



“The FARC In Transition: The Fatal Weakening of the Western Hemisphere’s Oldest Guerilla Movement”

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Introduction:

This paper is a follow-up to a report by the NEFA Foundation on April 1, 2008, on the state of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-FARC), the Western Hemisphere’s oldest insurgency. The purpose of this paper is to give a more detailed look at the future of the most prominent and largest designated terrorist organization operating in the Western Hemisphere. The first paper, “What the FARC Papers Show Us About Latin American Terrorism,”¹ analyzed part of the trove of guerrilla documents seized by the Colombian government in March 2008.



This paper examines:

- The impact of the deaths of three senior FARC commanders in the space of a month,

¹ Douglas Farah, “What the FARC Papers Show Us About Latin American Terrorism,” The NEFA Foundation, April 1, 2008, accessible at: <http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/nefafarc0408.pdf>. The paper examines not only the documents captured from the FARC, but also the history of the FARC’s involvement in the drug trade, the war with right-wing paramilitary groups, and the prominent support role for the FARC played by Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez.

- The naming of a long-time political operative rather than a recognized military commander as the group's new commander-in-chief,
- The shifting rhetoric of the group's primary international backer, president Hugo Chávez of Venezuela,
- What these developments could mean for the hemisphere's oldest insurgency.

The Case:

In March 2008, three of the seven members of the General Secretariat of Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), died. Raúl Reyes, the group's second-in-command, was killed by Colombian troops in Ecuador; Iván Ríos one of the senior members of the secretariat, was killed by his own body guards; and Manuel Marulanda, the group's legendary leader whose military career fighting the Colombian state spans more than six decades, died of a heart attack.

These deaths have left the FARC, at an historic crossroads, as it faces both internal and external crises of unprecedented proportions. The FARC is a designated terrorist organization by the United States and the European Union because of the group's deep involvement in drug trafficking, kidnapping of nationals and foreigners (including three Americans still in FARC custody, extortion, and the murder of foreigners (including seven Americans).

A record number of FARC commanders are deserting the rebel ranks, and the group, which was estimated to have some 19,000 combatants in 2004, is now a force of 9,000 to 11,000 fighters. At its peak, the FARC maintained seven regional "blocs," which in turn were comprised of some 70 "fronts" and several mobile columns. About half of the fronts are deeply involved in drug trafficking, particularly the Eastern bloc, which has the largest territory and almost half of the FARC military force.² Over the past two years, however, Colombian military and intelligence authorities say that several of the most significant fronts have been severely weakened and some have been largely dismantled.

"They (the FARC) are reduced militarily, isolated politically, have a reduced social base and we are cutting their finances," Gen. Freddy Padilla de León, the Colombian military commander, recently told the Economist.³

Documents captured from the computers of Raúl Reyes include thousands of files detailing the FARC's ties to the drug trade, its internal operations, and its external support network, primarily through the governments of Hugo Chávez and Rafael Correa in neighboring Venezuela and Ecuador, respectively.⁴ It will likely take years to fully analyze the 40,000 written documents and 610 gigabytes of information contained on the captured documents, and more information is likely to become public over time.⁵

For example, documents from the computer obtained by the Wall Street Journal paint an even starker picture of the relationship between Chávez and the FARC than the initial

² The seven blocs are: The Eastern, Central, Southern, Magdalena Medio, Western, Northwestern and Northern. The information on the blocs and fronts was provided by Colombian intelligence documents in possession of the author.

³ "After Sureshot," The Economist, May 31, 2008.

⁴ Farah, "What the FARC Papers Show Us About Latin American Terrorism," op cit.

⁵ "The FARC Files: Colombia and Venezuela," The Economist, May 24, 2008, U.S. Edition

documents did. Among the findings reported by the newspaper is the Venezuelan offer to provide the rebels with rocket-propelled grenades and ground-to-air missiles, as well as the opportunity to import weapons for the FARC as part of weapons shipments Venezuela was receiving from Russia. In exchange, the Venezuelan government wanted some of its troops to receive training in guerrilla warfare from the FARC.⁶

In the short term there is a strong possibility the FARC will launch, or attempt to launch, a military offensive against government troops, as the new leadership seeks to establish its credibility and legitimacy within the movement. In the longer term, it seems likely the FARC will implode, splintering into smaller, less coherent units dedicated primarily to criminal activities, without even the veneer of political ideology to justify its actions.

This is the pattern that Medellín and Cali cartels followed when their leadership was dismantled, as well as the fate of the different government-linked paramilitary units whose leaders were killed, captured, or extradited to the United States. The disruption in the command and control structures and the fact that financial gain rather than ideology was the driving force of these groups, contributed to their demise.

