

50 Years of the FARC: War, Drugs and Revolution

Jeremy McDermott and
James Bargent

2013



InSight Crime

Investigation and Analysis of Organized Crime

Table of Contents

The FARC 2002-Present: Decapitation and Rebirth	4
The FARC 1964-2002: From Ragged Rebellion to Military Machine	8
La Revolucion Vive	9
Hasta la Victoria?	10
The FARC and the Drug Trade: Siamese Twins?	12
"Negro Acacio" and Operation "Black Cat"	13
"Carlos Bolas" and Drugs for Arms	13
Alias "Sonia" and the Panama Connection	13
The Reality of the FARC Peace Talks in Havana	16

InSight Crime



Investigation and Analysis of Organized Crime

The FARC 2002-Present: Decapitation and Rebirth

James Bargent

In August 2002, the guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) greeted Colombia's new president with a mortar attack that killed 14 people during his inauguration. The attack was intended as a warning to the fiercely anti-FARC newcomer. But it became the opening salvo of a war that would shatter the rebels' hopes of a military victory.

The election of Alvaro Uribe as president was a message to the FARC: the Colombian people were not with them. The failed peace process of Uribe's predecessor Andres Pastrana took a population already alienated by terror tactics and kidnapping, and filled it with cynicism over whether the FARC would ever agree to peace. Their response was to elect a war president, making it clear to the rebels that if they were to seize power it would have to be in battle.

Militarily, the new president had two main advantages in his war against the FARC. The first was a set of two military plans: the US aid package Plan Colombia -- established during the Pastrana presidency -- in which billions of US dollars along with US personnel and advisors helped shape the Colombian military into one of the strongest and most advanced in the region, and Plan 10,000, a move to professionalize the army by replacing conscripts with voluntary recruits. The second was a paramilitary movement whose brutality and scorched earth offensives were proving devastating counter-insurgency tactics.

But Uribe was not only fighting a military war, he also launched a rhetorical war. He denied Colombia had a civil conflict, instead placing violence within the paradigm of the post 9-11 global "war on terror." Under this new conceptualization, the FARC were nothing more than bandits and terrorists. Anyone seen as an ideological sympathizer, or that stood in Uribe's way, became a terrorist too. Uribe's campaign was aided by a number of powerful countries placing the FARC on their terrorist lists, including the United States in 1997 and the European Union in 2002. The rebels' dreams of international legitimacy receded.

The security forces offensive fanned out from Bogota with the goal of forcing the guerrillas out of the center of the country. They flushed the guerrillas out of regions of commercial and industrial importance; secured infrastructure linked to energy production and extractive industries; and retook control of the country's main highways.

The military invested heavily in its aerial capacity and severely weakened the guerrillas through relentless airstrikes. The strategy included using heightened intelligence capabilities to target leaders and, with the help of a covert CIA program, carry out a devastating "decapitation" policy that took out at least two dozen FARC commanders.

In many regions, the army was not acting alone. The military worked in close collaboration with the paramilitaries of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). Since 1997, state forces had used them as shock troops and a clandestine arm, able to do the dirty work the army could not admit to. Collaboration with the AUC also reached into the highest levels of government, with alliances between the paramilitaries and Uribe's top political advisors, senior appointments, and even the president himself, according to the testimonies of demobilized AUC commanders -- claims Uribe fiercely denies.

The offensive drove the FARC back to the periphery of the country. The border regions became critical, with the FARC using camps in Venezuela and Ecuador to retreat, recuperate and launch attacks. Guerrilla units became smaller and more mobile but also more isolated and fragmented. The security forces' new intelligence gathering capacity made communications difficult, affecting unity and the rebel command's capacity to coordinate strategy. There were record levels of desertion, with somewhere around 20,000 members demobilizing after 2002, according to official figures. The number of fighters the FARC could call on fell to an estimated 8,000.

