

The latest Colombian peace process

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Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos has reinitiated a dialogue with the FARC. Talks began in Oslo and will continue in Havana. The Colombian government suspended orders to capture the 29 members of FARC's negotiating team as long as the negotiations take place, but have warned that they will be arrested if they try to leave Cuba. [1]

The talks will deal with five issues: the end of armed conflict; land reform; guarantees for the exercise of political opposition and citizen participation; drug trafficking; and the rights of the victims of the conflict.

The government's opening statement prioritized the first issue, an end to the armed conflict. FARC's statement suggested that peace implied a transformation of the state.

In some ways, both parties are negotiating from weakness – and in this, there is cause for optimism about the outcome.

The FARC has taken tremendous military blows in the past five years. Their commanders – Raul Reyes, Jorge Briceño, Alfonso Cano – have been killed, while other leaders like Simon Trinidad have been captured. They still have capacity to mount attacks – indeed they demonstrated it by attacking and killing five soldiers [2] after the dialogues started – but its capacity has been greatly reduced.

The FARC is also politically close to an all-time low, with its name synonymous with kidnappings, collateral damage against civilians, extortion, and attempts to control the agendas of social movements. When the previous round of dialogues occurred in 1999, the government agreed to a demilitarized zone in San Vicente del Caguan, but the talks failed and the FARC persisted in its unpopular practices. They suffered militarily and saw their popularity continue to decline. The Right in Colombia benefited politically, and Alvaro Uribe Vélez became president as the talks broke down.

Uribe's strategy for dealing with FARC was one based entirely on force. In fact, it is a misnomer to talk about a strategy for dealing with FARC, since Uribe's approach was much more general – it was an approach to Colombia's neighbours (Venezuela and Ecuador), to unarmed social movements, indigenous people, unions, and the political opposition. All were accused, effectively, of being terrorists or supporters of terrorism, and large numbers were then placed on assassination lists by government-sponsored paramilitaries.

This takes us to the political weakness of the government. Under Uribe, the government was wracked by one scandal after another. While promising nothing but the iron fist to the FARC (and unarmed social movements), Uribe immediately initiated negotiations with the paramilitaries in 2002. This was strange to those who know Colombia, because the paramilitaries are universally known to be linked to the government: these 'self-defense' groups operate at the interface of the military and police, landowners, and drug trafficking, assassinating movement leaders, committing

massacres to clear territories for landowners, doing social cleansing, and other crime. The negotiations with the paramilitaries led first to several very showy handovers of weapons and demobilizations by the paramilitaries for the cameras, followed by an uninterrupted continuation of their murderous activities. The next scandal occurred when journalists discovered evidence of 'montajes' – the Colombian army was planting car bombs in order to accuse FARC of a terror campaign in the city. The 'montajes' were followed by 'false positives', in which the army went a step further: actually killing innocent people, planting weapons on them, claiming they died in combat, and showing this as evidence of battlefield success against the FARC. Investigators also found numerous mass graves filled with disappeared victims of massacres – again, by the army and paramilitary. The last few years of Uribe's rule were filled with 'para-politica', in which military officials provided reams of evidence that politicians linked to Uribe had signed contracts with paramilitaries to control territories and eliminate enemies. Many of the paramilitary and military leaders, once convicted, were extradited to prisons in the US, where they won't be pointing fingers at those who gave them orders.

In the region, Uribe's paramilitary incursions and threats on the Venezuelan border were met with anger throughout Latin America and sanctions by Venezuela. His assassination of Raul Reyes in Ecuador without any warning or cooperation with that government alienated that country as well. The US Congress held up a prospective Free Trade agreement with Colombia over the country's human rights record, specifically the assassinations of unionists.

So, while Colombia's powerful Right still thinks of Uribe as a strong figure for standing up to the FARC, and Uribe's approach paid military dividends, the contradictions and scandals of the paramilitary-linked regime have taken their political toll, and perhaps, for the time being, run their course. The new President, Juan Manuel Santos, represents a different section of Colombia's elite, one more interested in security for mining operations, perhaps, than in cleansing the rural countryside of peasants and indigenous opposition. Hence the peace talks.

Perhaps neither side is entering these negotiations with the loftiest of motives, but the outcome could still be positive for Colombians. The war has certainly not benefited the majority. Instead, it has effectively concentrated wealth and land in a few hands, set Colombia's rural development back decades, and created a murderously difficult context for unarmed social movements.

Analysis by Colombian economist Hector Mondragon [\[3\]](#) shows how the war is interrelated with the agricultural sector: growing imports, technological dependence on transnationals, institutional weakness, priority for mining over agriculture, priority for biofuels within agriculture, displacement of peasants, and high prices and concentration of land. Mondragon shows how the Gini index for land concentration, always high in Colombia, reached a peak in 2009 at 0.875 (out of 1), reversing weak land reform efforts that started in the 1960s and brought the index as low as 0.840 in 1984. Colombia's agricultural sector has stagnated when it was not contracting in recent years, and has had the weakest growth in Latin America. Paradoxically, despite this weak growth and the tremendous rural insecurity, Colombia has some of the most expensive rural land in Latin America.

These specific problems can best be addressed by the proposals of peasant and indigenous movements in the countryside. Although the FARC's claim is correct, that true peace goes beyond a mere end to shooting war, it is also the case that an end to the shooting war between FARC and the government, even absent an end to the other kinds of violence, would be a huge step in the right direction, a step that would make it much easier for civilian resistance and social movements to seek true peace.

If the FARC signs, and demobilizes, it will be because they understand that every day the war goes on, the situation gets worse for the people. If that happens, it will be the starting point for renewed

struggles for land reform, for worker's rights, for human rights, for justice for the victims, and quite possibly, against mining, all of which will be taken up by their rightful owners, the many diverse movements of Colombia. If justice is a prerequisite for an end to the shooting war, then neither will be achieved. If an end to shooting can be achieved, the struggle for justice will have advanced.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] BBC News, October 18, 2012. "Colombia and Farc negotiators launch Norway peace talks". <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-19994289>

[2] BBC News, October 20, 2012. "FARC kills five in first attack during talks". <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-20019506>

[3] Hector Mondragon, "Ruralidad para la paz y paz para la ruralidad". "Caja de Herramientas" n° 144, octubre de 2012, p. 18-19. http://www.viva.org.co/caja_de_herramientas/caja144/