

A Vote Against Peace: Uribe's 'No' Campaign

***By Evan Fagan,
Research Associate Council on Hemispheric Affairs***

With the Havana peace negotiations—i.e. the international mediation regarding an end to 50 years of violence between the Colombian government and the leftist guerrilla group, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia; FARC)—coming to a close within the next few months, former President Álvaro Uribe, a staunch critic of the negotiations, has recently announced his support for the ‘No’ campaign. The campaign’s ‘No’ refers to the rejection of the negotiated peace process in the upcoming plebiscite expected to occur in late November.¹ Many supporters of the ‘No’ campaign are rallying behind Uribe under the belief that the current deal is a surrender by the government that would grant impunity to human rights violators and drug traffickers—the FARC—while ignoring the genuine victims of conflict and violence. While the feelings and perspectives of all the parties involved in these negotiations are valid, defeatist sentiments must be put aside so that all tiers of society can be dedicated to the creation and sustainability of peace, and to the end of the cycle of victimization, death, and displacement.

Uribe and his party, the *Centro Democrático* (Democratic Center), which he created in direct opposition to current President Manuel Santos’ conciliatory approach to the FARC negotiations, have provided a comprehensive list of reasons as to why Colombians should vote against the impending plebiscite.² However, peace can only come from compromise, which both President Manuel Santos and FARC leader Rodrigo ‘Timochenko’ Londoño Echeverri are dedicated to achieving. Since failure to implement the negotiated terms would lead to continued violence throughout the country, this article deconstructs the reasons as to why voting ‘No’ will prevent both sides from a constructive, peaceful society.

Victimization, Amnesty, and Fear Mongering

One criticism of the peace agreement provided by ex-Vice President Francisco Santos Calderón in *El Tiempo* is that Timochenko and Manuel Santos are not really involved in a genuine negotiation for peace. To clarify this point, he describes the negotiations as less of a heart-felt attempt at long-lasting peace for all, but more like a business deal that excludes the rest of society, including the victims of violence and displacement.³ Santos Calderón’s characterization of the negotiations as a business maneuver is correct. In fact, the negotiations are business-like; they are a compromise, a deal between two parties with different perspectives. The agreement is the closest the Colombian government and the FARC have ever come to reaching a lasting peace, due to the fact that both sides have been debating the logistics of the compromise for almost three years now. Furthermore, as agreed upon by the Constitutional Court of Colombia, the rest of society and the victims have a voice in the outcome through exercising their democratic right to vote during the plebiscite.⁴ Therefore,

despite the limited number of individuals involved in the official negotiations, it is nonetheless up to the Colombian people to finalize the agreement.

Santos Calderón also brings up the issue that the agreement ignores victims' rights and that violent perpetrators are being granted impunity for the sake of a 'peace' therefore undermining—even trivializing--victim's suffering.⁵ In fact, an analysis by the Human Rights Watch on the Colombia-FARC negotiation process brings attention to the agreement's troublingly vague wording regarding the potential pardons of those responsible for war crimes. As of today, certain clauses in the proposed agreement could allow war criminals and agitators to capriciously walk away from the table without any prison sentencing; meanwhile most international tribunals require the "deprivation of liberty" to some extent through incarceration, supervision, or some other form of disenfranchisement. Although the peace agreement allows perpetrators to avoid prison, prison is not always synonymous with justice. According to Ariel Ávila of *Semana*, the currently negotiated system of confession and reintegration of perpetrators can lead to more effective reparations for victims than imprisonment could.⁶

Avoiding prison is not without its catch. In order to avoid a prison sentence, ex-combatants must confess to their crimes. If they refuse to confess, provide incomplete confessions, or confess after a trial has already begun, they will face sentences for withholding the truth. If combatants confess, however, they are still subject to restorative and reparative "sanctions" that require ex-combatants to carry out projects in order to benefit victims in need, thereby actively assisting affected families and communities. These sanctions are set to last five to eight years, but their length is subject to change.⁷ Prison, the alternative, would do little to reform ex-combatants or to restore the lives of victims. The dedication to the reconciliation of truth demonstrates how Santos Calderón's claims that the victims will never know the full truth are misguided. In fact, telling the truth is the gateway to amnesty for ex-combatants.⁸ His last claim makes little sense and is, objectively, a lie used by his supporters to frighten Colombians into voting 'No.'

