As the biggest irregular army in Colombia, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - FARC) operates in various regions of the country in search of resources to fund their 50-year-old war against the government. The FARC is the oldest and most important guerrilla group in the Western Hemisphere. It has long financed its political and military battle against the Colombian government by kidnapping, extortion and participating in the drug trade on various levels.

In spite of a concerted effort by the Colombian government, with close to $8 billion in US assistance, the rebel group still operates in 25 of Colombia's 32 provinces and is estimated to have approximately 8,000 guerrillas in its ranks. Over the decades, the FARC has frequently adapted its tactics in order to survive, from its 1982 decision to begin taxing coca growers and cocaine laboratories, to its failed attempt at establishing a political party, the Patriotic Union (Union Patriotica - UP), in 1984. Following the military defeats suffered during Alvaro Uribe's presidency (2002-2010), and the 2008 death of its longtime spiritual and military commander, Pedro Antonio Marin, alias "Manuel Marulanda," the rebel group has focused less on controlling territory and more on guerrilla warfare tactics combined with building up its urban networks and increasing its political outreach. In 2012, the group began peace talks with the government of Juan Manuel Santos.

- Origins
- Modus Operandi
- Resources
Origins

The FARC’s roots can be traced back to the outbreaks of violence that afflicted rural Colombia following the assassination of the populist leader of the Liberal Party, Jorge Eliecer Gaitan, in Bogota on April 9, 1948. The assassination touched off a sectarian struggle, first in Bogota and later in the countryside, which started out as a battle between the country’s two chief parties, the Liberals and Conservatives. Entire villages were targeted for their political affiliations, among them the village of Ceilan, in the Valle del Cauca province, where the Liberal Party recruited young men like Manuel Marulanda, then known by the alias "Tirofijo," to fight off the Conservative paramilitary onslaught. The violence, which became known as “La Violencia,” would leave close to 200,000 dead during the next 15 years. Hundreds of thousands more fled their home towns for larger cities or more remote rural areas.

Among those who fled was a small faction under the control of the Communist Party of Colombia (Partido Comunista de Colombia). These colonists survived during their marches by organizing militias, or what were known as “self-defense” (autodefensas) units. The Partido Comunista de Colombia “autodefensas” were part of a larger Colombian communist strategy of "combining all forms of struggle," which also included developing unions, student organizations and vying for political posts. The organization’s unity and strategy attracted some members of the Liberal Party’s militias, among them Manuel Marulanda, who joined the party some time in the 1950s. The Partido Comunista de Colombia’s rural factions were tiny but represented an ideological threat to the government, which launched an offensive against their stronghold, the village of Marquetalia, Tolima, in 1964. The offensive cleared the rebels out but provided the spark for the party to formalize its armed group: the Southern Tolima Bloc (Bloque Sur de Tolima).

The rebel group adopted the name Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia in 1966, and began a slow, steady rise. The growth of the illegal drug market helped. In the mid-1970s, the guerrillas changed their bylaws and began collecting taxes from the numerous marijuana growers in the south of the country. They later expanded that mandate to include coca leaf plantations. During the same period the FARC began kidnapping en masse and extorting large and small businesses. In the early 1980s, the FARC began taxing cocaine laboratories that operated in their areas of influence.

The new revenue streams meant better equipment and more troops, but it came with a very high cost. Large cocaine traffickers began balking at the "taxes;" they also bought land and began to exert influence on local politics. When leftist
rebels from another guerrilla faction kidnapped the daughter of a large drug trafficking organization, several traffickers organized a paramilitary organization, Death to Kidnappers (Muerte a Secuestradores - MAS). There was also fighting between drug traffickers and the FARC over the rebels’ alleged theft of a large stash of cash in the Eastern Plains. Farmers, businessmen, and small shop owners began to turn on the rebels because of the excessive extortion and kidnapping.

