

The Colombian Trap: Another Partial Peace

Even though a series of armed groups have demobilized and violence has declined over recent decades, peace remains partial in Colombia. The current peace process with the FARC insurgency shows why Colombia has such difficulty achieving a complete peace.

By Enzo Nussio

In the early 1980s, the Colombian government was one of the first in Latin America to start negotiations with communist rebels during the Cold War. However, Colombia is the last one to continue to face a significant threat from those groups well into the 21st century. In the meantime, Colombia has become a rare success story in terms of homicidal violence reduction in Latin America, in contrast to countries like Mexico, El Salvador, and Venezuela.

After a series of demobilization processes with armed groups since the 1990s that led to repeated instances of partial peace, high hopes accompanied the peace agreement that the government of Juan Manuel Santos finally concluded with the most powerful guerrilla group in 2016. After an arduous negotiation process in Havana, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC according to its Spanish acronym) became a legal political party: the Revolutionary Alternative Forces of the Common People (still FARC). With this new political platform, the followers of the FARC were now poised to compete with ideas rather than weapons, which should have brought a long-desired complete peace to Colombia.

The peace agreement contained a plan for a series of remarkable reforms, including land redistribution to deal with the root causes of conflict, political guarantees for



Protesters during the November 2019 national strike expressing their discontent with Colombian politics and demanding peace. *Luisa Gonzalez / Reuters*

opposition parties, an ambitious coca substitution program, and a sophisticated juridical framework to deal with war crimes. As a direct result, the FARC quickly demobilized its fighting force and support network, roughly 10,000 men and 3,000 women, by mid-2017. Yet, the Colombian population remains largely dissatisfied with the peace process and the broader political landscape. According to a representative opinion poll from February 2020, three out

of four Colombians think that the implementation of the peace agreement is not on the right track, and only 13 percent look to the future of the country with optimism. What went wrong?

Starting On the Wrong Foot

While general disenchantment with democracy has gradually increased over recent years in Latin America and Colombia, the peace process has produced a separate

catalog of disappointments, beginning with the ratification of the peace agreement following its public signing. President Santos had promised to hold a plebiscite so that the population would have the final say over the agreement. Prior to the vote, immense polarization contaminated the debate and the razor-slim “No” to the peace deal in October 2016 cast a shadow over the peace process from its very start. The agreement was amended to account for the concerns of the opposing side. However, these amendments did little to alter the view of those suspicious of the deal. Hence, many saw the later ratification of the agreement by Congress as a betrayal of the will of the people.

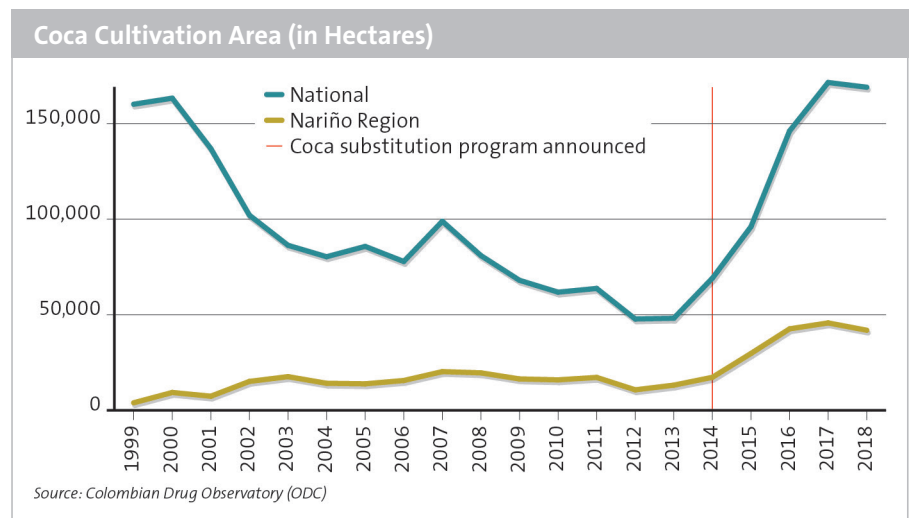
The political parties that opposed the peace deal exploited the same polarization during the ensuing presidential campaign to elect Santos’ successor in 2018. Iván Duque, from the rightist Democratic Center party, led by former president and political strongman Álvaro Uribe, won the electoral contest. The implementation of the peace deal already faced difficulties during the Santos government. However, while Santos was willing but unable to push some of the most ambitious aspects of the deal, Duque has been unable and unwilling to implement parts of the agreement. This is not a surprise given that the peace deal prescribed policies that are contrary to the preferences of Duque’s voter base, like land reform, coca substitution programs, and lenient punishment for crimes committed by the insurgency. As a result, the overall pace

