

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

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.³ 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.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. Shortly before his assassination he stated, “If I am killed, not one stone will be left unturned”.⁵ La 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

The Founding of the FARC

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 summarizes FARC ideology as, “The Colombian government is corrupt; the American government is imperialistic; FARC is the people’s army; the FARC and the poor are persecuted by the state”.¹² Beyond those simple tenants, their ideology is hard to pinpoint. They’re against drugs, yet profit off of the trade of cocaine and heroin. They’re for the protection of the citizens, 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 academic setting being taught economics, political science, and FARC ideology - all from the skewed perspective of a senior member of the FARC.¹⁴

Recruitment of Children

The FARC has recently received attention from human rights watch groups for their recruitment of children. They do not deny the allegations, with one of the guerrillas saying, “The children love the guerrillas because here there is love, warmth for them. We will not lie and say that there are no children in the organization. There are children in the organization, but they are particular cases and practically obligatory cases.”¹⁵ The children that the FARC allow into the organization are orphaned, often as a result of the violence of the Colombian Army and paramilitary groups. They have no clothes, no food, and no one to take care of them. Without the FARC, most of these children would find their way to a major city where they could then beg, become child prostitutes, and scrounge for food. The guerrillas take them in and give them clothing, food, education (albeit a skewed one), and put them to work in the kitchens of their camps. These children grow up indoctrinated with FARC ideology and frequently mature to become leaders in the FARC. The military and paramilitaries of Colombia, along with the government of Colombia, have created this situation through indiscriminate violence and nonexistent social services, and they are finally beginning to see that the old traditional methods are causing more harm than good.

Paramilitary Groups

It is important to pause here and highlight the shaky relationship between the Colombian Government, the Colombian Military, and the paramilitary groups sometimes referred to as “death squads”. Since the beginning of La Violencia, and arguably to this day, the Colombian government has not had 100% control over the Colombian military. In 1953, a military coup

¹² Ibid., Kindle loc 457.

¹³ There is recent evidence that they are developing a relationship with Venezuela. This relationship will be discussed later in the paper.

¹⁴ Ibid., Kindle loc 457

¹⁵ Ibid., Kindle loc 954.

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