

Entering the Political Stage

An Analysis of Former Guerrillas' Experiences in Colombian Politics

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Abstract

At the end of the 1980s, a changing national and international context led to the historic decision of four Colombian guerrilla groups to lay down arms and enter legal politics. The possibility to participate in the National Constituent Assembly, held out in prospect by the government for all guerrilla groups engaged in advanced peace negotiations, aroused expectations for possible change through non-violent means. More than two decades after the demobilisation of these groups and in the light of the limited electoral success of the ADM-19 political project (which emerged out of the guerrilla M-19, with the participation of the other three demobilised guerrilla groups and other minor political movements), this paper examines how the unsatisfied attempt to establish a real political opposition and change political culture was perceived from the point of view of the demobilised guerrilla groups. It reviews the expectations of former members from the EPL, M-19, MAQL and PRT, and contrasts these with their individual experiences in Colombian politics.

About the Publication

This paper is one of four case study reports on Colombia produced in the course of the collaborative research project ‘Avoiding Conflict Relapse through Inclusive Political Settlements and State-building after Intra-State War’, running from February 2013 to February 2015. This project aims to examine the conditions for inclusive political settlements following protracted armed conflicts, with a specific focus on former armed power contenders turned state actors. It also aims to inform national and international practitioners and policy-makers on effective practices for enhancing participation, representation, and responsiveness in post-war state-building and governance. It is carried out in cooperation with the partner institutions CINEP/PPP (Colombia, Project Coordinators), Berghof Foundation (Germany, Project Research Coordinators), FLACSO (El Salvador), In Transformation Initiative (South Africa), Sudd Institute (South Sudan), Aceh Policy Institute (Aceh/Indonesia), and Friends for Peace (Nepal). The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the Berghof Foundation, CINEP/PPP, or their project partners. To find more publications for this project please visit www.berghof-foundation.com. For further information, please contact the project research coordinator, Dr. Véronique Dudouet, at v.dudouet@berghof-foundation.org.

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List of Acronyms

ADM-19	<i>Alianza Democrática M-19</i> / Democratic Alliance M-19
ANAPO	<i>Alianza Nacional Popular</i> / National Popular Alliance
ANC	<i>Asamblea Nacional Constituyente</i> / National Constituent Assembly
CGSB	<i>Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar</i> / Simón Bolívar Guerrilla Coordinating Board
ELN	<i>Ejército de Liberación Nacional</i> / National Liberation Army
EPL	<i>Ejército Popular de Liberación</i> / Popular Liberation Army
FARC	<i>Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia</i> / Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
M-19	<i>Movimiento 19 de Abril</i> / 19 th of April Movement
MAQL	<i>Movimiento Armado Quintín Lame</i> / Armed Movement Quintin Lame
PCC-ML	<i>Partido Comunista de Colombia – Marxista Leninista</i> / Colombian Communist Party – Marxist Leninist
PRT	<i>Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores</i> / Workers' Revolutionary Party
UP	<i>Union Patriótica</i> / Patriotic Union

1 Introduction

In 1996, the Colombian state was confronted by a serious crisis. While the protracted armed conflict entered a new phase and violence reached levels never seen before,¹ President Ernesto Samper faced a huge legitimacy crisis related to (later proven) accusations that his presidential campaign had been partially financed by drug money. Only five years after the new Constitution had been signed (in 1991), and considering the obviously failed attempt to transform political culture, former guerrilla insurgent, Enrique Flórez of the Revolutionary Workers' Party (*Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores* – PRT), and political scientist, Pedro Valenzuela, worried about the possibility that “the lesson that these groups [FARC and ELN] have derived out of the political performance of the Alliance [referring to the ADM-19] is that the real opportunities for an alternative to the traditional bipartisanship in the institutional arena are limited”² (Flórez and Valenzuela 1996).

After having analysed the actual degree of inclusivity, both in the bargaining process of the new Constitution of 1991 and its implementation, and having stressed the limited success of reforming the exclusive Colombian political culture and its impact on the newly emerging political opposition composed of demobilised guerrilla groups (Rampf and Chavarro 2014), this paper reviews the decision-making process of the National Constituent Assembly (*Asamblea Nacional Constituyente* – ANC) of 1991 and its impact on subsequent Colombian politics, from the perspectives of former high-ranking members of demobilised guerrilla groups that were involved in the respective peace negotiations, the ANC, and in the political arena after 1991. In order to discuss the impression that the frustrated attempt could have possibly provoked among Colombian insurgents, this paper aims to contrast these groups' prior expectations with their actual experiences of political participation.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part analyses the armed actors' expectations regarding the ANC and their role within the arena of institutional politics. Some background is provided on all the actors under scrutiny, including their origins, constituencies, worldview and motives to leave the armed struggle. The second part of this paper will compare these actors' expectations with the reality which they faced during the 1990s. Special emphasis will hereby be placed on the role of the demobilised guerrilla groups during the ANC and the specific experience of the Democratic Alliance M-19 (*Alianza Democrática M-19* – ADM-19).

The analysis is based on interviews³ with former high-ranking members of all four guerrilla groups that signed peace agreements with the national government of Colombia between 1989 and 1991, and who were later also represented in the ANC. This includes the well-studied experience of the 19th of April Movement⁴ (*Movimiento 19 de Abril* – M-19), as well as the Popular Liberation Army (*Ejército Popular de Liberación* – EPL), the Armed Movement Quintin Lame (*Movimiento Armado Quintin Lame* – MAQL) and the PRT.

2 The Guerrilla Groups before the ANC

Expectations generally reflect the worldview of their owner and should therefore be interpreted and analysed in light of their guiding ideology. According to Andrew Heywood (2003), an ideology mainly consists of a perception of the world, a desire of what it should be like and the conviction of how to realise that desire. To be able to analyse

¹ The homicide rate reached 68 per 100,000 inhabitants in 1996. This was the year when the paramilitary expansion began and when the FARC achieved some of their largest victories over the national army (UNDP 2006; Echandía 2000).

² All quotations in this paper were translated by the authors from Spanish into English.

³ All quoted interviews, except those with former members of the MAQL (in Peñaranda 2010 and Tattay 2005) and with Antonio Navarro Wolff (1994), were conducted by the authors of this paper between September 2013 and February 2014, in the cities of Bogotá (Patiño, Villa, Flórez and Villarraga), Medellín (Fajardo and Mejía), Pereira (Toro), Barranquilla (Ortiz) and Sincelejo (Restrepo).

⁴ For additional background information on the history of the M-19, please see Dario Villamizar (1995). Ana Carrigan (2009) and Hernando Corréa (2005), offer a closer look into the Palace of Justice siege in 1985. See also: Patiño et al. (2009) for more details about the M-19's negotiation and demobilisation process.

a guerrilla group's expectations, it is thus essential to understand its origin, constituency, interpretation of the context that surrounds it and its motives.

For all four guerrilla groups which emerged during the 1960s and 1970s and who signed peace agreements with the Colombian government between 1989 and 1991, armed struggle represented a logical consequence of the perceived exclusionary Colombian state, representing one of the core reasons that led to the formation of guerrilla groups (Pizarro 1996).

The oldest of the guerrilla groups analysed as part of this paper was the EPL. It was founded in 1967 by a fraction of the Colombian Communist Party – Marxist Leninist (*Partido Comunista de Colombia – Marxista Leninista* – PCC-ML). The uniqueness of the EPL was the fact that it was an army commanded by a political party (though the two structures were kept separate), whereby the political party made all tactical decisions and designed the general strategies. Its origins as a revolutionary army date back to the so-called 'patriotic boards' – remnants of former liberal leaders that had been displaced during *La Violencia*,⁵ until the end of the 1950s (Villarraga and Plazas 1994; Fajardo, author interview 2013).

