo-Arabes como actores políticos en Barranquilla y la región del Caribe

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Abstract

This article aims to present through an exploratory research a first preliminary political history of the participation of the Colombian Arabs in local, regional and national politics, with a special focus on the city of Barranquilla and the Colombian Caribbean region. It mainly focuses on the period of time that goes from the 1950s until the end of the 1980s, which is considered as the missing link in order to understand the full involvement of the third generation of the descendants of Arab origins in the political life of the city and the region. These ages were analyzed through the local press, along with the data of the Registraduría Nacional on the local and national elections between 1958 and 1986. The second generation of Arab migrants did not involve massively in politics in these ages, but some figures among them took advantages of the economic crisis and political vacuum in the city in order to achieve important positions of power as local or national representatives.

Palabras clave: Colombian Arabs, Migration, Political History, Barranquilla, Caribbean Region.

Resumen

Este artículo tiene como objetivo presentar, a través de una investigación exploratoria, una preliminar historia política de la participación de los colombo-árabes en la política local, regional y nacional, con un enfoque especial en la ciudad de Barranquilla y la región Caribe colombiana. El artículo se centra principalmente en la época que va desde los años cincuenta hasta finales de la década de 1980. Esta se considera como el eslabón perdido para entender la plena participación de la tercera generación de los descendientes de origen árabe en la vida política de la ciudad y la región. Estas décadas fueron analizadas a través de la prensa local, junto con los datos de la Registraduría Nacional respecto a las elecciones locales y nacionales entre 1958 y 1986. La segunda generación de inmigrantes árabes no se involucró masivamente en política, pero algunos tomaron ventaja de la crisis económica y del vacío político en la ciudad con el fin de alcanzar posiciones importantes de poder como representantes locales o nacionales.

Keywords: Colombo-árabes, migraciones, historia política - Barranquilla, Región Caribe.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s around 11% of the senators of the Congress of the Republic of Colombia had Lebanese-Syrian and Palestinian origins (Fawcett, 1991: 21). Of these, 8 out of 25 members of the Chamber of Representatives elected in the Atlantic coast Departments had an Arab family name, and around 41% of the senators of the Liberal Party also had Arab origins (Vargas, 2006). Later, in 2006, the senators of Arab origins elected in the Caribbean Departments represented almost the 11% of the total, while around 8% of the representatives of the Chamber were too of Arab origins (Vargas, 2011, 215). Among descendants of Arab origins, Gabriel Turbay pioneered their involvement in national politics already around the 1920s and reached the climax with the election as President of the Republic of Julio Cesar Turbay in 1978. Other descendants of the first wave of Arab migrants started a political career in the 1950s and 1960s, especially in the Caribbean region, like Name, Tarud, Abuchaibe and Slebi. Some of these family names, like Name and Abuchaibe, are still nowadays in the political arena and they were joined at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s by new figures like the Char family, Segebre, Escaff, Bendek and Amin. Nowadays the city of Barranquilla and the Departments of the Caribbean region are the places where most of these individuals from Arab descent, and especially their extended families, achieved an extraordinary power on a political but also on economical level.

Considering the fact that among the descendants of the other migrant communities who reached Colombia since the 19th Century nothing similar happened, these numbers and data represent an important starting point for several research interrogatives. What has changed from the ethnically motivated insults against Turbay's candidacy to the presidency in the 1940s to the time when descendants of Arab migrants entered the political arena, especially in the Caribbean region, and slowly became a new elite? How was the evolution of the Arab descendants from the condition of rejection lived by their parents to their full emergence as a powerful and consolidate elite in the political and economic sphere?

This article takes its start from these interrogatives and it aims to write through an exploratory research a first preliminary political history of the participation of the Colombian Arabs in local, regional and national politics, with a special focus on the city of Barranquilla and the Colombian Caribbean region.¹ Barranquilla and the Colombian Caribbean Coast has been the main entrance for the first generation of migrants at the end of the 19th Century, mainly through the ports of Santa Marta, Cartagena and Puerto Colombia, in the outskirts of Barranquilla. Many of these migrants settled in different towns and cities around the region since the first decades of the 20th Century (Fawcett & Posada Carbó, 1998, p. 7). Many migrants and descendants of Arab origins resettled later in the city of Barranquilla due especially to the peculiar social and economical opportunities offered by the city, which has always been the regional centre for business, market and industry.

Previous studies on foreign and Arab colonies contribution to Barranquilla and the Coast stopped with few publications that covered this topic until the 1930s and the 1940s, leaving a gap in order to understand the evolution within the society of the Arab migrants and their descendants.² For this reason, this article aims to consider the already existent studies on Arab migrants contributions until these decades, but it will mainly focus on the period of time that goes from the 1950s until the end of the 1980s. This period is to be considered here as the missing link in order to understand the full involvement of the descendants of Arab origins in the political life of the city and the region. In order to do so it was analyzed the local press, like the *Diario del Caribe*, *La Prensa* and *El Heraldo*, along with the data of the Registraduría Nacional on the local and national elections between 1958 and 1986.

¹ Considering the lack of works and studies on this topic in Colombia, this is to be considered an exploratory research which hopes to open the space for more research on Arab descendants involvement in politics and their role in the Caribbean region. Indeed it is not possible to find monographs or books on this specific topic, but just short chapters in some of the works cited in the bibliography.

² A representative of this literature is the work of Posada Carbó and Fawcett. With few exceptions, those studies concerning the political history of the Caribbean region and Barranquilla mainly concern the first half of the 20th Century.

