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Their Darkest Hour: Colombia's Government and the Narco-Insurgency

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On 30 August 1996, elements of the Southern Bloc of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, or FARC), comprising some 400 combatants, executed a daring attack against a Colombian army company-sized outpost in Las Delicias in the Putumayo Department. Among the noteworthy aspects of this attack were the use of a mock-up of the objective for guerrilla rehearsals, the infiltration of guerrillas among the soldiers of the army garrison, and the use of mortars and explosive breaching charges. The insurgents successfully overpowered the 120-man garrison and captured half its troops.[1] The attack on Las Delicias was unprecedented in both its intensity and sophistication, and it marked a turning point in the four-decade history of the organization.

How could Colombia, a liberal democratic state with, until recently, one of the best-performing economies in Latin America, have produced an insurgency of the size, resilience, and intensity of FARC? The question deserves consideration for the following reasons: (1) The drug activities that take place in areas that are under FARC control have a direct consequence on the United States. (2) The violence and narcotics activities in Colombia are increasingly having a perverse effect on other countries in the region. (3) Much like Kosovo, the humanitarian plight of many Colombians may reach the threshold where it will become difficult for the international community to ignore it.

FARC is Latin America's largest surviving rebel army.[2] It is a communist insurgent organization that is the product of both unique social opportunities and the common interests of fringe groups within Colombian society. Insurgent groups in general capitalize on means, motives, and opportunities to mobilize resources on their behalf.[3] The resurgence of FARC over the last decade is best understood in terms of how it has mobilized resources in its contest with the Colombian state.

Entrepreneurial Socialism

Rhetorically, the objectives of FARC have remained largely unchanged throughout its existence. The group seeks to overthrow the ruling order in Colombia and to drive out what it perceives to be the imperialist influences of the United States in Latin America.[4] FARC still publicly clings to its Marxist-Leninist platform of massive redistribution of land and wealth, state control of natural resources, and large-scale government spending on social welfare. Additionally, the group's predilection for attacking economic targets has placed it squarely at odds with both domestic and international business interests.[5]

FARC's brand of socialism has traditionally fallen flat on the Colombian political stage and has had no success as a mobilizing frame beyond the smallest constituencies. The group's success during the current decade stems from the crafting of a new and largely apolitical *motive* of self-interest that has connected with several dissimilar groups: migrant and landowning coca-peasants, drug trafficking organizations, and, increasingly, disaffected individuals in urban areas.

In an effort to resurrect itself at the start of the 1990s, FARC expanded its participation in a number of criminal enterprises in order to compensate for a loss of external support. These economic activities have become so dominant and lucrative that they are now seen as an end in themselves. This has led many outside observers to question how committed FARC really is to seizing power. Rather than seeking to change the social order in Colombia, the organization appears more interested in preserving the anarchic status quo that has allowed its criminal activities to thrive. Beyond the financial and logistical benefits of FARC's economic initiatives, it seems certain that the success of these efforts has also enhanced recruitment. Long viewed as providing a life of danger and unlimited hardship, the

insurgency has doubtlessly attracted new members from among the underprivileged class thanks in part to the success of its criminal enterprises. The group's strength is believed to have grown from a low of about 1,000 in the 1980s to about 15,000 today.[6] While some members of the group's core cadre may still hold the dream of someday seizing power, many in the organization seem more concerned with the short-term personal benefits they can draw from participating in criminal activities. In this respect, its members win simply by prolonging the conflict.

The problem that FARC faces is that its entrepreneurial frame is exceedingly limited in its appeal. The overwhelming majority of Colombians reject the group as an organization of financial opportunists and are taken aback by the group's acts of violence.[7] This has led some outside observers to conclude that FARC is incapable of attracting the following necessary to take power in a nation of almost 40 million inhabitants and with nearly a quarter million military personnel under arms.[8] FARC's entrepreneurial frame is also vulnerable to a counter-mobilization strategy that advocates the need for law and order; such a campaign would require that security forces increase the likelihood of judicial punishment for insurgent-related criminal activities.

The Hollow Andean State and its Traditions of Violence

With the exception of a period of military dictatorship from 1953 to 1957, Colombians have generally enjoyed a democratic political process in their country. Two decades of power-sharing between the dominant Liberal and Conservative parties followed the period of military rule. The two parties began open and peaceful competition for power in the 1970s.[9]

Until recently, Colombia has also enjoyed a solid-performing economy. It is one of only a handful of Latin American countries with an investment grade rating. Colombia was the only large state in the region not to default on its debt payments during the 1980s, and its economy has grown by an impressive 4.5 percent annually for the last two decades.[10]

A number of left-wing insurgent groups have plagued Colombia during much of its recent history. These groups have primarily been rural-based and have thrived in a vacuum of government security and institutional presence in the more remote areas of the countryside. This lack of state presence has provided FARC and other similar groups with the *opportunity* to rise to the national political stage.

