

Why Colombia's Peace Deal Failed

Exclusive: Though polls show Colombians strongly favoring peace, President Santos's peace deal went down to a narrow defeat for a variety of unconnected reasons, including Hurricane Matthew's impact, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

It may take Colombia years to recover from the damage wreaked by Hurricane Matthew, which lashed the country's coast earlier this month before heading north. It did far more than simply flood roads and rip the roofs off peasant shacks. It also helped send the national referendum on peace with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) down to an historic defeat that almost nobody expected.

As a result, the nation is now in crisis. No one knows whether the Marxist guerrillas who agreed to lay down their arms will accept harsher terms demanded by leaders of the "No" campaign. Though being selected for the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize just days after the narrow "No" vote, President Juan Manuel Santos has been politically discredited inside Colombia, putting his legislative agenda at risk for the next year and a half. International markets punished the country's currency after the vote, registering investor concern over Colombia's governability.

Many news analyses blamed the referendum's defeat on FARC's history of violence and crime. The *Washington Post* called the vote "an extraordinary repudiation of the guerrilla commanders of the FARC . . . The outcome reveals the depths of Colombian public animosity toward the rebels, accumulated by decades of kidnappings, bombing and land seizures in the name of Marxist-Leninist revolution."

The *New York Times* agreed: "To many Colombians who had endured years of kidnappings and killings by the rebels, the agreement was too lenient. It would have allowed most rank-and-file fighters to start lives as normal citizens, and rebel leaders to receive reduced sentences for war crimes."

That was certainly the message favored by Colombia's right-wing Senator Álvaro Uribe, who led a scorched-earth campaign against FARC during his term as president from 2002 to 2010. More recently, Uribe fought tooth and nail to block the peace accord signed in August by President Santos and FARC leaders after 52 years of civil war, the death of a quarter million people, and the displacement of 7 million.

But a closer look at the evidence suggests that the referendum's extremely

narrow defeat was driven as much by voter overconfidence in its passage, bad weather, and a U.S.-style negative campaign that fomented resentment and anger around wedge social issues.

A War-Weary Nation

The referendum did not deliver a popular mandate against peace. It failed by a mere four-tenths of one percent, with only 37 percent of eligible voters showing up at the polls on Oct. 2, which was just two days after Hurricane Matthew reached its peak strength as a Category 5 storm and buffeted Colombia's Caribbean coast with nearly 160 mile-per-hour winds and torrential rains.

A majority of Colombians clearly favor peace in general and the signed accord in particular. Huge peace demonstrations followed the vote in many Colombian cities, even in Uribe's traditional stronghold of Medellín. Survey after public opinion survey had predicted passage of the referendum by a two-to-one margin. "We couldn't imagine that we would win," said Uribe's manager of the "No" campaign, Juan Carlos Velez.

So what went wrong? One problem, Velez said, was the polls themselves. Their lopsided margin instilled in the pro-government camp a sense of overconfidence, sapping the "Yes" campaign of energy and voter turnout.

In addition, torrential rainfall along Colombia's coast – a region of ardent pro-peace sentiment – impeded voting by four million people, or about 12 percent of eligible voters, according to election observers. The rains delayed the opening of polling stations and spoiled election materials. The extreme weather also discouraged supporters – who had every reason to expect victory – from turning out to cast ballots.

Election observers also reported "widespread illegal campaigning" near polling places and inadequate staffing or other poor conditions at nearly 40 percent of all voting stations.

The "No" vote was also inflated by a scare campaign based on misinformation, led by Velez out of the Lee Atwater and Karl Rove playbooks.

Velez explained to a Colombian newspaper – much to Uribe's chagrin – that he appealed to emotions and fear rather than facts. The "No" campaign "stopped explaining the agreements to focus the message on indignation," Velez said. "We wanted the people to go out to vote while fed up."

Velez's team convinced middle- and upper-class voters to reject the referendum by stirring up their resentment against an unrelated proposal by President Santos to increase taxes to offset declining oil revenues. Radio ads aimed at

poorer audiences criticized subsidies the government proposed to pay to former guerrillas to help them reintegrate into society.

“A social media campaign scared pensioners into believing they would have to give over 7% of their pensions to help support demobilized guerrillas,” reported The Guardian. “Flyers for the no side falsely claimed the accord would allow a joint government-FARC committee to prosecute anyone who was against the deal.”

Social Issues in Play

The “No” campaign also rallied conservative Catholic and Protestant evangelical voters by focusing their ire on Gina Parody, a gay education minister who had proposed mixed school bathrooms and more gender-neutral uniforms. She took a leave of absence to become a leading campaigner for the peace accord, which recognized the rights of gays and lesbians. Pointing to her, Uribe’s allies organized protests across the country to denounce the peace deal as a threat to “family values.” Colombia’s inspector general even charged that government officials were “using peace as an excuse to impose their gender ideology.”

Thanks to such tactics, “The ‘No’ campaign was the cheapest and most effective in a long time,” Velez boasted.

Velez has since resigned and is now under investigation for electoral fraud. Also under investigation is another former campaign chief for Uribe’s party, who allegedly ordered an aide to bribe military and police officials to help steal to the private emails of the government’s peace negotiating team.

Perhaps the most disturbing, if unproven, charges are those that connect Uribe and many party members to the country’s large paramilitary drug trafficking organizations, which also opposed the peace accord.

Some 3,000 of these heavily armed criminals are active across the country, according to the national police. Their threats to kill FARC members created one of the most significant obstacles to demobilizing the Marxist guerrillas, who feared the government could not protect them.

Now, unless President Santos and FARC can find a way to get peace back on track, all it may take is one massacre by these paramilitaries against FARC soldiers or sympathizers to plunge the country back into the dark hole of civil war – a war that the vast majority of Colombians want to end.

Jonathan Marshall is author or co-author of five books on international affairs, including Cocaine Politics: Drugs, Armies, and the CIA in Central America (with Peter Dale Scott). Some of his previous articles for Consortiumnews included “Derailing Peace Deal in Colombia,” “The Clinton-Colombia Connection,” and

Colombia’s Peace Finally at Hand

Exclusive: In a world darkened by war and disorder, a rare glimmer of optimism broke through as Colombia’s government signed a long-delayed peace accord with the country’s primary guerrilla movement, as Jonathan Marshall describes.

By Jonathan Marshall

With terrorist massacres hitting the news every few days, and financial markets reeling over the uncertain future of Europe, it’s no wonder pundits like Roger Cohen of the *New York Times* are warning that “the forces of disintegration are on the march” and “the foundations of the postwar world ... are trembling.”

But the news media have given only glancing coverage to one of the most positive developments of our time: the end to 52 years of armed conflict between the government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

That bloody war took the lives of a quarter million people and displaced another 6.9 million, more even than in Syria. It produced countless crimes and atrocities against civilians, fed the international drug trade, and presented extraordinary challenges to the preservation of Colombia’s imperfect democracy.

On June 23, the same day Great Britain voted to exit the European Union, the shooting officially stopped in Colombia with the signing of a definitive, bilateral ceasefire in Havana, Cuba. (Hmm, could the key role of the Cuban government have had something to do with the American media’s disinterest?)