This is due in order to identify those individuals with an Arab family name who participated and were elected as members of the regional Assembly and the city Council, along with the representatives of the Chamber and the Senate. On one side, the analysis of the press has been useful in order to understand how the ages between the 1950s and the 1980s opened the space for Colombian Arabs to get a prominent role in the actual society. On the other side, it was of particular importance in order to know the composition of the lists presented for the elections.³ Finally, and in order to complete a narrative on the evolution of the Arab colony, it will provide a brief overview of the actual presence of Colombian Arabs in Barranquilla and the Caribbean region politics.⁴ The studies on the political history of migrant communities and their evolution within the society are almost completely missing in Colombia. For this reason it will be necessary to dedicate the first part of this article to an analysis of the state of the art of the studies on Colombian Arabs and their process of evolution in other Latin American countries. Specifically, the analysis of the studies on Arab descendants political involvement in Latin America will help identify some variables to be used for the Colombian case. The variables will allow on one side to offer a comparative perspective on the issue and on the other side to advance some final considerations on the reasons behind the Arab descendants involvement in politics in the Colombian case.

For these reasons this exploratory research presents different aims and goals. On one side, it wants to open a field of study on the history, evolution and political participation of the Colombian Arabs and the descendants of other foreign colonies, especially in relation with the

³ There are two main issues at stake with the identification of Arab descendants by family name, which is considered here as still the main form to recognize a person of Arab origins. On one side, it is necessary to consider that some Arab migrants who reached Colombia had their name and family name changed by migration officers. On the other side, it is necessary to consider that the first generation of Arab migrants voluntarily abandoned part of their culture, first of all the language transmission to following generations, in order to achieve full integration into society.

⁴ In order to have a better narrative of these ages, the article is based too on some informal interviews with key members of the Arab descendants community and personalities in Barranquilla.

city of Barranquilla. Specifically, this article wants to delineate a first general political history of the evolution of Arab migrants and their descendants from the initial stage, characterized by episodes of low-level racism, toward their evolution as political and economic elites and their political involvement in Barranquilla, the Caribbean region and the national level. The importance of this exploratory study lies in the consideration that political participation is to be considered as the last step in the process of integration of the members of a foreign community to the society of migration.

2. THE COLOMBIAN ARAB COMMUNITY: BETWEEN GENERAL DATA AND APOLOGETIC LITERATURE

In 1991 Louise Fawcett published the study on the Arab migrants in Colombia mentioning the lack of research on this topic. More than twenty years after Fawcett's publication, the amount of studies on Arab migrants in Colombia did not considerably increase. Fawcett has been, along with her husband Posada Carbó, one of the few scholars who researched on the Arabs in Colombia and the Caribbean region with a proper academic and scientific standard. The work of Fawcett and Posada Carbó is to be considered a milestone in consideration of the recollection of data around the first Arab migrants arrival and their first involvement in the society until the decade of the 1930s and the 1940s, but leaving a gap in the studies on their following evolution.

Indeed it looks discouraging the lack of works on the role and evolution of the Colombian Arab community who, more than other colonies, have achieved a certain importance and influence in the political, economic and social life of the country.⁵ Such deficiency is going hand by hand with the lack of general works on migrations in Colombia and the few recollection of memoirs of the first generation of migrants.⁶

⁵ In the last decades, some Arab descendants showed particular interest in getting to know the culture, history and memories of their ancestors. Most of them gather around the association Encuentro Colombo Arabe, which is based in the city of Barranquilla.

⁶ According to Fawcett, this needs to be related to the importance of the oral history in the

At the same time, the literature on Arab migrants has been in part criticized for magnifying the role of Arabs in the development of Colombia and the Atlantic Coast, without taking into consideration the presence of other local communities (Rehnals, 2011, pp. 1-2). This goes hand by hand with the almost apologetic vision of the migrants evolution through a life of hard work as door to door peddlers to successful entrepreneurs or famous figures in the national sphere (Rehnals, 2007, pp. 1-2).⁷ Such criticism is mainly due to the consideration that most of the literature has been written by descendants of Arab origins, which directly or indirectly forgot to mention that also Arabs, along with Colombians, have been involved too in illicit practices which helped improved their fortune (Rhenals Doria, 2007, pp. 16-19).⁸ It is possible to find such apologetic vision too in other Latin American countries, where it is considered as a defensive approach emblematic of the attempt of full integration and social recognition of a society that has been hostile to them (Logroño Narbona, 2009, pp. 212-213).

The literature on the Arabs in Colombia mainly focuses on their arrival and first steps in the Caribbean region and on a national level. But it is almost ignoring the role of the colony descendants in the Colombian society or their evolution within the society in an economic or political perspective. Scholars widely managed to cover the data and the political, economic and religious reasons behind the Arabs arrival in Colombia, along with the countries of origin, which are mainly the

Caribbean region, where most of the Arabs arrived (1991, pp. 7-8).

⁷ It is common among those who write on Arab migrants and their descendants to recount the successful stories of some personalities of Arab origins. These stories, mainly recollected by Arab migrants descendants, are part of a process of self-recognition as an important part in building the Colombian nation.

⁸ The literature on Arab migrants in Colombia almost “forgets” to mention some illicit practices, which involved, along with Colombian national and members of other colonies, some members of the community too. The main illicit practice, which has not been mentioned in the literature, is smuggling. This practice has been particularly strong at the border with Venezuela in La Guajira Department, a place where several Arab migrants settled since their arrival. On the other side the literature attempts to present an image of the community as homogeneous and unified under the label of Arabs, without mentioning the conflicts between the different “nationalities”, like Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians. Such negligence implies the need to reconsider the scientific standard of some of the articles and books published until now on Arab migrants.