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of implementation declined with the start of the Duque presidency. Today, initial opponents of the peace agreement remain suspicious of the whole process, and supporters are now dissatisfied with its slow and partial implementation.

The Fragmented FARC

Due to negative sentiment about the peace process, established political elites have moved on to other topics, such as corruption and crime. In contrast, the new FARC party has a clear interest in pushing the agenda of the peace deal. Yet, it has almost no weight in the public debate. The FARC party has not been able to attract voters from outside of its immediate networks. In



parliamentary and local elections, it received less than one percent of the vote. This disappointing electoral outcome has much to do with the legacy of armed conflict. The FARC were responsible for severe war crimes, including massacres of civilians, kidnappings, and recruitment of minors. The government used these acts to portray the FARC as “narco-terrorists” rather than ideologically driven actors, resulting in a stigma that still plagues the FARC party.

Operating as a party has been difficult for the FARC. Even their leader Rodrigo Londoño, known as Timochenko, admitted that without the military discipline of war, cohesion within the party would have been difficult. From the beginning, there was disagreement between different factions. While Timochenko became the party leader, Luciano Márquez, known as Iván Márquez, the lead negotiator in Havana and number two of the organization, wielded considerable power. In August 2019, he and several other high-ranking FARC members announced that they had taken up arms again, arguing that the government had betrayed the peace agreement and forced them to go back to war. The break-away of Márquez is a significant development as the previously existing dissident groups lacked sufficient political importance, which enabled the authorities to discard them as mere criminal organizations.

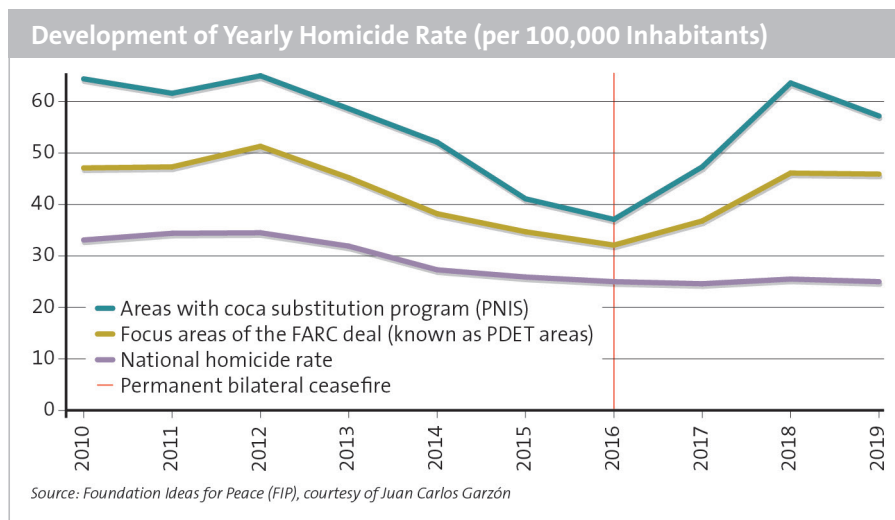
Dissident groups of the FARC emerged since the start of the peace process. As in most previous demobilization processes in

Colombia, some mid-level commanders disagreed with the deal and took up arms right away. The Peace and Reconciliation Foundation (PARES) estimates the number of members of those groups at about 1,800 former guerrilla fighters and 300 new recruits. These groups are mainly located in coca producing areas, such as the strategically located region of Nariño in the southwestern corner of Colombia next to Ecuador.

