

Meet the *Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común*: Colombia's New Political Party

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Introduction

For the last fifty years, Colombia has been torn by ongoing conflict between the Colombian government, paramilitary groups, and left-wing guerrillas fighting each other to increase their influence over the country. In 2016, a historic peace agreement was reached between the government and one of the left-wing guerrilla groups, *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - Ejército Popular (FARC-EP or simply FARC) (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army)*, to bring about hopeful peace in the ravaged nation. The peace deal that took nearly a decade to finalize has been met with skepticism as some of the principles in the agreement have been seen as difficult to accomplish. “For some, the FARC acronym carries a negative charge, but it also represents our history. We are going to continue the conflict but through legal politics,” stated Iván Márquez, a member of FARC’s secretariat, after a party meeting.ⁱ In agreement with the peace deal made with the government, the guerrilla force has taken steps to accomplish political participation; officially renamed *Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común (Common Alternative Revolutionary Force)*. The former guerrilla turned political party, will have a tough task ahead as it attempts to enter the political arena and bring stability to a country that has seen little of it over the last half-century. Questions regarding the likelihood of sustained peace and the viability of a FARC political party are sure to arise in the months and years to come. This transformation from guerrilla organization to a political party is not new to Colombia or Latin America; the *Movimiento 19 de Abril (19th of April Movement)* in Colombia started as a guerrilla movement before demobilizing into the *Alianza Democrática M-19 (M-19 Democratic Alliance)* in the 1970s. Other examples include the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front - FMLN)* in El Salvador, and the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front - FSLN)* in Nicaragua. Yet regardless of historical precedent, FARC will have a challenging task ahead if they wish to achieve a lasting peace.

Origins of FARC

To understand FARC as a political party, we must first understand its origins as a guerrilla organization. *Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia* was founded in 1964 as an armed wing of the Communist Party that followed a Marxist-Leninist ideology. The movement was born as “autodefensas,” paramilitary groups designed to defend poor rural peasants against the aggression of right-wing militia groups, in a conflict between liberals and conservatives during the 1940’s and 1950’s. Originally they were small and unorganized, but during the late 1980s they expanded into a formidable guerrilla army as their financial capabilities increased thanks to Colombia’s booming drug trade. ⁱⁱ This recent turn to a political party is not the first attempt by FARC; in 1984 they launched *Union Patriótica (Patriotic Union - UP)*, a political party that attempted to negotiate a peace settlement with the government. The party was small but gained momentum as power in the country shifted from the national to local level. In its first elections in 1986, the UP won several seats in Congress and its presidential candidate garnered over 300,000 votes, a record for a leftist candidate. Ultimately, paramilitary groups and drug traffickers, at times working closely with the Colombian government, assassinated UP members en masse in response to their victories that forced the guerrillas back into the jungle. ⁱⁱⁱ Criticisms of FARC have ranged in their practice of kidnapping for revenue, forced impressment of civilians, their association with the drug trade, and contributions from other hardline left-wing governments such as Cuba and Venezuela. ^{iv} Hence, one can see why the recent peace agreement has been met with judgment as these individuals, for the first time in decades, will now attempt to return to everyday life.

The current guerrilla leader Timoleón Jiménez, or better known as Timochenko, recently stressed at a Congress of members that the recent change “does not mean that we are giving up our ideological foundations or project of society; we will persist in collecting the Bolivarian flags and libertarian traditions of our people, to fight for power and to bring Colombia to the full exercise of its national sovereignty, and to enforce popular sovereignty.” ^v Under this banner, FARC will continue to pursue its left-wing agenda -- even as the United States remains a prominent actor in Colombia. Currently, the party intends to address issues varying from wealth distribution, inequality, health care, public housing, women’s rights, the fight against global warming, and urban drug use. ^{vi}

A challenge to FARC’s freshman political party will be whether its candidates are capable of operating effectively within Colombia’s political system. A number of its members have known no other life except that of the guerrilla. The FARC’s often Cold-war era’ Marxist rhetoric strikes Colombian citizens as an antiquated throwback to its 1964 founding; but proposals for reforms to complicated property laws may gain traction with rural voters who struggle as subsistence farmers. ^{vii} Given that a majority of their support currently originates from only rural areas, the party will also have to

adjust its platform to appeal to the urban sector of the country . In the initial years of transition into the political sphere, FARC will probably have to form coalitions with other competing parties and movements if they hope to achieve meaningful electoral success. But the new party's ambitions extend beyond the Congress. Although Ivan Márquez has stated that "the party will not field a candidate for president in the 2018 elections," preferring to seek a coalition with other leftist forces, it is clear that FARC-EP leadership has set its sights on the presidency. Such ambitions are not clandestine, as Márquez has stated "we have entered legal politics because we want to govern." ^{viii}

Along with its coming electoral challenges, the FARC also faces the formidable task of integrating women and its unprecedented feminist vision into the party and its platform. Estimates are hard to calculate, but some evidence suggests that upwards of 40 percent of the 18,000-member movement are women, while others sources from the government assert that around 30 percent of FARC ranks are women with a degree of independence and responsibility that is uncommon in Colombian civil society. ^{ix}

^xRegardless, the women in leadership positions of FARC have stated that "within the New Party, we will maximize vigilance to prevent any type of violence against women, people with diverse sexual orientations and identity constructions." ^{xi} There is strong belief that necessary empowerment of women in decision-making spaces, the right to decide on their own bodies, and respect for diversity and sexual orientation are essential to address in the years to come if the party hopes to appeal to the general public. These views can also be quite appealing to new sectors of urban society, and to new civil society organizations, as well as other political parties. It represents at the same time a challenge and an opportunity.