The FARC, however, offers one variable these other groups did not, which could delay or forestall its disintegration. That is the possibility of direct state support, primarily from Chávez in Venezuela, but also from Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, and Correa in Ecuador. (While Evo Morales of Bolivia is also a staunch ally of Chávez, there is little indication that, preoccupied as he is with his own internal political fight for survival, he is seeking contact with the FARC).

If these states exercise pressure to force the FARC to maintain a unified structure despite internal rivalries, as Fidel Castro did with both the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador, the guerrillas may not fracture as quickly or as completely. This is especially true if the insurgency grows more dependent on Venezuela and Chávez for its logistical needs, including weapons and ammunition. This dependency would give Chávez more leverage over the group's behavior.

However, it is not yet clear what role Chávez will be willing or able to play. His new-found ambivalence toward the FARC comes in the face of the documents from Reyes' computer showing his government's active role in supporting the FARC both politically and financially. The revelations, and Interpol's certification that the computers containing the documents had not been tampered with by Colombia authorities, generated pressure from around Latin America on Chávez to modify his stance.

Despite protestations against the Interpol findings, including calling Interpol secretary-general Ronald Noble a "gringo policeman" and ridiculing the agency's findings as ridiculous," Chavez has been noticeably more conciliatory toward Colombia and less supportive of the FARC since the findings were released.⁷

After spending months urging that the FARC be recognized as a legitimate "belligerent force" and be removed from U.S. and European lists of terrorist organizations, as well as

⁶ José de Córdoba and Jay Solomon, "Chávez Aided Colombian Rebels, Captured Computer Files Show," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 9, 2008, p. A01.

⁷ "The FARC Files: Colombia and Venezuela," op cit.

praising FARC leaders as “true revolutionaries,” Chavez did an abrupt about-face. On June 9, 2008, on national television, Chávez called the FARC a revolutionary movement that had “passed into history” and urged them to release all their hostages “in exchange for nothing.”⁸

In perhaps his most revealing statement, Chávez said that the FARC “should know something: you have become an excuse for the empire (the United States) to threaten all of us. The day that peace arrives in Colombia, the empire will have no excuse.”⁹

Whether Chávez’s true aim is to cut ties to the FARC remains to be seen, but the sharp change in tone and tenor of his comments deprives the rebel of their most vocal, public ally. If the relationship between Chávez and the FARC continues in some form, as is likely, then Chávez has lost his ability, at least for a time, to publicly champion the guerrillas’ cause, and that is not an insignificant loss. It is clear from the documents that the FARC desperately wants to be seen as a legitimate force, particularly in Latin America. By their own actions, they have tilted the cost-benefit analysis sharply against any public relationships.

The Generational Changes in the FARC Leadership

While the death of Reyes was an intelligence coup that badly hurt the FARC and the murder of Iván Ríos showed how deep the internal decomposition of the FARC has grown, it is the death of Manuel Marulanda (AKA Tirofijo, or Sure Shot) the portends the greatest challenge for the FARC.

Marulanda, who was born Pedro Antonio Marín, had been fighting the Colombian government for almost six decades, even before Fidel Castro in Cuba took up arms. As the last remaining link to the FARC historic founding in 1964 as a peasant revolutionary movement, Marulanda was a uniquely-revered figure in the movement. As such, Marulanda, although he only had a fifth grade education and reportedly never visited a major city or left Colombia in his life, commanded the loyalty and respect of both the military and political leadership of the armed movement.¹⁰



Figure 1: Manuel Marulanda (left) and Jorge Briceño
During Peace Talks With the Government

⁸ Jeremy McDermott, “Chavez Ends Support of FARC Rebels,” The Daily Telegraph, June 10, 2008.

⁹ Jeremy McDermott, op cit.

¹⁰ “After Sureshot,” The Economist, May 31, 2008. Marulanda himself admitted he did not know the year of his birth, but the general outlines his life are generally agreed upon.

Marulanda had already been a part of the Liberal Party militias for more than a decade when Colombia's most brutal civil war between the Liberal and Conservative parties, known simply as "La Violencia," ended in 1958. But, like other militias, Marulanda's group kept its arms and formed a semi-autonomous "independent republic of Marquetalia."

In 1964, as the central government cracked down on such autonomous regions, Marulanda and about 40 others escaped capture and formed the FARC.¹¹ By that time, Marulanda was already a committed Marxist, having met Jacobo Arenas, who became the FARC's chief ideologue and commander-in-chief until his death in 1990.