actual States of Lebanon, Syria and Palestine, at the time under the rule of the Ottoman Empire (Fawcett, 1991, p. 9; Fawcett & Posada Carbó, 1992; Vargas, 2011, pp. 104-116; Vilorio de la Hoz, 2003, pp. 6-13). It is generally accepted that they started arriving in Colombia massively around 1880, and continued to do so at least until 1930. The decision of moving to Colombia, at least in the first wave of migration, has been more related to fate or lack of more money in order to reach a much more attractive destination like the United States. In terms of the general migration process, the difference between Colombia and the other countries of the region is due especially to the restrictive policies of the state (Fawcett, 1991, pp. 24-25; Rhenals Doria, 2013, pp. 265-266; Vargas, 2001, pp. 79-93; Vargas, 2009). Many of the Syrians, Lebanese and Palestinians reached the Caribbean Coast, and especially Barranquilla received a considerable amount of migrants also of different nationalities such as Germans, Italians, French, British, Dutch and Jews, among others (Fawcett, 1991, p. 10; Villalón, 2008). Such conjunction made of Barranquilla a cosmopolitan city at the beginning of the 20th Century. Beside the difficulties in defining the exact amount of Arabs arriving in Colombia, scholars estimated them between 5.000 and 10.000 in 1930, around 20.000 to 30.000 in the 1960s and in the last decade around 50.000, including the descendants (Bruckmayr, 2010, pp. 152-153; Fawcett, 1991, p. 13; Fawcett & Posada Carbó, 1998, pp. 3-5). Arabs started arriving in different waves in Colombia: the first around 1880, the second after the Second World War, and the third at the beginning and during the Lebanese civil wars, which started in 1975 and lasted until 1990.⁹ These different migration waves implied also the change in terms of religious predominance of the migrants; while in the first waves it was predominant the presence of Christians, in the last decades Muslims became the main religious group of Arab migrants (Bruckmayr, 2010, pp. 156-158).

⁹ Several authors consider that the constant situation of war and political instability in the Middle East during the last decades of the Ottoman Empire, and as consequence the economic problems related with that condition, has been the main reason behind the decision of Arab migrants to leave their homeland. It is suggested here that during every period of turmoil in the Middle East, several new Arab migrants join their relatives in Colombia and in other Latin American countries. A recent example of that has been the war in Lebanon in 2006.

The first wave of migrants reached Colombia through the ports of the Atlantic coast and settled in different Colombian regions (Landazabal Hernandez, 2010; Posada Carbó, 1992), but mainly in the main cities of the Caribbean region and around the basin of the river Magdalena, at that time the main communication artery for consumer goods and exportations (Gonzalez Escobar, 1998; Vilorio de la Hoz, 2003). The main reason behind Arab migrants election of a place where to settle has been related to the economic opportunities offered by the place and the connection with other migrants from the same homeland. Indeed, the first generation of Arabs were mainly dedicating themselves door-to-door peddling, trade or small businesses, especially in the Caribbean region (Fawcett, 1991, pp. 17-18; Rhenals Doria, 2007, pp. 6-15; Rhenals Doria, 2011, pp. 12-16; Vilorio de la Hoz, 2003, pp. 40-47), and in some of these places Arabs did not face local competitors.

Until today, Arabs in Colombia are labelled as *Turcos* (Amat & Vargas, 2004; Fawcett, 1991, pp. 23-24; Klich & Lesser, 1996). The label has a certain derogatory connotation, and it is due to the fact that at that time their countries of origins were under the Ottoman Empire rule, and it reminds of an era of discrimination and low-level racism. Colombian migration laws were not giving predominance to Arabs, but instead to “biologically superior” races like the Europeans, which according to local intellectuals, would have been able to improve the Colombian race. Such discrimination was evident in the first two decades of the 20th Century, mainly in the local and national press (Amat & Vargas, 2004), but it considerably stopped around the 1930s and the 1940s. As suggested by Rhenals Doria, the arrival in Colombia at the beginning of the 20th Century of thousands of Afro-Antilleans along with Lebanese and Syrians made of them the “others” to reject. But facing the small amount of Europeans actually settling in Colombia, the intellectual and political elites informally decided to upgrade the status of the Arabs, especially due to their economic success (2013, pp. 247-248). For these reasons, a radical change in the perception of the Arabs occurred, especially in the Colombian Caribbean region (Rhenals Doria, 2013, pp. 263-264). It is possible to consider this as the first step in order for Arab migrants and their descendants to achieve a full integration and it needs to be considered here as a first step toward the involvement in the political arena.

At the same time Arab migrants managed to consolidate themselves as a respected community by establishing social clubs, like other foreign communities, especially in the Coast and in towns such as Barranquilla, Santa Marta, Cartagena and Lorica (Fawcett, 1991, pp. 26-27; Restrepo, 2003; Vargas, 2011, pp. 280-283; Vilorio de la Hoz, 2003, pp. 52-54; Yidi, 2012). In addition, they contributed to their environment with the donation of land, statues and money to public institutions (Gonzalez Escobar, 1998).

In terms of political participation and evolution of the community it is possible to suggest that the interest in local and national politics started in the second generation, approximately around the 1950s and the 1960s (Vargas, 2006). On a national level, it is possible to find few cases of political participation since the first generation. This is the case of the Turbay family, first with Gabriel Turbay Abunader, born in Colombia and involved in politics since the 1920s, and later with Julio Cesar Turbay, elected as member of the Departmental Assembly of Bucaramanga at the end of the 1930s, and as representative at the Chamber of Representatives in the 1940s. The latter was elected to presidency of the Republic in 1978. (Fawcett, 1991, p. 21; Fawcett & Posada Carbó, 1992; Vargas, 2011, pp. 203-211).

3. ARAB DESCENDANTS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN LATIN AMERICA

The migration process that drove Arabs in Colombia has been very similar to other Latin American countries. In the same way, mainly Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians, started reaching Latin American shores since the end of the 19th Century in different waves.¹⁰ The main difference in terms of scholarship is that in several of these countries, like Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico or Honduras, it is possible to find more studies on Arab migrants evolution and their descendants invol-

¹⁰ The book edited by Albert Hourani and Nadim Shehadi is to be considered a milestone in order to have a general idea on worldwide Lebanese migration and especially in Latin America. See: bibliography

vement in politics. The lack of this type of studies in Colombia makes the analysis of the literature on Arab migrants in Latin American as important in order to find possible variables to apply in a comparative perspective with the Colombian case.

The first steps of Arab migrants in Central and South America have been quite similar to those undertaken in Colombia. Indeed, door-to-door peddling became the prototype of the economic integration of Arab migrants in several countries, but especially in Brazil (Lesser, 2008, p. 34). In a similar way as it occurred in Colombia, many of the first generation of migrants explored areas they considered favorable for trade and business (Truzzi, 2009, pp. 81-82).

