Drugs, Violence, and FARC:
Colombia at a Crossroads

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Introduction

Colombia is a nation in crisis. Weary of violence and political instability, the country is listed by the US State Department as the home of three of the four existing terrorist organizations in the Western Hemisphere. The Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) was formed as part of the “Southern Bloc” of the Second Guerrilla Conference in 1966.1 In a country racked by an unofficial war since the late 1940s, FARC was one of several infant guerrilla groups formed in Colombia during the 1960s. The Federation of American Scientists describes FARC as the “military wing of the Colombian Communist Party.”2 FARC has deep roots in peasant struggles going back to the 1920s and has become “the largest, best trained, and best equipped guerrilla organization in Colombia.”3 But times are tough for the guerrillas. In light of growing conflict between FARC and the Colombian government, several questions merit attention. What are the roots of the FARC movement and how did FARC grow to be such a powerful organization? What is its present status in the ever-changing Colombia? Most importantly, what is its future, and how will Colombia be affected?

A Brief History

Long before la Violencia (1946-1964), peasant farmers were struggling with unfair treatment by large landowners. Out of this conflict, crude organizations opposed coffee plantation owners.4 By the time of la Violencia, peasants already held leftist ideas, and their groups would form the basis for guerrilla organizations like FARC.5 Stepping outside the traditional two-party political system in the country, FARC’s founders sought refuge within the then illegal Communist Party.6 “Grassroots groups, popular movements and any demonstration of disagreement or opposition were criminalized.”7 FARC and other guerrilla groups were forced into auto-defensa or self-defense groups to protect themselves from government oppression.

The advent of the Frente Nacional, or the National Front, a political agreement in 1958 between the two parties (Conservative and Liberal) to share power down to municipal posts, isolated the guerrillas even more. The political world was off-limits. Still, some within FARC harbored the hope that the group could become politically legitimate. By 1983, the FARC added Ejército del Pueblo, or “the People’s Army,” to their title to convey the group’s commitment to protect popular interests.8 Still, as Vargas Meza writes, “...the guerrillas experienced chronic tension between whether to develop the political or the military aspects of their operations.”9 Therefore, the Unión Patriótica—the Patriotic Union—a political coalition of the FARC and other left-wing groups, entered the “political debate” of 1986.10 In short order, the party’s political aspirations were cut short by bloody assaults against their candidates and elected officials by, according to FARC, “strong contacts between the sicarios (hired killers) and the military intelligentsia.”11 By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the party was “inoperative.”
according to Vargas Meza. FARC committed itself to armed insurrection to achieve its goals and there have been few intervals of peace between the government and FARC since the early 1990s.12 According to FARC, “The agreements of peace and truce passed thus through difficult times, surrounded by an atmosphere of…provocation against our fronts in truce.”13

Ideology

FARC’s ideological vision lies within socialism and Marxism, though they have developed a unique ideology—one of opportunity. Linda Robinson writes, “…the rebels would govern anyone interested in reforming one of Latin America’s most unequal societies, in which 10 percent of the people own 90 percent of the land.”14 FARC envisions a world where its leaders rule Colombia and would be able to elevate peasants to a more prominent position in society and government. FARC’s goal, as demonstrated in the addition of “People’s Army” to the organization’s name, has been to promote the interests of peasants and to bring down the country’s elite. In the Eighth National Conference of FARC-EP, their Political Declaration stated, “We have tried persistently to find the paths that lead us to a democratic peace, to a peace of social justice…and each time we have stumbled against the violent opposition of a militarized oligarchy…”15 FARC has made it clear that they will continue to fight while the government does not accede to its demands. It is interesting that in the 1980s, when the M-19 guerrillas gave up their arms after a political agreement with the government, FARC’s leaders, being distrustful of the government, refused to do the same. In view of the violence against its political wing, the UP, FARC showed real foresight in not laying down its arms. FARC was suspicious of the government and that has hampered the peace talks and any final cease-fire. Many analysts now wonder whether FARC and the government can negotiate with each other in good faith.