A Lasting Peace?

Alongside the ongoing peace process, one obvious question persists: will it succeed? On the one hand, much in the agreement struck between FARC and the Colombian government gives reason to be optimistic. For one thing, studies have shown that deals with "Electoral Participation Provisions" often have a much higher chance of achieving a more lasting peace if implemented properly. ^{xii} Such provisions allow for candidates chosen by FARC to compete in post-conflict elections with the government. While free and fair elections could help facilitate a more lasting peace, the integrity of these elections is of paramount importance. If the upcoming elections are fraudulent, or their integrity can be legitimately questioned, then the odds of FARC continuing to honor the deal made with the government are slim. ^{xiii} Fortunately, the agreement also allows the elections to be monitored by outside actors. These external forces, along with the presence of multilateral institutions such as the United Nations (UN), will provide an incentive for both sides to stay faithful to the tenets of the deal or face the ire of international public opinion.

Alongside the "Electoral Participation Provisions" and the presence of outside actors to

monitor the process, other parts of the agreement could also ease tensions between the various parties. With the disarmament of FARC guerrillas, the deal provides for the forfeiture of resources and assets gained through the use of methods such as extortion and drug trafficking. The compensation acquired from such forfeitures will go to victims and the families of victims directly affected by the conflict.^{xiv} While this certainly will do little to heal the deep wounds opened by 52 years of civil war, it may serve to ease tensions between the FARC and certain segments of Colombia's population whose suspicion of the peace process doomed the first agreement proposed by the government in October of 2016.

Regardless of the optimism expressed by leaders on both sides, many are still skeptical about the durability of a peace agreement. Wounds created by prolonged civil war have in the past proven difficult to heal—even when compared to conflicts on a much larger scale between developed nation-states. With 52 years of conflict, some of the men and women fighting for the FARC have known nothing but war. Many of these fighters, perhaps even a majority, were recruited, or in some cases forcibly removed, from small rural farms and communities as children. As a result, “the reintegration” of these soldiers back into society presents a daunting task for both the government and FARC high command.

One major concern for both sides is the possibility that many guerrillas, despite the deal made between the FARC leadership and the Colombian government, will simply take their arms and military experience to other paramilitary groups still at large in Colombia, such as the so-called *Ejército de Liberación Nacional*, or National Liberation Army—a left-wing militia which has been categorized as a terrorist organization by Colombia and the United States. Worse still, the possibility remains that disaffected former FARC veterans will bolster the ranks of drug trafficking gangs, which have plagued Colombia for decades. Moreover, given their past experience with the peace process in the mid- 1980s, many FARC fighters will be hesitant to turn their arms over to the government.^{xv}

Efforts to achieve successful reintegration of FARC fighters is currently being spearheaded by the UN along with Colombia's Reincorporation and Normalization Agency (ACR). While the task of reintegrating thousands of former FARC guerrillas into civilian life is certainly intimidating, the ACR has already brought an estimated 50,000 FARC fighters out of the jungle and back into civilian life over the past 14 years.^{xvi} Yet regardless of efforts made by the UN and the ACR, the real battle for successful reintegration will not happen at the federal or multinational level, but at the local one. Local communities will have a critical role to play in reabsorbing FARC fighters back into society. Moreover, providing a sense of belonging and purpose to former FARC guerrillas will perhaps be the most decisive factor in ensuring that they accept civilian life.

Conclusion

All in all, the longevity and durability of the peace process is still uncertain. While many provisions in the deal reached by FARC and the government, such as the promise of electoral participation in 2018, give reason to be optimistic, history leaves reason to worry. Past agreements have universally failed and have in some instances led to even further bloodshed—as was the case in the breakdown of a failed peace agreement made in the 1980s. Another reason to wonder whether the agreement will survive is the possibility that a pro-Uribe party wins the elections in 2018 and seeks to reverse the peace process. Former president Alvaro Uribe has been critical of the deal and a new candidate from his camp could do away with the agreement, jeopardizing the future of FARC and a sustained peace. Still, Colombia and the rest of the world can only hope that the conflict—which has claimed over 250,000 lives and led to the displacement of over six million people—can finally be brought to a decisive conclusion.^{xvii} Overall, the most pertinent question for the future is whether the “new” FARC will be capable of adapting their former mode of conduct into one that will allow them to achieve their political objectives. Only time will tell if they will be able to get the public and political support needed to achieve their radical vision for the future.

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