

CUADERNOS DEL CONFLICTO
PEACE INITIATIVES AND
COLOMBIA'S ARMED CONFLICT



CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

PREFACE

INTRODUCTION

I

IN SEARCH OF PEACE WITH THE ELN AND THE FARC

Aldo Civico, Center for International Conflict Resolution, Columbia University

Román D. Ortiz, Independent consultant in security and defense

Father Darío Antonio Echeverri González, National Reconciliation Commission

Rodrigo Pardo, *Cambio Magazine*

Eduardo González, Office of the High Commissioner for Peace

II

PARAMILITARY GROUPS: DEMOBILIZATION, REARMAMENT, AND REINVENTION

Javier Ciurlizza, American Program, International Center for Transitional Justice, ICTJ

María Teresa Ronderos, *Semana.com*

Juan Carlos Garzón, Organization of American States, OAS

Jeremy McDermott, BBC Correspondent

BIOGRAPHIES

Fundación
Ideas para la Paz

Woodrow Wilson
International Center for
Scholars

Edited by,
Cynthia J. Arnson
María Victoria Llorente

Román D. Ortiz

Independent consultant in security and defense

THE FARC: A TERRORIST ORGANIZATION WITH NO STRATEGIC WAY OUT?

The study of the FARC is plagued by the difficulties faced by security analysts when they try to anticipate events and foresee the evolution of the strategic scenarios. Specialists devoted to the study of terrorism –and particularly the FARC– have been shown up many times by reality’s amazing capacity to exceed predictions, either as the result of underestimating the catastrophic nature of certain threats, or because of a failure to identify the vulnerabilities of an apparently invincible adversary.

The inability to predict the future was evident in the guerrillas’ “Black March,” which plunged the FARC into an unprecedented strategic crisis. The astonishment stemming from the death of Raúl Reyes, the first member of the organization’s Secretariat to be killed by Colombian security forces, had barely begun to subside when, a week later, a second member of the guerrilla group’s leadership, Iván Ríos, died at the hands of his own head of security.

The impossibility of anticipating this chain of events, followed by the death of the founder of the organization, Manuel Marulanda, demonstrated the extent to which many analysts had erred in their assessment of the FARC’s resilience and almost invincible nature. The shock over the severity of the blows to the FARC made apparent that many of the views regarding the future evolution of the Colombian conflict had been based for a long time more on beliefs and perceptions than on empirical data and rigorous interpretation.

Difficulties in evaluating the resilience of Colombian armed groups and the prospects for the evolution of the conflict become most important when trying to assess the possibilities of reaching some kind of negotiated settlement with the FARC. It is essential to identify the analytical weakness that has most contributed to mistaken assessments of the strength of the guerrillas and of their potential to continue to exercise violence.

It seems clear that one factor that has contributed to a biased image of the strategic scenario in Colombia has been the tendency of many scholars to systematically

ignore military factors and the way that these condition the actors’ strategic options and prospects for the future. It is difficult to justify such a tendency from a scientific point of view, when the objective is to analyze an armed conflict.

This essay is divided into three main sections. The first section addresses some of the particularly relevant features of the FARC’s operations as a terrorist organization. The second evaluates the impact of the Colombian government’s military campaign on those specific features. The final section examines the possible future of the FARC in light of the group’s military attrition.

The strategic profile of the FARC

The FARC operates as an armed organization characterized by five basic features. First, it is a highly decentralized organization, a feature that is common in post-Cold War terrorist organizations. Each of the FARC’s operational units must independently generate its own human and financial resources. In other words, each front or bloc raises its own funds and establishes its logistical infrastructure independent of the organization’s other units. Theoretically, at least, this means that any front or bloc commander has the resources to become independent of the group’s leadership and wage war on its own.