Initially, the EPL was a regional organisation, located in the north-west of Colombia. In the late 1970s, the EPL leaders decided to transform into a national organisation and began to form regional fronts⁶ in the Atlantic coast region, the Magdalena Medio region and in the south of the country – mainly in the region of Putumayo. The new strategy also included the formation of urban fronts in big cities such as Bogotá, Bucaramanga, Medellín and Barranquilla (Fajardo, author interview 2013). Besides the significant support from peasant families living in its area of influence, the EPL had its most important constituencies within industry and trade unions. Furthermore, the PCC-ML had significant influence among students, however, this specific constituency was largely independent of the armed movement.

For its part, the PRT emerged in 1982, as a result of a split within the Colombian Marxist-Leninist movement (the EPL and the PCC-ML). Although it had some influence in trade unions and peasant movements in other regions of the country, the group had a clear regional focus on the Atlantic coast. The PRT remained a marginal conflict actor throughout its existence and operated primarily in the specific influence area in which it emerged.

In spite of the differences regarding their size and relative influence, both the EPL and the PRT shared a common interpretation of the problems of the political system, given their Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideological foundation. They considered the class struggle as a central matter, identifying themselves with the working class and associating Colombian elites with the bourgeoisie. Both movements vigorously criticised the closure of the political system that, according to their understanding, excluded any other political movement besides the two traditional parties (Liberal and Conservative) from access to politics. Specifically, the practice of governing by martial law and suspending basic political rights, was condemned as a tool to hold back political opposition. Additionally, and due to their key constituencies in the rural areas, land reform, consisting mainly in the claim for the redistribution of land titles, presented another important demand shared by the EPL and PRT (Flórez, author interview 2013; Mejía, author interview 2013).

As Darío Mejía (author interview 2013), a former commander of the EPL and one of their delegates in the ANC recalls, "we were proposing a possibility for a democratic opening; the country needed more participation, more democracy and political liberties. We [the EPL] also saw that power was monopolised by only a couple of families,⁷ and there were no possibilities for people to participate". Along the same lines of reasoning, former PCC-ML member Fabio Villa (2013) asserts:

⁵ *La Violencia* (The Violence) was a period between 1945 and 1955 during which the Liberal and Conservative Party fought by violent means, for the control of the State.

⁶ A front (*frente*) is a territorial military unit operating in a specific area. All Colombian guerrilla groups have been composed by various fronts.

⁷ These families were mainly those who had control over the largest industries in the country (oil and textiles, among others), as well as large land owners, who had their operations based in Bogotá or Medellín. These families also had some arrangements for political support with land owners from other regions, especially the Caribbean coast, where the EPL and the PRT had important constituencies.

The need to open the political system was clear. This was part of the fundamental reforms that had to be made. This included also the need to create more legitimate institutions: the courts, the Congress, it was very clear to us that these institutions were wrong, precisely because the bipartisanship had taken over them and corrupted them.

Similarly, Enrique Flórez (2013), referring to the PRT's conceptions about the armed struggle, points out that, "from the 1970s and onwards our group had very clear ideas about the oligarchic structure of the country and the presence of a bourgeoisie; all this classic analysis that was made about the power arrangements".

Almost a decade after the creation of the EPL, and as part of a new generation of revolutionary armed movements in Colombia, another important guerrilla group was formed: the M-19. This political-military movement was born out of a fusion between factions of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* – FARC) and the National Popular Alliance (*Alianza Nacional Popular* – ANAPO). The M-19 was dissatisfied with the traditional conception of 'armed struggle' that was shared (although with some variations) by all first generation Colombian guerrilla groups. While the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional* – ELN), FARC and EPL largely followed an international ideology of armed liberation through long-term rural resistance at this time, the founders of the M-19 felt an urgent need to shift their focus to the national level as a reaction to the changed Colombian context of the 1970s (Patiño et al. 2009). By drawing attention to the traumatic experience of perceived electoral fraud during the presidential elections in 1970,⁸ the M-19 outlined its decision to take up arms as a last resort. Since they perceived the political system to be of an exclusive nature, they considered it impossible to reach political power through peaceful, electoral means.

Responding to the changed Colombian context that was primarily characterised by increasing urbanisation, the M-19 had from its very beginning, been an urban movement. Its members originated from a combination of the middle class, the university-educated and common people from the major cities (Patiño et al. 2009). Although this was later expanded,⁹ the main constituency of the movement remained urban throughout the existence of the M-19.

As the EPL and later also the PRT did, the M-19 associated the root of the armed and social conflict in the country with the political exclusion that had been created by the National Front,¹⁰ particularly by the use of violence as the main instrument to solve political disagreements and land conflicts.¹¹ Besides criticism against the institutional design, the M-19's position included a critical review of the political culture and the strong-arm style of government, based on the permanent use of martial law. From the point of view of all three guerrilla groups mentioned thus far, the Colombian state suffered from a clear legitimacy crisis, manifested through the discrediting of the Congress, public mistrust over the army and fuelled by human rights violations. More than, for instance, the mainly rural-oriented EPL however, the M-19 also included the accelerated urbanisation of the country and the precarious social conditions that resulted, into its list of motives for armed struggle (Patiño et al. 2009).

The fourth and last group under scrutiny, the MAQL, can be described as an indigenous and armed, self-defence group. Founded in 1984 in the southern region of Cauca and with close relations to the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (*Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca* – CRIC), this movement had its constituency among the indigenous communities of that part of the country, which it aimed to protect against other armed

⁸ One of the most relevant examples of the criticised exclusivity of the Colombian political system took place on 19 April, 1970, when General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, ANAPO's presidential candidate, ran against Misael Pastrana Borrero, the candidate of the establishment, and lost the competition through a very peculiar outcome. The M-19 decided on its name based on this fact to remind the country that it was not possible to achieve power through democratic means.

⁹ After its sixth conference in 1978, the M-19 started to develop military units in different rural areas of the country, in addition to its urban structures.

¹⁰ The National Front was a political pact signed between the Liberal and Conservative Party in order to stop political violence and depose the military government of General Rojas Pinilla.

¹¹ The land conflict has been identified as one of the core causes for the Colombian armed conflict. It consists of the systematic and forced displacement of land workers and peasants by landlords, to further accumulate land. For more information see: Fajardo and Food and Agriculture Organization (2002) and Reyes Posada (2009).

groups fighting for control over indigenous territory and population.¹² The three core aims of the movement were to gain control over the ‘monopoly of violence’, contain the expansion of the revolutionary groups operating in the area, protect the indigenous communities from the armed conflict and to use self-defence violence against the rural landowners (Peñaranda 2010).

Marcos Avirama, a former leader of the CRIC, explained the situation in an interview:

[The] process of struggle was from the beginning marked by hard repression [...] from the traditional political parties, and also from some left wing organisations that wanted a process¹³ to be developed, but under their [own political] orientation, and not from the indigenous communities’ perspective... But the highest repression came from the state, through the police, the intelligence services and the army. The landowners began to organise bands of ‘birds’ [paramilitary groups]¹⁴ between 1972-1973 and came to assassinate several leaders. (Avirama in Peñaranda 2010)

Confronted with this difficult situation, the political agenda of the MAQL became dominated by social exclusion concerns at the regional level, as well as critique related to political exclusion and racism at the national level. The living conditions faced by the minority communities were hard. The indigenous and black communities were frequently exposed to racist laws and policies. One of the clearest examples of this was the fact that the 1886 Constitution did not consider them as citizens. This had some severe consequences for these communities – particularly in terms of lacking state support – resulting in very poor education, generalised undernourishment and a lack of access to public health services. Until the new Constitution of 1991, indigenous members of society did not have the right to vote or to be elected as state officials.

