DERADICALIZATION AND DISENGAGEMENT IN LATIN AMERICA

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In Latin America, the deradicalization process is framed in the context of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (or DDR) initiatives adopted at the end of left-wing insurgencies and civil wars that plagued the region in the second half of the 20th century. During this time, left-wing ideology and right-wing counter-responses to the actions of Marxist guerrillas drove internal violence, with Islamic fundamentalism making few inroads in Latin America, even after 9/11. Hence, the post-9/11 deradicalization processes at work in Middle Eastern and Western European countries battling Islamic extremism never took shape in the region, which explains the slightly “off” tone of this chapter when compared to the other ones in the handbook.

Although the lines between deradicalization and DDR are in general difficult to draw (Cockayne and O’Neil 2015), in the case of Latin America deradicalization has been – in an indirect fashion – an integral part of the peace processes. It has often taken the shape of individual psychological and physical disengagement from violence, and preceded the demobilization and reintegration activities of ex-combatants. Consequently, for the purpose of this chapter, building on Koehler’s discussion on disengagement in Chapter 2, I define ideological disengagement as the militant’s abandonment of ideology, and I use it as a proxy concept for deradicalization in the Latin American context. Due to personal and environmental factors as well as intra-group dynamics, ideology may become over time less attractive to the militant and shape less and less his/her worldview and behavior. Ideological disengagement can be psychological and physical. When psychological disengagement occurs, the militant stops valuing and identifying with the ideological principles of the group. When physical disengagement occurs, the militant refuses to carry out violence in the name of the ideology, and ultimately leaves the organization. Psychological and physical disengagement can occur independently as well as in tandem.

As the cases presented in this chapter illustrate, many countries in Latin America had no deradicalization programs in place during and at the end of their respective internal conflicts. For this reason, individual and collective demobilization at the end of the conflict did not come as a result of successful government initiatives. Individual demobilization was mainly a product of individual disengagement of militants who had become disillusioned with the armed group or switched priorities from aspiring to make a contribution to the success of “the
revolution” to desiring and pursuing a family life. The absence of government deradicalization programs was especially felt in Central American countries such as Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, which – until the 1990s – had been mired in decades-long civil wars. In the absence of official deradicalization programs, their governments relied on propaganda to discourage local support for the guerrillas and prevent new members from joining the conflict.

For combatants demobilizing collectively (or as a group) – irrespective of ideological orientation – the decision to disarm and demobilize was the outcome of a rational assessment at group level that the costs of continuing to fight were too high while the prospects of winning were too slim. For the combatants demobilizing in the early and mid-1990s, the end of the Cold War, the termination of Soviet sponsorship, and the ideological demise of Marxism-Leninism were all factors contributing to this assessment.

**Left-wing vs. right-wing disengagement**

For left-wing militants, individual disengagement came as the result of guerrilla members growing disillusioned with the organization as a whole and abandoning the ideological goals for more pragmatic or personal considerations. For the groups that demobilized collectively, some of the leaders entered politics to further the group’s political goals in a legitimate way, as was the case for M-19 guerrillas in Colombia in 1990.

However, the demobilization of right-wing paramilitaries remains a contentious point until today, especially in Colombia where some former combatants continue to engage in violent extremism. For several decades, the violent activities of Colombian paramilitaries were part of a state-sanctioned culture of deliberate violence against the left-wing armed groups, which often went hand in hand with drug violence. As the trade in cocaine grew extremely lucrative in the 1990s, the Colombian paramilitaries became increasingly involved in drug trafficking, with their violent activities being not entirely driven by genuine political principles, but also by desire for personal enrichment. Similar dynamics of violence are currently occurring in the drug cultivation and trafficking areas formerly under the control of Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia: FARC), control, which the ex-paramilitaries took over when FARC started to demobilize in early 2017. The dominating financial motivation for right-wing violence means that deradicalization programs designed to target those who engage in politically or religiously motivated extremism are less likely to be successful in this case.

Also, in Latin America most post-conflict transitional justice mechanisms have been predominantly designed to bring and maintain peace and stability after decades of internal conflict. As combatants were less likely to disarm and demobilize unless granted some form of amnesty, transitional justice processes focused less on bringing to justice the perpetrators of violence. Hence, former guerrilla and paramilitary members have not only been included in peace negotiations, but some of them also entered the political process at local and national level. While on the one hand this approach brought to an end most of the insurgencies and civil wars in the region, on the other hand, it had the undesired effect of de facto legitimizing violence, with criminal violence replacing ideologically motivated attacks.

**Chapter roadmap**

The next sections of this chapter cover the ideological disengagement (as a conceptual proxy for deradicalization in the Latin American context), and DDR into society of the major Colombian left-wing guerrilla groups (i.e., M-19, the FARC, and the National Liberation
The M-19 demobilization and reintegration process

In Colombia, the first successful guerrilla reintegration process took place in 1990, under President Virgilio Barco (1986–1990). Five guerrilla groups demobilized at the time, with M-19 (also known in English as the April 19th Movement) being the most prominent among them. The small size of the organizations, the relatively high level of education of the members, and the political acumen of their leaders contributed – among other factors discussed below – to the success of the demobilization (Porch and Rasmussen 2008), with deliberate government-led deradicalization initiatives playing little to no role in this case.

