

Sixth *Conversatorio* on the Colombian Peace Talks

London, 14 April 2014

Are Colombians ready for a peace process? This was the question which the 30 people who participated in the sixth *conversatorio* on the peace talks, on 31 March 2014, were left with. Analysis was provided by former student leader and Colombian writer – now Senior Lecturer at Birkbeck (University of London) – Oscar Guardiola-Rivera, with Andrei Gómez-Suárez (Researcher, Universities of Sussex and Oxford) moderating. To try to answer this question, the conversation between the participants went beyond an analysis of the circumstances of the ups-and-downs of Colombian electoral politics.

The starting point is to recognise that many people are deeply committed to peace. However, many Colombians are outraged at the behaviour of the guerrilla, and the Colombian government has not succeeded in persuading them of the legitimacy to negotiate. This demonstrates the validity of asking whether Colombians are ready for a peace process; but besides, four important events throughout 2014 so far reveal the many tensions that exist:

1. The revelations about the monitoring of the government's negotiating team and certain members of the State by some members of the Army;
2. The dismissal of the mayor of Bogotá Gustavo Petro;
3. The results of recent parliamentary elections which elected the Congress which will have to implement the peace accords; and
4. The debate about ownership of rural land in Colombia and illicit crops, which involves confronting the current model of economic development and the traditional concept of private property.

Petro's dismissal begs the questions whether what we are experiencing is history is repeating itself, thus justifying the violence from the institutionalised extreme right which caricatures the Colombian left as a "Castro-Chavismo" pawn. Consequently, the implementation of a potential peace deal with the FARC requires (1) recognising that the Colombian right exists; (2) that it is neither marginalised nor controlled, bearing in mind the evidence that suggests that sectors of the extreme right exercise power over the Colombian army; and (3) that the war has corrupted Colombian national institutions, making it necessary to reform and purify them.

The decision of Inspector General (*Procurador*) against the Mayor of Bogotá that resulted in his dismissal has been interpreted by many sectors as an attack on popular will. In this context the left's poor participation in the recent elections has been noted (the abstention rate in Bogotá surpassed 65%). It will be hard to convince certain sectors of the left that the negotiations in Havana are the gateway to a democratic peace, while elements still exist in State institutions, for whom a political left with real possibilities of gaining power, has to cease to exist, by hook or by crook.

The left's poor results in the last elections, however, show the importance of creating a coalition between centre-left parties and those on the democratic right who are working on issues of environmental justice, food security and climate change, among others. This is a must for effective implementation of any peace agreements.

Caution was expressed that the peace talks could continue to lack legitimacy insofar as they remain in the hands of exclusively military-economic elites without accommodating Afro-Colombian, indigenous and small-farmer participation.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognise the steps forward; for example, the joint statement at the end of round 22 of the negotiations, according to which the negotiators have "made substantial advances towards agreement about illicit drugs", demonstrates that the parties are in one mind when it comes to re-evaluating the military approach to a social problem, which needs to be addressed on a global scale through to the local. Furthermore, the decision of President Santos to revive the National Peace Council, the declaration of intent to create a Truth Commission after an agreement is signed, and the debate about a model of transitional justice, manifest the willingness to establish State policy of peace.

Thus, there are three major challenges on the background of the current rounds of negotiation:

1. Security, the fundamental basis to build confidence and secure adherence to the agreements;
2. Justice, which should guarantee respect for human rights and strengthen the rule of law;
3. Democratic civilian participation, where civil society may feel it has an active role in peacebuilding.

In conclusion, it is not easy to establish if Colombian society is prepared to accompany the peace process. Consequently it is necessary to generate and strengthen spaces for dialogue so that civil society actors may contribute to the construction of peace, by establishing alternative initiatives. International accompaniment and national support are the keys to success. Additionally, while the negotiating teams agree how to bring the armed conflict to an end, it is necessary to work on implementing structural reforms.



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