A crucial turning point for the FARC came in 1982, when the rebel leadership strongly supported by Marulanda, decided to move from attaining popular support and political victory to seeking military victory in Colombia. Included in the decision to switch tactics was the approval of the use of kidnapping as both a political weapon and a way to finance the movement. Over time, this thinking spread to drug trafficking, and the FARC moved from providing protection services to drug trafficking organizations to taking direct control over much of the trafficking business.¹²

This transition was spurred in part because of the drug cartels' decision to consolidate the growth of coca plants in Colombia, moving the planting from the traditional regions of Peru and Bolivia to the remote lowlands of their own country. The coca plant produces the leaves used to make cocaine. This decision sparked a broad migration of rural poor to the coca growing regions, which the FARC correctly saw as a potential base of political support. Thus the protection of the coca fields, and then the cocaine labs, were, for the FARC, inseparable from protecting its primary political constituency.

Marulanda, in a January 2008 letter to Chávez found in Reyes' computer and made public by the Colombian police, stated as much, in a contradictory statement on the FARC and drug trafficking:

In order to slander the revolutionary leaders of our movement (FARC), and not satisfied with all they have done to us, they say we are drug traffickers. They do not know that the FARC, as a matter of principle, and according to our statutes approved by the entire high command, prohibits the use, sale or traffic of drugs of any kind. In our case, we do collect a tax on the drug traffickers because they produce drugs in rural areas where the peasants are organized by us and depend on this for survival.

Because of the circumstances of its founding and its original composition, the FARC has always been primarily a peasant-based movement whose demands have centered on land reform and rural issues. While it has shown some ability, in the late 1990s, to operate urban fronts, it has been largely unsuccessful in moving into major cities and towns. This is a direct reflection of its primarily rural recruits and social base.

¹¹ There are differing accounts of the exact chronology of Marulanda's founding of the FARC and his steps toward radicalization. See: Phil Gunson, "Obituary: Manuel Marulanda, Founder and Legendary Leader of Colombia's Revolutionary Guerrilla Movement," *The Guardian*, May 27, 2008; and Chris Kraul, "Obituaries: Pedro Antonio Marín, Colombian Rebel Led the FARC Army," *The Los Angeles Times*, May 27, 2008.

¹² Kraul, op cit.

In contrast, other rebel groups such as the M-19 rebel movement of the 1990s was an almost-entirely urban group, and the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional-ELN) managed to operate in both urban and rural settings, although it never achieved military parity with the FARC.

At the time of Marulanda's death, the FARC was as weak and divided as it had been any time in the past 20 years. While no members of the seven-member secretariat had ever been killed in combat since the group's founding, Reyes and Ríos were killed within days of each other, shattering the aura of invincibility that had grown up around the senior leadership.

Reyes had long been groomed as Marulanda's successor, something that was suddenly not possible. Ríos' death was highly demoralizing because it came at the hands of his most trusted bodyguards rather than from the army, creating what Colombian intelligence officials say has been an orgy of internal purges in order to avoid a repeat of that type of assassination.

In its statement announcing the death of Marulanda, the FARC was extravagant in its praise of its deceased leader, placing him in the pantheon of fallen revolutionaries that none of the current leadership can lay claim to. The eulogy highlighted the difficulty the new leadership will have in filling his legacy within the organization.

The farewell statement said of Marulanda that he was an "Unrivaled strategist, great guide, invincible warrior, undefeated leader of thousands of political and military battles waged throughout 60 years of struggle...Mankind has no precedent a leader of the stature of Manuel Marulanda Velez."¹³

In addition to the deaths of its most senior commander, the FARC has suffered a growing stream of defections of its troops in recent months, even before the deaths of the commanders. These have included prominent mid-level commanders with years of combat experience. During the first five months of 2008, some 860 FARC members deserted on top of 500 that were killed and the 460 captured.¹⁴

¹³ Text of Communiqué Issued by the FARC on May 27 in the Colombian Mountains, translated by the BBC, May 28, 2008.

¹⁴ Sibylia Brodzinsky, "Is Colombia's FARC on the Ropes?" The Christian Science Monitor, May 21, 2008.

The most damaging of the many desertions was that of Nelly Avila Moreno, known as Commander Karina, the highest-ranking woman in the FARC and 24-year FARC veteran who was the commander of the Antioquia region, where Rios also operated. Her defection was a direct result of unrelenting military pressure on her units as well as a fear that her own bodyguards could turn on her.



