

FAECS AND COLOMBIAN ATTEMPTS TO FIGHT THE GROUP – THE EVERLASTING CONFLICT

Michelle Moreira Alves¹

ABSTRACT: The aim of this text is to present a short description and analysis about FARCS and Colombian government attempts to fight the group. It focuses also in US initiatives to intervene in this conflict. The analysis deals with aspects of this conflict from 60's until its formal peace agreement in 2016.

KEY-WORDS: FARCS, FARCS-Colombia conflict, USA intervention

Introduction

The internal conflict in Colombia has been occurring for half a century, since the 60s the FARCS, *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionárias de Colombia*, are seen as a disease that must be fought for the safety of the society, most of the right Colombian media argue that the FARC's are made of murders, drug dealers, and criminals in general that prevent the government from acting. To summarize, the group emerged from a guerilla against the authoritarian government and the USA support acting to stop the counterinsurgency. In the 60's the guerilla proclaimed the areas under their control as "Independent Republics" like the *Marquetalia*, at the time, the guerilla group had around 48 members that later was known as FARC, fighting the authoritarian government (BARBIERI, 2010). In the middle sixties the Latin America Strategic Operation (LASO) attacked the Independent Republics, the LASO was planned by Colombia and had support from the USA, their mission was to eliminate the self-defense areas. In the 70's the economic crises in the country intensified and the farmer rebellions as well, in this period the ideology was defined. The great cocaine cartel started to grow in the 80s in some paramilitary groups which belonged to the business men, among them a large group of drug trafficker connected to the Cali and Medellin cartels. Some leaders were killed, some were deported to the United States to serve a prison sentence and for a few time there was dispersal at the production but not a real reduction.

In the middle 80s the group elected several officials to the political sphere, a few years later the FARC's and two other groups started a junta to negotiate with the government, which broke the peace agreement making the FARC's go back to armed

conflicts. The president at the time, Belisario Betancur pushed the approval of the amnesty law releasing several arrested revolutionaries (CEARÁ 2009). In the 90's various terror attacks sponsored by the FARC's occurred.

From this moment the American intervention was more and more present, the attempts to counter the FARC's and the trafficking were frequent. During the Ernesto Samper mandate (1994-1998) there was an accusation that his campaign was financed by the trafficking, and the violence against the population that supported the guerilla increased (BARBIERI 2010). With Andrés Pastrana Arango in charge (1998-2002) some plans began to come into action, President Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2010)

¹ Bacharel em relações Internacionais pela Unesp de Marília. Endereço eletrônico: mih-more@hotmail.com

focused on eliminating the guerilla even though the guerilla kept growing. What characterizes this conflict is the combination of terror, corruption, social inequality, trafficking, American intervention and the proportion it took in the world. The government attempted several times to finish this internal conflict, four presidents tried to negotiate the peace in Colombia during this time, but unfortunately more than 260 thousand people had lost their lives, 7 million citizens moved because of the war and almost 45 thousand people disappeared. This work tries to understand the reasons why the conflict took that long to come up with an agreement, what were the mistakes from the government, the population and the international community. The longest revolutionary struggle in Latin America is not completely over, the armed groups are still living in some areas of the country.

The problem of the trafficking

The culture of coca leaf and the cocaine trafficking were the most important activity in the drug scenario, the highlight of this scene was in the 2000, in that year the culture of coca reached 163 thousand hectares according to Valencia (2005) the trafficking of cocaine to other countries was about 70 tons /year. Thus, Colombia controlled more than the half of this “business” worldwide. Part of this problem is linked with the fact that for the coca-growers it’s more profitable than any other product, even though they receive a small amount of the money (VALENCIA, 2005). The trafficking enhanced other phenomenon from the Colombian life like the guerrillas and paramilitaries violence, the corruption and the deinstitutionalization of the country.

The power of the FARC’s in the Colombian territory is a product of their control in the commodities, the roads, rivers, airports, etc. It allows them to survive exploring the available “resources” like the coca, coffee, emerald, bananas and others (BARBIERI, 2010).

The FARC’s began to charge taxes from the villagers and to directly control the plantations and to process the coca leaves. The guerrilla changed, articulating violence from the trafficking, the regular crime and the political violence the group sent out a sign that the state was going to breakdown. The whole Andean area was destabilized which worried even more the United States (VALENCIA, 2005).

The FARC’s used resources from the trafficking to finance their war, their development came in the middle 90s with the money provided from this activity. At that moment they doubled their capacity, becoming a true guerrilla army which enforced various defeats to the military forces between 1996 and 1998. The Colombian National Planning Department estimated that in 1996 the guerrilla’s profit was about 1,54% of the gross domestic product from that year (more than 500 million dollars). According to Valencia (2005) some analysts says that almost half of their profit came from the drug trafficking.

Colombia attempts to fight the FARC’s

The way of fighting the drug trafficking at the time was not closely related to armed conflict, it consisted in “control and limit” the drug flow in the territory (VALENCIA, 2005) In other words there was a tolerance in the country.

