FARC — Rebels with a Cause?

The FARC Methods

While without question the FARC’s reputation is on the heavy side, the group is more than just a concentration of power hunger individuals. For decades, the organization's high command has addressed such basic issues as unemployment and alternative crop development in its episodic peace talks with Colombian authorities. To some observers, the organization is, in its simplest form, a peasant uprising. Alfred Molano, a Colombian student of oral history, states that it is one of the only remaining champions of the Colombian peasantry. The organization fights for legitimate grievances yet engages in forms of random violence. The FARC leadership also feels the effects of being pushed aside by both the government and the international community, just as the people for whom they fight do.

The FARC is often criticized for its involvement in the coca industry. While coca is a convenient way for the rebels to finance their missions, it is also the only viable crop for many otherwise destitute farmers in the country. These farmers do not receive anything but meager benefits from the Colombian government, and like many others in especially impoverished areas of the country, the FARC represents the only pseudo-government system with which the local residents have any contact. Moreover, although the FARC is involved in a number of illegal enterprises, these same activities are acknowledged as a driving force of the Colombian economy.

The FARC requires that all of its members live according to the same socioeconomic principles that it endorses for the rest of society. Rather than living glamorous lives, the FARC combatants mainly eat whatever food peasants can supply them with, such as yucca, bananas, corn, and peas. The combatants are given no material incentives and receive no fixed salary. Rather, they are rewarded in other tangible ways. If a combatant proves to be a good fighter, then he or she will be promoted in the ranks or put at the front of a unit. In other cases, combatants can be awarded with special training in various functions. Furthermore, the FARC allocates part of its funds on a social security system that affords retired guerrillas a pension as well as some form of economic support to fighters’ families. The FARC also provides medical treatment to those who have been wounded in combat. In general, the combatants are well fed and provided with enough necessities to live a decent life.

Because of this, morale is relatively high among the FARC combatants, with relatively few individual desertions, even though the FARC requires a life of militancy. Once they become members of the FARC, fighters must take on specific war names and no longer use their old identities. The FARC adheres strictly to its political ideology, and these new de names are intended to evoke a particular spirit within the combatant of their being part of a larger movement. Their battle names also mask the real identity of the combatants in case they are captured. Moreover, participation in the FARC is completely voluntary. Its leaders have consistently opposed forced recruitment, believing that such tactics would hurt the organization more than they would help. For some, the FARC is a way of starting over and adopting a completely new lifestyle, one that often has a distinct purpose in mind.

For example, while the FARC does not have any specific rules prohibiting pregnancy or personal relationships, any action that would deter combatants from fulfilling their duties is not allowed. Obedience to the overall cause is highly valued and comes before anything else. Because pregnancy may limit a woman’s ability to fight alongside other rebel fighters, it is heavily frowned upon. Women are often persuaded to use contraceptives or other methods to prevent pregnancy. In extreme situations, women have even been ordered to leave their children behind because their motherly duties would interfere with obligations to the group. As for the FARC’s personal relationships, there are certain rules that must be followed. For women, relationships are only allowed with men within the organization. Men, on the other hand, are permitted to have relationships with women both inside and outside the FARC. For both men and women, personal relationships are not allowed to interfere with institutional responsibilities. While these expectations may be considered as being extreme, many join the FARC in spite of them because of the better lifestyle and sense of stability the organization offers, compared to the alternatives readily available.
Use of Child Soldiers

Many criticize the FARC for its extensive use of child soldiers. According to a UN report, the children are used “in hostilities, to recruit other children, act as spies in order to gather intelligence, serve as sex slaves, and provide logistics support.” The FARC members sometimes visit schools in western Colombia’s Cauca department to recruit children. Moreover, at times, armed groups will also travel to both private and public universities in search of new recruits. As involuntary recruitment is not permitted, the child soldiers must join voluntarily. Many see joining the FARC as a guarantee of life-long employment and income. Particularly for those living in extremely poor areas of the country, becoming a guerrilla fighter can be a more attractive option than other alternatives. For some, the FARC provides a way to escape from a dead-end life.

