

Post-Demobilization of the FARC:

Predictions for Colombia's Future Crimescape

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ABSTRACT

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Latin America's oldest insurgency, is at a critical juncture. Following a historic peace agreement in 2016 that required the organization to demobilize, the country and the world are closely watching the degree to which former fighters abandon the insurgency and successfully integrate into society. The peace accord provides a number of incentives to facilitate the process, most recently beginning implementation of special amnesty courts for former FARC fighters. While passing the legislation establishing these courts was an important step, the Colombian government has otherwise been criticized for failing to develop a clear national strategy to assist the former fighters and their families in the integration process.

While Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos remains optimistic that the demobilization effort will succeed, a significant number of dissident fighters will likely refuse to demobilize. Others will be drawn to organized criminal groups where they can continue their involvement in drug trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, and other crimes that offer greater opportunities for income than those allotted during the demobilization.

This study uses an organizational model developed using both Michael Kenney's research on the dismantling of the Medellin and Cali drug operations in the 1980s and the 1990s and the results of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) demobilization in 2006 to

help predict the number of potential dissidents and recidivists. Additionally, current trends in criminal activities in Colombia following the signing of the peace accord in 2016 provide support for conclusions and predictions for the country's future crimescape.

INTRODUCTION

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Latin America's oldest insurgency, has arrived at a critical moment in Colombian history – the post-demobilization period. On November 18, 2017, Colombia's Senate approved special amnesty courts for FARC members with 51 votes, passing a vital, albeit contested, component of a negotiated peace deal between the government and the former combatants.¹ As Colombia prepares to install the amnesty courts in 2018, both the country's citizens and global audiences are monitoring the effects of the FARC's demobilization on Colombia's criminal landscape. While Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos remains optimistic, there is likely to be a degree of recidivism by demobilized FARC forces, leading to continued drug activities in the country.

This paper will configure an organizational model for FARC drug operations among dissidents and recidivists post-demobilization using Michael Kenney's criminal organizational models as applied to the Medellin and Cali drug operations in the 1980s and 1990s. The paper will make comparisons to the 2006 demobilization of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) paramilitary forces, which will serve as an indicator of recidivism rates among the FARC. Finally, it will outline conclusions and predictions for Colombia's future crimescape based on Kenney's organizational model and assessments of criminal activities in Colombia since the signing of the peace accord in November 2016.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Prior to the FARC's formation, Colombia endured two bloody civil wars between its Liberal and Conservative parties, The War of a Thousand Days (1899-1903) and The Violence (1946-1957). These brutal political clashes resulted in the suffering, displacement, and deaths of hundreds of thousands of Colombians. A power-sharing agreement between the two parties concluded the second civil war, but ultimately did not address the number of underlying peasant complaints that preceded the conflicts. In response to this exclusion, Manuel Marlunda, a Colombian Communist Party member, formed the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) in 1964. The purpose of the FARC was to address land reform and provide defense for rural populations against the government.² However, these grievances rapidly evolved into an

objective of toppling the government and replacing it with a Marxist-Leninist body governed by the FARC.

In its early stages, the FARC garnered income solely from terror-related attacks that included violence, kidnapping and extortion. The FARC used the funds for its forces as well as basic services for its peasant support base. The guerrilla group significantly increased its revenue once it diversified into the cocaine market. Initially the FARC levied taxes on coca cultivation yields in areas of control (otherwise known as “safe havens” or *despeje*) or locales with weak government presence, but the FARC soon accelerated its involvement by exacting fees on drug flights in its territory.³ When the infamous Medellin and Cali cartels were dismantled through a joint effort by the Colombian and U.S. governments in the 1990s, Colombia’s cocaine market fractured into multiple small drug networks. The FARC eagerly exploited the power vacuum left behind by the cartels and erected a massive cocaine enterprise.

With some income estimates alleging upwards of \$1 to \$2 billion per year derived from the drug trade prior to the signing of the landmark peace accord with the Colombian government in 2016, the FARC’s humble roots belie its pervasive global criminal reach.⁴

FARC CRIMINALITY

Recent studies by scholars Livia Wagner and Max Manwaring demonstrate the extent to which the FARC was (as a mobilized, unitary organization) involved in a diverse spectrum of criminal activities within and beyond Colombia’s borders. Aside from extortion, kidnapping, cattle theft and drug trafficking-related crimes, the FARC was also connected to illegal mining and lumbering.⁵ Merely seven months prior to signing the peace accord, reports indicated that the FARC allegedly collected 20 percent of its funding from illegal gold mining.⁶