It is also worth noting that many of these ex-combatants are victims themselves. 50.14 percent of all adult FARC combatants were inducted into the group as minors.⁹ According to General Jorge Perdomo, the FARC have recruited 11,566 minors over the past 40 years.¹⁰ Most of these minors were inducted into the FARC due to social and economic vulnerability common within afro-Colombian and indigenous communities. A previous COHA article noted that children are "subjected to physical and psychological isolation in order to be fully indoctrinated."¹¹ Besides the psychological manipulation, those who wish to desert the FARC face the possibility of death if they are caught escaping. Many of the indoctrinated children were forced to assist in extortions, kidnappings, and assassinations—all of which were viewed as activities that could cause long-term trauma.¹² By voting 'No' to the peace agreement, voters are prolonging young combatants' exposure to traumatizing work with little hope for escape or improvement of working conditions.

The 'No' campaign and Uribe's supporters exploit the legitimate fears of Colombian citizens and other victims of the conflict by suggesting that no perpetrators of crimes will face justice. Amnesty is an important part of the deal as it offers many combatants the feeling of security needed to willfully lay down their arms and commit to living more traditional gun-free lives. It is also a necessary condition to achieve the delicate balance between justice and

peace sought after by negotiations. The amnesty being negotiated takes into account the complex historical and socioeconomic causes that led to the creation of guerrilla groups like the FARC and the initiation of armed conflict.

The proposed amnesty, however, is not for everyone—one *Voice of America* article describes how perpetrators of violence against women are being dealt with serious repercussions. With 15,300 victims of rape and sexual violence in Colombia throughout the conflict, the gender commission in Havana reassures the Colombian people that sexual violence is “included among the crimes denied amnesty,” showing that there will be exceptions for at least gender-based violence.¹³

Many victims disagree with Santos Calderón’s claims that victims will be done a disservice as a result of the deal. For example, Nidia Sánchez, a victim in recovery from war damages says, “As for a peace process, we want it to happen soon. The victims need this to end. We cannot wait our whole lives for [peace], and having those men in jail will not solve all of our economic and social problems.”¹⁴ Director of Transitional Justice in the Attorney General’s office, Carlos Villamil Ruiz, has tried to appeal to victims and those fearful of the agreement saying:

“I think we need to ask ourselves what generates more fear, having participants of the armed conflict continuing to generate violence, kidnapping and threats, or participants of the armed conflict, unarmed sitting in front of the judges and magistrates and authorities, telling the truth without a weapon and with the expectation of reincorporating themselves into civilian life.”¹⁵

As hard as it can be to overcome such trauma, looking at the bigger picture allows victims and other Colombian citizens to put the peace deal in perspective, and to show that abstaining or voting ‘No,’ would be a continuation of the hazardous status quo, which has benefited no one.

Political Fears

Santos Calderón admits that the FARC was born from a legitimate claim of exclusion from the political system, but he quickly goes on to say that this exclusion was never a justification for the FARC’s violent actions.¹⁶ However, when one looks back into the history that created the FARC, the National Front (the backroom deal of the central liberal and conservative parties to take turns ruling the country) that emerged after the civil war period known as *La Violencia* (1948-1958), completely erased opportunities for political dissenters to voice their opinions against the two major parties.¹⁷ More than just being silenced, many leftist groups were violently repressed, which directly led to the creation of the FARC as well as other guerrilla groups.¹⁸ History teaches that worse violence is bound to emerge from the repression of legitimate voices, beliefs, and ideals. The historical context of the FARC and its relationship with the Colombian government further delegitimizes the *Centro Democrático*’s stance on demobilized members of the FARC engaging in Colombian politics.

