Greed or Grievance –

Why does the FARC keeps fighting?

Katharina Röhl

Introduction

This paper analysis the driving forces behind the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in their continuing fight in an ever more violent armed conflict that has now lasted over four decades.

Different methods of approaching the question of why the FARC engages in Colombia’s civil conflict yield very different diagnoses of its root causes which might lead to radically different, or even mutually exclusive, policy implications. Economic analyses stress the rational, or even profit-maximising, behaviour of rebels, and conclude that the benefits of violence largely outweigh its costs. Historical approaches focus on the long-run developments that have led up to the outbreak of violence. They tend to be more inflexible in separating a conflict’s causes from the subsequent internal dynamics of action and reaction under a system of violence. Systemic approaches point to the social, political and economic ‘contradictions’ in the social structure, which inevitably polarise society to such an extent that the resulting tension can only be resolved in a violent clash between antagonistic forces.

This paper seeks to link the contributions of these different approaches to an explanation of the FARC’s extraordinary endurance and success.

The Colombian Civil Conflict

Politically motivated and drug-related systematic violence in Colombia has killed at least 35,000 people and forced millions to flee their homes in the past decade alone. 1 Colombia is thus the country with the highest homicide rate and the third largest number of internally displaced persons in the world. In 2001 alone, more than 3,000 persons were kidnapped. 2

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1 BBC http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/1738963.stm
According to Amnesty International, the vast majority of ‘disappearances’ and killings of civilians are the responsibility of the paramilitaries, ‘operating in collusion with the security forces’. But Amnesty also documents numerous atrocities committed by the FARC and by Colombia’s other remaining left-wing rebel organisation ELN, such as the political killings of mayors, judges, local councillors and officials whom the rebels accuse of collaborating with their opponents, as well as numerous disproportionate and indiscriminate attacks on civilians. Basically, the armed groups in the conflict are fighting for the control of territory to protect and promote the interests of those they claim to represent and who sponsor their rebel activities.

Colombia’s history has been remarkably violent; it is thus difficult to pinpoint the exact origin of the current civil conflict. After a decade of an internal conflict known as La Violencia, a 1958 CIA report concluded that ‘the country, due to its absence of State authority in rural areas, inequitable land distribution, and widespread lawlessness and poverty, risked genocide or chaos.’ Colombia has a highly stratified society, separating the traditionally rich families of Spanish descent from the vast majority of poor Colombians, most of whom are of mixed race. With few avenues for social mobility, this has provided a natural constituency for left-wing insurgents.

And indeed, the FARC’s influence has originated and been sustained mainly in Colombia’s countryside, where the State, due to difficult geographic conditions and the hostility of the rural latifundistas (wealthy landowner) class, was never fully able to make its institutions work effectively. The countryside was therefore controlled exclusively by the incredibly wealthy and powerful latifundistas and their private security forces that later became the paramilitaries. Tremendous social inequality and widespread abuses by patrons eventually mobilised small farmers, some of whom organised to form a guerrilla movement that would forcibly redistribute land. Those small Communist peasant groups that emerged in the 1920s in order to represent peasants taking to arms to defend themselves against the abuses by the all-powerful latifundista elite in rural Colombia later constituted the target group of the FARC, which was officially founded in 1964. Initially defending peasants’ interests, the FARC thus became a sophisticated insurgency movement with an ideologically dominated political agenda, declaring its intention to use armed struggle to seize national power.