In this context of repression and discrimination, the main demand made by the MAQL was autonomy for indigenous communities and the right to govern their own territories and apply their own traditions in justice and economy. As mentioned before, the Cauca region was under occupation by all armed movements that existed during the 1970s and 1980s. This placed the indigenous communities in the middle of the armed conflict and forced them to abide by ideas and practices promoted by the armed movements, while simultaneously defending themselves from the state and landowners. The situation left no room for an internal organisational process and made the desire for more autonomy an urgent matter (Peñaranda 2010).

By demanding its constituency’s right to autonomously decide on its way of life, the MAQL confronted one specific aspect of the general political exclusion and thereby shared a common agenda with the M-19, EPL and PRT. All guerrillas perceived that the political exclusion permeated all cultural and economic areas, marginalising every citizen who was not a white and catholic Colombian. By doing so, the exclusion was perceived to benefit a small oligarchy, composed of a few families both at a political and economic level (Flórez, author interview 2013; Mejía, author interview 2013 and Ortiz, author interview 2014).

3 The Decision to Lay down Arms and Enter Politics

The decision to transition from armed struggle into democracy and to sign peace agreements with the government was not an easy process. During the 1980s, two contextual factors fuelled internal discussions both within and between all guerrilla groups. First, at the international level, the fall of the iron curtain affected almost all guerrilla movements in Latin America. Colombia was no exception. This event accelerated earlier discussions about the

¹² It is important to highlight that most of the guerrilla groups operating in Colombia in the mid-1980s had some presence in the Cauca region at that time. The most powerful included the FARC, the EPL and the M-19. Paramilitary groups were also financed by local landowners to control the indigenous communities.

¹³ Many former members of guerrilla movements use the word ‘process’ to refer to an initiative of armed organisation (such as a guerrilla) in the context of the 1960s to 1980s.

¹⁴ The ‘birds’ or *pájaros* in Spanish, were paramilitary groups financed by landowners from the Conservative Party to eliminate liberal leaders during *La Violencia*.

pertinence of the armed struggle and cut off the guerrillas' international economic support (Mujica and Thoumi, 1996). Secondly, at the national level, a widespread feeling of fatigue from violence among society, framed a context in which several pieces fell into place, to push the guerrilla movements to disarm. The drug cartels achieved enormous power during the 1980s and declared war on the Colombian state. Simultaneously, and with close linkages to the drug cartels, some sectors of the traditional elite and national army, paramilitary groups began to gain economic power, political influence and military capacity, threatening the guerrilla groups, as well as their constituencies and other left wing social actors. This confrontation became asymmetric in its nature due to the drug money that the paramilitary groups had started to use to finance their cause, combined with the support they received from regional land owners (López 2007).

Moreover, the governments headed by Belisario Betancur and, in particular, his successor Virgilio Barco during the 1980s, started to recognise the structural roots of the armed conflict and aimed to seek a political solution. Both office holders attempted to confront these structural causes, signalling a democratic opening for the direct election of mayors, as well as several attempts to bring different insurgent groups to the negotiation table. Breaking with the traditional logic of repressive strategies geared at military victory over the guerrilla groups, this new strategy underscored the acknowledgment of these actors' political aspirations (Flórez, author interview 2013; Garcia 1992).

Against this background, a discussion was initiated between all guerrilla groups to consider whether they should engage in a dialogue with the government. This consultation, coupled with the aim to strengthen the military power of the guerrillas, led to the formation of the Simón Bolívar Guerrilla Coordinating Board (*Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar* – CGSB).

Within the EPL, initial discussions about disarmament and peace negotiations began in the early 1980s, particularly when Óscar William Calvo,¹⁵ an important leader of the PCC-ML, proposed the call for a National Constituent Assembly to reform the political institutions of the country – the most revolutionary 'flag' that could be raised at that time. With his open questioning of the armed struggle as the right way to achieve the group's political goals, Calvo triggered an internal discussion and set the future path for the EPL (Villarraga and Plazas 1994).

Former PCC-ML member, Germán Toro, recalls this internal debate about the merits and dangers of Calvo's proposal to opt for peaceful (as opposed to armed) political competition: "In the Central Committee of the party, from 1985 onwards, there were two tendencies: one that upheld the deepening of the war and another that considered these actions to be against the interest of the disadvantaged and those sectors that we claimed to represent and fight for" (author interview 2013). He particularly stresses the perception of a social fatigue with war, shared by some EPL and party members. Confirming this perception, Mejía (author interview 2013) recalls that, "it all began with internal discussions with regards to our role in relation to the people, because in a way, we considered ourselves as 'messiahs' or saviours, and by analysing that, we came to the conclusion that it was necessary to sit and talk to the national government".

Nevertheless, the top leaders of the EPL and a few leaders of the PCC-ML Central Committee opposed such dialogue. As described earlier, the Central Committee was the highest authority of the EPL, however, as its former member Álvaro Villarraga (author interview 2013) recalls, it was very hard for the party to take decisions without taking into account the stance of the armed wing. Eventually, members of both the political and armed wings came to similar conclusions – establishing the fight for democracy as their main priority. This meant that "it was necessary to demobilise the EPL because of a process of disintegration that had been occurring inside the guerrilla" (Toro, author interview 2013).

In the case of the PRT, the main arguments for disarmament were the internal loss of legitimacy for the armed struggle and the acknowledgment of the limited impact of its activities on society. The PRT's decision to enter into politics was facilitated by the fact that the majority of its members were active in civil resistance campaigns, rather than dedicated to the armed struggle (Flórez, author interview 2013; Ortiz, author interview 2014).

¹⁵ In 1984, Calvo was leading the peace negotiations with the national government of Colombia on behalf of the FARC, EPL and M-19.

Given that it was a self-defence army and part of a wider indigenous social movement, the transition process of the MAQL took on a different character. The MAQL's main internal reason for demobilising was the negative impact the armed action had had on indigenous communities – such as the abuse of power and the progressive tearing of their social fabric. Therefore, the political leaders of the movement sought a way to dismantle their self-defence army (Peñaranda 2010).

Asides from the independent debates within the EPL, PRT and MAQL, the decisive spark to take the final step towards putting down arms for these three groups came after two key events that changed the course of the armed conflict in the country. The first event was the surprising decision of the M-19 to initiate dialogue with the national government, taken independently of the other CGSB members.¹⁶ This was received very positively by society. The second event was the subsequent call for a National Constituent Assembly, led by large sectors of civil society who complained about the situation of extreme violence and political crisis the country was witnessing at the time. Both events encouraged the insurgent groups to believe that they had the possibility to realise change through a struggle fought with legal tools at the negotiation table (Villa, author interview 2013).

The decision to hold the ANC, thus became the final push that the EPL needed to start their negotiations; it was instrumental for convincing the leadership of the party (Mejía, author interview 2013). Furthermore, according to former PCC-ML Central Committee member Toro (author interview 2013), “the main political reason was the conviction that this was the most revolutionary thing that we could do at that stage of the struggle for democracy, and that if there was a chance for a democratic opening, the demobilisation was worth it, and it was worth it to leave the weapons to go into politics”. PRT members shared a similar analysis (Ortiz, author interview 2014).

