Political Engagement by Former Armed Groups Outside Party Politics

WRITTEN BY **VÉRONIQUE DUDOUET AND CLAUDIA CRUZ ALMEIDA**

EJÉRCITO ZAPATISTA DE LIBERACIÓN NACIONAL

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Introduction

Although peace settlements can bring an end to direct violence, it can take several decades to address the root causes, grievances and other contentious issues that gave rise to armed insurgencies. For this reason, many members of non-state armed groups do not consider the signing of a peace agreement to be the end of their struggle; rather, they envisage this point as a transition allowing for the continuation of struggle through peaceful and democratic means. Many armed groups choose to pursue their historical objectives by transforming into political parties, a pathway that has largely proven successful in contexts such as Nepal, Aceh, Northern Ireland, Mozambique and South Africa, among others.[1] The importance of rebel-to-politics transitions for sustained peacebuilding is recognized by the recently revised Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS) module 2.20 on the Politics of DDR. Former combatants see the formation of political parties continuing their aspirations as a peaceful channel for making their voices heard.[2]

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However, political activism is not solely restricted to the electoral arena, and the peaceful re-mobilization of former combatants can also occur through other forms of collective organizing, such as civil society organizations or more informal social movements, engaging in various methods of extra-institutional nonviolent action. These various channels of informal mobilization provide alternative opportunities for war veterans to contribute to post-war politics and, while doing so, to strengthen sustainable peace.

This research brief sheds light on multiple experiences of rebel-to-movement political transitions outside of formal party politics. As with party politics, civil society activism may allow former combatants to pursue broader socio-political objectives, such as 'continuing the struggle' for self-determination, local governance or political reforms. Alternately, they may mobilize through sectorial interest groups such as veteran associations, taking up new claims linked to their individual or collective DDR experiences, such as socio-economic reintegration support for marginalized segments of ex-combatants. Although they may not frame their objectives in explicit political terms, these types of mobilizations also impact local and national policymaking and governance. The IDDRS module 2.20 hints at the need to broaden our understanding of the political pathways out of armed conflict by considering various political arrangements outside party politics that allow armed groups to pursue their agenda through peaceful means. This brief contributes to the operationalization of this agenda by providing new evidence on nonviolent pathways to the re-mobilization of former combatants, their new means of struggle, and the factors influencing their trajectories.

The conceptual and empirical insights presented in this brief derive from previous research by the lead author on transitions from armed to unarmed struggle, complemented by personal observations from, capacity-building programmes that both authors have conducted with former combatants in various countries.[3] The analysis also draws on broader academic research at the interface between political science (peacebuilding, democratization) and sociology (social movements).

Options for collective organizing beyond party politics

The past three decades have seen a number of militant armed groups renounce violence to enter a peace process with their adversaries and subsequently transform into political parties. But there have also been a number of cases where movements, or a large segment of their membership, have instead turned to non-institutional political action through professional non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations or informal networks and social movements. These processes are as common as formal political reconversions, but they have received far less attention from the peacebuilding community.

Transitions from armed to unarmed politics – outside of party formation – are far from uniform and take various pathways. They may, for example, result from an organizational shift directed from the top leadership of armed groups, as was the case with the Zapatistas in Mexico. They may also stem from a disgruntled splinter group taking to the streets or ex-combatants forming civil society organizations or joining mass campaigns in parallel to the political careers pursued by their former leaders. We have seen examples of the latter in post-war countries such as Nepal, Colombia and El Salvador.

In various contexts, ex-combatants have also formed veterans' associations, which fulfil a multiplicity of roles.[4] They often serve a socio-economic function as members pursue self-development and generate income through joint ventures and cooperatives. Veterans' associations also serve as spaces for social contact, communication, mutual

support and reconciliation across the previous conflict divide, in particular when they bring together ex-fighters from formerly opposing armed groups. At the same time, such organizations pursue political claims, especially when they advocate through collective engagement 'from below'. Indeed, their members may mobilize to demand recognition and corresponding benefits for their wartime sacrifices or to call out their former leaders or post-war governments for their failure to implement peace accord provisions. For example, ex-combatants from marginalized social sectors may publicly protest to demand social reforms that involve greater gender or ethnic inclusion or to claim compensation for those who were disabled during the conflict.

Ex-combatant organizations entertain complex relations with former rebel parties. They may be closely tied to the 'mother party' or, on the contrary, express antagonism towards former leaders they feel have abandoned wartime promises to pursue self-interested political careers. While veterans' wartime identities may be a source of mistrust and stigma hampering broad popular support, their status as a 'threat to peace' with the capacity to remobilize violently also represents a unique source of leverage in protests, advocacy initiatives and negotiations with the political establishment.