In 2004, there is no sign of the FARC losing its momentum. On the contrary, despite extensive counterinsurgency, persisting paramilitary presence, and massive US military and financial aid all contributing to stop and destroy it, it has continued to grow and now controls

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3 AI http://web.amnesty.org/web/web.nsf/print/col-summary-eng
4 Sweig, p. 122
5 The scope of this paper does not allow me to go into details of the very heated debate on the intention and nature of strategy of Plan Colombia. The co-operation sought by the Colombian government with the US and some other Western governments as well as international financial institutions is ‘based on a drug-focussed analysis of the roots of the conflict’ (http://www.amnestyusa.org/news/2000/colombia 07072000.html) and is, at
58 per cent of Colombia's municipalities and employs 18,000 combatants. The FARC is thus by far the most successful rebel movement in Latin America (and perhaps in the whole world) in terms of its longevity, achievement and influence. On some accounts, it is also the world’s wealthiest guerrilla movement, with estimates of its annual income ranging from 300 to 700 million dollars, 65 per cent of which comes from ‘taxation’ of the drug trade, and the remainder from robbery, kidnapping, and extortion. Recent terrorist attacks ascribed to the FARC, such as last November’s bomb in a Bogotá bar, give rise to increased concern about the FARC potentially widening its strategy to include urban guerrilla warfare.

How did the FARC manage to grow and become so strong? According to Richani, the Colombian guerrilla groups ‘responded to the failure of the State to mitigate rural conflicts over land, and thus filled the hegemonic vacuum with their power.’ The State’s de facto control over most of its territory outside of the main cities has been so weak that it can even be argued that ‘the whole idea of Colombia as a functioning nation [is] a fiction.’ In several provinces (departamentos), the FARC has been consolidating its local political power and is now exercising de facto control instead of the State, administering local justice, schools, and market relations through their so-called ‘rules of convivencia’. These rules stipulate and enforce norms concerning all aspects of communal life including working hours, hunting and fishing regulations, alcohol consumption, prostitution, domestic violence, drug abuse etc. In some municipalities, such as Norte de Santander, Sur del Bolivar, Putumayo, for example, the guerrilla exercise their power through the election of the municipality councils and mayors and the administration of ‘public funds’. Candidates of Colombia’s two main parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives, may be tolerated as long as they play along with FARC rules. Thus, instead of taking political power through conquering the institutions of the central

least officially, mainly aimed at an eradication of the illicit drug cultivation and trafficking, in the hope that the process will eliminate the economic basis of the FARC. While the Colombian government presents the plan ‘as the means by which the international community can support the peace process between the Colombian government and armed opposition groups’ (http://www.amnestyusa.org/news/2000/columbia 07072000.html), and US strategic experts assert that ‘Plan Colombia is not a military strategy’ (Gabriel Marcella: Plan Colombia: An Interim Assessment, Hemisphere Focus January 2002), NGOs like Amnesty International warn that ‘social development and humanitarian assistance programs included in the Plan cannot disguise its essentially military character’ (http://www.amnestyusa.org/news/2000/columbia 07072000.html), with ‘the vast bulk of [...] money [...] spent on military training and weapons’ (Mike Gonzalez: The poisoned embrace: Plan Colombia and the expansion of imperial power’, International Socialism Journal, Winter 2001).

6 Nazih Richani: Sistemas de Guerra – La economia politica del conflicto en Colombia, 2003, p. 144. All translations from sources originally in Spanish are my own.
7 Sweig, p. 122
8 BBC http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/1746777.stm
11 Richani, p. 143
12 Sweig, p. 125
13 Richani, p. 143. This paragraph draws largely on information provided by Richani on the pages indicated.
State, the FARC apparently decided to deconstruct the influence of the State in villages and municipalities, and to ascend from there.

Until the 1970s, this ‘war of low intensity’ was characterised by the coexistence of guerrilla rule and a minimal presence of the State. The government and the right-wing mafia more or less tacitly acknowledged the status quo, a ‘comfortable military equilibrium […] between the guerrilla groups and the forces of the State.’

