

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 narco-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.

20th 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.¹ 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.²

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

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

² Ibid, p 47.

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 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. In the late 1990's, the FARC was kidnapping 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 "exchangeables" – 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. The FARC's second method of financing themselves is through drug trafficking, mainly through taxing the production and sale of coca, and through the development of the product into cocaine.

¹⁶ Ibid., Kindle loc 954.

¹⁷ Ibid., Kindle loc 429.