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Military Offensive, Misinformation Challenge Colombian Peace Talks

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As the government and rebels inch closer toward an agreement to end more than a half century of armed conflict, the Colombian people are starting to isolate pro-war factions and rally more and more around the idea that dialogue is the only suitable way to end this dark chapter of history and begin a new phase in which the country can finally develop its full potential.

Representatives of the government of President Juan Manuel Santos and of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerrilla army have been participating since November 2012 in peace talks in Havana, Cuba (NotiSur, Dec. 14, 2012). Their agenda is now close to completion and has already produced various pre-accords (NotiSur, Oct. 17, 2014).

Although the two sides have been careful to emphasize the "preliminary" nature of the agreements, recent polls suggest that Colombians are nevertheless encouraged. People see the accords as evidence that the talks are "on track," said sociologist César Caballero, director of the polling firm Cifras y Conceptos (C&C), which carried out one of the surveys in question. The results of the C&C poll were made public Feb. 5 by the radio station Caracol.

The poll results are of the utmost importance for President Santos and the rebels because it helps isolate ex–President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), who leads an extreme right faction that favors weapons over dialogue and continues to complicate matters for the ongoing Havana talks (NotiSur, Jan. 9, 2015).

The pro-war sector includes paramilitary commandos who, in an effort to counter the apparent progress of the negotiations, are making an increasing number of death threats against civil sectors that support the peace progress. A case in point were the threats made Jan. 13 against former senator Piedad Córdoba and other activists involved in the Frente Amplio por la Paz.

In the meantime, Uribe and Attorney General Alejandro Ordóñez, another active figure in the extreme right, have been working in alliance with major Colombian news outlets to spread false information about concessions that the government is supposedly offering the guerrillas. Among other things, the reports suggest that the rebels, once a peace accord is signed, will be given military leadership positions. The armed forces, in turn, have launched an offensive in an apparent attempt to provoke a reaction from and thus discredit the FARC, which has been observing a unilateral and indefinite cease-fire since Dec. 20.

Popular support

Despite the extreme right’s virulent efforts to derail the talks, Colombians are feeling increasingly optimistic that an armistice will eventually be signed. A separate agreement would have to be reached later with the country’s other active guerrilla group, the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), which is engaged in talks being mediated by the government of President Rafael Correa in neighboring Ecuador.
In just three months, the percentage of people who think the negotiations in Cuba will be successful rose from 39 to 49, according to C&C, which conducted its poll in the midst of a FARC cease-fire that the government has refused to join. The poll also suggested that Colombians increasingly view dialogue as the appropriate way to achieve peace. Approximately 42% now back the peace-talks approach, up from 33% in January 2013 and 39% at the start of 2014. César Caballero noted that, while the change may be gradual, it has also been steady.

In addition, the poll showed that 80% of Colombians support the idea that members of the FARC come out of hiding and be reintegrated into the legal fabric of society provided they relinquish their weapons, which should then be destroyed. Respondents were split, on the other hand, about how the eventual final peace accords should be ratified. Approximately 51% support President Santos’ idea of holding a referendum. The other 49% agree with the FARC proposal, which is that the matter be decided by a constituent assembly. Caracol, in presenting the results of the poll, found this parity to be particularly noteworthy.

While most of the poll numbers suggest that the hard right’s influence on the peace process is waning, there is one area where “Uribismo” continues to hold sway: only 34% of respondents think FARC leaders should be allowed to participate in elections or any other legal political activity.

**Mixed messages**

Even with growing support from the public, Santos finds himself in an uphill battle to keep the talks on target, fending off false right-wing-sponsored news reports while grappling, at the same time, with criticisms from the two guerrilla groups, which accuse the president of acting incoherently by kowtowing, in certain ways, to a far right that he previously served. Santos, critics are quick to recall, was Uribe’s defense minister from 2006 to 2009, a period that coincided with some of the military’s most virulent actions against the rebels.

On Jan. 7, a dispatch from the Associated Press (AP) news agency described how Santos was forced to refute a claim by Uribe, who told his 3.5 million Twitter followers that the president had accepted the FARC’s invitation to join the cease-fire as a way to quiet the bombs and guns until peace could be signed. Santos never said that. What he had said was that the guerrilla group was upholding a cease-fire as a way to quiet the bombs and guns until peace could be signed. Santos never said that. What he had said was that the guerrilla group was upholding a cease-fire that it unilaterally declared in December and that the military would quiet its weapons once an eventual peace accord was signed.

Later in the month, on Jan. 27, Santos again had to refute claims made by Uribe, who, together with Attorney General Ordóñez, said the government was negotiating the possibility of giving the guerrillas future leadership positions in the Army. Uribe said the news was "demoralizing" for the armed forces. He also said it explains why the military, in the middle of a cease-fire, had launched an offensive against FARC positions that includes air raids.

**Special advisors**

The constant criticisms being leveled by the far-right, together with the political advantage that the FARC has gained by declaring an indefinite cease-fire and then sticking to it, have prompted Santos to seek outside help from a select group of foreign advisors with expertise in peace negotiations.

In early January, the president’s Havana negotiators sat down for a closed-door meeting with four special guests: William Uri, a US mediation expert from Harvard University; Joaquín Villalobos, a former Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) guerrilla who helped negotiate...
El Salvador's 1992 peace accords and has since become an outspoken critic of all leftist groups in Latin America; Jonathan Powell, a former British Cabinet chief who helped broker the peace deal with the Irish Republican Army (IRA); and Shlomo Ben Ami of Israel, an ex–foreign minister who played a leading role in the 1978 Camp David peace agreements with Egypt.

It was after this meeting, in the historic city of Cartagena de Indias, that Santos first challenged Uribe’s claim that the government was willing to join the FARC’s cease-fire. "Up to this point," said Santos, "we’ve followed the maxim of Yitzhak Rabin, who said the trick is to negotiate as if there were no war and keep up the military offensive as if there were no peace process." Rabin, an Israeli politician and general, led peace talks with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) that resulted, starting in 1993, in the Oslo Accords. He was assassinated in 1995 while serving as prime minister.

**Sending out an SOS**

On Jan. 27, when Santos publicly denied the claims made by Uribe and Ordóñez, the FARC put its own pressure on the president by denouncing the constant Army attacks and issuing a dramatic plea for help in maintaining the cease-fire. "The military offensive is intensifying all around the country. The deployment of troops with bombing raids, attacks, and disembarkations is causing more victims by the day, on both sides," the FARC said.

The rebels admonished Santos for "trying to work the cease-fire to his advantage" and asked him to respond with "reciprocity and grandeur to really help quiet the guns." The FARC then, in dramatic fashion, turned its attention to the country as a whole and to its allies around the world. "We are issuing an SOS to the popular and social movements in Colombia, to the Frente Amplio por la Paz, and to the peoples and friendly countries around the world to defend this process and demand an end to the provocations that warmongering sectors are employing simply for the sake of dashing the hopes of peace."

A week later, on Feb. 2, the two sides returned to Havana to resume their dialogue, which ended with a new recess on Feb. 26.

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