Already, United Nations observers – all from other Latin American nations – have arrived in Colombia to monitor the agreement. The Colombian government has dispatched 2,000 troops to the northern part of the country to safeguard the demobilization of 1,200 FARC guerrillas, the first of as many as 20,000 who will lay down their guns once a final peace deal is signed.

The troops will play an essential role in *protecting* the ex-guerrillas from violence by right-wing paramilitary groups, such as “Los Urabeños,” which have terrorized FARC sympathizers as well as peasants, union leaders, students and others who make up the political base of the Left in Colombia.

The ceasefire is a stunning achievement given the deep wounds left by unbridled violence on both sides. The talks took 3½ years, testing the patience not only

of negotiators, but of the general public, which lost faith that the two sides could ever reach a settlement. (The smaller Marxist guerrilla group, ELN, has yet to reach a similar deal to lay down its arms.)

A Surprising Peacemaker

Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, who came to office with hardline credentials, surprised many by pursuing peace so relentlessly and at considerable expense to his popularity. But there was no mistaking his passionate conviction after the signing of the agreement:

“Today a new chapter opens, one that brings back hope and allows us to slowly heal our wounds, giving our children the possibility of not reliving the history that has caused our country so much harm. . .

“This is a critical step, a historic moment. However, the end of the conflict isn’t our final destination; the end of this conflict is our starting point so we can build together, united in our differences, a country where everyone has a place. Peace is possible, and more certain than ever. Let us build it now.”

The Cuban commentator Elio Delgado-Legon, applauding Colombia’s renewed hopes after more than half a century of war, asked, “Who could be against peace in Colombia?” His answer: only “the dim-witted and over-the-top reactionary minds, who have made war a lifestyle and who benefit from it in some way, without caring about the population’s suffering.”

The reality, however, is that former Colombian President Álvaro Uribe, one of America’s staunchest allies – a favorite of both President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and a recipient of billions of dollars in U.S. military aid – is spearheading mass protests against any “capitulation” to FARC.

Uribe, now a senator from the right-wing Democratic Center party, is leading a petition drive and other forms of “civil resistance” to defeat any peace settlement with FARC, whose fighters he brands – not entirely without justification – as “terrorists.”

At the beginning of April, he organized huge marches in Bogotá and Medellín, the country’s two largest cities, to protest the peace process and demand the resignation of President Santos. One of the country’s leading newspapers reported that Uribe’s protest was backed by Colombia’s largest paramilitary drug-trafficking organization, Los Urabeños, which managed to shut down much of the north of the country for 72 hours after assassinating a dozen policemen.

While one Colombian senator likened Uribe to Donald Trump, President Santos – Uribe’s former defense minister – simply termed Uribe’s anti-peace campaign “totally irrational.” Santos added, “I laugh when some go around trying to collect some signatures for . . . the war to continue . . . Because war is a factory of victims.”

Many ordinary Colombians are also concerned, however – not because they oppose peace, but because they have not been consulted by the government as to the future of guerrilla resettlement or land reform policies aimed at easing rural discontent.

American Support

To its credit, the Obama administration has given unambiguous support to the peace process. The White House lauded the ceasefire and praised the “courage and leadership” of President Santos in persevering with negotiations over nearly four years. It also committed funding to support implementation of a peace accord and to rid the country of land mines. (Colombia has the second highest number of landmine victims in the world behind Afghanistan.)

The cause of peace would be advanced if Hillary Clinton, Obama’s presumptive successor, went more clearly on record in support of Santos as well. That would mean breaking with Uribe, whose “legacy of great progress” she championed during an official visit to Colombia as Secretary of State in 2010 – against the advice of human rights campaigners who cited his administration’s responsibility for mass killings of civilians and ties to paramilitary drug traffickers.

The fact is, peace still needs all the help it can get in Colombia. In the famous words of one astute social observer: “It ain’t over ‘til it’s over.”

Jonathan Marshall is author or co-author of five books on international affairs, including *The Lebanese Connection: Corruption, Civil War and the International Drug Traffic* (Stanford University Press, 2012). Some of his previous articles for Consortiumnews were “Risky Blowback from Russian Sanctions”; “The US Hand in the Syrian Mess”; “Hidden Origins of Syria’s Civil War”; and “Israel Covets Golan’s Water and Now Oil.”]

The Clinton-Colombia Connection

Exclusive: Despite a grisly human rights record and alleged ties to drug traffickers, Colombia’s ex-President Uribe has been a favorite of Hillary Clinton and her husband Bill, helping Clinton associates turn hefty profits,

reports Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

On June 29, 2009, one day after Honduran military leaders ousted their country's democratically elected president, President Obama publicly branded the coup illegal and denounced it as "a terrible precedent." Yet even as he spoke, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was ensuring that U.S. aid continued and that major capitals would recognize the new regime.

Human rights activists have long decried her for abandoning democratic rights and values in Honduras. But many have overlooked her cozy embrace of the morally compromised Latin American leader who happened to be sharing the White House podium when Obama made his remarks: Colombian President Álvaro Uribe.

Obama was hosting Uribe to build political support for the U.S.-Colombia free trade agreement, which both he and Hillary Clinton had vigorously opposed during the 2008 election campaign. Obama praised Uribe's "courage" and his "admirabl(e)" progress on human rights and fighting drug cartels since taking office in 2002 – a controversial claim that Clinton's State Department would certify that September.

A year later, the love affair between the Obama administration and Uribe grew even hotter. After landing in Bogota for an official visit in April 2010, Defense Secretary Robert Gates lauded the "historic" progress that Uribe's government had made in the war against "narco-traffickers and terrorists."

"Uribe, in my view, is a great hero and has been an enormously successful president of Colombia," Gates told reporters.

Human rights campaigners were aghast. In an email to Hillary Clinton's chief of staff, a senior aide to Massachusetts Rep. Jim McGovern cited Gates as an example of what *not* to do during Clinton's upcoming visit to Colombia that June: "The most important thing the Secretary can do is avoid effusive praise for President Álvaro Uribe, who leaves office in August."

McGovern's aide cited several damning facts:

–Contrary to claims from Bogota, reports by the General Accountability Office and the U.S. Agency for International Development showed that U.S. aid and Colombia's anti-drug programs were failing to meet their goals and in some cases were actually stimulating coca production.

–Military killings of civilians were up – with as many as 1,486 civilians killed "during the first six years of Álvaro Uribe's presidency," she noted. (The

actual number was likely more than double that.)

–There were also “mounting allegations that the President’s intelligence service, the DAS, was put at the service of paramilitary leaders and narco-traffickers; used to spy on and intimidate Supreme Court justices, opposition politicians, journalists and human rights defenders; and employed in a campaign of sabotage and smears against political opponents” of Uribe.

–Dozens of President Uribe’s political supporters were under investigation for corruption and ties to illegal paramilitary units, she reported. “Many are large landholders with ties to narco-trafficking, the same local leaders who created and fostered the brutal pro-government paramilitary groups that killed tens of thousands of non-combatants in the 1990s and early 2000s. . . Those embroiled . . . include the President’s cousin, Mario Uribe; the brother of his former foreign minister; and individuals whom the President had named to be Colombia’s ambassadors to Chile, the Dominican Republic, and Canada.”