Means of mobilization

As stated in IDDRS module 2.20, former armed groups may fulfil their political aspirations by participating in formal political life: for example, by 'being able to vote, being a member of a political party that represents their ideas and aims, or running for office'. [6] However, there are many other means of mobilization for the pursuit of political claims. International peacebuilding agencies can more effectively support the transformation of armed groups into peacetime entities if they are better informed about the variety of peaceful mobilization strategies available to ex-combatants. The prospect of influencing local and national decision-making processes through conventional or extra-institutional action can encourage armed groups to dismantle their armed apparatus. Besides party politics, conventional channels also include discreet lobbying, public advocacy, dialogue and litigation. Extra-institutional methods of nonviolent resistance include mass protest tactics such as marches and demonstrations; non-cooperation and disruptive tactics such as strikes, boycotts and blockages; or creative methods of resistance such as land occupation, economic self-reliance or the creation of parallel institutions such popular committees or government in exile (see Table 1).[7] In this sense, when armed groups transform into social movements or when former combatants decide to engage in non-violent protest campaigns, they do so in order to continue their struggle through a new repertoire of action – without the threat or use of violence.

GENDER-BASED ACTIVISM AND EMPOWERMENT BY FEMALE FMLN VETERANS IN EL SALVADOR

In the wake of the 1992 peace accord in El Salvador, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) – an umbrella group of several leftist guerrilla organizations formed in 1980 – transformed into a political party, which went on to lead the parliamentary opposition for many years before winning the presidential elections in 2009 and 2014. During the DDR and political reconversion processes, many female former combatants felt left behind and perceived a lack of understanding of the gendered experiences of war and their post-conflict implications. Aspiring to contribute to social and political life from outside the FMLN party, they created several women's associations, such as Las Dignas. At the community level, this organization's members developed educational projects on the topic of gender-based violence and organized mental and health support initiatives to overcome the experiences of war. At the same time, they also became key influencers of national politics: for instance, by providing critical input into the government's national plan for women. Over the years, their activism influenced the national political agenda on gender issues, which translated into new legislation on women's rights.[5] Las Dignas thus provided a parallel space for former female combatants to channel their unaddressed needs and priorities into the political arena while keeping a critical distance from party militancy and contributing to the autonomous development of the Salvadorian women's movement. Thus, the emancipation of these militants from formal politics also empowered them to lead their own transition pathways.

Table 1: Engagement strategies along the armed/nonviolent and conventional/extra-institutional continuums

Conventional Action	Extra-institutional Action	
	Nonviolent Resistance	**Armed Resistance**
Party politics Advocacy or diplomacy Dialogue and negotiation Litigation	Protest and persuasion Non-cooperation (e.g., civil disobedience) Disruptive intervention Creative resistance	Sabotage Violent protests Guerrilla insurgency Terrorist attacks Conventional warfare

Source: Dudouet 2015

NONVIOLENT MOBILIZATIONS BY EX-COMBATANTS IN COLOMBIA

The history of the Colombian peace processes is marked by various episodes of rebel-to-party transformations, most notably by the M19 in 1990 and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) in 2016. But this history is also characterized by various nonviolent campaigns waged by Colombian citizens to influence the course of the peace processes and post-war peacebuilding.[8] Among those are many initiatives launched by former combatants. For example, several smaller guerrilla groups demobilized in the wake of the M19 movement in the early 1990s, including the Quintin Lame Armed Movement (MAQL) operating from the indigenous areas of Cauca. Following a guerrilla insurgency from 1977 to 1990, it underwent a formal DDR process after signing a peace accord with the government. While its top leaders joined mainstream politics, most ex-combatants went back to their communities and engaged in social activism through the Indigenous Regional Council of Cauca (CRIC). The CRIC waged campaigns for land rights and full citizenship through various nonviolent tactics, including massive marches and road blockages ('mingas'), as well as traditional self-defence ('indigenous guards'). Over the years, the movement has successfully recovered most indigenous ancestral land for communal use and retains a massive mobilization capacity.[9]

The 2016 Havana peace accord also gave rise to numerous civil society initiatives from former FARC combatants. While the political party has met little electoral success so far, many demobilized fighters are using parallel channels of social and political activism. These include local self-led initiatives in the 24 reincorporation zones across the country, as well as national campaigns for change. For example, the Pact for Life and Peace campaign (Pacto Por la Vida y la Paz), launched in 2020 by former combatants, aimed to denounce structural problems found across Colombia, such as illicit economies, poverty, social exclusion, land displacement and violence against youth and women. The campaign employed a wide array of tactics, including demonstrations, cultural events, dialogues and manifestos. Through large-scale mobilization, they successfully convinced President Iván Duque to initiate a participatory process to develop a public policy for the protection of social leaders and human rights defenders.

