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Political Violence, Election Uncertainty Challenge Colombia's Peace Process

by *Andrés Gaudín*

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As Colombia gears up for its next elections—on March 11 for the legislature and on May 27 for president—the peace that was secured, or so the public thought, in November 2016, now seems to be slipping away.

The warmongering far-right, led by Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), the twice-elected former president, is gaining ground, and its candidates are strengthening—to the point of warning that they'll annul the peace accords. Meanwhile, the governing coalition still hasn't settled on a candidate it can put forth as a successor to President Juan Manuel Santos. The various centrist parties have decided to join together behind a single candidate, but they will wait to select that person, through internal elections, until after the legislative vote takes place in March.

In the meantime, the guerrilla movement turned political party ([NotiSur, Sept. 22, 2017](#)) that now goes by the name Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común (Common Alternative Revolutionary Force, FARC) is seeing its members being killed on a regular basis by far-right squadrons and allied paramilitary organizations. The same goes for civil society groups working to strengthen the peace process and defend human rights.

As Colombian economist Camilo Rengifo Marín of the Centro Latinoamericano de Análisis Estratégico (Latin American Center for Strategic Analysis, CLAE) argued in various news outlets throughout the region, few in Colombia could have imagined that the peace, which had taken three years of negotiations to achieve, could be destroyed in such a short amount of time by the combined actions of an extreme right clamoring for the military extermination of all dissidence and an ineffective, outgoing government that has little to show for its eight years in power.

Government missteps

Many analysts agree with Rengifo that President Santos committed multiple errors after signing the peace accord. The first was submitting the accord's contents to an unnecessary constitutional referendum. All the deal really needed to go into effect, they argue, was legislative approval, which was assured. But Santos agreed to play the game that Uribe proposed—putting the issue to a plebiscite—and on Oct. 2, 2016, he lost. On a playing field that Uribe handled far better than Santos, and with a measly 37% of eligible voters participating, the “No to peace” option prevailed by barely 60,000 votes: 50.2% to 49.8% ([NotiSur, Oct. 21, 2016](#)).

Adding to the problem of the referendum result—which followed a dirty campaign marked by deceptions and inaccuracies—Santos then pursued a series of economic measures that ended up working against him and left his government in a difficult situation ahead of the upcoming elections. In 2017, Finance Minister Mauricio Cárdenas Santamaría, a conservative, instituted a series of shock measures that made a lasting impact. By year's end, as Rengifo noted, Colombia's unemployment rate reached a worrying 8.4%, meaning that an estimated 226,000 more people are out of work

compared to the previous year. In total, some 2.09 million out of an economically active population of roughly 26 million are jobless.

Domestic consumption has taken a hit as well due to a three-percentage-point hike in the value-added tax (VAT), which went from 16% to 19%, the region's second highest rate after Argentina's 21%. A comparative study by the multinational law firm Baker McKenzie found that the global average for VAT is 15% while in Latin America it is just 9%. Santos also proposes raising the retirement age in Colombia and increasing individual tax contributions from 16% to 18%.

Rengifo believes that if the government really wants to boost its coffers, it should start by tackling the problem of tax evasion, which he said costs the country US\$80 billion annually (9% of GDP).

"The government shows no signs of wanting to recover the money stolen by sectors that have always been on the margins when it comes to paying taxes," he argued. "Pensions cost US\$40 billion a year, which could be covered without having to change the current tax structure if even just half the unpaid taxes were recovered."

Targeted killings

Complicating matters for the Santos administration is a recent disagreement with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)—one of its key outside allies during the peace negotiations—regarding assassinations of human rights activists and other civil society leaders. The two sides are at odds not only over the number of people murdered, but also regarding how to interpret and qualify the killings.

In its most recent report, dated Dec. 20, the UN body put the number of assassinations at 105. Of those, 73 were human rights activists, it said, 18 were members of social and political movements, and 14 were killed while taking part in demonstrations. The report did not include information about killings of demobilized guerrillas but did insist that the assassinations are "systematic," meaning they stem from a policy designed to cause terror among all types of dissidents in Colombian society, discourage former guerrillas from entering civilian life, and send a message to the communities where the murders occur that they've been abandoned by the government.

Commenting on the report, the establishment news magazine *Semana* said the OHCHR's findings point a clear finger at what is happening in Colombia.

"The killings occur in areas where the guerrillas have demobilized, in places where there's now a power vacuum that the state hasn't filled, and in the context of generalized violence against the population by common and organized criminals," the weekly noted.

Semana suggested that in the majority of cases, the crimes are committed against people acting in defense of human rights: people who denounce or oppose illegal economic activity or criminal actions, insist on their personal or collective rights, or support policies linked to the peace accord between the government and the FARC.

What's surprising—as not only *Semana*, but other publications and civil society organizations point out—is how the government has tried to ignore or minimize the violence, and has refused to characterize the killings as systematic. Three days before the OHCHR report appeared, and again after Christmas, Defense Minister Luis Carlos Villegas insisted that many of the murders of these civil society leaders had to do with personal matters.

“The vast majority of the deaths of social leaders are because of fights between neighbors or arguments over women,” Villegas said in an interview with Noticias Uno, a weekend news program broadcast by the television network Canal Uno. In a subsequent interview with the daily El Tiempo, the minister again argued that there was “nothing systematic” about the crimes. He also doubled down on his claim that “the vast majority” of the killings stemmed from “arguments over women ... cheating, marital jealousies.”

Demanding protection

The minister’s remarks—which President Santos made no effort to correct—drew harsh criticism from news outlets, which used words like “aberrant,” “demeaning,” and “the product of a sick mind” to describe them. The FARC, now a major player in Colombia’s new political landscape, challenged Villegas as well, as did the Defensoría del Pueblo, the public office of the ombudsman.

“In light of episodes carried out by assassins and their clients,” the Defensoría del Pueblo said, it is strengthening its early alert system so that threatened communities and community members can benefit from quick and effective state protection. And in contrast to Villegas’s remarks, the Defensoría acknowledged not only the systematic nature of the violence, but also “the risks and threats posed by the presence, actions, and/or activities of criminal organizations, including successor groups to paramilitaries.”

On Jan. 4, after meeting with Santos in the northern coastal city of Cartagena, former president José Mujica of Uruguay, former Spanish prime minister Felipe González, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, and the FARC informed the Colombian leader that they would formally denounce the situation before international courts and legal bodies.

The FARC said that between June 27, 2017, when they officially laid down their arms, and Jan. 17 of this year, more than 30 former combatants have been murdered along with 140 civil society leaders and 47 members of a fariana (FARC-affiliated) community (34 former guerrillas and 13 family members). It added that “two comrades” had been gunned down on Jan. 16 in the municipality of Peque, in the northern Andean department of Antioquia.

“Given this reality, we demand that the government provide the ex-combatants with the security the need to participate in politics, as well as recognize the systematic nature of the crimes being committed,” the FARC party insisted.

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