



The United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia - AUC) was a coalition of right-wing death squads that used the conflict to camouflage their illicit economic activities. These included drug trafficking, displacement, kidnapping, and extortion. The AUC once operated in two-thirds of the country with approximately 30,000 soldiers.

The criminal legacy of the illegal, right-wing paramilitary organization remains, even though the AUC signed a peace accord with the government in 2003, and largely demobilized by 2006. New criminal gangs have inherited the paramilitaries' weapons, personnel and modus operandi around the country. For many Colombians, the peace process and the AUC's demobilization did not improve their situation. Fragments of the AUC, now referred to by the government as "criminal bands" or BACRIMs, for the Spanish acronym, are now dedicated to drug trafficking and organized crime, as well as attacks on civilians, especially activists and community leaders.

The paramilitaries' legacy extends beyond security. AUC members infiltrated the state and political parties, which has led to a series of investigations. The investigations continue and several prominent legislators have been charged, in what is known as the "parapolitics" scandal. The tradition of corruption continues to undermine and demoralize the Colombian government, and remains an integral factor in the ongoing violence in this country.

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Origins

The origins of the paramilitaries go back to the early 1980s, when drug traffickers, facing a wave of kidnappings by leftist guerrilla groups, decided to create a death squad they called Death to Kidnappers (Muerte a Secuestradores - MAS). This illegal group assassinated not just the kidnappers but any supposed member of the rebels' infrastructure, which included many innocent civilians, activists, union leaders and politicians. Later "self-defense" groups emerged, some of them initiated by Colombian army officers and politicians who called for the population to organize in their own defense. Many of them were legally constituted. However, rather than protect civilians from the transgressions of the guerrillas, many of the groups simply worked for drug traffickers and or at the behest of large landholders. The alliance with these powerful economic interests gave paramilitary groups access to weapons, cars and communications equipment, but it distorted their original purpose.

Indeed, the rise of the drug traffickers' economic power would change the face of the war. Powerful members of the Medellin Cartel invested heavily in land and, using the paramilitary groups, sought to shield themselves from the guerrillas' extortion and kidnapping attempts. MAS expanded exponentially in these rural areas. But soon the "self-defense" groups were protecting drug stashes and cargoes rather than civilians. These organizations also unleashed waves of violence against sectors of the population who were considered supporters of the guerrillas. Thousands of civilians were killed, including state agents and politicians, leading the government to criminalize the paramilitary groups.

The criminalization of these groups coincided with a larger battle over extradition fought by the Medellin Cartel and its leader Pablo Escobar against the government. This fight eventually spread to other parts of his organization. When Escobar killed two of their close associates, Fidel Castaño and his brothers, Carlos and Vicente, teamed with Diego Murillo, alias "Don Berna," to form a group called People Persecuted by Pablo Escobar (Perseguidos por Pablo Escobar - PEPES). They used Carlos as their intermediary with the police, who worked closely with the paramilitary group to gun Escobar down in December 1993. Fidel mysteriously disappeared shortly thereafter. One story is that he died fighting the Popular Liberation Army (Ejercito Popular de Liberacion - EPL). Another is that Carlos killed him in a family dispute. In either case, the core of the paramilitary group that he and Don Berna had created remained.

The second generation of paramilitaries came from the PEPES. The remnants of this group formed the Peasant Self-Defense Forces of Cordoba and Uraba (Autodefensas de Cordoba y Uraba - ACCU). In 1996, the ACCU created a loose

federation of self-defense groups comprised of seven regional organizations known as the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). These paramilitary groups were able to establish local fiefdoms in the main areas of guerrilla influence and drive out the rural population that they accused of collaborating with the rebels.

The AUC's emergence coincided with a shift in the drug trafficking industry. Following the destruction of the Medellin Cartel and the subsequent dissolution of the Cali Cartel, the market became segmented, giving rise to about 500 small micro-trafficking groups. Leftist guerrillas from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - FARC) also began exerting more territorial control over areas where drugs were harvested and developed. The result was near-inevitable conflict between the two remaining super-structures as the paramilitaries fought the guerrillas for control of the means of production of the drug crops, entering by force -- often with the support and assistance of the Colombian army -- and carrying out selective assassinations and massacres that generated massive displacement and widespread terror.