Although the idea of the FARC may be attractive to these children theoretically, the reality of life in the group often does not live up to these expectations. A UNICEF representative in Colombia notes “as soon as the girls are recruited for the groups, they are used sexually and are forced to have abortions if they become pregnant.” Although the FARC itself has severe consequences for members who commit these acts, this does not mean that the young women of the group are not at heavy risk.

Role of Women

The FARC has a substantial number of female guerrilla fighters and continues to attract them in relatively large numbers. Currently, women constitute as much as 40% of the group’s combat force. Women fight alongside men and endure the same hardships. The FARC’s internal regulations state that women are equal to men and can participate in all military operations. They perform guard duty, collect and gather intelligence, take on combat assignments and also serve logistical purposes. They are not given any less rigorous training and are expected to be able to complete the same tasks as men. Women also operate as spies, gathering intelligence or infiltrating government buildings and police stations. They are able to disguise themselves as maids or prostitutes; and, in this manner, they are able to gain access to certain intelligence information without arousing the same kind of suspicion as men.

Despite all the contributions women make, they are still underrepresented in the highest levels of command. However, the women of the FARC claim that this is because of the recent surge in female membership. In the 1990s, there were only a handful of females; now women make up nearly half of its cadres. Because of this, there is a large pool of female junior members who have not served long enough to be promoted.

For female combatants, the FARC represents a chance to escape oppression. The reason many women choose to join the FARC instead of opting for a more traditional kind of life is because of the relatively high funds and the agreeable living standards that the FARC offers. Money is a means of obtaining power and a better life, and the FARC provides many women with this option. Within Colombian society, women routinely face class oppression, unemployment, male sexual domination, and marginalization. Many of the FARC women come from poor areas and see no clear way of improving their lives. Women will also frequently earn significantly less money than men in Colombian society and have a much higher rate of illiteracy. These facts, combined with the rural traditions that reject education for women, provide additional incentive to join the FARC. The FARC gives women the opportunity to earn money, gain a status within society that they otherwise might not occupy.

Women also turn to the FARC to escape domestic abuse, boredom at home, and exploitation by their parents. Besides providing food and shelter, the rebel group is likely to give Colombian women new skills and a sense of self-confidence. Women in the group may find empowerment by their liberation as a result of their elevated status. Joining the FARC becomes an act of protest, a statement against the lifestyle they otherwise would have been forced to accept. It is an alternative way of life for Colombian women, one that seems very appealing against the backdrop of abuse and hopelessness.

Moreover, other Colombian paramilitary groups are known for raping, murdering, and mutilating women, all of which the FARC offers protection from. The FARC has a zero tolerance policy towards rape and expels men who commit the act, providing a relative sense of security to female members. Women in the rebel group are also taught how to fight and protect themselves. Joining the FARC can be a way to escape the fear that these women would otherwise have to live with daily.
**Drug and Criminal Activities**

The FARC is notorious for its criminal activities, most notably kidnapping, extortion, and participating in drug trafficking. According to the Joint Intelligence Committee of Colombia, in 2003 the marketing of cocaine hydrochloride accounted for 45.49% of the FARC’s total income, while extortion made up 41.31%, kidnapping 6.75%, investment output 3.04%, and cattle theft 1.39%. The estimated total amount earned that year from trafficking cocaine hydrochloride alone was 600 million USD. However, the FARC insists that it does not participate in drug trafficking, claiming that the only ties it has to the industry are the taxes collected from the commercialization of coca.

The FARC is not a drug cartel in the strictest sense, rather, it has an established tax system covering every phase of the drug industry. Any supplies needed in the commercialization of drug trafficking must go through the FARC-controlled posts, which have fixed taxes for each ton or gallon of cement, gasoline, sulfuric acid, and other raw materials. Cultivators of coca who have more than four hectares of land must pay a percentage of profits from its growth to the FARC, and processors must pay certain fees based on the weight of the coca paste or cocaine.