The Uribe administration's campaign against the FARC peaked in 2008. A controversial airstrike against a FARC camp in Ecuador killed the rebels' number two, Luis Edgar Devia Silva, alias "Raul Reyes." Shortly thereafter, Manuel de Jesus Muñoz Ortiz, alias "Ivan Rios," the head of the FARC's Central Bloc and youngest member of the Secretariat, was killed by his own security chief, who then claimed the reward offered by the government by sending them Rios' severed hand. Just weeks later, Manuel Marulanda died of natural causes. Then, with the FARC still reeling, the Colombian government struck a painful PR blow by rescuing the guerrillas' most high profile hostage -- former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt.

Born Again, but Different

With defeat after defeat on the battleground, the loss of their spiritual leader and some of their most skilled and experienced commanders, large scale desertions, and rock bottom popular support, the FARC had lost a great deal of power in just six years.

However, they retained a formidable fighting force and the funds to rebuild and continue in the struggle. What they needed was a new strategy.

Following the deaths of Marulanda and Reyes, leadership of the FARC fell to Guillermo Leon Saenz Vargas, alias "Alfonso Cano." Within the insurgency, Cano was more

renowned for his political theorizing than his military skills, yet the counter attack strategy he devised -- Plan Renacer (Rebirth) -- would put an end to hopes the Colombian government could militarily defeat the insurgency.

Cano's plan called for a move back to guerrilla warfare. Smaller, more mobile units would halt the advance of the army through the use of landmines and snipers, and go on the offensive by ramping up ambushes and bombings. The FARC would also invest heavily in more rural militias to regain influence and crank up their offensive capacity.

The strategy also called for a political offensive, increasing efforts to infiltrate and manipulate social movements, boosting the rebels' political wing, the Bolivarian Movement, and seeking to strengthen international support and win over public opinion.

The impact of Plan Renacer was plain to see. In 2007, the FARC launched 1,057 attacks, according to think tank Nuevo Arco Iris, just over half of the 2,063 committed in 2002. Four years later they launched 2,148 attacks -- a new record. Between 2008 and 2012, the rebels increased their territorial presence by 30 percent and began launching attacks in 50 new municipalities, according to monitoring group Centro Seguridad y Democracia.

The focus of the FARC's offensives also changed. The mining, oil and gas sectors became major targets. These attacks boosted the rebels' ideological credentials by taking on what some Colombians saw as exploitative foreign companies, and the FARC were able to simultaneously increase extortion revenues by threatening the companies. The guerrillas also began a campaign of assassinating members of the security forces -- their "Plan Pistola" (Pistol).

The militias proliferated rapidly, and by some estimates, the FARC can now count on up to 30,000 members, outnumbering fighters in the field by more than three to one. The militias -- which are usually either associated with a FARC front or with its political wing, the Bolivarian Movement -- are not as well-trained or well-armed as their counterparts in the field and for the most part are part-time insurgents. However, they are camouflaged among the civilian population and make for much harder targets than guerrilla columns. They have also increasingly been receiving military and explosives training, helping turn them into one of the FARC's primary weapons.

The militias not only strike through urban attacks and assassinations, they also operate profitable criminal networks, principally focused on extortion. The fact the militias are involved in crime has led to close ties with criminal groups, with the FARC sub-contracting work to specialists for both political and criminal attacks.

The FARC's rebirth was also aided by the end of Colombia's counterinsurgency movement after the AUC completed its demobilization in 2006. While numerous pseudo-paramilitary groups emerged from this breakup, they had neither the capacity

nor the motivation to take on a guerrilla army. Instead, they sought out alliances with the rebels, becoming business partners in the drug trade, and in some cases in arms deals and even intelligence sharing.

Although the FARC was once again successfully competing on the battlefield, the military continued to pick off key rebel commanders. In 2010, one of the guerrillas' most notorious and militarily adept commanders, Victor Julio Suarez Rojas, alias "Mono Jojoy," was killed in a military offensive. A year later, Alfonso Cano was killed in an air strike. Five members of the FARC's previously untouchable seven-man secretariat had died in just three years.

Breaking the Stalemate?

In February 2012, the FARC, now led by Rodrigo Londoño Echeverry, alias "Timochenko," announced they were to end kidnapping. The news was greeted by widespread skepticism, with the public reluctant to believe it was anything more than an empty public relations drive. Instead, it turned out, they were meeting a precondition of peace talks with the government.