The *Centro Democrático* is worried about FARC combatants engaging in Colombian politics with the support of its drug money, and says that based on their past actions, the FARC should give up its right to be an equal negotiator. Interestingly enough, a collection of leaked documents in 2014 shows that then-president Uribe had attempted a peace deal that

offered the FARC protection from extradition and congressional seats. It makes sense to oppose the inclusion of violent drug traffickers within the government; however, to achieve peace in a war that began due to political exclusion, political access must be granted. Thus, maintaining the most divisive policy that began the 50-year war would not ensure a sustainable peace—instead, it would further antagonize the FARC and other disenfranchised groups. What makes these criticisms particularly unwarranted is the number of politicians who have been tied to paramilitary groups. According to *Foreign Policy*, “Between 2006 and 2013, 45 congressmen and seven governors were convicted of having connections to paramilitary groups.”¹⁹ Paramilitary groups are responsible for atrocities equally reprehensible, if not more so than those of the FARC, between 1982 and 2013 where they are said to have carried out 1,166 massacres of both leftists and peasants. In fact, Uribe’s own brother was arrested in February for leading the infamous death squad known as the Twelve Apostles, which has been accused of planning multiple assassinations during the 1990s.²⁰ It is apparent that the government favors paramilitaries’ heavy right-leaning ideologies. While the government claims to be uninvolved in paramilitary-guerrilla conflict, it simultaneously criticizes the practices of the FARC.

To amplify the previous concern, the *Centro Democrático* has worries that the inclusion of the FARC in Colombia’s political system will risk the transformation of Colombia into a second Venezuela, a *chavista* state.²¹ While it is no secret that the FARC are of the left, it is a gross misstatement to say that they will garner enough political support to ever transform the Colombian political and economic system to that of the *chavistas*. Furthermore, it is unethical to exploit the hardships of the people of Venezuela in order to promote an anti-left rhetoric similar to that of the Cold War era. Demonizing and vilifying left-leaning groups is archaic and dangerous. This claim of a supposedly inevitable *chavismo*-like destruction of Colombia is yet another weak tool used by the *Centro Democrático* to promote fear. This desire to keep the FARC from legitimately expressing alternative political views serves to further illustrate the party’s inability to learn from Colombia’s history.

Narcos and the Peace Process

Many members of the *Centro Democrático* use the FARC’s association with drug trafficking to discredit the group and the current negotiations. They again raise the issue of impunity, saying that *narcos* deserve punishment for their crimes, and that they cannot use their history of political exclusion as reason to carry out illegal activity.²² In a statement issued on August 3, Uribe claimed that if the negotiations are passed successfully, *narcos* would feel emboldened due to their virtual impunity and that they will still maintain their ties to cartels. He claims that the peace deal will do nothing to curb drug manufacturing and distribution, but will likely increase interest in the business.²³ Similar to Uribe and his party’s previous claims regarding victims’ rights and politics, he uses Colombia’s pervasive drug-trafficking problem to further take advantage of its people’s fears.

There is little validity in the *Centro Democrático*’s hesitancy to allow those with past drug-trafficking experience to enter politics. Many in Uribe’s close personal circle have been directly involved in trafficking during his presidency, which in part delegitimized the country’s political institutions. For example, two of his presidential colleagues are in prison for drug-trafficking, one being General Santoyo who was extradited to the U.S. on trafficking charges. Santoyo was eventually replaced by Flavio Buitrago who was caught in a money-

laundering scheme.²⁴ Uribe's sister-in-law, Dolly 'La Meno' Cifuentes, and his niece have also been arrested for trafficking. Cifuentes and her brothers were charged with sending several tons of cocaine to the U.S. and for laundering drug money.²⁵ These are only a few examples of *narcos* with which Uribe is associated, showing that if he and his supporters are sincerely concerned with the politicians maintaining links to *narcos*, they must first turn their suspicions inward.