M-19 had emerged in 1974 as a Marxist-Leninist insurgent organization (Mapping Militants Project: https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/content/mapping-militants) in response to the alleged electoral fraud that had occurred during the 1970 elections. Inspired by the Cuban Revolution (Colombia: The 19th of April Movement), M-19 aimed to change what its members “believed to be a corrupt Colombian electoral system” (Mapping Militants Project) and to advance an inclusive and representative democratic structure. Although leaning strongly towards the left of the political spectrum, the group’s core goals focused on extending democratic representation and curbing government corruption.

The insurgent organizations that demobilized in 1990 did so collectively, but some guerrilla members also demobilized individually (Guáqueta 2007). Although the FARC and the ELN – the two other major guerrilla groups in Colombia – continued the fight against the government, the demobilization and reintegration process of M-19 into society was successful. Moreover, among the three major leftist guerrilla organizations, M-19 was the least ideological one. Given the group’s political agenda and focus on promoting democratic inclusion and representation, the demobilization process was the outcome of the group’s understanding of and adaptation to the political and social circumstances in the country at the time, with two major factors contributing to the success of the peace process:

1. The conflict between M-19 and the government was perceived as a legitimate manifestation of the group’s social grievances, garnering the public’s support.
2. As opposed to the other guerrilla groups, M-19 was interested in becoming a player in the democratic process (Porch and Rasmussen 2008). One of M-19’s preconditions to lay down arms was to obtain the government’s commitment to engage in constitutional reform. In this way, M-19’s political negotiations with the government during the peace process resulted in the group being perceived as a viable “political actor” committed to peace and to advancing democratic values (Guáqueta 2007). The 791 demobilized M-19 combatants became part of the “Alianza Democrática M-19” (AD M-19 or “Democratic Alliance M-19”) political party, gaining at the ballot box the second largest representation in Colombia’s National Constituent Assembly. They
made a strong contribution to redrafting in 1991 Colombia’s Constitution, introducing
democratic reforms and provisions aimed to safeguard human rights (Guáqueta 2007).
The political actions of AD M-19 after the conclusion of the peace process demo-
strated their commitment to the promotion of an open and inclusive democratic pro-
cess, which surpassed the group’s Marxist ideological inclinations. Also, the end of the
Cold War facilitated the group’s legitimate abandonment of Marxist ideological prin-
ciples, which its members had previously embraced.

It is worth mentioning that M-19 had made the decision to demobilize without being
defeated on the battlefield (Porch and Rasmussen 2008), for as long as the government
guaranteed two main basic outcomes: a legal pardon and physical protection for the
demobilized M-19 members (Guáqueta 2007). The legal pardon together with the societal
support of the peace process facilitated M-19’s reintegration and their acceptance as legit-
imate political actors (Guáqueta 2007).

The FARC demobilization and reintegration process

The most recent demobilization and reintegration process in Colombia was initiated (and is
currently stalling) in the context of the peace process with the FARC. The FARC was
established in 1964 as a peasant insurgency that embraced Marxist-Leninist principles, aimed
to defend the rights of rural poor, and opposed the privatization of natural resources (Her-
rera and Porch 2008). To further its cause, the FARC carried out terrorist attacks and
engaged in kidnappings and extortion (Sullivan and Beittel 2016). After a confrontation that
has lasted almost half a century, in 2012 the FARC and the Colombian government opened
a new round of peace talks, which followed previous reconciliation initiatives in the 1980s
and 1990s that did not result in a successful peace agreement.

One of the most important leftist guerrilla organizations in Latin America during the
Cold War, the FARC was considered to represent a “pure Marxist” organization. However,
with the end of the Cold War and the loss of Soviet support, the guerrilla movement moder-
ated its Marxist discourse. In the second half of the 1990s – with the demise of the Cali
and Medellín Cartels – the FARC became one of the top players in the drug trade in
Colombia. In this context, scholars and experts questioned – for good reason – the ideo-
logical discourse of the organization, arguing that the FARC morphed into a criminal
group, which has since maintained a political agenda as a mere façade for drug traffick-
ing.

