



## Colombia and the FARC: From Military Victory to Ambivalent Political Reintegration?

*Carlos Ospina*

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, Colombia entered a decade of civil war from which it has never fully emerged. A key contributor to the violence throughout has been las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), or FARC, an organization that reached its peak during the presidency of Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) but declined precipitously thereafter when decimated by a military-led national resurgence. This occurred, in the first instance, during the initial term of President Álvaro Uribe (2002-6), with consolidation continuing in the second Uribe term (2006-10).

Then the first term of President Juan Manuel Santos Calderón (2010-14) saw a startling reversal of the Santos electoral pledge to continue Uribe's policies and, in its place, a commitment to an open-ended peace process, which is ongoing at the time of this writing. Santos was narrowly reelected to a second term (2014-18) but finds himself faced with a host of economic, social, and political challenges aside from FARC's stubborn refusal to commit definitively to ending the conflict. This has placed Santos and his administration in an awkward position of needing a deal at almost any cost to validate their abandoning what was seen in 2010 as a model counterinsurgency, and embracing instead "conflict resolution" as advocated by an array of internal and external actors.

### The Roots of Conflict

The origins of the current conflict in Colombia date back nearly to independence in the early nineteenth century, yet fighting continues between the government and insurgent groups even today. This long and bloody struggle can be traced to several root causes, or drivers, described briefly below.

Political fissures opened shortly after the Colombian War of Independence in 1819, when Simón Bolívar and the Liberator Army defeated the peninsular troops of King Fernando VII. As early as 1839, civil war erupted, dividing those forces previously united in the independence struggle. Seven more civil wars were fought between 1839 and 1899.<sup>1</sup> All were politically driven by the emerging and competing Liberal and Conservative political parties, each struggling for power and defending its own political and economic interests.<sup>2</sup> The last of these civil wars, the Thousand Days' War of 1899-1902, was especially costly, with an estimated 200,000 deaths and widespread destruction of infrastructure. The result was enduring poverty for the survivors. This conflict had two

---

<sup>1</sup> Manuel Santos Pico, *Historia militar del ejército de Colombia* (Bogotá: Sección Publicaciones Ejército de Colombia, 2007), 149.

<sup>2</sup> Colombia's long history since the original Spanish intrusion into the Amerindian world on the fringes of the Inca empire has resulted in a population that is largely ethnically, culturally, and linguistically homogeneous. Unlike neighboring Peru, Colombia has no substantial indigenous population (officially one percent versus Peru's more than half, which gave the Sendero Luminoso insurgency a large ethnic recruiting base). Colombia's four percent black population is clustered in Choco department; thus, any political movement there draws from it.

well-defined phases. The first, in which regular armies fought each other, ended with the Conservative Party's victory at the battle of Palonegro. The second, in which Liberal insurgents who survived Palonegro fought on with guerrilla actions for two more years, ultimately ended in their defeat and the conclusion of a peace treaty, bringing the conflict to an end. And yet, this guerrilla legacy lived on.

Panama, at the time still a Colombian department, having tired of the seemingly perpetual violence and destruction – and with the armed support of a United States interested in building the Panama Canal – seceded and became independent. Meanwhile, the increasingly visceral hatred between Liberals and Conservatives festered. This acrimonious relationship lasted more than 50 years, and even though actual civil war did not reoccur, societal developments “failed to resolve the tensions between these political elites who supported a strong central government and those who supported strong regional governments.”<sup>3</sup> This enduring tension became a wellspring for future violence and the emergence of FARC in the mid-twentieth century.

Moreover, a tradition of rebellion and guerrilla warfare was born in certain regions of the country, such as el Cauca in the south and Santander near the Venezuelan border. In 1948, the historical accumulation of societal friction ignited an explosion when Liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was assassinated in Bogotá. Liberals blamed the Conservative government and rebelled, even attacking the presidential palace with support from defecting police. The army was called in, and after three days the situation locally was brought under control – at a cost of 3,000 casualties and a capital core in ruins.<sup>4</sup> Worse was to come, for the urban violence in Bogotá and other cities spilled into the countryside. There, peasants affiliated with the two parties continued to battle, directed by their leaders in the cities. It was civil war, with the traditional working tool, the machete, the offensive weapon of choice. It is estimated that 300,000 Colombians perished during the terrible days remembered as *la Violencia* (the Violence). The memory of the sheer horror became an enduring part of the Colombian psyche, to be exploited in particular by those who claimed to speak for the victims or as the authentic voice of history.

To protect their families, armed self-defense groups (*autodefensas*), with Liberal or Conservative affiliations, soon were organized. And, of course, they, too, fought each other with escalating intensity and violence. The Conservative groups were loosely related to the police, at that time typically a local rather than a national force. Liberal groups followed their own urban leadership, while those on the radical margins turned to the Communist Party of Colombia (PCC), founded in 1930. It urged self-defense forces not only to “resist” but to declare their autonomy from the state – in the Marxist lexicon, to liberate their social as well as their political formation.

The PCC interjected itself into the crisis to implement the strategy inherent in the model provided by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Its goal as a self-proclaimed vanguard of the revolution was to exploit the situation in order to mobilize people across a wide range of sectors. In fact, the party had already organized cells in the countryside as an extension of its urban networks. When violence exploded in the countryside, these groups became quite active against the Conservatives, in time joining

---

<sup>3</sup> Robert D. Ramsey III, *From el Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque: The Colombian Security Force Experience, 1988-2008*, Combat Studies Institute Press, Occasional Paper no. 34, 2009, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Santos Pico, *Historia militar del ejército de Colombia*, 268.

forces with the Liberals and attempting to co-opt them. In 1953, however, the political leadership of the country turned to a military man, General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, and handed him the reins of power from June 1953 to May 1957 – the only instance of military rule in Colombia during the entire twentieth century. He implemented a compromise, pardoning all who had been caught up in the political violence, and moved the country to a political pact, the National Front (*Frente Nacional*), from 1958 to 1974, whereby the two major parties, Liberals and Conservatives, would share power by alternating in four-year terms of office (keyed to the presidency). The PCC, however, was not included and, hence, resumed its struggle.

Ironically, the PCC was (and remains) a legal political party and used the guerrillas as only one of its many tools, though it had no operational control over them, providing only political guidance. This resulted in the increasing estrangement of the PCC guerrilla leader, Manuel Marulanda, who was joined by the PCC's own field representative, Jacobo Arenas. This led to the formation of FARC. (Most sources use 1963 as the actual founding date, and 1964 as the date the founding was formally announced.) Eventually, the estrangement led to a de facto split with the PCC in 1982, at FARC's seventh party conference. It was at this conference that FARC first broached the idea (realized in 2000) of forming an alternative to the PCC: a "Clandestine PCC" (PCCC), with FARC as that party's "popular army." Although the PCCC would have to wait, FARC thereafter styled itself *el Ejército Popular* (the People's Army, or FARC-EP). Its autonomy became complete with its embrace of fundraising through taxing the drug trade (at least, initially – later, it integrated itself into the complete cycle of production).