However, this coexistence of low State presence, strong landowners’ private defence and guerrilla movements’ local influence, was upset by the drug boom that began in the 1980s, as a result of which all sides stepped up their involvement in the conflict. Due to growing international demand for drugs, the opening of markets and international trade, as well as successful drug eradication programmes in neighbouring Peru and Bolivia that pushed coca cultivation to the north of the continent, Colombia’s illegal drug trade grew steadily, thus enabling the drug cartels to amass huge amounts of money and weapons and to increase their influence. Colombia is now the world’s leading cultivator of the coca leaf, producing 80 per cent of cocaine consumed in the US and in Europe, as well as most of the heroin used on the East Coast of the United States. From this new source of income, a class of nouveaux riches emerged, consisting of the main drug traffickers of the Medellin cartel, with its notorious boss Pablo Escobar possibly having been the richest man in Latin America.

The new narcomafia acquired large territories, which contributed to an aggravation of Colombia’s already huge problem of inequality and extreme poverty of landless peasants. Colombia’s fragile State institutions were further weakened by the ensuing excessive corruption, as drug traffickers bribed judges and police officers or had State officials assassinated if they inquired too deeply into illegal affairs. The Judiciary is now so weak and corrupt that more than 95 per cent of crimes are never prosecuted.

The FARC, though not directly engaging in the drug business, has tolerated and profited enormously from the drug trade, taxing every stage of the trafficking, from the peasants cultivating the plants to the operation of laboratories and the guarding of airstrips in the jungle from which the end products are flown out. With these profits, it could afford to sustain its forces, acquire more sophisticated weaponry, and recruit new combatants. Confrontations between the guerrilla and the drug mafia’s paramilitaries, originally created by wealthy landowners as a rural ‘self-defence force’ (now known as the AUC), became ever more frequent and violent. The paramilitaries habitually tortured civilians to obtain information about ‘subversive activities’ and killed everyone suspected of sympathising with the FARC, while ‘producers, distributors and cultivators of cocaine […] paid routinely for the security

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14 ibid., p. 142
15 Sweig, p. 123
16 David Bushnell: Colombia – Una nacion a pesar de si misma, 1996, p. 357-8
17 Sweig, p. 133
offered to them by the guerrilla organisations.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, Colombia saw its decade-long civil conflict turn into ‘high intensity’ warfare.

In the late 1980s, the FARC briefly flirted with a political route to power by establishing a political party, the Patriotic Union (UP). However, their efforts were shattered and the rebel movement traumatised when some 3,000 sympathetic activists were massacred by government death squads during one particular peace effort in the 1980s.\textsuperscript{19} Several years later, renewed peace talks with the Pastrana government collapsed and negotiations have since been in suspended animation, made less likely still by the newly elected President’s hard-core stance towards the guerrilla.\textsuperscript{20}

**Grievances: The FARC’s View**

Recent interviews conducted with spokesmen of the FARC reveal that the movement still purports to be purely politically motivated. Just as forty years ago, the FARC claims to be ‘an expression of the people’,\textsuperscript{21} a political and military organisation whose aim is the ‘solution of the problems that affect the more than 30 million Colombians who live in poverty’.\textsuperscript{22} Defining themselves as ‘marxistas, comunistas y bolivarianos’\textsuperscript{23} and cherishing Marxist rhetoric, they stress the exploitation of the peasant and working classes by the ‘governing caste’ whose political and economic interests ‘are not the interests of the working people nor of the revolutionaries.’\textsuperscript{24} According to Raul Reyes of the FARC, ‘the essence of the confrontation between the State and the guerilla is class struggle.’\textsuperscript{25} Thus, they view the Colombian conflict as an antagonism between ‘two armed actors: on the one hand the State and its war apparatus, serving those who have everything, and on the other hand the people with their revolutionary army.’\textsuperscript{26}

The ‘people’s grievances’ the FARC purports to protest against and to remedy are both economic and political in nature. Politically, they lament the shambolic state of the Colombian democracy, viewing Colombia’s political regime instead as a dictatorial liberal-conservative conspiracy: ‘There are no channels for the political expression of ideas for change, because any opposition [trade union, student, indigenous and community leaders] to the liberal-