The profits from their war spoils allowed the AUC to grow exponentially and create an army of more than 30,000 soldiers. But the source of this profit, principally drugs, placed the group in the crosshairs of the United States government, which sought to break up what had become arguably the largest drug trafficking organization in the world. Sensing a showdown and already facing a series of indictments in the US for drug trafficking, the paramilitaries sought a way out by negotiating a peace deal with the Colombian government. Between 2003 and 2006, the two sides hammered out an agreement, and numerous paramilitary fronts demobilized. The shortcomings of the process, however, were immediately apparent. The government lacked the infrastructure to verify who the demobilized paramilitaries were and whether they had turned in all their weapons. Some paramilitary groups deliberately duped the government, handing in old and poorly maintained weapons and conscripting civilians to pose as paramilitary soldiers.

These groups began operating under new names even before the demobilizations officially ended in 2006. The new groups -- the Urabeños, the Rastrojos, ERPAC, the Paisas, the Machos, Nueva Generacion, Aguilas Negras, the Magdalena Medio Group and Renacer, among others, have had a powerful impact on Colombia. While more than 30,000 paramilitaries demobilized, many remained at large or abandoned the process and have since been implicated in grave human rights violations, drug trafficking, extortion, kidnappings and many

other criminal acts, which could lead to legal action against the Colombian government for failing to properly regulate the peace process.

Modus Operandi

The paramilitaries were a loose federation of armed groups, whose columns ranged in size from 10 to 150 troops. Some operated as death squads, moving in smaller units to avoid detection, eliminate their enemies in a systematic manner, and cause fear in the local population. Other parts of the organization worked in large, military-style columns, aiming to push the enemy from their territory with “slash and burn” techniques. The AUC, however, was never a vertical hierarchy. Its individual parts operated in a relatively autonomous manner, which often led to serious disagreements and even military battles between them.

Most of these fights centered on disputes over the group’s mission. Ostensibly, the paramilitaries were combating leftist guerrilla groups. But this battle included the attempt to control drug trafficking corridors and coca-growing regions. Major drug traffickers participated in the financing and leadership of the paramilitary groups throughout the country, but especially in the Magdalena Medio region in central Colombia, the northeastern part of the Antioquia department, and the departments of Cordoba and Meta. The alliances with drug trafficking groups eventually made the paramilitaries indistinguishable from their bosses. The two allies also acted similarly in many respects beyond their business interests, including using their muscle and financial power to buy politicians and fund campaigns, as well as assassinate those who did not collaborate, as seen with the 1989 murder of Luis Carlos Galan, the presidential front-runner.

The Castaño family is a perfect example of this dichotomy. After the FARC kidnapped and killed the father of Fidel, Vicente and Carlos Castaño Gil, the three brothers gathered several family members and murdered the perpetrators. It was beginning of a family odyssey that would eventually lead to the creation of the AUC. Fidel and Vicente also worked with the Medellin Cartel for years, and Carlos was an Escobar hitman. What’s more, Fidel, using drug money, invested heavily in land and cattle along the northern coast, and formed his own paramilitary group in the early 1990s when he fought a brutal war of extermination against the EPL and FARC rebel groups. But he also used his military power as a means to earn money. He displaced smaller farmers, bought their land and either developed or put cattle on it, often selling it on at a much higher price. In the end, the paramilitary leaders' battle plan was indistinguishable from their economic strategy.

The same was true for the organization as a whole. Indeed, most of the AUC's individual units were really camouflage for the group's larger purpose: trafficking drugs. Ideology was secondary and those who tried to push the drug traffickers from the AUC's leadership posts were often eliminated, as in the case of Carlos Castaño. The AUC splintered in early 2000, as Castaño attempted to separate his faction from another part of the group, which he claimed was only interested in trafficking drugs. The dispute led to his murder in April 2004, at the hands of the AUC. Vicente, who many believed had been running the AUC throughout, took control and when his attempts to negotiate with the government failed, he returned to clandestine life. He is believed to have been murdered in 2008.

It's little surprise then that the AUC concentrated their troops in areas of economic strategic interest: Guajira, Cesar, Magdalena, Atlantico, Bolivar, Sucre, Cordoba, Antioquia, Caldas, Risaralda, Choco, Tolima, Valle del Cauca, Cauca, Narino, Putumayo, Caqueta, Guaviare, Meta, Vichada, Casanare, Arauca, Cundinamarca, Boyaca, Santander and Norte de Santander.

Resources

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