This stage has been normally followed by a period in which Arab migrants started actively shaping their environment by especially abandoning their culture. According to Truzzi, in Brazil and around the region of Sao Paulo, Lebanese started possessing more and more resources and invested in local industry or bigger business (2009, pp. 70-71). At a later stage, the passage to the new generation implied the sons' enrollment in local universities in order to improve their social status. Such enrollment was also useful in order to build a special connection with local elites, especially since the second half of the 1940s (Logroño Narbona, 2009, p. 216; Truzzi, 2009, pp. 74-75). After these stages, Arab migrants started getting involved in politics and state institutions, first at local level and then at regional and national level. In other cases, the process of full integration was reached through the involvement too in state institutions such as the military or the diplomacy in the ages between the 1920s and 1950s (Logroño Narbona, 2009, p. 212). In the case of Honduras the integration was reached mainly through a slow process of marriages between Arabs and local Honduran elites (Euraque, 2009, p. 246). In the case of Chile, Palestinians, which represented the main Arab community, started getting involved in local politics since the 1930s, then reached the national Congress in the 1940s and positioned as Ministers since the 1950s (Baeza, 2013).

Arabs' involvement in politics seems to have been different from country to country, but a common trend among them was the lack

of politics of ethnic representation (Baeza, 2013, Truzzi, 2009). On the contrary, many Arab descendants accessed national politics through different political parties with different structures and ideologies. In other cases, like in Argentina, it was evident the predominance among Arab descendants of a specific party, as it was the case of the *peronismo* (Vargas, 2006).

Like in the case of Colombia also in Ecuador and in Argentina, Arab migrants and descendants managed to reach the Presidency of the Republic. While in the case of Argentina, Carlos Menem was part of a later wave of migrants and he was elected to Presidency in 1989. In the case of Ecuador, Arab descendants reached the Presidency in the 1990s with Abdalá Bucaram and Yamil Mahuad, respectively in 1996 and 1998, after careers in local politics, such as congressmen, ministers or majors of main cities (Vargas, 2006). In the case of Ecuador, the Arab involvement in national politics was documented since the 1940s, and several times Arab migrants and descendants attempted to shape a family dynasty in politics (Vargas, 2006). In the case of Honduras, the racially motivated attacks to Carlos Facussé as Presidential candidate marked the campaign in 1989 and made that Arab Hondurans were not willing to present themselves as party leaders (Euraque, 2009). It is interesting to notice that in terms of class composition of Arab descendants involvement in politics, in the case of Brazil, politics has been mainly an issue of elites in the Lebanese and Syrian colonies (Truzzi, 2009).

In other cases, integration and involvement in politics was mainly due to the opportunities offered by the location of places far from the centers of power and by situations of political vacuum or changes. In the case of the Argentinian Patagonia, Arabs, already since the 1930s, managed to control the space left empty by local market elites who were just interested in foreign exportation and not in local markets (Dimant, 2008, pp. 178-181).

In order to maintain their economic power and to increase their social capital, Arab descendants implemented different tactics especially on a local basis, which was considered as fundamental in order to enter

the political arena. One of these strategies has been that of obtaining the presidency of a locally recognized football club, which offered the necessary confidence of being elected for political positions (Truzzi, 2009, pp. 83-84).

It is possible now to delineate some variables that will be taken into consideration for the Colombian case in terms of migrant descendants evolution and in terms of political participation. First of all, it is important to underline the presence of different stages of integration before political involvement. These stages change from country to country, especially in terms of time duration. However, it is possible to affirm that this stage started around the decades of the 1930s and the 1940s, and first on a local level. Then, the involvement in politics increased through the second and third generation of migrants, who achieved a university degree along with the first contacts with traditional political elites. The university degree is not to be considered as the main tool in order to get a full involvement in politics or to increase their social status, but it was also accompanied by marriages with elites or by joining state institutions. In some cases politics has been mainly an issue of elites within the community, while in some other cases it was more ground based. Finally, it is necessary to highlight the importance of a particular conjectural situation, for example in terms of political vacuum, upheaval or disruption on an economic level, which in some cases offered certain opportunities for new actors who wanted to join the political arena.

4. THE SHAPE OF A NEW ECONOMIC ELITE: COLOMBIAN ARABS FIRST STEPS IN BARRANQUILLA AND THE CARIBBEAN REGION

Arab migrants mainly settled in the Caribbean region, of which Barranquilla is to be considered as the biggest and most important city. Barranquilla is also the biggest city in Colombia with a more predominant presence of Arab descendants, and the place where nowadays Arab descendants managed to reach influential positions within its society.

The first groups of migrants arrived on the Caribbean coast from Europe and North America few decades before the first wave of Arab migrants. For this reason, Barranquilla has been considered since that time as a place for foreign “colonies”, due especially to the growing role of its port, which made the city at the beginning a symbol of Colombian material progress and the national center of capitalist industries in the 20th Century (Zambrano, 1998, pp. 43-45, 158-163). When the first Arab migrants arrival at the end of the 19th Century, Barranquilla was already in a process of increasing its size and population, and soon it displaced Cartagena as the main center of the coast (Sourdis, 2009). The town soon became the main hub for trade and business, due especially to its geographical location: the presence of the port, which was the main Colombian port until the 1930s, the central position on the basin of the Magdalena, the main Colombian river and primary artery of communication between the Atlantic coast and the interior of the country (Becerra & Restrepo, 1982, p. 82). These conditions put the basis for an important industrial, commercial and urban development (Villalon, 2003, p. 117), and especially since the 1920s made of Barranquilla a real modern city with improving public services (Ospino Contreras, 2003, p. 21; Zambrano, 1998, p. 178).¹¹