These experiences exemplify the alternative and trustful means that politically motivated combatants find to continue their struggles peacefully, which can help consolidate DDR processes. Furthermore, when such mobilizations bring about effective policy change, ex-combatants are less likely to be lured back to violence or crime by dissident armed groups.

Why do ex-combatants sometimes organize outside party politics?

It is important for DDR practitioners to understand the considerations that drive ex-combatants to take political action outside formal party politics. They may do so to pursue the original objectives that drove the armed insurgency or to promote new claims and agendas that emerged from the insurgency or their post-war experiences. This knowledge will help practitioners design appropriate programmes to facilitate conducive environments for demobilized armed groups to engage in peaceful activism, especially when formal politics are not deemed a viable option.

Former combatants turn to extra-institutional political activism either by choice or necessity. Some may be tempted by the informality, creativity and flexibility of civil society engagement, which presents many comparative advantages over the formal requirements of party politics. For instance, one of the keys to successful political action, both in formal politics and informal organizations, is the

mobilization of a constituency. Party politics requires rebels-turned-politicians to attract a sufficient number of voters across large segments of society to gain meaningful representation via the formal democratic process. By contrast, an innovative, well-organized nonviolent campaign only requires a few hundred participants to attract media attention and influence policymakers.

Moreover, most combatants transitioning to civilian life have little experience with the bureaucratic procedures and regulations of party politics and lack the required skills for electoral campaigning, fundraising, strategic communication or law-making. Therefore, the informal world of platforms, social media campaigns and street activism opens the door for flexible forms of mobilization. At the same time, these forms of engagement also provide an outlet for ex-combatants to keep alive the political education and field-based knowledge they gained during the conflict, combined with vocational training acquired through DDR programmes, at the service of their communities.

Another recurrent factor shaping individual and collective pathways to political activism through civil society organizations or social movements is the exclusionary character of political parties. The political transition of armed groups will inevitably leave out a majority of activists, especially those representing marginalized voices and agendas. For example, demobilized women are often discouraged from pursuing political careers, and their reintegration options are often be limited by social stigma, mistrust and limited financial means, as well as sexist and gender-stereotypical approaches to DDR.[10] Self-led reintegration through civil society activism offers an alternative outlet for female ex-combatants to shape public debates and contribute to policymaking.

In other instances, the transition from armed insurgency to nonviolent mobilization is influenced by interactions with the social environment. Even during wartime, armed groups coexist with civil society entities such as trade unions, churches, ethnic organizations, women's collectives and student groups. When they maintain close links with these actors, combatants may become 'socialized' into joining local or national nonviolent campaigns. For instance, in Colombia, a coalition of feminist collectives and indigenous and ethnic minority organizations joined forces with former FARC female combatants in 2021 to build a communication campaign for a gender-inclusive reincorporation pro-

SOCIAL PRESSURE AND GLOBAL SOLIDARITY IN CHIAPAS

The case of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in the Chiapas province of Mexico helps to elucidate how rebel-to-movement transitions are shaped by social interactions with other actors, from local supporters and allies to global solidarity networks. The EZLN initially launched a Marxist-inspired guerrilla insurgency on 1 January 1994. But after only twelve days of combat, a mutual ceasefire was declared with the government, following pressure from the civilian movement that had emerged in defence and support of the Zapatista project. This pressure group demanded that the armed movement lay down its arms, initiate a dialogue process with the state and continue its struggle through unarmed means.

This prompted the Zapatista leaders to shift the framing of their struggle to a focus on autonomy, land access, use of natural resources and protection for Chiapas' indigenous communities, as well as to reconsider their repertoire of action. They developed a broad range of nonviolent tactics, including marches and caravans throughout Mexico, demonstrations and protests in cities worldwide, embassy occupations, symbolic displays and artistic events to raise funds and celebrate the Zapatista rebellion. Regional and global trends of the 1990s also played a role in this transition. The Zapatistas aligned their struggle with emerging indigenous movements on the American continent, who rejected armed action in favour of civil resistance and international alliance-building. At the international level, the Zapatistas also appealed to the growing counter-globalization movement. The support they gained from these transnational networks further reinforced their belief in the efficacy of nonviolent resistance. In the absence of a rebel-to-politics transition, and despite the lack of political agreement with the Mexican government, the Zapatistas successfully established structures for democratic self-governance, such as the Councils of Good Governance, through nonviolent mobilization. [11]

cess, called 'We are Movement: Popular Women, Peace and Territory' (Somos Movimiento: Mujeres Populares, Paz y Territorio). Rather than using formal political channels, its members – led by former FARC commander Senator Victoria Sandino – seek to shape political debates and narratives through social media activism. In this way, civil society actors can exercise significant agency in promoting the demilitarization and social re-mobilization of armed groups.

