12-6-2013

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Breakthrough in Colombia Peace Talks Opposed by Far Right, Applauded By Everyone Else

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Category/Department: Colombia
Published: 2013-12-06

Colombia is divided into two, though far from equally sized, camps regarding ongoing peace talks between the government and guerilla leaders. While a large majority supports the process, a small but powerful far-right sector is doing all it can to ensure that the violence, which has as already plagued the country for half a century, continues.

Hoping to put an end to the lengthy internal war, officials representing the government of President Juan Manuel Santos agreed, in November 2012, to begin talks with representatives of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerilla army (NotiSur, Dec. 14, 2012). The process was opposed from the start by the pro-war sector, led by ex-President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), which launched a campaign aimed primarily at discrediting President Santos. The campaign presented Santos, who came into office in 2010 after serving as Uribe’s defense minister, as a "traitor" who "protects criminals" and "degrades the military" by giving the rebels equal standing in the peace talks.

Last month, on Nov. 6, the government and guerillas announced a deal by which the FARC would demobilize and be granted status as an official political entity and yet be allowed—at least for now—to keep their weapons. As the talks progress toward what the two sides are hoping will be a definitive peace accord, the guerillas would eventually be expected to disarm.

The general public, according to recent polls, is enthusiastic about the breakthrough. Two polls by the Observatorio de la Democracia, operated out of the private Universidad de los Andes, showed an increase in the percentage of Colombians supporting the negotiations. One of surveys, released on Nov. 25, estimated support for the talks at 67%.

The numbers seem to have little influence on the uribismo sector and its allies—a group that includes Santos’ defense minister as well as the head of the government mission sent to Cuba to conduct the peace negotiations—who are doing everything in their power to prevent the talks from advancing.

Dubious accusations

The sector’s latest push to derail the process began on Nov. 13, when Defense Minister Juan Carlos Pinzón called a press conference and dropped a "bombshell" revelation. Pinzón, claiming he has just come from a meeting with Uribe, announced that he had assigned the ex-president a special security contingent of some 300 soldiers to protect him from a just-discovered FARC assassination plot. Citing government intelligence sources, the defense minister accused FARC of planning other high-level assassinations as well.

Pinzón failed to back up his vague claim with any precise details. Nevertheless, the government’s chief negotiator, Humberto de la Calle, immediately accepted the story as true and accused the FARC of "placing the future of the talks in jeopardy." Óscar Iván Zuluaga, Uribe’s chosen candidate
for next year’s May 25 presidential election, spoke out as well, saying, "The talks should be broken off right now," and promising, if elected, to put an immediate end to the negotiations—on Uribe’s orders. Zuluaga represents the Uribe Centro Democrático (UCD) party.

The rebels did not pull out of the negotiations. And Santos, rather than react immediately, took his time responding to the allegations. When he finally did, on Nov. 18, the president said that the intelligence report was "very old"—dating back to his time as defense minister (2006-2009)—and that the information had, in the end, proved to be false.

The far right found itself isolated in its criticisms of the peace process. Poll numbers published later in the month in the country’s establishment media offered evidence of just how marginalized the sector was: surveys by Gallup and Ipsos, the only trustworthy polling firms, showed support for Zuluaga at barely 10%.

No turning back

It took the Santos administration and the FARC five months to reach their Nov. 6 agreement, testament to just how complicated the negotiations have been. In its cover story, published three days after the deal was announced, the Bogotá news magazine Semana said the two sides have come too far at this point to be thwarted by someone bent on ruining the process in one fell swoop.

Although neither has said so explicitly, the government and guerillas appear to have finally found some key common ground at "the heart of the negotiations," the Semana article suggested. "The FARC is deciding to disarm and transform itself into a legal political party, and the government is promising to open up the democratic process and provide the necessary conditions so that the opposition has the guarantees it needs to operate within an institutional framework."