FARC had its origin in a period of political violence that occurred from 1948 to 1954.[11] The group emerged in 1966 as the armed wing of the Colombian Communist Party.[12] The 1970s and the 1980s saw alternating periods of hostility and truce between the Colombian government and a number of Cuban-backed insurgent groups, most notably FARC and the Democratic Alliance M19. The 1980s also saw the rise of the Colombian drug cartels and early cooperation between the cartels and insurgent groups.[13]

In many ways, the current period of insurgent activity began during the 1990-94 administration of President Cesar Gaviria Trujillo. Gaviria undertook profound economic reform that had significant results in the areas of finance, labor, and trade. His programs were largely responsible for the progressive economic growth that has occurred during much of the 1990s.[14] Regrettably, many Colombians did not benefit from this prosperity. This was especially true in the remote frontier regions along the Putumayo and Guaviare river basins in southern and eastern Colombia and in the regions along the Panamanian and Venezuelan borders. These areas were largely disconnected from the rest of the nation's economy and have provided a hotbed for insurgent activities.





Figure 1. Colombia.

Gaviria also supported efforts to draft a new constitution that significantly enhanced civil rights and provided for the reintegration of insurgent elements into society.[15] In addition to this improving domestic picture, the insurgent groups were also receptive to calls for demobilization because the end of the Cold War had resulted in a loss of external support.

During this period of reconciliation, both the M19 and the People's Liberation Army (EPL) demobilized and became part of Colombia's legal political life. For a time it seemed that FARC and the smaller National Liberation Army (ELN) would follow suit. However, negotiations with FARC broke down and the group's newly founded political party, the Unidad Popular (UP), failed to make any political inroads. FARC members refocused on invigorating their domestic sources of income: they practiced extortion, bank robbery, and kidnapping, while increasingly becoming involved in providing protection to drug operations.[16] In fact, of the 1,822 abductions reported in Colombia during 1997, authorities attributed 900 to FARC.[17] FARC sought to compensate for a loss of external support by mobilizing resources within Colombia. Many of FARC's leaders have spent their entire adult life as guerrilla combatants. These individuals were seemingly not willing to demobilize and have nothing to show for their years of struggle.

Ironically, the lack of effective government presence that allowed FARC criminal activities to grow also facilitated the emergence of right-wing reactionary groups. Most prominent among these are the Castano and Carranza family paramilitary groups that received private financing to protect landowners from insurgent extortion practices. These illegal groups diversified into a number of criminal enterprises, including drug activities.[18] The paramilitary organizations are responsible for a large number of abuses committed against people suspected of being sympathetic to the insurgency. In some instances, the paramilitary groups have apparently operated with the approval of individual members of the government security forces.[19]

Rural Peasants, Drug Lords, and Cynical Revolutionaries

Through a combination of coercion and enticement, FARC has managed to draw new recruits from the fringes of Colombian society. FARC developed an increasingly solid symbiotic relationship with the *Cocaleros* or coca-growing farmers. This association showed its strength when coca peasants timed mass protests to coincide with FARC military operations.[20] In some areas, the coca farmers tended to be modest landowners. In other areas, the farmers were migrants who moved to zones outside of the government's sphere of control to participate in the lucrative drug trade.[21]

FARC also solidified its relationship with various drug-trafficking cartels in Colombia. The guerrillas taxed all coca crops, paste production, and the transportation of narcotics in and out of the regions under their control.[22] FARC used proceeds from these and other criminal activities to buy weapons in the international black market. According to the Colombian National Police, FARC exchanges drugs for weapons and cash with organized crime groups in Chechnya, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.[23] FARC has reportedly obtained additional weaponry from Middle East and Central American sources.[24] Perhaps more alarming, reports indicate that as much as 90 percent of the ammunition used by the insurgents may come from Venezuelan army stocks and was sold to them by corrupt officials in the neighboring country.[25] FARC has experienced no apparent shortage of small arms and ammunition; indications are that support weapons, such as mortars, are in limited supply.[26]

FARC's connections with the largely apolitical coca farmers and with the often right-wing drug cartels provided it with the *means* to contest the state for power. By facilitating an environment for drug activities, FARC was able to mobilize resources on an unprecedented scale. The role of the coca peasantry seems exceedingly vulnerable to population control measures. Efforts to control the population, however, would require that the Colombian security forces reorient away from large-unit sweeps that seek to engage the elusive guerrillas in a decisive maneuver battle and focus instead on securing population enclaves beyond the major cities throughout the country.