Due to the lack of a strong colonial past, Barranquilla presented a different elites formation respect to those of Santa Marta and Cartagena, where local traditional elites were grounded in the society since the time of the colony (Sourdis, 2009). Barranquilla always had a more flexible social stratification with occasional elites changing. A first side effect of such flexibility in social stratification, caused since the beginning of the 20th Century the elites lack of interest in the city’s regional development (Alvarez Llanos, 2003, pp. 324-325; Zambrano, 1998, p. 101). At the same time and for the same reasons, even if the city was developing at a fast pace since 1870, its elites did not have much power on a national political level mainly because it was made of foreigners

¹¹ Barranquilla presents a history of alternating phases of economic progress like at the end of the 19th Century and very beginning of the 20th, with times of recession and economic crisis (Villalon, 2008, pp. 1-2; Ospino Contreras, 2003, p. 23).

who were just interested in market activities (Meisel Roca, 2012). Such considerations need to be related with first migrants lack of interest in political power but just in the economic one. Foreign communities will only later realize that local politics and an important position on a national level would make of them an elite in a strategic position and with an important decisional power (Meisel Roca, 2012).¹²

In an initial period, Arab migrants had been excluded from the market and trade, due especially to the role of the previous foreign commercial elites who established themselves as stakeholder since the beginning of the 19th Century (Becerra, 1982, p. 108). Soon they managed to join the other foreign communities in helping building the coast, as happened in the various Departments of the Caribbean region (Fernando González, 1997, pp. 74-75; Gonzalez Escobar, 1998), especially at the beginning of the 20th Century, with roads and arteries of communication, especially because it was considered useful for their businesses. Many Arab migrants built their economic power in Barranquilla in trade and industries related to textiles (Zambrano, 1998, pp. 186-188), and they started to join the Barranquilla Chamber of Commerce in 1916 (Fawcett, 1991, pp. 26; Fawcett & Posada Carbó, 1998, p. 24). Arab migrants in these ages got involved in the society on an intellectual level too. The main figure of this time was Elias Muvdi in the 1920s, a Palestinian importer, real estate entrepreneur and philanthropist, who made several donations to the Atlántico Department (Posada Carbó, 1998, p. 218; Zambrano, 1998, p. 8).¹³ Syrian-Lebanese were mainly involved in import businesses (Fawcett, 1991, p. 19; Zambrano, 1998, p. 159), and since the decade of the 1920s, they managed to improve the capitalist industry of the town (Zambrano, 1998, p. 177). At the same time they started establishing small social clubs like the Club El Libano in 1890 and the Union Siria in 1914 (Vargas, 2011, p. 282; Villalon, 2008).¹⁴

¹² According to Alvarez Llanos, Barranquilla, along with the whole Caribbean region was characterized since the beginning of the 20th Century with episodes of corruption and clientelism (2004, pp. 58-62).

¹³ It is possible to consider these types of donations as a form to improve their social integration (Landazabal Hernandez, 2010).

¹⁴ The congregation of the members of the community in social club would then take a major

While in Barranquilla Arab migrants and descendants did not involved in direct politics in the first decades of the 20th Century, in other parts of the Caribbean region they managed to reach already political positions in these years. In 1936, Cesar Fayad became a member of the Cartagena Council, and in 1941 Abraham Jabib a member of the Council of Lórica, a town in the Córdoba Department in the Caribbean region with a predominant Arab population (Vargas, 2006; Vilorio de la Hoz, 2003, pp. 55-56).

The economic and industrial dynamism that characterized Barranquilla in the years 1934-1944 soon deteriorated due to different local and external factors, leaving space and opportunities for new figures to achieve positions of power in local institutions (Zambrano, 1998, p. 195). Indeed, even though according to the census of 1945 the town appeared as booming on the industrial level, with astonishing numbers of industries and employed workers, a crisis was already in the make (Sourdis, 2009). This was due especially to various factors: the move of the trade to the port of Buenaventura after 1942, the decreasing exports from the region, and the protectionist policies of the National Front, which deeply affected Barranquilla's economy and caused the downfall of the whole Caribbean region (Meisel Roca & Posada Carbó, 1993; Meisel Roca, 2009, pp. 169-170; Ospino Contreras, 2003, p. 31; Sourdis, 2009; Villalón, 2003, p. 117). The town began in the 1930s, but without realizing its gravity until the second half of the 1940s, an industrial and commercial crisis, which lasted for several decades and until the 1990s (Bell Lemus & Villalón, 200, p. 253).¹⁵

Filling the Gap, Taking Advantage of the Political Vacuum: Arab Descendants and the Coast Economic Lag

In 1958 Barranquilla definitely entered in a stage of crisis until the 1990s, on an industrial, commercial, social and political level, due also

and important development during the 1950s.

¹⁵ The industrial crisis will last until the 1990s, while the commercial and cultural life would have a brief resurgence between 1948 and 1958.

to a vacuum in terms of political leadership (Bell Lemus, 1993, p. 35; Bell & Villalon, 2000, pp. 254-255, 275; Villalon, 2003, pp. 117-118). The decades between the 1950s and 1960s were a period of economic stagnation, slow demographic growth, low employment and political depression (Sourdis, 2009; Meisel Roca, 2012).¹⁶

The few studies concerning the Caribbean region and Barranquilla during the National Front and later until the end of the 1980s strictly connect the economic crisis with a space of opportunity for the appearance of new political figures. According to Bell and Villalon, the fact that the previous economic elite and the traditional entrepreneurs lost interest in the fate of the town allowed new groups to reach the management of public institutions (2000, p. 275). As a consequence, an enlargement of the political representation occurred in these years, especially at local institutions like the Departmental Assembly and the Municipal Council, where most of the candidates belonged to the Liberal Party (Villalon, 2003, p. 118).¹⁷ These groups revolutionized the existent *modus operandi* in politics in a more cronyst way, and they displaced the previous political class, which was mainly made of a mix of politicians and entrepreneurs (Bell & Villalon, 2000, p. 275; Sourdis, 2009). The new class in power aimed instead almost exclusively to use politics in order to acquire a stronger economic power (Ospino Contreras, 2003, p. 31). The decadence of politics in these decades is evident by the fact that Barranquilla had an average of two mayors every year, and a strong deficit in public services (Bell & De la Espirella, 1988, p.