In August that year, the FARC's old enemy, ex-President Alvaro Uribe, denounced his successor Juan Manuel Santos for secretly negotiating with the FARC. Santos dismissed his comments as "pure rumors." A week later, he confirmed they were true.

Official talks have now been ongoing in Havana, Cuba, since October 2012. However, the government, wary of creating another Farclandia, has flatly refused the FARC's calls for a ceasefire, and combat continues.

Since 2002, the Colombian government has thrown everything it has at the FARC, recording major successes. And yet the guerrillas still have close to 40,000 members, as well as a presence in 28 of Colombia's 32 departments and 262 of its 1,119 municipalities, according to Indepaz. They remain one of the largest, best-armed and funded Marxist insurgencies of the modern era. A lot is at stake in Havana.

The FARC 1964-2002: From Ragged Rebellion to Military Machine

James Bargent

On May 27, 1964 up to one thousand Colombian soldiers, backed by fighter planes and helicopters, launched an assault against less than fifty guerrillas in the tiny community of Marquetalia. The aim of the operation was to stamp out once and for all the communist threat in Colombia. The result was the birth of the longest running communist insurgency in Latin America: The FARC.

Marquetalia was one of the ostensibly communist "independent republics" that sprung up in Colombia's isolated and neglected rural areas in the 1950s. It was home to around 50 families of communists, outcast Liberals and other outsiders, and protected by a small band of guerrillas led by a man already building a fearsome reputation; Pedro Antonio Marin, alias "Manuel Marulanda," or "Tirofijo" -- "Sure Shot."

The operation to take Marquetalia lasted nearly two months. Marulanda and his men were outnumbered and outgunned, but they fought the military back and then slipped away.

Five months later, the survivors regrouped and staged their First Conference, and the guerrilla insurgency that would become the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) was born.

Before Marquetalia, Marulanda had been a rogue Liberal, a veteran of the civil war between Liberals and Conservatives who had broken ranks rather than turn on the communists that had fought at his side. At the conference, Marulanda declared himself a communist revolutionary, dedicated to the overthrow of the Colombian state.

Marulanda became the driving force and military mastermind of what was then the "Southern Bloc" and in 1966 would become the FARC. At his side was Luis Morantes, alias "Jacobo Arenas," a trade unionist, Communist Party leader and Marxist theorist, who assumed control of the rebels' political wing.

Together, these two men -- one military commander and the other Marxist ideologue -- formed the backbone of the FARC.

The guerrillas, acting as the armed wing of the banned Communist Party, spread through rural Central and South Colombia, but during the early years, their numbers never got far over 500 and plunged as low as 50.

La Revolucion Vive

After surviving their first years of tenuous existence, the FARC began to grow slowly but steadily in the 1970s. As they did, they adopted ever more sophisticated tactics, in both the military and political arenas. They set up a seven person High Command -- the Secretariat -- in 1974 and divided their army into fronts, with each running its own combat units, intelligence gathering, finances, logistics, public order and mass work programs. They also began infiltrating small towns, courting favor by imposing their own form of law and order.

Although the FARC were already funding their struggle through kidnapping and extortion, for many Colombians they remained romantic rebels. Their image was polished by the government's brutal and violent oppression of any left-linked political movement -- oppression which pushed new recruits into the arms of Colombia's insurgent groups.

By 1982, the ragged band that had escaped Marquetalia formed the core of a 3,000 strong guerrilla army, with 32 fronts. At their Seventh Conference, the rebels marked their growing stature with reforms to strategy and structure that would shape the next phase of the Colombian conflict.

Marulanda and Arenas used the conference to present their eight year plan to seize power. The blueprint included a military strategy to slowly surround the cities by advancing throughout the countryside. "The FARC will no longer wait for the enemy to ambush them, but instead will pursue them to locate, attack and eliminate them," the rebels declared.

The FARC also made military reforms, including the addition of "EP" to their name, for "Ejercito del Pueblo" (People's Army), new disciplinary codes and recruitment guidelines, which allowed for recruitment of children as young as 15.