While it is certainly true that the FARC's disbanding will create a power vacuum within a large part of Colombia's drug world, the government is taking the necessary steps needed to ensure that demobilized rebels do not fall back into drugs. The Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR) and other reintegration organizations are actively working towards integrating ex-combatants back into civil society so they do not continue trafficking after demobilization. Through the ACR, the government spends about \$1,500 USD per person per year for the six and a half years that the average demobilized fighter is involved in the program. The program reintegrates ex-combatants through providing them with education, healthcare, security, personal wellbeing, housing, and improved familial and societal relations.²⁶ Programs like these proactively assimilate ex-combatants into everyday life, and give them the tools that they will need to interact with their communities in a productive and legal manner. In a discussion at the Americas Society/Council of the Americas, ACR Director Alejandro Eder stated that Colombia has a lower rate of relapse when compared to other countries with similar programs. One of the organization's main challenges is to attract rising officers who have more to gain through drug trafficking.²⁷ Although there is low public support for the ACR's mission, Eder aims to help the Colombian populace in a gradual "transition from fear to forgiveness and reconciliation."²⁸ If the public realizes that forgiveness is the key to a better, more productive Colombia, then there may be greater financial support from private companies, which would allow the ACR to spend more money getting ex-combatants to reject their ties with the *narcos* and the drug-trafficking industry.

In addition to the ACR, former president César Gaviria, head of the 'Yes' campaign, has also spoken against critics who use drug-trafficking fears to tarnish the peace accords. He goes on to say, "No one can come to say that after the signing of the agreement, the FARC will continue in the drug business." He elaborates: "I don't believe that the U.S. having an ambassador at the negotiation table in Havana, and its own President Obama backing the peace process, supports the FARC to continue with drug-trafficking."²⁹ This is a solid point, since over 90 percent of all cocaine on U.S. streets comes from Colombia.³⁰ The U.S. has contributed money to Colombia's war on drugs since 2000 under "Plan Colombia." Since its inception, the U.S. has given well over \$5 billion USD, mostly to the military and police.³¹ With that much spending aimed to curtail cocaine production in Colombia, there is no explanation as to why the United States would be interested in allowing *narcos* to freely continue with their illicit practices. There is also nothing indicating that the U.S. would cease to support Colombia in its elimination of the drug trade should the peace deal be enacted. The U.S. may very well increase its efforts since the FARC, a major drug producer, will be eliminated from the international market and Colombia will be closer than ever to reducing trafficking within its borders.

Also, with the FARC demobilized and the conflict resolved, the political atmosphere that began the FARC's involvement in drug trafficking will no longer exist. With the FARC now being transformed into a legal political entity, there will be no reason for FARC members

to fund their agenda with drug money. Illegal groups all over the world finance their goals through drug trafficking; however, political inclusion significantly reduces the chances of ex-combatants' continuing their drug trade. The ACR also works hard to prevent ex-combatants and victims from relapsing and continuing their work in illegal markets and cartels.

Recommendations

Due to the valid concern regarding victims' rights (both direct victims as well as ex-combatants), those interested in uplifting victims of violence might want to focus their energy towards strengthening psychosocial support, both individually and communally. *D+C Development and Cooperation*, a news outlet specializing in international development, recommends that, in addition to strengthening individual psychological support, fostering social cohesion is an essential factor in allowing victims to reintegrate back into everyday life. One example of such reintegration efforts is found in the municipality of Pensilvania in central Colombia's Caldas department, where the private foundation Sol Naciente provides free dance classes for those looking to heal from wartime trauma. In their report, Greg Maaß and Mario Pilz comments on the classes, saying, "The protected space of shared dance lessons helps people regain their dignity. As they refined themselves in dance and self-expression, they begin to muster the strength to become involved in social life once again."³² This is not to be overly simplistic in saying that all these victims need is a couple of dance classes, but rather these communities need to proactively work towards integrating victims back into everyday life within a safe space. Since the 'No' campaign, as well as many others, are concerned with victims' rights, then communities should be more proactive in facilitating transition and reintegration into Colombian society. Whether the peace negotiation goes through or not, community leaders should be working towards socializing and reintegrating victims. However, voting 'No' will inevitably lead to the creation of new victims—new displaced citizens, new victims of violence, and new young people being recruited into an organization whose ultimate intent is to hurt them.