FARC got its lucky break following the election of President Ernesto Samper in mid-1994. Samper was immediately embroiled in a major scandal when it was discovered that his political campaign had received contributions from the Cali drug cartel. This in turn resulted in the Clinton Administration decertifying Colombia as a full partner in the war on drugs. Decertification resulted in reductions in US aid. Additionally, President Samper was forced to endure a difficult political trial in the Colombian Congress that eventually exonerated him of personal responsibility. The controversy weakened the Samper Administration and the Colombian armed forces.[27]

Jorge Briceno, alias "El Mono Jojoy," commander of the FARC Southern Bloc and lifelong guerrilla leader, saw an opportunity in the Samper Administration's scandal. Briceno detected a lack of resolve in the Colombian regime. He correctly surmised that a politically weakened administration would have no stomach for a stepped-up insurgent campaign. At that point, Briceno executed the spectacular attack on the Colombian army outpost in Las Delicias described at the beginning of this article. Despite decades of insurgent activity, the Colombian people were severely shaken by the attack; concerned family members demanded that the Samper government take whatever action was necessary to ensure the safe release of captured government soldiers.

The terms for the release of the 60 troops from Las Delicias and another ten held by the Southern Bloc were unprecedented. On 15 June 1997, the government agreed to the army's demilitarization of 5,000 square miles of territory in the Caqueta Department. Army commanders subsequently sought to go back on the agreement.[28] A series of bloody setbacks for the government soon followed. The most significant was a battle near the Caguan River in the Caqueta Department that started on 26 February 1998. Reportedly the battle took place when an informant led elements of an elite, all-volunteer, counterinsurgency brigade to the site of a base camp containing 600 guerrillas from the Southern Bloc. To their dismay, the soldiers fell into a sophisticated zone ambush. The three days of fighting that followed resulted in the death of 80 soldiers and the capture of 43.[29] While the government troops inflicted severe casualties on the guerrillas, the Samper Administration felt it could not tolerate further losses. During the additional negotiations that followed, the Colombian government was seemingly bent on achieving peace at any cost.

The 70-year-old founder and senior commander of FARC, Pedro Antonio Marin, alias Manuel Maralunda Velez, retained the leadership of the insurgent organization during its negotiations with the government.[30] However, Briceno clearly rose in prominence as a result of his successes, and many observers now see him as directing the FARC's military campaign.[31] Throughout its history, the group's tactical operations have sought to avoid insurgent

casualties. Most of FARC's strikes fall into the category of harassment attacks. Briceno's doctrine seems to be one that accepts limited casualties in order to inflict maximum pain and political leverage on the regime. Briceno has showed a willingness to mass several hundred guerrillas to attain decisive results at a time and place of his choosing.

The FARC's Eastern Bloc seemingly applied Briceno's doctrine when it massed several hundred guerrillas to overrun remote army and police outposts in Miraflores and Mitu in August and November 1998. The attack on the outpost in Mitu and subsequent ambush of a relief column resulted in the death of more than 100 police and soldiers.[32] The spectacular FARC tactical successes in the Southern and Eastern Bloc areas of operations occurred against a backdrop of daily lower-level guerrilla actions throughout the country. Some have speculated that recent FARC successes must be attributable to a new external source of advisory support. It seems entirely possible, however, that FARC's tactics have been internally conceived to exploit the political and military conditions that presently exist within Colombia.

The Politics of Intimidation: The Urban Cell in Perspective

Overall, the Colombian civil war is thought to have claimed 35,000 lives over the last ten years.[33] The conditions of violence and lawlessness in the countryside have exacerbated the traditional patterns of urban migration. In fact, Colombia is considered to have one of the largest internal refugee problems anywhere outside of Africa.[34] Media accounts estimate that fully 1.5 million war refugees have moved from the countryside to shantytowns outside various cities in Colombia in recent years. Since this movement has occurred over a more prolonged period of time than, say, the displacement of Albanians from Kosovo, it has been less widely noticed. Surprisingly, media accounts have disproportionately blamed the far smaller paramilitary groups rather than the insurgency for this phenomenon.[35]

FARC's urban activities have played an important supporting role and have taken place in most of the cities and towns throughout the country. The Antonio Narino Urban Net is active within the capital city of Bogota itself.[36] FARC's urban militias or "Columnas Urbanas" carry out underground functions and receive the support of part-time auxiliaries.

The FARC urban underground operates in cells of six people.[37] Among their activities, these cells conduct a variety of acts of terrorism, including urban sniping, planting of explosive devices, and the disruption of industry and public services. US oil companies have been hit hard, with 77 pipeline bombings in 1998 alone.[38] FARC also frequently bombs the offices of mainstream political parties.

