

The state of the negotiated political solution of the Colombian conflict

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In the short or medium term, it seems impossible to prepare the way for a humanitarian prisoner exchange in Colombia, with possible future peace negotiations between the government of Alvaro Uribe Velez and the guerillas, in particular the Colombian Armed Revolutionary Forces or FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionaria de Colombia) even more unlikely still. From the government perspective, all hopes lie in the success of its "democratic security" strategy, which is based on counter insurgency and authoritarianism. And Uribe can count on the Bush Administration's backing in pursuing that policy, which has spared no expense in strengthening the Colombian armed forces.

For the Colombian president, any possible peace dialogue, even the negotiated exchange of FARC held hostages for guerrillas languishing in Colombian jails is counterproductive to his strategy of "democratic security". Uribe refuses even to go so far as to acknowledge the existence of a conflict in Colombia, which elements from both warring parties put down to political, economic, social, historical and cultural reasons, all - or at least the most essential - of which could be addressed to deliver peace along with democracy and social justice.

Carlos Gaviria Díaz, President of the opposition party Polo Democrático Alternativo (Alternative Democratic Pole)¹ declared a few weeks ago in the Argentinean capital Buenos Aires to *El Clarín* newspaper that: "In spite of the blows which the state has dealt to the FARC, the armed conflict is far from drawing to a close, as Uribe believes. And unfortunately, I think dialogue with the FARC is impossible with this government. Colombia needs a more democratic government which has a more complete understanding of the conflict and which proposes complete solutions."

The main obstacle is Uribe's reluctance to acknowledge the conflict and establish a dialogue with the guerrillas in public which might allow "complete solutions" to be adopted, as Carlos Gaviria Díaz has indicated, and which would strengthen democracy and provide answers to social problems in a country with many limitations and enormous social chasms. The difference between the democratic left and Uribe's "ideology" is that whilst the former sees the strengthening of democracy as a means of ending the conflict, the latter believes quite the opposite, that it is by weakening democracy and imposing authoritarian and even totalitarian restrictions that the armed insurgency will be defeated. Uribe is heading towards unanimism, which is to say, towards the exclusion of all opposition voices, by means of massaged opinion polls which establish popularity ratings so high that they may shortly reach 100 percent. And in such circumstances, the opposition, which is very small according to these statistics, is expected to simply disappear.

¹ The Polo Democrático Alternativo is the umbrella party which brings together all of the legal left wing forces which participate in the Colombian political system, including the Communist Party and groups which demobilised in the peace process of the nineteen nineties. The President of the PDA is Carlos Gaviria Díaz, ex presidential candidate of the 2006 second round of voting, a recognised legal expert, university professor and former judge of the Constitutional Court.

The radical and inflexible position of the FARC also does nothing to help create a space for negotiations. The stubborn demand for a demilitarised zone in the Pradera and Florida municipalities, in the Valle del Cauca in the west of the country as a precondition of any humanitarian prisoner exchange has proved to be a serious or “insurmountable” obstacle in President Uribe’s lexicon. In essence, both the government and the guerillas have put notions of humanity to one side and have turned the prisoner exchange issue into another bargaining chip of the political and military game which is underway.

Shortly before the news broke that FARC Commander in Chief Manuel Marulanda had died, and subsequent to the attack on Raul Reyes’ base in Ecuadorian territory, Ivan Marquez, member of the FARC Secretariat warned in an article published on the internet that the unilateral liberation of hostages was to be suspended and that only if the Pradera and Florida municipalities were demilitarised would the FARC acknowledge that conditions were in place to negotiate a prisoner exchange.

This scenario hardly gives grounds for much optimism. And this despite the efforts of the “Group of Friendly Countries”, particularly France and Switzerland, and of the willing disposition of Venezuelan President Chavez, who managed to secure the unilateral liberation of seven civilian FARC held hostages, not to mention Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa’s own contribution to bring the Colombian government and the guerilla insurgents closer together. These efforts are limited to the extent that they are solely aimed at furthering a prisoner exchange deal, whilst almost no mention is made of peace negotiations, something which might put an end to an armed conflict the nature of which is inherently political and social.

II

There is no doubt whatsoever that the military aspect of the Colombian government’s “democratic security” policy has dealt a series of massive blows to the guerrillas, although the violent death of two members of the Secretariat, Raul Reyes and Ivan Ríos, did not take place in combat strictly speaking but instead in “sporadic” actions. Reyes’s death during an air strike which violated Ecuadorian borders whilst the guerrillas slept on foreign soil sparked a serious crisis in relations between the two countries; and Ríos was betrayed by one of his closest bodyguards who, unable to resist a succulent bounty, killed him and cut off one of his fingers as proof of his “feat”. The finger was exhibited as a war trophy by the Minister of Defense, Juan Manuel Santos, the same man who argues with great pomposity that Manuel Marulanda’s death by natural causes is a victory for “democratic security”.

Such triumphalism has clouded the judgment of the government and the Colombian military. They assure us that the FARC is close to being defeated. “We are at the end of the end”, said General Freddy Padilla de Leon a few months ago, Commander of the Armed Forces. And yet this is the same mantra which has been repeated for the last sixty years, and which has prolonged the war indefinitely. These are not new proclamations; years and years go by without the kind of concrete results which a negotiated political solution would bring.

Despite the setbacks it has suffered, the FARC is far from being defeated; it boasts a presence throughout Colombian national territory and an enormous capacity for destabilisation if we take into considerations the armed conflicts which are frequent the length and breadth of the country, not just in the South where the bulk of both government and guerilla troops can be found. The Colombian conflict clearly has no military resolution. The Armed Forces are as incapable of

crushing the guerrillas, as President Uribe dreams every day, as the guerrillas themselves are of seizing power at the barrel of a gun as the programme of their guerrilla conferences call for. The only way forward is by means of a political negotiation which would bring national reconciliation and a new Colombia of peace, democracy and social justice.