In conclusion, she maintained, the real heroes were not Uribe but “Colombian prosecutors, investigators, witnesses and non-governmental organizations trying to uncover the truth about these abuses” under conditions of great personal risk.

Falling on Deaf Ears

Her advice fell on deaf ears. Just one week later, Secretary Clinton was in Bogota to affirm the administration’s strong support for a free trade agreement, and underline Washington’s commitment to helping Uribe “consolidate the security gains of recent years” against “the insurgents, the guerillas, the narco-traffickers, who would wish to turn the clock back.”

Echoing her friend Bob Gates, she added, “because of your commitment to building strong democratic institutions here in Colombia and to nurturing the bonds of friendship between our two countries, you leave a legacy of great progress that will be viewed in historic terms.”

Clinton had nothing to say about the quarter *million* victims of right-wing paramilitary groups, many of them backed by the military, as reported in a November, 2009 cable from the U.S. embassy in Bogota. Nor did she have anything to say about the more than 2,700 union members murdered since 1986 (including hundreds under Uribe), making Colombia by far the world’s most dangerous place for organized labor.

Secretary Clinton may have been influenced by her husband’s warm relationship with Uribe. As President, he had signed and implemented a multi-year aid package called Plan Colombia, which contributed more than \$8 billion to Colombia’s

counterinsurgency wars, despite Washington's full knowledge of the military's "death-squad tactics" and cooperation with drug-running paramilitary groups.

In retirement, former President Clinton deepened his ties to Uribe and Colombia. In 2005, he introduced Uribe to Canadian mining magnate Frank Guistra, who was a leading donor to the Clinton Global Initiative fund; Guistra was interested in acquiring mineral and oil rights in Colombia. In 2005, Clinton also picked up \$800,000 from a Colombia-based group for a speaking tour of Latin America to tout the merits of a U.S-Colombia free trade agreement. (Guistra provided the private jet for Clinton's tour.)

To further promote the trade pact, Bogota provided a \$300,000 P.R. contract to Clinton's pollster Mark Penn. As part of his publicity campaign, Penn arranged for Uribe to hold an award banquet in honor of Clinton in 2007. Clinton reciprocated by featuring Uribe as an honored guest at his Clinton Global Initiative annual meeting a few months later.

When news of Penn's contract with Bogota got out in 2008, Hillary Clinton had to fire him as her campaign strategist, lest she lose endorsements from labor unions. She insisted that her husband's relationship with Colombia would not influence her stand on the free trade deal, which she opposed because of "the history of violence against trade unionists in Colombia."

Reversing Course

As we have seen, both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton reversed course once in office. Clinton may simply have been following the President's lead, but critics point to her family's unsavory financial connections as another explanation for her change of heart. As *International Business Times* reported last year:

"When workers at the country's largest independent oil company staged a strike in 2011, the Colombian military rounded them up at gunpoint and threatened violence if they failed to disband, according to human rights organizations. Similar intimidation tactics against the workers, say labor leaders, amounted to an everyday feature of life. . . .

"Yet as union leaders and human rights activists conveyed these harrowing reports of violence to then-Secretary of State Clinton in late 2011, urging her to pressure the Colombian government to protect labor organizers, she responded first with silence, these organizers say. The State Department publicly praised Colombia's progress on human rights, thereby permitting hundreds of millions of dollars in U.S. aid to flow to the same Colombian military that labor activists say helped intimidate workers.

"At the same time that Clinton's State Department was lauding Colombia's human

rights record, her family was forging a financial relationship with Pacific Rubiales, the sprawling Canadian petroleum company at the center of Colombia's labor strife. The Clintons were also developing commercial ties with the oil giant's founder, Canadian financier Frank Giustra, who now occupies a seat on the board of the Clinton Foundation, the family's global philanthropic empire.

"The details of these financial dealings remain murky, but this much is clear: After millions of dollars were pledged by the oil company to the Clinton Foundation – supplemented by millions more from Giustra himself – Secretary Clinton abruptly changed her position on the controversial U.S.-Colombia trade pact.

"Having opposed the deal as a bad one for labor rights back when she was a presidential candidate in 2008, she now promoted it, calling it 'strongly in the interests of both Colombia and the United States.' The change of heart by Clinton and other Democratic leaders enabled congressional passage of a Colombia trade deal that experts say delivered big benefits to foreign investors like Giustra."

According to a report this May by the AFL-CIO and four Colombian unions, 99 Colombian workers and union activists have been killed since the trade agreement took effect in 2011. Another six were kidnapped and 955 received death threats. Only a small fraction of those crimes were every solved.

Meanwhile, Uribe continues to be a major force in Colombian politics. In April, he mobilized a street protest against efforts by the current government to bring about a lasting peace with the Marxist guerrilla group FARC; a leading newspaper reported that Uribe's protest was backed by Colombia's largest paramilitary drug-trafficking organization, Los Urabeños, which managed to shut down much of the north of the country for 72 hours after assassinating a dozen policemen.

Ties to Drug Trade

A connection between Uribe, paramilitary groups, and drug traffickers is all too easy to imagine, despite his denials and Washington's hero worship. Consider a few family connections, among the many that have been alleged:

–One of Uribe's brothers was arrested this February for allegedly leading a death squad against suspected leftists that was run from the family cattle ranch. A Colombian legislator cited testimony that Álvaro himself may have "ordered massacres" from the ranch.

–Another brother was arrested (but not convicted) for suspected ties to cocaine kingpin Pablo Escobar; his extramarital partner was later arrested on a U.S. warrant for allegedly working with the head of Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel, Joaquín

“El Chapo” Guzmán. Their daughter was also listed by the U.S. Treasury Department as a major money launderer.

–Uribe’s two sons are under investigation for massive tax evasion and showed up in the recent “Panama papers” leak as shareholders in a British Virgin Islands tax shelter;

–Uribe’s campaign manager and former chief of staff was flagged by DEA in 2001 as Colombia’s largest importer of a key precursor chemical for the production of cocaine.

–Uribe received contributions to his 2002 presidential campaign from the country’s largest and most murderous paramilitary organization, the AUC, which was listed by Washington as an international terrorist organization. By the time of Uribe’s election, according to one expert, “the AUC had become the most powerful network of drug traffickers in the country’s history.”

Uribe arranged a sweetheart deal to allow AUC leaders to escape serious justice with most of their wealth intact, until the nation’s top courts intervened. Uribe’s chief of security from 2002 to 2005 pleaded guilty in 2012 to taking bribes to protect the AUC.

–And as far back as 1991, a confidential U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency report called Uribe a “close personal friend” of Pablo Escobar, and said he was “dedicated to collaboration with the Medellín cartel at high government levels.” It also noted that his father had been murdered “for his connection with the narcotic traffickers.”

On the plus side, President George W. Bush awarded Uribe the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Georgetown University’s Walsh School of Foreign Service named him a Distinguished Scholar. And Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation named him to its Board of Directors in 2012.