The end of the Cold War indeed reduced the appeal of Marxist ideology among FARC
members, and – similar to M-19 – their ideological disengagement was not an outcome of
government-initiated programs. In the post-Cold War environment, ideological disengagement
– followed subsequently by individual demobilization – was often the result of indi-
vidual disillusionment with life in the guerrilla movement and due to the gap between the
ideological principles FARC leadership was trying to sell to the rank and file, and the actual
self-interested actions in which the leaders engaged. Furthermore, in the post-Cold War
environment, fewer recruits joined the FARC out of ideological conviction, with research
by Saab and Taylor (2009) showing ideology ranking fourth among the main reasons why
individuals joined the guerrilla movement. Many new recruits joined FARC without
embracing ideological fervor and engaged in violence out of financial necessity rather than
political conviction. However, the reasons why they joined the guerrilla group had an
impact on their subsequent decision to abandon violence and demobilize.
According to the findings of research conducted by Rosenau et al. (2014), prior to 2012 most FARC members demobilized individually. Since 2002, over 21,000 guerrilla members belonging to FARC and ELN demobilized independently and voluntarily surrendered themselves to Colombian security forces. After 2012, they demobilized collectively. To be granted the status of “demobilized illegal combatant” – which translated into access to limited financial benefits and counseling – the guerrilla members had to agree to an interview in which they presented evidence of their membership in the organization, their activities in the armed group, and the reasons why they decided to leave the organization (Rosenau et al. 2014). FARC’s forcible recruitment of combatants “through threats, violence, and intimidation” (Rosenau et al. 2014) represented one of the main reasons driving individual FARC members to desert the guerrilla movement. Besides coercion and forcible recruitment, Rosenau et al. have identified discontent with family life, family or personal ties to guerrilla members, the desire for a better life, and the desire to escape recruitment in rival armed groups such as the ELN or the AUC, as additional reasons why individuals joined the FARC (Rosenau et al. 2014). Rosenau and colleagues’ findings are in line with previous research on the topic, which had identified the following four most widespread reasons for joining the FARC: forced recruitment (20%), the attraction of weapons and wearing a uniform (20%), false promises to receive a salary and good treatment (16%), and political convictions (12%) (Saab and Taylor 2009). Last but not least, the weakening of the FARC and the drop in membership after 2002 are also associated with “Plan Colombia” and the counter-narcotics (and, indirectly, counter-insurgency) measures that it entailed (Rochlin 2011; Shifter 2012) as well as with President Uribe’s “scorched-earth military campaign against the Marxist FARC guerrillas” (Salazar 2018).

In the case of female recruits into the FARC, Natalia Herrera and Douglas Porch identify romantic or affective ties, the desire to emulate glamorous guerrillera (or female combatant) figures, and unhappy home situations in which the young women were physically and verbally abused, as the main reasons for joining the guerrilla group. Similar to their male counterparts, few of the women recruited into the FARC cited ideology as the main reason for joining. However, most of the women Herrera and Porch interviewed confessed their adherence to the left-wing ideological principles to which they were exposed post-recruitment (Herrera and Porch 2008). Not only women, but all FARC recruits underwent a rigorous indoctrination process after joining the guerrilla group, with many embracing Marxist-Leninist principles by the end of their training period. Nonetheless, the discrepancy between the principles with which recruits were indoctrinated and the obvious practices of leadership disillusioned many rank-and-file recruits, who ultimately abandoned their adherence to the organization’s ideological principles. Furthermore, individual needs and desires drove the recruits away from the guerrilla group, and individual demobilization was not the product of successful deradicalization programs, but a natural process of “growing out” of the organization (or ideological disengagement) as a result of intra-group dynamics (Koehler 2016) as the examples below illustrate.

Alongside identifying the motivations and circumstances under which individuals joined the FARC, Rosenau et al. also identified the main reasons why recruits left the armed group. According to their research findings, the poor treatment of lower-level combatants by their superiors, hunger and extreme fatigue, ideological disenchantment, and “perceived deviation from the revolutionary principles that had first attracted” them to the movement motivated some of the members to desert the guerrilla organization (Rosenau et al. 2014). Moreover, the desire of some guerrillas to pursue their personal lives and rebuild family connections – the FARC does not allow for family visits (Herrera and Porch 2008) – made
them determined to leave behind the revolutionary goals of the group (Rosenau et al. 2014). Furthermore, the differences in the enforcement of policies prohibiting romantic relationships among members – strictly enforced for rank-and-file members but relaxed for the leadership – deepened resentment within the organization.

The personal motives are especially present in the case of the guerrilleras who demobilize from the FARC. The group’s policy to ban pregnancies and force female combatants to have abortions once they become pregnant ultimately led some guerrilleras to prioritize the creation of stable family relations over revolutionary life and to, ultimately, leave the organization (Herrera and Porch 2008). For many of the women Herrera and Porch interviewed, “pregnancy, and especially the birth of a child, changed their attitude to the organization” (Herrera and Porch 2008). For other women, the discrepancy between FARC’s rhetoric regarding gender equality and the actual practice that failed to accommodate female ambition, punishing it instead, represented another factor driving some guerrilleras away from the organization. However, the lack of viable alternatives outside the guerrilla organization and the difficulties of reintegrating into society as a former woman guerrilla combatant meant that women deserted the group at lower rates than their presence in the organization (Herrera and Porch 2008). Overall, the women’s continued membership in the guerrilla group was not representative of their ideological inclinations or their adherence to violent extremism.