III

But the chance of peace recedes into the distance due to the country's political crisis which originated in the "parapolitics"² and the "yidispolitics",³ which have affected the image of the Uribe government and compromised it through the number of perverse alliances which it made in order to win back-to-back presidential elections and secure a majority in the Congress of the Republic. With the same manoeuvres and mutual back-scratching, the judicial branch has slowly been co-opted in as well, although the Supreme Court has proved much more resilient to attempts to bring it into line.

Álvaro Uribe Vélez needs the war and possible future military victories to redefine an image tainted by corruption and the scandalous alliances he has fostered, something which will serve as a smoke screen and a get out clause for his own mistakes and crimes. That explains why he goes to extraordinary lengths to press for investigations into the alleged nexus of congressmen, politicians, and journalists with the FARC and ELN, his intention being to show that "everybody makes mistakes" and that Colombia should "forgive and forget" when it comes to attributing responsibilities. This scenario creates distrust and new difficulties for a possible future peace process and rapprochement between the government and the guerrilla leadership.

IV

Since the death of Manuel Marulanda there has been much speculation about foreseeable changes in FARC policy. The official communiqué in which the FARC Secretariat announced its main leader's death by natural causes does not hint at a change of course or anything like a volte-face, although it does reiterate its openness to a humanitarian prisoner exchange and peace negotiations. Some analysts read great significance in the absence of any mention of the demilitarisation of Pradera and Florida in the communiqué.

However, the FARC will surely maintain its political direction and its fundamental goals. In this political and military organisation, decisions making is a collective process although there is no doubt that Marulanda exercised a strong leadership because for the FARC he was more than a commander, part of the legend of the guerrilla movement itself. This gave him a kind of authority which perhaps his successor Alfonso Cano will not enjoy, but in any case the latter was named new Commander in Chief with the unanimous backing of the Secretariat. Some analysts attribute the naming of Cano as a nod in a direction by Marulanda just before he died, which might be the case.

In the FARC, there is no hard line or soft line, no political - military wing divide. All members take a hard line when it comes to defending decisions and points of view. In any case, Cano's political trajectory, his experience in that field, mean that the Secretariat will take on a slightly more political emphasis, taking into account the incorporation of Pablo Catatumbo in the Secretariat, somebody close to Alfonso Cano and of the same political background.

²"Parapolitics" is the term given to the nexus of politicians, mostly Uribists, with paramilitary groups and drug traffickers, which allowed them to win the regional elections, provide votes for the Uribe presidential candidacy, and take over the municipal and departmental budgets until all opposition was physically exterminated. The matter was investigated by the Supreme Court of Justice which has gone on to indict almost 62 congressmen, the vast majority of whom are Uribists.

³"Yidispolitics" refers to the case already proven by Supreme Court of Justice in which the votes of ex members of parliament Yidis Medina and Teodolindo Avendaño were bought in order to guarantee the passing of a constitutional reform which allowed Uribe to stand for an unprecedented second term of office, compromising President Uribe himself and various of his ministers with the charge of bribery.

In the previously cited interview with the Buenos Aires *El Clarín*, Carlos Gaviria Díaz also adds “It’s evident that the new leader, Alfonso Cano, is more of a political animal than a soldier. But we shouldn’t forget that Alvaro Uribe’s government is determined to take the war to the FARC, something which makes it difficult to see how the FARC can change course when faced with such a government. I hope that Cano’s wider political vision will lead him to see that the time has come to look for political solutions, starting with a prisoner exchange.”

Carlos Gaviria is right. But for this to happen, more than simply gestures from the FARC are required. These might arise in any case from Cano’s political instinct, which let us hope predominates when it comes to decision making, or at least in taking the political initiative, because FARC resolutions are collective, but slow and late in coming due to the communication difficulties between the members of the Secretariat. But the government must also do its part. It cannot put all its strategic eggs into one military basket, banking on victory by taking the war to the guerrillas, adversely affecting the civilian population and seriously undermining democracy by imposing restrictions on liberties and the rights of the opposition. For President Uribe, any questioning of his policy implies solidarity and sympathy with the terrorists.

That is no way to entice the FARC to the negotiating table, above all when there is deep mistrust stored up over the years due to the refusal of the Establishment (the elite?) to negotiate fundamental issues in past dialogue processes, including the Caguan talks held under the previous Andres Pastrana government or, even worse, guerrilla unwillingness to demobilise and integrate into political life in light of the genocide which befell Patriotic Union in the nineteen eighties.

In the case of a peace processes with the guerrillas - both the FARC and ELN - a different model needs to be adopted to the one used with the “AUC” paramilitary grouping. Paramilitarism was an ally of the Establishment and of the ruling class in the dirty war on the left and its democratic organisations. Rather than being a counter insurgency factor, it instead formed part of the preemptive war to check the strengthening of the left and its democratic organisation. The guerrilla movement has an undeniable political origin, and it ought to be treated in line with that. That is why the most important thing is to make democratic and social reawakening a priority, so allowing for the causes of the conflict to be eradicated, and to open up the country to a new political and social reality.

A truth commission is indispensable to this end, more so than a peace and justice law, so that the international human rights violations by all sides can be brought to light. That includes the state, which has been no innocent by-stander throughout the internal conflict. It has actively made the situation worse with state sponsored terrorism, its nurturing of the paramilitary groups and its involvement in the dirty war.

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