Hillary Clinton clearly sides with the camp of Uribe’s admirers. It’s time to call her out and make her account for that choice – and for a record that calls into question her professed devotion to human freedom, democratic values, and the rights of organized labor.

Jonathan Marshall is author or co-author of five books on international affairs, including *The Lebanese Connection: Corruption, Civil War and the International Drug Traffic* (Stanford University Press, 2012). Some of his previous articles for Consortiumnews were “Risky Blowback from Russian Sanctions”; “Neocons Want Regime Change in Iran”; “Saudi Cash Wins France’s Favor”; “The Saudis’ Hurt Feelings”; “Saudi Arabia’s Nuclear Bluster”; “The US Hand in the Syrian Mess”; and “Hidden Origins of Syria’s Civil War.”]

Colombia's Bittersweet Peace Deal

Exclusive: After generations of warfare, Colombia finally has a negotiated model for peace, but the agreement is more a settlement between two battered parties than a moment of celebration. Still, it carries a promise of greater social equity and some accountability, reports Andrés Cala.

By Andrés Cala

The Colombian government and the continent's mightiest and longest-surviving guerrilla army, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, are set to finalize a bittersweet peace agreement next spring with no victors, millions of victims, and just enough justice to basically turn a page on decades of unrelenting bloodletting.

The point of no return, barring unexpected sabotage, was the landmark Sept. 23 announcement that a transitional legal framework had been drafted to deal with all war criminals. President Juan Manuel Santos and FARC leader Rodrigo Londoño, a.k.a. Timochenko, shook hands and Cuban President Raúl Castro, the middleman, joined the three-way clutch. They set a six-month deadline to sign the peace treaty, followed by a two-month disarming and demobilization process.

Although details on the legal deal have not been fully divulged, mainstream press outlets in an attempt to call a winner suggested the FARC had capitulated. But the truth is that agreement was the lowest common denominator to break a stalemate, or to paraphrase Santos, it's the maximum amount of justice that was possible to achieve peace.

The FARC had said they would not accept being punished, which was a nonstarter, not because the government or the majority of Colombians says so, but because international law does. Blanket amnesties no longer offer the cover against crimes against humanity of last century's peace deals and the guerrilla movement ultimately realized that any agreement not only had to be brokered with the government, but accepted by the majority of the population and respected by international tribunals.

Furthermore, justice or accountability will be served in small portions, but to all sides, which is a prerequisite to lasting peace after nearly 70 years at war. The FARC surely, but also state security forces, elites, politicians, financiers and others "directly or indirectly" involved in the conflict will have to own up to their abuses.

It was a FARC demand to move forward, but also the government's way of shielding elites.

A Slap on the Wrist

As it is, the basic outline foresees no jail time for those who fully confess to their crimes within a given timeframe. Most rank-and-file criminals will be amnestied, and a special tribunal, including minority foreign judges, will prosecute the leaders responsible for "the most serious and representative" crimes. They will have to compensate their victims and do community work "with effective restriction of liberty," but no prison, which sounds like house arrest at best. Those who don't confess will be prosecuted by regular tribunals and face up to 20 year in jail.

The Obama administration, which supported Santos's peace process, has said it will respect one of the provisions of the deal with the FARC which would shield them from extradition. Of course, the U.S. has for decades been helping Colombia weaken the 10,000-15,000 strong FARC, which contributed to FARC's decision to negotiate what had become an unwinnable war. FARC also recognized that it had lost significant popular support, even while retaining military might.

The CIA, DEA, NSA, and the Pentagon have all been operating since the 1980s, covertly at first, but overtly since 2000 through the \$9 billion Plan Colombia military aid package, which only broadened previous bilateral cooperation deals. (The U.S. involvement over those three-plus decades also means Washington does not have clean hands regarding the government's abuses.)

The angriest opposition to the transitional framework deal, as usual, came from former President Alvaro Uribe, who is mobilizing his followers against the peace process. It's ironic though that the extreme-right populist leader might also benefit from it.

Uribe will at some point have to come clean about his role in the conflict (as should the U.S.). For Uribe that day may come soon. Colombia's attorney general has asked the Supreme Court to investigate him for ties to paramilitary groups in relation to a massacre in 1997. Uribe has immunity from prosecution during his two-term presidency, but not before then.

If indeed Uribe is prosecuted, he too would be covered under transitional justice, as much as hundreds, if not thousands of military officers, rich landowners, businessmen, and former and acting politicians.

It turns out that both FARC leaders, also responsible for human rights violations, and Uribe and other paramilitary supporters will get little more than a slap on the wrist, but there is little alternative when the endgame is

peace.

According to a 2013 independent report on the conflict, 220,000 people were killed, 25,000 are unaccounted for, and almost 5 million were forcibly displaced from their home since 1958. More than 80 percent of the victims were civilians and most crimes were perpetrated by anti-insurgent paramilitary groups with close ties to the state, which were organized, trained and armed in the 1990s in part by the CIA and DEA.

Colombia's war goes back further though to 1948 when Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, a popular democratic leader, was assassinated, setting off a decade of conflict called La Violencia, in which another 200,000 people were killed. The FARC is rooted in that conflict and the resulting deal brokered by the country's warring conservative and liberal elites to share power, rather than address gross inequality, which is among the world's worst.

It is this inequality that is at the heart of Colombia's conflicts, including the drug war. Greater income equality and land redistribution are the only ways to bring lasting peace, regardless of the recent negotiations.

Turning a Page

Peace talks began formally in October 2012 after months of secret contacts in Cuba, bringing the two sides closer to peace than any of three previous attempts. The government and the FARC agreed to broadly negotiate six points: land reform, political participation of insurgents, the drug trade, creating a truth commission, ending the conflict (which includes transitional justice), and implementation and ratification of deals. The first five have been partially agreed to and pending is the last point.

The real test will come after the two sides finalize the peace deal and the terms have to be ratified by the Colombian people. Santos initially suggested it would be through a referendum, which the FARC has opposed from the get-go. He has backtracked recently. The FARC alternative was to hold a constitutional assembly but that has also been ruled out. Whatever recourse Santos and the FARC agree on will test Colombians' ability to turn a page.

If all goes as planned, within a year, FARC guerrillas will have disarmed. By then, it is likely the National Liberation Army, or ELN, will also join in, as well as other illegal armed groups. But this negotiation, as others in the past, will be useless unless the agreements are fully implemented and Colombia's underlying problems are addressed.

War in Colombia is directly related to the structural economic inequality. As a peasant army, the FARC demanded access to land. Its evolution into a communist

movement came later.

USAID estimates 62 percent of country's best farmland is owned by 0.4 percent of the population. Additionally, ruling elites have over time imposed and tightened an unfair model that undermined Colombia's economic growth, under-taxing land tenure while overtaxing labor, with gross economic consequences, including rendering business and industry globally uncompetitive.

Were it not for oil and coal, the country's economy would have long stagnated, which makes overhauling the current system urgent as commodity prices are sure to remain low for at least the remainder of the decade.

Indeed, Santos has to be credited for understanding the stakes, which are not simply negotiating with the FARC. He has been using the peace process to catalyze major reforms, albeit slowly, despite angry opposition from the country's elites and armed forces. The real test thus is still to come once peace is signed.