The relationship with drugs, agreed upon at the same 1982 conference, gave FARC the financial means to seek implementation of its military project, which called for seizing state power. From the moment it entered into this relationship, despite recognizing the risk, FARC increasingly became a captive of its own means. The military and political cause served as the movement's motivating force, to which social and economic issues, though rhetorically significant, were subordinated. FARC embraced the struggle against rural poverty, discrimination and exclusion, and social class structure in the abstract and made them components of its narrative, but it took few tangible steps to address these challenges, even in isolated areas where it held sway.

Leading figures in local areas responded to FARC's depredations – and the government's lack of counteraction – by falling back on the historically tested response: forming *autodefensas*. Although popularly manned and supported in the beginning, these eventually followed a trajectory similar to that of FARC itself: recruiting manpower from outside threatened localities and raising money through involvement in the drug trade. Just as importantly, the same atrocities normally associated with FARC – and by *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Army), a much smaller but still active Marxist-Leninist insurgency after the Cuban model – became staples of the *autodefensas*. Since self-defense groups were legal before the mid-1990s, a subsequent designation of illegality did not dissuade at least some individuals in the military and the police from continuing their support for such groups. In time, these grew and became yet another factor contributing to the endemic violence, with the peculiar characteristic that many of their actions were directed against the local populace (who supported FARC) and included massacres, assassinations, rapes, and other forms of violence.

## Rise and Fall of the FARC Insurgency: Adrift in a Sea of Coca

FARC's evolution as an insurgent movement, and its transformation into a trafficking and terrorist organization, was a direct consequence of adopting involvement in the narcotics trade to finance its would-be revolution. During FARC's early period of growth, its financial means came from kidnapping for ransom and extortion, which resulted in a weak organization, poorly equipped and trained, with no real strategy or significant military capacity. But with the inflow of drug trafficking revenue, this situation changed dramatically, and FARC turned into a powerful force with enough capacity to sustain a protracted war and to attack military units of battalion and even brigade size.

### *Illicit Finance*

FARC's financial support structure has evolved in line with the organization's history. In its initial incarnation in the 1960s, it was a genuine peasant organization waging a real insurgency; thus, as a movement it was poor. Support came from the people of those regions where FARC was present, because the combatants were seen as *los muchachos* (the boys), who were fighting for a better future for all Colombians. But the financial resources collected in this way were insufficient to meet the organization's aspirations. The PCC, while not an advocate of protracted war or "useless guerrilla fighting," saw these FARC groups as a tool for provoking the government in the rural countryside and also as a means to advance its conspiratorial strategy of arraying all possible means under the guidance of a Leninist vanguard party (as emerged from the PCC Tenth Party Congress in 1964). To the PCC, the guerrillas (soon to establish themselves as FARC) would be part of the strategy of insurrection—not the main part, but merely a component acting in the countryside.

Support from the PCC was therefore very limited, and FARC throughout the 1960s and 1970s remained a small organization with limited assets and limited local, rural objectives. During this early phase, then, the PCC mainly influenced and stimulated FARC through ideological support but had no operative or tactical control and, in fact, was not involved in FARC operations.<sup>5</sup> This could therefore be described as a politically "naive" phase in FARC's evolution; its illicit means and networks were not nearly as developed as they would be years later.

Eventually, FARC leaders realized that under this arrangement, they would never accomplish their objective of seizing power through prolonged war, and, moreover, that such a goal was not what its "mentor," the PCC, wanted. They came to the realization that FARC was merely a sideshow—merely a component part of the PCC's strategy of struggle. Thus, they decided that FARC must fight its own war by its own means, independently of any external support. This signaled the end of the purely "insurgent phase," when FARC depended completely on the rural people in its areas of operation for sustenance and security. It did remain in touch with the PCC, but the party was no longer a factor in FARC's decision making.

---

<sup>5</sup> Carlos Ospina, *A la cima sobre los hombros del diablo* (Madrid: Editorial Académica Española, 2012), 910.

With this distancing from the PCC, and loss of that source of financial support (meager though it surely was), sustainability became a pressing issue. FARC adjusted to its new financial circumstances by adopting innovative new methods of extraction, including kidnapping and extortion. Thousands of Colombian citizens were abducted, taken into captivity, and, in some cases, killed by FARC kidnapping squads. Soon, though, a new and even more lucrative means of financial sustenance would emerge and become dominant: drugs.

At the end of the 1970s, drug trafficking had arrived in Colombia.<sup>6</sup> The new commerce was rapidly adopted and became widely used by a range of illegal organizations. First, it was marijuana, but soon it became clear that this product required substantial physical inputs – not only space for cultivation but also vehicles for transportation. To generate profits, hundreds of shipments of product had to be moved – ultimately an inefficient business model because making a profit required transport of great quantities. Moreover, competition in the marijuana business was already quite brutal, with places such as California producing significant quantities for the U.S. market. In contrast, cocaine was superior on all counts. It was through exploiting the enormous potential inherent in the cocaine trade that a figure such as Pablo Escobar built, in Medellín, the cartel that was to emerge as the leading organization in the drug trade. Indeed, in 1989-91, it grew powerful enough to challenge the state directly. In Cali, the Rodríguez brothers established a less brutal (though possibly more profitable) rival cartel.<sup>7</sup>

The FARC leadership was not interested in “dirty money.” Until that time, strict regulations prohibited the use of drugs in any way inside the organization. But a subordinate column chief, Argemiro, began extorting drug traffickers within his area of operations.<sup>8</sup> He charged by the number of kilos produced in the labs, the number of hectares under cultivation, number of workers, and in many other ways. Soon, his column became wealthy, and he became very rich. National-level FARC leaders – the Secretariat – were horrified. Arrested by Secretariat forces and tried in a revolutionary court, Argemiro was expelled from the organization and, some months later, assassinated, likely by his old companions.

But the idea of using drug money to finance operations began to make sense at the Secretariat level. The logic went that if FARC could tax all aspects of the cocaine cycle, with zero tolerance for individual use or enrichment within the movement itself, it could secure a sustainable source of financial support while improving its fighting capabilities. This would allow the conflict to move to a more intense phase, from guerrilla action to directly challenging the state. At the next FARC conference (the seventh, in 1982), the Secretariat approved taxing drug traffickers in FARC areas in the same manner that Argemiro had, but with the difference that revenues should be forwarded to the Sec-

---

<sup>6</sup> See James D. Henderson, *Colombia's Narcotics Nightmare: How the Drug Trade Destroyed Peace* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Felicia Allum and Renate Siebert, eds, *Organised Crime and the Challenge to Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 89.

