

The FARC and the War on Drugs in Colombia¹

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ABSTRACT

What explains the interactions between insurgent groups and illicit economies? What are the consequences of involvement in illicit economic activity for insurgent motivations and behavior? What are the implications for policy? This paper looks at the relationship between conflict actors and illicit economies with an analysis of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). My objective is to provide a summary of the FARC's interactions with the drug trade since the first coca boom in 1978, and identify factors that account for the FARC's strategy and outcomes. I argue that the case of the FARC highlights the continued importance of political and military factors in driving insurgent economic strategies. Moreover, I argue that despite the FARC's longstanding relationship with the drug trade, the insurgent group has not succumbed to criminalization, mainly because of high organizational discipline. Instead, the FARC's role in the illicit economy has been more regulatory than participatory. From a policy perspective, FARC regulation of the illicit economy matters because it suggests that the presence of an insurgency can, in some cases, restrain some of the violence associated with illicit economies. If this is correct, then demobilizing insurgent groups will result in a more criminal violence.

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Introduction

This paper analyzes the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the drug trade in Colombia since 1978. With it, I take on three tasks. First, I use qualitative evidence to document the FARC's changing relationship with the drug trade. Second, I analyze and compare the relative importance of economic, military, and political goals in shaping the FARC's interactions with the drug trade. Finally, I assess the appropriateness of recent counterinsurgent and drug war policies in Colombia and offer recommendations based on what we know about the FARC's relationship with the illicit economy.

From my analysis, I offer three arguments about non-state armed actors and illicit economies. First, I argue that political and military goals are more important than economic factors in determining insurgent interactions with illicit economies. The FARC became more involved in the drug trade based on the logic of territorial control. The main goals were maintaining the political support of the social base and protecting against military threats from outside the region. Second, I argue that organizational structure matters in determining whether links to the drug trade provoke criminalization within insurgent groups. Finally, I argue that the FARC's political and military goals, combined with internal organizational discipline, resulted in a more regulatory than participatory role for the FARC in the drug trade.

We know that conflict contributed to the expansion of the illicit economy in Colombia.² However, at the same time I find that the activities of insurgents, particularly the FARC, constrained criminal tendencies and violence. If this is the case, then a critical question is what drug related crime looks like in the absence of the FARC? That is, what will be the effects on the

² Díaz and Sánchez 2004

structure of the drug trade if political negotiations between the Colombian government and the FARC succeed?

Context: The FARC and the Drug Trade in Colombia

The FARC

The most economically stable and democratic Andean nation, Colombia has nonetheless been burdened with multiple internal threats to sovereignty since the 1960s, including four insurgencies and dozens of local paramilitary movements. By far the largest and most powerful non-state armed actor in the Colombia conflict, the FARC officially emerged as an insurgent organization in 1964. However, the guerilla group is historically rooted in the peasant self-defense movements during the civil war period known as *La Violencia* (1948-1957).

La Violencia was a violent civil war between Colombia's two dominant Liberal and Conservative political parties. At the national level, *La Violencia* was an elite conflict that resulted from a power struggle within the Colombian oligarchy. Conflict began with the assassination of the Liberal party's presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán Ayala in 1948.³ As violence spread to the countryside large sectors of the peasant population participated in guerilla bands, self-defense groups, and as bandits and neighbors resolving personal vendettas with violence.⁴ The war ended in 1958 with the signing of the National Front, a power-sharing arrangement between Liberals and Conservatives.

³ See Braun, Herbert (2003) *The Assassination of Gaitan: Public Life and Urban Violence in Colombia*, University of Wisconsin Press

⁴ Oquist 1981; Sánchez and Meertens 1984

The National Front institutionalized oligarchic power within a semi-democratic framework. Meanwhile, popular forces mobilized during the war were excluded from political participation.⁵ The exclusivity of the National Front, and neglect of the ‘social question’⁶, directly contributed to the formation of the FARC.

In the rural sector, political exclusion of popular forces contributed to the transformation of peasant self-defense groups into offensive guerilla organizations. Indeed, the FARC began as a loose network of displaced peasant bands that constructed independent republics in the departments of Huila, Tolima and Caldas.⁷ In May of 1964 the Colombian military carried out ‘Operation Marquetalia’ against the largest peasant republic in Tolima.⁸ In the aftermath of the devastating attack, 45 remaining peasant leaders fled with their families to the jungles of the eastern and southern frontier. There, they found willing recruits among the peasant colonizers displaced by violence a decade earlier.⁹ The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) declared war on the state on July 20, 1964.¹⁰

For the next two decades, the FARC remained active but did not pose a serious threat to the government in Bogotá. In fact, the FARC survived by successfully hiding in the jungles of the most economically marginal regions. However, the onset of illicit drug cultivation in

⁵ The National Front alternated the presidency between the Liberal and Conservative party every four years.

⁶ In Colombia the social question had two dimensions: The rural dimension which had to do with the unequal distribution of land and the need for rural reform, and the urban question which had to do with extending political inclusion to the popular classes.

⁷ Tolima, Huila and Cauca experienced intense inter-party conflict in the 1950s. See Henderson, James D. (1985) *When Colombia Bled*, University of Alabama Press

⁸ FARC comandar Jaime Guaraca (Matta 1999:47-52); FARC comandar Jacobo Arenas, *cese del fuego*, pp. 82

⁹ Arenas, *Cese del fuego*, pp. 81-84

¹⁰ *ibid*, p. 92

Colombia in the 1980s transformed the FARC into a formidable military opponent with control over large swaths of national territory.¹¹

The first coca booms in Colombia took place in the southern frontier departments of Caquetá, Guaviare, and Meta which were coincidentally FARC strongholds. Illicit drugs provided lucrative and continuous rents allowing the FARC to build enormous military capacity. The amalgamation of political grievance and economic opportunity resulted in a rapid escalation in the scale and lethality of conflict in Colombia between 1985 and 2004¹². During this time, the FARC consolidated territorial control in coca growing regions.