With regards to MAQL leaders, their decision to consider laying down their arms was influenced by the strengthening of the indigenous movement in Colombia, which stressed the need to put an end to the armed conflict. The national government had also begun to leave aside the initiatives that came from the indigenous sectors close to the MAQL, due to their armed struggle. By discrediting the political objectives of the civil indigenous leaders, the damage that the MAQL's armed struggle was resulting in, was made evident.

In this scenario, the ANC provided the perfect opportunity to change the site of interlocution and give importance to the indigenous movement in the decision-making process of the new Constitution. Henry Caballero, the MAQL spokesman for the peace negotiations with the national government recalls that, “in this context, it is evident that the peace negotiations were seen in a positive light by the indigenous directorate [...]. The interest for a negotiation that included all indigenous communities was important not only for the leaders of the Cauca region but for the entire national indigenous movement” (Caballero in Tattay 2005).

All final peace agreements between the EPL, MAQL, PRT, and the national government, clearly highlight the central importance of the possibility to participate in the ANC after ceasing arms. In the case of the MAQL, the right to send a delegate to the Assembly was already defined in the Preamble. The agreements signed by the EPL and PRT also defined this right in Article 1.

In the case of the M-19, the surprising decision to initiate peace talks with the Barco administration also needs to be analysed in the light of a series of internal shifts and discussions around three issues. The first was the realisation that the military strategy used by the M-19 after the Palace of Justice Siege in 1985, had failed:¹⁷ the “lack of popular ‘echo’ by these military actions, led Pizarro – and all of us – to be convinced that military action had reached its top” (Patiño, author interview 2013). The second issue was internal exhaustion. For example, former M-19 commander Otty Patiño (author interview 2013) stresses that, “many of the people that were part of the movement were getting tired, and some others were performing activities that were not in the revolutionary

¹⁶ The M-19 was a member of the CGSB and it had been decided that all the armed left wing movements would sit down with the government for the peace talks together.

¹⁷ In 1985, the M-19 besieged the Supreme Court building to hold a ‘political trial’ where the Colombian State was to be charged and sentenced for not fulfilling the 1984 peace agreements made with the national government, as headed by Belisario Betancur. The attack ended as a huge tragedy for the country, with dozens dead and several disappearances.

spectrum” – such as extortion activities or abuse of power. The third issue was the previously mentioned change of the military and political balance in Colombia, which put the guerrillas in a disadvantaged position.

The M-19 had lost its popularity and underwent a major leadership crisis after the Palace of Justice Siege. It therefore decided to change its military strategy and focus on a war against the national oligarchy, which was expressed in the 1988 abduction of the conservative leader, Alvaro Gómez Hurtado. As Patiño (author interview 2013) recalls, this was a risky move because “of course this could have led us to terrorism and even to the death of Gómez Hurtado – fortunately the country reacted positively back then”. The alternative was to use the abduction as a last resort to create a new window of opportunity for negotiations with the national government – which is exactly what later occurred. After long and fruitless discussions with the FARC in the CGSB, Pizarro eventually used this window of opportunity to start bilateral peace talks with the national government. This led to the M-19’s demobilisation and to civilian reintegration in 1990 (Patiño, author interview 2013).

4 The Former Guerrilla Groups’ Expectations towards the ANC

As part of its peace agreement with the national government, the M-19 had requested a constitutional reform to broaden political participation in Colombia. This request, however, failed to pass Congress – a fact that worsened the political crisis and increased public calls for an urgent reform of the exclusive political system. After a Supreme Court decision finally enabled the call for a National Constituent Assembly in 1990, the expectations of many sectors of society were concentrated on the latter. At this time, the ANC became the main goal for all four guerrilla groups, albeit each one of them had different expectations.¹⁸

The group that felt most enthusiastic about the ANC was the EPL, given its historic proposal for an ANC raised by its (later assassinated) commander, Calvo. Toro (author interview 2013) asserts that although the design of the 1991 ANC matched with Calvo’s earlier proposal, the initiative that led to the decision to hold the ANC neither emerged from the EPL, nor the PCC-ML: “it [the ANC] coincided with our background and therefore we felt quite comfortable in that process”.

According to many interviewees conducted with the EPL and PCC-ML for this paper, the ANC was perceived as the means to achieve the transformation of all the contested elements of the political system, and to put an end to exclusion (Toro, author interview 2013). Villa (author interview 2013) exemplifies some of these elements by saying, “the need to open the political system was clear, it was a fundamental reform that had to be achieved in the ANC, but also to create more legitimate institutions, such as in the judiciary and Congress”. He also adds, “we wanted an assembly that would be the holder of people’s power and would have full capacity to make decisions over all matters. This was fundamental”.

The expectations on the ANC were also high within the PRT, especially when the bilateral negotiations with the government reached the point where the PRT’s broad agenda, which included a range of structural reforms, could no longer be discussed during the negotiations and instead, be left for discussion in the ANC. Therefore, the ANC became the PRT’s arena to address structural violence through fighting social and political injustice:

In the beginning we expected to put all our demands for structural changes regarding the economy, politics and democracy on our negotiation agenda. But soon enough, after the call for the ANC, all these issues became a matter for the ANC and we ran out of agenda points. Even the proposal from the national government to us was to make an ‘express agreement’ to get a favourable position in the ANC and from there, to state all our proposals for the new Constitution. (Flórez, author interview 2013)

The MAQL also saw the ANC as a huge opportunity for their demands to be included in the new political settlement – as can be seen in a letter written by the MAQL to Monsignor Pedro Rubiano, president of the

¹⁸ For more information about the Colombian National Constituent Assembly of 1991, see Rampf and Chavarro (2014).

Colombian Episcopal Conference in 1990, in which the group stressed that, “the ANC is the opportunity for our country to mend its historical mistakes, for the people to really become the essence of the nation and this can be translated into its institutions. The ANC has to recognise the ethnic variety of the country and to value the indigenous component of every single Colombian citizen” (MAQL 1990). With this in mind, they built an alliance with the EPL and the PRT to jointly negotiate with the national government and demand the possibility to participate in the ANC.

As for the M-19, even though the calling of an ANC was not on their negotiation agenda, they quickly realised that it would be the primary arena for negotiating a new political settlement (Patiño, author interview 2013). Right after their demobilisation, many former M-19 members pushed for the creation of a new political party. Following the famous metaphor of its former commander Jaime Bateman, the movement designed a political “*sancocho nacional*”,¹⁹ by inviting all progressive sectors of Colombian society to join in. By merging with other movements loosely grouped in the Democratic Movement Colombia United (*Movimiento Democrático Colombia Unida*) and, for instance, the EPL’s legal wing Popular Front (*Frente Popular*), the ADM-19 gave birth in early 1990. After gaining 12.5% of the votes at the 1990 presidential elections, the new party and especially its political leader and presidential candidate, the former M-19 commander Antonio Navarro Wolff, took up the invitation of newly elected President Gaviria, to participate in the preparation process of the ANC.

5 Former Guerrilla Groups’ Experience at the ANC

Having gained the second highest number of seats and with Antonio Navarro Wolff as a skilled political leader in its ranks, the ADM-19 immediately made a bid for the leadership of the left wing forces represented in the ANC. Both the EPL, who had two delegates,²⁰ and the PRT, with one representative²¹ without the right to vote,²² accepted this claim to leadership and formed a loose alliance with the ADM-19 fraction. In particular, EPL and PCC-ML members participated in the elaboration of the ADM-19’s constitutional initiative (Mejía, author interview 2013). While coordinating many issues with members of the ADM-19 and especially the EPL representatives, MAQL’s delegate, Alfonso Peña Chepe, formed a close informal alliance with indigenous delegates from other political forces represented in the ANC (Villarraga, author interview 2013).