<sup>8</sup> FARC, *Seventh Conference Final Report*, June 1982; copy examined in mimeo (unavailable online). For a sanitized (i.e., no mention of drugs or terrorism) version of FARC's Marxist-Leninism, see Emilio Salgari, *Marulanda and the FARC for Beginners*, FARC-EP, 2011, <https://farc-epeace.org/pdf/Marulanda-and-the-FARC-EP.pdf>.

retariat, in this way preventing the accumulation of wealth in any individual guerrilla leader's hands.

Subsequently, various FARC regional commands were tasked with controlling coca cultivation in their areas, charging the authorized taxes, and sending the money to the Secretariat. The Secretariat in turn distributed funds according to the different regional requirements for weaponry and war materiel as well as sustainment of the operational tempo dictated by FARC strategy. In particular, the Sixteenth Front (one of 67 such rural geographic "fronts of war" that also functioned as unit headquarters with integral combatant formations), near the Venezuelan border; the Fifty-Seventh Front, near the Ecuadorian border; and the Fifty-eighth Front, near the Panamanian border, were assigned this responsibility. This was the Secretariat's theory and intent. And indeed, by adopting this new operating concept, FARC grew in strength. At the same time, however, individual guerrilla leaders were also lining their own pockets, and soon personal enrichment became a common practice for individuals with access to illicit funds. Some deserted, absconding with substantial personal fortunes.

Adoption of cocaine trafficking marked a significant turning point. With such a sustainable and highly lucrative revenue stream, many of FARC's strategic projects became feasible, and the idea of a full-scale war against the state took shape. With the organization of larger columns and "regularization" of formations (i.e., turning purely guerrilla units into light infantry), FARC could jump to the next stage in its "people's war" strategy of insurgency. This war of movement, in which FARC-EP "military" units attacked similar units of the army, was the high tide of the organization's revolutionary project. Initial assaults against military forces in small bases began as early as 1994, but the August 30, 1996, overrunning of a 120-man company at Las Delicias, eastern Putumayo, on the Río Caquetá began a series of devastating FARC attacks that often featured multiple-battalion strength and even improvised armor. More than 400 members of the military and the national police were killed, and some sources warned that FARC was winning the war.<sup>9</sup>

With the huge drug profits flowing in, FARC could also purchase new weapons. A shipment of 10,000 AK-47 rifles with the associated accessories and parts, for instance, was purchased in 1999 using falsified documents provided by corrupt senior Peruvian officials, including Vladimiro Montesinos, then the national security adviser to Peruvian president Alberto Fujimori. Simultaneously, the Secretariat decided to invest in legal businesses to build a sustainable support infrastructure. This was done using contacts in other countries, particularly in Colombia's self-proclaimed "Bolivarian" (neo-Marxist) neighbors. It was estimated by some observers that through shell companies, FARC ran a network of transportation companies, small industries, and similar businesses in Venezuela and Ecuador. The Secretariat also used coca receipts in neighboring countries to hire services, such as medical personnel (doctors and nurses), and hospital facilities to treat their wounded and sick personnel.

Despite the Secretariat's efforts to prevent leakage of illicit revenue flows within the organization, newly rich cells began diversifying into new businesses in their regions. As a consequence, their chiefs became wealthy. They began to distinguish themselves

---

<sup>9</sup> Douglas Farah, "Colombian Rebels Seen Winning War; U.S. Study Finds Army Inept, Ill-Equipped," *Washington Post*, Apr. 10, 1998, <http://colombiasupport.net/archive/199804/wp41098.html>.

and show off their affluence, wearing upscale wardrobes and eating better food. They had their own personal money – something previously forbidden within the organization. They created their own local networks of coca traffickers and learned the nuances of the trade, even imposing price controls and regulating the market in ways that caused resentment among the peasants and non-FARC local drug lords.

As a consequence of these developments, FARC has not needed direct external funding support. Nor has it received material support from abroad. On the contrary, with the huge revenues from its drug trafficking business, it has the resources to provide financial assistance to foreign friends and followers. From the FARC files seized in 2008 by Colombian forces during an operation (Fénix) in Ecuador, it seems clear that FARC provided financial support to the political campaigns of sympathetic Bolivarian supporters Hugo Chávez, in Venezuela, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador.<sup>10</sup> Both of them were ultimately elected – Correa is the incumbent president of Ecuador, and Chávez died of cancer in March 2013, while still in office.<sup>11</sup> The seized computers contained the files of Raúl Reyes, a member of the FARC Secretariat, who was killed during the raid. There are also reports from the government of Paraguay, of FARC financial support to the Paraguayan People's Army (EPP), a recently organized guerrilla force responsible for the kidnapping and execution of Cecilia Cubas, daughter of former Paraguayan President Raúl Cubas.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, over time, FARC's involvement in drug trafficking allowed it to become a very different organization, one that continued to use terrorism and guerrilla tactics but could also field light infantry columns structured and armed much like the Colombian forces themselves. Indeed, given the identical uniforms, equipment, and even weaponry, only tactical modifications (e.g., differently colored arm bands) distinguished one from the other. This was true also for the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, or ELN) forces (the "other" guerrilla group) and the AUC (the self-defense groups, which, at their peak, had roughly as many combatants as FARC). FARC and the AUC had become integrally connected with the drug trade, while ELN relied primarily on extortion for its funding. Not discussed here but also requiring state attention and application of resources were the numerous "petit cartels" – successors to the crushed major drug cartels. But FARC retained the focus of government concern because only FARC could field regular forces that threatened the very existence of the state. In this, it was aided by sanctuary and assistance from Venezuela and Ecuador. Gradually, too, a division of labor saw coca handed off to the Mexican cartels for distribution to the U.S. market, which brought these astonishingly violent actors into the larger field of government concern. A similar development in expansion of distribution routes occurred in West Africa, with Europe the ultimate destination (and profits from that market segment at one point nearly equaling those of the United States). In this theater of operations, though,

---

<sup>10</sup> See IISS, *The FARC Files: Venezuela, Ecuador and the Secret Archive of "Raúl Reyes,"* (London: IISS, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Both presidents denied the allegations, which are based on overwhelming evidence, and have said that the captured documents were part of an elaborate conspiracy by the Colombian government (at the time, headed by Álvaro Uribe).

<sup>12</sup> The victim was found dead on February 15, 2005, five months after she was kidnapped. For recent discussion of the group and its connections with FARC, see David E. Spencer, "The Paraguayan People's Army 2010-2011: Strike-Counterstrike," *Security and Defense Studies Review* 13 (2012): 51-62, <http://chds.dodlive.mil/files/2013/12/pub-SDSR-v13.pdf>.