Table 1.3: FARC Fronts and Fighters, 1964-1999¹³

Year	Fronts	Fighters
1964		44
1984	27	
1986	32	3,600
1989	44	13,200
1995	60	7,000
1999	60	18,000

Twenty years after the attack on Marquetalia, the 45 men that were the original FARC had transformed into 45 fronts. Armed with illicit rents, the growth and territorial expansion of the FARC continued unabated until 2004. The FARC grew from 32 fronts and 3,600 fighters in 1986 to 60 fronts and 7,000 fighters in 1995, and finally 18,000 fighters in 2001 with control

¹¹ Díaz and Sánchez 2004

¹² *ibid*

¹³ Arenas, *Cese del fuego* *ibid*: 76, 74

over about 40 per cent of Colombian territory making the FARC the largest guerilla organization ever in Latin America.¹⁴

The Illicit Drug Trade in Colombia

Prior to 1994, most illicit drugs that passed through Colombia were purchased from cultivators in Peru and Bolivia.¹⁵ Until that time, Colombia's primary role in the drug trade was in the processing of coca base into cocaine, and in the trafficking of illicit *mercancía* to North American and European markets.¹⁶ However, Peruvian and U.S. authorities interdicted the air bridge by which Colombian narcotics traffickers transported Peruvian coca base to Colombia. Few planes were intercepted, but the threat was sufficient to deter traffickers and devastate the coca market in Peru.¹⁷ Soon after, Colombia's two cartel system broke down into several smaller *cartelitos*. Both changes shifted production to Colombia where a vast and marginalized frontier provided thousands of willing cultivators. Between 1978 and 2001, illicit plantations increased by 500 percent in Colombia to about 169,800 hectares.¹⁸ In 1998 Colombia became the world's top producer and exporter of illicit coca and its psychoactive derivative, cocaine.

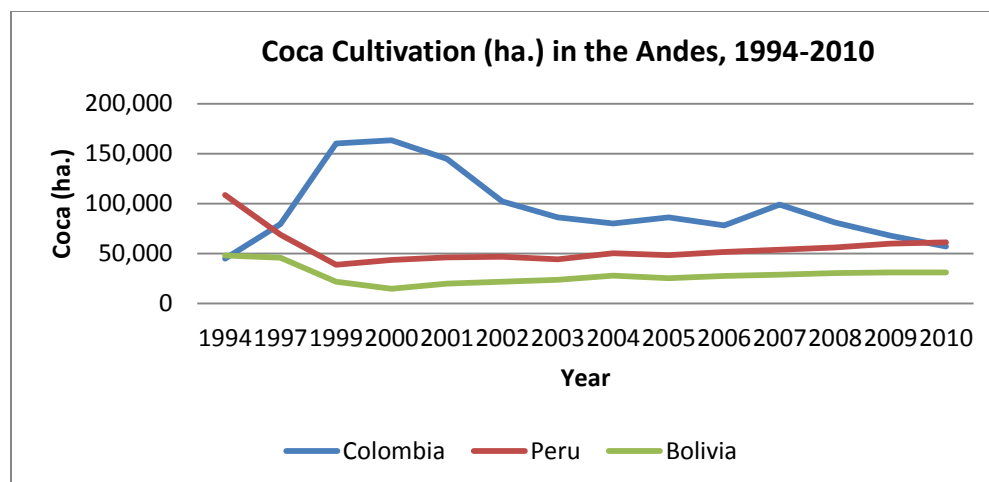
¹⁴ Richani 2002: 74; McClintock 1998: 73; Other sizeable Latin American guerilla groups include the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) which peaked at 6,000 fighters, the Salvadorian Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) with 8,000 combatants, and the Peruvian Shining Path (SL) with 10,000 fighters.

¹⁵ Gootenberg 2008: 291-324; Thoumi 2005: 79

¹⁶ McClintock 1988: 128-129

¹⁷ A victory for anti-narcotics policy, the 1995 U.S.-Peru joint aerial interdiction campaign Operation Condor crippled the illicit coca market in the Upper Huallaga Valley by forcing down or shooting down planes suspected of carrying coca base (Anthony et. al. 2000).

¹⁸ Felbab-Brown 2009: 72



Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Andean Coca Cultivation Survey 2010

The shift of illicit coca production to Colombia between 1978 and 1994 was beneficial to the insurgent organizations operating in the frontier regions that were targeted by traffickers as sites for coca cultivation. Most illicit drug production in Colombia takes place in the departments of Guaviare, Caquetá, Meta, Nariño and Putumayo south of the capital city of Bogotá, and the departments of North Santander, Arauca and Bolívar in the eastern plains and Caribbean regions. In these areas one finds roughly 47% of the total coca cultivation in Colombia concentrated in just 10 municipalities¹⁹. The FARC is present in all of these areas.

The illicit economy in Colombia is based on a complex commodity chain that entails the voluntary participation of thousands of Colombians. Direct participants included peasants, chemists, chemical suppliers and smugglers, purchasers (middlemen), pilots, bodyguards, front men or *testaferros*, narcotics traffickers, and money launderers. In addition, another set of actors

¹⁹ However, production decentralized in response to law enforcement and counternarcotic aerial spraying with glyphosates. While most production concentrates in small zones, these zones are spread out across 200 municipalities in 23 of Colombia's 32 departments (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) World Drug Survey 2007: 176; Mejía and Rico 2011: 19).

functions as a social support network that protects or tolerates the industry but does not directly participate, these include national and local political elites, police, members of the armed forces, public employees, lawyers, tax advisers, financial advisors, and bankers²⁰.

The peasant social base that supports the FARC participates in the primary link of the commodity chain as illicit producers. Indeed, the first two phases of illicit production constitute peasant economies. Most illicit cultivators are permanent frontier settlers that devote about a quarter of their land to growing illicit drugs for profit. The average plot is only 1 hectare,²¹ and most labor is family labor. In addition to settled peasants, recent migrants—some from urban areas-- also engage in coca farming, but devote more of their time and resources to producing coca paste.²² In 2005, an estimated 68,600 Colombian households were involved in coca cultivation.²³ In 2008, this number increased to 166,000 households²⁴. Approximately two thirds of these household also engage in the relatively simple craft production of coca paste, the base for cocaine.²⁵

The Structure of Coca Cultivation in Colombia²⁶

Year	2000		2001		2002	
	#Farms	Hectares	#Farms	Hectares	#Farms	Hectares
Fields <3 hectares	61,109	65,989	63,233	68,615	56,664	58,785
Fields >3 hectares	11,956	84,919	10,413	67,724	6,292	35,687

²⁰ Thoumi 1995: 96-97

²¹ The average plot size in 2002 was 2.2 hectares and 0.6 hectares in 2008 (Mejía and Rico 2011: 22).

