

# **LAS FUERZAS ARMADAS REVOLUCIONARIO DE COLOMBIA – EJERCITO DEL PUEBLO**

## **A BRIEF HISTORY**

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The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army (FARC) is an organization 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 narcotics trafficking ring. In order to understand what the FARC is today, it is necessary to understand its history. The FARC is an organization that was born out of necessity, out of fear, and out of violence and has evolved in response to the ever-changing politics in Colombia. They are an organization that tried to negotiate with the Colombian government several times, only to be slaughtered upon reentry into society. They are an organization that protected villages from the brutal Colombian military during La Violencia. In its early years, the FARC was an organization formed to protect the citizens of Colombia, yet the modern FARC attacks military targets with zero concern for civilians in their way. The FARC of today is not the FARC of 1964.

### **20<sup>th</sup> Century Colombia**

The FARC was a product the violence and disregard for the life that characterized Colombia during and after La Violencia. La Violencia officially began in 1948 with the assassination of Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, but the conflict began much earlier than that. Gaitán arrived on the political scene of Colombia following the “Banana Massacre” of 1928. In 1928, the workers employed by the United Fruit Company organized a strike demanding, among other reforms, that the UFCO cease paying them in the form of coupons to their own company store. In response to the strike, the Colombian dispatched the military, which promptly slaughtered hundreds of strikers.<sup>1</sup> This massacre attracted the attention of the press and made it into mainstream newspapers read in the cities and the countryside. The event polarized the country, and attracted the attention of the young Gaitán. Gaitán quickly rose in popularity, but was rejected as a radical by both the liberal and conservative parties. During Gaitán’s time in politics, he actively warned the ruling class that the conditions in the countryside were intolerable and would inevitably lead to violence.<sup>2</sup>

1930 saw the election of the first liberal to the Colombian presidency in nearly 50 years. Rather than stabilizing politics, this reignited tensions rooted in Colombia’s previous civil war. Conservatives feared the liberal rise and began forming armed militias. A politician by the name of Laureano Gómez Castro formed an extremist wing of the conservative party and rapidly

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<sup>1</sup> Ruiz, B. (2001). *The Colombian Civil War*. Mcfarland & Co Inc Pub. p 44.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p 47.

gained the support of the Colombian army. Despite the polarization of its politics, Colombia remained relatively peaceful during the '30s and early '40s. This changed rapidly following 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.<sup>3</sup> In September of 1947, Gaitán disclosed a secret document detailing the Ospina government's plan to import huge quantities of weapons into the country in order to handle the growing liberal unrest.<sup>4</sup> 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 assassi

## **The Founding of the FARC**

The FARC was born out of the violence during and after La Violencia and the corresponding

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

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 Colombi