Dissident groups have benefited from a flourishing coca production since the peace negotiations. 2017 was a record year for production (see Figure above), and Nariño has become the region that produces by far most coca. Several factors have contributed to this development, but the peace deal played an important role by creating perverse incentives for coca farmers to increase their cultivation areas. When the government and the FARC announced their crop substitution program in 2014, the prospects of receiving financial benefits stimulated coca production. This has had important international implications for the chain of drug trafficking affecting Central and North America. The US government has consequently applied pressure on Colombia to increase its coca eradication efforts, including the use of aerial spraying with glyphosate. Even though its health consequences and lack of cost-effectiveness led to its suspension in 2015, it could come back into practice as a desperate measure to confront the coca boom.

Old and New Obstacles

A set of additional illegal actors beyond the FARC dissidents are benefiting from the



thriving coca economy and other sources of illicit rents, like illegal mining. Some of these groups inherited the space that the United Self-Defense Forces (AUC) left when they concluded their demobilization in 2006. The AUC was an illegal paramilitary group that fought alongside the government against the insurgencies and was responsible for massive human rights violations, including forced displacement and more than 1,000 massacres. In the wake of its demobilization, and similar to the current peace process with the FARC, a number of dissident and rearmed groups appeared in its former stronghold areas. After a process of consolidation, the Golf Clan (*Clan del Golfo*, also called *Urabeños* and *Gaitanista* Self-Defense Forces) is now the most powerful of these groups and has about 2,500 armed members, according to PARES.

The ELN (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*, National Liberation Army) is another long-standing guerrilla group that remains active in Colombia. Cuba initially sponsored this communist insurgent group in the 1960s. While it was always less powerful than the FARC, it still comprises about 3,000 armed members and thus represents a significant threat. In February 2020, it paralyzed several remote areas with an “armed strike”. Negotiations with the ELN became public in 2016 under the Santos government, but witnessed constant setbacks. The government was less inclined to make concessions to the ELN after the agreement with the FARC. Government officials likely assumed that once the FARC demobilized, the ELN would become obsolete. However, this assumption

may not hold. President Duque, who inherited the negotiations, halted them in early 2019 after a bomb attack on a police academy perpetrated by ELN members that left 22 cadets dead.

The ELN has extended its activities from the border of the Colombian Arauca region far into Venezuelan territory, where they act like a pro-government militia. It is possible that the Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro finds strategic value in the presence of Colombian insurgents on Venezuelan soil as they may support the regime in the case of an armed confrontation with the opposition there. This adds further tension to an already strained relationship between Venezuela and Colombia resulting from more than one million Venezuelan refugees arriving in Colombia over recent years and Duque’s attempts to oust the Maduro government with a diplomatic encirclement. With this complex geopolitical situation in the Andean region, the ELN remains a clear hindrance to a complete peace in Colombia.

Since the signing of the peace accord with the FARC, the competition between the ELN, Golf Clan and FARC dissidents has led to violence. Areas with previous FARC presence – where territorial development plans (PDET) are in place – and illicit crop substitution programs (PNIS) have witnessed increasing homicide rates since 2016, in contrast to the national trend (see Figure above). This is in line with many other peace processes around the world where former conflict regions have struggled to bounce back to normality.

The killing of social leaders has also accompanied the realignment of illegal actors. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights confirmed 108 killings of human rights activists in 2019, most of them from rural areas and many belonging to indigenous and coca-farming communities advocating crop substitution. Heated debate exists about the reasons for these murders, but there may be a systematic logic behind them. The killings increased immediately after the establishment of a permanent ceasefire that left a power vacuum in the formerly FARC-dominated areas. According to analysts, newly arrived illegal groups have targeted social leaders to intimidate the local population and establish territorial control.