There are also taxes for moving the drugs out of the area regardless of the transportation method, plane, boat, or road. However, according to Colombian President Álvaro Uribe, the FARC has now graduated from collecting taxes to becoming an actual merchant. The guerrilla group now buys basic paste from producers and sells it to more integrated vendors for a profit.

Besides drug trafficking and extortion, the FARC executes a significant number of kidnappings in Colombia. It is important to note, however, that nearly half of the world’s kidnappings take place in Colombia, and the FARC or the National Liberation Army (ELN) are responsible for almost half of those. Kidnapping methods have become highly systemized, and the FARC has trained experts for every stage of the process. The guerrilla group also has highly advanced communication equipment, which can be used to access privileged information from official entities. This gives the FARC the ability to construct a detailed database that can be used to carry out both individual and collective kidnappings. The FARC charges an average ransom of 100,000 USD for its Colombian victims, while the ransom for foreigners can be fifteen times higher. Nearly every one in five of its victims is a foreigner.

**The FARC and Society**

Although the FARC has never garnered much foreign economic support, the group’s income continues to grow. The insurgents have managed to establish a broad-based underground economy, which exists in illegal, informal as well as formal markets. Moreover, globalization has helped the FARC with many of its operations, allowing resources to circulate faster and connecting them to foreign markets. Despite the various changes in Colombia’s economy and markets, the FARC has managed to successfully adapt to the structural changes and to create its own direct ties with international markets. As a result, the FARC has been able to make itself a significant component of the Colombian economy and a complete withdrawal would almost certainly devastate various sectors.

In many parts of Colombia, most notably the areas near the Amazon, the FARC almost functions as the government. The inhabitants of these areas have no other option but to rely on the FARC and to continue supporting its operations. Many of these areas have been forgotten by the central government and have low population densities. It has become extremely difficult for the Colombian government to assert its leverage in some of these remote places on a government-to-government basis because the locals here have developed a working alliance with the FARC. Any social benefits that these people receive are from the FARC, rather than a state institution. Oftentimes, the only state presence available is a small local police force that is powerless compared to the FARC’s much stronger local installation. In Cartagena del Chairá, a village in Cauca, in southern Colombia, a peasant came forth with the revealing observation: “everybody has grown up with the idea of the authority of the...”
guerrillas. Another generation that recognizes the authority of the Army has yet to come.” In various parts of the country, it is a fact of life that the government has yet to definitively break the allegiance between the FARC and the local communities.

While the FARC provides a number of social benefits and the protection of local populations, it also demands something in return. Every corporation that operates in the region must pay an extortion fee. Even the public sector is not exempt from these fees; the FARC manipulates local institutions to obtain leverage over municipalities. The guerrilla group may decide where public funds end up and which private companies are allowed to do business in certain areas. Of course, the FARC’s manipulation in the drug economy creates insecurity in the area. However, at the same time, the drug trade is one of the only viable means of income available to the guerrilla groups, even though such areas barely possess any infrastructure and already feature crushing unemployment.

The FARC’s Ongoing Battle

Because of the various controls that the FARC has established within Colombia and the dependency both civilian authorities and the formal economy have on the group, the FARC has established relatively strong roots within society, which give it a certain amount of leverage. Its presence is hard to ignore, not only because of its role in the domestic economy, but also because of its de facto control over entire areas and ultimately its partial integration into the international economy. The FARC also has established itself as a symbol of modest hope in many places, creating incentives for marginalized sectors of society to join the fight. Although joining the FARC may not seem like an ideal solution, it may be the only option for some people to pursue a new lifestyle and to escape poverty and provide even rudimentary living standards. While much of what the FARC does is far from admirable, its vivid presence also highlights the larger chronic problems within Colombian society, which the government has yet to resolve.

THIS ARTICLE IS EXTRACTED FROM A LONGER ARTICLE PUBLISHED BY THE COUNCIL ON HEMISPHERIC AFFAIRS ON JULY 6TH 2010. THE FULL ARTICLE CAN BE FOUND AT http://www.coha.org/farc-%e2%80%93-rebels-with-a-cause/