²² González-Arias 1998: 52-54; Vargas 1999: 83

²³ UNODC World Drug Survey 2007. p. 176

²⁴ Mejía and Rico 2011: 17

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ UNODC (2003) Colombia Coca Survey, p. 20

While most coca is grown on small farms, there is commercial production with illicit plantings of 25 to 200 hectares. With larger operations, the illicit crops are harvested by a transient population of paid laborers called *raspachines*. Planting, maintaining, and harvesting coca is a labor intensive activity. In 2008, an estimated 9,708,848 rural laborers worked in some activity having to do with illicit drug cultivation. The total value of this labor was an estimated CO\$250,000 million. The commercial farmers have direct links to narcotics traffickers. In contrast, peasant producers typically sell to *chichipatos* (middle-men) who purchase either raw coca or coca paste from peasants, which they then sell to *traquetos*. *Traquetos* are the links between the primary production stage and narcotics trafficking organizations. The loyalty of the *traquetos* belonged to the traffickers, not to the coca growers. Indeed, he is often dispatched to the region by the narcotics trafficking organization.²⁷

After coca paste is purchased from peasant and commercial producers, it is transformed or *crystalized* into cocaine proper by specialists working in mobile laboratories called *cocinas* (kitchens) that are operated by the drug trafficking syndicates. The process requires significant chemical inputs and a large initial investment of upward of a million dollars to establish a *cocina* or cocaine processing laboratory²⁸. It is in this phase that non-state armed groups become directly linked to the cocaine production chain as either security providers or direct operators²⁹.

Finally, at the top of the chain are the Colombian crime syndicates that export cocaine to foreign markets. The structure of narcotics trafficking has changed in Colombia. Smuggling of illicit drugs started initially took place through loosely organized network of export syndicates.

²⁷ González-Arias 1998: 54

²⁸ Mejía and Rico 2011: 17

²⁹ *ibid*

In the 1980s, the narcotics trafficking business was monopolized into a two-cartel system under the Medellin and Cali syndicates³⁰. Eventually the two cartel system collapsed in the 1990s resulted in the re-decentralization of crime syndicates into many small *cartelitos*, the largest and most powerful is the *Norte del Valle* cartel. The decentralization of the Colombian illicit economy also facilitated the dominance of Mexican drug trafficking cartels in the Western Hemisphere.³¹

In Colombia export syndicates monopolize all links in the illicit commodity chain *with the exceptions of raw material production*.³² Indeed, the cartels have established processing labs, smuggled drugs overseas, organized distribution in the United States, and developed sophisticated money laundering schemes. They have built impressive organizations with their own security forces, lawyers, and financial advisors³³. However, at the stage of raw material production, narcotics traffickers have competed with insurgents, in particular the FARC.³⁴ The FARC has successfully blocked attempts by narcotics trafficking organizations to control the production phase of the illicit commodity chain in some-though not all-Colombian regions.³⁵

The FARC's Vertical Integration into the Drug Trade

The FARC first encountered illicit coca production in the departments of Caquetá, Meta, and Guaviare in the late 1970s. These departments comprise part of the southeastern frontier where the FARC fled in the aftermath of Marquetalia and constructed a territorial stronghold

³⁰ The Medellin cartel was controlled by six drug lords: The brothers Jorge, Fabio and Juan David Ochoa Vasquéz, Pablo Escobar Gaviria, Carlos Lehder Rivas and José Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha. The Cali cartel was led by two drug lords: Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela and José Santacruz Londoño (Felbab-Brown 2009: 76).

³¹ *ibid*

³² Thoumi 1995: 85

³³ Felbab-Brown 2009: 72

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ Thoumi 1995: 94

centered on the municipality of San Vicente del Caguán in Caquetá. Since then, FARC's relationship with the drug trade has followed a pattern of increased vertical integration from taxing and protecting illicit activities in the 1980s to directly purchasing from illicit producers by the mid-1990s. Finally, there is evidence that the FARC participates in international drug trafficking. However, the evidence consists of up-stream in house activities such as operating laboratories and selling to traffickers, but the international trafficking link remains under the control of the *cartelitos* and the FARC relies on regional criminal networks.³⁶ Hence, the bulk of the rents the FARC collects from the drug trade continue to come from taxes and fees paid by illicit market actors in exchange for protection and regulation.³⁷

The first booms in illicit coca production in FARC-controlled territory occurred between 1978 and 1981. The Medellín Cartel initiated the boom by distributing the first coca seeds to subsistence peasants in the department of Caquetá.³⁸ Indeed, coca produced tremendous social turmoil that was a threat to the FARC's revolutionary goals. Practically overnight, the region of El Caguán was flooded with fortune seekers, guns, and rapidly escalating crime and violence. Therefore, the FARC's initial reaction was to prohibit settlers from cultivating coca plants. In addition, the FARC initiated eradication plans on two occasions prior to 1986, though these plans were never carried out.

³⁶ Saab and Taylor 2009: 465

³⁷ Some lower-level FARC commanders became more directly involved in the drug trade, purchasing coca paste and setting up laboratories to independently produce cocaine. However, these cases are exceptional. Most of the narcotics-derived profit that the FARC collects has been protection payments than from illicit market actors (Ortiz 2002: 137)

³⁸ Jaramillo and Cubides 1989: 42 Puentes Marín 2006: 25; According to the testimonies of illicit coca farmers in El Caguán, narcotics traffickers provided seed and then paid illicit cultivators COL\$1,200 per gram of coca leaf (Jaramillo and Cubides 1989: 42, footnote 10).