After February 2002, when one of several attempted peace processes with the government broke down, both male and female guerrillas faced the same dilemma when considering whether to desert or not: “where to go?” Given FARC’s propensity to recruit from the local communities, the individuals who left the guerrilla group could not go home to areas controlled by the insurgency without risking recapture or receiving the death sentence for desertion. The members’ low level of education and lack of marketable skills also made it difficult for many to survive in urban environments, which would have provided them with anonymity and some degree of protection from the insurgency (Herrera and Porch 2008). In this light, the demobilization process resulting from the November 2016 peace accord signed between the FARC and the Colombian government (Angelo 2017) was the combined outcome of gradual ideological erosion across several decades of conflict and of the lack of viable prospects for guerrilla victory. Under the 2016 accord, the demobilized FARC leaders are not to face prison time, but they are to give up their wealth – most of which comes from illicit drug trafficking – and to pay reparations to victims of their violence and abuse.

Some of the challenges associated with the implementation of the current peace process, and the disarmament and reintegration of FARC combatants, are the result of the FARC being treated as a political actor, while many of its fronts have been heavily involved over the years in the cocaine trade. Hence, the government’s political incentives are not likely to compensate for the members’ financial losses once they renounce drug trafficking (Norman 2017), and the peace process is unlikely to put an automatic end to narco-violence.

Furthermore, while FARC leadership benefited directly from the drug trade, the rank and file did not have access to narco-trafficking proceeds and did not receive a salary in exchange for their participation in the organization (Norman 2017). This division between leadership and rank and file is likely to create further impediments to the implementation of the disarmament and reintegration plan. Under the agreement signed with the government, each demobilized rank-and-file guerrilla is supposed to receive from the government $6,100 over a two-year period. Delays in payment or cut-backs in funding, added to broken promises for education and employment opportunities that have yet to materialize, are likely to push former combatants to resume violence and re-engage in illicit activities (Norman 2017). Furthermore, Norman’s research concludes that, in the aftermath of the peace agreement,
violence will continue, and it will not be ideologically motivated but driven by the quest for illicit profits (Norman 2017). These conclusions are unfortunately vindicated by the assassination since 2016 of hundreds of activists and human rights leaders who challenged the presence of paramilitaries in the coca cultivation territories that FARC vacated. In this light, government-led efforts towards combating violent extremism should take into account the lack of ideological motivation of perpetrators, and tailor the initiatives to combat criminal violence.

**The Colombian paramilitaries demobilization process**

The right-wing paramilitaries in Colombia formed in the early 1980s to counter the kidnapping and extortion activities of left-wing insurgent groups, such as M-19, FARC, and ELN. The right-wing paramilitaries were mainly supported by large estate landowners, ranchers, and traders, who – due to their wealth – were the principal targets of guerrillas’ kidnapping and extortion activities, and could not rely on the government for protection (Guáqueta 2007). In December 2002, President Álvaro Uribe initiated negotiations with the leaders of the AUC – the main right-wing paramilitary organization in the country. The negotiations aimed to reach an agreement for a collective voluntary demobilization process (Nussio and Howe 2016). The AUC had been formed in 1997 by bringing under its umbrella the various regional paramilitary groups that had operated individually throughout Colombia since the 1980s (Guáqueta 2007). After its formation, the AUC carried out kidnappings and political assassinations, and was heavily involved in the drug trade (Ahram 2016). For Uribe, reaching an agreement with the paramilitaries was a necessary precondition for the initiation of the peace agreement with the FARC and the ELN, the two leftist insurgent groups still fighting against the government. FARC or ELN members feared that if they had demobilized and disarmed before the paramilitaries had, they would have faced certain death at the hands of the right-wing organizations (Porch and Rasmussen 2008).

The partly political, partly criminal motives driving the paramilitary groups had an impact on the success of the demobilization process. Violence in the country did not come to an end with the demobilization of the AUC. “Massacres, selective killings, extortion, robbery, and threats in support of ‘social cleansing’” (Nussio and Howe 2016) continued and were carried out by newly formed organizations, which also had a partly political, partly criminal motivation. They are known as “BaCrims” – the short form for “Bandas Criminales” (or criminal bands/gangs).

Although the paramilitaries were supposed to be ideologically inclined towards the right side of the political spectrum and in direct opposition to the left-wing organizations, most individuals who had joined the “paras” did so for “the promise of money and of a better life” (Rosenau et al. 2014) or to revenge the death of a family member or friend at the hands of the leftist militant groups. Gradually, the little ideological motivation the paramilitaries had disappeared, and by the time the AUC started to demobilize, its members engaged in violence mostly to support criminal activities or purely for the sake of violence.

During the demobilization process, the Colombian government remained largely aware that many individuals had been recruited in the right-wing paramilitary groups by being promised a good wage. Hence, in addition to pull factors such as granting “amnesty from criminal investigation, prosecution and conviction to AUC fighters who voluntarily participated in demobilization” (Angelo 2017), the government added to the demobilization package social benefits such as health insurance, economic incentives, and vocational training.

