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Colombia

A Partial Peace in Colombia

- IV Online magazine - 2017 - IV506 - March 2017 -

Publication date: Monday 27 March 2017

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Colombia's peace accord serves capitalist interests, but may also open new space for the grassroots left. In November 2016 the Colombian Congress approved a peace deal between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas, potentially ending a 50-year armed conflict that has killed at least 220,000 people — 82% civilians — and displaced almost seven million.

The accord includes mechanisms for disarmament and reintegration of guerrilla fighters, lenient sentencing for those who confess to committing acts of violence, and an allotment of 10 congressional seats for FARC politicians for eight years. Separate peace talks with the smaller National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrilla force are now underway.

Most of Colombia's independent progressive movements support the accord, but also stress its limitations. The Agrarian Summit (Cumbre Agraria), a nationwide "peasant, ethnic, and popular" coalition formed in 2014, sees in the accord a potential "end to the enormous suffering that the armed conflict has caused." But as it said in November, the right is still "killing us."

In 2016 state and right-wing paramilitary forces killed at least 114 labor unionists, peasants, indigenous people, Afro-descendants and other human rights defenders, including 30 in the three months after the ceasefire began. The paramilitaries have publicly promised that these murders will continue.

Progressive movements like the Summit and the People's Congress, a nationwide peace and justice coalition, strongly reject a "neoliberal peace," one that involves simply "laying down arms" while ignoring the "structural causes" of violence. But the government has refused to challenge the power of capitalists. President Juan Manuel Santos has repeatedly promised that "our model of development isn't changing" and that "private property won't be affected."

The text of the accord does talk about returning stolen land and democratizing land ownership, but those provisions (as is the entire accord) are entirely dependent on "existing laws" and the "good faith" of the government and large landowners.

The peace will thus be partial, in both senses of the word: limited in its delivery of physical security for activists, and strongly biased in favor of capitalist interests.

Despite its many limitations, though, the accord could eventually open new political space for progressive and leftist forces. The extent to which it does so will depend on a range of actors, including capitalists, the U.S. government, and Colombia's own popular movements.

The struggles among and within those forces will determine whether the accord brings continued neoliberalism and violence in the guise of peace or, in the words of the Agrarian Summit, the "peace that we aspire to, with no more victims."

Is Peace Good for Profits?

The final, revised accord followed four years of negotiations and voters' narrow rejection of a prior version in an

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October referendum. [1] Far-right former president Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) had vehemently attacked the deal and his own former ally, President Santos (2010-present), demagogically accusing Santos of “handing the country to the FARC.”

Uribe’s campaign to derail peace also alleged that Santos was undermining “family values” by allowing gay rights reforms, rhetorically linking the guerrillas’ attacks on the nation to the assault on the nuclear family. [2]

The Uribe-Santos feud is a conflict within the Colombian right, with the two leaders representing disparate capitalist blocs. Uribe represents the rural elites who specialize in cattle ranching, land speculation, and narco-trafficking. Those elites have repeatedly crushed agrarian reform initiatives since the 1940s.

They have created and funded the paramilitary death squads which, alongside the Colombian state, have historically committed “and continue to commit” the vast majority of massacres and other human rights violations. [3] And they have been the prime beneficiaries of the paramilitary theft of eight million hectares of land “15% of the national territory” since the 1980s.

This bloc, along with Colombia’s military- and security-industrial complex, has been the biggest winner from the war and the repression it enables. Not surprisingly, the president of the cattle ranchers’ federation (FEDEGAN) has been a vocal critic of the peace accord and of a 2011 land restitution law. This far-right faction is currently “strengthening paramilitarism and is designating anyone who advocates peace as a military target,” says Afro-Colombian activist Francia Márquez.

Uribe and other far-right politicians have an added interest in scuttling the peace accord. Since the accord promises light sentencing for military and paramilitary members who confess their crimes, the Uribistas are terrified that paramilitaries will disclose their connections to civilian officials like Uribe.

Some, like the notorious Salvatore Mancuso, have already done so, contributing to the “para-politics” scandal that engulfed Uribe’s administration and forced the dissolution of his secret police agency. In 2008 Uribe furtively extradited 14 paramilitary leaders to the United States on drug charges, presumably so that they would not incriminate him in Colombia.