The collective dynamic within the ADM-19, and the independent delegates of the former guerrilla groups were sustained during the 150 days of ANC’s existence. All ANC delegates interviewed assessed the overall atmosphere as productive and respectful. Navarro, as a demanding leader of the fraction, initiated daily meetings during which all important issues were discussed and the voting behaviour of the group was coordinated. Nevertheless, as Villa (author interview 2013) highlights, in some cases, ADM-19 delegates were able to vote independently from the group’s position if they were not in agreement.²³

As within the ADM-19’s fraction, the atmosphere within the ANC was characterised by mutual respect. As Toro (author interview 2013) emphasises, the “relationship between us was able to bypass ideological and political differences, the spirit of consensus, respect for pluralism [and] the ability to generate recognition from others, regardless whether [he/she] had a completely opposite view to mine”. This impression was shared by EPL delegates as well. For instance, Mejía (author interview 2013) recalls:

¹⁹ A typical Colombian stew with many different ingredients.

²⁰ Both EPL delegates were designated in free and secret internal elections of the movement on 25 January 1991, during a reunion in San José. The decision to do so by the Central Committee was imposed by low ranking members who were against the original plan of the PCC-ML, one which intended that they appoint the two delegates of the EPL themselves (Mejía, author interview 2013).

²¹ Matías Ortiz was designated in a free and secret internal election during a reunion in Tolú.

²² The smaller guerrilla groups, namely the PRT and the MAQL, only had the right to argue but not to vote. According to the former PRT negotiator, Enrique Flórez, this governmental decision reflected President Gaviria’s fear that the ANC could be dominated by insurgent groups, as judged by the ADM-19’s overwhelming success in opinion polls before the ANC election (Flórez, author interview 2013).

²³ According to Buenahora (1995), one of the delegates that most deviated with its votes from its fractions position was the ADM-19 delegate, María Teresa Garcés.

I think that in the ANC it was important that we all talked, that we said what we thought and that in that space, people understood that we are one unique nation with a lot of diversity [...]. Well, the diversity of thoughts, of culture, of action, we were all very different, to understand that, I think was a valuable space for the time we were living in, a time when death, torture and disappearances were very common matters.

Even though positions were far from consensual on some issues, every delegate was willing to hear the arguments of the other sides. This occurred to some extent because of the lack of a sufficient majority to impose the position of one party or movement (Flórez, author interview 2013),²⁴ but also because of a shared, profound feeling of doing something meaningful that united all different political fractions. Mejía, for instance, remembers one moment when Alfredo Vázquez Carrizosa, delegate of the Patriotic Union (*Unión Patriótica* – UP), proposed a withdrawal of all left wing delegates from the ANC. Together with other representatives of former armed movements, he refused to do so and argued that, “after having spent a lifetime fighting for people’s right to participate, [...] and after finally having succeeded to gain at least the possibility of citizen’s participation” (Mejía, author interview 2013) in the formulation of the new Constitution, he would have under no circumstances withdrawn from the ANC.

Retrospectively, some former delegates borrow the metaphor of an ‘island’, to describe the dynamics within the ANC. On the one hand, this metaphor refers to the delegate’s relative isolation from their constituencies. Because of the ANC’s temporal restriction of 150 days and their heavy workload, communication and consultation with people outside the Assembly was nearly impossible. Flórez (author interview 2013) even stresses that many former combatants learned of their delegates’ decisions through the media. On the other hand, Toro (author interview 2013) contrasts the productive atmosphere of the ANC with the conflictive and exclusive Colombian political system of that time. From his point of view, the ANC was some kind of an idealistic island of mutual respect and pluralism in the rough sea of Colombian *realpolitik*:

[The] ideal climate of political confrontation is the spirit in the Constituent Assembly, but ultimately that was [...] an island. The real power outside the Assembly [...] let us become exhilarated by that spirit in the Assembly, while they [the political elite not represented in the ANC] kept pulling the strings.

Several examples illustrate the idealistic nature of the ANC which brought together delegates that had previously perceived each other as mortal enemies and in some cases, had even laid the foundation for individual reconciliation. For instance, a friendship based on mutual respect developed between two members of the recently demobilised EPL and two delegates whose relatives had been assassinated by the same guerrilla group (Fajardo, author interview 2013). The best expression of the overall pragmatic and constructive ambience, regardless of political differences, was likely the early alliance between Navarro Wolff, a former commander of the M-19, and Álvaro Gómez, a conservative leader and member of the old political establishment, who had been kidnapped by the M-19 in 1988. Both leaders not only jointly assumed the ANC presidency together with Horacio Serpa, but to some extent, they also defined the Assembly’s internal procedures.

Besides the positive perception of feeling accepted and included, Mejía (author interview 2013) stresses that some of the former combatants arrived to the ANC feeling quite ‘wet behind the ears’ in terms of politics. This points to the difficulties that some delegates had had to face during their transformation from guerrilla fighters to ANC members – entering the political arena and competing with professional politicians. Interviewees also drew attention to a difference between the experiences of members of the ADM-19, including former M-19 and civil cadres of the EPL and PCC-ML, and the delegates representing recently demobilised groups such as the PRT and the EPL. While the former do not mention any problems regarding their transformation from activists of a clandestine organisation into politicians, the latter highlight the necessity to learn the ABCs of politics:

²⁴ To be approved, all Articles had to be accepted by the absolute majority of all delegates in a first debate, or a two-thirds majority in a second debate.

What happens is that one comes [to the ANC] with a very reformative idea believing that what we were thinking would be achieved. Then, one finds himself confronted with a phenomenon that politics depend on partnerships, [...] with a political class, which has [...] two hundred years of experience, compared to some guys that just arrived from the countryside, dreamers with many very poetic ideas, with a vision of power totally different. And that initially strikes one, but once one realises that this is how it works, one also starts to look for alliances. (Mejía, author interview 2013)

These distinct experiences can be partly explained by the fact that the M-19 demobilised almost a year before the other groups and had by the time of entering the ANC, already participated in national elections. However, it can also be explained by the individual background of each former insurgent. For instance, while the former M-19 commander, Navarro, had spent some time abroad promoting the M-19's cause within political circles of the international Left, Mejía largely remained a full-time military commander of the EPL.

In spite of initial difficulties, even delegates of guerrilla groups that had demobilised shortly before the ANC, mutually shared an overall positive feeling of having achieved a lot of their individual agenda. Although all interviewees acknowledge that they did not attain all of their goals, they do not perceive that they had to compromise some demands over others: "I think that no issue has been sacrificed. We discussed and defended topics according to what we thought. But just as there were issues where we gained space, there were other issues where others won space" (Mejía, author interview 2013). The mere opportunity to rise and defend some issues which they identified as important was recognised as a victory in itself. As a result, most issues of special interest to the former guerrilla groups were embodied in the new Constitution of 1991. In the case of the EPL, these issues included the constitutional restriction of martial law, the recognition of diversity by introducing special rights for minorities, a judicial reform through, for instance, the newly-created political charter (*tutela*) – for the protection of a broad catalogue of fundamental rights, and the opening of new democratic spaces for direct political participation (Mejía, author interview 2013).