However, individuals guilty of massacres and massive human rights violations were excluded from amnesty and were not covered by the provisions of Law 782 of 2002, which
governed the demobilization process. The government had to make a special effort to incentivize those excluded from the benefits of Law 782 to demobilize (Angelo 2017). The emphasis the Colombian government placed on financial inducements as pull factors for demobilization was an indirect admission that profit – next to revenge – was one of the key drivers for right-wing violence, with little genuine ideological motivation being present.

Part of the formal government-led deradicalization initiative, President Uribe relied on the “Program of Reincorporation to the Civil Life” that had been in place and designed to coordinate the demobilization of the guerrillas in the 1990s. The program focused on the provision of healthcare, education, vocational training, and employment opportunities for former combatants, who demobilized either individually or collectively. Vocational training was intended to offer a viable alternative for individuals to make a living in the legal economy, and to prevent recidivism of demobilized fighters into crime and violence.

To support the reintegration of former combatants into society, the system the Colombian government set in place was supposed to monitor and assess their reintegration and their performance in the program. However, according to a 2005 Human Rights Watch Report, the monitoring system was not devised to reveal whether the demobilized paramilitary members continued to be involved in criminal activities or if they have de facto remained part of paramilitary structure (HRW 2005). In spite of these legal provisions, many demobilized combatants had a hard time finding employment in their communities. The former fighters had psychological problems that made their reintegration into society difficult, with employers refraining from hiring them due to their lack of formal training and skills, and for fear of delinquency or disciplinary problems (Angelo 2017). Also, as the AUC demobilized collectively, little individual deliberation was involved, rendering – according to Ribetti cited in Chowdhury Fink and Hearne (2008) – the AUC demobilization process less effective: most ex-paramilitaries who returned to join armed groups went through a collective – not individual – disengagement process. During the demobilization process, some 1,800 individuals refused to surrender their weapons and opted out of the mandatory registration process. They maintained control of the drug cultivation and trafficking areas of their former leaders, and reorganized themselves into BaCrims (Angelo 2017). These offspring organizations – often referred to also as neo-paramilitaries – are criminally inclined (Nussio and Howe 2016) rather than politically motivated. Some Colombian officials refer to a “reparamilitarization” of Colombia (Porch and Rasmussen 2008) taking place with the emergence of these new entities.

Furthermore, former combatants were disproportionately exposed to the risk of being killed in the aftermath of demobilization. From 2003 until 2010, 1,966 individuals who demobilized collectively died after their demobilization; among them, 1,385 former paramilitary members had been killed, with most of the killings being conducted by professional killers (Nussio 2011). The former combatants’ involvement in criminal activities, outstanding disputes among the fighters, revenge killings conducted against those who assisted in the judicial process against their leaders, and the lack of law enforcement capacity to protect the demobilized fighters from those who held a grudge against them – be they previous enemies, victims, comrades, or leaders (Nussio 2011) – are the main reasons why former combatants are more likely to be assassinated post-demobilization, especially in areas of the country with a strong paramilitary presence (Nussio and Howe 2016). Moreover, the newly formed BaCrims also aim to recruit demobilized paramilitaries using a mix of economic incentives and threats to their lives or those of family members. When they resist the threats and decline reincorporation, the former combatants are very likely to be killed. In the context of the imminent threats demobilized paramilitaries...
face, they relocate to other areas of the country, engage in self-defense, or band together as a group to protect each other (Nussio 2011). Lack of security does not push former paramilitary members to band only with each other, but they often join others who experience a similar environment, such as former guerrillas, drug traffickers, or soldiers (Porch and Rasmussen 2008). All these responses to the threats they face to their security prevent the former AUC combatants continuing the process of reintegration into society, and make it more likely that they re-engage in violence (Nussio 2011). Also, the incentives Álvaro Uribe’s government provided to AUC leadership, but not to mid-rank commanders, structured the demobilization process in such a way that mid-level commanders acted as “spoilers” (Nussio and Howe 2016).

The incorporation of the demobilized paramilitaries into the political process faced strong societal opposition, which had an impact on the government’s efforts to resettle and reskill the ex-combatants, pushing some of them into joining the BaCrims. The opposition was due to the paramilitaries’ involvement in drug trafficking, their record of human rights violations and perpetration of brutal massacres, and their perceived high level of influence over the economic and political environment (Guáqueta 2007). The paramilitaries and the government security forces were known to have previously collaborated at local level in certain areas of the country.

The paramilitary forces had been linked to intimidation of voters and political opponents on behalf of landed, business, and political elites, as well as the assassination of labor union leaders and left-wing and human rights activists. In the “parapolitics” scandal, over 1,000 officials with political ties to President Uribe had been investigated for their links and involvement with the AUC (Angelo 2017). In this way, the demobilization and reintegration process of the AUC had been complicated not only by the paramilitaries’ deep involvement in the drug trade, but also by their close ties (see infiltration of) different government security agencies such as the military, police, and the intelligence services (Porch and Rasmussen 2008).

