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Colombian Voters Narrowly Reject Government-FARC Peace Deal

by Andrés Gaudín

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A misleading campaign organized by the extreme right managed in the span of just 10 hours—the time allotted for an Oct. 2 plebiscite in which barely a third of eligible voters participated—to thwart what had taken the Colombian government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) 45 painstaking months to accomplish: a comprehensive peace deal, signed Sept. 26, that looked to end 52 years of brutal civil war.

Does the “No” vote in the peace-deal referendum mean that Colombia is an antidemocratic, war loving country? Not likely. In Uruguay, a demonstrably democratic country with plenty of plebiscite experience, people came to the conclusion some time ago that major conceptual issues, matters that are almost philosophical in nature, shouldn’t be submitted to a simple “Yes” or “No” vote (NotiSur, Nov. 6, 2009). The situation in Colombia, instead, raises a different question: Did it really make sense to hold a referendum on an accord that had been signed just six days earlier, without taking the time to properly educate people about the contents of the deal? The journalist Stella Calloni argued in the Brazilian online magazine Diálogos do Sul that the answer, as the Uruguayans concluded earlier, is no.

Colombians continue to pursue peace despite the “No” result. On Oct. 10, eight days after the referendum, the government of President Juan Manuel Santos and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), the country’s second largest guerrilla force after the FARC, announced in Venezuela that they would begin official peace talks on Oct. 27 in Quito, Ecuador. The two sides had already been engaged in secret negotiations. Before the announcement, the ELN agreed to government demands that it turn kidnapped civilian captives over to the International Committee of the Red Cross. “Now that we’re moving forward with the ELN, it will be a complete peace,” Santos said. Ecuador is one of the countries—along with Venezuela, Norway, Chile, Cuba, and Brazil—that helped oversee the unofficial phase of the government-ELN negotiations.

Minuscule margin

Of the 34.9 million people eligible to vote, only 36.7%—far less than the normal election average of more than 50%—participated in the Oct. 2 referendum. The “No” option won, but with support from just 18.43% of the eligible voting population, versus 18.27% who chose “Yes.” The other 63.3% of eligible voters didn’t even take part in the transcendent decision.

“One has to really think about that: Less than one in five people voted against the peace deal,” said Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa in his first reaction to the plebiscite, which captivated the entire region of Latin America like no other vote before it.

The voting margin was so narrow that it makes the “No” victory—just as it would have been for “Yes” had the results been reversed—more of a numerical issue than a political fact. President Santos had said before the referendum that a strong “Yes” showing was needed to consolidate
peace. But the same could be said for the “No.” The 0.16% difference between the two sides is little more than a statistical anecdote.

Still, it was enough to throw Colombia back into a situation it had worked hard to overcome, one as complicated, perhaps, as the scenario that existed before November 2012, when the government and the FARC first met publicly for peace talks in Havana, Cuba. The sides had been meeting for two years before that, but in secret, in Oslo, Norway.

**Uncertain outlook**

On Oct. 3, a Monday, negotiators returned to Cuba to “think out loud about what took place,” as FARC leader Rodrigo Londoño, better known as Timochenko, said. On Tuesday, after putting it to a vote, the rebel group ordered its combatants to return to the safety of their jungle bases. On Wednesday, Santos met with representatives of the “No” faction, headed by former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010).

Two days after that, Santos was back in the news when the Norwegian Nobel Committee, in Oslo, honored him with its prestigious Peace Prize. Santos characterized the award as “a mandate from the international community to forge ahead with the accord with the guerrillas, and as a tribute to the victims.” The decision was celebrated across the globe. Some observers were surprised and disappointed, nevertheless, that the Nobel committee—as it has done on a number of previous occasions—didn’t also extend the honor to the other side of the peace process, the FARC, in this case.

