

FINANCIAL TIMES

Colombia's FARC turns from armed conflict to politics

Guerrilla group vows to respect democracy while sticking to its leftwing principles

Gideon Long in Bogotá

After half of century of fighting in the jungles and mountains of Colombia, the country's biggest and best-known guerrilla group, the FARC, announced its transformation into a political party this week, vowing to respect the rules of democracy while sticking to its leftwing principles.

The party will still be known as the FARC but its name has changed. Rather than being the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, it will now be the Common Alternative Revolutionary Force.

Its symbol, unveiled at a packed news conference at a hotel in Bogotá on Friday, will be a red rose — strikingly similar to those of the British Labour party and the Spanish socialist party, the PSOE.

“Maybe for some the FARC initials have a negative connotation but at the same time they represent our collective history and our revolutionary past,” Ivan Márquez, one of the FARC's leaders, told reporters.

“We want people, when they see the rose, to associate it with us and see the FARC,” he said, holding up a single red flower for the cameras. “The rose is a very positive image. The rose is beautiful. The rose means love. The rose means friendship and an open heart.”

Mr Márquez said the new party would compete in congressional elections next year and has bold ambitions.

“We have entered legal political life because we want to be the government or part of it,” he said.

The party's launch marks a remarkable metamorphosis. Formed in 1964 as a Marxist guerrilla movement, the FARC became one of the most feared and powerful armed groups in the world. At its height in the 1990s, it numbered about 20,000 men and controlled vast swaths of the country, even encircling the capital.

But after the turn of century the government started to crush it under the hardline rule of then-president Álvaro Uribe. By this decade, the FARC was a shadow of its former self, increasingly

reliant on the cocaine trade for financing, and agreed to peace talks in Havana with the government of the current President Juan Manuel Santos. Those talks led to a peace deal last year and this year the FARC finally disarmed.

After Friday's news conference and the end of the party's conference, hundreds of former FARC fighters poured into central Bogotá and gathered for a concert in the Plaza Bolívar, in the shadow of the city's imposing 19th century cathedral.

Many had travelled for hours from remote mountain villages and jungle towns. Former guerrillas rubbed shoulders with police officers in the square — a sight unthinkable in Colombia just a few years ago. Some of the ex-fighters wore T-shirts emblazoned with the hashtag #nuevopartido (new party) and the slogan: “for a new country”.

“This has been a very important week for us,” said Astolfo Caro, a 70-year-old former fighter who had travelled from Monte de Maria in the north of the country, as he waited to pass through heavy security and enter the square. “Today is the final day for the implementation of one part of the Havana peace accords.”

And yet the FARC will not find it easy to convince Colombians that it can be trusted. Just over half of the electorate rejected the Havana deal in a referendum last year and many are still angry that the slightly modified accord was then pushed through Congress anyway.

After decades of brutality in which 220,000 people were killed, hundreds were kidnapped and millions forced from their homes, many Colombians want nothing to do with the guerrillas and rightwing paramilitaries that dominated their lives for so long — even if they now promise peace.

A recent Gallup poll showed that only 12 per cent of Colombians had a favourable view of the FARC while 84 per cent disapproved. For most of the past two decades the group's approval rating has been stuck in single figures.

“There's a deep feeling of unpopularity,” said Jorge Restrepo, director of the Conflict Analysis Resource Center in Bogotá. “A lot of people want to punish the FARC — not in a violent way but by excluding them from the political process.”

He said there was some room for the FARC to grow by reaching out beyond its heartland in Colombia's poor rural communities “but not much”.

Despite the group's transition to peaceful politics, Colombia's peace process is far from complete.

Many of the FARC arms caches are still hidden in remote hide-outs. The UN is dismantling them one by one but the fear is that some of the weapons could fall into the hands of criminal and drug-trafficking gangs.

The country's second-biggest guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), is still active and although it is in peace talks with the government, an agreement has yet to be reached.

Polls consistently show that after the euphoria and drama of last year, when the peace deal was signed, rejected and then rammed through parliament, Colombians are more pessimistic about the process now than they were in 2016.

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2017. All rights reserved.