

BOGOTA (Reuters) - Colombia's disarmed FARC rebels have their eye on forming a political coalition for the 2018 elections, ex-rebel leaders said on Friday, as the group marked its transition to a political party with a concert in Bogota's central square. The former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), whose political party will be called the Revolutionary Alternative Common Force, ended its part in a decades-long war that has killed more than 220,000 people under a 2016 deal which granted amnesty to most of its fighters. The decision by the group to preserve its famous FARC Spanish acronym raised eyebrows, given many Colombians associate the word with decades of bloodshed. Whether the ex-rebels can convince Colombians, many of whom revile them, to back the new party remains to be seen. The FARC will hold 10 automatic seats in Congress through 2026 under the terms of the accord and may campaign for others. Both legislative and presidential elections are set for 2018 and the party plans to reach out to ideological allies to try to form a coalition, without abandoning its Marxist commitments to land reform and social justice, the group said. We are continuing, via an exclusively political path, our historic goal and aspiration for a new order of social justice and true democracy in our country, said secretariat member Ivan Marquez at a closing event for the group's six-day conference to inaugurate the new party. We want our ideas to be available for a transitional government of reconciliation and peace for the elections in 2018, whose foundation will be a great democratic coalition, Marquez said. The formal party launch, featuring musical performances and a planned speech by FARC leader Rodrigo Londono, known by his nom de guerre Timochenko, took place in Bogota's colonial Bolivar Square on Friday in front of a crowd of thousands. Long live peace! shouted the crowd, as FARC members on stage displayed banners reading Welcome to political life. We don't want one more drop of blood for political reasons, we don't want any mother to spill tears because her children suffer violence, Londono said. That's why we don't hesitate to extend our hands in a gesture of forgiveness and reconciliation. We want a Colombia without hate. Londono said the party would focus on fighting corruption and poverty, especially in rural areas, and that politics would not be easy. Our first step now is to present to Colombia our political party, its strategic program, our proposal for political action, Londono added. The FARC's often old-fashioned Marxist rhetoric strikes many as a throwback to their 1964 founding, but concrete proposals for reforms to complicated property laws could get traction with rural voters who struggle as subsistence farmers. FARC leaders have repeatedly expressed fears that members could be targeted for assassinations in a repeat of the 1980s killings of some 5,000 members of the rebel-allied Patriotic Union party, which grew out of a failed peace process with the government.