In a joint communiqué, the government and FARC described the agreement as a "democratic opening within the framework of ending the conflict." In time, the two sides plan to sign a final peace accord that "will imply the laying down of arms and the proscription of violence as a method of political action," the statement read.

The analysts at Semana, Colombia’s leading news weekly, see that goal as both a starting point and a point of arrival for the ongoing negotiations. "If the FARC hadn’t agreed to lay down their arms, the process wouldn’t have had a future," the magazine suggested. "Now that they’ve settled on that particular issue, the chances of a final accord improve exponentially."

"In the days leading up to the agreement," the Semana article continued, "President Santos—no doubt under pressure because of the approaching elections—pushed hard for speeding up the negotiations. He even said at one point that the talks should be concluded before the end-of-the-year Christian holidays. He also insinuated the possibility of ending the talks if an agreement couldn’t be reached quickly. But on the night of Nov. 6, when he went on national television and radio to announce the agreement, his attitude changed radically. ‘This is not the moment to stop. Quite the contrary,’ he said. ‘It would be irresponsible to break up the dialogue or take a break when we’re making substantial gains.’"

A "two-way pact"

High Commissioner for Peace Sergio Jaramillo, the second-ranking person on the Santos government’s negotiating team, offered his own assessment of the Nov. 6 agreement. "For
Colombia, peace is a revolution," he told various news outlets. Jaramillo said there are three chapters to the agreement. The first is a fundamental pact between all sectors of Colombia society, which agree that politics must never again involve weapons. "This is a two-way pact," he said. "Those with arms stop using them and start following the rules of democracy. The state, on the other hand, guarantees that neither they nor anyone else involved in politics will be the object of violence. That’s because in order to build peace, politics must be dignified."

The agreement proposes that all political parties accept a "Statute of the Opposition" accord as a way to prevent tragic events like the genocide of the Unión Patriótica (UP) from ever occurring again. The UP was a leftist political party founded in 1985 by guerilla fighters who had demobilized as a part of a peace process negotiated with the government of then President Belisario Betancur (1982-1986). When the peace process broke down, the state—together with paramilitary units—slaughtered thousands of UP members, including two presidential candidates, eight senators, 13 deputies, 70 city council members, and 11 mayors. In addition, tens of thousands of UP sympathizers fled into exile abroad.

The other two chapters of the agreement focus on guaranteeing greater citizen participation in national politics by making it easier, for example, to register new political parties and by coming up with specific strategies to promote "reconciliation and coexistence." The agreement calls for an eight-year transition period during which time new political groups will receive economic support: state funds designated for political parties will be distributed more rationally and fairly. The new parties will also be guaranteed media access, so that—after a half-century of war and living in hiding—they can better share their ideas directly with the public.

Reasons for hope

One of the most "concrete points" in the agreement, Semana noted, is a plan to designate the regions most affected by the war—and most abandoned by the state—as "special transitional districts." This would give those areas additional representation in the Cámara de Representantes, Colombia’s lower house of Congress.

Legislators and political leaders (from the left to the center-right) congratulated the two sides for their breakthrough deal, as did analysts, academics, social and civil organizations, the UN, and European and South American heads of state. Even the Colombian Army’s top military commander, Gen. Juan Pablo Rodríguez, expressed support. "If the FARC operates within the framework of the law, we must guarantee their rights and freedoms," he said.

Backers of the process are particularly encouraged that the government and guerillas—which have tried but failed to negotiate before—have gone from simply expressing their hopes for peace to signing an actual document to that effect. Only the far right, with Uribe at its head, opposed the agreement. The sector once again vindicated the war, saying the only way to deal with the rebels is with arms. All this agreement does is "give our future killers a way to earn their living," the uribismo sector opined.

President Santos, in his speech on the evening of Nov. 6, offered what seemed to be an anticipated response to Uribe’s pro-war faction. "It’s not with blood and fire that we tackle the challenges that will allow us to build a better nation," he said.