Hence, decentralization in the gathering of resources generates structural, centrifugal forces that push the organization toward its dismantling. It is true that over the last 40 years, the FARC secretariat has combined significant investment in communication systems with enormous political effort in order to counteract this tendency toward division and maintain the unity of command. However, in light of the pressure the organization is facing from the military, the question is whether it will be possible to continue to implement the strategies aimed at maintaining the unity of different parts of the organization.

A second key feature of the FARC is the predominantly *campesino* provenance of its militias. This chiefly *campesino* composition of the group’s rank and file has turned the FARC into a historical exception. In his classic book, *Guerrilla and Revolution in Latin America*, Timothy Wickham-Crowley demonstrated with empirical data that most of the Latin American guerrilla groups during

the Cold War period were made up of urban middle-class individuals who moved to rural areas in search of a suitable strategic environment in which to carry out their revolutionary projects.

However, Wickham-Crowley himself acknowledged that the FARC was the exception to this rule. This does not mean that the political and military contributions of combatants of urban origin were not decisive in the history of the group. To the contrary, their participation was an essential driving force in the modernization of the guerrillas during the 1980s.

But beyond the key role played by the combatants from the cities, the chiefly campesino composition of the FARC has had two key strategic effects. On the one hand, the guerrilla group faced serious recruitment problems due to a decline in the rural population of Colombia. Some of this decline resulted from increased internal displacement toward urban areas, at times as a consequence of the conflict but also due to economic pressures. On the other hand, the predominance of militias of rural origin has become a decisive obstacle in the FARC's attempts to expand toward the cities. It is a well-known fact that one of the most strategically difficult transitions for an armed group is that from the country to the city. Thus, the potential for projecting itself from one space to the other depends, to a great extent, on the number of operatives whose urban origin allows the armed group to function in an urban environment. In the case of the FARC, the lack of urban militias has thwarted the group's prospects for moving into the cities. Not even the intense efforts made by the organization to recruit new militias in urban areas have managed to overcome this problem.

A third strategic feature of the FARC is its high level of corruption and criminalization. Recent evidence makes it possible to say that a high percentage of the FARC's "full-time" combatants are no longer dedicated to fighting government forces, as one would expect of a classic guerrilla organization; instead, they have turned to criminal activities such as kidnapping, extortion, and drug trafficking. The criminalization of the FARC is generating serious problems within the organization.

To begin with, it seems increasingly clear that there has been a gradual change in the group's organizational cul-

ture. Thus, certain FARC units seem to respond more to the imperatives of a drug trafficking organizational culture than to the behavioral patterns one would expect of a revolutionary organization (if the guerrillas can still be labeled as such). In addition, this acute process of criminalization has led to the proliferation of disciplinary problems within the FARC. The documented cases of many commanders who have deserted, taking their front's money with them in order to be able to enjoy a more comfortable retirement, are clear examples of this phenomenon.

Another feature that stands out is the militaristic tendency of the FARC and its inclination to give priority to any strategic option aimed at strengthening its military capacity, independent of the potential political consequences. The FARC sought to build a sophisticated military capacity in two ways. First, they sought to equip themselves with state-of-the-art weapons, either by making large purchases on the black market or by developing an increased capability to manufacture their own weapons. Second, they attempted to improve the training of some of their combatants by sending them to sympathetic countries abroad, or, more frequently, by hiring as advisers former members of armed groups such as the Salvadoran FMLN or the Irish Republican Army.

The FARC's militaristic tendencies are seen in the totally indiscriminate use of force during attacks on towns, in which urban areas are demolished without reservation, and in terrorist attacks on civilian targets, such as the bombing of the El Nogal Club in Bogotá in 2003. The FARC's systematic demonstration of its destructive capacity led many to overestimate its military potential, to the point that even suggesting the possibility of defeating them on the battlefield was considered anathema.

Finally, the organization's commitment to a high level of internationalization is also worth emphasizing. As the computers recovered during the attack on Raúl Reyes's camp in Ecuador have shown, the FARC made a systematic effort to build a network of global contacts. The extensive involvement of the FARC in drug trafficking was already well known. Likewise, the long-standing cooperation with terrorist organizations such as the IRA had been clearly demonstrated after the arrest in 2000 of three IRA members in Bogotá.