FARC leaders quickly found both prohibition and eradication to be politically problematic, since both policies alienated the peasant illicit cultivators that were the FARC's social base. Hence, in response to social demands for protection of illicit production against state repression, crime, and community disintegration, the FARC embarked on a new policy.

The FARC's first attempt to regulate the drug trade was by forming autonomous self-defense groups. The self-defense groups were quasi-civilian militias that were tasked with monitoring and collecting taxes from illicit crop producers and drug traffickers. Part of the idea behind the self-defense groups was to regulate and collect rents while protecting the organization from criminal influences by enlisted actors outside the organizational hierarchy. However, in the end the autonomy of the self-defense groups was problematic. The groups became notorious for abuses against the civilian population. Therefore, the FARC disbanded the self-defense groups and developed a new strategy that involved directly regulating and taxing the illicit economy.³⁹

In 1982 at the 7th Conference of the FARC, the guerilla group officially changed their policy to permit the cultivation and selling of coca base in exchange for the collection of taxes and fees. The strategy satisfied political and military goals: the FARC would protect and regulate on behalf of their peasant social base while using illicit rents to finance the armed struggle. Rents included a 10% tax per kilo of coca base. This tax, known as the *gramaje*, was paid by narcotics traffickers, intermediaries (those who worked for traffickers and purchased from illicit cultivators), and small and commercial cultivators.

³⁹ Puentes Marín 2006: 55; author interview with Kyle Johnson, researcher for Corporación Arco Iris, Bogotá, Colombia, September 28, 2011

In essence, the FARC became an ‘intermediary on behalf of small producers’, providing regulations such as a fixed price on coca base that decreased the high risk and insecurity that came with involvement in a criminal economy. Over time, protection and regulation extended to also include supplying and taxing air fields, constructing and maintaining processing labs and protecting export routes.⁴⁰ A key example of this mutual exchange is the fees paid by the Medellin cartel for FARC protection of the hacienda *Tranquilandia*, an enormous cocaine laboratory discovered by Colombian authorities in 1984.⁴¹

By the early 1990s, roughly 20% of FARC combatants were engaged in economic protection activities in regions with illicit crops.⁴² By 1998, the portion increased to about 33%.⁴³ Regulation including controlling production levels, prices, and the size of the labor force.⁴⁴ FARC taxes were set at a fixed 7-10% on the sale of coca leaf and paste paid by illicit cultivators, 8% on the purchase of coca leaf and paste paid by merchants, and fixed fees paid by traffickers for the protection of laboratories, airports, and properties⁴⁵.

While the FARC continued to exploit the drug trade predominantly with taxes and fees, their activities have expanded to include more direct forms of participation. In 1991, the FARC began displacing the middlemen, or *chichipatos*, that purchased coca on behalf of narcotics traffickers in some regions, including Caquetá. Rather than regulate the exchange between coca farmers and middlemen, the FARC monopolized the purchase of coca in the region. In effect,

⁴⁰ Initially most peasant cultivators were exempt from the tax, but the intermediaries who purchased from small producers paid a 10% tax on their purchase (Tickner, García, Arreaza 2011: 417-418; Pécaut 2008)

⁴¹ Puentes Marín 2006: 48, 7; Ortíz 2002: 137

⁴² Ortíz 2002: 137

⁴³ Rangel 1998: 125-126

⁴⁴ *ibid*

⁴⁵ Pizarro: 92; Puentes Marín 2006: 62

this meant that the FARC controlled the price of coca base, which created incentives for higher prices that were at odds with the interests of peasant producers. Not surprisingly, this period coincides with an increase in FARC predation toward the civilian population.⁴⁶

The FARC's increased role in the drug trade was a response to a military threat from right-wing paramilitary groups from outside the region that were attempting to undermine the FARC's territorial control by forming alliances with local narcotics traffickers. Indeed, the paramilitary movement in Colombia essentially provided narcotics traffickers with an army with which to combat the FARC. Relations between the FARC and drug traffickers were cooperative at first, but grew more conflictive over time. The FARC provided security and order, public goods that were collectively beneficial. Nonetheless, with time the FARC increased fees and demanded better prices. In some regions, the narcotics traffickers were subjected to kidnappings and extortions alongside other economic elites. Hence, in 1984 Colombia's narcotics trafficking elite issued a manifesto denouncing the guerillas. As part of their declaration of war on insurgents, the drug traffickers hired private security forces to confront the guerillas in the regions where they owned land or where they cultivation of illicit crops took place.⁴⁷

Hence, the logic behind increased vertical integration was in the first place military, though economic goals also played a role. More direct participation not only limited the access of narcotics traffickers to the region, but also provided more income that the FARC could then use toward expanding their military capacity. In fact, between 1996 and 1998 increased state military incursions against the FARC in the *cinturón de la coca* corresponded with intensified

⁴⁶ Felbab-Brown 2009

⁴⁷ Tickner et al, 2011: 420

activities and participation of these fronts in the illicit economy, and increased control of front commanders over illicit profits.⁴⁸

Chronology of FARC Involvement in the Illicit Economy in Caquetá, 1977-2001⁴⁹

Year	FARC Intervention
1977	Begin Coca Cultivation
1978-79	-Initial Opposition of Coca -Create 'self-defense' militias
1979-1999	-Regulation of coca cultivation -Require cultivation of subsistence crops
1982-1998	-Charge taxes on coca paste merchants, cocaine production laboratories, and cargo flights
1985	Illicit crop substitution proposal included in the El Caguán development plan between the FARC, the State and the community
1991-1992	Policing regulation of narcotics traffickers and <i>cocinas</i> (processing labs)
1998-1999	-Restrict entry of coca buyers for fear of entry of paramilitaries -Begin purchase competition from paramilitaries
1999	FARC proposes second illicit crop substitution plan to be carried out in Cartagena del Chairá, Caquetá
2000	FARC direct commercialization of coca paste

Finally, the FARC eventually accessed rents higher up the commodity chain in the international trafficking of illicit drugs. However, while the level of involvement cannot be ignored, the available information is nonetheless very limited. It suggests only isolated events involving one particularly notorious FARC commander Tomás Medina Caracas (aka Negro Acacio) and arms-for-drugs deals with Brazilian and Mexican drug traffickers⁵⁰. The activities of Negro Acacio are indeed atypical for the FARC. In most cases, the FARC deals with brokers and

⁴⁸ *ibid*

⁴⁹ Uribe 2002

⁵⁰ Negro Acacio allied with Luis Fernando de Costa (alias Fernandinho) the most powerful drug trafficker in Brazil, with the goal of trading cocaine chlorohydrate in exchange for weapons. Tomás Medina Caracas was the FARC's 16th Front commander. He was indicted in the United States in 2002 on charges of drug trafficking (Library of Congress 2002: 54).

rarely supports direct ties with international traffickers.⁵¹ So, there is very little evidentiary support for the widely held belief that the FARC is a drug trafficking organization.