Estimates of the FARC’s total annual income vary. Some project the FARC’s income as upwards of \$100 to \$300 million per year, while others believe it to be closer to \$1 to \$2 billion dollars, as noted earlier.⁷ Despite the discrepancy, scholarly estimates agree that at least half of the FARC’s income was derived from the drug trade.⁸ In the early 2000s, the insurgent group was reported to be the largest global cocaine supplier.⁹ Scholar Colin Clarke comments that “narcotics remain both the most common and most lucrative form of organized crime used by terrorist groups... The cultivation of illicit crops like poppy or coca is labor-intensive and provides employment to hundreds of thousands to millions of people in particular countries.”¹⁰ While providing jobs to its rural peasant support base, the FARC’s participation in narco-trafficking facilitated the formation of partnerships with various local criminal gangs, known as *bandas criminales* (BACRIM).

The FARC also partnered with international terrorist organizations such as the Basque separatist group ETA, Hezbollah, Mexico's Los Zetas and the Provisional IRA.¹¹ Such was the FARC's global reach, the insurgent group was allegedly connected to organized crime in thirty countries and utilized West African ports as major transit points for cocaine trafficking.

Perhaps one of the more telling cases of the transnational nature of the FARC's criminal enterprise was its linkage to a Russian smuggling ring that operated from 1999-2000. During the brief span of the ring's operation, routine shipments of up to 88,000 pounds of cocaine moved via air transport from Colombia to the former Soviet Union.¹² In exchange for the cocaine, the FARC received quantities of Russian and Eastern European arms. The ring encompassed Russian military personnel, diplomats, and organized crime leaders, in addition to the FARC. Interestingly, one of Brazil's most notorious drug lords, Luiz Fernando Da Costa (alias Fernandinho), was considered vital in facilitating the weapons shipments to the FARC. Furthermore, US reports have potentially connected Hezbollah to the ring as well.¹³ As Bruce Bagley states: "This was a truly global criminal network, servicing a wide range of criminal actors, from local crime bosses all the way to international terrorism."¹⁴

While the majority of the FARC is now demobilized, dissidents continue to maintain some of the FARC's criminal fronts. Comparing the FARC's operations and structure prior to demobilization and the evolution of its structure within dissident groups allows for a better understanding of Colombia's crimescape.

WHEEL AND CHAIN NETWORKS

In his article "The Architecture of Drug Trafficking," Michael Kenney proposes two distinct organizational models to describe trafficking networks in the 1980s and 1990s, during which the Medellin and Cali cartels peaked and then disbanded. He argues that the term 'cartel' inaccurately describes the operations in these two cities; as these major drug networks did not have a monopoly on the cocaine market and therefore could not control global market prices, unlike a genuine cartel.¹⁵

Instead, he utilizes the concept of wheel and chain networks. He offers the following defining characteristics of a wheel network:

Wheel networks...contain a core group that manages the overall enterprise and peripheral nodes that perform specific tasks, sometimes for different core groups...Core groups exploit their resources to contract the services of different peripheral nodes that perform the same task, including multiple transportation rings, distribution groups and money launderers. Core groups are led by

*veteran traffickers that have the contacts, capital and knowledge to coordinate large-scale drug shipments.*¹⁶

Kenney utilizes the concept of a wheel network and applies it to the height of drug operations led by organized crime groups like Pablo Escobar and the Cali 'kingpins' in the 1980s. The core groups (i.e. Escobar, Cali kingpins) dominated their respective wheel networks in Colombia.

Wheel networks, as used by Kenney to describe criminal narco-trafficking networks, can also apply to the FARC's drug operations leading up to the 2016 peace agreement (pre-demobilization). The FARC was organized around a seven-member secretariat that governed the actions and operations of the insurgent group.¹⁷ This secretariat mode of governance fits the core group aspect within the context of the wheel model. As veterans of the insurgency, these leaders had the knowledge necessary to coordinate large-scale drug operations. While the FARC was a politically motivated insurgent group, its proclivity toward narco-trafficking as a key funding source for its operations evolved the organization from a peasant guerrilla movement to a major transnational criminal network. The wheel network constructed by the FARC spanned international borders, penetrating both Africa and Europe in the expansion of its criminal enterprise.¹⁸

Returning to Kenney's organizational models, he suggests a second concept to describe Colombia's drug landscape outside of the large wheel networks: chain networks. He provides a few features of these networks:

*Chain networks coordinate transnational drug flows sans the synchronization provided by core groups. Chain networks are decentralized and 'self-organizing': they contain independent nodes that perform specific tasks and transact directly with other nodes without mediation and oversight by core groups. While some nodes may contain influential leaders, relations among different groups are characterized by horizontal rather than vertical accountability...in chain networks, individual nodes often contain only a single level of management: the manager or boss who gives orders – and the workers that carry them out.*¹⁹

These chain networks may be a useful organizational model when examining the FARC dissidents and recidivists in the post-demobilization period. Similar to what occurred with the demobilization of the AUC (a large paramilitary defense group turned narco-traffickers), 15-20 percent of the demobilized FARC may recidivate and join smaller, flat chain networks as part of the ranks of a local BACRIM and continue drug operations.²⁰ This has already occurred to a degree with certain FARC members that rejected

the peace accord outright and refused to demobilize, forming the basis for the dissident groups identified across Colombia. Post-hoc analysis of the AUC disbandment in 2006 cited “the surfacing of post-demobilization armed groups...[with] substantial evidence that these groups have a variety of linkages with the former AUC.”²¹ The outcome of the AUC demobilization provides support for a similar result with demobilized FARC forces, which have already experienced cases of desertion.²² A growing percentage of these forces, for any number of reasons, will likely be lured back to Colombia’s lucrative shadow networks, and will form their own fragmented, criminal factions or otherwise ally with other FARC dissidents or BACRIM.

Insight Crime reported in early 2017, that Colombia’s most notorious BACRIM, Clan del Golfo (also known as Clan Úsuga, Los Urabeños, and Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia), comprised of former mid-level AUC leaders, was actively recruiting FARC dissidents in order to seize former drug and illicit mining enterprises in various parts of Colombia.²³ Some reports have shown that certain FARC dissident groups have noticeably strengthened since the signing of the official peace agreement more than a year ago (November 24, 2016).²⁴ These dissident groups will likely continue to engage in their own chain networks where they are already based, especially where local areas lack a strong government presence.

The demobilization of the FARC dismantled the transnational wheel network controlled by the FARC secretariat. However, the spokes of this network spurred the creation of fragmented, small-scale chain networks wherein dissidents and recidivists take residence on their own or alongside members of Colombia’s organized criminal groups. As demobilized FARC forces become more disillusioned with the peace implementation process, these chain networks will gain more new recruits and there will be further obstructions to the peace process.

POLITICS OF THE PEACE AGREEMENT

One critical impediment to the implementation of the 2016 peace agreement is the politics surrounding it. The Colombian Congress is currently debating and voting on individual pieces of legislation to establish the legal foundation for the peace accord. Unfortunately, fast-track authority for legislative action ended November 30, 2017, significantly decelerating the process. However, the Senate managed to pass the controversial Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) on November 16, 2017, enabling the establishment of special amnesty courts for the FARC in 2018.²⁵ This was a key request of FARC members in the peace accord. More recently, the JEP announced in March 2018 that it would begin gathering evidence and arranging the initial hearings; however, no specific date is set for the first set of proceedings.²⁶ To date, over 4,600 former

FARC combatants have provided testimony.²⁷

Nevertheless, the JEP may be confronted by a high-profile case sooner than expected with the consideration of Seuxis Paucis Hernández Solarte, alias “Jesús Santrich.” Colombian authorities arrested Santrich in April 2018 after the United States indicted him for attempting to traffic 10 tons of cocaine worth \$320 million.²⁸ A former high-level FARC commander, Santrich was a key negotiator in the 2016 peace agreement and represented one of ten seats allocated to the FARC in Congress, as promised by the peace deal.²⁹ The JEP will decide whether Santrich’s crime was committed prior to or following the signing of the peace agreement, the latter of which would strip him of benefits within the special peace jurisdiction.³⁰

Santrich’s potential involvement with the drug trade post-demobilization is a significant blow to demobilized FARC members in the eyes of the Colombian public, who already disfavor the peace agreement. Further reinforcing this negative perception are recent allegations of corruption surrounding the Colombian Peace Fund (Fondo Colombiano de Paz), the government agency charged with managing resources for the peace agreement implementation. Concerns arose when the ambassadors of Norway, Sweden and Switzerland conveyed their unease to President Santos over transparency and management of funds allotted for the implementation of the peace agreement. Altogether, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland pledged over \$200 million toward the peace process. Furthermore, the Colombian Attorney General’s Office notified Santos “of a lack of transparency in both fund and contract management, evasion of legal controls and the existence of an illicit network of intermediaries that allegedly interfered with how and to whom projects were allocated.”³¹ These alarming allegations may fuel public disapproval, which in turn may be reflected in the results of the presidential election in May 2018.