The great attack against the growing, process and trafficking of drugs in Colombia started in 1994, from this moment until June 25th of 2004 – the International Day Against Drug Abuse-approximately 621.221 hectares of coca plantation had been fumigated. This are had doubled from 1994 until 2004 (VALENCIA, 2005).

The hardest period of confrontation of the armed groups linked to trafficking started in 2000, when the Plan Colombia took place. It was planned in 1998 in the Andrés Pastrana mandate and came into action two years later (BARBIERI 2010). Some authorities told that it was possible to reduce one half of the planted area that, as said here before, reached 163 thousand hectares. Authorities are proud of reducing the cocaine export in about 260 tons.

In the first years of Plan Colombia, while Andrés Pastrana was president, there was no articulated strategy that would effectively respond to the change of the vision of the Colombian conflict in the USA. The only focus was to reduce the coca planted areas by fumigation.

They intensified the fumigation and acted against the guerrillas and also against the small cartels, but in general there was no oriented plan to a real change in the scenario.

The fumigations and the military procedures drove out thousands of farmers, the situation was known as refugees in their own country, because of that Colombia passed through a serious humanitarian crisis (CEARÁ, 2009).

With President Álvaro Uribe Vélez a proper project started to develop with change of purpose, from controlling to eliminating. Uribe argued that the insurgency had remained because in the last fifty years there was no leadership in Colombia, the political zone and the intellectuals were being condescending with the guerrillas, and were taking for granted the subversive reality that was going on (VALENCIA, 2005). Neither the State had conditions to defeat the guerrillas nor did the insurgents have the strength to take Bogotá. Uribe changed this “negative symmetry” using all he could to reduce the insurgency in the south of the country.

On the other hand, the president moved away the resistance that the Colombian government still had regarding the USA participating in the conflict. He accepted the idea that came from Washington that he should eliminate once and for all the guerrillas. Uribe called this strategy “democratic safety” and had two main concepts. Negotiate with the paramilitaries and militarily beat the guerrillas. President Uribe accomplished, like no other president before, the promise of do all it was possible to beat the guerrillas, all with American support. This way, he created new brigades, battalions, more than six hundred squads of soldiers and other military forces. He also strengthened the American military workers in the Colombian territory- circa two thousand men. Uribe increased the country’s defense, above 5 % of the gross domestic product and kept an assistance about six million dollars from the USA (CEARÁ 2009).

The direct confrontation with the guerrilla occurred first with the reaction to their attacks, with fast determined counter-attacks. Thus, the cost increased and the removal movements became painful. The release of the Bishop Zapaquirá, kidnapped by the FARCs, was the first surprise due to this new tactical attitude from the army. There are more notable cases: the Commune 13 from Medellín, the Liberty Plan in the Cundinamarca department and the Plan Patriot. The two firsts had brought good results to the government, like the regain of the territory and the loss of important positions by the guerrillas (VALENCIA, 2005). But at the time the core of the guerrillas hadn’t been reached. Their command structures were untouched and some hidden areas were not reached yet.

American intervention

Since 1970, with President Nixon in charge, the USA included in the National Security Doctrine the fight against the production and commercialization of drugs. A fact that in the future would have major implications in the relations with Colombia. In the Reagan years (1981-1989) the drug battle was subordinated to the policy of the foreign politics, it was a question of national security. The next years when George Bush (1989-1992) was president, his administration took back the expression “drug

war” mobilizing the Defense Department in the fight against drug trafficking. The Colombian situation became international when the following American President, Bill Clinton (1993-2001) took office, especially considering the Plan Colombia supported and financed by the USA (SANTOS, 2010).

In the Clinton’s administration there were moments of tension, especially considering the escape of one of the most wanted drug trafficker by the authorities in Colombia and the United States, Pablo Escobar. This period was remembered for the amount of murders of important public figures from Colombia. The accusation that the Samper’s campaign was financed by the trafficking money deteriorated the diplomatic relations between Colombia and the United States, the USA classified the country as a “narcotic-democracy”. (VILLA, OSTOS, 2005).

The Colombian armed forces passed through a transformation in the way of acting and had a modernization in the weaponry in addition to the American military and intelligence support. The public force adopted later a strategy that consisted in killing the main leaders from the FARC’s to fragment the groups in order to destabilize their fronts (VALENCIA, 2005).

One of the reasons USA joined the fight against the FARC’s was because of their major problem with drug trafficking, more than fifty thousand people die every year in the USA due to drug trafficking. According to Valencia (2005) 80% of the cocaine and 50% of the heroin that enters the country come from the Andean region. With the Plan Colombia the USA, as said above, changed the goal to “eliminate” the guerillas and multiplied their resources in the involvement of the conflict.