However, the evidence confiscated during the operation that killed Raúl Reyes revealed or confirmed a long list of new international initiatives which until then had been only rumored or simply ignored. Such is the case, for example, in the FARC's systematic effort to acquire surface-to-air missiles in Central America and Eastern Europe, or its surprising role in the trafficking of nuclear materials, something revealed when Colombian authorities seized 35 kg of uranium that had been in the hands of the FARC. Evidence has also surfaced regarding the fluid connections with –and the effective support provided by– high-ranking government officials from Venezuela and Ecuador to an organization that has, after all, included on the U.S. and European Union lists of terrorist organizations.

The democratic security policies of the Colombian government have dealt decisive blows both to the organization's capacity to raise resources and to its internal cohesiveness. With respect to the former, the extent of the government's territorial control has pushed the guerrillas into remote areas–rugged areas, highlands 3500 meters above sea level, jungles, and border zones–thus reducing the availability of resources as well as the size of the population under their control. At the same time, the government's strategies against drug trafficking and kidnapping have hurt the FARC's two main criminal activities. Thus, the organization has faced increasing logistical problems, a gradual decrease in funds, and a diminishing number of available recruits.

With respect to the organization's loss of cohesiveness, the key factor has been the increase in the lethality of operations carried out by the Colombian security forces. The increasing capacity of the military and police forces to locate and attack guerrilla concentrations with ever greater accuracy has forced the FARC to disperse its troops, thus making it more difficult for the leadership to maintain control over its structures. At the same time, the capacity of Colombian intelligence agencies to intercept the FARC's radio communications created additional difficulties for the Secretariat's efforts to maintain fluid contact with its subordinates.

In this context, the simultaneous disappearance of three long-time members of the guerrilla group's leader-

ship necessarily had a two-fold effect. On the one hand, it was necessary to replace three figures who had traditionally led the organization, thus dislocating the command and control structures. On the other hand, the definitive breakdown of the myth of the invulnerability of the guerrilla group's leadership dealt an overwhelming blow to the group's morale.

This combination of factors provoked an increase in tensions within the organization. A division in the current leadership of the group is not likely, given that the new key figures after the “Black March” debacle –Alfonso Cano, “Mono Jojoy”, and Iván Márquez– seem to have found a way to reduce frictions among themselves. However, the weakening of the FARC's structure would appear to be irreversible. The growing lethality of the government offensive has made it clear to the organization's leadership that the tide has turned against them; that is, the probabilities of their being defeated multiply as the military pressure increases.

At the same time, local and regional commanders are facing ever greater difficulties in communicating with and following the orders of their superiors. This combination of a greater perception of threat and isolation from the line of command necessarily increases the pressure on those at subordinate levels to be inconsistent about following their superiors' orders, and, rather, to seek individual solutions. The exponential increase in desertions among the most senior and experienced FARC combatants is an unequivocal sign that this logic is stimulating the dissolution of the organization.

The alternatives: Negotiating from a weak position or betting on radicalization

The great paradox is that precisely at the moment when its command structure is paralyzed, the FARC must face a decisive dilemma: either to negotiate or to become more radical. With respect to the first option, the alternative could be to try to improve the organization's political image through a series of concessions aimed at setting the stage for negotiations. The moves toward rapprochement might include the liberation of politicians and members of the military and police who remain in captivity after the Army rescued Ingrid Betancourt and 14 other politi-

cally significant hostages held by the FARC during Operation Jaque.

However, the initiation of a sort of detente with the government clashes with the strategic tradition of the organization, which has always rejected any gesture that could be interpreted as a sign of weakness and has therefore appeared inflexible regarding the conditions for possible talks. It would seem particularly difficult to modify this track record of inflexibility, especially for a leader who, like Alfonso Cano, recently appointed to replace the late Manuel Marulanda, does not have the unconditional support of the organization's rank and file.