¹⁶ In these decades, in the Caribbean region as well as at a national level, the political life was characterized by a strict bipartidism, which opposed conservatives and liberals. A conflict that was disguised through the presence of different political movements, groups and parties such as the Anapo of Rojas Pinilla and the Revolutionary Liberal Movement (MRL). Elections were held every two years until 1970, and then replaced by a four-years mandate. A remarkable date to be considered is March 1988 with the first popular election of a mayor, which opened a new stage in Colombian political history and revolutionized the access to politics and power on a local level.

¹⁷ According to Villalon and Ospina there is an evident relation in these decades between the interests in terms of cronysm of a new political class that needed votes and the interests of internal migrants who arrived in Barranquilla outskirts and needed a place or a land where to live. This was facilitating an exchange of votes for favors. See: Villalon (2003, p. 118) and Ospina Contreras (2003).

2). A representative view of the situation of the 1960s, which shows the mistrust in political actors, is given by the editorial of the daily *La Prensa* of March 12th 1960, with the title “Esto de los candidatos” and alerting on the need to control the candidates:

o más frecuentemente se han impuesto a fuerza de engaños, de mentiras, de promesas imposibles de cumplir, todos con el afán de conquistar posiciones de influencia para enriquecerse, para entrar a saco en el tesoro público (*La Prensa*, March 12, 1960)

Among the new groups and individuals who ventured in local politics in these times of crisis, and who mainly joined the ranks of the Liberal Party, there were new figures among Arab descendants as well, mainly a second generation who was already born in Colombia. The decades between the 1950s and the 1960s are to be considered the golden age for Arabs in Barranquilla in terms of integration in the society and capitalization of their economic power. Since the 1950s, it was possible to feel the strong presence of the Arab migration in the economy, politics and cultural life of the town (Villalon, 2008, p. 52), along with the establishment of the first consulates of Arab states. Arab migrants and first descendants founded the Club Campestre Caribe in 1964, after the establishment a few years before of the Centro Juvenil Árabe and the Club Alhambra (Vargas, 2011, pp. 280-283).¹⁸

On a political level, several figures emerged with different backgrounds and political careers. The most important and powerful political figures of these decades among Arab descendants have been Jose Name Teran, Juan Slebi and Moises “Musa” Tarud. Along with other secondary figures from the colony, these three figures enacted a fierce fight until the end of the 1980s especially as representatives of the Chamber and later for the Senate. The three figures also represented the different forms to get into politics: as professional politicians or as

¹⁸ The foundation of different clubs in Barranquilla is also due to internal conflicts between the Palestinian and the Syrian-Lebanese factions.

private actors who turn to the management of public institutions and positions.

Jose Name Teran was born in Sincelejo, in the department of Sucre, in 1936, and moved to Barranquilla where he obtained a degree at the Universidad del Atlántico. He managed first to reach the Department Assembly as a substitute in 1958. After this first step, his presence in local and national politics had been almost continuous until his death in 2011. In those years, Name set the basis of a political dynasty, which is still powerful today.¹⁹

But Jose Name Teran was not alone among the Arab descendants who ventured in politics in those years, but not many marked local and national politics like him. Indeed, while in 1960 Name ran for the Department Assembly, Gamal Najar attempted to be elected for the Municipal Council. In 1962 Jose Name Teran appears for the first time as candidate for the liberals for a position as a representative for the Chamber of Representatives, but he couldn't manage to reach the position, something he achieved in 1964 as substitute along with the position of member of the municipal Council. In the same electoral round Said Sauda Marrugo ran in the electoral list of the Revolutionary Liberal Movement (MRL) for the Assembly and the Council, along with Oscar Abuchaibe as a substitute candidate for the Senate. The Abuchaibes are a family dynasty of Palestinian origins that has been active in the political and economic life of Rioacha and Maicao, in the Department of La Guajira, and Barranquilla. The most representative figures of the family have been Jose and Antonio Abuchaibe, major stakeholders in La Guajira, and Eduardo Abuchaibe Ochoa, who was involved in local politics of La Guajira Department and on a national level as Congressman and member of the Senate.²⁰

¹⁹ Jose Name Teran, and later his son, has been working hand by hand for several decades with his brother David Name Teran, who is considered a major contractor of the State and the Atlantic Coast for the firm Consultores del Desarrollo Condesa.

²⁰ According to several members of the community informally interviewed for this research, the reason behind the decision taken by many Arab migrants to settle in La Guajira region is due to the fact that it is a place on the periphery and with blurring borders with Venezuela. The

At the beginning of the 1960s several other Arab names appeared as candidates in the electoral lists for the liberals and the conservative parties for several positions in Barranquilla and on a national level: Elias Moises Aschkar, Neyib Marun, Abel Daza, Rafael Alvarez Teran and Moises "Musa" Tarud. In 1964 Moises Tarud ran for the Municipal Council of Barranquilla. Moises Tarud belonged to a family of Palestinian origins, which in its first generation developed an important business in the textile industry.

In the 1966 electoral round, Juan "Juancho" Slebi appeared in the local political scene as candidate for the Chamber. Slebi, an Arab descendant of Palestinian origins but born in Barranquilla, was at that time a recognized entrepreneur in the textile industry. As pioneer of a future trend in local politics, he moved from the private to the public sector and joined the Movement of National Renovation, he later funded the United Liberal Front (FUL) and, as representative of the Chamber, he became an influential figure in Barranquilla politics until the end of the 1990s.

In this same electoral round there has been an important presence of Arab descendants as candidates for local positions, like Narciso Eljach, Salimon Nader, and Sabas Saad.