However, perhaps the most critical move of the conference was a minor reform to fiscal policy. For the first time, the FARC was to tax coca production, as the rebels' need to fund their expansion overcame their moral concerns about the "counter-revolutionary" drug trade that had exploded in the country. The resulting boost to income would take the FARC to the next level in the conflict.

While the FARC were planning their path to power, the Colombian people elected a president promising to seek peace, Belisario Betancur, in 1982. The new president reached out to the insurgents, and, for the first time, the FARC participated in high level peace talks.

As part of the process, the FARC launched a political party -- the Patriotic Union (UP), in 1985. While the FARC initially dominated the party, it also captured the imagination of a broad range of leftists, peace campaigners, and those disillusioned with a closed shop political elite. In elections the year after the UP was founded it won 14

congressional seats -- two of which went to FARC commanders -- along with numerous seats in state congresses, and 351 council seats.

However, while the state was talking peace, a counter-insurgency movement was gathering strength in the shadows. Drug traffickers, land owners and the country's social and economic elites, tired of the guerrillas' kidnapping and extortion, began to fight back with death squads and private armies.

These burgeoning paramilitary groups, in many cases backed by the Colombian security forces, saw the UP as the FARC's soft underbelly and easy targets. Before the killing was done, an estimated 3,000 UP militants and leaders had died, among them two presidential candidates, eight congressmen, 13 state deputies, 70 councilors and 11 mayors.

The slaughter drove the FARC back into the mountains, abandoning the UP to its fate as the already rocky peace process stumbled towards its end. The door to politics had clearly been slammed shut, and the military wing took priority.

Throughout the negotiations, the FARC never showed any serious intention of laying down their arms, following instead the strategy of the "combination of all forms of struggle." Meanwhile, the government failed to deliver on promises of security for the UP and social reforms. These failures were to prove costly.

Hasta la Victoria?

The FARC emerged from the chaos and killing of the 1980s not weakened, but stronger. Their new found wealth from taxing the drug trade, coupled with the pause in hostilities during peace talks, had enabled them to build strength and nearly triple in size.

The rebels were also armed with a new justification for their war. Although the FARC and the UP underwent an acrimonious split, the party's extermination gave the guerrillas the perfect retort to calls for them to lay down their arms and participate in democratic politics. Armed struggle was the only way.

The 1990s began with a death that would usher in a new era for the FARC. Jacobo Arenas died of natural causes, leaving behind a gaping hole at the rebel's ideological heart -- one that would never truly be filled. His death also removed one of the major obstacles to the FARC increasing its role in the drug trade: his belief that the trade was morally compromising.

The guerrillas established closer relations with drug traffickers to increase their cut of profits, while in some areas they started taking on a more significant role in the trade, processing and smuggling cocaine. They also ramped up kidnapping and extortion to unprecedented levels, making the FARC richer than ever before. The money helped build a force of over 10,000 fighters divided into 60 fronts.

The new FARC military machine went on the offensive. The rebels launched ever bolder and grander attacks, and hit and run guerrilla tactics gave way to a war of movement with strikes against battalion-sized army units and military bases. The rebels increased their territorial control, and began to meddle more in politics, buying influence through threats, violence, corruption, and kidnapping high profile politicians and their families.

The most brazen and daring FARC attack was launched in October 1998, when close to 2,000 guerrillas seized the town of Mitu, the capital of the department of Vaupes. Although the FARC only held the town for three days, the attack sent a powerful statement to newly elected President Andres Pastrana -- one he was unable to ignore.

Just months after the seizure of Mitu, President Pastrana conceded to the FARC's preconditions to new peace talks -- a demilitarized zone covering 42,000 square kilometers that was home to 80,000 people. The region would become the FARC's de facto mini-state, dubbed "Farclandia."

The ceding of Farclandia to the rebels was a huge gamble. It did not pay off. The rebels used the territory to hold kidnap victims; plant drug crops; and regroup, retrain and build strength. The government hoped the strains of administering the territory would prove draining, but instead the guerrillas reveled in their autonomy, proudly showing off their "laboratory of peace" to international journalists and civil society.