Congressional elections in March already proved the mounting discontent with the peace deal in Colombia. Santos’ Social Unity Party was weakened in the Colombian Senate, obtaining only 14 out of 100 available seats; after previously occupying the majority of any political party. The Democratic Center gained the most seats in the Senate, acquiring 19 out of 100. The leader of Democratic Center is former president Alvaro Uribe, a staunch opponent of the peace process. Additionally, the Radical Change Party, another peace accord opponent, obtained 16 seats out of 100.³² In the lower house, the Democratic Center and Radical Change parties are nearly evenly matched with the pro-peace agreement Social Unity and Liberal parties. These two latter parties together control 60 seats in comparison to 62 seats held by the Democratic Center and Radical Change.³³ This division in Colombia’s congressional houses portends a divisive presidential election, especially in light of the corruption allegations.

Finally, a comprehensive strategy for rebel reintegration remains an

ambiguous issue as the government has yet to offer a concrete national plan. On a recent visit to Colombia, Jeffrey Feltman, Under-Secretary for Political Affairs for the United Nations (UN), stated:

*Reintegrating former fighters is a difficult prospect in any post-conflict situation. Success in the context of Colombia demands the development and implementation very quickly of opportunities that provide former fighters, including women, with an alternative that is attractive and distinct from that which may be on offer from illegal economies...efforts on a larger scale are needed.*³⁴

The FARC recently criticized the government for the inadequate conditions of zones designated for demobilized members. The FARC cited a lack of access to public and financial services, housing, food and economic opportunity, coupled with poor sanitary conditions and delays in the issuing of documentation to inhabitants.³⁵ The lack of tangible plans for the reintegration process may dilute the FARC's overall participation in the peace process and drive desertion.

RECIDIVISTS AND DISSIDENTS

While the Santos administration estimates that the amount of FARC dissent is about seven percent, or approximately 700 rebels, reports suggest that the actual amount is closer to 15 percent, or around 1,000-1,500 rebels.³⁶ This figure is not surprising; the AUC suffered a similar result when it disbanded in 2006 under Alvaro Uribe's administration.³⁷

Given the length of the insurgency, many FARC members were born into fighting, or otherwise joined at a young age. Researchers Enzo Nussio and Kimberly Howe cite a study conducted by the Colombian Family Welfare Institute, stating that about "50% of all FARC fighters joined this group when they were younger than 18 years of age and that youth recruitment has increased dramatically in recent years."³⁸ As a consequence, the dissidents' available skills create more opportunities for them in the criminal underworld. This does not encourage reintegration into Colombian society nor the seeking out of licit, but oftentimes less lucrative, careers.

Journalist James Bargent writes that within one week of complete demobilization in August 2017, reports surfaced that dissidents had overtaken major drug trafficking areas in the northern, southern, central, and eastern portions of Colombia.³⁹ Across the country, FARC dissidents were detected in 16 different municipalities.⁴⁰ Bargent also asserts that the continued forced recruitment of youth, robbery of arms, and murders connected to the FARC dissidents demonstrate their criminal impact. When the FARC released its

official asset list (woefully low in comparison to estimates by third parties), notations delineated certain assets as “in the hands of dissidents,” revealing the alarming potential resources that breakaway groups may have in their possession to continue their criminal trade.⁴¹

As stated previously, some degree of recidivism is already anticipated from demobilized FARC combatants. When the AUC demobilized in 2006, former paramilitary members ascribed their return to crime as a result of their inability to reintegrate, the threat of retaliation from victims, and/or the limited profits (in comparison to illicit trade proceeds) derived from a legitimate occupation.⁴² These factors will likely also influence the return of former FARC rebels to illicit activities. Around 34 former FARC members and 13 family members have been killed since April 2017.⁴³ More recently, two former FARC members were murdered in January 2018 while campaigning in northwest Colombia.⁴⁴ Incidents such as these may provoke others to rearm out of fear.