Murders of demobilized FARC members further add to a complex security environment. Up to the end of 2019, UN reported the killing of 173 ex-FARC combatants. This number is much lower than after the demobilization of the AUC paramilitary groups (1,385 ex-paramilitaries were killed between 2003 and 2010). Yet, every report of a murdered former FARC combatants sends a chilling message to the remaining ex-combatants and undermines their trust in the overall peace process.

Long-term Progress

Despite this bleak snapshot, Colombia has made progress over recent decades, particularly in terms of homicidal violence. Colombia was one of the most violent countries until the early 2000s, with a yearly homicide rate above 70 per 100,000 inhabitants. This stands in contrast to the global average of roughly six and the European average of one. Colombian cities used to dominate the infamous rankings of the most violent cities in the world, and Medellín had a staggering rate of more than 400 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in the early 1990s, higher than most wartime battle zones. In 2018, “only” two of the 50 most violent cities in the world were located in Colombia and the homicide rate has continuously dropped to 24 (in 2019). Hence, while peace is still partial, the country represents a success story in terms of

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violence reduction within the wider Latin American context. Now an upper-middle-income economy according to the World Bank, Colombia has even become a revered tourist destination.

While relative democratic stability and steady economic development have provided favorable conditions, a mix of security policies also helped to reduce violence in Colombia. Since the 1980s, Colombian governments have oscillated between the search for a negotiated settlement to the conflict and a military solution. Negotiations have led to the demobilization of a series of armed actors in the 1990s, including guerrilla groups such as the M-19 and EPL guerrillas, the AUC paramilitaries in the 2000s, and most recently the FARC. Furthermore, the professionalization of the armed forces has allowed the government to push insurgencies farther away from densely populated areas. At the same time, the government had to deal with the emergency of extreme drug cartel violence that peaked in the early 1990s and declined after the death of cartel boss Pablo Escobar in 1993 thanks in part to more effective criminal prosecution.

To manage the threat of violence, Colombian institutions have developed critical expertise in the field of security. The US considers Colombia an exemplary case in terms of counterinsurgency strategy and draws lessons for Afghanistan. The anti-kidnapping unit of the National Police (called GAULA) has trained similar units abroad, for example in Guatemala, and the

Colombian agency for the reincorporation of ex-combatants (today ARN according to its Spanish acronym) has repeatedly invited representatives of sister agencies from other conflict-affected countries to their south-south cooperation tours.

However, security-focused interventions alone cannot create a complete peace. In the confrontation with the guerrilla groups for instance, government forces have long

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held an overwhelming military advantage over their opponents. Yet, the confrontation has never been simply military; it has also been about establishing legitimacy in the eyes of the citizens. As long as the inhabitants of rural areas do not view the government as a more trustworthy partner than illegal armed groups in their territories, military progress is futile.

A Silver Lining

After the peace accord with the FARC, violent actors, ranging from drug-trafficking organizations to the broken pieces of the demobilized FARC, still dominate the news in Colombia. Interpreting this reality as “peace”, as framed by the Santos government, is too much to ask of the residents of

violence-affected regions. While the peace discourse was perhaps necessary to sell the peace process to Colombian voters, it also raised expectations that could not easily be satisfied.

However, there remains a silver lining more than three years after the bittersweet signing of the peace accord. The process with the FARC enabled an increasingly vibrant and mature civil society to develop. It is no coincidence that Colombia has recently seen the biggest social protests in years. The broad reforms protesters demanded, targeting social inequality, access to justice, and corruption, are necessary to inhibit the emergence of new violent groups and to escape the trap of partial peace. While the problems of Colombia have been over-diagnosed, the implementation of solutions has been insufficient due to a lack of political will among the established parties. Addressing the big social and political challenges will take time. Reforms should start, as Colombians like to say, “the day before yesterday”.

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