Leadership

FARC’s leaders had been influential in previous Marxist movements, usually at a grassroots level with strong ties to peasant reform movements. The most visible commandant of FARC-EP rebels is Manuel Marulanda Vélez, otherwise known as “Tirofijo,” or “Sureshot.” In his early 70s, Tirofijo continues to be an important voice in Colombia. He is, in point of fact, a “legend.”16 A skittish man, of whom President Andres Pastrana has said, “He doesn’t trust anyone,” Marulanda began his guerrilla career in the Communist resistance group led by Isauro Yosa and Jacobo Prias Alape in the 1950s.17 Throughout failed attempts at peace with the government, Marulanda rose through the ranks until in 1966, as part of the “Southern Bloc,” he became commander of one of the six major FARC fronts.18 Marulanda is from a peasant family. His solidarity with the peasant population is unquestionable. Yet, in this jungle war, Marulanda realizes that his is a precarious position on top of one of the world’s most dangerous revolutionary groups. In a 1999 interview, he said, “It is always good to be careful. One never knows…It is very difficult to know who is earning a salary and willing to die as well. Therefore, it is better to be cautious.”19 Enemies do not come solely from the outside. It seems evident from Marulanda’s remarks that he fears infiltration of FARC’s
ranks by opposition groups trying to thwart guerrilla operations. Raúl Reyes is another of FARC’s top military men. He has been omnipresent in negotiations with the government. But if Tirofijo is a circumspect, distrustful leader, Reyes has been constantly in the limelight, condemning the government for failing to deal with the threat of the paramilitaries. Reyes has said, “Nobody can understand why we should continue a dialogue with a government that does nothing to fight against the paramilitaries.”20 As spokesman for FARC, Reyes has also made their plans and objectives clear. In 1999, he said, “The FARC is fighting for power because the FARC wants to govern Colombia.”21 Reform-minded and critical of the Pastrana government for allowing the paramilitaries to operate freely, Reyes has warned, “the confrontation will get worse and the war will continue” if rebel demands are not met.22

FARC leaders are also now stepping into the 21st century. Robinson writes, “They are in touch with the world…Rebel leaders have e-mail addresses and may respond to messages, but they have only begun to make physical contact.”23 With dynamic leaders and a growing presence on the international scene, FARC has developed into a powerful and influential force in Colombia.

FARC in the 1990s: Drugs, Demilitarization, and Violence

By the end of the 1980s, FARC had grown from a relatively insignificant fringe group to a major political force before the assassinations of their officials, but their most important period of growth, change, and influence was yet to come. The fragility of Colombia’s peace and the government’s inability to control drug cartels in Cali, Medellín, etc., made public support for guerrillas widespread in poor areas of the countryside. Vargas Meza writes, “[FARC’s] armed capability has grown because of their ability to take military…advantage of cracks in a highly decayed regime that requires reforms of the existing socio-economic and institutional framework.”24 Perhaps FARC had been killed as a national political force, but its leaders began building a vast, powerful network of local fronts and grassroots supporters.

By 1998, with President Andres Pastrana now in office and willing to negotiate with the guerrillas, FARC gained even more support and power. The government reluctantly gave up a portion of land the size of Switzerland east of the eastern cordillera of the Colombian Andes to FARC to jump-start negotiations. 25 Not that it was necessary. In 1997, The New Leader estimated that “the guerrillas [held] sway in as much as 40 percent of Colombia.”26

With the demise of the Medellín and Cali cartels, FARC gained entrance into a lucrative and dangerous market—drugs. Drugs had come to peasant populations much earlier. Vargas Meza writes that in the 1950s “completely neglected by the government, peasant settlers…soon found coca to be the only product that was both profitable and easy to market.”27 As US CIA Director George J. Tenet testified before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, FARC “earns millions of dollars from taxation and other involvement in the drug trade.”28