\textsuperscript{18} Bushnell, p. 360
\textsuperscript{19} Sweig, p. 136
\textsuperscript{20} Recently, some of President Uribe’s public Statements were designed to demonstrate a similarly tough position towards the paramilitaries, a small group of whom were shown last November on television to lay down an even smaller number of arms.
\textsuperscript{21} Diana Sofia Giraldo, Ismael Roldan, Miguel Angel Florez (eds.): Periodistas, Guerra y Terrorismo, 2003, p. 76
\textsuperscript{22} ibid., p. 90
\textsuperscript{23} ibid., p. 76
\textsuperscript{24} Cecilia Orozco: Y ahora que? El futuro de la guerra y la paz en Colombia, 2002, p. 92
\textsuperscript{25} ibid., p. 93
\textsuperscript{26} ibid., p. 101
conservative regime continues to be assassinated. [...] Therefore, in Colombia we cannot access political power through legal means. Complaining about the restriction of media freedom since Colombia’s main commercial media outlets are owned by only a handful of large groups who allegedly act in the interest of the ruling class, the FARC operates its own radio station ‘La Voz de la Resistencia’ which is described as ‘another battlefront’. Most importantly, however, FARC spokesmen stress what they see as an ongoing and structurally deeply engrained economic crisis, notably marked by very high unemployment rates, lack of social security, serious deficiencies in the health and education systems, shortage of adequate housing and access to electricity and running water, as well as the absence of affordable bank loans and infrastructure such as roads connecting the cities with the countryside. Underlying the poverty is the lack of land reform which, according to Richani, is ‘the most outstanding source of conflict in Colombia: the fight for land’. Simon Trinidad of the FARC laments that ‘Colombia has more than 1.5 million peasant families without a single square meter of land’. Further, peasants are forced to cultivate illegal produce such as coca and marihuana because that ‘is the only thing the market pays for. They cannot live from the sale of yuca, beans, plantanes or potatoes, because they would die of starvation’. Firmly placed at the core of the FARC’s ideology, social inequality is cited by the guerrillas as Colombia’s main malaise. ‘The incredibly high concentration of wealth in a few hands in this country [...] has impoverished Colombian society as a whole’, says Trinidad. Indeed, the UNDP Human Development Index confirms that ‘over the last [ten] years, [...] we can observe not just a fall of income per head but also a deterioration of the [national] distribution of incomes. The conclusion is obvious: the welfare of the population has worsened.

With this understanding of the historical and current situations in Colombia, what are the objectives that the FARC pursues? Reyes states explicitly that it ‘aspires to govern the country’ and to ‘conquer political power’, in order to construct ‘a new State with a pluralist, patriotic and democratic government [...]’, with the aim of protecting the fundamental rights of

27 Giraldo et.al., p. 80
28 BBC http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/hi/world/americas/country_profiles/1212798.stm
29 According to the Washington Times, the number of underemployed In the countries’ 13 major cities was 33.2 percent in November 2003 (http://www.washtimes.com/upi-breaking/20040126-021309-3826r.htm). However, the labour market has in the last ten years become much more informal (27 per cent have only temporal employment in 2000, as opposed to 17.5 per cent in 1992). Among those who have permanent jobs, 47.5 per cent earn less than the minimum wage (36.3 per cent in 1992). Diez Anos de Desarrollo Humano en Colombia, UNDP, 2003, p. 80
30 Orozco, p. 96
31 Richani, p. 27
32 Giraldo et.al., p. 80
33 ibid., p. 85
34 ibid., p. 80
35 UNDP Report, p. 8
those excluded and marginalised’, a State where ‘real social justice’ would prevail.\textsuperscript{36} In the ‘new Colombia’, the State would be ‘the major owner of strategic resources like oil, natural gas, carbon, gold, diamonds and nickel’.\textsuperscript{37} During three years of peace negotiations with the Pastrana government which collapsed in 2001, the FARC suggested that the government hand out subsidies of one hundred dollars per month to families suffering from unemployment. However, according to Reyes, the government was ‘not at all interested in discussing this particular suggestion.’\textsuperscript{38}