As these examples illustrate, the paramilitary groups enjoyed little ideological legitimacy among the population, with gruesome violence conducted for profit or revenge being their key signature. Upon their demobilization, there had been little to nothing left of their initial right-wing ideological inclination, with most of the violence being conducted in support of criminal activities or for self-defense. As BaCrims’ and former paramilitaries’ extreme violence is not rooted in a radical ideology, but is mostly financially or security driven, government programs aimed to counter their extreme acts of violence need to be tailored accordingly and to take into account the existing differences in motivation of the perpetrators.

The ongoing ELN peace process

The Colombian armed group Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN or the National Liberation Army) was created in 1964. Similar to the formation of the other leftist guerrilla groups – the FARC and the Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL or Popular Liberation Army) – ELN’s creation was a reaction to the closing of the political arena to other political actors except for the Liberal and Conservative Parties, which alternated in power after 1957 under the banner of the “National Front.”

The ELN has proved to be the Colombian armed group the most difficult to demobilize, and one of the few armed groups in Latin America continuing to confront the government. Members of the organization have a strong identity, mainly built around an ideology combining “Roman Catholic morality with a strict belief in Marxist materialism,” which makes it difficult for the government to bring them to the negotiations table. According to Gruber and Pospisil: “This moral component is consequently present throughout their documents

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The strong ideological identity that ELN has created for its members allowed the organization to weather well the ideological demise of Marxism-Leninism at the end of the Cold War. This identity has made the group extremely resilient throughout the past 50 years of conflict with the government. During this time, the group has demonstrated a high level of adaptability in the face of adversity without losing sight of its main ideological goals (Gruber and Pospisil 2015). Up to this moment, the guerrilla organization and the government have been unable to simultaneously sanction a collective demobilization process. Only individual desertions from the ELN have taken place, with individuals deciding to leave the organization, disarm, and reintegrate into society. Most desertions so far have been motivated by ill treatment by ELN commanders (Rosenau et al. 2014), with individual ideological disengagement being the product of intra-group dynamics and disillusionment with the cause.

However, soon after the FARC entered the peace negotiations with the Colombian government in November 2012, the ELN leadership expressed their interest in the peace process. They were rebuffed by the administration of President Santos, who demanded the release of all kidnap victims as a precondition to the talks. Between 2014 and 2018, the ELN leadership and the Colombian government have been engaged several times in “exploratory peace talks” (Sullivan and Beittel 2016), which have either been delayed or put on hold due to the continued ELN attacks against oil pipelines, civilians, or security personnel. Starting with May 2018, the peace talks between the ELN and the Colombian government have resumed in Havana, Cuba. The strong ideological hold the ELN has over its members makes the implementation of a deradicalization program tailored to the specific mix of Catholicism and Marxism-Leninism a prerequisite for a successful peace process and DDR program.

The path to defeating the Peruvian Sendero Luminoso

Sendero Luminoso – also known in English as the “Shining Path” – is a Maoist insurgency that emerged in Ayacucho, Huamanga (Friedman 2018), and has been active in Peru since 1980. Although the group has been significantly weakened over the past few years, it has remained active, committing some 13 terrorist acts in 2015, and has approximately 250–300 members (Sullivan and Beittel 2016). Similar to other leftist guerrilla movements in Latin America, Sendero Luminoso was born in the context of the land redistribution tensions which have plagued the countries in the region since their independence from Spain in the 19th century. However, as opposed to the other examples discussed in this chapter (Colombia, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala) in which the left-wing guerrillas were motivated by the lack of agrarian reform, Sendero Luminoso came in to fill the power vacuum left by a poorly designed and implemented reform. The failure of the agrarian reform made it easier for the insurgency to successfully recruit members among the indigenous communities and the university students who were unable to find employment after graduation (Kay 2001).

Among the most cited reasons why many individuals joined Sendero Luminoso are the “systematic regional and ethnic marginalization, government corruption, and extreme poverty and underdevelopment” (Friedman 2018). Alongside ideology, individual motivations to join the movement included romantic ties to some of the fighters, the desire to take revenge against the government for the human rights abuses perpetrated by the military, or the desire to “belong” resulting from low self-esteem or a tough family situation. However, irrespective of their commitment to ideology, once the personal motivations had worn off,
many members – especially women recruits – started to lose their allegiance to the group and demobilized. Understanding these dynamics and to make defections harder, the new recruits were immersed in comprehensive indoctrination sessions, and Sendero forced them to commit acts of violence that would make it impossible for recruits to return to their original communities (Friedman 2018). Irrespective of its efforts, the disillusionment that many members and supporters experienced as a result of the group’s “dogmatism, (ideological) rigidity and use of violence” led to individual ideological disengagement and subsequent demobilization, weakening Sendero Luminoso and leading to its near defeat (Kay 2001). According to Kay, an additional key contributing factor to Sendero’s demise was its inability to provide security in the communities that supported its ideological mission and to protect the population from the human rights abuses of the government’s security forces (Kay 2001) carried out in the context of an “iron fist” counter-insurgency approach. Lastly, the change in the government’s tactics to less militarized ones (Friedman 2018) and the capture of Sendero’s leader shifted the balance in favor of the state.