The risk of recidivism can also be inferred by a reading of the open letter from the FARC’s former commander-in-chief, Rodrigo Londoño Echeverri, alias “Timochenko,” to Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos in September 2017. In the letter, Timochenko criticized the government’s lack of effort in implementing certain aspects of the peace accord and reintegration measures. This includes issuing identification cards, bank accounts and income stipends, as well as constructing adequate camps in designated concentration zones for former combatants.⁴⁵ UN Under-Secretary-General Feltman also expressed concern during his recent speech in Colombia about “the drifting of a number of FARC members out of the zones, for a range of reasons that include joining the so-called ‘dissidents’...a troubling sign of what could be the result on a wider scale if reintegration efforts are not very substantially accelerated.”⁵⁶

Furthermore, Timochenko communicated concern over the slow-moving legislative process to pass individual components of the peace accord. The government’s inability to meet these requirements will likely persuade some number of former rebels to reenter a life of crime – potentially a more appealing option when compared to their current conditions.

However, the greatest threat of recidivism may come from former mid-level commanders in the FARC. As Sarah Zukerman Daly remarks in her article, “the mid-ranking commanders, stripped by demobilization of their war incomes and status, engage in crime and pull their rank and file with them.”⁴⁷ Mid-level leadership has allegedly acted in its own interest previously, as Insight Crime reported in relation to the released asset list: “While many fronts certainly profited from lucrative criminal activities, it is most likely that many mid-level commanders never declared this wealth nor pushed it up to the FARC leadership, preferring to line their own pockets.”⁴⁸ These alleged actions may offer a clue toward potential recidivism, as these officers may pursue their lost status and profits within an illicit organization.

COLOMBIA'S CRIMESCAPE POST-DEMobilIZATION

On November 24, 2017, Colombia celebrated its first year of peace with demobilized FARC members. While a momentous occasion for a country that has long suffered violence and conflict, Colombia needs to remain vigilant of its evolving crimescape as dynamics shift correspondingly to the FARC's demobilization.

Encouragingly, insurgent-related crimes have decreased. A 2017 report in *Americas Quarterly* stated that "homicides fell by 6 percent in the first half of 2017 compared to last year. Other types of violence deployed by armed groups also declined significantly over that period, including threats (down 35 percent), extortion (43 percent), terrorism (52 percent), and kidnapping (18 percent)," citing both the peace process and various public security initiatives as reasons for the favorable numbers.⁴⁹

However, other statistics provide evidence of new criminal groups asserting themselves in past FARC strongholds. In former conflict areas, the homicide rate has increased by 15 percent.⁵⁰ Some sources surmise that the FARC-controlled populations were left vulnerable to BACRIM and the National Liberation Army (ELN), another insurgent group, once the rebels forfeited their arms. In particular, BACRIM appear to have expanded since the demobilization, reportedly penetrating 18 additional municipalities in Colombia, totaling 74 in July of 2017.⁵¹ Further evidence of new criminal players in Colombia's crimescape is reflected through the spike in social leader assassinations; an effort by criminals to remove local opposition. Insight Crime reports that an average of one social leader murder has occurred every four days since the signing of the peace deal in 2016.⁵² Overall, new criminal organizations have spread to at least 90 of the 242 municipalities where a FARC presence was detected prior to demobilization.⁵³

These alarming numbers indicate a shift in the organization and make-up of Colombia's criminal underworld. The wheel networks that were characteristic of the Medellin cartel, the Cali cartel and the FARC are fragmented into nimble, decentralized chain networks that often control only one or two components within the drug trafficking supply chain. With no core group to target, Colombian authorities are faced with the daunting task of locating these dispersed networks and rupturing the often-replaceable nodes in their confrontation with Colombia's drug trade. BACRIM, the ELN, FARC dissidents, and other armed groups have exploited the demobilization of the FARC by overtaking major drug corridors within the country, and these groups will continue to extend their reach.

With the labored pace of legislative action to construct the legal foundation for peace implementation, former rebels are likely to become impatient with the process. Desertion in the coming months will allow for the formation of more

robust dissident networks. If the AUC demobilization in 2006 provides any indication, combined FARC dissident and recidivism rates may reach upwards of 20 percent if reintegration efforts are not significantly augmented by the government. The arrest of former commander Jesús Santrich demonstrates the continued threat and allure of criminal networks to demobilized FARC members and casts doubt on whether some members have completely abandoned criminal activities.

While Colombia has indeed arrived at a promising point in its history with the peace accord, security forces and citizens alike need to confront a new reality. Despite the FARC's demobilization, Colombia's criminal underworld has simply evolved, taking advantage of the vacuum left behind by Latin America's largest insurgency. Efforts outside of Colombia to combat transnational criminal networks hold lessons applicable to FARC's demobilization. International partnerships, a stronger government presence in vulnerable areas, and a viable substitution of a profitable licit crop (among other proactive measures) are needed to mount a significant challenge to Colombia's global cocaine industry and other illicit networks.

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