The FARC also used the peace process to build international support and push for recognition as a legitimate belligerent force in Colombia's conflict. However, they showed little interest in negotiating. The talks stalled time and again, and eventually broke down amid kidnappings, hijackings, military assaults and claim and counter claim of bad faith and broken promises.

At the start of 2002, President Pastrana declared the talks dead, and military hostilities resumed. The army moved against Farclandia. The FARC murdered the Governor of Antioquia and kidnapped presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt.

By the time the peace talks collapsed, the FARC had a 15,000 - 20,000 fighter army, which occupied over a third of Colombian territory and was circling the main cities of Bogota, Medellin and Cali. It was well armed, organized, and rich.

The rebels had reached the height of their power during the Pastrana peace talks, but by the time military hostilities resumed, two new, strong enemies were already looming on the horizon: the money, machines and might of the US military; and the cunning, determined and ruthless incoming President Alvaro Uribe.

Another enemy, the paramilitary army of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), was stronger than ever, and on the march. The AUC was more deadly than the Colombian army, and, crucially, fought the guerrillas using their own tactics.

The FARC and the Drug Trade: Siamese Twins?

Jeremy McDermott

The FARC have always had a love-hate relationship with drugs. They love the money it brings, funds which have allowed them to survive and even threaten to topple the state at the end of the 1990s. They hate the corruption and stigma narcotics have also brought to the rebel movement.

The agreement signed on drugs this month at peace talks in Havana could have a huge impact on the drug trade in Colombia -- if it were ever to be implemented. The rebels of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) are in a position to choke the cocaine trade or to turn themselves into the most powerful drug trafficking syndicate in the country.

Yet there is a lack of clarity on the exact nature of the relationship between the rebels and the drug trade. For more than a decade, the FARC have been regularly described as "narco-terrorists" in communiqués spilling out of the Ministry of Defense, but the guerrillas themselves emphatically deny they are drug traffickers.

What they do admit to is the "gramaje." This is essentially a system of taxes imposed on the different links of the drug chain in their areas of control, and includes:

- A tax on the growers (the cocaleros) -- which usually does not exceed \$50 per kilo of coca base
- A tax on the buyers -- up to \$200 on a kilo of coca base
- A tax on production in laboratories in their areas of control -- up to \$100 for every kilo of cocaine produced
- A tax on airstrips and flights that leave from their territory -- again another \$100 per kilo.

This means the rebels admit to earning up to \$450 from each kilo of drugs produced and moving through their territory. Even if this were their only involvement in the drug trade, it would earn them a minimum of \$50 million a year just on the coca base trade in their areas of influence, and up to \$90 million on the movement of cocaine.

These numbers are calculated based on the United Nations (UN) estimate for Colombian cocaine production, which was placed at 309 tons a year in 2012, of which the FARC control around two thirds. However, these figures are not only a huge underestimation of cocaine production in Colombia; the rebel involvement in drugs is also far more extensive and is not restricted to cocaine -- it also includes heroin, and a recent and increasingly lucrative development, marijuana. A conservative estimate of FARC earnings from the drug trade would be \$200 million.

Outside of the gramaje, other drug trafficking activities are neither recognized nor sanctioned directly by the FARC's ruling body, the seven-man Secretariat. This is the way the rebel high command seeks to maintain deniability in terms of the drug trade. This lack of central control over rebel drug-related activities is also the reason the FARC do not dominate Colombia's cocaine trade.

Security force operations and criminal proceedings have provided glimpses over the years of how deep FARC involvement in the drug trade has extended, and here are a few examples:

"Negro Acacio" and Operation "Black Cat"

Tomas Molina Caracas, alias "Negro Acacio," was the head of the 16th Front, based in Vichada, which sat astride the triple frontier with Venezuela and Brazil. In 2001, the army deployed its newly minted Rapid Deployment Force, which was composed of Special Forces equipped and trained by the United States and shuttled around in shiny new Blackhawk helicopters. The operation was dubbed "Black Cat." The results were the seizures of FARC documents detailing the production, processing and transport of approximately two ton shipments of cocaine, each earning the FARC \$2 million. There were details of at least seven such shipments. The second overwhelming piece of evidence was the capture of the principal buyer of the drugs, Brazilian drug lord Luis Fernando Da Costa, alias "Fernandinho Beira-Mar" ("Freddy Seashore"). Da Costa is a member of Brazil's oldest criminal syndicate the Red Command (Comando Vermelho).