Uribe and his followers, whom people in the “Yes” camp accuse of being “crazy war mongers,” continue, in the meantime, to work against peace efforts. After mounting a campaign peppered with lies—they said, for example, that the government would cut pension payments by 7% to finance demobilized rebels, and that Santos had made a pact to hold fraudulent elections so as to assure Timochenko the presidency—Uribe is now demanding concessions that the guerrillas will never agree too. One is that the transitional justice system designed to operate after the conflict be scrapped, and that the rebels, therefore, hand over their weapons in exchange for nothing, which essentially means in exchange for jail.

“Future talks are going to be difficult, especially for Uribe,” said Foreign Affairs Minister María Ángela Holguín, one of the government’s official negotiators. “There were some formidable agreements reached with the FARC. To go from that to demanding they lay down their arms and go to jail just seems to me like a provocation.”

**Financing and fraud**

On Oct. 6, Juan Carlos Vélez, a former senator and the political and financial point man on the “No” campaign designed by Uribe’s extreme-right Centro Democrático (CD) party, made a revelation that caught the public by surprise and irritated his political boss. In a radio interview, Vélez divulged the names of companies that financed the “No” campaign and admitted that the strategy he and his colleagues used was based on lies and meant to provoke indignation among voters. Uribe has since urged Vélez to leave the CD.

“The admission by the head of the CD campaign that they lied to voters is proof that there was fraud,” said Sen. Claudia López of the Alianza Verde. Lawyers with the party accuse Uribe of direct involvement in the scheme and insist that his actions, as well as those of Vélez, constitute a crime.
(electoral fraud) that is punishable, according to the penal code, by between four and eight years in prison.

The revelations also sparked a wave of criticism against the businesses Vélez identified as having funded the pro-war campaign. The list includes the radio and television conglomerate RCN and multinationals like the Dutch brewing company Heineken, the British motor oil company Castrol, and Foton, an affiliate of the state-owned Chinese automaker Beiqi Foton Motor Co.

**Missed opportunity**

Holguín said that the “No” victory also raises doubts in the international arena, specifically with regards to the many organizations and entities—ranging from the UN to the European Union, the Vatican and fellow Latin American governments—that had promised to help Colombia navigate its post-conflict future. The minister noted, for example, that EU cooperation funds have already been frozen. She also said that while the UN mission will remain in Colombia to observe the current ceasefire, its presence will not be indefinite given that its mandate, as defined by the Security Council, is to “verify the peace agreement,” which in practical terms no longer exists.

The same goes for efforts to clear parts of the country from land mines, a complicated task being carried out jointly by the government and the FARC under the supervision of international experts (*NotiSur*, April 3, 2015). The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the Red Cross, for their part, will keep their respective teams in Colombia, though it’s unclear whether they will continue to receive the underage guerrillas who had begun to demobilize.

The civil war began in 1964 when, under the leadership of Manuel Marulanda, the FARC first took up weapons in the tropical grasslands of Yarí, the same territory in southeastern Colombia in which the rebels, days before the peace accord was signed, held what was supposed to be their last gathering as an armed group. The peace deal, reached 52 years later, promised to do away with the guerrilla group and replace it with a new political party.

The conflict resulted in some 280,000 deaths and 45,000 disappearances, left thousands mutilated, displaced 7 million people and forced hundreds of thousands into exile. Over the course of that bloody war, three attempts were made to negotiate a peace settlement. But it wasn’t until November 2012, with the governments of Cuba and Norway acting as guarantors, and Chile and Venezuela in an accompanying role, that hopes of ending the conflict finally began to take shape (*NotiSur*, Dec. 14, 2012).

On Aug. 24, in Havana, negotiators signed a pre-accord. Finally, on Sept. 26, in the Colombian city of Cartagena, Santos and Timochenko sealed the deal on a 297-page document—translated, for the plebiscite, into 62 of the country’s 65 native languages—that spells out in detail the various items in their carefully negotiated agreement. Chief among those are issues regarding land ownership—one of the original causes of the war—and guarantees for the safe reinsertion of guerrillas into mainstream politics (*NotiSur*, July 15, 2016).

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