In a context of relentless insurgent attacks and car bombs in Lima, Shining Path declared an armed strike in the capital for February 14, 1992. María Elena Moyano, a prominent Afro-Peruvian community leader who grew up and lived in Villa El Salvador, decided that the time had come to challenge Shining Path. The insurgent group had been gaining ground in Villa El Salvador, particularly among the rank and file of the different women’s organizations in the district, including the community kitchens. Moyano, co-founder and former head of the FEPOMUVES, was elected deputy mayor of the district in 1989. She and several local IU leaders were mercilessly fustigated in Shining Path’s newspaper *El Diario.*

Moyano organized a march for peace on the day of Shining Path’s declared armed strike. She sought to mobilize broad support from different political parties and social organizations. However, only about 50 people participated in the march, a small number compared to past mobilizations in the district. The recent history of division of the Left, and the pervasive fear that gripped Lima’s residents in the context of the ongoing violence, meant few people were willing to challenge Shining Path in a head-on confrontation such as Moyano was proposing.

The day after the armed strike, while visiting a community barbeque, Moyano was ambushed by a Shining Path hit squad. She stood before her would-be assassins, telling her two children to turn the other way so they would not see what she knew was going to be her murder. After the assassins shot her, they placed sticks of dynamite on her body, physically obliterating her in a brutal display of violence.

The murder of Moyano shocked Peru. She was one of the few grassroots leaders who had become a public figure due to her outspoken defiance of Shining Path. She was celebrated by the local press, and was often invited to give interviews. In late 1991, invoking the name of a play by Bertolt Brecht, the weekly *Caretas* referred to her as “Mother Courage” for her defense of the poor in the face of hunger and political violence; the daily *La República* named her “person of the year.” But Moyano was very much alone in her determined, if quixotic, campaign to challenge political violence on the part of both Shining Path and the armed forces.
Neither the state that lionized Moyano after her death, nor the insurgents who demonized her to justify her murder, cared much to recall Moyano’s rejection of insurgent and state violence. Each actor sought to cast an image of her that best suited their own political purposes: for the state, she became a community leader who stood up to the brutality of Shining Path, proof positive that the insurgents were repudiated by the people and justifying state actions to crush them using all means at hand. For Shining Path, Moyano was a state collaborator and a member of the revisionist Left the Maoists considered their principal enemy—a double betrayal of the revolution that must be paid in blood.

Moyano’s life and struggle were far more complex, as was the situation in barriadas like Villa El Salvador, where unarmed men and women struggling to survive in a poor country made poorer by foreign indebtedness, economic crisis, political violence, and harsh austerity measures, now found themselves facing pressure from different armed groups to collaborate or

Figure 7.1 María Elena Moyano Leads Protest against Hunger and Violence

Community leader María Elena Moyano leads a march protesting political violence by the Shining Path and state security forces, as well as government economic policies that perpetuate hunger and poverty. Moyano became a visible symbol of civil society resistance to political violence. On February 15, 1992, she was murdered by Shining Path in her hometown of Villa El Salvador.

Source: Caretas Archive.