

The Colombian peace process: paradoxes and dilemmas

By Juan Gabriel Tokatlian

■ Executive summary

The parties to the conflict in Colombia are relatively close to a final agreement, but obstacles remain. Internal tensions remain high in Colombia, despite the advances in Havana, and the need to promote a “pedagogy for peace” is urgent in light of these tensions. In particular, the transformations and adjustments required to achieve a successful peace and not just a temporary reduction of violence need to be focused on. A NOREF-Universidad Di Tella seminar in Buenos Aires concluded that the government-FARC negotiation process is gradually becoming a fact of Colombian politics, but frictions will grow as peace becomes more likely. The issues of land, the state and the rule of law will remain central to Colombian society and therefore to the peace process. In a problem-filled global environment, peace in Colombia could be a positive factor. The U.S. has not undermined the peace negotiations as it did under previous Colombian administrations, while the participation of Latin America will be significant in building peace in Colombia.

The NOREF-Universidad Di Tella international seminar on “Peace in Colombia” held in Buenos Aires on October 16th 2014 revealed the complexities and contradictions of the negotiation process initiated during the first mandate (2010-14) of President Juan Manuel Santos between the government of Colombia (GOC) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Several features were apparent.

Firstly, after half a century of armed conflict both parties are relatively close to a point that experts have defined as a mutually hurting stalemate, i.e. “a situation in which neither party thinks it can win a given conflict without incurring excessive loss, and in which both are suffering from a continuation of fighting. [So] the conflict is judged to have entered a period of ripeness”.¹ But also “there is an underlying fear of never reaching a win-win resolution”. Thus, “unless there is a fundamental change in how Colombian society views and manages this conflict, we can be assured these differences will stalemate” (Abbott, 2013: 1). This duality corroborates the existence of real obstacles that need to be overcome and that major changes of various kinds are essential in order to conclude a viable and verifiable peace process.

Secondly, the talks and agreements (on three items of a five-point agenda) advanced in Havana are in many ways

in an inverse relationship to the debates and environment experienced in Bogotá. The negotiating parties, helped by Cuba, Norway, Venezuela and Chile, have generated a reasonable level of trust and proved to be capable of compromise, while the situation in Colombia – as the 2014 presidential election campaign exemplified – is characterised by polarising attitudes among and statements by key domestic actors. This critical difference suggests the fragility of the conversations, the imperative to continuously de-escalate tensions, and the crucial need of support from outside countries and institutions.

Thirdly, even though several polls have repeatedly indicated that Colombian public opinion supports the dialogue in Cuba and believes that there will be a final accord between the GOC and FARC, it also has deep doubts about the actual achievement of peace. This combination of expectation, ambiguity and scepticism among the population demonstrates the urgency of promoting a “pedagogy for peace” by both the GOC and the FARC.

Fourthly, the protracted (and degraded) nature of the armed conflict in Colombia demands a long-term perspective, which means an understanding of the notable transformations and adjustments required to achieve a successful peace and not just a very temporary reduction of

¹ <<http://glossary.usip.org/resource/mutually-hurting-stalemate>>.

violence. In that sense attention to the post-conflict context is reasonable, but should not neglect the important political, social and economic efforts that are currently needed to sustain the ongoing dialogue. Several international examples, both positive and negative, can be used as models here, because the Colombian case has its own peculiarities, but is not exceptional.

In light of this overall framework, the one-day deliberation demonstrated the following:

- The GOC-FARC negotiation process is gradually becoming a fact of Colombian politics. Without overemphasising the argument, there are several signs to indicate that both parties are willing to remain committed to a political solution to the longest armed conflict in Latin America. Peace is not inevitable, but an agreement seems foreseeable.
- As the remaining issues – victims, and disarmament and demobilisation – on the five-point agenda become the centerpiece of the talks and no bilateral cease-fire is established, one may expect growing friction in Havana and increasing confrontations on the ground in Colombia. Tensions are a typical feature of the final phase of peace negotiations.
- Old and new – and very deep – challenges, with or without armed conflict, have characterised the Colombian reality. Three questions were always present, and remain so: land, the state and the rule of law. Modernising and reforming the agrarian sector, extending the effective presence of state institutions, and guaranteeing basic rights to all citizens are major considerations that could (or should?) be a focus of the government even prior to a final settlement with the guerillas.
- Amid deteriorating conditions in several global settings, the Colombia peace process could be a positive phenomenon in 2015. The multiple conflicts in the Middle East are worsening; the situation in Europe, in particular with regard to Ukraine, is deteriorating several disputes in Africa are persistent and becoming critical; and tensions in Central Asia and South-East Asia are recurrent. If the GOC-FARC negotiation process is positively concluded, then Latin America will end its long cycle of politically motivated armed conflict.
- It was noted at the seminar that the U.S. has not been a negative factor in the Colombian peace talks and has not exercised any form of veto. This is a highly relevant fact in light of the failed peace approaches with the FARC during the government of President Belisario Betancur (1982-86) and the failed peace process between the government of President Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) and the FARC. In these two cases Washington's covert or overt opposition was an influential factor.

- In the event of a successful end to the Colombian conflict, the participation of Latin America may be significant. Colombians themselves will be responsible for achieving peace in their country, but peace in Colombia is fundamental to the regional interests of South America. The region may contribute to the peacebuilding process in various areas such as transitional justice, forensic investigations of victims, land mine clearance and removal, and human rights in the armed forces, among many others.

To sum up, the seminar on Colombia sponsored by NOREF and Universidad Di Tella made evident that ultimately the country is facing a key choice: enter the 21st century, with its potential for peace and prosperity, or remain in the violent 20th century.

Reference

Abbott, P. K. 2014. "The intractable conflict: why Colombia's war against the FARC eludes resolution." *Small Wars Journal*, November. ■

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