Figure 1: Commander Karina in Custody

Her surrender, along with those of her family, and calls for dialogue with the government were widely seen as serious blows to the guerrillas because of Moreno's high

visibility and fame within the movement.¹⁵

The Role of the United States

One of the primary factors allowing the Colombian government, after years of failure to stem the growth of the FARC, to not only stop the rebels but roll back those gains, has been massive amounts of U.S. aid under Plan Colombia. Since the latter days of the Clinton administration, there has been a growing bipartisan recognition that the FARC's political activities were directly intertwined with the production, protection, and movement of cocaine. These narcotics ties were in addition to the FARC's demonstrated willingness to kill and kidnap U.S. citizens.

As the FARC's behavior changed (largely based on the acquiescence of Marulanda to the demands of FARC field commanders such as Jorge Briceño to immerse the rebels in drug trafficking activities after the end of the Cold War), so did the conditions placed on counter-narcotics aid from the United States. Congress and the Clinton administration initially limited the U.S. aid to the National Police and its elite Counternarcotics Unit, largely because of deep and justified concerns over the Colombian army's abysmal human rights performance. The primary use for the aid was to be counternarcotics, not counter-insurgency.

However, by 2002, those priorities were no longer viewed by U.S. officials as separate, and the military began receiving larger amounts of aid. Intelligence sharing between U.S. and Colombian militaries was greatly expanded.¹⁶ At the same time, the bipartisan support for aid to Colombia has held. The result has been that, since 2000, the United

¹⁵ Rory Carroll, "Blow to FARC as Top Female Commander Surrenders," *The Guardian*, May 20, 2008. While about a third of FARC combatants are women, there are none on the secretariat.

¹⁶ See Karen DeYoung, "U.S. Eyes Shift in Colombia Policy; Greater Aid for War Against Leftist Guerrillas Sought," *The Washington Post*, Jan. 15, 2002, p. A01; and Douglas Farah, "U.S. Ready to Boost Aid to Troubled Colombia," *The Washington Post*, Aug. 23, 1999, p. A01.

States has given Colombia some \$4.45 billion, making it the third-largest recipient of U.S. aid outside of Israel and Egypt.¹⁷

In addition to professionalizing its forces, the Colombian military has used the funds to expand the security forces by one-third, bringing the current total to 270,000. This includes, for the first time, a professional army of 80,000 troops, while the rest are draftees that serve for only limited periods of time.

The core troops are trained into elite, mobile brigades usually transported by helicopters. The army has also acquired Brazilian-made Super Tucano tactical bombers. In addition to the hardware and training, U.S. aid has focused on intelligence training and signal intelligence, a key to breaking into the FARC's internal deliberations. As the FARC was forced to disperse, in the face of the military offensive, they became much more reliant on satellite telephones and radios for communication, a vulnerability exploited by U.S. and Colombian intelligence.¹⁸

The results have been dramatic, particularly in breaking the command-and-control structure of the FARC. The impact has also been felt strongly in cutting the FARC's ability to communicate and coordinate across different fighting fronts, forcing them to rely on couriers and other less rapid forms of communication.

Even these forms of communication have been more difficult. Many deserters have described the hardship endured by the relentless pursuit of the army, something unheard of in the war until two or three years ago, when the military largely stayed in its fixed-location bases. Finally, the significant rewards program for the capture or killing of senior FARC leaders also seems to be paying off, as in the case of the bodyguards who killed Ivan Ríos and then collected the \$2.7 million bounty on Ríos' head.¹⁹

Commander Karina, the woman who turned herself in after 24 years of combat, listed all of these factors in her decision to surrender, even though she is likely to spend the rest of her life in prison. She said she arranged to turn herself in exchange for guarantees she would not be killed because of the constant harassment by the military and because she feared one of her erstwhile comrades might turn on her to collect the \$2 million bounty on her head. She also said she had had no contact with the FARC secretariat for two years because of communications problems. "I don't know what the state of the FARC on a national level is, but we are fractured," she said at a press conference.²⁰

The New Leadership

¹⁷ The counter-drug and counter-insurgency aid figures come from the Center for International Policy, and its studies of Plan Colombia, accessed here:
<http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/aidtable.htm>

¹⁸ The FARC leadership was aware of the vulnerability but seemed unable to take the necessary steps to reduce their exposure. In a Sept. 22, 2007 letter to other members of the secretariat, Marulanda says he is "only going to use the radio for short transmissions from now on, in order to avoid a massacre. We were six hours on the radio while the aircraft locate us and our messages are longer all the time."