Indeed, Da Costa may today be the top leader of the Red Command. It was clear that Negro Acacio, until his death in an aerial bombardment in 2007, was the principal fundraiser for the FARC's Eastern Bloc, answering directly to Victor Suarez, alias "Mono Jojoy," the Bloc's commander, Secretariat member and rebel field marshal. It was also clear that money from drugs fueled the growth of the Eastern Bloc, to 6,000 fighters in 2002, making it the most powerful military division of the rebel army.

"Carlos Bolas" and Drugs for Arms

In June 2002, Eugenio Vargas Perdomo, alias "Carlos Bolas" was arrested in Suriname and swiftly extradited to the US. There he was convicted of drug trafficking, on charges of handling more than 200 tons of cocaine on behalf of Negro Acacio and the 16th Front. He served 11 years in a US prison and was deported back to Colombia in June 2013. But Carlos Bolas was more than a simple trafficker. His principal role was as a buyer of arms on the international black market. The currency in which he paid, happily accepted by illegal arms dealers, was cocaine. He is believed to have had a hand in the purchase of 10,000 AK-47 assault rifles which were parachuted into the Colombian jungles in 1999 and provided far and away the biggest injection of weapons to the rebel army in its 50 years.

Alias "Sonia" and the Panama Connection

Anayibe Rojas Valderrama, alias "Sonia," was the head of finances for the FARC's powerful 14th Front, based in Caqueta. I met her in 2001 in the main camp of the 14th Front in Las Peñas Coloradas, on the Caguan River, where she exercised an iron control over the movement of drugs in this traditional coca-growing region. She was captured in Caqueta in February 2004 and extradited to the US. In 2007 she was found guilty by a Washington DC court, of drug trafficking to the US and sentenced to 16 years in prison. During her trial it came to light that she had been responsible for sending tons of cocaine to the US (the Colombian army put the figure at 600 tons, undoubtedly a vastly inflated figure), with many of the deals negotiated by her personally in Panama.

All of these cases refer to the years when the FARC was at the height of its powers, its commanders were seemingly untouchable and huge swathes of the country were under the rebels' undisputed control. That ended in 2002, and by the end of 2008 the FARC had seen the death of its founder and supreme commander, Pedro Marin, better known by his alias "Manuel Marulanda," two other members of the Secretariat had been killed, and the rebel command control structure was in tatters.

The FARC today is a much more fragmented movement, and the rebel fronts enjoy greater autonomy than they had a decade ago. Several units have deepened their involvement in the drug trade and are exporting drugs. The 57th Front moves cocaine into Panama, often working with its former paramilitary enemies, now grouped under the "Urabeños"; the 48th and 29th Fronts, in the border provinces of Putumayo and Nariño respectively, move drug shipments into Ecuador, where many end up in the hands of the Mexican cartels; the 33rd Front in Norte de Santander moves large quantities of cocaine into Venezuela, while the 16th Front is back in business, moving drugs into both Venezuela and Brazil. (For more details on current FARC involvement in the drug trade see Criminal Activities of the FARC and Rebel Earnings).

FARC involvement in drugs is no longer restricted to coca and cocaine. The rebels are also involved in the heroin business in the departments of Nariño, Cauca and Tolima. The 6th Front in Cauca has become perhaps the major supplier of marijuana in Colombia. This is not only for the domestic market -- a new particularly potent strain, known as "creepy," is now being exported to neighbors as well.

The future of the Colombian drug trade is intimately linked to success at the negotiating table in Havana. Should an agreement be reached with the FARC, the rebels are, like the Taliban were in Afghanistan, the best placed to have a major impact on drug crop cultivation. However, there is also the risk that individual FARC units will go into the drug business for themselves and work alongside the Urabeños and other drug trafficking syndicates, or even start working directly with Mexican cartels.

What is certain is that the rebels and the drug trade cannot be separated. They might now be described as Siamese twins, and the fate of one is now inextricably bound to the other.