President Santos, on the other hand, draws support from a more transnationally-oriented elite power bloc, composed of sectors like finance, insurance, telecommunications, media, tourism, and some mining and agribusiness interests. The rising prominence of the National Business Council (Consejo Gremial Nacional) since its formation in 1991 is a measure of these sectors’ strengthened influence in the country.

Many leaders in these sectors have come to see the impact of the armed conflict as net-negative. War offers an excuse to repress dissent, but is undesirable in other ways. It imposes “opportunity costs” by impeding “foreign and national capital investments,” said Nicanor Restrepo, the late leader of the Antioquian Syndicate. [4]

Restrepo and many other business executives publicly supported Santos in his 2014 reelection showdown against the pro-war, Uribista candidate Áscar Zuluaga. Some in this bloc expect that peace will open up new geographic areas for mining, oil drilling and industrial agriculture.

In April 2016, the Canadian ambassador predicted that peace will mean “that businesses in the mining and energy sector” “many of which hail from Canada” “can enter socially conflictive zones that they haven’t entered before.” Juan Carlos Echeverry, president of Colombia’s nominally public state oil company, told reporters around the

same time that “with peace, we hope to be able to enter Caquetá, Putumayo, Arauca,” and other rural regions “with greater strength.”

Capitalists are also salivating over government promises to create new Rural Economic Development Zones (zidres) that would hand over huge territories to large private interests, plans which the Agrarian Summit and others have strongly criticized.

The disagreement between the two blocs is strategic, not principled. Santos has continued the business-friendly economic policies of Uribe, and his promises to maintain those policies were one condition of elite support for the peace process.

Nor is Santos a genuine believer in peace. He was Uribe’s defense minister during the peak of the military’s “false positives” strategy, in which at least 4,300 civilians were murdered and dressed as guerrillas to inflate body counts. During his own presidency, Santos has continued counterinsurgent warfare and helped guarantee impunity for right-wing violence.

Rather than principle, it was capitalist reassessment of opportunity costs, the government’s inability to completely defeat the FARC, popular pressures for peace, and the mediation role of international actors — most notably the Cuban, Norwegian and Venezuelan governments — that led to the peace deal.

U.S. Staying Power

Tepid U.S. support for the peace accord, like Santos’ own pursuit of the accord, seems to reflect a shifting strategic calculus. The Obama administration played an ambivalent role, rhetorically supporting peace and sending a special envoy but not rebuking the Uribistas’ sabotage of the process.

With the Colombian state incapable of totally vanquishing the FARC, and the peace accord’s preservation of basic capitalist prerogatives, many top leaders in Washington favored negotiations.

Moreover, an accord promised certain benefits: it would guarantee a more stable environment for foreign investment and, in the words of U.S. peace envoy Bernard Aronson, send a “signal about American staying power” in Latin America, a region beset in the early twenty-first century by challenges to U.S. imperialism.

U.S. policy toward Colombia has historically pursued a consistent, bipartisan set of goals, though employing varying strategies over time.

Republicans have been avid promoters of terror in Colombia, and Donald Trump will likely continue that legacy. But it was a liberal Democrat, John F. Kennedy, who sent Special Forces General William Yarborough to Colombia to promote the use of, in Yarborough’s words, “paramilitary, sabotage, and/or terrorist activities against known Communist proponents.” [5] Those activities included the use of napalm and other scorched-earth tactics against rural villages.

Since the 1990s there continues to be relatively little difference among presidential administrations regarding Colombia policy. Uribe and Santos have both garnered bipartisan praise in Washington for their staunch support of neoliberalism and U.S. policy in the Americas.

The \$10 billion aid package known as Plan Colombia, initiated by Bill Clinton, has made Colombia the region's biggest recipient of U.S. military aid since the 1990s. [6] Over that same time period, the Colombian government has by far the worst human rights record in South America, with thousands of progressive activists and social "disposables" murdered by state and paramilitary forces.

The correlation between U.S. support and state brutality is not coincidental. A systematic 2010 study by the Center for Global Development identified "a distinct, asymmetric pattern: when U.S. military aid increases, attacks by paramilitaries, who are known to work with the military, increase more in municipalities with [Colombian military] bases."