The underground's campaign of subversion against municipal mayors has been especially noteworthy. In the last three years, FARC has victimized a number of local government officials; the group's elements have killed 20, kidnapped 32, and threatened another 56 mayors. According to a Colombian army report, 13.1 percent of the nation's municipal mayors have direct links to the insurgency. Another 44 percent of the mayors collaborate in some form with the insurgency. Hence, officials believe, through a combination of bribery and intimidation, FARC influences to one degree or another a staggering 57.1 percent of the nation's mayors. These mayors attend clandestine meetings, implement policies that are favorable to the insurgency, and on occasion even divert government funds to the guerrillas.[39] Far from insulating the population from insurgent influence, the regime has been incapable of protecting its own grass-roots infrastructure.

Future Prospects

The year 1999 can easily be seen as the Colombian government's darkest hour to date in its decades-long civil war. The current administration of President Andres Pastrana has in error embraced the policy of "peace at all costs" initiated by President Samper. Pastrana recognized an expanded demilitarized zone of 16,216 square miles in December 1998.[40] FARC has used this zone in Caqueta as an operations base for attacks. Further, since drug operatives are no longer required to work in a clandestine manner, drug activities in the demilitarized safe haven have reached new heights.[41] US drug czar Barry McCaffrey estimates that 30 percent of the landmass in Caqueta and neighboring Putumayo is now growing coca.[42]

The fact that the Pastrana Administration has gone ahead with negotiations even without a prior cease-fire agreement from the rebels highlights its lack of resolve.[43] The political outlook is further complicated by the deterioration of what had been a solid economy; this is in part due to earlier deficit spending by the Samper Administration.[44] A five-percent decline of the nation's GNP made 1999 the worst year on record for the Colombian economy. Recession

and government austerity measures have led to a soaring 20-percent unemployment rate that was acutely felt in urban areas and that FARC has exploited politically.[45] During the summer of 1999, a full year after assuming office, President Pastrana had an approval rating of only 21 percent for his handling of both the economy and the insurgency.[46] Defense Minister Rodrigo Lloreda resigned in protest over Pastrana's management of the peace process.[47]

A nationwide series of attacks in July and December of 1999 may have demonstrated the limits of the Briceno Doctrine. Government forces repelled these attacks, but they resulted in the deaths of perhaps several hundred guerrillas and government troops. FARC had hoped these actions would strengthen its hand during ongoing negotiations.[48] Despite these modest government successes, however, the outlook continues to be bleak.

The implications of the war in Colombia for the United States are significant. FARC-perpetrated violence has already sporadically spilled over to most of Colombia's neighboring countries, including Brazil, Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela. Additionally, FARC's criminal activities have had effects well beyond the borders of Colombia. The explosion in drug production has had a measurable social impact on every major city in the United States. International business interests are challenged by the conditions of lawlessness within Colombia. American citizens and other foreigners have already been abducted and executed by FARC operatives in Colombia.[49] Finally, the plight of the Colombian people themselves is a concern that the United States may find increasingly difficult to ignore.

Earlier this year, the Clinton Administration proposed \$1.3 billion in military aid to assist the Colombian government's counter-narcotics effort over the next two years.[50] The purpose of the aid was not to combat the insurgency. The centerpiece of the package included 30 Blackhawk and 33 Huey helicopters and funds to train and equip anti-drug units.[51] As the aid proposal was under review in February, Colombian chief negotiator Victor Ricardo held talks with FARC representative Raul Reyes in Stockholm, Sweden. Reportedly, both sides studied the Swedish model of economic and social development as part of a possible peace plan.[52] But a breakthrough seemed very unlikely, and in the meantime violence has continued unabated.

The single most disturbing factor of the war is the Colombian government's failure to develop any counterinsurgency framework whatsoever. Combined training exercises with US forces have enhanced the tactical proficiency of several individual Colombian units. Should the United States decide to directly support the Colombian government against the insurgency, the situation would require a national and regional advisory effort. The Colombian National Police, in particular, have demonstrated the ability for meticulous intelligence work that characterized their successful campaigns against the Medellin and Cali drug cartels. The current situation demands a national campaign plan that can harness the full potential of the Colombian security forces as part of an integrated counterinsurgency effort; such an endeavor would have to counteract the means, motives, and opportunities of the insurgency.

Conclusion

FARC is the product of both unique social opportunities and the common interests of fringe groups within Colombian society. While the overwhelming majority of Colombians reject FARC's socialist model as an alternative to their elected government, the insurgents have the means at their disposal to sustain themselves indefinitely. While some members may still aspire to attain FARC's political objectives, the organization appears focused on the short-term benefits it can draw from participating in criminal activities. In this regard, many insurgents may believe that they win simply by prolonging the conflict.

The relationship between FARC and its apolitical auxiliary of coca farmers is largely responsible for the insurgency's ability to mobilize an unprecedented amount of financial resources. This relationship, however, also represents a strategic vulnerability that is susceptible to government counteraction.

FARC's effective leadership has significantly enhanced the group's leverage and political influence. It has also contributed to a deteriorating situation that, like Kosovo and East Timor, may soon place pressure on the United States and the international community to take action.

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