The general perception around the renovation of the political class in this period of crisis was not very well accepted by the public opinion. The *Diario del Caribe*, on March 25, examined with certain skepticism the election of the new Municipal Council:

la adición de tres o cuatro nombres de los que se puede esperar una labor benéfica y eficaz en favor de los intereses de la ciudad, no alcanza a compensar la presencia de otros, ya "conocidos de autos", cuyas actuaciones en pasados Concejos han dado origen al descrédito y mal nombre de esta institución Municipal (*Diario del Caribe*, March 25, 1966, p. 1)

members interviewed considered that as a main characteristic of the Arab identity and explained this decision in terms of trade, market and economic opportunities.

In 1968 elections, while it was possible to see a consolidation of the position of Moises Tarud in the Council and as representative of the Chamber, it is necessary to highlight Name's failure to get a position for the Chamber. Besides Tarud and Name, other Arab descendants ventured in local politics: Jose Chedraui, Jairo Guerra Chadid and David Ahcar. While most of these figures were running for a position in the Assembly, the Council or the Chamber of Representatives, there were no candidatures in these decades of Arab descendants for the Senate. Indeed, until 1974, the main dispute for the Chamber has been among the three Arab descendants, Name, Slebi and Tarud, who mainly monopolized the electoral battle.

A major change occurred in 1978, when Slebi and Name run and were elected for the Senate and they were elected. In these years, Moises Tarud was still appearing as candidate on a local level, but strongly decreasing his support, along with Rafael Uribe Name, Jose Chams Abdala and Victor Abuchaibe.

The major development of the decade of the 1980s, beside the usual dispute between Name and Slebi that will last until the end of the 1990s, is the appearance of figures that will have certain predominance in local politics in the future. This is the case for example of Jacobo Acosta Bendek, who will be chosen as major of Barranquilla for the bienium 1983-84 and who will run for the Chamber in 1986. The Bendek family, of Palestinian origins, arrived in Colombia around the 1920s. The Acosta Bendek family has been active since the 1960s in the health business and they established in 1973 the Universidad Metropolitana of Barranquilla. The Acosta Bendek need to be highlighted as a major family dynasty involved in national and the Caribbean region politics, and which is still active in the political arena.

With the beginning of the 1980s there has been an increase of Arab descendants as candidates for local or national positions: Marum Gossaim Jattin, Eduardo Abuchaibe Ochoa, Gustavo Dajer Chadid, Fabio Tarud, Munir Escaf, Luis Abuchaibe Abuchaibe, Jorge Malkun Tafache, David Ahcar George, William Ganem and Ernesto Tarud Tarud.

The presence of Arab descendants in Barranquilla has not been massive in these times of crisis, but several of them attempted to take advantage of the situation and in the local political class renovation in order to achieve a position of power in politics. The great majority of them have been elected for the Liberal Party and other branches of the same political current.²¹ Figures like Slebi, Tarud and Name have been the main actors in local politics since the 1970s and through the 1980s. Such involvement of Arab descendants in local and national politics was common also in the other departments of the Caribbean region.²²

As represented by these cases, both in Barranquilla and in the whole region, the involvement in politics, mainly since the 1950s and the 1960s came from Arab second generation descendants. Many of them achieved a university degree from local or national universities (Vargas, 2011, pp. 196-197)²³, while others reached positions of power in politics by switching from the private sector to the public one. These have been two forms of doing politics that have been maintained in the following years by new actors reaching the political arena. A meaningful example of that is Fuad Char, who belongs to a family of Syrian origins, and who moved from Lorica to Barranquilla in 1955 in order to find better business opportunities. In this city, after achieving a solid and powerful economic condition with the Olímpica retail store chain, he soon started to capitalize his economic power in the political arena (Char, 2013; Viloría de la Hoz, 2003, pp. 59-70; Vargas, 2011, pp. 189-193).

²¹ According to Vargas, the Liberal Party was particularly strong in the Caribbean region. This is the reason the author considers in order to explain the strong relation between the party and the Arab descendants who got involved in politics in the region. See: Vargas (2006).

²² In 1962, José Miguel Amín was elected as Governor of Córdoba and one year later Jorge Jattin Dumett as mayor of Lorica (Viloría de la Hoz, 2003, pp. 55-56). According to Viloría, Lorica had 13 mayors of Lebanese-Syrian origins in the decades between the 1960s and 2000 (2003). At the same time, since its establishment in 1951, in the organizational board of the Department of Córdoba 3 members out of 12 have been of Lebanese-Syrians origins.

²³ Such trend would be much more evident in the third generation of Arab descendants, who entered politics since the end of the 1990s. Along with national universities they would also achieve international and postgraduate degrees. This has been the case of Alejandro Char and Jose David Name Cardozo.

5. THE ACTUAL PREDOMINANCE OF THE COLOMBIAN ARABS IN BARRANQUILLA AND THE COLOMBIAN CARIBBEAN REGION

At the beginning of this article, it was mentioned that Arab descendants managed to achieve a prominent position at local and national level especially since the beginning of the 1990s, with stunning percentages of representations in the Senate and the Chamber. Like in the period analyzed before, when it was suggested a certain relation between the economic condition and the political situation, also in relation to this period, it is possible to affirm that the new economic condition led to the emergence of new political actors. Since the 1990s, the Caribbean Coast lived a new economic resurgence due especially to the mining industry and the increasing traffic and exportation of goods especially in Barranquilla, the major port of the Caribbean Coast (Sourdis, 2009).

On a political level, until the beginning of the 1980s the Governor of the Department and the mayor were elected by traditional families who made the town running in the first part of the century (Villalon, 2003, p. 121). The novelty of this period came from the conflict between new and traditional elites, which exploded in the confrontation for the election of the mayor, for the first time in 1988 through popular election.²⁴

Name and Slebi continued their role as main political actor in these decades. While the latter almost left politics at the end of the 1990, Name managed to increase his power, at least until 2007. Both had an important role in the transition into politics of the new generation of Arab descendants, represented by the Char family and the Amin Escaff, the latter a political partner of Juan Slebi since the previous decade. In 1984, Name was elected as President of the Senate and he soon managed to substitute as Governor of the Atlantico the old elite families' representative Abel Francisco Carbonell with Fuad Ricardo Char Abdala (Villalon, 2003, p. 121), a private entrepreneur and president

²⁴ The law that reformed the election of the mayors was emitted in 1986. It is possible to suggest here the need for further research on the relation between the national process of political decentralization and the emergence in these years of new political actors on a local level. See: Sarabia Better (2003).

of the local football team Junior. Char became the first governor who was not part of the traditional elites.²⁵ Char began, since his election as governor in 1984, a successful career as national politician, achieving positions as Minister and senator, especially until 2006 when he left his office to his son Arturo (Viloria de la Hoz, 2003, pp. 58-59).