In 2001 the Peruvian government set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación, broadly known as CVR). As the CVR did not offer amnesty to those who came forward and publicly testified, few militants had any tangible incentive to do so, with both Sendero Luminoso and the military avoiding taking part in any public hearings of the Commission (Friedman 2018). Furthermore, the Peruvian society at large was more focused on the missing persons and on granting support to the victims of violence rather than on the reintegration of the ex-combatants. The former fighters were often stigmatized and had to hide their past. Also, as in the other cases of post–conflict reintegration in Central and South America discussed in this chapter, women had a tougher time than men reintegrating into society, marriage rarely being an option for most of them. As a result, they were often left to fend for themselves on the margins of society (Friedman 2018).

Similar to the Colombian left-wing organizations discussed above, ideological disengagement occurred not as a result of well-established and implemented government programs, but as individual members had become disillusioned with the organization or its leadership, and abandoned the ideological cause for more pragmatic ones, including self-preservation and focus on family life.

**Post-civil war ideological disengagement in Central America**

In Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, the members of the left- and right-wing organizations fighting in the civil wars had a strong degree of ideological motivation. In the Central American context, the disarmament phase of the DDR process did not concern only the guerrillas or right-wing paramilitaries as in Colombia, but government soldiers also had to surrender their weapons in El Salvador and Nicaragua (North 1998). In this light, the term ex-combatants covers both “former government soldiers as well as former members of armed opposition groups” (Spencer 1997). Across all three countries, at the end of the civil war lack of adequate funding, political will, and security stood in the way of proper implementation of demobilization and reintegration programs (Spencer 1997).

Ideology was at the heart of the civil wars in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, with clear divisions drawn between right-wing and left-wing supporters. Furthermore, with the United States and the USSR providing foreign aid along ideological lines, the right–left divide only grew deeper during the conflict. These decades-long internal wars exhausted the population and the resources of the state. With the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union, the civil wars in Central America also started to unwind, and ideological
considerations were subdued to pragmatic considerations: putting an end to the violence and concluding a viable peace agreement. The extreme violence that Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala experienced took place in the context of society-wide civil wars that reached far larger proportions than the left-wing and paramilitary violence in Colombia and Peru. When the peace agreements in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala were concluded, DDR-related considerations prevailed and the ideological deradicalization of former combatants remained an afterthought. All sides suffered from the lack of state resources available to support the demobilization and reintegration process. The violence that followed the peace agreements was not ideological in nature, but represented a “learned response” and the only tool ex-combatants on both sides had available to confront a failed reintegration process.

**Nicaragua**

In Nicaragua, at the end of the civil war in 1990, the government of Violeta Chamorro funded the creation of “Contra-controlled” development zones aimed to facilitate the reintegration of the Contras (or right-wing combatants) into the civilian population. The creation of such zones provided the Contras with an incentive to demobilize, but many of the areas ended up lacking water and electricity due to lack of funding and for being located in rural areas where landmines were present (Cupples 2004). The funding for DDR programs fell short of the promises made during the peace process, driving some ex-Contra groups to rearm, form the “re-contras,” and demand land, credit, housing, and amnesty (Rogers 2001).

Most of the government soldiers who fought on behalf of the Sandinista government were let go from the army with little support, which pushed many into a life of crime (Spear 1999). Furthermore, the attacks they suffered at the hands of the re-contras, translated into the re-armament and re-organization of ex-soldiers into groups called “recompas,” aimed at defending themselves and their communities. Some of the former guerrillas and soldiers joined forces to voice their common demands for housing, credit, and amnesty, and they were called “revueltos.” The Nicaraguan government re-engaged in negotiations with all sides – the “re-contras,” “re-compas,” and “revueltos” – and aimed to disarm them. However, with a weak economy and few financial resources available, the government achieved very little on this front (Rogers 2001).

**El Salvador**

In El Salvador, the civil war ended in 1992 with the Chapultepec Peace Accords that promised demobilization payments, land redistribution, and education to help ex-combatants reintegrate into society (Spear 1999). The Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) refused to disarm and demobilize in advance of negotiations and they demanded a full political agreement before disarming. Indeed, disarmament ended up being the last agenda item discussed with the government (Muggah, 2013). After signing the final peace agreement on January 15, 1992, the guerrillas were granted amnesty, and the main FMLN leaders returned home to El Salvador by the end of January (Munck 1993). In line with the provisions of the peace agreement, on February 1, 1992 the cease-fire came into effect, and by October 31, 1992 the full demobilization of the FMLN was to be completed as well as their transition to a legal political party. Part of the demobilization process, the FMLN forces were expected to assemble in UN-supervised “concentration zones” also called “secure areas” where they were to turn in their weapons, prior to returning to civilian life (Munck 1993). Although there were delays in implementing the agreed schedule, the
guerrillas stuck to their side of the bargain. The most serious resistance to the implementation of the peace accords came from the Salvadorean Army, which refused to purge the high-level officers who had committed atrocities during the civil war (Munck 1993).