Evidence does not suggest that FARC-EP is involved in the sale and trafficking of drugs abroad, but they do control the largest coca-producing region in the world, and they maintain strict order within a pseudo-state of their own making. Journalist Maurice Lemoine writes that the guerrillas have state-of-the-art cars, power generators at their
command center, and Internet access. Yet, the wealth of the drug industry that reaches FARC has more to do with taxes on drug production and not trafficking. Lemoine writes, “The guerrillas watched the coca industry spread in the days when the military, political and economic elite were doing well out of the trade in cocaine.” When the guerrillas got into the action, they levied taxes on production of coca leaves, basuco paste, or drug middlemen, “but never on the peasants,” as Lemoine points out. Still, as San Francisco Chronicle reporter Robert Collier writes, “The guerrillas…earn hundreds of millions of dollars annually by charging “taxes”—protection money—to coca growers, middlemen, and laboratory owners.” It is a lucrative enterprise. When the Cali and Medellín cartels were dismantled in the 1990s, coca production and trafficking spread out to hundreds of groups, most of which are located in coca-rich lands in which FARC holds sway. Ron Chepesiuk writes, “…several carteleros, or baby cartels, have sprung up to keep their product flowing to Europe and the US.” And this flow of drugs has by no means been slowed. Collier writes, “Colombia produces an estimated 600 metric tons of refined cocaine and 75 metric tons of heroin a year, about 90 percent of the cocaine and 65 percent of the heroin reaching the US market.” FARC can charge all of these producers as much as they want. Drug money enabled FARC to buy weaponry and influence and allowed the guerrillas to elevate their national profile. The result has been increased profits and success against government opposition. In a strange paradox, drugs have helped the FARC to stabilize areas that they control and have forced the government to relinquish the moral high ground by supporting anti-guerrilla activities by murderous paramilitary groups.

Legitimate or Criminal?

Ironically, FARC has brought a sense of security and justice to once lawless areas. Argeni, a FARC female guerrilla member, says, “Here [in FARC], there’s equality…A guerrilla who discriminates against women gets disciplined.” Murderers, drug users and pushers, rapists, and other criminals are either put to death or punished harshly. Residents rejoice, “Now, you can live with your door open!” However, many analysts are worried at FARC’s swelling ranks. Jamie Dettmer writes, “Forcible enlistment of peasant children to swell the guerrilla ranks also has continued apace.” Recruiting children raises questions about waning strength of the guerrillas in outlying areas, but it also raises serious concerns. Children that are born and raised in war clearly maintain violent tendencies as they grow. Peasant children who join guerrillas may not ever have the chance to learn anything but the violence and brutality of war; and these children, according to Dettmer, may often be enlisted by force. In order to persuade families to allow their children to go to war in the jungle, FARC has probably employed various forms of intimidation. Furthermore, the human rights ramifications of this recruitment are numerous. Children can be put in the line of fire more easily; they are smaller, there are more of them—in short, they are expendable. Guerrilla forces who often care nothing about their own lives cannot reasonably be trusted with the lives of innocent children. It has been argued by some that, whatever their failings, guerrillas have been able to virtually eliminate crime from areas that they control, but how is the financial burden of keeping its municipios safe relieved? Many analysts say that drug money pays for the guerrillas’ activity, and no matter how generous and good FARC’s tenure may seem to
be, this fact alone negates any positive leverage they could bring to bear on a negotiating table. Vargas Meza comments on this “narco-guerrilla” theory, a belief that “guerrillas are major drug traffickers and that counterinsurgency and counternarcotics operations are one and the same.”40 Colombian and US officials have used the supposed narco-guerrilla theory to justify a military response to the guerrilla threat. However, Vargas Meza argues that this should not always be the case. Many peasants grow coca because it is a tried-and-true way to make money. According to many analysts, guerrillas, ever mindful of the needs of the peasant population that keeps them in power, support this trade by providing protection in return for loyalty and money. Vargas Meza points out that there is a big difference between large, “industrial,” drug cultivators and small peasant farmers trying to earn their living.41 On the other hand, FARC leader Manuel Marulanda Vélez said in a 1999 interview, “The FARC wants to show the world and the United States, as well, that it is not involved in drug trafficking, that it does not grow drugs, and that it does not live off the drug business...Thousands of peasants need to produce and grow drugs to live because they are not protected by the state.”42 As the Colombian army has moved into areas of coca cultivation, there have been widespread reports of human rights violations and cruel crop eradication that left peasants struggling to survive. Guerrillas have used these accusations as justification for attacks against military personnel and property.43 CIA Director Tenet stated, “US involvement is also a key FARC worry...FARC leaders declared that US soldiers located in combat areas are legitimate ‘military targets.’”44 The ensuing violence between government forces and guerrillas, and the atmosphere of violence widespread in much of Colombia has augmented the spread of paramilitary groups, right-wing extremists bent on stopping the guerrillas and gaining “control over drug-growing zones and other strategic areas of rural Colombia.” stated Director Tenet.45 Peasants have come to trust in FARC, the only group who listens to their concerns about growing violence by paramilitary groups against them. FARC leader Raul Reyes said, “The FARC does not protest when guerrillas die in combat as they are fighting with arms against the State. But it is completely different when the paramilitaries murder unarmed people who are not guerrillas, and who in many cases are not even friendly toward the guerrillas.”46 Meanwhile, the Colombian government has ignored the needs of their peasant citizens. Vargas Meza writes, “[the government has] failed to defend the interest of this vulnerable population.”47 The result of all of these factors has been increased violence and militarization over narcotics—with no end in sight.