The above narrative can be summarized into four basic observations. First, the FARC's initial reaction to the drug trade was more cautious than enthusiastic. For a time, the FARC prohibited coca cultivation and formulated initiatives to eradicate illicit crops. Second, the FARC's decision to exploit the drug trade was above all a response to pressures from peasant cultivators who were the FARC's primary social base. Third, the FARC became more integrated in the drug trade as a response to the paramilitary threat. Finally, while the FARC relies on rents from the drug trade more than any other resource, there is insufficient evidence to conclude that the FARC is an international drug trafficker. In fact, what is most impressive is the FARC's remarkable autonomy despite longstanding links to the drug trade.

Explaining FARC interactions with the Drug Trade

How do we account for the FARC's choices regarding the drug trade? Did vertical integration in the illicit economy transform the FARC into a criminal organization?

There is little evidence that the FARC's interactions with the drug trade are wholly or even primarily motivated by economic goals. Instead, FARC behavior conforms to the logic of territorial control with a primary concern for political and military factors. Undoubtedly, the FARC exploited the drug trade for rents. However, the primary concern at the time was civilian support and cooperation, and control resources in order to keep armed rivals out. Likewise, there

⁵¹ In the case of the 43rd front, Jorge 40 allied with Loco Barrera, a Colombian broker, who bought cocaine from the FARC (Tickner, Garcia and Arreaza 2011: 4202-422; Library of Congress 2002: 51-54). Indeed, as Tickner, García and Arreaza argue, as the Colombian drug trade became increasingly decentralized, the role of brokers became increasingly important, particularly *chichipatas*, *armadores*, and *metabrokers* (2011: 422-423).

is little evidence that the FARC transformed into a criminal organization. Rather than succumb to profit-seeking, the FARC constructed mechanisms to discipline the rank and file and protect the organization from criminal influences. While certainly the character and goals of the organization have changed over time, the FARC's internal structure and objectives remain distinct from that of a criminal syndicate.

The Logic of Territorial Control

The FARC's involvement in the drug trade is based on a broader set of objectives than pure profit-seeking. The FARC's strategy conforms to the logic of territorial control based on building political, military *and* economic power in order to protect territory from incursions by armed rivals, including state security forces. While all three objectives were important, some took priority at different points in time.

Political economists such as Paul Collier and David Keen argue that participation in internal conflict is fueled by profit-seeking.⁵² Hence, when lucrative and lootable natural resources are present, it follows that conflict will erupt and endure.⁵³ Illicit crops constitute a lucrative and lootable natural resource. Yet, the FARC did not engage the illicit economy with enthusiasm. Instead, the FARC's initial approach was hesitant, suggesting a political rather than economic rationale was guiding their strategy. FARC prohibition of illicit cultivation followed political considerations. After all, the drug trade was a criminal, capitalist enterprise that conflicted with FARC revolutionary goals. In addition, the coca boom ignited a process of social disintegration within frontier peasant communities that threatened to weaken the FARC's social support base.

⁵² Collier et al. 2003; Keen 1998; also see Cramer 2002 and Le Billion 2002

⁵³ Ross 2003, 2004

Paradoxically, political factors also pushed the FARC to abandon prohibition in favor of a regulatory role vis-à-vis the illicit economy. Despite the social ills of the drug trade, the FARC's peasant social base economically benefited from the cultivation of illicit crops. In fact, the profit gains from illicit coca cultivation far exceed that of licit crops. Hence, the FARC's prohibitionist stance alienated their peasant social base and threatened to undermine political dominance in the region. What is more, peasants sought protection from the crime and disorder that accompanied the drug trade, and from predatory traffickers and the state's security forces. Hence, by exploiting the drug trade, the FARC gained not just economically but *politically*.

The FARC used its military authority to protect and regulate the illicit economy in exchange for rents in a way that was collectively beneficial for insurgents and market actors. The FARC's strategy won the insurgent group broad, albeit fragile, political support in coca growing regions. Certainly, the level of popular support for the FARC in coca regions surpassed the level of support for the FARC in regions without illicit crops.⁵⁴

The FARC's approach to the drug trade conforms to a broader pattern observable with several insurgent organizations faced with similar economic opportunities. For example, in the Upper Huallaga Valley of Peru, Shining Path insurgents hesitated to engage illicit drug cultivation, but eventually regulated and taxed the drug trade on behalf of illicit cultivators in order to secure a local social base.⁵⁵ In Afghanistan, the Taliban engaged illicit opium poppy farmers as a political strategy for building a social base. The Taliban also attempted to eradicate illicit crops. In 2001, the Taliban instituted a ban on poppy cultivation that reduced the area of

⁵⁴ Felbab-Brown 2009

⁵⁵ Gonzales Manrique 1990; McClintock 1988: 127-128

poppy cultivation by 99 per cent.⁵⁶ Finally, some insurgent groups never engage the illicit drug trade, forgoing lucrative rents largely based of political concerns. The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in Chiapas, Mexico is a case in point.⁵⁷

Since the first coca boom ended in 1981 the FARC has transformed into a remarkable military machine. The FARC's transformation was not limited to military capacity, but included an increasingly militarized structure and organizational objectives.⁵⁸ As the FARC became increasingly militarized, they became estranged from their peasant social base.⁵⁹ The FARC's military character is evidenced by changes in economic strategy. While political goals shaped the FARC's initial interactions with the drug trade, it was military goals that led the FARC to monopolize coca markets in the 1990s, though in both cases maintaining territorial control was the underlying goal. The key factor was the threat posed by right-wing paramilitaries. In particular, FARC dominance in coca growing regions was threatened by an alliance between the areas narcotics traffickers and the paramilitaries.