It is not enough to vote 'No' in the hope of a future, more sustainable peace. The Colombian people need peace now, which can only be achieved through immediate action. Regardless of their discontent, opponents should still be engaged in the implementation of the peace agreement; by remaining highly critical, they can take part in creating peace—the ultimate goal of both parties. Being critical, however, does not justify the use of fear mongering. Instead, members of the *Centro Democrático* and others should make absolutely certain that institutions and communities are strong enough to implement such an ambitious peace plan. Finally, opponents should ensure that the reintegration and demobilization occur with transparency and accountability.

It should be further emphasized that those who are leading the 'No' campaign do not want peace, they do not want reconciliation, and they do not want compromise—what they want is to win when winning is no longer an option for sustainable peace. To achieve any form of peace, compromise is necessary: the government must be prepared to grant concessions, and the FARC must abandon its guerrilla forces. Both have already agreed to do so, and it will soon be up to the Colombian people to agree to their terms. Uribe and the *Centro Democrático* say they reject the plebiscite in order to attain a more sustainable peace, but it is likely impossible to reach a universally accepted agreement.

If it were up to Uribe, who has always favored a ‘*mano dura*’ (heavy handed) approach to dealing with the FARC, the war would continue until the FARC are completely eliminated or imprisoned.³³ This can be seen in his past policies and views regarding the organization. It can also be seen when contrasted with President Santos, as the *Economist* depicts in detail.³⁴ Should Uribe and his campaign succeed in voting down the agreement, he will do everything in his power to make sure the FARC are dealt with in the harshest of manners, which would renew turmoil and chaos in Colombia. Given the situation, compromise is the only means to move forward. Compromise and peace go hand in hand, and with compromise comes a little bit of work. It is the responsibility of the Colombian nation to stay informed throughout these negotiations leading to the plebiscite where the battle will come to a head: At the end of the day, does Bogotá want a *mano dura*, or a reparative path towards reconciliation?

*Translated by the author

**By Evan Fagan,
Research Associate at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs**

¹ Taborda Herrera, Ernesto. “Plebescito por la paz, qué es, cómo, y cuándo se hará.” *El Universal*, August 6, 2016. Accessed August 19, 2016. <http://www.eluniversal.com.co/politica/plebiscito-por-la-paz-que-es-como-y-cuando-se-hara-232301>

² “Centro Democrático.” Páginat Oficial de Álvaro Uribe Vélez. Accessed August 16, 2016. <http://www.alvarouribevelez.com.co/es/content/centro-democratico>

³ Santos Calderón, Francisco. “La impunidad tiene un costo enorme”: Francisco Santos Calderón.” *El Tiempo*, August 7, 2016. Accessed August 15, 2016. <http://www.eltiempo.com/politica/proceso-de-paz/razones-para-votar-por-el-no-en-el-plebiscito-francisco-santos-calderon/16666716>

⁴ “Colombia Constitutional Court Approves Plebiscite on Peace Deal.” *TeleSur*, July 18, 2016. Accessed August 16, 2016. <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/Colombia-Constitutional-Court-Approves-Plebiscite-on-Peace-Deal-20160718-0028.html>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ávila, Ariel. “La mafia que nos gobernó.” *Semana*, May 17, 2016. Accessed August 16, 2016. <http://www.semana.com/opinion/articulo/ariel-avila-uribe-critica-impunidad-pero-su-gobierno-la-fomento/473939>

⁷ “Human Rights Watch Analysis of Colombia-FARC Agreement.” *Human Rights Watch*, December 21, 2015. Accessed August 15, 2016. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/21/human-rights-watch-analysis-colombia-farc-agreement>

⁸ “Human Rights Watch Analysis of Colombia-FARC Agreement.”

⁹ Springer, Dr. Natalia, *Como corderos entre lobos: del uso y reclutamiento de niños, niñas, y adolescentes en el marco del conflicto armado y la criminalidad en Colombia*. Bogotá: Springer Consulting Services, 2012, 27.