Conclusions and implications

The findings presented in this brief demonstrate that there are many pathways to political re-mobilization for former members of armed groups beyond joining political parties or taking up positions in the state apparatus. Civil society entities such as ex-combatant associations, women's associations or grassroots social movements allow ex-fighters to keep a sense of collective belonging and common identity and to remain politically engaged. Using a wide array of conventional or extra-institutional methods of engagement, former combatants turned nonviolent activists have grabbed media attention, shaped local and national political agendas and influenced legislative reforms. Whether former combatants decide to engage in either formal or informal political action, these choices are partly conditioned by their personal preferences, skills and capacities, and emerging opportunities. But these trajectories are also shaped by intra-group and inter-group factors, such as evolving power dynamics and patterns of marginalization within emerging political parties, as well as social interactions with community members and allies.

The process of re-mobilizing former combatants through civil society organizations and social movements is highly informal, which makes it difficult to properly document and raise awareness of the potential benefits of rebel-to-movement transitions for conflict transformation. As this research brief argues, supporting the political re-mobilization of former combatants through formal and informal channels contributes to post-war stability and sustainable peace, enabling these actors to defend their interests and pursue their struggles through nonviolent democratic means. While it is a welcome step that Module 2.20 of the revised IDDRS considers the transformation of armed groups into political parties as an essential complement in DDR programming, the operationalization of this policy guidance will need to account for the multiple forms of political engagement that ex-combatants take up.

Based on the insights presented in this research brief, we can identify at least two main policy recommendations for international peacebuilding actors, including UN-led DDR missions. First, during ongoing armed conflicts, development agencies and other international donors should prepare the ground for the effective political transformation of armed groups into civil society entities. For example, they can identify and support existing civil society organizations, social movements and community leaders with close ties to armed groups, who can entice combatants to join and rally around popular initiatives or broad-based nonviolent campaigns. These activities should be conducted in a conflict-sensitive manner, with careful messaging, to avoid leading armed groups to believe that external agencies seek to weaken them or undermine their unity and cohesion at the negotiating table and in post-war politics. Peacebuilders should also conduct careful analysis to ensure that they collaborate with autonomous societal actors who are genuinely committed to nonviolence, rather than inadvertently shifting power dynamics in favour of armed groups by supporting their civil society wings. Ultimately, if nonviolent political strategies are effective in inducing political reform, this will encourage former militants to stay on a peaceful path.

Second, during early post-war transitions, UN entities and other agencies involved in DDR programming need to broaden the scope of reintegration

support schemes available for ex-combatants. In particular, they should develop tailored support options for effective political re-mobilization, both within and outside party politics. This approach goes against the logic of most DDR programmes that aim to sever ties between ex-combatants by breaking chains of commands and encouraging individual reinsertion into society and the economy. By contrast, this research hints at the benefits of collective reintegration schemes through self-led organizations such as veterans' associations and social movements. By working closely with such civil society entities, peacebuilding agencies enhance the local ownership of DDR planning and implementation and also help prevent the political marginalization of ex-combatants. For instance, organizations of female ex-combatants contribute to the promotion of gender-responsive transitions. Finally, by encouraging former militants to broader their repertoire of political action beyond party politics, international actors can also contribute to preventing disgruntled former fighters from relapsing into violence in the wake of unfavourable electoral outcomes.

Endnotes

[1] An extensive list of references on rebel-to-party transformations can be found here: https://politicsafterwar.com/2018/07/08/rebel-to-party-transformation/

[2] See IDDRS. 2019. Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards. Module 2.20: The Politics of DDR. Inter-Agency Working Group on DDR (IAWG), p. 20. https://www.unddr.org/modules/IDDRS-2.20-The-Politics-of-DDR.pdf

[3] See Véronique Dudouet. 2013. 'Dynamics and factors of transition from armed struggle to nonviolent resistance', Journal of Peace Research, 50: 401-413; Véronique Dudouet, ed. 2015. Civil Resistance and Conflict Transformation: Transitions from Armed to Nonviolent Struggle. London: Routledge; Véronique Dudouet, Hans J. Giessmann and Katrin Planta. 2016. The Political Transformation of Armed and Banned Groups: Lessons Learned and Implications for International Support. Berlin: Berghof Foundation; Véronique Dudouet. 2021. 'From the street to the peace table: Nonviolent mobilization during intrastate peace processes', Peaceworks No. 176, Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace.

