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Colombia, From the Guerrilla to the Ballot Box

Teaser: A conversation with Pastor Alape, former guerrilla mayoral candidate for the Comunes Party.

Author Bio: This article was produced by [Globetrotter](#).

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[Article Body:]

On May 4, 2023, during the International Summit on Nonviolence held in Antioquia, Colombia, a [handshake](#) shocked those who were present. The handshake was between two men with vastly different histories. One of the men was Daniel Gaviria, whose father—Guillermo Gaviria, former governor of Antioquia—was killed in 2003 when he was a hostage of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People’s Army (FARC-EP). The other man was Pastor Alape, former commander of the FARC-EP. Gaviria said that the handshake took place because Pastor Alape was “taking steps toward nonviolence.” “That

gives me confidence and leads me to extend forgiveness to him,” said Gaviria.

Pastor Alape commanded one of the FARC-EP’s regions and was part of its highest body, the Estado Mayor Central. FARC-EP, founded in 1964, signed a peace agreement with the Colombian state in 2016. It was then [transformed](#) into the Comunes Party, comprising former guerrillas and members from various social movements. This party, which has contested elections, focuses its attention on the need to implement the peace agreement and advance the cause of social justice in Colombia. One of the lingering problems in the country is the full incorporation of former guerrilla fighters into the country’s social and political life.

Not long after the handshake, we spoke to Pastor Alape about the process of reintegration. He told us that as part of this process, he has decided to be the first former member of the national leadership of the FARC-EP to run for regional elections. Pastor Alape is [running](#) to be the mayor of Puerto Berrío in Antioquia, where he grew up. In his new civilian life, the former combatant decided to combine the name given to him by his parents (Félix Antonio Muñoz Lascarro) with the name given to him by the guerrilla struggle (Pastor Alape) and be called Pastor Lisandro Alape Lascarro. Earlier in July, he [said](#) that he joined the FARC-EP to “change the country with a lead” and now through Comunes he wants to “change it with the votes.”

Resistance of a Legal Kind

In 1974, Pastor Alape—at the age of 15—joined the Communist Youth. That year, a pact that was formed in 1958 between the Liberal and the Conservative parties to govern together as a National Front ended. It was this political turmoil that led to the armed struggle of the FARC-EP and other groups in the 1960s. But, in 1974, the Colombian Communist Party (PCC)—which had been underground—became politically active again. His work in the Communist Youth from that time, Pastor Alape told us, allowed for his “political formation through legal resistance.” This time was short-lived, and when the violence restarted, Pastor Alape joined the FARC-EP.

After 53 years of armed resistance, the warring parties [signed](#) a historic peace agreement in Havana in 2016 and Comunes entered the electoral domain. As part of the peace agreement, to incorporate Comunes into legal politics, the party is represented in Congress by 10 members. But it has thus far not been able to win many seats in the different local and regional bodies. In the October 29 regional elections, Comunes will contest 145 seats, including for the mayor’s office in Puerto Berrío, which Pastor Alape is running for.

A Community That Survives

“I have not been very fond of electoral politics,” Alape told us. “But when I arrived in the town of Puerto Berrío and met with old and new friends and family, these interactions gave me the impetus to try and use the political system to initiate state action on behalf of marginalized communities.”

Puerto Berrío or El Pueblo, as Pastor Alape calls it, is a small municipality of around 51,000 people in the province of Antioquia, which is located on the banks of the Magdalena River. On December 17, 1979, Pastor Alape left his home on a small boat on this very river to go to Matarredondain Chaparral (Tolima) to join the FARC-EP. Now, he walks along the riverbanks and campaigns to become its mayor.

Pastor Alape told us that his campaign is “a very demanding exercise in listening.” One of the main aspects of his campaign is to involve the people of the town in the “construction of public policies.” During the meetings with the community, he concentrates on gathering people’s thoughts and ideas about how to improve things in the town. “These communities,” he told us, “have had the power to survive the most adverse conditions.” Due to this, they already know how to “govern their homes, their communities, their villages.” But they have faced barriers from the state, which rather “than guaranteeing rights has a policy of violating rights.”

The Guerrilla’s Campaign

As a new party and as a party of the left, Comunes does not possess the resources of established parties of the wealthy. That is why Alape’s campaign is managed by a very small team. To compensate for this, Pastor Alape said that he is drawing upon his experience as a guerrilla fighter. He is also utilizing the experiences of various local governments and building knowledge from their experiments and their failures.

The point of his campaign is to “broaden democracy,” which is a phrase that could mean a variety of things but with Alape it means something specific. His campaign aims to, “design the lines of action based on community commitment.” If the community will not commit itself to making certain changes, then Alape is not going to go ahead with them. The community must, he said, “feel part of the government,” and change must happen with community involvement. If the community is not committed, then the policy will fail, which is why Alape said that he will not “promise what cannot be fulfilled.” If the community is not committed to a certain agenda, then that agenda will have to be set aside for now. “We might have to postpone the aspirations we have,” he said.

“We do not have economic resources,” Pastor Alape told us. “But we have people.” And if “everyone contributes, we will magnify our work.” If policies that are possible are backed

by the community, and if these are realized, then more people will begin to imagine deeper policies and more enduring solutions. This momentum will increase “the expectation of change.” This method of doing politics, Pastor Alape said, comes from his experience during the guerrilla struggle.

Countries like Colombia as well as Nepal have shown not only that peace agreements can hold after decades of conflict but also that the guerrilla fighters can bring their experiences in the armed struggle and use them in civilian life. If it works in Colombia, as it seems to be [working](#) in Nepal, it should be able to work in other long-term conflict zones too.