During the 1990s it seemed evident that the politicians of the second generation of Arab origins attempted to put the basis to shape family dynasties involved in politics, the management of the local economy and public contracts. Fuad Char, mainly running in the ranks of the party Cambio Radical, shared his political power with his sons: Alejandro Char, who was elected in the local Council in 1997 and as mayor of Barranquilla for the 2007 – 2011 period, and Arturo Char Chaljub who was elected as senator in 2006, along with his nephew David Char Navas. Jose Name Teran mainly transmitted his powerful position to his son Jose David Name Cardozo, who has been elected as senator.²⁶

6. CONCLUSIONS

This article aimed to present a first general view of the evolution of Arab migrants and their descendants' integration and access to political power in the city of Barranquilla and the Caribbean region. It was preferred to present a general and preliminary picture of this evolution in order to leave room for further studies on the topic. However, the article mainly focused on the period of time between the 1950s and the end of the 1980s, of which it was possible to access primary sources, in order to shed light on these decades and the Arab descendants evolution in Barranquilla's politics. These decades have been considered of particular importance for being the missing link between the studies

²⁵ The political relation between the Name family and the Chars has been discontinuous and based on common interests. A good example of that is the Char family alliance with Name in 2007 in order to elect Alejandro Char as mayor of Barranquilla.

²⁶ The legacy of Juan Slebi has been mainly inherited by her nephew Zuleima Slebi, who established in 2004 in Barranquilla the association Encuentro Colombo Arabe, in an attempt to gather the Arab descendants on a national level and to publicly promote the contribution of Arabs to the Colombian society.

on Arab migrants in Barranquilla, which stopped in the 1940s, and the economic and political predominance in the city of several Arab descendants since the 1990s.

The city of Barranquilla has been considered here in this article as probably the major hub for Arab descendants in Colombia for activities related to economy and politics. Many of them settled in the town since their arrival, contributing in their first generation at the beginning of the 20th Century to its economic growth. The city's economic growth as prominent centre of trade and business in the Caribbean region caused the later arrival of many Arab descendants in the city attracted by its opportunities. Arab migrants and first descendants acquired certain respect in the society for their economic power and business abilities, and their evolution was coincidental too with a plan at the end of the 1930s from intellectuals and elites to identify the "others" with the Antillean origins migrants, as it has been highlighted by Rhenals Doria and Florez Bolivar (2013). This is considered here only a first step in the colony evolution and integration. The evolution of the Arab migrants toward a condition of full integration in Colombia was coincidental with an Arab golden age in Barranquilla, especially between the 1950s and the 1960s, a period in which the town was in a deep economic and political crisis.

The economic situation appears to have also been an important factor in terms of political involvement. On a general perspective, the economic, cultural and political crisis since the 1950s helped create the opportunities for new actors to access the management of the *res publica*, it weakened traditional family elites, and it finally created a gap in the management of the city.

The second generation of Arab migrants did not involve massively in politics, but some figures among them managed to find a place in the management of the public goods, especially in times of crisis like the one the town lived in the 1950s. They took advantage of the crisis and the lack of a strong political leadership to reach important positions of power as local or national representatives. In certain periods, they even monopolized the dispute for the town political representation, as it was

the case of figures like Jose Name Teran, Moises Tarud and Juan Slebi. The first involvement of Arab descendants in politics in Barranquilla put the basis for the later more massive involvement of politicians of Arab origins during the 1990s and the formation of family dynasties, of which the most prominent have been the Names and the Chars.

In approaching politics for the first time, Arab descendants used two general forms. On the one hand, individuals entered the political arena as “professional politicians” while achieving a university degree. Pioneer of this way of doing politics has been Jose Name Teran, who already in the 1950s started building his political empire and his own family dynasty. On the other side there were those individuals with a personal or family background in private sector businesses, who decided to enter politics, like Slebi and Tarud. Such modality would be followed too by the Char family at the end of the 1980s. These modalities have been common also among the descendants of Arab migrants in other Latin American countries approximately in the same period.

It is suggested here that Arab descendants in Barranquilla during the period taken here into consideration, even if they were disputing the same political position, mainly aimed to speak to all the *barranquilleros*, and they did not use the ethnic vote in the public sphere, like for example politicians of Palestinian origins in Chile or Syrian-Lebanese in Brazil (Baeza, 2013; Truzzi, 2009).

But why was there such an increase and consolidation in political and power position among Arab descendants in Barranquilla and the whole Caribbean region in the 1990s? Was it the expected evolution of a process that began in the 1930s with Arab migrants first steps toward integration? According to Fuad Char, the reason behind Arab descendants political involvement was mainly due to the fact that locals were not caring of politics (Vargas, 2006), just as it was suggested by other scholars (Villalon, 2003). Why did only descendants of Arab migrants and not other foreign colonies members achieve such predominance in local politics? Is there any relation between how political leaders act in the Arab Levant and the way of doing politics by Arab descendants abroad? This article leaves these interrogatives unanswered and opens

the space for new researches on the topic, either on the political and economic role of Arab descendants in Barranquilla and the Caribbean region, and either on the history of Barranquilla and the evolution of its migrant communities.

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List of the data analyzed from the Registraduría Civil Nacional on the following dates of elections for the area of Barranquilla:

March 16, 1958

March 20, 1960

March 18, 1962

March 15, 1964

March 20, 1966

March 17, 1968

April 19, 1970

April 21, 1974

February 26, 1978

March 14, 1982

March 9, 1986