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Andrés Gaudín

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Disarmed Colombian Rebels Enter Politics, Keep 'FARC' in Party Name

by *Andrés Gaudín*

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After spending 53 years participating in Latin America's most devastating and bloody domestic war, and two months after turning over its last weapons to a UN mission, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) ended its guerrilla war in order to form a political party. It has been active in Colombia's legal political system since Sept. 1 ([NotiSur, April 28, 2017](#), and [Aug. 4, 2017](#)).

"The FARC's political party could be a step towards an opening up of Colombia's political system," Marc Chernick, director of the Center for Latin American Studies and professor of conflict resolution and human rights at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, said just before the party's founding congress. Chernick, who also teaches at the University of Los Andes in Bogota, continued, "I think they will seek to consolidate a leftist party that isn't necessarily Marxist, considering they are not the only actors in a very fragmented left."

Agreements made at the congress proved Chernick correct. Despite the many positive signals given by the old guerrilla movement in its transition to legality, the greater part of the establishment ignored the new party born as the Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común (Alternative Revolutionary Force of the Common), a name that, by preserving the old acronym (FARC), is a sign that the former rebels are willing to assume responsibility for their political past.

Analysts say that this wasn't the best option in terms of winning elections. While the leaders and main figures of all political parties were invited to participate in the opening of the congress, held during the last five days of August, none attended, not even Humberto de la Calle, former head of the official peace negotiations mission during the four-year dialogue held in Cuba.

The only notable figure present in the opening ceremonies and who briefly addressed the 1,200 delegates was former President Ernesto Samper (1994-1998). Speaking as a private citizen, he said, "I suppose, and I support, that the new party plans to lead a progressive bloc for peace."

When the constitutional congress of the "party of the FARC" opened, the organization's secretariat asked the delegates to look to the future, and when voting on each of the proposals, debate without basing their ideas on a longing for the past. "We have to be aware of the extent to which we must address the nation without dogma or sectarianism," it advised.

Perhaps because of that, an analyst at Bogota-based *Semana* magazine reasoned, the logo the party adopted has a red rose, a symbol of the Socialist International, which is, at least in Europe, synonymous with social democracy. Nevertheless, when the time came to choose a name, the delegates imposed a reference to the past. The vote for the party to use the same acronym that identified the guerrilla forces for more than half a century was decided on a 628-264 vote, with 300 abstentions.

Some say the decision revealed a sense of nostalgia. But those who argued in favor of the name said it marks the validity of revolutionary dreams and shows the unwavering loyalty to those who died

in the war. "The guerrilla base, and now those in the party, sought to make it clear that abandoning arms is not the same as abandoning ideology and to reaffirm group identity and internal cohesion," Semana said. The magazine added that if its name is taken in the abstract, the party's program "is broader and distances itself from the classic postulates of parties with Marxist roots."

Platform more reformist than socialist

In fact, the opening platform tends to be more reformist than socialist. It refers to a mixed economy, does not question private property, and focuses on stimulating the territories (especially on environmental issues) and on the social demands of the poorest sectors. As for the political program for this period, they emphasize the peace agreement and the need to generate unity to defend it in next year's legislative and presidential elections, to be held on March 11 and May 27, respectively.

In his closing speech to the congress, Rodrigo Londoño—the legal name of the top FARC leader who fought under the name of Timochenko between November 2011 and the formation of the political party—spoke about every citizen's need to have access to education, good health care, a home, and dignified work. He also spoke about women's right to the same opportunities that privileged men have received historically, about respect for gender diversity, the importance of child care, and the need to generate more opportunities.

Asked his opinion, Gustavo Petro, presidential candidate for the Progresistas movement, gave a lapidary response. "Those are simple generalities we all subscribe to," he said.

Since Nov. 24, 2016 when a definitive peace accord between the government of President Juan Manuel Santos and the FARC was signed, the guerrilla organization has given many signs of its decision to move toward a new form of political action within the canons of Western-style democracy. Beyond the fact that the first peace accord signed last October was rejected by a plebiscite marked by low voter turnout and following an untruthful campaign driven by Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), the ultra-right former president ([NotiSur, Oct. 21, 2016](#)), the insurgent past seems to work against the new party. The FARC's last moves when still a guerrilla force did not sensitize a society that receives well-intentioned, objective news drop by drop. According to Gallup polls, their image is slightly higher (12%) than the old parties, but with a significant level of rejection (86%).

In the days leading up to the public presentation of the party, the FARC took steps that Colombians did not properly value. On Aug. 6, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) announced that 4,500 former combatants, mostly peasants who had benefitted from the FARC's literacy campaigns, had enrolled in educational plans that would guarantee them a higher degree of training.

"This is a key decision for us because the presence of former guerrillas helps build trust with the rest of the population in remote areas far away from the major urban area," said Christian Visnes, director of the NRC in Colombia. "About 4,000 people live near our education centers." The Norwegian governmental agency was already carrying out educational endeavors in conjunction with Colombia's Universidad Nacional Abierta y a Distancia (UNAD), but now it is settling in areas where conflict was strong and "where the state has not arrived to provide security guarantees and establish the control that the guerrilla forces once had," Visnes explained.

Former rebels to clean minefields

Days later, on Aug. 11, it was learned that about 1,000 former guerrilla fighters will join the Humanicemos DH (Desminado Humanitario) program to clean up fields planted with mines in

20 municipalities. For this task—which due to the serious risks involved has few volunteers—the first 436 already-selected former combatants will receive an Organization of American States (OAS) training certificate. Humanicemos DH is one of the projects created and managed by the FARC to facilitate its integration into civil society, joining Nueva Colombia Noticias (NC Noticias) and Economías Sociales del Común (Social Economy of the Common, ECOMUN). NC Noticias is a new journalistic program broadcast Sundays on YouTube. It received a baptism by fire on Feb. 20 when it transmitted an interview with President Santos from a guerrilla encampment in the southern department of Putumayo. ECOMUN is the first legitimate FARC business created after disarmament. It is a cooperative though which they plan to channel support to all the productive projects established from now on. Its first 37 members were trained in courses taught by the Labor Ministry's Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (National Learning Service).

Beyond its integration projects, reality continues to show the high level of rejection shown in the Gallup poll. On Sept. 1, Colombian journalist Sinar Alvarado wrote in The New York Times' Spanish-language web edition that the fundamental challenge now is to create conditions for political coexistence.

"The establishment will have to show tolerance toward the FARC and its new party and also toward whatever other initiative that points to the renovation of a leadership dominated by secular castes" and corrupted by so-called narco-politics, he wrote.

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