Colombians continued to remain much more active, with FARC itself engaged in distribution (e.g., in Spain).

### *Growth of the FARC Threat to the State*

As it became a very different movement in capacity and capability, FARC carefully organized itself to implement its strategic plan for seizing power. In warfighting, its strategic task was to penetrate the western 40 percent of the country, where 96 percent of the population lived (areas of mountains and coastal plains). Meanwhile, it used as its base areas the eastern 60 percent of the country, where only four percent of the population lived (but where most of the drugs were produced). It projected its power into local space by establishing “fronts of war” (*frentes de guerra*, or *cuadrillas*) – rather like beachheads in an assault landing, except that they were clandestine. The *frentes* could expect support from FARC’s base areas in the eastern llanos (tropical plains), and they combined command and control with geographic domination and efforts to mobilize the population. In reality, mobilization of any consequence never occurred. Thus, the image of a beachhead being captured is apt, for popular allegiance was not *won*; normally, the people were captured. There was no set size (either in manpower or geography), but as an insurgency, FARC was always trying to become as powerful as possible.

During most of the conflict, there were 67 fronts in the rural areas and just four in urban areas. To orchestrate their actions, the fronts were grouped under seven *bloques* (blocks), though in reality two were “candidate *bloques*.” As with the *frentes*, *bloques* had no established number of assigned units. Just as the military had regular, territorially assigned units with the strike power in special counter guerrilla battalions and mobile brigades, so FARC had its equivalent units. Fronts contained numerous “columns” (actual combatant units of varying strength and armament), most of them assigned in an area, but others that were mobile. This was true even at the highest levels of command and control, with several “mobile *bloques*” that operated alongside the seven territorial *bloques*.

For much of its history, command and control of the seven *bloques* was exercised by the seven members of the Secretariat (with one member assigned to each *bloque*). National Guerrilla Conferences, of which there have been nine (the last was in 2007), comprise representatives from the organizational elements of FARC – the *bloques*, fronts, columns, and various other entities – and theoretically set the strategic direction for the movement, with the Secretariat then implementing the instructions. In reality, as in all Marxist-Leninist organizations, the mechanics of power and institutional patronage dictate that the Guerrilla Conferences are subordinate; they not only meet infrequently but, when they do meet, essentially serve only as a rubber stamp for decisions already prepared and staffed. Still, democratic centralism (behind-the-scenes debate but strict party discipline once a decision has been reached) dictates that diverse opinions may have their say – within the limits set by an armed organization with a track record of eliminating those who run afoul of party discipline.

Secretariat members themselves are ostensibly elected by the National Conference. As might be expected, in reality, the original FARC leadership has replenished its ranks by selecting replacements (as required by death or party discipline) from what, in standard Marxist terminology, would be termed a Central Committee, with the conferences merely giving “assent.” The Central Committee is known in FARC as the “general staff” (*estado mayor*) and has some 32 members. These constitute the politico-military brain trust of FARC. They are effectively responsible for implementing the insurgency campaign against the Colombian government. Incapacitated staff members are immediately replaced by other guerrillas, so that the directive capacity of the Secretariat and staff is not interrupted. There is no fixed term for any of these individuals. Members of the Secretariat, in fact, have generally served until death. The de facto chairman of the Secretariat is FARC’s leader. Historically, this person has had near-absolute authority and control over the entire organization and makes the major decisions. Thus far, FARC has had only three such chairmen, or maximum leaders.<sup>13</sup>

As noted above, it was the seventh conference, held in 1982, that adopted exploitation of the drug trade (or so it was intended to be) as the primary revenue earner for the organization. This occurred as an initiative of the Secretariat, authorized by the chairman. The consequences, as indicated previously, have been severe for the movement in terms of its intended close relationship with the people.

Ironically, FARC had specifically rejected the “guerrillas lead” approach to mass mobilization (associated with Che Guevara), whereby the guerrillas themselves are to be a focal point (*foco*) for sparking action through launching inspirational attacks. The intent, though, is not the attacks themselves but their role in mobilizing the people. (Hence the term for the strategy: *focismo*.) In contrast, the “guerrillas support the political organizers” approach, if it may be crudely put, is that associated with the “people’s war” of Mao Tse-tung or the Vietnamese theorists, notably Truong Chinh.<sup>14</sup> It was this model that FARC adopted. And yet, its conduct negated the approach. In particular, recourse to drug trafficking, kidnapping, and extortion for funding meant there was little need to win the allegiance of the people when one could simply coerce them. Further, manpower came not from the purported social base but from marginalized youth who, in effect, were joining a gang called FARC. Image was everything, substance little (although, as with any left-wing organization, FARC could always attract support from “useful idiots” – to borrow from Lenin’s purported terminology – particularly in European radical circles).

The result was that FARC’s fronts, which should have contained a variety of units and types of manpower, were essentially *focos* in search of a mass base that never really appeared. Their main tasks were to fight government forces, recruit new members, and obtain local finance and support. What developed was that small units carried out the

---

<sup>13</sup> Manuel Marulanda was the organizer and first FARC leader. He died of a heart attack in 2008, after forty years of leadership. His successor, Alfonso Cano, was killed by the army during a military operation in 2010. The current leader, Rodrigo Londoño Echeverry (aka Timochenko), initiated the current peace process with the Colombian government.

<sup>14</sup> For historical discussion, see Thomas A. Marks, *Maoist People’s War in Post-Vietnam Asia* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2007), 21-55; for analytical discussion, see Thomas A. Marks, “Insurgency in a Time of Terrorism,” *Desafíos*, Bogotá 12 (1st semester 2005): 10-34, <http://revistas.urosario.edu.co/index.php/desafios/article/viewFile/671/601>.

recruiting and financing, while the bulk of the front assets sought combat. And even this last term should be used with some caution, because FARC's actions were overwhelmingly terrorist in form and essence. They consisted primarily of attacking the people and their livelihood. Typically, FARC units were deployed in remote areas, where government was mostly absent and living conditions for peasants were primitive. In such a setting, the national challenge was always how to incorporate the local populations into the state. Thus, FARC became the only governing authority, neither improving nor particularly diminishing the local inhabitants' livelihood (though always using violence as a normal mechanism for dispensing justice).

Still, some three-quarters of Colombians nationwide lived in urban areas and towns. This meant that the small population segments that had been captured did not provide an adequate basis for building either immediate combat power or the "new world" lauded in deceptive FARC propaganda. The local populations were an inadequate foundation if ever FARC was to expand and make a bid for state power. This had the consequence of forcing FARC still deeper into the drug trade just to hold on to its minimal gains. It functioned, in other words, like any other criminal organization that must amass power to dominate its "turf."