[4] See Luisa María Dietrich Ortega. 2015. 'Untapped resources for peace: A comparative study of women's organizations of guerrilla ex-combatants in Colombia and El Salvador'. In Seema Shekhawat. ed. Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 232-249; Ralph Sprenkels. 2018. After Insurgency: Revolution and Electoral Politics in El Salvador. Notre Dame, IN: University Notre Dame Press; Gyda M. Sindre. 2016. 'In whose interests? Former rebel parties and ex-combatant interest group mobilisation in Aceh and East Timor', Civil Wars 18(2): 192-213; Nikkie Wiegink. 2019. 'The good, the bad, and the awkward: The making of war veterans in post-independence Mozambique', Conflict and Society 5(1): 150-167.

[5] See International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). 1998. After the Peace: Women in Post-Conflict Reconstruction. Information Bulletin, International Center for Research on Women; UN Women. 2011. A Salvadoran Law to Achieve Equality Between Men and Women.

[6] See IDDRS. 2019, op. cit., p. 9.

[7] See Gene Sharp. 1973. The Politics of Nonviolent Action. Boston: Porter Sargent.

[8] See Virginie M. Bouvier. 2009. Colombia: Building Peace in a Time of War. U.S. Institute of Peace Press; Rosie McGee. 2017. 'Invisible power and visible everyday resistance in the violent Colombian Pacific', Peacebuilding 5(2): 170-185; Elisa Tarnaala. 2016. Women in armed groups and fighting forces: Lessons learned from gender-sensitive DDR programmes. Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF).

[9] See Katrin Planta and José Armando Cardenas Sarrias. 2015. 'Two sides of the same coin: Indigenous armed struggle and indigenous nonviolent resistance in Colombia', in: Véronique Dudouet. ed. Civil Resistance and Conflict Transformation: Transitions from Armed to Nonviolent Struggle. London: Routledge, 154-172.

[10] See Alexis Leanna Henshaw. 2020. 'Female combatants in post-conflict processes: Understanding the roots of exclusion', Journal of Global Security Studies 5(1): 63-79; Michanne Steenbergen. 2020. 'Female ex-combatants, peace, and reintegration: reflections on the disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration programmes in Liberia and Nepal', Reconstruction 40(44): 4737-45.

[11] See Guiomar Rovira Sancho. 2015. 'From armed struggle to interaction with civil society: Chiapas' Zapatista National Liberation Army', in: Véronique Dudouet. ed. Civil Resistance and Conflict Transformation: Transitions from Armed to Nonviolent Struggle. London: Routledge: 126-153.

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Author biography

Dr Véronique Dudouet is a senior research advisor at Berghof Foundation. Since 2005, she has managed various collaborative research projects on non-state armed groups, inclusive peace processes, negotiation and mediation, post-war transitions and nonviolent protest movements. She conducts regular policy advising, peer-to-peer advising and training seminars with conflict and peacebuilding stakeholders. She has authored numerous publications in the fields of conflict transformation and nonviolent resistance, including three books.

Claudia Cruz Almeida is a junior project manager in the Global Learning for Conflict Transformation Department at Berghof Foundation. Her work and research focus on post-war transitions through a gender-sensitive lens. She is currently working on a project that supports women in resistance and liberation movements in peace negotiations and post-war transitions.

The Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) is the Swedish government agency for peace, security and development. FBA has since 2005 supported research primarily through its international Research Working Groups. These are composed of well-merited scholars from universities and research institutes worldwide who conduct scientific research on issues related to FBA's areas of expertise.

The Politics After War (PAW) is a research network for collaborative activities and knowledge sharing among researchers interested in dynamics of party politics, political mobilisation, state-society relations and the state in post-civil war contexts.

The United Nations Department of Peace Operations, Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions: DDR Section (UNDPO/OROLSI/DDR) established in 2007, deploys peacekeepers who, as early peacebuilders, assist conflict-affected countries in re-establishing the rule of law and security institutions necessary to build and sustain peace. It includes five components: Police Division; Justice and Corrections Service; Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Section; Security Sector Reform Unit; and UN Mine Action Service.

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