



Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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Study Acceptance Date: June 2024
Study Sequence No. 7

Colombia 1964–2016

Executive Summary

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) is a guerrilla organization born in 1964 from an ongoing internal conflict known as La Violencia (the violence), which originated from economic grievances in the 1920s. Initially, armed peasants demanded better social and economic conditions for farm workers. These ideological roots were influenced by communist currents, first from Russia and, after 1960, Cuba, leading the FARC to adopt Marxist-Leninist rhetoric.¹ With the fall of the Soviet Union, the FARC lost its external financial support and needed new funding sources. Taking advantage of the height of drug trafficking in 1980s Colombia, the organization entered the drug business as a source of financing.² It also carried out kidnappings and extortions, transforming gradually from an insurgency to a criminal group and a terrorist organization sanctioned by the international community.³

The FARC's criminal activities and income from narcotics undermined the Colombian government through corruption, assassination, and intimidation and allowed the FARC to achieve significant military capacity in the late 1990s. By 2002, the FARC had approximately 21,000 combatants, excluding urban militias.⁴ The combatants developed the capacity to attack military bases, population centers, and critical infrastructure. During the administration of President Álvaro Uribe (2002–10), however, the government regained the initiative and weakened the FARC. By the time Colombia's 2016 Peace Accord was signed in 2016, approximately 11,000 combatants and 57 leaders had been neutralized by Colombian military forces.⁵ After their demobilization in the peace process, the military wing of the FARC officially ceased to exist, and the organization entered Colombian politics. Some armed dissidents broke away from the main organization, however, and continued as a transnational criminal organization, operating from bases inside Venezuela.

Assessing the Five Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

Yes. Since declaring its independence from the Spanish crown, Colombia has integrated as a nation, and maintained its sovereignty.⁶ Despite several civil wars and internal conflicts—and having broad ethnic diversity—Colombia has established a national identity characterized by common interests, histories, cultures, principles, values, and beliefs.⁷

2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

Yes. Colombia is one of the most stable democracies on the continent. In its political history, there has been no government overthrows and no dictatorships.⁸ The electoral processes, political institutions, and the separation of powers are clearly defined.⁹ Despite the ideological differences and shortcomings of the various governments in power, citizens continue to trust in the legitimacy of the elected government.

3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country’s overall population?

No → Yes. During the conflict with the FARC, the secure segment of the population fluctuated but reached more than 85 percent due primarily to the dramatic demographic shift from a rural population to an urban one. In the 1920s, more than 80 percent of Colombia’s population was rural, making it difficult, if not impossible, to secure 85 percent of the population from contact with insurgents. By 1993, that figure had dropped to 30 percent, and, by 2005, it had dropped to 28 percent.¹⁰ The growing urban population made security control easier. As a result of urbanization, improved roads in the rural areas, and better distribution of rural security forces, at the beginning of the 2016 peace talks, the 85 percent minimum percentage had been achieved.

4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

No → Yes. In the early years of the FARC, it did not have external cross-border sanctuary to a militarily significant degree. During the last two decades of the conflict, however, FARC insurgents established camps and bases of operations in Ecuador and Venezuela within marching distance of the international borders.¹¹ A large part of the FARC leadership also took refuge in these countries. Some of them were neutralized in neighboring territories, such as the case of Raul Reyes, who was killed in his camp in Ecuador, and Rodrigo Granda, who was captured in Caracas.¹² Initially a small factor in the conflict, these sanctuaries had grown by 2024 into permanent bases where FARC dissidents regrouped and operated large, organized crime syndicates.

5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

Yes. The existence of the Colombian army dates to the colonial era and the war of independence. With the defining battle of independence on the Boyacá Bridge, the birth of the Colombian army became official on August 7, 1819.¹³

Outcome

This case study supports the Five Factor model. It is an outlier because toward the end of the conflict, the guerillas had external sanctuary in neighboring Venezuela and Ecuador. The Colombian army could and did carry out offensive operations against the guerillas in both countries, however, so it is a valid question whether these were actually *sanctuary*. The government won and led the FARC to demobilize and sign the 2016 peace treaty. The political decisions during the negotiations, the results of the peace agreements, and the complexity of the post-conflict infrastructure are not relevant to the assessment. The permanent bases now in Venezuela and the return to arms of splinter groups of FARC dissidents suggest the conflict is not over. The extent to which the FARC is a legitimate political movement and not an organized criminal gang is questionable.

| COLOMBIA 1964–2016 | | |
|--------------------------|------|-----|
| NATIONAL IDENTITY | YES | |
| GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY | YES | |
| POPULATION SECURITY | NO → | YES |
| EXTERNAL SANCTUARY | NO → | YES |
| EXISTING SECURITY FORCES | YES | |

Endnotes

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<https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/Research-Commentary/Study-of-Internal-Conflict/SOIC-Conflict-Studies/>

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