The absence of any viable capacity for governance, then, has been glaring. Even during the Pastrana presidency (1998-2002) peace talks, when FARC was granted 42,000 square kilometers as a demilitarized zone, it did not provide more than the most basic services to the roughly 100,000 people who remained in the region (at least part of which coincided with FARC's historic "liberated zone" declared decades earlier, during la Violencia). The major service provided during this period was the improvement of perhaps a thousand kilometers of secondary dirt roads. But even this service had the ulterior motive of facilitating the movement of the columns implementing the struggle against the government – that is, for use as mobility corridors. The local population was authorized to use these roads only under certain circumstances, and yet, they were forced to maintain them during the winter rainy season. Some FARC units provided sporadic minimal medical assistance to the local population, though less than might be expected given that FARC had its own jungle hospitals for treating its wounded combatants.

### *FARC Slips, Stumbles, and Falls*

Even as FARC followed "people's war" doctrine – an approach that was supposed to be built on interaction with the population – the organization's structure for projecting power increasingly operated in the clandestine manner demanded by involvement in the drug trade and in widespread use of terrorism. A pernicious inversion occurred whereby FARC's estrangement from the population increased in proportion to its increasingly symbiotic linkage with criminality. Rather than embracing the people, it brutalized them. By mid-1998, FARC, far from waging people's war, had become a predator.

It was this reality that allowed the Colombian state to regain the initiative. During the Pastrana administration (1998-2002), FARC's predatory nature and nearly total reliance on combat power financed through criminality exposed it to a carefully designed response executed by a dramatically enhanced military. FARC's structures – that is, its *bloques* and *frentes* with their constituent forces in columns – were attacked systemati-

cally even as the support network of the drug trade was disrupted. If this approach is reminiscent of Vietnam, it is because the armed forces were keenly aware that FARC, while claiming in essence to be like the Viet Cong, living amongst the people, in reality had become like the North Vietnamese Army in the border areas with Laos and Cambodia, where the combatants occupied bases far from the population.

Colombia's close relationship with the United States after World War II, which included contributing troops to the UN effort in Korea, meant that the military had a viable reservoir of knowledge about the Vietnam War. This was enhanced by specific strategic input, such as commissioned memoranda written by U.S. personnel present in Colombia.<sup>15</sup> Further, by 1998, FARC had thoroughly absorbed the Vietnamese variant of people's war, as transmitted through the FMLN insurgents of El Salvador. As with the Vietnam case, Colombian forces had access to ample U.S. input, enabling them to assess FARC's misuse of FMLN's warfighting approach—which, like Hanoi's, dictated that “all forms of struggle” form a seamless, symbiotic whole. Instead, FARC privileged combat to the near exclusion of all else. This made it vulnerable, particularly because its institutional hubris prevented it from recognizing the capabilities possible in a modern military that embraced adaptation.

Simultaneously—and certainly getting most of the publicity both domestically and abroad—the United States made an important contribution through Plan Colombia. This was an expansive “whole of government” approach to strengthening the Colombian state and its defensive capabilities. Only the counternarcotics aspect was realistically funded, however, and this in turn, for reasons of U.S. policy and law, was kept separate from operations against the counterinsurgency. Regardless, the U.S. role was important in reversing misguided earlier efforts by Washington to motivate Bogotá through “sticks” rather than “carrots” for its supposed lack of will in addressing its numerous challenges—notably, the growth of the narcotics trade.<sup>16</sup>

In the intense fighting during the Pastrana administration, FARC's effort to shift to mobile warfare (also known as *maneuver warfare* or *main-force warfare*, in the terminology drawn from the Soviet military) was defeated. To borrow another term apparently first used in a warfighting sense by the Soviets, the *correlation of forces* had shifted decisively against FARC. Astonishingly, though, the Colombian military strategy took place divorced from national strategy. For nearly all President Pastrana's four-year term, the government negotiated with FARC while ordering the military to pursue its own strategy. Only the military emerged strengthened from the process.

A remarkable feature of the first generation of FARC leaders was its permanent isolation from the quotidian realities of everyday Colombian life. These guerrilla leaders, hiding in the deep jungle, had little interest in establishing processes of strategic communication. For them, the key to the struggle was the armed confrontation with the army. All their efforts were directed toward achieving military advantage on the

---

<sup>15</sup> The most important of these memoranda made clear the deficient nature of the campaign architecture with which FARC sought to implement its people's-war strategy.

<sup>16</sup> See Thomas A. Marks, “A Model Counterinsurgency: Uribe's Colombia (2002-2006) vs FARC,” *Military Review* 87, no. 2 (Mar.-Apr. 2007). For a negative but fascinating discussion (which claims extensive Colombian military involvement with the self-defense groups), see Winifred Tate, *Drugs, Thugs, and Diplomats: U.S. Policymaking in Colombia* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2015).

ground. When former president Pastrana invited them to hold peace talks in 1998, they saw it as an opportunity to advance their military project. In their own terms, the peace process was a subterfuge for the development of their strategic plan. Their strategy was to debate endlessly while strengthening their military capabilities and expanding drug trafficking activity, recruitment, and arms purchases. Meanwhile, talks continued. Pastrana offered a demilitarized zone to which the state had no right of entry. FARC took advantage of this naive gesture and continued to strengthen itself while simultaneously unleashing attacks against the armed forces and the national police.

FARC participation in the peace process, then, was transparently a line of effort within the overall insurgent strategy. Its actions were disingenuous and calculating, counting on government hopes for peace and on Bogotá's gullibility. Insurgent violence was constant, and FARC launched seven major offensives during the three years of the peace effort (1999-2002). Of about 20,000 active combatants, some 35 percent were involved in these attacks. Initially, the government interpreted this as part of the negotiation strategy, assuming that FARC was attempting to show a strengthened military capacity that would fortify its bargaining position. But military intelligence managed to pierce the deception and discern FARC's intentions. According to captured FARC documents and prisoners, the plan was to prolong the talks as much as possible while at the same time preparing for future military offensives.

FARC's general approach was simple. It called for open-ended talks between the government, FARC's representatives, and representatives of groups that it could expect to be sympathetic to its positions and cant. What the government tabled as a limited agenda, FARC turned into an expansive agenda with blurred milestones and diffused responsibilities. There was no time limit, so meetings lasted for days as FARC used dilatory negotiating techniques to divert talks in many different directions. Colombian media gave wide coverage to the meetings, and guerrilla leaders had every opportunity to appear and address a national audience. Months went by fruitlessly, with no hope of achieving any agreement, and initial optimism gave way to increasing pessimism. Moreover, from the first moment, FARC declared that it would never surrender its weapons or disband its militias. After all, it felt that it was winning the war, for the government had come to them to urge peace talks after the astonishing series of battlefield reverses that began in 1996 and continued through mid-1998.