Concerns About the Future: FARC and Colombia’s Future

At the same time, FARC’s ideology and message of hope for Colombia raises some troubling ethical dilemmas for the guerrillas. The guerrillas defend themselves saying that they are defending themselves in a corrupt political system. However, there are some measures which most outside observers agree should be taken. First, kidnappings have to be stopped. Governments around the world may draft their citizens in time of war, but guerrillas abduct civilian, non-combatant citizens for profit. Several important leaders, including recently presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, have been kidnapped from the Colombian countryside. This atmosphere of violence has distressed the country’s rank-and-file. “In Bogota and other cities,” writes Christian
Century reporter Dean Peerman, “the wealthy live in fear of being kidnapped for ransom; according to the North American Congress on Latin America, at least half of the world’s kidnappings occur in Colombia.”

Secondly, guerrillas have publicly advocated crop substitution programs and have urged the US to end their crop eradication programs that often destroy “legitimate” foodstuffs and other crops. However, for all of FARC’s complaints that the government has not provided adequate programs for crop substitution, their own plans for their peasant followers are inadequate. They lack a sound platform for financial development other than drugs; they have only been able to use violence against anti-drug operations; and without coca, “eradication ultimately provides the guerrillas with an army of unemployed youth who have no prospects of future employment.” Though it has been able to bring some stability and security to the regions under its control, FARC lacks the political and economic infrastructure to govern properly. The result is an uncertain future for FARC’s followers and a blow against FARC’s continuing efforts for legitimacy.

According to many analysts, human rights violations have not been limited to military and paramilitary groups. There is general consensus that FARC has supported itself at least partially through violence. The guerrillas themselves acknowledge that it took time to establish peace and order in the demilitarized zone. Lemoine writes, “During the first months, there was growing condemnation of the guerrillas’ excesses—belongings ransacked, civilians arrested, selective murders.” The continuous violence has taken its toll on the Colombian people, who have had to endure years of violence and war. Many have also wondered if an organization that has based their rule on warfare and their business activities on kidnapping and narcotics can effectively rule a country peacefully. FARC says it has always sought peace, but how many lives have they destroyed in the Colombian wilderness? They pledge to want a “democratic” government, but, by definition, they are Marxist rebels who continue to model themselves on rulers like Cuban dictator Fidel Castro. FARC’s message has been antagonistic, contradictory, and skewed by their belligerent attitude.