However, the guerrilla organization's military prospects are not that bright. The improvement of the government's military capacity is structural in nature and places the FARC in a position of inferiority that will be hard to reverse. In other words, the chain of operational successes throughout 2008 has not been the result of sheer luck, but rather the fruit of years of investment in training and technology on the part of the security forces. In this sense, the substantial improvement in the capabilities of the security forces to locate and attack guerrilla structures is irreversible in the Colombian strategic scenario. Moreover, the only two alternatives open to the FARC in order to modify the current military situation would either be to start using new high potency weapons such as surface-to-air missiles, or to resort to tactics such as launching indiscriminate terrorist attacks in urban areas. The problem is that both options would lead the organization to its sure end, albeit by different routes. Any use of missiles would undoubtedly threaten the monopoly over the country's air space that the military forces have enjoyed until now. But, at the same time, launching these missiles not far from U.S. territory would be likely to provoke a military reaction from Washington.

As to the terrorist option, it is worth recalling that the last actions of this sort not only brought about the absolute disrepute of the FARC, but also drove the public to close ranks behind the government. Given this precedent, a campaign based on indiscriminate attacks is likely to have precisely the opposite effect of the one sought by the guerrillas, generating an even greater shift of opinion in favor of the government.

The lack of feasible alternatives is an additional factor that could stimulate the internal division of the FARC in the medium or long term. In the absence of any clear option that would guarantee the future of the organization, it is possible that part of the FARC could opt for a negotiated solution to the conflict, while another part could choose radicalization. Two factions could thus appear within the organization: one made up of supporters of what could be called the "IRA model," favoring talks aimed at the surrender of arms; and a second, radical sector with two variations defined by the relationship to violence. Those in favor of a "Shining Path model" would opt to launch an indiscriminate urban terrorism campaign, while those supporting a "Polisario Front model" would try to establish an alliance with a sympathetic government in order to use its territory as a safe haven. The latter formula is very similar to that attempted by the Polisario guerrillas when they sought the support of Algeria in their struggle against Morocco to achieve the independence of the Western Sahara.

In light of their imminent military defeat, the more pragmatic sector of the FARC would choose the "IRA model," seeking rapprochement with the government in order to negotiate the best possible conditions for demobilization. At the other extreme, those in favor of radicalization have two options that are not necessarily mutually exclusive: urban terrorism and the seeking of support from a government that would sponsor the continuation of the armed struggle.

Neither of the forms of radicalization would appear to offer a feasible way out for the guerrillas. The terrorist campaign launched by the Shining Path generated a great wave of rejection by the Peruvian people, who completely isolated the group and provided the necessary political support to the government in Lima so that it could launch an aggressive counterterrorist campaign. The result was the dismantling of Shining Path structures in the big cities and the marginalization of what was left of the organization—small groups relegated to some of Peru's most remote zones. In the case of the Polisario Front, the guerrillas sought the protection of Algeria as a way of preventing their military defeat at the hands of the Moroccan armed forces. The members of the Polisa-

rio front were able to continue operating, but only at the cost of losing their strategic autonomy and becoming an organization subordinated to a foreign power. As a result, the group lost all the support it had in Western Sahara and ended up as a militarily weak and politically irrelevant organization.

Regardless of which of the three options outlined above is chosen by the majority of the FARC, it is worth noting that all three alternatives have something in common, in that each represents the political end of the FARC. Irrespective of whether the guerrillas opt to demobilize, turn to terrorism, or seek the support of a foreign government, the various alternatives constitute a tacit acknowledgment of the group's defeat by the government and the dissolution of its future political capital. Thus, while 2008 did not mark the endpoint of the long-standing Colombian conflict, it will undoubtedly go down in history as the year of the FARC's political demise. •