¹⁹ Toby Muse, "Colombia to Pay Bounty to Rebel who Killed His Boss," Associated Press, March 14, 2008. What remains unclear is whether the rebel who killed Ríos is eligible for the \$5 million reward offered by the United States for any of the seven members of the secretariat, along with the promise to relocate the person and the person's family.

²⁰ Sibylia Brodzinsky, op cit.

Given the situation on the ground and the weakness of the FARC, many experts expected the FARC secretariat to choose its chief military commander, Jorge Briceño, (also known as Mono Jojoy) as its leader. Briceño, the son of a FARC guerrilla who was born in a FARC camp, once served as Marulanda's bodyguard. He is widely reported to be the architect of the FARC's increasing involvement in drug trafficking, as well as the commander of the units that have carried out the most high-profile kidnappings.²¹

Briceño, who formally joined the FARC in 1975, was indicted in the United States in 2004 on charges of drug trafficking and kidnapping U.S. citizens. The Department of Justice statement on the indictment said that Briceño controlled and directed FARC drug trafficking activities by "issuing orders regarding the acquisition, transportation and sale of cocaine by various fronts of the FARC and the movement of drug money."²²

Briceño's position is strengthened because his brother, German Briceño (AKA Grannobles), is also a senior FARC commander known for kidnapping and drug trafficking. German has also been indicted in the United States and is also charged with ordering the 1999 execution of three U.S. citizens, all Native American Indians, who were working in indigenous communities in Colombia. The three, Ingrid Washinawatok, Lahe' ena'e Gay, and Terence Freitas, were executed by troops under German's command after receiving permission from Jorge to carry out the executions. Both Jorge and German Briceño have been convicted in absentia in Colombia on charges of murder, kidnapping, and drug trafficking.²³

²¹ Marie-Sophie Joubert, "FARC Under New Leader Alfonso Cano," France/24 TV, May 27, 2008, viewed at: <http://www.france24.com/en/20080527-farc-colombia-cano-chief-alfonso-marulanda-hostage-betancourt>

²² Department of Justice Press Release, "High-ranking Member of Colombian FARC Narco-Terrorist Organization Extradited to U.S. on Terrorism, Drug Charges," Dec. 31, 2004, accessed at: http://www.usdoj.gov/opa/pr/2004/December/04_crm_808.htm. For more background on Briceño and his role as presumed heir apparent to Marulanda, see: <http://www.elmundo.es/1998/07/11/internacional/11N0041.html> and "People Profile: Alfonso Cano, Colombia," Latinnews Daily, June 3, 2008.

²³ Dan Molinski, "Colombian Rebel Commander Convicted in 1999 Killing of Three Americans," Associated Press, Dec. 13, 2005.



Figure 2: Alfonso Cano (left), Manuel Marulanda (center) and Jorge Briceño

Instead of choosing Briceño, however, the FARC named Alfonso Cano, (whose real name is Guillermo León Sáenz Vargas), a long-time political leader, for its top position. Because the FARC's inner workings are largely hidden from the outside world, it is not possible to know how or why that decision was reached. There are various public reports of Briceño's anger over not being chosen. The consequences of his disgruntlement, given that he controls both the best FARC troops and much of the group's revenue stream because of his control of the cocaine trade, could be serious.

However, there may be a more pragmatic reason for passing over Briceño for the top spot. According to rebels who recently deserted, Briceño is suffering from diabetes and in poor physical shape. Recently captured photos also show the rebel commander has lost a great deal of weight and is ill.²⁴ If this is the case, then the naming of Cano can be seen as a more pragmatic step, and signal the possible waning influence of another of the FARC's old guard.

Cano is not an insignificant player in the FARC in his own right. He has often been a visible face of the FARC, participating as a negotiator in several of the rounds of peace talks between the rebels and the government. He has also served in the secretariat for more than a decade. But his appointment as commander, and the naming of two other leaders to replace Reyes and Ríos on the seven-member secretariat, has significantly altered the leadership away from those representing the rural majority of the combatants, towards those who have had a more urban experience.

For the first time in its history, a majority—four of the seven members—has studied at the university level. In addition to Cano, there are two doctors in the secretariat: Rodrigo Londoño Echeverry, known as "Timochenko," who announced Marulanda's death; and

²⁴ Jineth Bedoya, "En el Infierno de la Guerra Estuvo Cinco Días Un Equipo Periodístico de El Tiempo," *El Tiempo*, June 2, 2008, accessed at: <http://beta.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-4229483>

Mauricio Jaramillo, known as “The Doctor.” Milton de Jesus Toncel, known as “Joaquín Gómez,” is an agricultural engineer.²⁵ Most of them underwent ideological training in the old Soviet bloc, where they learned a Stalinist brand of Marxism and how to operate in a strictly rigid hierarchical structure.