Can Santos deliver what no Colombian leader has accomplished since independence forcing ruling elites to accept a more equitable distribution of power and resources? That remains to be seen.

Andrés Cala is an award-winning Colombian journalist, columnist and analyst specializing in geopolitics and energy. He is the lead author of [America's Blind Spot: Chávez, Energy, and US Security](#).

Colombia's Choice: Peace or War

Exclusive: Colombia's future may be decided by the June 15 runoff election between a far-right candidate who favors a renewal of counterinsurgency war and the incumbent president who has staked his political career on a negotiated outcome, as Andrés Cala explains.

By Andrés Cala

The outcome of Colombia's May 25 presidential elections paints a grim picture. The 40 percent of voters who bothered to turn out is almost equally split between those who oppose and support peace talks. The rest of the electorate appears so disenchanted with politicians that they didn't cast a vote.

A runoff vote on June 15 will pit the first round victor, the extreme-right candidate Óscar Iván Zuluaga, and the surprise loser and incumbent center-right

President Juan Manuel Santos. So, it boils down to a matchup between the extreme-right and the center-right with the only substantive issue that is being debated: whether to negotiate a comprehensive peace and implement accompanying structural reforms to address Colombia's chronic inequality. In practice, the runoff becomes a referendum on war or peace.

Yet only Colombians and their leaders are to blame for ending up at this juncture which may determine the future of generations. Other than conflicting and simplistic narratives portraying the other side as evil, there has been basically little to no intelligent debate about what's at stake.

Zuluaga has promised to unleash a scorched-earth campaign against what he depicts as a secret plan negotiated by Santos to impose Venezuelan-style socialism in Colombia. With that conspiracy theory at the center of his campaign, Zuluaga won almost 3.8 million votes, or 29 percent. Santos, who ran a poor campaign that pleaded with voters for another four years to pursue peace, won 3.3 million votes, or 26 percent. The Left captured 2 million votes and the center-left 1 million, while another conservative candidate garnered 2 million.

But a more significant message may have come from the silent majority of Colombians who stayed home. Nearly 20 million Colombian chose not to vote, or 60 percent of eligible voters. Another 1 million cast blank or null votes. What this silent majority does in the runoff will determine much of Colombia's future, and with it possibly South America's.

The Power of Uribismo

Behind Zuluaga's strong showing was former President Alvaro Uribe, who governed between 2002 and 2010. Uribe has a bleak human rights track record, especially from his ideological war against the Left. But he undeniably remains the country's single most influential political leader. He is Colombia's very own caudillo reflecting a populist resurgence across the continent, albeit coming from the Right rather than the Left, the orientation of most other South American populists.

In fact, Zuluaga won the first round for essentially the same reason Santos won his first election: because Santos had Uribe's blessing then and Zuluaga has it now. Santos lost almost two-thirds of his 9 million votes from 2010, most of which went to Uribe's new favorite, Zuluaga, a little known figure before the elections.

The first-round campaign was down-and-dirty and lacking real issues other than the peace negotiations occurring in Havana, Cuba, with the Revolutionary Armed of Colombia, or FARC for their Spanish acronym. Energized and disciplined,

Zuluaga has the bulk of the extreme-right voting power. In his victory speech, he read a message from Uribe to the crowd's cheers, and he promised to end the peace process and use all available firepower to pacify the country.

To win the first round, Zuluaga successfully boiled down the choice to his promise to fight back and defeat the FARC once and for all, a familiar yet hardly realistic pitch. But it's nonetheless an effective one in a country that has been at war for half a century with the FARC and other armies, killing more than 250,000 mostly civilians and leaving generations of direct and indirect victims, most of them in the last two decades. Anti-leftist rhetoric has a long legacy in Colombia.

Two days after the elections, Zuluaga flipped and in an effort to attract more votes said he would be willing to negotiate. But that may cost him votes among the extreme-right, so his net gain is uncertain. Plus, the negotiation terms that he set are a non-starter.

Santos, on the other hand, has asked for patience with the peace talks but he can't offer any guarantees of success, a message with its own familiar ring to Colombians who have been through three failed peace efforts with the FARC only to endure bloody resurgences.

It's understandable why a big part of the population prefers the simplistic, yet heavy-handed repression offered by Uribismo, which did superficially pacify the country at the cost of serious human rights violations. But it's also true that the majority of Colombians prefer peace, implying that Zuluaga's potential gains in a second round may be limited. But that doesn't mean Santos will win.

Missing a Slam Dunk

Politically, Santos dug his own grave. To start with, instead of making peace negotiations part of a broader vision, Santos tied his reelection to the peace process with the FARC, just as Uribismo wanted. Then, Santos failed to deliver on an overly optimistic timetable for negotiations. That left Santos vulnerable to an aggressive campaign by Uribe's party. Zuluaga portrayed Santos as a weak but arrogant president who was negotiating a surrender to the FARC. Some attacks depicted a covert socialist takeover of Colombia in terms reminiscent of Cold War paranoia.

But the warnings struck a nerve as populist messages tend to do, especially when Santos responded evasively and with his own dirty politics, fear mongering about Zuluaga's war path rather than defending his own economic and social record, which has in fact been good despite the various headwinds including the lingering civil war and the global economic struggle.

The result was that Uribe's followers mobilized in mass, while many voters who once supported Santos stayed home, especially those disappointed with the peace process and tired of the political establishment that offers more of the same.

Colombia's silent majority, 60 percent of voters across the political spectrum except for the extreme right, has the most at stake in the next round, whether the nation will be torn by escalating violence or whether the country can build on its economic progress.

The future will depend on whether Santos energizes enough of these disgruntled voters and gets them to the polls. If the only issue is peace, Santos might have an edge because in the first round the "peace" candidates garnered slightly more votes than the "hawks." Those voters who skipped the first round also are more likely to favor the peace process, according to opinion surveys. So, Santos's ability to inspire this silent majority could be the key to the second round.

The Silent Majority

Santos acknowledged his campaign's failings and promised an overhaul. His best option is to reassure enough voters that the peace process, on top of his economic and social program, is a better option for the country than a hardline Uribe-dominated government managed by Zuluaga.

But the peace process as it stands probably doesn't offer enough to excite voters. Some observers think that the FARC should announce a ceasefire to demonstrate more concrete results, but that might play into Zuluaga's narrative that Santos is in bed with the FARC to divvy up the country.

Santos's challenge is to explain how much Colombia has to lose if the difficult negotiations are abandoned now. The FARC and the government have agreed on the most prickly issues, including eradicating drugs and FARC's political participation after the war.

Still pending is the negotiation of a unilateral ceasefire by FARC and its militants' full reintegration into society. But the FARC has said it will not move on those issues until after the elections. It's also clear that the FARC will not surrender to Zuluaga if he wins and another bloody counterinsurgency campaign begins.

Santos has been prudent in negotiations, as he should be, but incapable of reassuring society about the outcome. It's up to Santos, the commander-in-chief and top elected official, to show that peace and its benefits are within Colombia's grasp if he is reelected. So far, he has failed to make the case.