While the FARC pays lip service to the idea of finding a political solution, Reyes does stress that, due to the diametrically opposite interests of the governing elite and the guerrilla, ‘there is no chance of sharing power between the current rulers and the guerrilla.’\textsuperscript{39} In the short run, the FARC’s strategic goals seem to be the control of more territory, as it demands, for example, the demilitarisation of the departmentos of Caqueta and Putumayo as a condition for further peace agreements.

Repeatedly, the guerrillas blame the media to be responsible for incitement to State violence and for gross misrepresentation of ‘the truth’. As Vargas from Colombia’s smaller guerrilla movement ELN states, ‘the media deliberately simplify the Colombian conflict to an extreme where it is being sold as a problem of drug trafficking and violence, in order to conceal the real background’ of the struggle.\textsuperscript{40} Indeed, there seems to be a widespread consensus in the world’s mainstream media that ‘the lucrative returns from drugs and kidnapping now dominate the rebels’ agenda, and have largely replaced ideological motivations.’\textsuperscript{41} Is, then, all of the above just empty rhetoric and propaganda employed for the sake of achieving material gains?

\textbf{Greed: an Economic Analysis}

Recent economic analyses of rebel movements in civil conflicts show a tendency to discharge the rebels’ own account of their ‘noble cause’ in favour of adopting explanations focussed on the material benefits of violence. In particular, Paul Collier’s work on ‘Greed and Grievance’\textsuperscript{42} has been hugely influential since the late 1990s, arguably informing, for example, World Bank policies.\textsuperscript{43} Collier, after having analysed empirical data from a study of

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Orozco, p. 100
\item Giraldo et.al., p. 81
\item Orozco, p. 89
\item ibid., p. 101
\item Giraldo et.al., p. 104
\item BBC http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/hi/world/americas/country_profiles/1212798.stm
\item see, for example, Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, ‘On economic causes of civil war’, Oxford Economic Papers, Vol. 50 (4), pp. 563-573, 1998
\item See also footnote 5 above on international support of Plan Colombia. According to Marcella, ‘the central premise [of the strategic theory behind Plan Colombia] is that drug money feeds the coffers of the guerrillas, whose attacks give rise to self-defense organizations – the paramilitaries. If the narco money goes away, the
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various world-wide civil conflicts from 1965-99, concludes that, contrary to popular belief, rebellions are ‘unrelated to objective circumstances of grievance while being caused by the feasibility of predation’, i.e. the opportunity of rebel movements to generate an income sufficient to sustain their subversive activities by tapping local resources. In other words, for Collier it is greed (coinciding with the availability of means to satisfy this greed), rather than grievances, which ultimately cause these conflicts.

In more detail, Collier found that during the period under examination, ‘the risk of civil war has been systematically related to a few economic conditions, such as dependence upon primary commodity exports and low national income. [...] Conversely, and astonishingly, objective measures of social grievance [...] have had no systematic effect on risk. [...] This is because civil wars occur where rebel organisations are financially viable. [...] Rebellion’, according to Collier, is essentially ‘large-scale predation of productive economic activities. [...] The difference between the failure and success of a rebel movement are to be found ‘not in the “causes” that these [...] rebel organisations claim to espouse, but in their radically different opportunities to raise revenue.’ Colombia is quoted by Collier as a paradigm example of such a rebellion motivated by greed. Massive export of primary commodities such as cocaine (whose profits multiply in virtue of the illegal status of the drug), geographic diversity that complicates an effective State response, and low economic growth as well as widespread unemployment explain why the Colombian guerrilla is financially viable, difficult to crush effectively, and able to recruit new followers, whether through force or monetary incentives.