The general agenda of the talks included 12 points: (1) political solution to the armed struggle; (2) human rights; (3) integrated agrarian policy; (4) exploitation and preservation of natural resources; (5) social and economic structure; (6) reforms in the judicial system, and the fight against drug trafficking and corruption; (7) political reforms to improve the democratic system; (8) changes in the model of the state; (9) international humanitarian law; (10) military reform; (11) international relations; and (12) formalization of the agreements.

During the more than three years of discussion, not even one of these points was resolved. The Colombian government asked for an international verification commission to document and verify the way the talks were implemented, but FARC refused with the excuse that such a commission would have no authority. Trying to reinvigorate the peace talks, the Colombian government organized travel to several European countries to discuss the peace process and examine social-democratic modes of governance. This

effort, too, came to naught as the talks continued to go nowhere. Ongoing attacks by FARC forces, political assassinations, and the hijacking of a domestic commercial airliner drove Pastrana to lose faith in the process and eventually, on February 23, 2002, to order the armed forces to recover the demilitarized zone and capture FARC's main leaders. (The first occurred, but not the second.) After talks that had occupied most of his term in office, President Pastrana realized that he had been deceived. It was a dispiriting experience for Colombians and was to play a key role in the unprecedented first-round electoral victory, in 2002, of a third-party candidate, Álvaro Uribe.

By the start of Uribe's two terms as president (2002-10), the security forces had regained the strategic initiative and presented him with options that simply had not been there for President Pastrana. Uribe took advantage of this opportunity to implement his spectacularly successful Democratic Security and Defense Policy. It enhanced still further the shield provided to democratic society by the security forces (military and police) while galvanizing social and economic mobilization through political initiatives. FARC was hammered to perhaps a third of its peak strength and completely lost initiative at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. Even its efforts at a transition to terrorism were largely ineffective.

Whereas Democratic Security was explicitly the strategic approach during Uribe's first term (2002-6), Consolidating Democratic Security was the approach during the second term. The new approach differed in that it reversed the kinetic-versus-nonkinetic emphasis, with joint task forces focusing on FARC remnants, and special operations being used to target leadership figures. Successes were as impressive as those of the earlier Uribe term, but strategic focus suffered. Joint task forces were ultimately just an operational equivalent of the tactical "whack-a-mole" approach that had proved so ineffective before the Pastrana presidency. The search-and-destroy focus, ostensibly to eliminate FARC remnants (and, to a lesser extent, the still very small ELN), was an American-inspired approach that led to undue emphasis on body counts. It also laid the groundwork for scandal (the "false positives" episode, wherein noncombatants were killed and reported as guerrillas).

Imperfections aside, by 2010 the security forces' demonstrable operational progress left FARC with few options. Showing a sophistication surprisingly lacking for the previous several decades, FARC leadership recognized the need to emphasize nonkinetic approaches, notably seeking to alter the frame and narrative through information warfare, and recruiting Lenin's "useful idiots" in promising Colombian sectors. Externally, the movement managed to establish reasonably secure bases in Venezuela and Ecuador so that FARC could survive no matter what blows it suffered on its own soil. Now FARC could turn its internal focus to mobilizing coca growers, or *cocaleros* (as had been conspicuously successful in Bolivia, where coca is legal), marginalized members of organized labor, and alienated left-wing elements, such as radical professors and students. Colombia has a vibrant legal left wing, so both fellow travelers and recruits were there to cultivate.

## FARC and the Peace Process

Thus, FARC mutated from an insurgent movement into a hybrid organization where political and criminal actions and personnel intermixed. This intermixing led to questions about the organization's true nature, goals, and motivations. While political and criminal activities may be linked in the field, the FARC leadership, through the Secretariat, is experienced and deft in managing this dichotomy. The objective ("ends") to which all FARC activity ("ways") is directed, whether political or criminal tactically, remains ideological and political: seizing state power. For many years, FARC leaders thought this goal could be reached only through force and a protracted guerrilla war funded through criminality, particularly the drug trade—a connection, it is worth noting, that FARC continues to deny.<sup>17</sup> As already noted, FARC's "means" (fundraising) swallowed its "ways," turning it into a hybrid narcoterrorist organization. Now it appears willing to consider other approaches.

Just how this shift has come about remains a matter of speculation. On the one hand, it is known that FARC's leadership has grown increasingly concerned at the damage that its involvement in the drug trade has inflicted on the "ideological project." On the other hand, whatever its bravado, FARC has, in fact, been decimated and presently numbers an estimated 7,500 combatants. Its leaders have increasingly been eliminated by targeted killings, both by precision-guided munitions launched from aircraft and by more traditional special operations. Still another factor is that the previously conducive regional context provided by the Bolivarian states, led by Venezuela and Ecuador, has altered dramatically. This shift began visibly after Colombia's March 2008 killing, inside Ecuador, of FARC second-in-command Raúl Reyes, by precision-guided munitions, in the previously mentioned Operación Fénix (Operation Phoenix), and the subsequent capture of what was essentially a duplicate of FARC's master computer files, by the special-operations unit that swept the ground after the strike. FARC vigorously denied the contents of the files. But the find nonetheless provoked considerable diplomatic controversy and pressure because it demonstrated conclusively the involvement of the Bolivarian states with terrorism and drug trafficking through their support of FARC (and other similar groups). Later, the March 5, 2013, death of the Bolivarian linchpin, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, combined with a rapidly deteriorating economic position, only accelerated the Bolivarians' desire to be rid of an increasingly problematic adventure.

Ten years after the unsuccessful talks of the Pastrana presidency, with a very different strategic reality and tactical situation on the ground thanks to the Uribe presidency, then-newly elected President Juan Manuel Santos (2010-present—he is now in his second term) extended secret peace feelers to FARC. By this time, after years of decline, the FARC leaders appeared to realize that their armed struggle had no prospects of success. As a component of their revised emphasis on political aspects of the struggle, they conditionally accepted new peace talks but remained determined to obtain as much advantage as possible by exploiting the government's eagerness to obtain peace through negotiation and compromise. The Secretariat again had some specific points:

---

<sup>17</sup> During the peace talks in Havana in 2013, Iván Márquez, the leading FARC negotiator, has denied such links and denounced the allegations as false.

- FARC would turn into a political party and become an active part of the legislature, with representatives in both houses.
- No FARC member would be imprisoned even a day or be tried by the Colombian justice system.
- The Colombian justice system would have no moral authority or jurisdiction to judge FARC's deeds.
- FARC cadres would not surrender their weapons to the government.
- Colombia's rural regions would enjoy political and economic autonomy. (This point was not included in the negotiating agenda.)<sup>18</sup>

These proposals make evident FARC's concept and goals in the peace negotiations. FARC has two main objectives: First, it seeks to obtain legitimacy before the Colombian people and the international community by showing goodwill in its pursuit of peace and a political settlement to the conflict. (This will be useful later on during the call for elections.) Second, if FARC's conditions can be realized, it will have control over important rural regions, especially in the southern part of the country, where it has long been active. This will allow the Secretariat to have its own political and geographical capital, as well as access to resources in those regions.