In 1984, the FARC tried another tactic and launched a political party while negotiating a peace settlement with the government. The Patriotic Union (Union Patriotica - UP) was small but gained momentum as the country shifted to greater local government control of funds and projects. 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. In the country’s first municipal elections in 1988, the party won 16 mayoral campaigns and another 247 city council posts. The reaction from those who opposed the party was swift.

Paramilitary groups and drug traffickers, at times working closely with the Colombian government, assassinated UP members en masse. Over 3,000 were killed in a six-year period, and the FARC returned to the mountains, where it continued its meteoric rise.
The guerrillas' growth during this period caused concern, and many questioned the FARC's intentions regarding the UP, wondering whether the rebels had used the party as a means to strengthen itself militarily even while it negotiated peace and talked about turning in its weapons. Between 1984 and 1988, the period that the UP was the strongest, the FARC doubled the size of its forces. This growth was due to many factors, among them the attacks on the UP, which pushed many to give up on the democratic process, as well as the FARC's strategy, which drew from the Partido Comunista de Colombia's idea of "combining all forms of struggle."

This expansion continued apace in the 1990s. After the government launched an aerial assault on the guerrillas' headquarters in 1991, the FARC began spreading its forces throughout the countryside and developed its offensive tactics. In the mid-1990s, the rebels perpetrated a series of spectacular and debilitating assaults on government forces, capturing hundreds of Colombian soldiers and policemen who quickly became bargaining chips in a new round of negotiations between the government and the FARC. Not long after a prisoner swap between the two sides, the government ceded to the rebels a huge territory the size of Switzerland in the southern provinces of Caqueta and Meta, opening the door to more peace talks.

The talks, however, were in trouble from the start when Tirofijo, who had since taken on the formal nom de guerre of "Manuel Marulanda," did not appear at the inauguration. The years that followed included some advances but mostly difficulties. The FARC used the territory to regroup, recruit, train and launch attacks on nearby towns. When the army gave chase, the rebels would retreat to the demilitarized zone. The FARC also held kidnapping victims in the region and oversaw large coca plantations, the raw material used to make cocaine. In what many saw as a sign of the rebels' real intentions, they built roads and tunnels, as if preparing for the type of prolonged war that Mao Tse-tung had fought in China, or the Vietcong in Vietnam.

The talks ended in 2002 when the FARC hijacked an airplane and landed it along a highway, before taking several passengers captive. Fighting broke out immediately as the government sought to retake the land it had ceded for the negotiations. Shortly thereafter, the guerrillas kidnapped Green Party presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt and her campaign manager, Clara Rojas. In February 2003, an airplane carrying four US government contractors and a Colombian pilot who were doing surveillance over the FARC-controlled region in the south crashed. Three of the contractors were taken captive.
These events coincided with the 2002 arrival of President Alvaro Uribe who, unlike his predecessor Andres Pastrana, had campaigned on a war platform. The FARC greeted him by launching mortars at the presidential palace during the August 7, 2002, inauguration.

Undeterred, Uribe reinforced the army, strengthened police intelligence, placed security forces in nearly every municipality and created incentive programs for the rebels to turn themselves in to the authorities. This effort got a boost from the US, which had begun an ambitious assistance program in 2000, which it labeled "Plan Colombia." Following the kidnapping of the three contractors, the US intelligence services upped their training, equipment and assistance to the Colombians, accelerating an already fast-track professionalization program.

The results have been historic, and their powerful cumulative effect has transformed Colombia. Thousands of guerrillas have voluntarily demobilized, weakening the FARC and building up the state's intelligence on the rebels. In September 2007, in what was the first of a serious of major blows against the group, the Colombian Air Force bombed a FARC camp in the eastern province of Guaviare, killing the rebel leader Tomas Medina Caracas, alias "Negro Acacio."

