

Forty Years of Insurgency: Colombia's Main Opposition Groups

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FOR more than forty years, the government of Colombia has had to contend with an insurgency waged by multiple groups that represent a mosaic of conflicting ideologies, methods, and capabilities. This article will examine the three main insurgent groups currently active in Colombia. These are the left-wing *Fuezas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia Ejército del Pueblo* (FARC-EP) and *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), and the right-wing *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia or AUC). The now defunct "The 19th of April Movement," or M-19 as it is better known, will also be discussed on account of its historical importance.

Although each group is distinct and both the FARC and ELN oppose the AUC, they have some universal trends that are true to varying degrees. All three are considered terrorist organizations by the United States and the European Union, use the illegal drug trade as a funding mechanism, and have employed child soldiers.¹ They can be considered as relatively decentralized organizations that possess a unifying purpose and mission. Therefore, the local roles, missions, and alliances of a particular group may vary, but the central beliefs and purposes of each individual group remain the same. Recruits in these groups often are second and third generation and may serve for ideological reasons or they may be press-ganged. However, since the annual income of an average insurgent is many times greater than that of the average rural Colombian, the financial rewards are a powerful motivator.

The following article will provide a brief description of each group. It will highlight that group's particular history and political leanings, as well as their relative size and capabilities. By having a little knowledge of these groups, the reader will be better able to understand the present operational environment in Colombia.

FARC-EP: *Fuezas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia Ejército del Pueblo* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia of the People)

The most important insurgent group in Colombia, which also represents the greatest threat to the government, is the FARC. According to *Jane's International*, it is the best-equipped, trained, and organized insurgent group in Latin America.² Its arsenal includes heavy machineguns and, reportedly, man-portable surface-to-air missiles (MANPADS). The FARC is potentially the world's richest and best-funded insurgent group with a yearly income of more than one billion U.S. dollars. Given this level of funding, the group has the capability to support a force several times its current size of 14,000–17,000 members who are organized into groups called "Fronts."³ The founder and leader of the FARC is Pedro Marín. However, he is better known by his *nom de guerre*, Manuel Marulanda, or his nickname, *Tirofijo*, meaning "Sureshot," a reference to his marksmanship.

The FARC traces its roots to *La Violencia*, the 1948–1966 Colombian civil war between the Conservatives and the Liberals that claimed from 100,000 to 250,000 lives.⁴ Marín was the leader of a radical Liberal insurgent group in *La Violencia* that later adopted a communist ideology. In 1964,



FARC flag



On 7 November 1998, Colombian President Andrés Pastrana Arango granted the FARC a 42,000 square kilometer demilitarized safe area, known derisively as "FARClandia." Here Pastrana and the FARC founder and leader, Pedro Antonio Marín, engage in unfruitful peace negotiations.

American Hostages in Colombia

THREE U.S. citizens have been held captive by the FARC since 13 February 2003. The contractors were taken when the engine of their Cessna Caravan 208B died during a counter-drug mission in south-eastern Colombia. Unfortunately, the crash site was near a FARC unit. The guerrillas took them captive before rescue teams arrived. Four of the five aboard the Cessna, Marc Gonsalves, Thomas Howes, Tom Janis, and Keith Stansell were Americans, and one, Luís Alcides Cruz, was a Sergeant in the Colombian Army.¹ Janis, the pilot, and Cruz were immediately executed. The other three Americans were captured and taken hostage. They remain in FARC custody today, four years later.

Although the threat of kidnapping is a clear danger to American personnel, it applies equally to other foreigners and Colombians. Primarily the FARC, and to a lesser degree the ELN, use kidnapping as a way to fund operations through ransom money, or to gain a valuable strategic advantage. This is particularly true for members of the Colombian government, military or police forces. They are held by the FARC and used as bargaining chips during peace negotiations, or to foster a prisoner exchange. For instance, on 25 March, 2006,

the FARC released two policemen that had been held since November 2005, to demonstrate goodwill and “sweeten the pot” for an exchange of captured FARC guerrillas.² In total, the FARC holds some 60 “political” prisoners hostage, including former Presidential-candidate Ingrid Betancourt, according to various press reports.³ The FARC also holds an untold number of civilians—possibly over a thousand—for ransom or extortion money. The extent of the problem is considerable. Colombia has the highest rate of kidnapping in the world, and the vast majority of these go unreported. In 2003 alone, *Jane’s* reported that an estimated 673 victims provided the FARC with more than \$91 million in ransom money.⁴



Leaflets such as this, publicize the plight of the three Americans in FARC custody. The leaflets offer a reward in return for information that might help authorities secure a release for the captives.