But he must also convince Colombians that he will deliver more economic growth,

social investment and stability. The peace process must catalyze a broader redressing of historically divisive issues, starting with wealth distribution, which is the worst in Latin America.

In that sense, a Zuluaga victory would be a step back for Colombia, back to the free-market ideology of neoliberalism, back to more human rights violations (and impunity from accountability), and back to hostile relations with its neighbors who are in line with the Chavista movement of Venezuela. In short, Colombia would be going back to Uribe.

With revival of Urbismo, thousands of more lives would surely be lost and Colombia's best chance for peace in its modern era would be dashed. Peace also would be likely to bring economic structural changes that could benefit millions, albeit gradually.

But all of that is riding on whether Santos can reach Colombia's silent majority and defeat this latest manifestation of caudillismo.

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Colombia's Battered Rebels Seek Peace

Exclusive: The U.S. government's use of targeted killings on al-Qaeda-linked "terrorists" has stirred legal and moral objections. But what about using drones to assassinate Latin American peasants fighting a corrupt oligarchy? That issue has emerged in Colombia's long guerrilla war, Andrés Cala writes.

By Andrés Cala

There are signs that South America's oldest and mightiest guerrilla army, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (or FARC), is undertaking a tactical pivot toward ending more than half a century of armed struggle, raising hopes for a lasting cease-fire, eventually a full demobilization and possibly peace.

An examination of FARC's military actions in 2013 and the evolution of peace negotiations with the government suggest that this turn is more substantive than earlier hopes for a resolution of the long-running conflict. The peace prospects are also enhanced by the likely reelection of Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos who so far has been resolute in backing talks.

These initiatives toward peace have played out against recent revelations about the role of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency in assisting the Colombian military in killing at least two dozen of FARC's leaders under a covert program authorized by President George W. Bush in the early 2000s and continued under President Barack Obama, according to [an investigative article](#) in the Washington Post.

Amid this loss of leadership and other military setbacks as well as the erosion of grassroots support in war-weary Colombia the FARC has grown demoralized as it faces the government's superior, U.S.-backed armed forces. As a result, the FARC appears to have concluded that politics is a better conduit for pursuing a revolutionary agenda as part of the continent-wide "Bolivarian" movement for change.

The tactical shift, primarily seen in the FARC's increasing political and social involvement as well as more targeted military activity, is echoed in year-long and still ongoing peace talks in Havana with the Colombian government.

But the FARC is far from defeated. The guerrilla army retains about 11,000 fighters spread across the country, with a diminished but still disciplined military structure, according to a report published last month by the Fundaci3n Paz y Reconciliaci3n, which analyzes the evolution of the conflict since peace talks began.

In 2013, the FARC was responsible for more than 2,000 attacks, from bombings of the power grid to assassinations. It's a similar number to the annual average since 2010, but tactics changed in 2013, partly for military reasons, partly to address public opinion, and partly to improve the group's negotiating hand.

The report also described the FARC's innovations in mobilizing its political supporters into a mass movement conducting protests, peace marches and more, further exposing the group's transition however limited toward taking their grievances into the political arena.

Militarily, the FARC has mostly foregone economically-motivated kidnappings or massive attacks on population centers. Instead, the guerrillas carry out targeted assassinations or bombings and strike-and-retreat attacks on the armed forces. They are especially targeting energy infrastructure, such as oil pipelines, electricity transmission towers and coal railways. These attacks minimize adverse public reactions, while still hurting the country's economic vitality to get businesses and the people to keep up pressure on the government to sign a peace deal.

President Santos, who is seeking reelection in May, is running primarily on

delivering on peace and policies to improve wealth distribution. He is staking his political future on the success of peace talks with the FARC as well as the National Liberation Army (or ELN), the second biggest leftist insurgency.

Indeed, the ELN and the government are expected to soon announce the beginning of parallel peace talks. The FARC and ELN also recently agreed to jointly press their common goals, illustrating the tactical pivot of both guerrilla groups as they shift toward the end of their armed struggle, even if a full demobilization is still distant.

Colombia's neighbors and other interested parties also have been nudging the warring parties toward a political settlement, but negotiations to end long and bitter wars are delicate matters, meaning that the Colombian situation could change quickly.

Outgunned and Unpopular

In essence, the FARC is finding itself outgunned by the same kind of drone and targeted missile strikes that have been used in Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Middle East and North Africa against radical Islamist militias. These high-tech techniques have, in effect, denied the guerrillas their main military advantage of hiding in Colombia's vast countryside and jungles. Highly accurate missiles and effective intelligence have resulted in multiple assassinations carried out by Colombian forces with covert U.S. help.

The FARC also has lost territory and thousands of fighters to desertions, captures and combat casualties. But that has involved the movement shedding many of its undisciplined and ideologically dubious foot soldiers whose numbers had inflated the FARC's fighting force to more than 20,000 at the start of the new century. But the FARC's growth contributed to its decline as Colombian intelligence infiltrated the FARC's ranks with spies.

The FARC's interminable war also has taken a toll on its popular support. Colombians are understandably war-fatigued and that includes the country's political left and labor movements. The FARC and ELN have not recovered from the public relations damage of indiscriminate terrorist activity, including mass kidnappings, bombings and massacres.

Colombians also strongly and broadly support the decade-old military buildup and offensive against the FARC and other illegal militias, despite the government's disappointing track record in moving against right-wing, drug-funded paramilitaries that earlier Colombian administrations deployed against the FARC and other leftist movements.

Santos, nominally a right-of-center leader, has broadened the military offensive

against the FARC, while simultaneously implementing a series of populist social programs, slowly improving the lives of millions of Colombians. That, in turn, has helped Santos convince many Colombians, including some FARC militants, that politics, not arms, can be a more effective route to social change.

Thus, it appears that time is on the side of peace, since Santos looks sure to be reelected, giving him, the FARC and ELN more time and a renewed mandate to negotiate peace. While the government may have the upper hand, militarily and politically, the FARC may see a path for a nascent left movement to unite and achieve social and economic reforms if peace negotiations are successful.

Under this analysis, the FARC's more promising route toward transforming Colombia may be to follow the democratic political revolution that the late Hugo Chavez trail-blazed in Venezuela and that Cuba's Fidel Castro has embraced as a region-wide alternative to violence.

Surviving Reactionary Forces

But the ride to a peaceful transition won't be smooth. A key reason why the FARC has waged such a long guerrilla war is that the state has historically failed to deliver a meaningful democracy that addresses the needs of the poor and oppressed indigenous groups. Colombia's reactionaries, led by former President Alvaro Uribe, can be expected to continue pushing back against both leftist social reforms and Santos's peace efforts.

Uribe, however, has failed to rally public opinion against the peace process and against his heir, Santos, despite Uribe's best efforts. Every time a security breach takes place, Uribe blames Santos and the FARC. Uribe also orchestrated an attempt through the Prosecutor General's office to unseat the mayor of Bogota, a former guerilla fighter not related to the FARC. And, right-wing paramilitary forces have killed leftist politicians as a further provocation against a peaceful settlement.