A separate study by the Fellowship of Reconciliation and U.S. Office on Colombia found that "areas where Colombian army units received the largest increases in U.S. assistance reported increased extrajudicial killings on average."

The U.S. government has always been aware of the Colombian military's "death squad tactics" (as noted by the CIA in 1994), as well as its close ties to paramilitaries. The paramilitaries, as U.S. officials also know, have drawn a large share of their funding from narcotrafficking. Yet without batting an eye, the U.S. government has always publicly claimed that the FARC is the main source of drug trafficking and terrorist violence.

This dogma shaped Plan Colombia, which was purportedly designed to fight narcotics and terrorism. As anthropologist Winifred Tate notes, "Even though the vast majority of the drug trade was being conducted by right-wing paramilitary forces" "who were also committing most of the terror" "U.S. officials focused almost exclusively on the guerrillas." [7]

Some Democrats have periodically expressed concern for human rights, but such concern has never interfered with the policy of U.S. support for the Colombian government. Under the Obama administration, the labor attaché at the U.S. embassy in Bogotá privately admitted that the 2011 "Labor Action Plan" that accompanied the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement was toothless, while the office of the U.S. Trade Representative frankly stated in 2015 that the continued widespread murder of labor unionists does not constitute a violation of the agreement.

Neither the peace accord nor the Trump presidency will dramatically alter U.S. policy. Formal peace may eventually undermine the pretext for high levels of military aid to Colombia, but that aid had already been tapering off somewhat in recent years, part of a geographic reorientation to Mexico and Central America.

Neither the close military partnership nor the basic goals of U.S. policy are likely to change in the near future. On the contrary, top players in Washington see the accord as a way to advance those goals.

Prospects for a New Left

One of the most important consequences of the peace accord could be the opening of new political space for the left, broadly defined.

Many on the left are justifiably scared of a repetition of the late 1980s and 1990s, when the right murdered between 3,000 and 4,000 members of the Patriotic Union, a leftist civilian party formed in the midst of peace negotiations between the FARC and government.

Yet an end to the guerrilla struggle is a positive development, even if a few on the international left still cling to a romantic view of the FARC. While the FARC's stated goals are indeed revolutionary, the group's actions have long since alienated it from the large majority of the population. Since the 1980s its frequent brutality against civilians and its increased reliance on drug money have foreclosed any chance of it leading a broad, cross-sector alliance.

The Colombian right, meanwhile, has benefitted tremendously from the FARC's unpopularity, successfully equating the FARC with "the left" in the public mind and using the guerrillas as a pretext to repress nonviolent challengers. Whatever the guerrillas' accomplishments in some parts of the countryside, their net effect on the left is decidedly negative.

To be sure, the right will remain perfectly willing to use violence. The early months of "peace" have seen no abatement of violence against civilian activists. Francia Márquez, who has organized struggles against dispossession by mining companies in her home region of Cauca, warns that paramilitaries will continue to play the role of "clearing the path" for businesses that "seek to enter our territories with greater strength" under the peace accord.

But the formal end to the war could also constrain the right's freedom to engage in extermination and its ability to discredit progressive demands. For this reason, the peace accord may create new opportunities for civilian social movements.

Those movements can build on existing foundations. In recent decades the indigenous and Afro-Colombian movements in departments like Cauca, Valle del Cauca, and Chocó have been at the forefront of popular struggles.

Starting with the historic 2013 agrarian strike, a broad, multiethnic peasant movement has mounted hundreds of marches, protests and popular assemblies in opposition to neoliberal trade agreements, rural inequality, resource extraction and racism. In June 2016 Agrarian Summit member organizations blockaded over 100 roads in 23 of Colombia's 32 departments.

Some of these mobilizations drew substantial support from urban workers, students and professionals. Students showed impressive mobilization capacity of their own when threatened with an education privatization reform in 2011.

There have also been several attempts at coalition-building around anticapitalist platforms in recent years. The People's Congress and Agrarian Summit are two such initiatives, and the Patriotic March formed in 2012 is another. These coalitions have played leadership roles in the broader peace movement, which has itself facilitated the "unity of popular, democratic, and progressive sectors," as the People's Congress hoped in 2013.