Adding to Colombians’ distress is the attitude of some US officials. Ron Chepesiuk writes, “The mood here plummeted last March [1996] when the United States ‘decertified’ Colombia from the list of countries cooperating fully in the War on Drugs. The country felt it had been lumped with pariah states like Iran and Syria.” It is disheartening to residents of a politically unstable country like Colombia to be judged by the primary narcotics consumer, namely the US. It may be imagined that after the “decertification” of Colombia many residents might have asked themselves how committed US officials are to the “War on Drugs” if record numbers of Americans are using drugs, going to jail for distributing them, and enriching Colombians in the process. FARC is also worried about the ramifications of Plan Colombia, instituted during President Bill Clinton’s term in office. The Economist reports that “FARC wants the military side of Plan Colombia…scaled down in favour of programmes to wean poor farmers off growing coca.” Plan Colombia, however, was developed as primarily a military program, designed to “cut the FARC’s drug income and force it to take the peace efforts more seriously.” However, the guerrillas have often reacted adversely to these programs, taking a hard-line stance on drugs, peasants, and, ultimately, peace.

An additional challenge is the threat of FARC banding together with terrorist groups from around the world. There have long been rumors of links between the Cuban
government and guerrilla groups around Latin America. Additionally, Sharon Stevenson of Newsweek reported as recently as January of this year, “Elements of Colombia’s largest guerrilla army have long hopscotched across porous borders with Ecuador, Panama, Peru and Venezuela to elude counterinsurgency units.”54 It has recently been discovered—and long suspected—that FARC has been trying to recruit peasants and other citizens from surrounding countries to support them if they have to flee Colombia. The incursion of FARC guerrillas into Peru has that country’s government uneasy. Ana, an 18-year-old daughter of peasant coca farmers in Peru, says, “They [the guerrillas] can come here [Peru] if things get difficult in Colombia.”55 Stevenson reports that FARC rebels may be responsible for an increase in the activity of the now-dormant Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso) insurgent group.56 Latent after the capture of their leader, Sendero followers may have found the necessary support in FARC leaders, who are always eager to foment rebellion.