Both recruitment of combatants and the promotion of an international reputation recognising the rebels as potential insurgents are aided, however, by the guerrilla’s appeal to real or imagined grievances. In Collier’s own words, ‘grievance is to a rebel organisation what image is to a business’, and a sense of grievance, designed to legitimate violence in front of those affected as well as outside observers, is ‘deliberately generated by rebel organisations.’ While he does not deny that grievances play a role in the facilitation of rebel contacts with the local population or external political actors, he infers that, ‘if anything, rebellion seems to be the rage of the rich’ at the expense of the civilian population.

In sum, while ‘popular perceptions see rebellion as a protest motivated by genuine and extreme grievance [...]’, economic analysis sees rebellion as [...] the ultimate manifestation of organised crime.

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44 Collier, p. 134-40
45 ibid., p. 144-5
46 ibid., p. 145
47 ibid., p. 152
48 ibid., p. 144
Greed or Grievance?

For an understanding of the conflict in Colombia and an attempt to explain the FARC’s incentives to continue fighting, how helpful is Collier’s economic analysis in explaining the violence as a means of greedy warring factions for whom grievances are merely the instrument to justify the incitement to and prolongation of a violent civil conflict? Can the FARC’s appeal to popular grievances and its purported concern for a solution be discarded as ‘deliberately generating’ a sense of grievance in the interest of organised crime? Trying to find a synthetic explanation between this extreme viewpoint and the FARC’s depiction of themselves as altruistic martyrs for social justice, Sweig contends that ‘it would be a mistake to regard Colombia’s conflict as only a terrorist or drug problem. Nor should it be considered a classic Marxist insurgency. [...] It is, rather, a mix of all these elements.’49

While Collier’s empirical findings deliver interesting insights into relevant factors (in the Colombian case, for example, the impact of the drug boom) that might fuel or sustain civil wars, his conclusion that it is greed, rather than grievance, that causes rebellions, has been criticised for a number of reasons and must ultimately be rejected.

First, in trying to explain the outbreak and continuation of a conflict, singling out a clear-cut ‘cause’ of the fighting might not be possible – instead, the sociopolitical context, in particular the social location of the groups parties to the conflict prior to the violence must also decisively shape the nature of the civil conflict. Collier states that ‘perceived grievances and the lust for power are found more or less equally in all societies. [...] Groups are capable of perceiving [...] grievances [...] regardless of their objective circumstances, a social phenomenon known as relative deprivation.’50 It would follow as a logical consequence of the supposed ubiquity of feelings of relative deprivation that these cannot be the ultimate trigger or cause of civil wars which, luckily, occur less than everywhere. Given, on Collier’s assumption, the similar omnipresence of people’s lust for power, the one determining factor that separates the occurrence of a rebel movement from all other scenarios where, despite greed and grievance, a rebel movement fails to form, would be ‘the feasibility of predation.’51

However, this logic seems to underestimate the human price to be paid for violence which adversely affects people’s motivation to fight. It also overestimates the degree to which individuals can be manipulated into taking up arms for a cause which they might, in the absence of rebel propaganda, not have supported. Obviously, in the case of Colombia, the FARC formed long before the current ideal conditions for looting export activities of illegal

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49 Sweig, p. 123
50 Collier, p. 145
51 ibid.
primary commodities appeared in the picture. It would seem, then, that the ‘illegal taxing’ activities by rebels do help to sustain and even escalate their fighting, but the mere availability of predation must not be confused with the cause of the civil conflict.

Second, as Keen criticises, ‘though Collier is right to suggest that rebels may be reluctant to acknowledge the degree to which they are driven by greed, there are equal dangers in suggesting that the expression of grievances tells us nothing about their real motivations.’

