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## JOURNAL

## The FARC's Overreach in the Peace Process

By *[Douglas Farah](#)*

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### The FARC's Overreach in the Peace Process

Douglas Farah

The shocking rejection by the Colombian people of the peace agreement between the government and FARC rebels, aimed at ending 52 years of conflict has sparked an outpouring of analysis and recrimination by those who supported the deal.

While the government poured enormous resources into its campaign to vote yes and President Juan Manuel Santos staked the credibility of his administration on a positive outcome—something almost all polling showed as a given—the referendum was narrowly defeated.

There are multiple reasons for the surprise outcome, but largely missing from the discussion is the fact that the FARC is perhaps the most reviled insurgency that ever arose in Latin America outside of Peru's Shining Path and its victims went largely unheard.

One of the main criticisms of the agreement negotiated over four years in Havana, Cuba, was Santos consistently acted as if the FARC was a co-equal force to whom major concessions needed to be given. In fact, the FARC only went into negotiations because it was a thoroughly defeated military force. In the decade from 2002-2012 its leadership had been decimated, its territorial control lost in all but the most remote areas of the country, and its military capacity reduced from around 20,000 combatants to about 7,000.

Lost in the long, insular and intricate negotiations was the fact that the FARC had survived through a combination of drug trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, sexual slavery and forced labor conscription. While being treated by the Santo government as a legitimate military force, the FARC had devolved into a movement largely devoid of real political coherence and increasingly reliant on its reduced military strength to enforce its will in the limited areas where it was still relevant. Public polling showed the FARC enjoyed the support of roughly 3 percent of the population, and far less in urban centers.

Having been a close observer to the negotiations that ended the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan civil wars, the contrast in the public perception of the insurgents in Colombia is striking. When the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador went to the negotiating table they had territory and the solid backing of more than a quarter of the population, making them a real political force to be reckoned with. In the first elections after the signing of the peace agreements in 1994 the FMLN was beaten badly by traditional measurements (49 percent to 27 percent), but proved the group had a political base that eventually grew until the former guerrillas won the presidency for the first time in 2009.

The Sandinistas in Nicaragua, even after years of war and mismanagement, retained a solid 30 percent of the loyalty of the electorate, and, after leaving power in 1990, were able to return to the presidency in

2007.

For the FARC, a group that has been a largely isolated rural insurgency known to the rest of the country and the world for its brutal kidnappings that often lasted years, its cocaine laboratories, and its merciless extortion, there is no such political base to build on.

The agreement contained some significant reforms that were widely acceptable to most Colombians, including the FARC's demobilization, meaningful land reform, the rights of displaced people to return home and the promise of billions of dollars in infrastructure development in traditionally isolated areas.

But when the FARC was guaranteed seats in both the Senate and lower chamber without having to stand for elections, it caused an outcry. When the leadership of the movement was in essence granted extended parole with no jail time for their common crimes and crimes against humanity, it caused widespread outrage. The government's efforts to explain why this was not a form of impunity was never broadly grasped.

When the FARC leadership said the group had no financial resources to turn over for victim reparations, despite strong evidence that they have more than \$1 billion and possibly ten times that much in financial holdings inside and outside of Colombia, the thousands of victims were offended. The disgust was furthered when the leadership showed up at the signing of the ceasefire wearing Rolex watches and other visible signs of wealth.

As the talks dragged on it became clear the FARC was actively encouraging peasants to grow as much coca—the raw material for cocaine—as possible. Colombia's years of eradication efforts that had consistently reduced coca crops were quickly reversed. From 2013 to 2015, according to United Nations figures, coca production doubled from 47,000 hectares to 96,000 hectares.

In addition, the FARC was granted 31 “areas of concentration,” including 23 rural areas and eight towns, where they would gather to eventually demobilize. What is striking is that the locations placed the FARC in control of most of the strategic routes and territory it controlled at the height of its strength. The idea that the FARC could regain much of the territory it had lost in the war, without firing a single shot, was widely viewed as a both dangerous and indulgent.

It is not clear what the next steps will be. No one considers a return to war a viable option and the FARC leaders must know they would be crushed if they were to order a renewal of hostilities. The Santos administration is badly wounded and desperately seeking the help of its political enemies to find a way to move forward. What is clear is that many Colombians were not willing to accept peace at any price.

*The views expressed in this essay are personal and do not reflect the position of any part of the U.S. Government.*

### About the Author



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