The Colombian paramilitaries formed as an armed reaction to insurgent predation, and the Colombian government's willingness to negotiate with insurgents in 1982 and in 1998.⁶⁰ The first paramilitaries sprung up in various localities in the 1980s as autonomous self-defense

⁵⁶ Farrella and Thorneb 2005; Labrousse, Alain (2005) The FARC and the Taliban's Connection to Drugs, in *The Journal of Drug Issues*; also see Felbab-Brown 2009

⁵⁷ See Earle, Duncan and Jeanne Simonelli (2011) Zapatista Autonomy in Cartel Mexico: Preserving Smallholder Viability, in *Culture, Agriculture, Food and Environment*, 33(2), pp. 144-140

⁵⁸ Ferro and Uribe 2002; Ortiz 2002; Pécaut 2008; Pizarro Leóngomez 2011

⁵⁹ Gutiérrez Sanín and Giustozzi 2010

⁶⁰ President Belisario Betancur (1982-1986) opened negotiations with the FARC, ELN, the Popular Liberation Army (EPL) and the April 19th Movement (M-19) in 1982. State talks with guerillas agitated members of the national military and rural landowners contributing to the formation of paramilitaries in Boyacá and Córdoba. In 1998, President Andrés Pastrana Arango (1998-2002) arranged negotiations with the FARC in Caquetá resulting in an increase in paramilitary activity. see Romero 2003

groups supported by rural elite landowners (including narcotics traffickers) and factions of the Colombian military. In 1997, paramilitary commander Carlos Castaño Gil spearheaded a nationally unified paramilitary force called the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC).⁶¹ The AUC's goal was to purge Colombia of insurgents and their civilian supporters. To that end, the AUC's strategy was to attack the guerillas' social support base and access to resources. This meant targeting FARC strongholds with significant illicit crop production.

In reaction to the threat from paramilitaries, the FARC began displacing the middlemen that worked for the narcotics trafficking organizations as merchants that purchased coca base from peasant producers. The FARC's main objective in monopolizing the purchase of coca paste was to limit narcotics traffickers' access to the region thereby protecting their territorial domain. Certainly, in this case military goals trumped political goals since monopolization of the market led to increased predation and ultimately a decline in popular support. However, economic goals remain secondary. Increased vertical integration undoubtedly resulted in greater rents, but these rents were channeled into building military capacity rather than the personal fortunes of FARC leaders and the rank-and-file.

Organizational Discipline and Criminalization

Patrick Johnston and Paul Staniland argue that the effect of resource wealth on insurgent behavior depends on the insurgents' organizational structure and particularly the level of internal control and discipline.⁶² In contrast to an excess of research looking at types of resources, Johnston and Staniland find that the resources are not as important as the structures put in place

⁶¹ Medina 1990; Romero 2003

⁶² Johnston 2008; Staniland 2009

to collect and deploy rents. The case of the FARC offers strong empirical support for Staniland and Johnston's argument. After three decades of involvement, the FARC has not transformed into a criminalized organization. While interactions with the drug trade follow the logic of territorial control, I argue that organizational structure is the key factor determining the extent to which involvement in criminal economic activity corrupts insurgent groups. I argue that FARC's impressive internal discipline accounts for their success in guarding against criminal influences.

When FARC leaders made the decision to exploit the illicit economy, the possibility of criminalization was a chief concern for FARC leaders.⁶³ The formation of the self-defense groups was in part a strategy to separate the collection of illicit rents from the organization. When the self-defense groups proved impossible to control, the FARC constructed organizational mechanisms to directly regulate and tax the illicit economy while guarding against criminal influences. Beginning at their 7th national conference in 1982, the FARC instituted a strict internal disciplinary regime and hierarchical command structure. FARC combatants do not receive a salary, only the basic amenities for their survival, and most have no direct access to organizational resources.⁶⁴

The command structure of the FARC is multi-tiered and rotating resembling professionalized military organization. The base of the pyramid is formed by the fronts, which are the primary tactical unit. The fronts are organized in blocks, which control operations in a particular region. Finally, the top tier comprises the general staff, protected by a security perimeter of about 2,000 combatants and a reserve contingent of Special Forces and popular

⁶³ Domínguez in Jaramillo and Cubides 1989: XIV

⁶⁴ Gutierrez Sanín 2006

militias. In the framework of territorial control, the popular militias lived in the communities under FARC control, gathering intelligence on the population. Indeed, the FARC adopted the organizational elements of modern conventional armies, with their hierarchical structure, rigid vertical discipline and internal order.⁶⁵

With this organizational structure in place, the FARC centrally controls resource extraction activities. Resources, including illicit rents, are collected from the base of the organization, and most are passed up to higher levels for organizational use. To protect resources from the abuses of lower ranking commanders, FARC high commanders dispense themselves throughout the organizational structure, with each member of the 7-member national secretariat accompanying a different block to provide constant oversight. Moreover, to reduce incentives for front and block commanders to become powerful local warlords, the FARC periodically rotates the lower command among the different blocks and fronts⁶⁶. The high commanders that make up the FARC Secretariat have a long history with the guerilla organization. They are either founding members or have demonstrated loyalty or merit by working their way up through the ranks. Last, the FARC invests considerable resources in communications equipment and leaders maintain constant contact with the various blocs, fronts and units⁶⁷.