- 1 John McQuaid, “Special Report: Fatal Mission,” *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 9 November 2003.
- 2 International Committee of the Red Cross, “Colombia: two police officers released,” 25 March 2006, <http://www.icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/colombia-news-250306!OpenDocument>.
- 3 The *Economist*: Economist Intelligence Unit, “Country Report: Colombia: “The political scene: Efforts commence to engage the FARC,” 3 October, 2006, <http://www.eiu.com>; BBC News, “Colombia to vote on hostage swap,” 27 January, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4654440.stm>.
- 4 Jane’s Information Group, “Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC),” 16 December 2005, <http://www.janes.com>.



The FARC holds prisoners in compounds such as this one. To complicate rescue attempts, the FARC periodically rotates groups to new locations.



This mural, in the Colombian National Military Headquarters, brings attention to military and police captives remaining in FARC custody. Some hostages have been imprisoned for five years or more.

the Colombian Army attacked the “independent republic” at Marguetalia. Marín escaped and joined with local Communist-inspired groups to form the FARC as the armed wing of the Communist Party of Colombia.⁵ At the time, its numbers could be measured in the dozens. Not until the early 1970s could the group deploy more than fifty fighters. It is now an extremely capable insurgent force with elements of combatants—including rapid reaction forces and “tax collectors.”

The group relies on a three-tiered funding mechanism. The most important tier is involvement in the drug trade, which includes trafficking as well as “taxing” production. Tier two is nearly as lucrative as the drug trade, and involves extorting businesses or “taxing” landowners.⁶ For example, in 2000, the FARC’s decree of Law 002, announced that the group expected those worth over \$1 million to pay “taxes.”⁷ If not, they risked the threat of kidnapping for ransom, the third tier in the FARC’s way of obtaining revenue. To date, the group holds dozens of captives, including three Americans.⁸

The FARC uses intimidation to prevent the local population from betraying it to the Colombian government. This intimidation can range from veiled threats to outright assassinations or “disappearings,” in which the victim is never seen nor heard from again. The FARC has also received outside training assistance—most notably from the Irish Republican Army (IRA)—and is well versed in the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs).⁹ The most notorious IED in Colombia, the “bunker buster,” in IRA parlance, or the “barbecue bomb,” is a propane cylinder turned into an exploding projectile. The FARC use it extensively. The weapon is extremely difficult to aim and its use often results in considerable collateral damage, such as on 2 May 2002, where a barbecue bomb aimed at an AUC target instead hit a church, killing 117 people.¹⁰ Such use has led to appeals from groups like Human Rights Watch to end the use of indiscriminate weapons.¹¹

In 1982, the FARC added EP to its name to symbolize that it was an organization of the people.¹² In 1985, it started on a political path and formed its own political party, the Patriotic Union (UP).¹³ However, over the course of the next several years, hundreds of UP members were murdered, and the group fell back on continued guerrilla action. The group has entered into periodic peace talks with the government, although they appear to be used on the part of the FARC to rest and reorganize. In late 1998, the Pastrana administration ceded to the FARC a demilitarized area the size of Switzerland, known unofficially as “FARClandia,” and officially as the *Zona de Despeje* (the “open land”). However the FARC’s continued operations led President Andrés Pastrana to order Colombian forces to retake the demilitarized zone. President Alvaro Uribe Vélez has been even less willing than Pastrana to negotiate with the FARC. As with all the other insurgent groups, he has demanded that the FARC disarm before starting negotiations.

ELN: *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Army)



ELN flag

Like the FARC, the ELN is a Marxist-inspired group that formed in the mid-1960s. It is second in size and importance to the FARC, but is an important political force. The group was formed in 1964, in the Santander region of northern Colombia. It drew its inspiration from Marxist and Maoist ideas, although some of the ELN’s early recruits were trained in Cuba and brought with them much inspiration from the Cuban Revolution. The ELN also has a heavy influence from Roman Catholicism, and four of its early and influential members had previously been Catholic priests.¹⁴ The ELN is considerably anti-imperialist and resents outside influences on Colombia. The group has been nothing but resilient. In the 1970s, it twice survived near total annihilation.