Some analysts have called this the change the rise of the “Woodstock Generation” because many of the new leaders rose out of the counter-culture push and radicalization that wracked Latin American universities of the 1960s and 1970s. Cano himself has said, “I entered into a political struggle in the midst of May ‘68 and Vietnam.”²⁶

The predominance of the urban, educated leadership in a peasant movement represents an historic shift and a true generational transition within the movement. However, some who have dealt with the FARC for decades predict that this very change will lead, at least in the short term, to the FARC becoming even more hardline and less disposed to dialogue to end the conflict. In this analysis, the new generation of the secretariat must prove itself even more radical than Marulanda and the old guard in order to retain the loyalty of the troops in the field.

“The new leadership, and especially Cano, have to consolidate their position and assure the obedience of all the commanders,” said Rodrigo Pardo, a former Colombian foreign minister who has negotiated with the FARC. “Mono Jojoy (Briceño) will only be placated by tough language and a hard-line stance by Cano. So he will not be able to speak of dialogue or peace in the short term. He has no capacity to change now.”²⁷

However, given that these men also have a great deal more experience in the world outside of the rural guerrilla hinterland, and are likely more attuned to the problems the FARC faces in terms of its international image, some analysts are predicting that a FARC military offensive could be accompanied by a humanitarian gesture such as releasing more high-profile hostages, especially those reported to be in poor health and close to death. Those who are severely ill include Ingrid Betancourt, a dual Colombian-French citizen kidnapped in 2002 as she was campaigning for president of Colombia, and Marc Gonsalves, one of three Americans government contractors being held by FARC since February 2003.²⁸

The Personal Histories That Can Make History

²⁵ “People Profile: Alfonso Cano, Colombia,” op cit; and “Top Colombian Leaders, Dead and Alive,” The Associated Press, May 25, 2008.

²⁶ Henry Orrego, “Woodstock Generation Take Over Leadership of Colombian Rebels,” Agence France Presse, English service, May 31, 2008.

²⁷ Rodrigo Pardo, in comments at the Inter-American Dialogue, June 3, 2008.

²⁸ Author interview with Colombian and U.S. officials. The situation of Gonsalves, Tom Howes and Keith Stansell is complicated by the fact that the FARC has said they will not be released unless two senior FARC members, extradited and convicted of drug trafficking and kidnapping in the United States, are freed and returned to Colombia.

A great deal of the future of the FARC and peace negotiations will depend on two men whose personal history makes it very difficult for them to transcend the traditional paradigm of the decades-long struggle. The two are Colombian president, Alvaro Uribe, whose father was killed by the FARC in 1983;²⁹ and Cano, whose closest allies participated in an abortive peace process with the government and were gunned down as a result of that by government forces. Both are strong-willed and bitter men, and both have lost much in the conflict. Their personal histories present added obstacles to the already-difficult task of building enough trust to have serious negotiations.



Figure 3: Alfonso Cano, leader of the FARC (left) and Alvaro Uribe, president of Colombia (right) have personal histories that make peace a remote possibility.

Neither is known for their ability or willingness to compromise. In addition, Uribe's long-standing ties to right-wing paramilitary groups after the FARC murdered his father, the very groups that killed Cano's people, have caused continuing and growing scandal in Colombia. More than 30 members of the Colombian congress, including Mario Uribe, the president's cousin and closest political ally, have been taken into custody because of illegal ties to the paramilitary organizations.³⁰

Unlike Marulanda, Cano's biography is relatively well documented. Cano was born on July 22, 1948 in Bogotá, and studied law and anthropology at the National University. He joined the FARC in the 1970s after heading the Juventud Comunista (Communist Youth) at the National University in Bogotá. His university companions remember him for his dance moves at parties, his love of poetry and film, and his love of politics, although few pegged him to join the violent rebel movement. By 1982, he was giving classes in Marxism to young guerrillas, and after a brief time in jail, joined the FARC.³¹

In perhaps the defining time of his political life, Cano played a key role in organizing the Unión Patriótica (Patriotic Union-UP), a political party that grew out of a peace process

²⁹ In an interesting turn of fate, the Colombian government says that Commander Karina was one of those responsible for the death of Uribe's father, although they have presented no public evidence to support this claim. See:

http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/americas/05/18/colombia.farc/index.html?section=cnn_latest

³⁰ Frank Bajak, "Ally of Colombia's President Arrested in Paramilitary Scandal," Associated Press, reprinted in the Boston Globe, April 23, 2008, accessed at: http://www.boston.com/news/world/latinamerica/articles/2008/04/23/ally_of_colombias_president_arrested_in_paramilitary_scandal/. While Uribe himself has not been implicated, Mario, his cousin, helped found the president's political party, served in the senate on a ticket supported by Uribe and was among Uribe's closest confidants.

