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Colombia Might Be Edging Closer to New Peace Negotiation

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Perhaps in few countries of the world is the "peace-dialogue" concept as clearly incorporated into the political language and a society's yearning as in Colombia. That is not to say, however, that, after nearly a half century of a bloody internal war, the belligerent parties are in a constant search for some form of negotiation. The war is waged between the national armed forces and the guerrilla organizations but also involves the drug mafias' private armies and the paramilitary groups, which have turned the pain of Colombian society into a big business.

In the last three decades, under three administrations, three dialogue panels were set up to negotiate peace. Between 2002 and 2010, however, during the two terms of former President Álvaro Uribe, the very concept of peace was erased from official discourse. For the rightist government, the phenomenon of a strong and deeply rooted guerrilla force was strictly a military problem and, consequently, could only be resolved militarily.

In 2010, President Juan Manuel Santos took office. Little by little, the former defense minister has distanced himself from the shadow of his predecessor. Following passage of a law providing reparations to victims of the conflict (NotiSur, July 8, 2011), he admitted in June that Colombia's problem is not military but rather social.

In this new environment, Colombians think that, perhaps, the moment has come when, for the fourth and hopefully final time, the government and the guerrillas can establish the minimal basis for a peaceful future. This will, however, be impossible if the mafia armies and the paramilitary groups are not first eradicated.

Before the May 2010 elections in which Santos was victorious, the guerrilla Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), the oldest guerrilla group in Latin America, raised the idea of resuming peace negotiations. Analysts were convinced that it was just a slogan that formed part of the FARC's political strategy aimed at influencing the electoral process and sending out a sign of its constant presence in the life of the country.

FARC makes new overture for peace talks

In late May of this year, the FARC again signaled that it wanted a "civilized exit to the conflict," lamenting that the Colombian governments of the last half century "have been under the directives of [US] imperialism" and formalizing their peace proposal. "We have never rejected a political solution to the social and armed conflict, which the Colombian oligarchy intensified with each government cycle, because the search for peace with social justice is part of our being and the reason for our struggle, alongside our conviction that we can only build it with the participation of the people," read a statement released on May 30 to mark the 47th anniversary of the founding of the organization. The document also gave a brief summary of the history of the failed peace dialogues with the administrations of Presidents Belisario Betancur (1982-1986), César Gaviria (1990-1994), and Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002).
As it did in February 2010, before the presidential elections, the FARC defined itself, saying, "We are not warmongers nor do we fight for personal vengeance; we have no material resources or privileges to defend. We are revolutionaries of conscience committed to an unending search for a just and sovereign society."

After pointing out that it is "profoundly humanist," the FARC explained that it was "obliged to wage war against a leadership class subservient to the empire, which has systematically used violence and personal threats as a political weapon to maintain its power from Sept. 25, 1828, when it tried to assassinate the Liberator Simón Bolívar, until today, when it practices state terrorism to maintain the status quo."

The FARC says that a prerequisite to sitting down at the negotiating table is first setting certain minimal guidelines, because until now "the difficulty that Colombia has faced in achieving reconciliation through dialogues and accords has been the government's oligarchic concept of peace, which only accepts the insurgency's absolute submission to the 'established order,' or, as an alternative, 'the peace of the grave.'"

**Past talks provide cautionary tale for guerrillas**

The guerrilla document recalled how, as an outcome of the peace dialogue with Betancur, the Unión Patriótica (UP)—the legal arm of the FARC and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)—was created in May 1985 to participate in the political life of the country. That experience ended with the extermination of more than 3,000 people by the Army and the paramilitary groups, among them three presidential candidates, eight senators, 13 deputies, 70 city councilors, and 11 mayors (NotiSur, May 5, 2000).

"In Colombia, many good and capable people who wanted a better country and who struggled through nonviolent means, such as Jaime Pardo Leal, Bernardo Jaramillo, Manuel Cepeda [the three presidential candidates], and others were victims of premeditated murder by the state intelligence services in alliance with the paramilitaries and the mafias, enemies of the people, in an unprecedented genocide that physically liquidated an entire emerging dynamic political movement: the Unión Patriótica," said the FARC.

The last presidential candidate assassinated was Cepeda, then a national senator, in 1994 (NotiSur, Aug. 26, 1994). His case was presented to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR), which, in its May 2010 ruling, defined the crime as an act of state terrorism. The IACHR ruled that Colombia had to apologize for the assassination and publically vindicate the figure of Cepeda, a ruling that Uribe ignored. Finally, on Aug. 9, in a historic act celebrated in Congress, Interior Minister Germán Vargas complied with the IACHR order.

In early June, the campesinos, who have said, "We civilians are bearing all the pain," expressed their support for dialogue. In a convening document for the Encuentro Nacional de Comunidades Campesinas, Afrodescendientes e Indígenas por la Paz, held Aug. 12-15, they invited the "government, business groups, military leaders, political parties, and the guerrillas" to participate in the event. The text emphasized the need "to look for ways to physically or however possible hear the voice of the FARC and the ELN."

They did not provide the necessary security, and the two long-standing guerrilla organizations could not participate in the event. The group that organized the Encuentro, the Asociación Campesina
del Valle del Río Cimitarra—winner of the national peace prize—said, "The Colombian conflict can end through dialogue and through attacking its objective causes by carrying out political, economic, and social reforms that allow the national population's living and working conditions to improve. But also through the willingness and the express political decision by the forces in contention, the government and the guerrillas." It is clear that the campesinos consider the armies of the mafias and the paramilitaries not a part of but rather beneficiaries of the conflict.

**Santos holds out vague possibility of talks**

From the time he took office, Santos did nothing more than condition any possibility for dialogue on prior capitulation by the guerrilla organizations. However, since passage of the Ley de Víctimas and his recognition of the state's full responsibility for Cepeda's assassination, a door might have been opened. In any event, the president gave a vague hint on July 5, when he spoke to bishops at the meeting of the Conferencia Episcopal de Colombia (CEC). And he did so mixing what could be defined as "the best of President Santos" and "the worst of former minister Santos."

The president highlighted the role that the Catholic Church plays "in the search for peace" and said that "what's needed is for the guerrillas to realize that arms will only continue to bring prison or the grave."

Santos then spoke for the first time about the possibility of establishing a mesa de diálogo to negotiate peace. "When we see that circumstances can be propitious, we will call on the Catholic Church to help us obtain our longed-for objective [peace], because, if the conditions are not there, our public forces will have to continue acting," he said.

For the FARC and the campesinos, there is a social conflict to resolve, and the government now says that when it sees the possibility for dialogue in favor of peace it will do so with the participation of the Catholic Church. The only problem is that the bishops want the armies of the mafias and the paramilitaries to sit at the same table, and those two sectors are not part of the conflict but rather are taking advantage of it to do business.

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