

LAS FUERZAS ARMADAS REVOLUCIONARIO DE COLOMBIA – EJERCITO DEL PUEBLO

A BRIEF HISTORY

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The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia ± 3HR5OHV\$P)\$&LVDRUJDDQDWLRQ rooted deep in the history of Colombia. Due to its long history, the FARC has played different roles in different time periods, and consequently is viewed by different people in vastly different ways. To some, the FARC is the hero of the commoner, to others a terrorist organization, and to others still, a narcotrafficking ring. In order to understand wh-4(c)-5(ki1 0f t)11(()-16(F)23(A)5(RC i)-4(s)6odf

gained the support of the Colombian army. Despite the polarization of its politics, Colombia UHPDLHGUHODWLYHOSHDFHINXGKLDQWKHYDQHDUON7KLVFKDQHQGUHDSwing the 1946 elections. In 1946, Gaitán ran for president without the support of the liberal party, causing a split that resulted in the victory of the conservative candidate, Mariano Ospina Perez. Ospina was elected president of Colombia with only 42% of the vote.³ In September of 1947, Gaitan GLVFORVHGDVHFUHWGRFHHQGHWDLOLDQWKH2VSLQJRYHUHQVYVSDQRLPSRUWKJHTBQL weapons into the country in order to handle the growing liberal unrest.⁴ The liberals assumed he was preparing to violently crush all opposition and reacted by arming themselves, setting the scene for a civil war.

With the messy political situation and the resulting violence, the people of Colombia were ready for a change. Gaitán was certain to win the 1950 election, assuming he could stay alive. Gaitán refused bodyguards, claiming the act of accepting bodyguards would transform his image from a man of the people into a corrupt politician. He believed he was immune ± that no one would be stupid enough to assassinate him. QWHKLP6KRUWOEHIRUHKLVVDVVLQWLRQHVDWDWHG?I,DPNLOOHGRQVWRQZOOEHOHIWVWKKGLa Violencia was officially ushered in on April 9, 1948 with the assassination of Gaitán. The assassination shattered what little faith the people of Colombia had for their government and sparked the greatest riot the western hemisphere has ever seen, known as Bogotazo. Although official numbers do not exist, historians estimate that over 2,000 people were killed and 5,000 injured in that single night⁶. Unfortunately, Bogotazo was but the beginning of a long war within Colombia.

The assassination of Gaitán sparked a civil war that Colombia is still recovering from. The Colombian Liberal Party and Colombian Communist Party formed guerrilla units and fought against the Colombian Conservative Party, the Colombian military, and sometimes even against each other. Order rapidly disintegrated and violence escalated to appalling levels. Torturous methods of execution, such as crucifixion and dismemberment by chainsaw became commonplace, as did violence against women and children.⁷ Over the course of La Violencia, thousands of farmers fled from the developed farming lands to the relative security of the Amazon jungle, previously only inhabited by small tribes of indigenous peoples. During the 1950s, small villages began to spring up in the Amazon, surrounded by plots of cleared land. As a result of the violence, the jungle was being rapidly colonized without the knowledge or planning of the powerless Colombian government. The Colombian military considered these villages to be communist threats, and systematically destroyed each one that it found, frequently brutally murdering the civilians. For roughly ten years, violence overtook Colombia, ultimately resulting in over 300,000 deaths in the single decade.⁸ Although it is often cited as the end date of La Violencia, the formation and solidification of the National Front in 1958 did not magically end the violence. Violence in Colombia has fluctuated since La Violencia, with a recent spike in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

³ Ruiz, p 51.

⁴ Ruiz, p 52.

⁵ Herbert, Braun, *The Assassination of Gaitán: Public Life and Urban Violence in Colombia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 132.

⁶ Ruiz, p 56.

⁷ Ruiz, p 28, 235.

⁸ "Colombia - La Violencia." *Country Studies*. <<http://countrystudies.us/colombia/22.htm>>.