³¹ Juan Forero and Steven Dudley, "Tough Intellectual Takes Rebel Reins in Colombia," The Washington Post, June 9, 2008, p. A01.

between the government of Belisário Betancourt and the FARC that led to the demobilization of hundreds of combatants.

However, the UP political movement was born at a time of rising political violence in Colombia, which coincided with the rapid spread of the wealth and political influence of the Medellín cocaine cartel, led by Pablo Escobar and Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha. The leaders of the Medellín cartel were investing much of their illegal wealth in the purchase of massive properties, often in areas where the FARC exercised a great deal of influence. To defend their properties from the FARC, the drug traffickers trained and equipped thousands of paramilitary troops, often with the blessing and support of the Colombian military.

The paramilitary forces viewed the UP, which was closely aligned with the Communist Party, as a direct extension of the FARC, and set out to systematically annihilate its members, especially those participating in the electoral process. The campaign of assassinations accelerated following the relative success of the UP in the 1986 municipal elections, where the UP won 5 senate seats, 9 seats in the lower house, and several hundred municipal offices. The UP's presidential candidate, Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, was assassinated in 1987, and his successor, Bernardo Jaramillo, was killed while campaigning for the presidency in 1990.

Within a few years, some 3,000 members of the UP were killed, and the party has virtually ceased to exist. As Steven Dudley wrote in his book on the UP, the FARC military leadership was not sorry to see the UP fail. "The FARC, meanwhile, had the perfect excuse to hang onto its guns forever. Anytime anyone mentioned disarmament, the FARC said the words 'Unión Patriótica.'"³²

The assault on the UP was particularly hard on Cano, who was one of the promoters of the idea of having the FARC form a political wing. The deaths of his friends and companions in that movement, particularly given the closeness of many in the Uribe government to the paramilitary units, may make Cano unwilling to negotiate in any meaningful way.

Alberto Rojas Puyo, a former UP member who knew Cano, told the Washington Post that the fate of the UP had hardened Cano. "Wounds of that magnitude do not heal easily," he said. "And even if Cano could get over them, he would have to convince his comrades to get over them as well."³³

Further muddying the waters, Uribe himself was named in a September 1991 Defense Intelligence Agency report as a friend of Medellín cartel leader Pablo Esobar and a participant in drug trafficking activities.

The document says the intelligence therein has not been fully evaluated, and is meant to give a brief overview, from an intelligence source, of the main drug traffickers at the time. Uribe, listed as number 82 on the document, is described as:

³² The fullest accounting of the fate of the UP, its troubled history and its ties to the FARC is found in Dudley's book Walking Ghosts: Murder and Guerrilla Politics in Colombia, Routledge, 2006.

³³ Forero and Dudley, op cit.

*A Colombia politician and senator dedicated to collaboration with the Medellín cartel at high government levels. Uribe is linked to a business involved in narcotics activities in the US. His father was murdered in Colombia for his connection with the narcotics traffickers. Uribe has worked for the Medellín cartel and is a close personal friend of Pablo Escobar Gaviria. He has participated in Escobar's political campaign...*³⁴

Uribe has strongly denied the charges, and says his political career has been transparent and that he was in the United States, at Harvard University, at the time he was alleged to have been working with Escobar.³⁵

Cano's old wounds will run directly against president Uribe, whose father was killed by the FARC in 1983, which may be one of the primary reasons Uribe has been so aggressive in his pursuit of the rebels.

According to Colombian presidency press office, Uribe's father, Alberto, was killed by the FARC's 5th Front on June 14, 1983, when he attempted to fight off a kidnapping attempt while on his farm outside Medellín. Alvaro's brother Santiago was wounded in the shootout.³⁶ The experience would turn Uribe into one of the most vociferous critics of the FARC. His primary campaign platform called for the military defeat of the FARC and "*mano dura*" or a firm hand against the insurgents. He also promised to work to reintegrate into society those guerrillas who turned themselves in.