According to interviewed members of all four groups under analysis, the only important demand that was not fully achieved concerned the issue of territorial restructuring, even though many members of the ADM-19 and particularly the PRT delegate, José Matías Ortiz, stood up for it (Flórez, author interview 2013; Ortiz, author interview 2014). Although the Constitution of 1991 did incorporate some decentralisation measures, such as giving more resources to the departments and municipalities and allowing the popular vote for governors, it also left their further legal specification in the hands of Congress, who only reached an agreement in 2011, after almost twenty legislative proposals had been rejected. Ortiz (author interview 2014) critically comments that, "[Congress members] came up with a law that does not honour the principles that we established in the constitutional process".

When assessing the former guerrilla groups' achievements in the ANC, however, it is essential to stress that the delegates of these groups supported a reformist rather than a revolutionary agenda. All participating former guerrilla groups primarily sought political reforms and neglected reforms of the economic system, a fact that Villa (author interview 2013) highlights when he points out that, "as the claims were modest, the disappointments also were". Nevertheless, some of the interviewed ex-delegates retrospectively admit two "historical mistakes" of the ANC. According to former EPL delegate Fajardo, they underestimated the negative impact of both the drug business and paramilitary groups, who both somewhat benefitted from the reformed institutions. For instance, the public election of governors and mayors not only broadened democracy, it also opened the door for the co-optation of state institutions, through both the drug cartels and paramilitary (Fajardo, author interview 2013). On the other hand, under pressure from some sectors of the traditional elites, the ANC delegates agreed to their ineligibility for the next

elections.²⁵ This mistake negatively affected the implementation and legal specification of the new Constitution and the aim to bring about a reformed political settlement.

As discussed by Rampf and Chavarro (2014), and as recalled by many former delegates, the ANC failed in its ambitious attempt to change the Colombian political culture and eradicate corruption and clientelism (Fajardo, author interview 2013; Flórez, author interview 2013). Others, such as Patiño (author interview 2013), further argue, that the ANC should have blocked constitutional reforms during a specific time period after the signing of the new charter. In his point of view, such an arrangement would have given the newly codified political settlement the time to consolidate itself. Furthermore, the emerging political forces failed to successfully compete with traditional parties to establish a real opposition. That experience of failure will be described in the last section of this paper, through the example of the political project ADM-19.

6 Former Guerrilla Groups' Experiences after the ANC: The Case of the ADM-19

As argued earlier, right from its establishment, the political project of the demobilised M-19 movement embodied its main principle and objective – namely, inclusion. Following its creation on 02 April 1990²⁶ and in preparation for the ANC, the ADM-19 adhered to its declared project to form a broad movement to fight the “kingdom of exclusion” (Patiño, author interview 2013) of the two traditional political parties. By inviting other left wing movements,²⁷ including the three guerrilla groups which were at that time involved in negotiations with the government, the party attempted to send a message of unity to the traditionally divided Colombian Left (Toro, author interview 2013). The invitation to reformist groups of the traditional parties, on the other hand, aimed to break the historical marginalisation of the Left and to move the ADM-19 closer to the political centre. The political project sought to leave behind the logic of the ADM-19 being a political vehicle for former insurgents, to become instead, an alliance of reformists, willing and able to solve the political crisis: “Whoever was seeking change had to avoid precisely smelling too much like guerrillas” (Patiño, author interview 2013).

Both strategies were reflected, for instance, in the composition of the ADM-19's list for the ANC election and the final ADM-19 fraction at the Assembly. Besides former M-19 commanders such as Otty Patiño and Antonio Navarro Wolff, the fractions included members of the PCC-ML Central Committee, such as Toro, members of the Conservative and Liberal Party, as well as the apolitical but very popular coach of the national soccer team, Francisco Maturana. Toro (author interview 2013) even highlighted the inclusion of a representative of paramilitary groups, namely, Augusto Ramírez Cardona.

Although the legal wing of the PCC-ML (*Frente Popular*) was one of the founding members of the project, for at least some sectors of the party and EPL, joining the political project under the banner of the smaller M-19²⁸ was the result of a simple political strategy. Besides sharing the conviction of the importance of the symbol of unity with the former M-19, they discerned the M-19's largely positive public image and hoped for increased representation in the ANC (in addition to the two EPL delegates from the peace agreement) by including PCC-ML members into the list of the ADM-19 (Fajardo, author interview 2013; Mejía, author interview 2013). Convinced that the end justifies the

²⁵ If anything could be perceived as a trade-off from the interviewed delegates' point of view, it is the decision to incapacitate ANC delegates for the next congressional elections (Patiño, author interview 2013; Villa, author interview 2013). Some highlight as well, that this particular decision rested mainly in hands of Navarro (Patiño, author interview 2013).

²⁶ At this time, the new democratic movement was still called the Democratic Alliance. Only after the assassination of the former M-19 commander, Carlos Pizarro, on 26 April, was 'M-19' added to the name, as a symbol of solidarity with the demobilised guerrilla groups among the other factions (Villarraga 2013a).

²⁷ Besides some factions of the UP, other left wing movements such as *Colombia Unida*, *Frente Popular*, *Movimiento de Participación Ciudadana*, *Movimiento Popular Inconformes de Nariño* and *Socialismo Democrático*, among others, joined the ADM-19.

²⁸ According to Uribe (1994), the demobilised number of M-19 and EPL guerrilla combatants amounted to 791 and 2,149 respectively.

means, these actors did not perceive the label of the M-19 as a problem, but rather as a driving force for national politics:

When we led the demobilisation process [and took] the decision [...] that democracy was the fundamental goal, we did not think that we were the centre of the universe or that all had to join us. We were open to join or to build a force together with all progressive and democratic sectors. (Toro, author interview 2013)

Many low ranking members of the EPL met this decision with a more critical gaze, particularly rejecting the appearance of 'M-19' in the name of the common political project, since they were afraid of a possible internal dominance of former M-19 leaders (Uribe 1994). Later, some segments of the former M-19 who supported Navarro and the former commander, Vera Grabe, took the decision to dissolve all former guerrilla group structures and fractions inside the ADM-19, in order to unify the movement (Patiño, author interview 2013) and confirmed to some extent, suspicions that low ranking members had perceived: that the M-19 supremacy could possibly result in a loss of the other groups' identities. Several interviewees from other guerrillas (such as Flórez of the PRT and Mejía of the EPL) retrospectively perceive this as a mistake, as described below.

With its broad and inclusive strategy, enabling and seeking the participation of all interested left wing and progressive movements and politicians – even from the traditional elites,²⁹ and benefitting from the tail wind from the peace processes³⁰ and the electoral support of many frustrated Colombians, the new ADM-19 party commenced its (at least initially) successful journey into Colombian politics. In 1990, it ran for presidential elections. As the replacement of the assassinated presidential candidate Carlos Pizarro, Navarro Wolff finished up third and became Minister of Health in Gaviria's government. Half a year later, the new political entity won 26.7% of the votes in the ANC elections³¹ and became the second largest fraction, after the Liberal Party. The ADM-19 seemed to have excellent prospects for establishing itself as long-term political alternative to the Conservative and Liberal parties.

After still considerable results in 1991 congressional elections³² that nevertheless did not quite meet the ambitious expectations of many ADM-19 members, the party failed in 1994 however to gain a single seat in Senate elections, and Navarro clearly lost the race for Presidency by receiving less than 4% of the votes.³³ Bipartisanship had managed to conserve its traditional hegemony. According to political analyst Eduardo Pizarro (2002), the two traditional parties managed to gain a stable electoral result of around 80% of all votes in all three Senate elections held between 1991 and 1998. The remaining votes were distributed among up to 13 alternative movements and parties. The idea of unity of the left wing opposition and the establishment of a coherent alternative political force now seemed more than ever, to be a utopian dream.