The Reality of the FARC Peace Talks in Havana

Jeremy McDermott

If we are to believe the Colombian government, the question is not if, but rather when, an end to 50 years of civil conflict will be reached. Yet the promise of President Juan Manuel Santos that peace can be achieved before the end of 2014 is simply an electoral mirage.

The results of the first round of voting in the May 25 presidential elections showed that the peace process was not the magic electoral ticket that Santos hoped it would be. While he will still enter the second round, his opponent Oscar Ivan Zuluaga polled over 29 percent of the vote to his nearly 26 percent. And the prospects for peace under a Zuluaga administration are dim indeed.

Part of the problem is that negotiations have been hermetically sealed, with only controlled and bland statements being released from Havana that give little hope that real progress is being made. And indeed, after InSight Crime visited Havana and spoke to negotiators from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), it seemed the government line of unbridled optimism and progress did not correspond to the reality.

So far, according to the government, three of the six points on the negotiating agenda have been resolved. These are the "Integrated Agricultural Development Policy," which deals with all issues concerning land; "Political Participation"; and, most recently, the "Solution to the Problem of Illicit Drugs."

The drug issue was certainly forced through quickly in order to show some sort of progress on this crucial theme before the first round of voting. However, the other two are also far from resolved -- it seems that the thorniest issues have been left for discussion further down the line.

One can understand why the government would want to first find as much common ground as possible and build trust before getting to the real meat of the talks. However, that is not the way things have been presented to the Colombian public. FARC negotiators also told InSight Crime that there were still 20 items outstanding from the first two points on the agenda.

The three remaining topics on the agenda are "Ending the Conflict" (demobilization and transitional justice), "Victims of the Conflict," and "Implementation, Verification, and Legalization of Accords."

Land

The first official report issued on the negotiations, published on June 21, 2013, entitled the "First Joint Report of the Negotiating Table," was little more than a list of

good intentions. It included few concrete measures and had the proviso inserted: "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed."

A return to the first agenda point is necessitated by the FARC's demand for the creation of Peasant Reserve Zones (Zonas de Reserva Campesina - ZRC). While the June report recognized the importance of such zones, it contained nothing regarding the FARC request for the granting of some 40 ZRCs, comprising up to nine million hectares, which would enjoy some of the privileges of indigenous reservations, with a certain degree of autonomy. Putumayo already has one ZRC. The FARC will certainly request more in this department and in the other provinces in which it has interests and a significant presence.

This issue alone could prove to be a major sticking point for the peace process. For the FARC it would be a way of legalizing control of land that the group already holds, a way of employing and protecting its members in a post-conflict scenario, and -- with anything up to two million Colombians within the zones -- a way to secure at least eight seats in Congress during elections. For the opponents of the talks, foremost among them former President Alvaro Uribe and his presidential candidate Zuluaga, this would be akin to simply handing over large areas of the country to the FARC, and would again raise the specter of the safe haven that ex-President Andres Pastrana granted the FARC during the last round of peace talks (1999-2002). This ended up becoming the training camp for the FARC war machine and a center for drug negotiations.

Political participation

The last time the FARC participated in the legal political arena was in 1985, when they formed a political party, the Patriotic Union (Union Patriotica - UP). The UP participated in elections in 1986 and won five seats in the Senate and nine in the House of Representatives -- with chief FARC negotiator Luciano Marin Arango, alias "Ivan Marquez," one of those elected. However, as many as 4,000 UP candidates, members, and supporters were then murdered by right-wing paramilitaries and their allies in the security forces.

This experience casts a long shadow over talks and any post-conflict scenario. The FARC fear being picked off as soon as they leave the relative safety of their mountain and jungle strongholds. And the killing of left-wing activists is not something consigned to the past. Those agitating for the restitution of land have been assassinated in areas like Cordoba and Antioquia, while the Patriotic March (Marcha Patriotica), a left-wing party identified as sympathetic to, if not supported by, the FARC, has seen 48 of its members assassinated over the last two years.