One of his biggest challenges of this promise has been the surrender of Karina, the FARC guerrilla commander who police say was a direct participant in the attack that killed Uribe's father. Karina denies that she was involved, saying "my hands are not stained with that blood." Uribe had personally urged Karina to surrender, and reportedly one of his first acts as president was to order a special operation to capture her.³⁷

How Karina fares in the judicial system, and whether her trial is widely perceived to be fair, could have a great deal of influence over whether other FARC leaders decide to turn themselves in to authorities.

The Road Ahead

Given the deep personal animosities that inevitably play such a significant but often-overlooked role in determining how conflicts are resolved, predictions are difficult. However, it is clear that the FARC of today is no longer the same organization it was even three months ago. The guerrilla group is undergoing its most profound internal and external crisis of recent decades and perhaps the deepest since its founding.

³⁴ The DIA report was declassified following a Freedom of Information Request filed by the National Security Archives, a non-governmental research group based in George Washington University. The full document, an analysis of it, and the response of the government of Colombia can be found at: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB131/index.htm>

³⁵ Presidential communiqué issued July 30, 2004 in response to the release of the document. Communiqué in English and Spanish is viewable at: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB131/index.htm>

³⁶ Presidential communiqué, op cit.

³⁷ <http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/americas/05/19/farc.rebel.surrender/>

Among the most important changes are the death of the traditional leadership, and the loss of the aura of invulnerability that had helped the FARC maintain a mystique of a dominant military force. The new leadership will face the twin challenges of consolidating its leadership over the whole of the FARC, while at the same time being much more attuned to how the outside world views the rebel movement.

There is a broad consensus that the first order of business for the new FARC leaders, if it is possible, will be to launch successful strikes against the government forces, as a way of establishing its own legitimacy. The next step, searching for a negotiated end to the conflict, will be far more complicated, and it is not clear that the new generation of leaders will move in that direction.

Cano has consistently stated that the goal of the FARC is to overthrow the Colombian government and establish a Marxist society. However, he has enough experience outside the jungles of Colombia to realize that such a dream is outside the realm of the probable, and that, even if the FARC were to succeed, it would be hard pressed for allies in the uni-polar world.

The price for association with the FARC and its criminal activities also remains high, making external state support for the group difficult. Even Chávez, who has shown no hesitation in moving his “Bolivarian Revolution” forward, has been forced to back away from the group. The new, more educated and worldly leadership, may understand this better than the old guard could have, and take steps to change the FARC’s image.

The simplest but most difficult step would be to free at least some of the 40 high-profile hostages the FARC is holding, including Betancourt and the three American contractors. This move has been resisted by Briceño, among others, because it would leave the FARC with few bargaining chips for any eventual peace talks.

Despite the setbacks enumerated here, it would be a mistake to write off the FARC as a spent force. Any group that can raise millions of dollars from drug trafficking, maintain an international structure, and successfully resupply itself with sophisticated weaponry and communications, will not simply disappear. This is particularly true if its strongest political base is involved in an illicit activity and therefore inherently hostile to the government and government efforts to eradicate the activity, and by extension the livelihood of the FARC political base.

However, with the old-guard leadership gone, many of the FARC fronts in disarray, the central leadership weakened, and the command and control structures ruptured, it is likely that those units able to survive through criminal activity will move ever-more strongly in that direction, while those that cannot will be defeated militarily or surrender.

While the FARC has, in recent years, attempted to inculcate its new recruits with at least some of the Marxist ideology that once undergirded its struggle, that will likely diminish even further. If Cano is unsuccessful in re-establishing international relations, particularly with Chávez in Venezuela, his ability to maintain a semblance of the group’s cohesion will further weaken, and mechanisms for redistributing wealth among the different blocs (where those involved in drug trafficking and kidnapping paid a percentage of their earnings to the central command structure) will be less functional.

Looking at the historical record, it seems most likely that the FARC will simply fragment into different regional structures that will lose any veneer of ideological coherence for their struggle. Given the dominance of some of the FARC units in protecting coca crops, cocaine laboratories, and drug trafficking routes, it is unrealistic to think those units will cease fighting. Rather, they will likely more formally ally with established drug trafficking groups in their specific region, bringing a new military capacity to those groups, while reaping economic dividends for themselves.

Those units that are cut off and have little source of outside income will likely be left to their own fates. The consequence is likely to be similar to the dismantling of other armed groups in Colombia; the FARC will cease being a direct threat to the state, but the overall level of drug trafficking and criminality will likely not diminish, and in fact may increase. FARC units, if the military pressure continues and the international isolation holds, will become criminal threats with regional but not national reach. Income from drug trafficking will continue to fuel an armed confrontation with the state, but at a much lower and dispersed level.