With these objectives in mind, FARC leaders think they will have better chances to gain political power through elections. Retaining their weapons, they will act as the main authority in those areas. Moreover, in time, FARC leaders hope that they will be able to change the nature of the state and turn Colombia into a socialist polity resembling the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela with its neo-Marxist ideology. FARC leadership has not abandoned its Marxist-Leninist goals, only cloaked its ideology with language appropriate to the twenty-first century, when ignorance of communism is ubiquitous.<sup>19</sup>

The current round of peace negotiations between the Colombian government and FARC is taking place in Havana and is being facilitated by Cuba and Norway. While there has been some progress, there are no substantive agreements yet. The talks are organized around the main grievances cited by FARC over the years to justify its long insurgency. The talks were preceded by a secret agreement between the Colombian government and FARC, establishing the framework for an agenda. According to this framework, the Havana peace talks should be limited to those items identified in the secret agreement. To further shape the agenda, the government and insurgent leaders held a series of secret meetings for a year and a half. Once the agenda was ready, yet another agreement was signed, committing each party to limit the talks to those items identified in the framework. The purpose of this commitment was to avoid a repetition of the 1999-2002 experience, when FARC introduced new issues and allegations that were disruptive and counterproductive to actual negotiations. Such combative methods prolonged the process, and ultimately, the negotiating effort proved fruitless. Indeed, as already noted, FARC took advantage of those years to reorganize, expand, and train

---

<sup>18</sup> Iván Márquez, FARC's chief negotiator, issued a statement in Havana during a press conference. His statement included these points.

<sup>19</sup> Nothing in such an assessment of FARC need be treated as mere opinion. Anyone may access the group's extensive online presence and that of its fellow travelers. Indeed, FARC essentially boasts of its Cold War approach. See, for example, the official FARC website, <http://farc-ep.co/>.

its cadres, as well as to expand its involvement in the drug cycle. In retrospect, it is clear that FARC's objective was never to reach an agreement, but to buy time for a general offensive, which it attempted in the seven major assaults that were defeated by the revitalized security forces.

In this second effort, the government and FARC appeared committed to reaching an actual agreement, but this was to occur within one year of the August 2012 official agreement on an agenda, which was announced in Oslo, Norway.<sup>20</sup> Having learned from experience, the government stated that it would make no truce with the guerrillas. The agenda would consist of five basic points:

- rural development focused on mitigating the unequal distribution of land in rural areas, and the economic disadvantages of poor farmers;
- FARC's participation in Colombian political life after its demobilization as a guerrilla force and its organization as a legal political party;
- an end to the fighting, and the laying down of arms by the guerrillas;
- an end to drug trafficking by FARC;
- recognition of the rights of the conflict's victims.

Initially, and in breach of the agreement that there would be no cease-fire during the talks, FARC ordered a two-month cease-fire by all its members and invited the government to do the same. The government rejected the request. Fighting continued, though at lower levels of intensity, and FARC units continued recruiting. In certain regions, such recruitment included children under 17 years of age. Essentially, FARC continued to operate in the same way that it had for decades, and nothing on the horizon justified the belief that a change was taking place in the Secretariat's mind-set as a result of the peace process. The number of combatants, though diminished in its ability to fight the military directly, was sufficient to keep up operations throughout the country, using terrorist attacks to disrupt infrastructure. In this way, FARC could show the state the price for refusing to accommodate FARC positions at the negotiating table. That this was precisely the approach used so successfully by Hanoi in the Vietnam War – and taught directly to El Salvador's FMLN – seemed to escape Bogotá's negotiating team.

At the time of this writing (August 2015), no agreement had been reached on the most important issues: actual demobilization of FARC as an armed organization, and its integration into the nonviolent political process. Despite the government's best intentions, FARC has gradually turned Bogotá from its effort to use a relatively restricted, structured negotiating protocol. Now, because of the peace process's long duration and the excessive hopes raised, the government finds itself in the position of being gradually made to give way. FARC's position throughout has been to claim that the inequities and brutality of the state compelled it to wage its insurgency. It claims to speak for a broad social base and simply denies the extent to which it has, for decades, privileged assault on the innocent as its principle methodology for waging war. There is no crime that it has not committed: from torture and murder to laying extensive (and, normally, unmarked) minefields throughout the country, to kidnapping and rape, to drug trafficking. All these crimes it simply denies, insisting instead that the facts of history be

---

<sup>20</sup> For timeline and details, as understood by FARC, see FARC-EP, "Diálogos de paz" (in English), Mar. 1, 2011, <http://farc-epace.org/index.php/timeline.html>. Needless to say, FARC would disagree with much of this analysis.

decided by various truth commissions and international panels. The vocal group of left-wing fellow travelers within Colombia who will lend themselves to such projects all but guarantees the turning inside out of events as detailed in this chapter. The state becomes the enemy of the people.

Apparent cases of indiscipline that have surfaced (such as the “false positives” scandal), have not helped the government’s case. These have been overstated, however, and have obscured a much more important point: disorientation and uncertainty within the military. Ironically, the conscious effort to avoid the errors of the previous negotiations has ended up replicating the same structural disconnection between national and military strategies that was the Achilles’ heel of that period. The talks have not only been conducted largely in secret but have been accompanied by the unrelenting FARC attacks on the security forces, to which the government has been loath to respond lest it disturb any progress being made. Rather than setting the agenda, as planned, the government has repeatedly been forced onto the defensive, all but acquiescing in the more extreme claims of FARC and cause-oriented groups who, throughout the conflict, have sought to portray the military as little more than a state-sanctioned death squad. The toll on military morale has been heavy.

This has been accompanied by a government obsession with maintaining a consistent public front, thus going to extreme lengths to ensure that no information contrary to government positions emerges from the security forces—who are the most reliable source of such information. Since evidence concerning FARC actions and motives frequently contradicts the government’s publicly stated positions, the recourse of the Santos administration has been to ensure (through regular replacement of individuals) a compliant chain of command. The result has been a stifling of professional opinions and judgment.