After the demobilization phase, the next step was to reinsert the former guerrillas into society. To achieve this outcome, the government sponsored programs that included “land transfers, farm loans, technical assistance and housing, as well as services for the war-wounded” (Segovia 2009). Although women accounted for approximately 30% of the guerrilla forces, the reinsertion programs did not take into account their specific needs as heads of household, with women facing discrimination in terms of access to land and credit. As a result of these practices, the reinsertion of women into productive life registered the least success (Segovia 2009). Overall, as Segovia argues, in El Salvador, demobilization and disarmament took place without being followed by the successful reintegration of ex-combatants into civilian life (Segovia 2009). The main obstacles in the successful implementation of the reinsertion programs have been limited funds (El Salvador is one of the poorest countries in Central America), delays in land redistribution, and the lack of employable skills of many ex-combatants who had fought in the civil war over the past 12 years (Spencer 1997).

Guatemala

In Guatemala, DDR had been at the forefront of the peace negotiations between the Guatemalan Government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) to bring to an end the 36-year civil war, which had been “one of the bloodiest and longest internal armed conflicts of the Latin American continent” (Viaene 2011). The peace process lasted over a decade and focused on government and society demilitarization and on strengthening civilian power. As a result of the 1996 peace process, ex-combatants – both soldiers and guerrillas – were granted amnesty for the violent acts they committed during the civil war. However, this step – although needed to bring the war to an end – created resentment among the general population as it meant that most of the atrocities committed during more than three decades of conflict went unpunished (Spencer 1997). Furthermore, one of the outcomes of the failed demobilization efforts was the rise in organized crime and youth gang-related violence in the country.

Reintegrating female fighters

In all three cases – Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala – it is worth mentioning the experience of former female fighters who had to reintegrate into society at the end of the civil war. While fighting with the guerrillas during the civil wars, the women felt valued and respected for their skills, and they experienced a high degree of equality. However, at the end of the conflict when they demobilized, the women reintegrated “back into poverty and traditional gender relations” (Hauge 2008). In Guatemala, the worsening in post-demobilization condition was especially acute for women who demobilized individually (Hauge 2008).

As the examples above illustrate, the DDR efforts that followed the peace accords ending the Nicaraguan, Salvadorean, and Guatemalan civil wars did not include any official or government-sponsored deradicalization initiative. With the ideological demise of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the parties to the conflict were left animated by land redistribution and other pragmatic concerns as well as the desire to bring to an end decades-long internal conflicts. Ideology and ideological divides played little to no role in the violence that followed the peace agreements, violence that was the direct result of a poorly financed and implemented DDR process.
Conclusion

This chapter has presented an overview of the deradicalization or ideological disengagement and DDR activities of the left- and right-wing combatants fighting in insurgencies in Colombia and Peru, and in the civil wars in Nicaragua, Salvador, and Guatemala. In most of these cases, and in particular for the left-wing organizations, the initial ideological inclination of the group eroded over time, especially after the end of the Cold War. The disillusionment with life in the organization and the intra-group dynamics, together with the low prospects for victory, led to the individual psychological and physical disengagement of many group members, who ended up ultimately abandoning both the ideological cause and the organization. The individual ideological disengagement and demobilization were often precursors for collective demobilization at the end of government-led peace processes. In the cases where violence followed the demobilization process, the episodes were not born out of ideological conviction, but were either financially motivated, resulting from the lack of resources available for the reintegration of ex-combatants, or driven by self-preservation, with former combatants having to fend off attacks from former rivals or comrades.

In the case of the right-wing Colombian paramilitaries, some combatants refused to demobilize. Some of those who have demobilized continued to engage in violence to protect their access to drug-trafficking profits or to protect themselves from the violence other armed groups (e.g., BaCrims) conducted against them. Ideology played little role in post-demobilization violence, especially for the right-wing organizations, which have been since their inception less ideologically driven than guerrillas.

Regarding the DDR process, while the demobilization and reintegration of Colombian M-19 guerrillas in 1990 were a success, the jury is still out regarding the outcome of the peace process with the FARC. The negotiations with the ELN – the most ideologically motivated of all Colombian guerrillas – are still in the early stages. While some experts and Colombian government officials talk about the “re-paramilitarization” of the country, with the BaCrims often being referred to as “neo-paramilitary” groups, the balance tilts more in favor of a successful demobilization of the AUC rather than of a resounding failure, with the topic remaining rather controversial. Last but not least, the lack of adequate funding and the tough economic situation in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala had a direct impact on the success of demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants at the end of the civil wars.

References