This brings us to a point that is a deal breaker for the FARC: the handover of weapons. The FARC will not disarm immediately. Rebel negotiators talked of an implementation period of up to ten years, in which they would retain their weapons to defend

themselves should the government not honor the pledges made in any agreement. For Uribe and Zuluaga, and perhaps the majority of Colombians, this is unlikely to be palatable, as it would mean that the FARC could re-launch their military struggle at any moment.

Furthermore, the FARC cannot be expected to create a political party immediately and compete in the current political arena. The creation of an open, as opposed to their currently clandestine, political apparatus, will take time, but they expect some political power immediately. The only way the FARC will sign a peace agreement and make the transition from a military to a political organization is if they are guaranteed a measure of political power while the transition takes place. There is, however, resistance to FARC leaders being eligible for political posts from opponents of the peace process, who have cited the convictions in absentia that most of the group's high command have for criminal acts, particularly for crimes against humanity.

The government made much of the agreement on drugs in the lead up to the recent presidential vote. And indeed the FARC could have a pivotal role in containing the drug trade in Colombia (see *The FARC and the Drug Trade: Siamese Twins?*).

There are other key issues currently being brushed under the carpet. One is that of jail time. The FARC negotiators were very clear on this. Prison time is a deal breaker. "We will not spend a day, not a single second in jail," said a senior FARC commander. The legal framework for any peace deal has also not yet been completed. An agreement could be signed tomorrow, but implementation remains impossible.

Another two potential sticking points are the issue of a Constitutional Assembly, which the FARC insist is necessary to build the conditions for a lasting peace, and the inclusion of their smaller cousins and allies of the National Liberation Army (ELN). President Santos has promised to establish a dialogue with the ELN, but neither a venue nor a concrete start date have yet been announced.

The FARC today

The other telling sign from the May 25 presidential vote was an abstention rate of almost 60 percent. One of the reasons that the peace process is not a more pressing political issue is the perception on the part of the Colombian public, fomented by this government, that the rebels are all but defeated. They are still clearly a bit of a nuisance, it would seem, but no longer threaten the integrity of the state. Add to this the Uribe line that the FARC can be defeated militarily and you have a public that does not see a FARC deal as their most pressing concern.

What is also clear is that there is a misunderstanding of the FARC today. Most Colombians are still in the 2008 mindset, when the FARC lost three members of the Secretariat, Ingrid Betancourt and the other hostages held by the guerrillas were freed in a daring rescue operation, and it seemed the days of the insurgents were numbered.

The death of FARC founder and supreme commander Pedro Marin, alias "Manuel Marulanda," was in a way the best thing that could have happened to the FARC, which at that time was stuck in the past, unwilling to adapt to the changing military and political conditions in Colombia. All that changed with the promotion of Guillermo Leon Saenz Vargas, alias "Alfonso Cano." Cano redesigned rebel strategy with his Plan Renacer (Plan Rebirth) and Plan 2010. He forced the guerrillas to return to their roots and political work. The military conditions no longer allowed for the concentration of large numbers of fighters against traditional security force targets. It was now the age of the militiaman, hidden among the civilian population, able to set off a bomb when a patrol passes, or kill an isolated member of the security forces.

The government takes great delight in charting the decline of the FARC's guerrilla fighters, down from 16,000 in 2002 to just over 7,000 today, according to the latest statistics from the Ministry of Defense. But these are the uniformed rural guerrilla fighters. There is no mention of the militias, which may number as many as 30,000 today, and have become the primary offensive weapon of the FARC.

This concentration on political work and the building up of militias could be seen as a positive thing should an agreement be signed. This is exactly the kind of work that could aid the FARC in the move from an irregular guerrilla army into a political force. However, if the peace process collapses, the growing strength of these militias presents a security threat that Colombia is ill-equipped to confront. These are no uniformed rebels that the army can take on -- these are rebels hidden among a civilian population that, in FARC strongholds, shields and protects them. There are no targets for the army; it is a slow and laborious intelligence job for the police to identify and disarticulate these networks. And, in many rural areas under FARC control, the police do not even leave their heavily fortified stations.

The conditions for a real peace agreement are in place. The environment is perhaps more propitious for a deal than ever before in the last 50 years. Yet it is clear that the talks in Havana are not what the government has been selling, and that peace is not around the corner.