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The weapons are gone but the revolution lives on

The Colombian guerrilla group FARC has transformed itself into a left-wing political party

After more than 50 years of armed conflict against the Colombian state – and less than a year after signing a peace treaty – on 1 September 2017 the FARC relaunched itself as a political party. It plans to retain the same name, though the acronym will no longer stand for Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) but rather for Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común (the People's Alternative Revolutionary Force). It wants to make clear transition from guerrilla group to political force, without abandoning its goal of revolutionary change.

The party has just over six months before it faces the ballot box. Its candidates will contest elections for the House of Representatives and Senate (together known as the Congress) on 11 March 2018.

Under the terms of the peace agreement, the guerrillas' political successors are guaranteed at least five seats in the House of Representatives and a further five in the Senate (out of a total of 166 and 102 respectively) – regardless how many people actually vote for them. All seven members of FARC's ruling body are expected to win seats in one of the houses. They'll likely be joined by members of Voces de Paz, the civilian group that has represented FARC in Congress since early 2017.

Whether the FARC exceeds the figure of five seats in either house will depend on the actual election results. To win additional seats in the Senate, it needs to top five percent in a nationwide poll. Things get more complicated in the House of Representatives, with each of the country's 32 departmentos forming a separate constituency. Smaller parties have the best chances of getting their candidates elected to the House in their regional heartlands and in the more populous departmentos, which have more representatives.

The details of FARC's actual manifesto are still hazy. Though it still describes itself as a revolutionary force, many of its leading figures are sounding a more moderate tone. Most of the party's long-term goals – peace, democracy, social justice, conserving the environment – are compatible with centrist politics. However, the decision to keep the same name and much of the old leadership may harm them at the polls.

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The FARC is trying to pull off a difficult balancing act, as it embraces a new kind of politics while still clinging to its military past. It likes to think it went into peace talks on an equal footing with the government, not as the losing side in the armed conflict. It will need to convince both its former supporters and the general public that the sacrifices of the last five decades were worth it; that the armed conflict was honourable; and that the continuation of this conflict in the political arena is just that – a continuation, not a break with the organisation's past. However, the FARC also realises most Colombians won't welcome it with open arms, and that to achieve its goals it must form political alliances.

What political groupings, if any, might be open to such alliances?

Of the existing parties, the Alternative Democratic Pole and the Green Alliance are closest to the FARC in terms of ideology. However, together they have only nine representatives and 10 senators. If the FARC takes their seats, these smaller parties could disappear from the political map, as they need to surpass a three per cent threshold to secure seats in the Senate.

Aware of this dilemma, the FARC is aiming for the political centre ground. It also hopes to attract votes from former abstainers who have not felt represented by the traditional parties. This strategy could prove especially successful in certain rural regions. Additionally, the FARC is hoping candidates sympathetic to it will be elected in new constituencies established in the regions most affected by the armed conflict. Political parties participating in national elections cannot stand in these constituencies.

The FARC will probably not stand a candidate in May's presidential elections. That is the responsible thing to do. A FARC candidate would raise the spectre of 'Castrochavism' and stoke fears that Colombia could

turn into another Cuba or Venezuela.

That makes it more likely the next president will be a conservative – either vice president Germán Vargas Lleras from the Radical Change party, part of the current governing coalition, or a candidate from the opposition Democratic Centre led by former president Álvaro Uribe.

A possible alternative candidate could be drawn from a proposed 'coalition for peace' comprising the Liberal Party, President Juan Manuel Santos's centrist Social Party of National Unity and some smaller left-wing parties.

There is a slim chance the FARC could prove a catalyst for such a coalition. If it wins seats in Congress in March, pushing out smaller parties, there may be a backlash among more established politicians left of centre. Lesser-known presidential hopefuls would still have two months till the May elections to pull out, bolstering the likelihood a candidate from the 'coalition for peace' would be elected.



Lothar Witte
Bogotá

Lothar Witte heads the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's (FES) office in Bogotá, Colombia. Previously he was director of the FES office in Madrid, Spain, and worked in the 'International Policy' departement of the foundation. Witte studied economics and sociology in Berlin and Nashville, Tennessee.