After the 9/11 the Colombian government gathered with the American doctrine from president Georg W. Bush against terrorism, classified the FARC’s as a terrorist group and searched for international support to solve the problem claiming this was a war against terror worldwide (CEARÁ, 2009)

The Council on Foreign Relations, an influent center of American thought created an independent commission that in 2003 went to Colombia and published a report about the situation, advising a change in the USA politics. To this commission, Colombia is a key-country of the crisis in the Andean region. The report argued that the area was going to collapse, the democracy was in danger and a huge change in the North American politics was necessary. In four years the amount of the staff in the Bogota Embassy increased from four hundred to two thousand (VALENCIA, 2005). The American help included helicopters and guided bombs to fight the terrorism in the country that was in its peak from 2000 until 2007, turning Colombia into the number one country in Western world to receive assistance from the USA according to the legal advisor for Regional Security Politics in Washington’s cabinet in South America at the time, Adam Isacson.

The second stage in Plan Colombia emerged in 2003, known as the Patriot Plan and more focused on the antidrug strategy. With this operation it was possible to regain territories, this time the military strategy used air force and took the soldiers to the rural territories dominated by the FARC’s. Their mission was to reach the most important leaders of the guerilla, forcing their members to leave the fortress in south and east Colombia, establishing the civilian control in those territories (CEARÁ 2009).

This military action involved more than eighteen thousand soldiers, supported and trained by the South Command of the American Armed Forces. Regarding the drug fight, the Colombian government indicated a decrease of 46.4% in the illegal growing between 1999 and 2005 however there was no impact in the cocaine flux to the USA. During 2005, almost at the end of Plan Colombia, the Bush administration guaranteed the economic and military intervention maintenance in Colombia (SANTOS, 2009).

After Barack Obama was elected President of the United States and the democrats got in charge, the Colombian government was worried with the financial help coming from the country that support the military policies and offend the human rights (CEARÁ 2009).

The Last Years

Since 2012, some representatives of the FARCs and of the government from Juan Manuel Santos officially started the peace dialog in Cuba. Since the presidential election, Juan Manuel Santos continued the politics that Uribe started and the military efforts kept to press down the enemy. The president dialogued peacefully with the group in 2012 and an agenda was created to achieve an agreement and end the war. The agenda included the agrarian development, the FARCs participation in the politics, a solution to the drug problem, an end to the conflict and compensation to the damage of the victim's families (GRISALES 2013).

Differently from previous President Uribe, President Santos talks openly about the armed conflict, the president negotiate peace with the group, turning it the central peace of his reelection campaign. After reaching agreements in Havana they started discussing the problem of illicit drugs, the agreement covers the eradication and substitution of coca as well as public health and drug consumption. The first point discussed was the land reform and guarantees for the left political parties. The nature of the Havana conversations stands in contrast to the deals in the 2000s with the paramilitary groups (OTIS, 2014).

Rodrigo Granda, the FARC negotiator, said if the international community saw the group as a drug trafficking organization, there would be no peace talk possible. He claims that the FARCs are an organization with political proposals considering to Otis (2004).

The FARCs signed the official peace agreement in November of 2016, the international impact was so big that Juan Manuel Santos received the Nobel Peace Prize that year (MARIUM, 2017).

The FARC agreed to end any relation that possibly have to do with drug trafficking, this vague statement represents something huge, this was the first time the group admitted the involvement in trafficking of drugs (OTIS, 2004).

There is a political nature of the violence in Columbia, the guerillas and the paramilitaries didn't accept the State as mediator of the opposite interests in the society. The armed groups expressed their conception and exercise of power, they have an idea of what should be the State (GRISALES 2013). Therefore, the violence is due to absence of State than to the omnipresence, the last decade the Uribe government secured the state presence.

Unfortunately, it's likely that some members of the FARC become drug dealers in Colombia even with the end of the group if we consider the historical situation in the country and the amount of armed groups in the last years. Because of the structure of the group, their organization and the commands it could give away to separation and criminalization. The FARC is divided in seven blocs, each one with sixty seven fighting fronts but the Colombian military intelligence agents declared that only fifteen of the fronts were following the orders of the secretariat (OTIS, 2004).

Conclusion

Many are the reasons that complicated the Colombian attempts to fight the FARCs, since the group emerged the government tried to combat it. At the beginning, there was no real attention from the ones in charge since the group was not yet as strong and violent as it became later. In the Pastrana mandate for example the critique is around the negotiations that did not foresee a cease of hostilities and let the FARCs increase their military power at the same time the peace terms were discussed. The lack of state presence and strategy made it more difficult to end the conflict besides the fact that the State had conditions to defeat the guerilla at that moment. The conflict took a long time to have an end due to a combination of failures from the government and due to the power and influence of the group in the country. The FARCs started to lose their power in 2012, the Colombian government and the *Fuerzas*

Armadas Revolucionárias de Colombia signed a peace agreement in the city of Cartagena. The conflict lasted more than half a century leading more than two hundred thousand people to death. To be fair, the right way to end the war is the political negotiation and inclusion, even with all the political agreements involved the peace only will reach Colombia when the deep causes of the conflict are completely solved.

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