The public is aware of this situation. Both the peace process and President Santos personally stand low in the opinion polls (Santos at consistently below 30 percent at the time of this writing). But Congress (and the major outlets of mainstream media) remains in the majority hands of the party of President Santos, National Unity, which results in control of the legal pathway for threatened and actual prosecution. The result has been an unhealthy imbalance in civil-military relations. This has been particularly dangerous because FARC has demonstrated a growing awareness of the security vacuum created by the failure of state armed capacity to empower democratic mobilization. Thus, FARC has thus dramatically increased its efforts to mobilize *cocaleros*, marginalized indigenous elements, and the extreme left wing of labor and of the political spectrum (e.g., students). These efforts, accompanied by a robust information warfare campaign, have allowed FARC to interject itself into national politics in the same manner as Hezbollah or any other political party that also fields its own armed forces.

FARC, then, with the assistance of antisystemic elements within the polity, is using the long-drawn-out peace talks to cultivate the position that Colombian democracy is not “authentic”—indeed, not even legitimate. Faced with this relentless effort, the government has simply not offered a response, let alone turned to the security services. The government cites a tactical count of incidents as proof that the security situation is healthy. But this misses the point that FARC has shifted its emphasis to a different line of effort—away from “violence leads” to forming front organizations in order to wage political warfare, while solidifying its position abroad. Its intent is to emerge as a strong

political party leading a rewriting of the constitution, which was the methodology for bringing the communist M19 group into the political mainstream in the late 1980s. (The new constitution was ratified in 1991.) FARC's enhanced political effort has occurred even as global economic challenges have buffeted the Colombian economy. The situation has caused FARC leadership again to feel that it can seize the moment, that "history" favors it. FARC's orientation is one not of reintegration into democratic politics, but of yet another plan to destroy democracy in favor of its Marxist-Leninist (Bolivarian) alternative.

In demanding that the government support it in seizing the moment, FARC continues to claim that its astonishing record of terrorism never occurred and that its ongoing connections with the drug trade are pure fiction. It has signed minor agreements committing the organization to work with the government in clearing minefields throughout the country and in ending the drug trade but has portrayed both as a consequence – if not the creation – of the democratic system. At each moment of pressure in the talks, terrorism has increased dramatically to press the government for concessions. And these the government has given, in the latest instance committing to a bilateral cease-fire (effective at the time of this writing). Always, there is the persistent spinning of a narrative that portrays the violence of the country as "civil war." This is roughly the equivalent of framing the societal turmoil caused by the Red Brigades of Italy in the 1970s and early 1980s as evidence of a country divided against itself – which was not at all the case there, and much less so in present-day Colombia.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

The peace process is ongoing. At some point, hard negotiations will be needed, balancing the competing requirements of justice – for victims from both sides of the conflict – and peace. But because the discussion has spent years barely progressing beyond what ultimately are peripheral concerns, no trade-offs have yet been made between stabilization and justice. Worryingly, President Santos has announced that certain accommodations will likely be required, giving measured immunity to former guerrillas. The general prosecutor registered his agreement with the president and announced that justice must benefit the peace agreements and serve reconciliation. FARC has unequivocally stated that should a peace agreement be reached, no FARC members will be turned over to state justice, and that any measures applied to FARC must also be applied to the military. Colombians have little confidence in the government – a consequence of its obsessive secrecy concerning the peace negotiations, which are a matter of central national concern. This low level of trust has raised concerns within Colombia that the government's position might end up in de facto – or even de jure – impunity for terrorists, regardless of the atrocities they have committed. FARC is determined to achieve this through its campaign of equating isolated instances of security forces' indiscipline with its own blatant flouting of international law and adoption of terrorism, including torture of prisoners, execution of kidnap victims, and assaults on innocent civilian populations.

Indeed, most of the core issues driving the long conflict have yet to be addressed. They are part of the agenda of the peace negotiations, but they have not yet been moved

---

<sup>21</sup> On the Red Brigades, see Donatella della Porta, "Left-Wing Terrorism in Italy," in *Terrorism in Context*, ed. Martha Crenshaw (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1995), 105-59.

to a position of resolution. Both sides seem, in a sense, to be looking to the United States, which was asked to become involved late in the process, to produce a “package” that will somehow cut the Gordian knot. That the United States was “successful” in the earlier El Salvador case is often held up as a model. But that case, as is evident in even the most cursory examination of media reporting, has proved a disaster precisely *because of* the compromises made between security and justice. (There, too, cause-oriented groups played a leading role in demanding gutting of the security services, to the extent that the country was all but helpless before the onslaught of the drug cartels and other criminal gangs.)

One critical point that will prove extremely contentious will be the profits from drug trafficking that have poured into FARC’s coffers in the past decades and have been the fuel powering this illicit power structure and the struggle in Colombia. Crimes such as kidnapping and extortion also wait to be addressed in the process, for FARC has stated emphatically that they were simply acts of war, for which it claims immunity from punishment.

Among the many countries worldwide grappling with illicit power structures, Colombia is distinct, perhaps even unique. For not only is an “ideological project” – FARC – being dismantled, but other projects, political (e.g., ELN) and criminal (the drug cartels), remain on the field of battle. Through strategic and institutional adaptation, Colombia has moved to an exceptional point in its history, when it is more integrated and more robust in its socioeconomic-political structure than ever before.<sup>22</sup> FARC has not been a part of this transformation and, indeed, has been passed by, continuing to live physically and psychologically in a Colombia of another era. It points to the imperfections of society, such as the high levels of rural poverty, but offers statist solutions that, time and again throughout history, have proved, at best, impractical, and at worst, devastating to human life. In this, FARC is supported by cause-oriented groups (the loudest voices being foreign) that see Colombia as akin to El Salvador or Nicaragua of the Cold War and claim that “anything” is better than war. Solutions for building are not a part of their agenda – a shortcoming that has ever been the gap in FARC’s soul. That FARC’s illustrations of “just” societies are the human and physical disasters seen in Cuba and Venezuela highlights the point.

Out of hubris, Colombia abandoned an approach that had brought it to the very brink of victory. Clichés (especially that “all insurgencies have been settled through negotiation”) were substituted for strategic planning, and hope for method. The decisions made cannot be undone. But the methodology of tactical surrender in the expectation of strategic victory is destructive of the polity’s democratic essence. To equate systematically applied terrorism with the imperfections and missteps (no matter how criminal in individual cases) of the state is to negate all that the Democratic Security and Defense Policy tapped: the willingness of an empowered citizenry to move beyond its parochial concerns and fight to establish a more promising, just order. It is that order, with its tenacity and deep democratic roots, that will lead Colombia forward.

---

<sup>22</sup> See Carlos Ospina and Thomas A. Marks, “Colombia: Changing Strategy amidst the Struggle,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 25, no. 2 (2014): 35471, [www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09592318.2014.903641](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09592318.2014.903641); David E. Spencer, “Importancia estratégica de una nueva cultura de accountability,” in *Fortalezas de Colombia*, ed. Fernando Cepeda Ulloa (Bogotá: Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, 2004), 391-415.