¹⁰ Alsema, Adriaan. “FARC faces charges for recruiting more than 12000 child soldiers.” *Colombia Reports*, May 17, 2016. Accessed May 17, 2016. <http://colombiareports.com/farc-face-charges-recruitment-12000-children/>

¹¹ Fagan, Evan and Evan Owens. “The FARC and Child Soldiers: A Question of Reintegration – So Near, Yet So Far.” *The Council on Hemispheric Affairs*, May 23, 2016. Accessed August

15, 2016. http://www.coha.org/the-farc-and-child-soldiers-a-question-of-reintegration-so-near-yet-so-far/#_ftn8

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Reuters. "No Amnesty for War Rapists: Colombia Peace Talks Turn to Women's Rights." VOA, July 27, 2016. Accessed August 15, 2016. <http://www.voanews.com/a/colombia-peace-talks-turn-to-womens-rights/3438068.html>

¹⁴ Begue, Michelle. "Colombia's peace talks spark fears of possible FARC amnesty." CCTV America, November 6, 2014. Accessed August 15, 2016. <http://www.cctv-america.com/2014/11/06/colombias-peace-talks-spark-fears-of-possible-farc-amnesty>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Francisco Santos Calderón. "La impunidad tiene un costo enorme": Francisco Santos Calderón."

¹⁷ "El Frente Nacional." Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango. Accessed August 16, 2016.

http://www.banrepcultural.org/blaavirtual/ayudadetareas/politica/el_frente_nacional

¹⁸ "Colombia: Conflict Profile." *Peace Direct*, August 2009. Accessed August 15, 2016.

<https://www.insightonconflict.org/conflicts/colombia/conflict-profile/>

¹⁹ Alpert, Megan. "Politics Roils Colombia's Tentative Peace Deal With the FARC." *Foreign Policy*, July 18, 2016. Accessed August 15, 2016.

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/18/politics-roils-colombias-tentative-peace-deal-with-the-farc-eln-santos-uribe/>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ CNN Español. "Inicia la campaña del plebiscite por la paz en Colombia: ¿qué dicen los del 'Sí' y que los del 'No'?" *CNN Español*, August 4, 2016. Accessed August 15, 2016.

<http://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2016/08/04/inicia-la-campana-del-plebiscito-por-la-paz-en-colombia-que-dicen-los-del-si-y-que-los-del-no/>

²² Francisco Santos Calderón. "La impunidad tiene un costo enorme": Francisco Santos Calderón."

²³ Prensa Centro Democrático. "Nuestra campaña por el NO: Uribe." Página Oficial de Álvaro Uribe Vélez, August 3, 2016. Accessed August 15,

2016. <http://alvarouribevelez.com.co/es/content/nuestra-campana-por-el-no-uribe>

²⁴ Ariel Ávila. "La mafia que nos gobernó."

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Sonneland, Holly K. "Explainer: The Challenge of Reintegration in Colombia." AS/COA, June 26, 2015. Accessed August 15, 2016. <http://www.as-coa.org/articles/explainer-challenge-reintegration-colombia>

²⁷ Middleton, Kailie. "Summary: A Discussion with Alejandro Eder, Director of Colombia's Agency for Reintegration." AS/COA, January 31, 2013. Accessed August 15, 2016.

<http://www.as-coa.org/articles/summary-discussion-alejandro-eder-director-colombia%E2%80%99s-agency-reintegration>

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ CNN Español. "Inicia la campaña del plebiscite por la paz en Colombia: ¿qué dicen los del 'Sí' y que los del 'No'?"

³⁰ "Q&A: Colombia's civil conflict." *BBC*, May 27, 2013. Accessed August 15, 2016.

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-12447532>

³¹ "U.S. Policy in Colombia." *Amnesty International*. Accessed August 15, 2016.

<http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/countries/americas/colombia/us-policy-in-colombia>

³² Maaß, Greg and Mario Pilz. “Returning to everyday life.” *D+C*, July 23, 2016. Accessed August 15, 2016. <http://www.dandc.eu/en/article/study-identifies-measures-reintegrate-victims-colombias-civil-war-everyday-life>

³³ “La mano dura de Uribe.” *El Tiempo*, December 22, 1996. Accessed August 16, 2016. <http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-660640>

³⁴ “Santos v Uribe.” *The Economist*, April 7, 2012. Accessed August 16, 2016. <http://www.economist.com/node/21552204>