Yet, these attempts to derail peace talks have so far proved unsuccessful. President Obama has lent public support for peace talks with the FARC and other trust-building steps by the Colombian government and the guerrillas.

The Washington Post's disclosures about the long-running CIA covert operation to eliminate the FARC's leadership had only a muted impact in Colombia where it's been well known for years that the CIA has been operating in support of the government's counterinsurgency war. So have the Drug Enforcement Administration, the National Security Agency and the Pentagon as part of the more-than-decade-old \$9 billion Plan Colombia military aid package, as well as earlier cooperation deals.

Uribe and other former Colombian officials have openly acknowledged CIA involvement as legal and longstanding. However, over time, the U.S. aid has achieved a qualitative improvement in the capabilities of the Colombian security forces. Earlier, Colombia's military lacked the drones and the precision missile technology that enabled the kind of surgical strikes that decimated the FARC's leadership.

According to the Post article, the CIA held supervisory control of the guided missiles used in the attacks, including one strike across the border in Ecuador that killed Raul Reyes, the alias of the FARC's second in command. The CIA probably didn't pull the trigger, nor did it have to. Colombia's armed forces are proficient enough for that. But the CIA and the U.S. government likely had to approve the operation.

Many Colombians also feel little sympathy for the FARC and view U.S. covert support for these targeted killings as primarily a U.S. domestic concern. In the United States, the Colombian program taps into other questions about what President George W. Bush dubbed the "global war on terror," which has raised legal and moral objections to what amount to assassinations of people sometimes arbitrarily called "terrorists."

While some Americans see justification for using these tactics against al-Qaeda leaders because of the group's role in the 9/11 attacks the U.S. participation in drone assassinations of armed peasants fighting against corrupt oligarchies in Latin America could be seen in a different light, as an imposition of a brutal authoritarianism in defense of economic elites.

Moreover, the Post's highlighting these covert operations at this delicate time in the Colombian peace talks prompted regional rumblings about a possible conspiracy to disrupt the negotiations. Ecuador's President Rafael Correa suggested that the sources who confirmed the Post story wanted to trigger spats between Colombia and Ecuador, Ecuador and the U.S., Colombia and the FARC, and any other involved parties.

"For me, this is an attempt by Colombia's right wing and the American and international right wing to boycott the peace process in Colombia, which in my opinion is the biggest news in Latin America in the last decade. The extreme right of Colombia doesn't want peace, it wants war," Correa said.

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Struggling for Peace in Colombia

Exclusive: Normally, peace negotiators end a conflict first and then examine the war crimes later. But the long-running civil war in Colombia has such a secretive and brutal history that efforts to cease the fighting began with an investigation of the slaughter, writes Andrés Cala.

By Andrés Cala

After more than half a century of civil war with 220,000 dead and millions of others wounded or displaced Colombia has entered what can be described as a year of reckoning before it has to decide whether to pursue a lasting peace or to resume running up its infamous tally of bloodshed.

The one-year time frame refers to the time in office left for President Juan Manuel Santos, unless he's reelected. That is not to say he's the savior of peace. Reconciliation doesn't depend solely on him, although he has become a vital player. The timing relates more to the political realities of Colombia.

Its citizens will not accept another endless peace process with the country's strongest insurgents, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (or FARC). And peace efforts, with the FARC and others, could end Aug. 7, 2014, when the victor of next May elections is sworn in.

But the real deadline is even closer. Santos and all other actors, including those from the civil society, set a timeframe at the onset of peace talks with the FARC which expires by the end of this year at the latest, and November is the target to announce an agreement. Anything after that would just drag negotiations into the political campaign, strengthening the anti-peace front led by former President Alvaro Uribe who has promised to break off talks and defeat the FARC through military means.

"There are some who apparently prefer more years of conflict, more years of pain and death, to the possibility of peace," Santos said this week in clear reference to Uribe.

There have been three failed peace negotiations with the FARC, each of them ending in intensified war and strengthening those who favor a military endgame. The FARC is an 8,000-strong, well-armed and well-trained guerrilla army that since the end of the last peace process in 2002 has lost most of its top leaders. But it hasn't capitulated and while its chances of victory are slim to impossible it could rely on the flow of drug money to prolong the war for years.

Moreover, the FARC is just one of dozens of actors in Colombia's conflict that are financed, in one way or another, by the drug trade. The conflict is often less ideological than economic with the various sides competing for control of territory.

As difficult as any negotiation would be, a peace deal with the FARC would mark just the beginning of a demobilization and integration into the nation's political process. An agreement also would set in motion other parts of the complex process of pacifying Colombia, starting with the unanswered question of what to do about gross human rights violators, of which there are hundreds, if not thousands, many of whom remain involved in decision-making in the political and military spheres.

The state is not strong enough to pacify the country alone after decades of constant bloodshed and a long list of failed remedies. But peace must start somewhere and somehow, even in Colombia. And that will require a political mandate that has to be arranged before the year ends.

Mea Culpa

Unlike most other peace processes in modern history, Santos decided to start with truth, otherwise called historic memory, rather than with an end to the conflict first followed by a truth commission, the course that is most common in Latin America. Colombia, especially the state, refused for years to face its past, with millions of people denied the very basic acknowledgement that they have been victims, not just combatants.

It also must be accepted that the violence in Colombia has sprung from economic and social disparities. It won't matter if the FARC combatants sign a peace deal if the root causes of the conflict remain unresolved. That means addressing land reform, institutionally-sanctioned inequality, and a vicious cycle of hate and revenge.

Bluntly put, the FARC has not been the cause of Colombia's conflict, as Uribe and his supporters insist, but a byproduct of the state's inability to address structural inequities that have given rise to right-wing paramilitaries, organized crime and other guerrilla forces.

The United States, United Nations, European Union, Latin American neighbors and just about all rational observers have long recognized this, but getting the message through to Colombians and their leadership has been next to impossible because those who benefit from war have controlled the debate much more than those who work for peace.

That is why Santos's decision to commission an independent report on Colombia's

conflict was a prerequisite to any lasting peace with the FARC and other actors.

The nearly 500-page document delivered in July about the horrors of the war since 1958 estimated 220,000 dead, almost 180,000 of them civilians; nearly 5 million displaced; 25,000 disappeared; and 28,000 kidnappings. The report also included gruesome testimonies from victims and concluded that the worst of the war began in 1990 and covered the two administrations of Uribe, starting in 2002.

By far, most atrocities were committed by paramilitary forces, followed by guerrillas, and the state. But the report is also unequivocal in pointing to the state's complicity in paramilitary crimes by allowing armed groups sponsored by rich landlord patrons to purge 65,000 square kilometers, an area larger than West Virginia.

The report highlights that 80 percent of congressmen investigated for paramilitary crimes belonged to Uribe's coalition, including his cousin. Most of Uribe's closest aides are being investigated or have been already convicted, although Uribe himself retains immunity from courts as a former president for any crime, even before he was president.

The Road Ahead

No two wars are the same, but the complexities of Colombia's conflict have made peace especially illusive. It's not as simple as negotiating an end to brutal communist insurgencies and right-wing paramilitaries, which itself would not be simple.