Overall, however, left fragmentation and weakness remain the dominant patterns. Only a tiny portion of the population is involved in grassroots political activity. In many poor urban neighborhoods, the only organizations are gangs and evangelical churches. Unions have been decimated by violence and neoliberal labor laws.

As anthropologist Lesley Gill has noted, the hegemonic framework of "human rights" in progressive circles reflects the weakening of collective, class-based politics in recent decades. [8] At the level of political parties, the Alternative Democratic Pole is a significant opposition force, but lacks a mass membership base and connections to popular struggles.

The growth of a mass-based left will require building new organizations at the local level that can address popular grievances while fostering solidarity across geographic and sectorial boundaries. The cities, home to two-thirds of Colombians and long neglected by the left, must be a special priority.

A New Historical Era?

There is some reason for hope. Recent years have seen impressive levels of civilian political mobilization. An industry coalition, the Mining and Energy Committee, recently warned that the peace accord may bring “an increase in nonviolent social protest.” And despite the horrific repression and violence for which Colombia is known, the country’s history is filled with courageous resistance movements that might serve as inspiration. [9]

What sort of peace will emerge is still unclear, for the implementation of the accord will be fiercely contested in practice. But as the People’s Congress argued in 2013, the process may “make possible the construction of a popular bloc that allows us to alter the correlation of forces on the national level,” a bloc that can confront both the “militarist sectors” of the elite that continue to sponsor death squads and the “sectors that opt for peace but are unwilling to accept change.”

The peace accord offers the potential, at least, for “the opening of a new historical era: that of greater popular mobilization, constructing a country with social justice.”

[Against the Current](#)

[1] The regions most impacted by violence tended to vote Yes in the October referendum. At least 60% of voters in the departments of Chocó, Cauca, Nariño, Putumayo, Atlántico, and Vaupés voted in favor. In the Urabá region of Antioquia — Uribe’s home state, and a paramilitary stronghold — ten of eleven municipalities voted Yes.

[2] The No campaign’s protests against what it calls “gender ideology” in the accord — that is, the stated commitment to gender and sexual equity — highlight the deep-seated patriarchal foundations of the Colombian right (which, not surprisingly, has consistently used sexual violence as a method of war).

[3] For instance, between 1980 and 2012, paramilitaries were responsible for 59% of massacres; state forces were responsible for 8%, and guerrillas 17%. Paramilitaries are still a powerful presence despite their ostensible demobilization in the mid-2000s. See Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, *¡Basta ya! Colombia: Memorias de guerra y dignidad* (Bogotá, 2012), 36; idem., *Desmovilización y reintegración paramilitar: Panorama posacuerdos con las AUC* (Bogotá, 2015), 431-92; Jasmin Hristov, *Paramilitarism and Neoliberalism: Violent Systems of Capital Accumulation in Colombia and Beyond* (London, 2014), 112-37.

[4] Nazih Richani, *Systems of Violence: The Political Economy of War and Peace in Colombia*, 2nd ed. (Albany, 2013), 129-51 (quote, 134); Forrest Hylton and Aaron Tauss, “Peace in Colombia: A New Growth Strategy,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* 48, no. 3 (2016): 253-59

[5] Quoted in Michael McClintock, *Instruments of Statecraft: U.S. Guerrilla Warfare, Counterinsurgency, and Counter-terrorism, 1940-1990* (New York, 1992), 222.

[6] The \$10 billion figure excludes unknown billions in covert aid from the CIA and NSA

[7] *Drugs, Thugs, and Diplomats: U.S. Policymaking in Colombia* (Stanford, 2015), 47

[8] *A Century of Violence in a Red City: Popular Struggle, Counterinsurgency, and Human Rights in Colombia* (Durham, 2016)

[9] Forrest Hylton, *Evil Hour in Colombia* (London, 2006); Gonzalo Sánchez, *Ensayos de historia social y política del siglo XX* (Bogotá, 1984); Vanessa Joan Gray, “Nonviolence and Sustainable Resource Use with External Support: A Survival Strategy in Rural Colombia,” *Latin American Perspectives* 39, no. 1 (2012): 43-60.