In March 2008, the government bombed a FARC camp located near the Putumayo river, a couple of kilometers inside Ecuador, killing Luis Edgar Devia Silva, alias "Raul Reyes" and several other guerrillas. That same month, Manuel Marulanda died of natural causes. The new leadership of the FARC, Guillermo Leon Saenz Vargas, alias "Alfonso Cano," and Victor Julio Suarez, alias "Mono Jojoy," had been trying to implement a new strategy, but government forces’ constant offensives strangled their attempts. Mono Jojoy was killed in September 2010 and Alfonso Cano in November 2011. Several other FARC leaders have taken refuge in Venezuela and other neighboring states. The FARC's maximum leader is currently Rodrigo Londoño Echeverry, alias "Timochenko," a battle-hardened commander whose ideological views were forged not only in Colombia but also in communist Moscow, Tito's Yugoslavia and Cuba.

The FARC is far from finished. The rebel group still has several thousand troops and continues to draw strength from government economic policies that have widened the divide between rich and poor in this country. The FARC also still operates in coca-growing areas, from which it can draw tremendous revenue, increasingly dabbling in the trade of the processed cocaine itself. Since 2007, the number of attacks launched by the FARC has been steadily increasing, according to independent conflict monitors, and in 2011 surpassed its previous high point of 2002. The type of attacks suggests the rebels have changed tactics. Having been driven from the territories they once controlled, they have
increasingly focused on classic guerrilla tactics such as hit-and-run style assaults and ambushes.

However, the victory that for many seemed within their grasp at the turn of the century has receded into the distance and the rebels may have been weakened enough to really want an end to the armed conflict. In August 2012, President Juan Manuel Santos announced that the government had been holding preliminary talks with the rebels in Cuba for some months. Formal talks were launched in Oslo in October and continue in Havana. Santos rejected the rebels' calls for a ceasefire while negotiations were taking place, assuaging concerns that the rebels might use the talks to build up their military capacity. The rebels initially held a unilateral ceasefire, which saw a massive although not total drop in attacks, but when that came to an end in January 2013, launched a new wave of assaults, including kidnappings. Nevertheless, both sides say they remain optimistic about the prospects for peace. As talks continued throughout 2013, the FARC and the Colombian government stalled while discussing the issue of land reform, which the rebels said is vital for any potential peace agreement.

**Modus Operandi**

The FARC is a complex group with a well defined structure and line of command. It's organizational structure has evolved throughout the years as a result of a process of adaptation to the main challenges of the internal conflict. Ostensibly hierarchical, the geography and size of Colombia has made it nearly impossible for the central command, known as the Secretariat, to exercise control over the whole organization, which is broken up into fronts, with the exception of various special forces units that tend to roam where they are most needed or to carry out a special operation. The FARC has a vast support network of logistical experts in bombing, transportation, kidnapping, arms trafficking, food storage, etc., and manages militia groups in the cities. The relative autonomy of the fronts can make them lethal criminal organizations. Indeed, these units, of which there are over 70, have an incentive to thieve, kidnap, extort and plunder, since their growth depends, in part, on their financial return.

On the political front, the FARC is connected to the Communist Party of Colombia. Each rebel unit has a political operative, and each soldier has political as well as military duties. These include paying attention to and analyzing the daily news, and spreading the gospel of the FARC to family and friends. For all intents and purposes, the FARC has broken from the Partido Comunista de Colombia and, after their public political project, the UP, failed, they have been running two clandestine structures, the Bolivarian Movement and the Clandestine Communist Party of Colombia.
There is much discussion about whether this structure and modus operandi constitute a "cartel," or a criminal organization. While it is true that parts of the FARC traffic in illegal drugs in increasing quantities, kidnap, extort, and partake in other criminal activities that undermine their mission, their overall structure, recruitment, modus operandi and purpose remain centered in political rather than financial returns. This makes it hard for InSight Crime to say they are simply a criminal enterprise.

Resources

- Daniel Pécaut, "Las FARC: Una guerrilla sin fin?" (Bogota, 2008).
- Council on Foreign Relations, FARC, ELN Profile

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