In this way, the FARC directly and effectively governed the illicit market and the negative externalities of the drug trade without succumbing to internal criminalization.⁶⁸

Insurgent groups with less disciplined organizations are not as successful. For example, another

⁶⁵ Author interview with Juan Guillermo Ferro Medina in Bogotá, Colombia, September 23, 2011; Pizarro Leongómez 2011: 220, 224

⁶⁶ Pizarro Leongómez 2011: 231, footnote

⁶⁷ Ortíz 2002: 141

⁶⁸ Gutiérrez Sanín 2006

Colombian insurgency, the National Liberation Army (ELN), became involved in the drug trade much later than the FARC but quickly suffered from criminal influences. Compared to the FARC, the ELN has a more federalized organizational structure with power concentrating at the level of the front. The ELN's central command prohibits group members from involvement in the drug trade. Nonetheless, several ELN fronts became highly involved in the drug trade against the directives of national leaders. In some areas such as in the department of Nariño, ELN exploitation of the illicit economy has been highly predatory and involved alliances with neo-paramilitary organizations.⁶⁹

Finally, social networks also seem to matter, though to a lesser extent than organizational structure. No doubt, the FARC's strong peasant origins made it politically less problematic to engage the illicit economy compared to more urban organizations. At the onset, a large sector of the FARC's popular base economically benefited from coca cultivation. Conversely, the ELN counted on the support of an urban social base, including university students, social movements and unions, and the religious community and this explains the ELN's reluctance and late entrance into the drug trade.⁷⁰ Hence, the FARC certainly had greater *political* autonomy, creating immunity from international pressures and ideological constraints on their activities related to the drug trade. Such activities were simply more problematic for the ELN and similar groups that function under the auspices of conservative religious or leftist ideology.⁷¹ Nonetheless, armed actors have exploited illicit economies even where such influences are strong. Eventually the ELN did exploit the drug trade for rents as did the religiously conservative Taliban in Afghanistan.

⁶⁹ Millán 2011

⁷⁰ Broderick 2000; Felbab-Brown 2009

⁷¹ Ortíz 2002: 140

Policy Implications

Since 1999, counterinsurgency and anti-narcotics ‘drug war’ policies have converged in Colombia. The overlap in drug war and counterinsurgent policy is based on the notion, widely accepted by policy-makers in Colombia and the United States that the insurgents exist only to profit from the drug trade. In 1999, President Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) signed Plan Colombia, a policy package designed to end the Colombian armed conflict by combining military attacks on insurgents with controversial force eradication and interdiction efforts with significant U.S. military and counter-narcotics aid. Following Plan Colombia, the U.S implemented the Andean Counter-drug Initiative (ACI), a policy package that specifically aimed to undermine the drug trade. While ACI is an explicitly anti-narcotics policy, it is understood as a tool for undermining the insurgency in Colombia.

Based on my analysis, I find that the assumptions underlying these policies are problematic, since the FARC’s role in the drug trade has been more regulatory than participatory. Without a doubt, illicit cultivation has expanded due to the FARC’s activities, and the FARC would not have become the military force that it did without illicit rents. However, at the same time, the FARC’s strategy for collecting illicit rents has centered on governance: regulating the market exchanges, controlling labor and production (to protect prices), offering security and representation vis-à-vis the state, and constructing order in an otherwise anarchic environment. Therefore, as much as the FARC has contributed to the growth of the illicit economy, the insurgent organization has also curtailed the power and predation of criminal organizations as well as the negative externalities of the drug trade in those regions where coca cultivation takes place.

The FARC's Regulatory Role

Nearly three decades ago, Timothy Wickham-Crowley theorized that insurgent relations with local populations are often times cooperative and even rest on legitimate authority.⁷² At the time, Wickham-Crowley's argument was a radical deviation from the standard view of insurgent-civilian interactions as inherently predatory, an assumption underlying conflict studies even today. More recent analysis by Zachariah Mampilly and Ana Arjona support Wickham-Crowley's observation that guerilla relations with civilians vary between predatory and contractual.⁷³ Contractual relationships are based on an exchange of rents for public goods like security, order, and economic regulation. Illicit and informal economic activities provide particularly auspicious opportunities for insurgents to provide public goods as a strategy for accessing rents while building popular support. Illicit and informal economic activities exist beyond the state's security apparatus creating a vacuum of authority that insurgents can fill.

FARC relations with local populations in coca producing zones demonstrate the kind of contractual exchange that Wickham-Crowley and Mamphilly describe. The FARC exploited the drug trade for rents mainly by bargaining with illicit cultivators, intermediaries, and narcotics traffickers. In this way, the FARC constructed a broad coalition of local supporters based on the provision of collectively beneficial public goods. As Wickham-Crowley's theory predicts, support for the FARC began to break down as their tactics shifted toward created predation, thereby breaking the contract. In particular, narcotics traffickers became disgruntled with the FARC predation, and therefore supported the right-wing paramilitaries. With the paramilitary organizations, the narcotics traffickers could potentially gain not only freedom from FARC fees

⁷² Wickham-Crowley 1987 s

⁷³ Mamphilly 2011; Arjona 2008

and domination, but also direct control over the primary link in the illicit commodity chain: illicit production.

Indeed, the FARC mediated on behalf of illicit cultivators in their relations with narcotics traffickers, such as some of the predatory tendencies of the latter were curtailed by the FARC's authority in the region. For example, prior to the FARC's involvement in the drug trade narcotics traffickers enforced a division of labor in coca growing regions. The traffickers secured the method for processing coca leaf in to paste, thereby leaving peasant cultivators dependent on traffickers to purchase their coca leaf with the traffickers controlling prices.⁷⁴ However, the FARC discloses this information to cultivators, and eventually most begin to process their own leafs into paste. Moreover, the FARC ensures fair prices from traffickers.

What is more, the onset of the illicit economy itself led to a certain amount of social stratification in frontier regions, where commercial farms began to emerge and out-compete some of the smaller family operations. Commercial farmers had direct ties to narcotics traffickers who were also large landowners. The FARC regulated the distribution of land and resources in favor of peasant producers. One key difference between the FARC and the paramilitaries in coca-growing regions is that the FARC guarded against the development of large-scale coca plantations while the AUC promoted and participated in the endeavor. As Saab and Taylor explain, "The different strategies of FARC and the AUC in the early part of this decade were reflected in the landholding patterns of the respective geographic regions of each group. While large, well organized "coca estates" run by landlords and paramilitary gangs predominated in

⁷⁴ Author interview with Kyle Johnson, Corporación Arco Iris, in Bogotá, Colombia, September 28, 2011

northern Colombia, in the south there is still a pattern of small-scale coca cultivation by peasants and *colonos*,”⁷⁵

Moreover, the FARC engaged in policing activities in order to re-establish order in areas affected by the coca boom. The FARC created order in zones with illicit cultivation by military supporting the work of local civil society organizations, most importantly the *Juntas de Acción Comunal* (Community Action Boards; JACs).⁷⁶ The JACs formed independently of the guerilla movement and were the main force behind frontier development in the 1960s and 1970s. Prior to coca, the settler communities actively participated and made demands on government through their local JACs. However, the social and economic transformations brought by the drug trade undermined the JAC’s role in maintaining order. With rents from the drug trade, the FARC reinvigorated the JACs, infused them with capital and authority.⁷⁷ In this way, the FARC’s presence was central to overcoming collective action problems that impeded order and security in communities that were being undermined by crime.