In retrospect, Toro (author interview 2013) comes to the harsh conclusion that: "There was no prospect for a greater political pluralism simply because of the incapacity [to seize the moment] of actors that should have taken advantage of the whole ANC process". He links the traumatic failure of the inclusive political project of the ADM-19 not only to external, but explicitly to internal mistakes. External factors include the speed with which the traditional parties managed to adapt to the new rules of the game (Pizarro 2002), once they realised the political threat ensuing from emerging political parties and movements. This was a lesson learned from the electoral results of the ANC, when large sectors of the traditional elites had simply underestimated the potential of these new forces. Another external factor worth mentioning, was the problematic security situation faced by former guerrilla members during their transition to the political arena. Fajardo (author interview 2013) stresses, for example, "we all received constant threats [...]. Well, this is the cost of making peace".

Although all interviewees recall traumatic experiences, the PRT was particularly affected:

²⁹ As in the ANC elections, the party list running for Congress in 1991 also included, in addition to M-19 veterans, former EPL and PRT members, politicians of the Liberal and Conservative Party, unionists and entrepreneurs (Dirección General para la Reinserción 2000).

³⁰ Many Colombians associated the ADM-19 positively with the peace agreements which had just been signed between the government and M-19, EPL, PRT and MAQL. For many ADM-19 voters, the party represented a choice in favour of a negotiated end to the armed conflict.

³¹ Electoral result according to Santos and Ibeas (1995).

³² The ADM-19 gained nine out of the 100 seats in Senate and 13 out of the 161 seats in the House of Representatives.

³³ As the only ADM-19 candidate, Janeth Suárez gained one seat in the House of Representatives (Dirección General para la Reinserción 2000).

Many people from our movement had to endure a very traumatic reinsertion process. There were very few who chose to go into politics in such a risky context. For example, in the department of Bolívar, in the municipality of San Jacinto, we ran with a list of eight candidates for the local council elections, and they killed seven of them. Only one survived. (Flórez, author interview 2013)

As a reaction to permanent death threats and a wave of assassinations, many former insurgents left politics, or even the country – as in the case of Bernardo Gutierrez, former EPL commander and elected Senator of the ADM-19.

Internal factors also affected the political project of the ADM-19. In fact, some former insurgents, such as Flórez, Toro and Villarraga, argued that these were even more important than external factors in explaining the party's decline after the ANC. Most importantly, the ADM-19's failure to consolidate as a political party became critical in times of crisis (Flórez and Valenzuela 1996; Villarraga 2013a; Toro, author interview 2013). Two issues were particularly mentioned: the lack of clear internal structures, and the lack of a solid ideological platform.

The first issue can be traced back to an (over)ambitious electoral agenda and the inclusive design of the political project. Within a period of four years, the ADM-19 ran for eight national elections. Especially after the June 1991 decision regarding the ineligibility of ANC delegates, the party only had three months to present a new party list and to organise an electoral campaign for the congressional elections in October 1991. While public expectations regarding the party's electoral result were high, particularly due to the overwhelming outcome of the previous ANC election, many Colombians believed in the forthcoming triumph of the new party over the established political elite (Patiño, author interview 2013). As a result, a steady flow of new aspirants for political offices entered the ADM-19. The party had little time and no mechanism to filter candidates according to their actual commitment to the ambitious project, before adding them to the party list.³⁴ At this time, many opportunists entered the party, looking primarily for a political career and with only limited interest in the political project as such:

It was crazy. [...] People arrived thinking that we were about to touch the sky and that people would vote [for us] without even a campaign. Then there were people being sure that we were going to win 30, 40 seats in Congress and they were happy to have the 25th, 30th [place on the list]. They hardly cared. [...] Everyone was happy. (Patiño, author interview 2013)

In November 1991, Navarro finally launched the first real attempt to build up an internal organisational structure by creating a national directorate and an executive committee, albeit without much success (Boudon 2001). In the following month, the new structure neither achieved the unification of the diverse regional groups, nor did it set the ground for a fluid communication between the party and its Senators (Flórez, author interview 2013; Villa, author interview 2013). Especially in the aftermath of the electoral results of 1991, many frustrated opportunists who did not manage to gain a seat in Congress, began to openly question Navarro's claim for leadership. The flood of opportunists entering the ADM-19 and their hurry to run for elections gave rise to the second internal problem, namely, the failure to create a clear political profile based on a solid ideological and programmatic platform. As Patiño and Villa (author interviews 2013) highlight, many party members and even some elected Senators did not contribute to the development of the new party. They were only interested in their personal benefits and political careers.

By reflecting on the reasons for the disastrous results of the 1994 congressional elections, Navarro himself explained ADM-19's decline and the loss of the collective spirit within the party. In an interview in the direct aftermath of the elections, he critically stressed serious leadership problems which somehow led to a loss of control over the party's fraction in parliament. The party's leadership was unable to ensure coherent collective action and therefore, gradually lost its public image of unity:

³⁴ In this difficult and hectic situation, Navarro as a pragmatic leader oversaw the selection of new members and the composition of the candidate list.

What happened was the dissolution of the collective spirit [and later of] the organisation, [as a consequence of] the outcomes of 1994. [...] Our people began to replicate the method that each was on his/her own, the head of a part of the movement and we lost the potential to act collectively. (Navarro 1994)

This lack of coherent actions was further increased through the internally criticised policy of electoral coalitions promoted by Navarro, who was primarily focused on quick electoral results in the short-run and who personally aimed for the presidency in 1994. Besides impeding the M-19's disassociation from the traditional political elite, this strategy also complicated the important task of building up a solid support base, tied to the party through programmatic conviction instead of spontaneous emotions, such as punctual sympathy for one of the candidates. While Boudon (2001) primarily attributes this decision to Navarro's overall pragmatic character, Villarraga (author interview 2013), and Flórez and Valenzuela (1996), go even further by stressing that many of the former M-19 members simply underestimated the importance of an elaborated ideological platform. By following the ANC's spirit of consensus, they preferred to forge political alliances in order to secure electoral results and reach political offices, instead of playing the role of a real critical opposition (Flórez, author interview 2013; Villarraga, author interview 2013).

Particularly during the 1992 regional elections for governors, mayors and city councils, the ADM-19 established a series of pacts with parts of the traditional parties and other sectors of society, such as regional movements and even economic groups. One example was the electoral alliance with Carlos Albornoz, candidate of the Conservative party in Nariño, with the aim of gaining political support for ADM-19's candidate Raúl Delgado. Two years later, Navarro himself described some of these coalitions as serious tactical mistakes. According to him, the proximity to Pedro Bonett, member of the Santo Domingo group – one of the most influential economic groups of the country, created the impression that the ADM-19 had been “handed over to the traditional forces of the country's economy” (Navarro 1994).

Additionally, the party's participation in Gaviria's cabinet hindered, at least initially, a clear public delimitation between the progressive party and the government.³⁵ This became critical when the president sought the implementation of criticised neoliberal reforms, proposed an unpopular tax reform and pointed more and more towards a military solution to the sustained conflict with the two remaining guerrilla groups: FARC and ELN – a policy that neither the ADM-19 nor its electorate approved.