The ELN has historically dominated areas that Colombia’s petroleum pipelines traverse. Given its aversion to outside influences on Colombia, it targets foreign oil companies and receives a substantial amount of its funding through extortion.¹⁵ In part due to moral aversion on the part of its Catholic roots, the ELN’s involvement in the drug trade is considered minor to that of the FARC. However, a third method of financing its operations comes through kidnapping and subsequent ransom. The ELN’s most famous kidnapping occurred in 1999. Upset that the Pastrana Presidency was not giving the ELN the same attention as that shown to the FARC in negotiated talks, the group dramatically ramped up its actions to force the Colombian government to take notice. The group hijacked a Fokker 50 flight in mid-air and forced it to land in ELN-controlled territory. Following this, the ELN seized an entire church congregation in Cali, and



From 1986 until 2006, this one pipeline in northern Colombia suffered nearly 1,050 attacks. These attacks can produce environmental disasters and also result in the loss of millions of dollars in lost production and fuel.

later captured a fishing boat off Barranquilla.

Estimates place the current size of the ELN at about 3,000-4,000 members.¹⁶ Given its relative size in comparison to the FARC and the AUC, the ELN has resorted to force multipliers. It is the group most noted for the use of landmines. Although the FARC and the ELN have been known to clash, in 2003, the groups announced an alliance.¹⁷ They have worked in conjunction even to the point of participating in attacks together. This has been particularly true in areas where the AUC has put pressure on both groups. Since 2002, the ELN has had several rounds of discussions with the Colombian government. However, to date, they have not been successful.

AUC: Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia)



AUC symbol

Although officially disarmed, the AUC is the main right-wing insurgent group in Colombia.¹⁸ The AUC's stated purpose is to provide regional protection from Marxist insurgents. However, the U.S. Department of State reports that Carlos Castaño, the founder and head of the AUC until rival factions murdered him in April 2004, said that 70 percent of the AUC's activities were funded through the illegal drug trade.¹⁹ Like the FARC and ELN, it has been declared a terrorist group by both the United States and the European Union. Under the terms of *Plan Colombia* and its military adjunct, *Plan Patriota*, the AUC declared that the government was putting enough pressure on the FARC and ELN that its presence was no longer needed. The AUC agreed to disband by April 2006. However, several AUC groups are still active and, given the availability of weapons in Colombia, it is likely that independent factions in the group can undertake paramilitary actions at will.

The AUC was officially formed in April 1997, but it trac-

es its roots to the self-defense militias that have long been present in Colombia. Many right-wing militias sprang up among rural landowners because they did not think that the Colombian government was doing enough to ensure their safety. There was an economic aspect as well, as the FARC and ELN were "taxing" landowners, forcing them to turn over a portion of their income or assets. The AUC was set up as an umbrella organization that could coordinate these numerous but far-flung right-wing militias, and serve as a regional counter-insurgency force. In essence, it served as an adjunct to the military.

However, several of the AUC members brought into the fold had a checkered past. For instance, the Castaño brothers had been members of *Muerte a Secuestradores* (MAS) [Death to Kidnappers] and later *Perseguidos por Pablo Escobar* (Victims of Pablo Escobar), known as "Los Pepes."²⁰ MAS was formed by narco-traffickers in the mid-1980s for the sole purpose of hunting down and killing M-19 members. *Los Pepes* was formed in the early 1990s by narco-traffickers to hunt down narco-trafficker Pablo Escobar and his associates.²¹

The Castaño brothers brought to the AUC this experience in narco-trafficking. Like the left-wing groups that it sought to oppose, the AUC also looked to the drug trade for funding. Additional funding was obtained through donations. The AUC served to pacify areas from FARC and ELN control, and used as its methodology intimidation, assassination, and outright combat. Often, the AUC's methods were brutal and the group has been accused of serious human rights abuses.²² When the Colombian military became sensitive to human rights issues, its tacit association with the AUC ended.