The Founding of the FARC

The FARC was born out of the violence during and after La Violencia and the corresponding loss of faith in government. Referring to La Violencia, Pedro Marín, founder of the FARC, ~~Ø~~RWH³The police and armed Conservatives would destroy the villages, kill inhabitants, burn

supported by the military, had an even more brutal reputation. Children and teenagers in the countryside matured in an environment where the military was to be feared for their brutality and the guerrillas respected for their protection. In addition, the guerrilla-controlled areas historically have been areas of extreme poverty, which with the exception of military raids, received absolutely no support from the Colombian government. This combination of factors made it easy for the FARC to recruit guerrillas.

One author says that even among those simple tenants, their ideology is hard to pinpoint. The guerrillas, yet using their guerrilla tactics, frequently kill civilians. They teach a Marxist ideology, yet consistently rebuffed approaches from Cuba and the former USSR.¹³ Despite the seeming contradictions, every guerrilla is taught FARC ideology. All FARC recruits are sent to a training camp somewhere in the Amazon region. There they are not only taught guerrilla tactics and methods of navigating the dense jungle, but also spend four hours of each day in an

overthrew the established government of Gomez and placed General Rojas in power. Since this point, traditional government has been slowly wrenching power from the military, but frequently the two have not been operating as one force. The paramilitary groups further complicate the relationship between military and government. In the late 1960s, the Colombian army established the paramilitary groups as legitimate special operations groups. Violence was encouraged in these groups and oversight was minimal at best. The government turned a blind eye to the methods of torture and murder used by these groups, hoping they would succeed in obliterating the guerrilla organizations and establishing peace. Eventually the government saw that these groups were doing more harm than good and that the tactics used by them were not only unsuccessful, but provided the FARC with angry recruits bent on revenge. In 1989 the government outlawed paramilitary organizations, but that did not dismantle what had been established, nor did it dismantle the relationship established between the military and the paramilitary groups. The Colombian Peace Commission found that from 1988 to 1997 there were over 20,000 murders committed by illegal organizations. Of those, paramilitaries and drug cartels were responsible for over 80%, while the guerrilla groups (FARC and ELN among others) were responsible for 20%.¹⁶ Paramilitaries would not only attack the guerrillas, but would protect themselves, attacking any police found investigating them, journalists reporting on them, or lawyers trying to prosecute them. In addition, paramilitary groups turned to the same sources of funding as the FARC; kidnapping, extortion, and drug trafficking. By encouraging the formation of paramilitary units in the 1960s, the Colombian government opened the door to the formation of armed groups outside their direct control. These morphed into organizations that are arguably doing more harm to Colombia than the very organization they were formed to fight.

In conclusion, the government condoned, but frequently did not control the army, and the army tacitly condoned, but ultimately did not control the paramilitary groups. The result of this complex situation was that the government was typically not in a position to successfully negotiate for peace. Any agreement for amnesty to which they came meant very little in reality, as the paramilitary, and to a limited extent the military, could not be forced to respect it.

Revenue Streams

The FARC has two main sources of income- kidnapping and drug trafficking. Hostage taking serves several purposes for the FARC. The primary purpose of kidnapping is to extract ransom money, which then funds their guerrilla activities. ,QKHODWHYWKH)\$&DVNLGQSSLQ over one thousand Colombian citizens per year, with ransoms ranging from a couple hundred to a couple million dollars.¹⁷ The secondary purpose of kidnapping is the political bargaining power the FARC achieves through the practice. The FARC does not only kidnap citizens, but also members of the Colombian army and national police force, which it considers prisoners of war rather than hostages. The FARC refuses to ransom these soldiers, and instead views them only as HFKDQHDEOHV prisoners who will only be released in exchange for FARC members imprisoned in Colombia. The practice of kidnapping is used by the FARC to raise funds, gain power for prisoner exchanges, and instill fear in the people of Colombia. 7KH)\$&YVHFRQPHWKRGRIILQLQWKHPVHOYHVLVWKURJKGUXWUDIILFNLQDLQWKURJK taxing the production and sale of coca, and through the development of the product into cocaine.