In the changing Colombian context of the 1990s³⁶ and after the elections of 1991, the ADM-19 finally paid the price for its strategic mistakes. Without any social, cultural, religious or ethnic base, as well as being programmatically constrained due to its lack of a well-elaborated ideological platform or political programme beyond the simple principles of inclusion and democracy, the party largely depended on swing voters attracted by individual candidates³⁷ or specific current issues – such as the hope for a negotiated end to the armed conflict (Garcia 1994). After riding on a wave of euphoric expectations for a negotiated end to the conflict, a solution to the political crisis, and closely linked to the popularity of its leader Navarro, the ADM-19 found itself confronted with the lack of loyal social support after the armed conflict escalated and highlighted the failure of the new Constitution as a peace pact. From then on, Navarro almost disappeared from mass media.³⁸

Reflecting on this difficult situation, some former members of EPL and PRT retrospectively consider the M-19's decision to dissolve internal blocks a mistake. For instance, by destroying the common identity of the EPL, the

³⁵ Navarro (2014) himself pointed out that, “one of the lessons that [they] had learned is the necessity to maintain their political independence from the government”, in order to establish an alternative political project.

³⁶ The euphoric atmosphere of optimism of the early 1990s, that was particularly grounded on expectations that the ANC achieved peace agreements that would lead to real political change and stable peace, was broken by failed peace negotiations with the remaining guerrilla groups, an increasing number of casualties, mainly due to paramilitary groups, and the realisation that the new Constitution did not automatically transform the political culture.

³⁷ Otty Patiño refers to the ADM-19, on some occasions as, ‘Navarrismo’ (Patiño, author interview 2013).

³⁸ While Patiño (author interview 2013) points critically to a systematic public campaign launched by the traditional elites aimed to defame Navarro's prestige, Villa (author interview 2013) mentions the increasingly difficult access to mass media in the changing context. According to him, the different peace processes which initially secured presence in media, were later taken for granted, when the focus shifted to other topics.

ADM-19 “destroyed [as well] something that in the future could have been a new movement” (Mejía, author interview 2013) and ultimately broke the link to the different movements’ former constituencies, some of which had been built up and looked after for over 20 years. These constituencies indeed transformed into the social base of independent political movements in some regions, such as the movement of Hope, Peace and Liberty (*Esperanza Paz y Libertad*) in Antioquia and Córdoba (Flórez, author interview 2013; Villarraga, author interview 2013).

Because of the lack of a strong internal organisation, the party leaders could not prevent the heterogeneous groups inside the ADM-19 from drifting apart after the 1991 election (Patiño, author interview 2013). While communication and coordination was poor, many local strongmen gradually took on political lives of their own, under the ADM-19 banner.³⁹ The party’s decision to abandon the practice of presenting unified candidate lists in 1992, further strengthened the trend of internal divisions and defections (Boudon 2001). Flórez (author interview 2013) remembers that “every sector of the ADM-19 having major influence in one region generated its own claim for leadership, made its own lists and clashed with the others [i.e. groups within the party]”. Toro (author interview 2013) even critically notes that by failing to create a real party culture and discipline, the ADM-19 replicated the very political culture which it had been criticising. He refers thereby to the party’s tendency towards establishing its own political barons, electoral micro-businesses and clientelistic networks.

Unable to secure internal cohesion, and in some cases, unable to prevent groups from leaving the ADM-19, the party was forced to accept that the project of unifying the alternative political sectors of Colombian politics had failed. Once in open competition with the Liberal and Conservative parties and their well-trained *maquinaria* (a dense network of clientelistic ties used by the traditional political elite to mobilise votes), the ADM-19 was confronted by its limited logistical and financial resources. Especially after the initial state support (a part of every signed peace agreement) had been expended,⁴⁰ the financial base of electoral campaigns was more than tight, as some former party candidates recall (Flórez, author interview 2013; Toro, author interview 2013). The one-time arrangement of a special electorate constituency for peace in the 1994 local elections, in which only demobilised insurgents could be elected, was not sufficient to balance this disadvantage.

7 Conclusion

Comparing former guerrilla groups’ political expectations, participation in the ANC and their limited success in subsequent politics, one can only wonder why these groups never really questioned their decision to end armed struggle and enter politics. If the inclusive Constitution of 1991 was largely unable to change the exclusive political culture of the country, and if the demobilised armed opposition largely failed to consolidate a cohesive political party,⁴¹ one ponders why there has never been a relapse into armed struggle by any of these groups.

The case of the ADM-19 offers some hints to address these questions: for most of the former insurgents interviewed, the very fact that they had been included in the ANC is enough for them to look back on that experience with positive feelings and to identify with the Constitution of 1991, as *their* constitution. Although many interviewees offer a rather negative assessment of the implementation of the new Constitution and stress the fact that it has never been able to contribute to real change in Colombian political culture, they never considered a

³⁹ Considering this trend, in 1994, Navarro criticised the fact that important local electoral victories had not been transformed into political strongholds of the party. Referring to Barranquilla, the largest Colombian city on the Caribbean coast, he expressed that, “the mayoralty served to give credit to a mayor and his administration, but had never been part of a coordinated political project” (Navarro 1994).

⁴⁰ According to Villa (author interview 2013), the ADM-19 spent most of the financial support received by the M-19 during the electoral campaign for the ANC and Congress in 1990 and 1991, respectively.

⁴¹ Although the common political project of ADM-19 failed, some interviewees individually went on with their participation in Colombian politics – some of them quite successfully. While Jaime Fajardo joined the Liberal Party and Enrique Flórez and Otty Patiño became high-level officials of the Bogotá Town hall, others left active politics to join civil society organisations. Many former insurgents such as Álvaro Villarraga or Vera Grabe, now run NGOs (*Fundación Cultura Democrática* and *Observatorio Para la Paz*, respectively). Germán Toro, for his part, fully withdrew from active politics after a series of failed campaigns for political office.

return to the armed struggle. Many of them rather express some kind of responsibility for the protection of the new Constitution.

Within all former armed groups under analysis however, the key decision to lay down arms was made because of their shared conviction that armed struggle did not lead them anywhere. Merely achieving political success was therefore not enough of a determinant for them to rethink their chosen strategy. Furthermore, from the point of view of all interviewees, the experience of the limited impact of the new Constitution, such as the failure of the ADM-19, can be explained not only by external factors related to the exclusive political culture, but also by the internal incompetence of the demobilised groups, their delegates in the ANC and the ADM-19 party itself. This interpretation implies a few lessons learned, such as the importance of a legally guaranteed period during which counter-reforms should be forbidden and the Constitution should be granted time to develop, or the conclusion that too much inclusivity can become an impediment while designing and establishing a new party and its programmatic basis.

Two decades after the ADM-19's traumatic electoral defeats, many protagonists accept these lessons and thereby draw their attention to the current peace process between FARC and the government in Havana. The same debates that took place back then (e.g. Flórez and Valenzuela 1996) seem to be relevant once more. Which lessons can the FARC⁴² learn out of the experience of the 1990s?

Although the current context is certainly different, the external circumstances do not seem to favour a new, alternative political movement any more than in the 1990s. With this in mind, it remains to be seen how the FARC will handle their transition internally. Without the ambitious attempt to unify the whole spectrum of the Left in Colombia, a clear programmatic base and a much more local approach, at least one thing can be sure: the FARC's project is already moving in a different direction.

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⁴² For a more detailed comparison of the M-19 peace process and the current FARC negotiations from the perspective of two former M-19 commanders, see Grabe and Patiño (2014).

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