In fact, the grievances singled out by the rebels’ public relation efforts are more often than not real and grave, to the extent that they may induce parts of the ordinary population with the feeling of having nothing to lose, which certainly psychologically facilitates the decisions of individuals to leave their, however endangered, legal existence and join subversive violent groups. The danger of downplaying grievances lies also in the policy implications drawn from an analysis of the conflict’s dynamics. Where there are real grievances, in the sense that basic human needs are not being fulfilled (such as the need for self-sustaining agricultural production and human security in rural Colombia), a solution that suggests a return to the pre-war political economy is by far not enough – war, after all, ‘was generated by precisely this status quo ante’. The pre-war conditions should, therefore, not be the point of reference if a durable solution of post-conflict peace-building is sought.

Third, as Richani suggests, in attempting to understand civil conflicts, traditional analyses’ misleading focus on causes and solutions of civil conflicts prevent us from recognising the political economy, or system, of war. Our attempts to explain warring factions’ motivations to combat will be limited if we restrict our understanding of war to ‘a contest between two sides, with each trying to win, [and to representing] only a breakdown or collapse [of the peacetime status quo], rather than the creation of an alternative system of profit, power, and protection.’ Under this new system, ‘there may be vested interests not only in chaos and [...] strife but in the depiction of chaos and [...] strife.’ Thus, it is necessary to clarify which groups derive certain benefits from a civil war situation which peace times could not offer them. Economic benefits aside, governments and their armed forces often seize the opportunity to increase their power excessively by declaring a state of emergency which enables them to suspend democratic rights, checks and balances, and to suppress political

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53 ibid., p. 22
54 Richani, p. 25
55 Keen, p. 19
56 ibid., p. 22
opposition by labelling opponents as rebels.\textsuperscript{58} Thus, an armed conflict will readily be sustained if ‘for significant groups [...] violence represents not a problem but a solution.’\textsuperscript{59} Given the FARC’s incapacity to take over the whole State and its refusal to share power with the government, it is currently probably in the best possible position: The FARC has been able to accumulate enough military and political power and economic resources to be interested in prolonging the war. Having adapted to such a positive political war economy, it would now need an \textit{incentive} to stop rather than to continue fighting.

As Richani summarises, three main factors, all of which are pronounced in Colombia, lead to the formation of a war system which tends to be self-perpetuating: a lack of mediating institutions, a positive political war economy, and an equilibrium of strength between the warring parties.\textsuperscript{60}

As for the first factor, in Colombia there is a failure or absence of mediating institutions or channels through which a political solution to the conflict between the antagonistic groups could be found. With the FARC’s excessive conditions to start peace talks anew and President Uribe’s focus on tough military measures, negotiations with even a slight prospect of success seem to be farther away than ever. Also, bearing in mind the UP massacre during political efforts to implement a peace agreement, the rebel organisation suffers from massive distrust towards the government and its allies, a distrust which, in view of the Colombian ruling elite’s comfortable economic position and its neglect of the country’s widespread poverty, is very deep-seated, and understandable.

Second, an equilibrium of strength between the conflict’s actors leads to a comfortable impasse. During the period of low-intensity warfare in the 1960s and 1970s, all sides of the conflict more or less tolerated each other’s influence in certain regions, as a result of which the FARC became firmly institutionally established and began to fulfill the tasks the weak State institutions were unable to address. Despite an increase in violence from all sides since the 1980s, the State would have to stock up its armed forces enormously to achieve a solution by military means. With the old question of rural administration and security policies remaining, the State might choose not to pay those extremely high costs of breaking out of an impasse situation that all parties have gradually adapted to. However, it remains to be seen whether mounting US pressure to put an end to its drug import by stopping supplies from Colombia will – backed up with vast and increasing financial and military aid – make the difference in militarily crushing the rebels.

Finally, a high level of success of the antagonistic parties to adapt to the conflict by establishing a ‘positive political economy’ through the accumulation of political and economic resources, will result in armed conflict being the best available option, given the high

\textsuperscript{58} Keen, p. 32
\textsuperscript{59} ibid., p. 25
\textsuperscript{60} Richani, p. 24-5
economic costs of peace. At the moment, there is not much that peace has to offer to the rebels.

