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Revised Accord Rekindles Colombia Peace Prospects

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After a month of accelerated negotiations, the government of President Juan Manuel Santos and the guerrillas of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) signed a revised peace agreement on Nov. 24 that could finally put an end to 52 years of civil war. A week later, both branches of Congress approved the accord with support from 77% of the country’s lawmakers. Although no one voted against the deal, 27 senators and 36 deputies from the far right chose to abstain.

The developments follow the narrow defeat, in an Oct. 2 plebiscite, of an original peace accord that the two sides finalized in September after 45 months of negotiations in Havana, Cuba (NotiSur, Oct. 21, 2016). Only 30% of the population participated in the referendum, which opponents of the peace deal won by just 55,000 votes.

And yet, because 50.21% is more than 49.78%, former president Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), the leading opponent of the peace-making efforts, felt empowered to demand a total rewrite of the hard-fought agreement (NotiSur, Nov. 4, 2011, Dec. 2, 2011, Feb. 8, 2013). Uribe, joined by pentecostal ministers from isolated rural areas who see the agreement as “a deal with the devil,” demanded a complete revamping of the accord with regards to agrarian land-use issues (the origin of the more than half-century-old conflict) and judicial matters (how combatants will be treated once they’ve handed over their weapons).

**Paramilitary pressure**

Ultimately, the government and FARC negotiators opted to make minor changes to the accord, ignoring the far-right’s proposal, for example, that agrarian development prioritize large business groups at the expense of the country’s approximately 6 million small-scale farmers. Instead the agreement places an emphasis on individual family farms.

The UN’s Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), for its part, believes that the agreement, which has now been approved by Congress, “will allow Colombia to make productive use of vast areas of land that were the scene of fighting in recent decades.” ECLAC head Alicia Bárcena said the use of the land by family farmers will make “the economy more dynamic and lead to greater social inclusion.”

The political right, in contrast, wants large-scale landholders to retain control of the country’s rural areas. In that sense, according to Aída Avella, spokesperson for the leftist Marcha Patriótica, “Uribe represents the most bloodthirsty paramilitary sectors, which want the land to remain in the hands of the 0.4% of the population that owns 45% of the national territory.”

On Nov. 22, the FARC demanded that Santos take “concrete steps to halt the new paramilitary genocide.” The call followed a wave of attacks in the departments of Meta (central), Caquetá (south) and Nariño (west) that left at least three people dead. The Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) paramilitary group, which supposedly demobilized during Uribe’s second term, distributed flyers...
saying, “We’re back for good.” They warned FARC “militia and front men” that they’d come to “clean things up.”

In the first 11 months of 2016, some 60 community leaders were killed, according to the Ministry of the Interior. In addition, 30 people were seriously injured and nearly 300 threatened. While no one has directly accused Uribe, both Avella and Pablo Catatumbo, a guerrilla commander, insinuated that the former president might be involved. “[Uribe] doesn’t stop at anything to continue the business of war,” Avella said.

The case for US support

The local establishment pays extremely close attention to everything the US says or does with regards to Colombia—hardly a coincidence given Colombia’s standing as the superpower’s principal political and military ally in Latin America. It came as little surprise, therefore, that a series of New York Times editorials and opinion pieces commenting on the peace process and expressing obvious support for the Havana agreement would resonate among all of the political sectors except the far-right, which nevertheless took note of the publications.

The most attention-grabbing of the articles, titled “Colombia Needs Help to Make Peace Last,” was published Dec. 13 and written by Bernard Aronson, a former assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs (1989 to 1993) who participated in the Colombian peace process as a special envoy appointed by US President Barack Obama. Filed from Oslo, Norway—where in a ceremony held just days earlier, President Santos had received the Nobel Peace Prize—Aronson’s piece complements statements he’d made previously acknowledging mistakes that US administrations, particularly that of President John F. Kennedy (1960-1963), had made in the 1960s, when the FARC first took up arms.

Echoing arguments Santos made during his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Aronson recalled that the war claimed 220,000 Colombian lives and displaced 6 million people. “In United States population terms, that would translate into 1.3 million dead and 36 million displaced Americans,” he wrote. Aronson also noted that year after year in Colombia, landmines kill or injure people at rates higher than anywhere in the world other than Afghanistan.

“The peace accord sets out to bridge the great historic divide between what President Santos calls ‘the two Colombias’: the Colombia of developed, modern urban centers and the Colombia of the vast, impoverished interior, where historically there has been little or no government presence,” Aronson wrote.

As part of his argument for why the US should continue to support the peace process, Aronson then cited the University of Notre Dame’s Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies (which is monitoring the agreement) to emphasize just how precarious the peace deal is. “[The institute] reports that half of all negotiated settlements fail and the conflict resumes,” he wrote. Those that do succeed, he went on to say, do more than just address security issues; they also look at the social and economic roots of a given conflict. “The institute says Colombia’s agreement addresses root causes more comprehensively than any other negotiated settlement has,” Aronson wrote.

At no point in the piece did Aronson mention by name either the rightist Centro Democrático party or its leader, Uribe, whom The New York Times, in an Oct. 14 editorial, described as “the man blocking peace in Colombia.” Instead, he emphasized the importance of precisely those sections of the agreement (agrarian policy and transitional justice) that Uribe so vehemently opposes. “To
close this gap [between the ‘two Colombias’], the government has committed itself to a far-reaching program of rural development for the largely peasant population that includes provision of land, titles, credit, roads, and crop substitution programs,” Aronson explained.

The diplomat also stressed the importance of land-mine removal, a process that has already begun as a joint effort (under UN supervision) between the government and the guerrillas. “To fulfill these and other commitments, the government must create far-reaching programs and policies that will cost billions of dollars and take years to carry out. It must establish a system of transitional justice, a truth commission, and investigative and protective units to safeguard the lives of demobilized former combatants and human rights activists,” Aronson wrote. Uribe, in contrast, argues that such programs would lead to the establishment in Colombia of a “Castro-Chavista state.”

**Turning to Trump**

Aronson concluded his piece by arguing that the international community and the US in particular ought to continue helping Colombia. “The United States has no closer strategic partner in Latin America than Colombia, and our interests in the region are intertwined,” he wrote.

President Obama, who leaves office later this month, seems to agree. He recently requested US$450 million for the 2017 fiscal year for an economic assistance program called Paz (peace) Colombia. On Dec. 10, the European Union (EU) offered assistance as well. Ana Paula Zacarías, the EU’s top representative in Bogotá, announced a donation of US$110 million. In addition, she said that Colombia would have access to US$440 million in loans from the European Investment Bank “with the aim of promoting productive social programs that allow for integral development in the areas hardest hit by the war.”

Regional bodies have also signaled their support for the process, as has the UN and the BRICS group of countries made up of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. Nevertheless, the Colombian right announced that in 2017 it will launch a strong international offensive to “destroy” the agreement.

Óscar Iván Zuluaga, the Centro Democrático presidential candidate who lost to Santos in the 2014 elections (NotiSur, July 4, 2014), said his party will mount “a campaign to demonstrate to the world the institutional abuses that allowed these dealings with the FARC.” He also promised to “strengthen relations with countries that are home to the great centers of modern thought”—Spain, Italy, and Germany, basically—and to improve ties in particular with the incoming US administration, to be headed by president-elect Donald Trump.

“Our idea is to spell out the risk of Colombia turning toward Castro-Chavismo,” Zuluaga said. The minister of the interior, Juan Fernando Cristo, countered by calling the Centro Democrático’s would-be campaign “irrational, ridiculous, and absurd.”

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