Ties between FARC and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) have also been discovered. Jamie Dettmer writes, “The recent arrests in Colombia of three IRA hands…stunned even longtime apologists for the Colombian guerrilla movement, shaking confidence in the peace negotiations in which both guerrilla forces are involved.”57 IRA members were reportedly teaching FARC guerrillas techniques in urban bombing, a terrifying threat not yet common in Colombia.58 The fear that bombings such as those seen in the Middle East could become commonplace in Colombia is great; the cities have been relative safe havens from outright war. However, it now appears that the guerrillas sought to expand their operational scope by learning urban terrorism from those who have done it the best—the IRA, who have been terrorizing Ireland and Britain for decades. Jeremy McDermott also writes, “One of the three Provisional IRA suspects charged in Colombia with training Marxist rebels had previously visited the country on clandestine missions…”59 FARC leader Marulanda claimed that the three IRA men were discussing “international relations” with the guerrillas.60 Marulanda maintained that “various parties and political movements from Europe and the United States” have “visited” FARC, discussing “international relations.”61 For their part, representatives of Sinn Fein and the IRA, such as Mitchel McLaughlin, denied stories about the IRA teaching FARC how to use urban warfare. However, many skeptics around the world concluded that IRA members being caught in the company of FARC leaders had much more to do with violence than with “international relations.” Dettmer writes, “Intercepted cell-phone exchanges between FARC commanders and telltale explosive residues reportedly found on the clothes of the captured IRA trainers point to something far more ominous for Belfast and Bogota.”62 FARC’s link with the IRA isn’t the only troubling issue in this situation. According to Dettmer, FARC bought weapons from the Russians in the 1990s.63 The guerrillas have also had contact with Middle Eastern terrorist groups, including, as Dettmer writes, “a shadowy Hezbollah network located in Brazil.”64 US President George W. Bush’s administration has pushed for a military concentration of forces against FARC in recent months, a position only augmented by the recent discoveries of links between the guerrillas and terrorist networks around the world. Recently, Colombian President Pastrana ordered the military to retake the Switzerland-sized territory from FARC, a move which seemed to coincide with the US’s war on terror and with Pastrana’s exasperation in the face of failed peace talks. As long as FARC demonstrates that it is willing to cooperate with terrorist groups, the US
will continue to shift its policy of crop eradication and interdiction, and concentrate more and more on military solutions to the drug question. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, on the United States consolidated the resolve of American officials to combat terrorist groups through military means. Though many analysts suggest that civilian peasants farmers who cooperate with FARC in coca production should not be considered as military targets, it seems that the US and Colombia will intensify military action against FARC if their intransigence continues. FARC maintains that peace remains a viable option. In a recent email, FARC leaders insist, “we did everything possible to avoid war.” They also propose a National Constituent Assembly meeting with participation of everyone involved in Colombia’s political process, including the guerrillas “as a belligerent force.” This Assembly would hammer out a National Accord to “create the basis for the future peace.” In the unlikely event that this Assembly is convened, FARC and other guerrilla groups might be able to reenter the democratic process. An agreement at this point, however, seems unlikely. The leading candidate for president, Alvaro Uribe Velez, who is described by FARC leaders as the “candidate of the “new pajaros” or paramilitaries,” seems unwilling to negotiate with the guerrillas. Therefore, FARC’s overdue efforts for peace may be running out of time. Therefore, FARC’s future very much depends on the group itself. Peace efforts with Pastrana have failed, but FARC faces what is in many ways a tougher challenge. Public support has waned in the past months. What began as a revolutionary movement aimed at reforming the government and promoting the views and interests of the peasant population has turned into a rather stagnant struggle for power. Jeremy McDermott writes, “Gone are the days of Che Guevara and the Cuban revolution, with people rising against oppressive dictators. Colombia is a democracy, and the guerrillas can buy any revolutionary fervour they need.” Questions about the future of the revolutionary movement in Colombia abound, but one question stands above all: Will FARC be able to stand the test of time? In this age of heightened security, the war on terror, and a growing intolerance for mindless brutality, FARC may not be able to weather the storm growing up around them. Colombia’s future, meanwhile, hangs in the balance.

Notes

3 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 “Las FARC-EP: 30 Años de Lucha Por La Paz, Democracia, y Soberania.”
11 Ibid.
12 Meza, “The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Illicit Drug Trade.”
13 “Las FARC-EP: 30 Años de Lucha Por La Paz, Democracia, y Soberania.”
15 “Las FARC-EP: 30 Años de Lucha Por La Paz, Democracia, y Soberania.”
16 Ibid.
17 “Las FARC-EP: 30 Años de Lucha Por La Paz, Democracia, y Soberania.”
18 Ibid.
21 Robinson, 34.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Vargas Meza, “The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Illicit Drug Trade.”
27 Vargas Meza, “The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Illicit Drug Trade.”
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Chepesiuk, 6.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
40 Vargas Meza, “The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Illicit Drug Trade.”
41 Ibid.
43 Vargas Meza “The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Illicit Drug Trade.”
44 Tenet.
45 Ibid.
47 Vargas Meza, “The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Illicit Drug Trade.”
48 Peerman, 638.
51 Chepesiuk, 6.
53 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Dettmer, 13.
58 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
62 Dettmer, 13.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
65 Vargas Meza, “The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Illicit Drug Trade.”
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 McDermott, “Reality of Colombia’s FARC Coming to Light,” 13.