Under FARC tutelage and economic support, and without any financial support from the central government, the JACs constructed schools, river ports, and participated in the founding of new towns. With time, the JACS even supplemented the state in police functions and authority. They controlled and punished delinquency, even dealing with egregious violations such as murder or rape. JAC members backed the political work of the guerilla and identified with the

⁷⁵ 2009: 466

⁷⁶ JACs formed in 1958 under law 14 as community-based organizations that would carry out development projects with state and local funds. The state’s intention for the JAC was to pacify rural unrest. However, over time the government financially and politically abandoned JACS. Control of the JACs was then usurped in many instances by non-state armed actors, including the FARC. Author interview with Juan Guillermo Ferro Medina, September 23, 2011, Bogotá, Colombia

⁷⁷ Jaramillo and Cubides 1989: 257-258

guerilla leadership⁷⁸. It was understood that the work of the JAC was possible because of the authority of the FARC. “In many municipalities of these areas, the only authority, beyond the symbolic state police station in the capital centers of the municipalities, is that of the FARC, and [FARC] is the sole provider of essential public services,”⁷⁹

Indeed, the FARC effectively used its military authority to force local cooperation in a way that allowed the local community to increase their incomes through illicit cultivation but without taking unduly high risks. The FARC created a semblance of order in an otherwise anarchic environment of unrestrained profit seeking, exploiting illicit rents to build up *both* military and political power, becoming a prosperous, disciplined, and formidable force against the State. As Ortíz explains,

“... the links of the guerrillas to the drug trade have not only provided important financial benefits for the insurgents but have also assured them of a substantial level of support from those sectors of the agricultural population involved in growing drug crops. In this way, the exercise of parallel government functions by the FARC in certain coca growing areas has had important political consequences in the sense that it has secured a social base for the armed organization. Consequently, the opposition of the FARC to the Colombian government’s campaigns to stamp out illicit crops has been doubly motivated. On the one hand, the insurgents have tried to defend their drug-based revenues, while at the same time trying to protect the interests of the coca growers with the aim of ensuring their continued political support for the rebel movement,”⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Jaramillo and Cubides 1989: 258

⁷⁹ Ortíz 2002

⁸⁰ 2002: 138; Also see Felbab-Brown 2009

The FARC's effectiveness in restoring order won the insurgent group broad local support for at time. Popular support in such a context is difficult to measure, but there are some moments of visible and widespread political support. For example, in 1996 thousands of peasants were mobilized by the FARC in a massive demonstration against fumigation of illicit crops. Moreover, the FARC has successfully recruited an army of nearly 20,000 armed combatants with little evidence of forced recruitment and without economic incentives.⁸¹

Conclusions: The Drug Trade after FARC

Following the 2001 overthrow of the Taliban government by U.S. and NATO forces, illicit opium production in Afghanistan skyrocketed from 70 to 92 percent of the world's total in 2007,⁸² and the security situation rapidly worsened. The dismantling of a terrorist organization unintentionally contributed to the expansion of the drug trade alongside the fragmentation of the insurgent movement, leading to conditions of intensified conflict, lawlessness, and violence.⁸³ The problem was that the policies in place to construct a stable government in Afghanistan did not take into account the Taliban's role in the drug trade. More than a beneficiary, the Taliban provided centralized regulation of the drug trade in much the same way-though arguably more centralized-as the FARC does in some regions of Colombia. Hence, when the Taliban was dismantled and the narco-economy left in place, the result was increased instability and insecurity as criminal interests filled the vacuum of authority.

⁸¹ Guttierrez Sanín 2006; Ramírez 2011; the effects of the FARC-coca connection on popular support vary between the coca regions and the country as a whole. FARC support for the illicit economy won them legitimacy vis-à-vis the population involved in coca cultivation. However, the cost was the loss of legitimacy in front of general public opinion (Ferro 2004).

⁸² UNODC 2007 Afghanistan Opium Winter Rapid Assessment Survey

⁸³ *Matthew Lacouture (2007) Narco-Terrorism in Afghanistan: Counternarcotics and Counterinsurgency, International Affairs Review: <http://www.iar-gwu.org/node/39>*

There are important lessons from the Afghan case to be applied to the current situation in Colombia, and the question of constructing citizen security and combating the drug trade in a post-FARC environment. As in Afghanistan, policies that address either the illicit economy or the insurgency tend to spill over into the other realm having unintended consequences. For example, the war on drugs and the use of aggressive eradication techniques such as aerial fumigations increased the legitimacy of the FARC as a defender of the interests of coca farmers.⁸⁴ Similarly, the successful demobilization of the FARC either through military conquest or political bargaining could have unintentional consequences for the war on drugs. By eliminating a key actor in the organization and regulation of the illicit economy, the demobilization of the FARC could create space for contestation among purely criminal interests leading to greater insecurity and violence.

Indeed, the role of the illicit drug industry in intensifying and prolonging the Colombian conflict has been thoroughly analyzed. The insurgency would have been weaker and over sooner had it not been for the presence of an illicit, lucrative, and lootable resource. Hence, we have a sense of what insurgency looks like without the drug trade. An equally important question is what the drug trade looks like in the absence of an insurgency? The question is particularly pertinent given recent events in which the FARC is sitting down with representatives of the Colombian government in order to engage in political negotiations. Evidence from Afghanistan suggests that the drug trade will not only persists post-conflict, but could become more violent.

⁸⁴ Felbab-Brown 2009

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