Under *Plan Colombia*, Bogotá sought to put an end to the insurgency within six years. The government of Colombia increased pressure on the insurgents and raised the level of government security forces in affected regions. The AUC saw that the process was working, thereby negating the need for it to exist. The AUC officially finished the disbandment process in 18 April 2006.²³ By this time, a total of 30,150 AUC members had demobilized, and in the process, had turned in some 17,000 weapons.²⁴ However, several of the groups that are under the AUC's umbrella have yet to demobilize.

M-19: *Movimiento 19 de Abril* (Movement of 19 April)

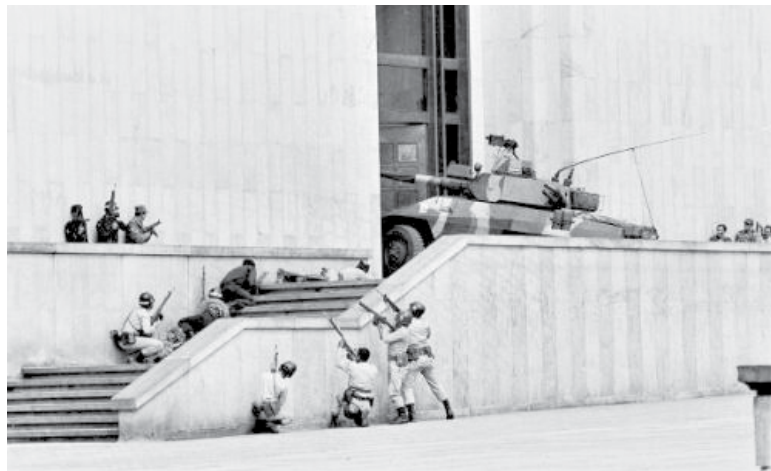
Although the M-19 is now a defunct group, its historical actions and importance merit inclusion in this narrative. The M-19 was also a leftist group, but contrasting with the FARC and ELN, was composed of urban intellectuals from the upper classes. The M-19 traces its beginnings to, and is named for, what the group alleged were the fraudulent presidential elections of 19 April 1970, where former dictator Gustavo Rojas Pinilla was



M-19 flag



Carlos Castaño, the founder and leader of the AUC, was killed in April 2004.



On 6 November 1985, the M-19 seized the Palace of Justice in Bogotá. Here a Colombian Army Cavalry Regiment EE-9 Cascavel armored car breached and entered the building while firing its 90mm main gun.

denied victory. The group is most well known for its characteristic bold exploits. In 1974, the group stole one of the swords of Simón Bolívar as a symbol, pledging only to return it once Bolívar's ideals were accomplished.²⁵ In 1979, the group transformed itself into a serious threat by digging a 246-foot tunnel, whereby it gained access to an army warehouse and stole several thousand weapons.²⁶ On 27 February 1980, the M-19 engineered the takeover of the Embassy of the Dominican Republic. The group captured fourteen ambassadors—including the American ambassador—and others. In exchange for a sum of money and transportation to Cuba, the final hostages were released on 27 April 1980.

By the mid 1980s, the M-19 would be the Colombia's second largest insurgent group behind the FARC, but was short of funds. The group tapped into the drug trade by kidnapping the family members of prominent narco-traffickers, who, in retaliation, formed MAS. With police and army help, MAS tracked down M-19 members, then tortured and killed them, reducing the M-19 membership by half.²⁷

The M-19's most audacious action took place on 6 November 1985, when thirty-five insurgents stormed the Palace of Justice in Bogotá. They took some 300 lawyers, judges and Supreme Court justices hostage. The Army attacked, and in addition to the kidnappers, eleven Supreme Court justices and ninety civilians lost their lives. This was M-19's last major action. By the end of the decade, the M-19 had turned in its weapons and renounced armed struggle. The group returned Bolívar's sword and transformed itself into a political party. The party existed through the 1990s—sometimes achieving a significant percentage of the vote—but merged with another party in 2003.

As can be seen, Colombia has had its share of insurgent groups. Those represented above are only the major groups. These groups have perpetuated the country's violence and are responsible for much of the illegal drug trade. Hopefully, the direction taken by the M-19 and the AUC—disarming—will be adopted by the left-wing groups. Only then will Colombia have the chance to end the insurgency that is now headed into its fifth decade. ♠

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