First of all, laying down their arms would mean judicial punishment or worse for most of the guerrilleros, which is a price that neither the FARC nor, indeed, their adversaries in the paramilitary organisations would want to pay for peace.

Second, as mentioned above, the FARC understandably lacks confidence in the elite’s willingness or genuine commitment to long-term change, given Colombia’s persistent and worsening social inequality. The FARC’s Marxist ideology certainly continues to fuel their understanding of too deeply engrained and irreconcilably different class interests.

Third, Colombia’s outstandingly violent history does not provide reason for optimism. Virtually all studies on transitions and post-conflict peace-building warn that societies returning from violent conflict to ‘normal’ democratic politics are vulnerable to backlashes, particularly in the first few years. In Colombia, political violence has dominated most of the time since the nation’s independence in 1810, and a reckless struggle for power between the two traditional parties has always been prevailing over ideological confrontation. Seeing a ‘peaceful solution’ to the conflict as a simple return of the pre-war State of affairs is therefore an illusion, not just from the perspective of the guerrilla and the alienated and impoverished masses.

With regard to the influence of individual personalities, it is not unlikely that the FARC leaders have simply adapted to leading their lives as fighters far away from civilisation, and, having been extremely successful as a rebel movement, there seems to be no immediate incentive to give up the large influence and relatively comfortable position they are enjoying.

Finally, but very importantly, many individual guerrilleros as well as the organisation as a whole are economically better off than the larger part of the average Colombian population. Psychologically, it is open to question whether the latter is a motivation of greed or grievance. However, we can safely assume that, in a country where unemployment hits all sectors of society in great numbers, where cultivating traditional agricultural products is not a viable business, and where those who engage in the production of illegal crops are being persecuted, a ‘normal life’ as a peasant is not a real alternative.

**Conclusion**

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61 It could be argued that recent developments of independent rather than liberal or conservative candidates being elected into some of Colombia’s highest political offices (such as the President and the mayor of Bogotá) heralds a decline of Colombia’s elitist bipartidismo. It remains doubtful though whether this trend will contribute to a more representative democracy.
By way of an analysis of the FARC’s proclaimed objectives and the socio-economic context in which the Colombian civil conflict is being fought, this essay aimed at discerning the FARC’s motivations to continue its engagement in the increasingly violent conflict. Different theoretical approaches were drawn on to shed some light on the various factors constituting incentives for the FARC and the way these factors interact.

It will be concluded that widespread and massive grievances as experienced by Colombia’s rural population, most prominently extreme social injustice and poverty, provided the conditions for the outbreak and establishment of a prolonged civil conflict, and they certainly continue to form the basis of the social and political framework which informs the warring factions and shapes their strategies. However, given the great suffering that the violence in general but also the guerrilla activities in particular inflict on the local population, it is obvious that the armed struggle of the FARC has been unsuccessful in improving the situation of the very groups they claim to represent. Without blaming them exclusively, violence in Colombia seems to have become an end in itself, a development in which greed, as reinforced by the availability of large profits from illegal activities, certainly played a decisive role and is, in turn, leading to an increase in grievances.

The importance of discerning a civil conflict’s dynamic and the incentives of each of the warring parties goes beyond academic interest. Often very concrete and influential policy implications follow from analyses such as Collier’s. A focus on the drug problem and its economic consequences, for example, might sponsor military-oriented responses like Plan Colombia which aim at the eradication of coca production and the crushing of Colombia’s rebel organisation and which thus, according to Amnesty International, ‘completely [ignore] the Colombian State’s own historical and current responsibility.’

This responsibility also involves measures to alleviate and abolish structural, long-lasting and real grievances of millions of Colombians that are not addressed by anyone but the FARC which, sadly, itself contributes to, rather than solves, the rural population’s suffering.

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