Peace in Colombia requires monumental economic, political, institutional and societal corrections, from land reform and income distribution to disarming literally tens of thousands of battle-hardened combatants, generations of them in fact, defending a wide spectrum of causes and economic interests. And most of them have little or no incentive to give up their arms, especially following a history of targeted assassination of those who do.

Even with a FARC accord, violence will continue, especially during the election year. It's no coincidence that during first half of 2013 more human rights activists and civil society leaders have been assassinated as paramilitaries have tried to derail peace talks. Peace needs momentum and oxygen or else it will collapse under the pressure of so many parties that would benefit from simply extending the bloody status quo, most importantly the multi-billion-dollar narcotic and arms industries.

Around 60 percent of Colombians support peace talks, according to polls, but the support is conditional on a deal being signed this year. Santos, who won the

presidency largely thanks to Uribe's support, remains personally popular though most Colombians oppose his reelection.

Uribe, who can't seek election again, retains his own substantial popularity and has severed ties with Santos. Uribe has vowed to field a candidate to end peace talks. So, ultimately, the elections will become a referendum on peace.

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South America's Drift toward Unity

Exclusive: Over the past decade, as the United States has focused on Middle East "terrorism," its traditional sphere of influence in Latin America has spun further out of the U.S. orbit, with major regional countries coalescing around areas of cooperation. This pattern is deepening despite occasional political flare-ups, writes Andrés Cala.

By Andrés Cala

If you just read the recent headlines, it would seem that the "anti-imperialist" Latin American bloc, led by Venezuela, is gearing up for a new showdown with "pro-Yankee" Colombia, much like last decade's escalation of tensions that climaxed with ominous saber-rattling.

Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos declared that he wanted to join the U.S.-led military alliance, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), causing Venezuela, Bolivia, Argentina and even Brazil to denounce what they saw as a threat that would undermine nascent regional bonding that promises to have profound geopolitical significance.

Even before the NATO flap, Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro had threatened to withdraw his country's support for Colombia's peace talks aimed at ending a half century of bloodshed. Those negotiations were partly orchestrated by Maduro's mentor, the late Hugo Chávez. Why was Maduro, Chávez's successor so upset? Because Santos had hosted a visit to Bogota by Henrique Capriles, Maduro's nemesis and defeated presidential contender.

But these disputes are a smokescreen. Colombia cannot, even if it wanted to, join NATO, and Colombian officials have since corrected the original statement.

Instead, Colombia will likely sign a cooperation agreement with NATO. Santos also will not seek to undermine Maduro nor support his ouster. And Maduro will not withdraw support from the peace process nor pursue a confrontation with Santos.

More than ever the two governments depend on each other and both support more regional integration. All the alarmist headline grabbing is just populist-driven rhetoric aimed at finessing internal political hard-liners within Colombia and Venezuela.

Moreover, the recent outbursts must be understood in the context of Latin America's decades-long evolution toward economic and political stability. Put simply, both Colombia and Venezuela intend to keep transitioning toward a sustainable center. That reality was further underscored on Wednesday when U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry met Venezuelan foreign minister Elías Jaua in Antigua, Guatemala, and announced talks aimed at reducing the strains in relations between the two countries.

But such developments don't bar more demagoguery by the Venezuelan and Colombian governments directed at each other, mostly to placate domestic sentiments from the Right and Left that might otherwise destabilize the two countries and threaten the underlying renewal of ties. To better understand this dynamic, let's back-track.

Brutal Counterinsurgency

Santos was elected in 2010 as the handpicked successor of the right-wing populist Alvaro Uribe, who was the antithesis of Chávez in Venezuela. Santos was expected to extend Uribe's policies that improved the economy and reclaimed large swaths of Colombian territory from the control of narcoguerrilla movements, namely the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and Ejército Nacional de Liberación (ELN), but at the expense of human rights and democratic institutions.

When Uribe took over in 2002, he unleashed brutal paramilitaries against the FARC, an 18,000-strong force of well-armed and trained combatants. He also strengthened Colombia's armed forces, a combination that broke a stalemate and pushed back the guerrillas.

But the price was paid with thousands of civilian lives. In effect, the Colombian state had gotten into bed with paramilitaries and drug dealers to gain the upper hand. Uribe's more radical and authoritarian right-wing regime merged rich landowners, narcotraffickers, paramilitaries and corrupt politicians and did so with the support of war-weary Colombian voters.

Geopolitically, Uribe was warmly embraced by President George W. Bush and emerged as the bulwark for U.S.-driven policies to contain the left-wing socialist movement of Venezuela's Chávez. The result was a fractured Latin America, split in two flanks led by the two neighbors.

For years, the two countries were at each other's throat. Chávez saw Colombia as opening the door to a U.S. invasion to depose him, and Colombia saw Venezuela as a shelter for Colombian guerrillas. Venezuela and Colombia came to the point of mobilizing troops to their border.

When Uribe failed to gain court approval for a third consecutive presidential term, Santos stepped up as Uribe's stand-in. However, to the surprise of most, Santos moved to completely overhaul the country's foreign and domestic policy, opting for more regional integration and strengthening democratic institutions which Uribe had undermined.

Santos had inherited what amounted to a trade embargo with Venezuela and strained relations with another neighbor, Ecuador. In short, Colombia had few friends in Latin America and only conditional support from the United States. Colombia lost valuable markets and Colombian guerrillas were exploiting bilateral frictions to their benefit.

While clearly no friend of the Left, Santos showed himself to be a pragmatist. Rather than making Colombia subservient to Washington, Santos concluded that Colombia's best interest would be served by strengthening ties to the rest of Latin America and to the emerging global titans like China and India.

Only three days after taking office, Santos reestablished relations with Venezuela, which Chávez had severed with Uribe. Chávez agreed to deny Colombian guerrillas use of his territory and to reactivate commerce. Colombia agreed not to interfere in Venezuela affairs. Colombia also dropped out of a military deal with the U.S. that was signed by Uribe.

By intertwining the economic fortunes of Colombia and Venezuela, Santos made it more costly for Venezuela to threaten Colombia, regardless of ideology. Chávez and Cuba also proved instrumental in getting the FARC to negotiate with Santos, creating the best chance for peace in Colombia after more than half a century of ongoing war with multiple rebel groups.

Within months of Santos taking office, Colombia reestablished relations with Ecuador through the mediation of Chávez. Santos also visited Brazil and Argentina, mending fences with those two major South American nations. In less than four months, Colombia had reversed almost a decade of diplomatic setbacks with the rest of Latin America.

Renewed Tensions

So, the renewed bilateral tensions between Venezuela and Colombia appear to be the result of unrelated domestic affairs. After the death of Chávez and a narrow election victory, Maduro is struggling to assert control over Venezuela. He faces his most direct challenge from his own military, not the Capriles-led opposition. That said, pressure from Capriles and markets are the perfect excuse for the military to depose Maduro.

Maduro's threats against Colombia and his raucous conspiracy theories are directed at a domestic audience, not Colombia, as he tries to show that he's as strong a caudillo as Chávez was. Meanwhile, the economy needs time to be realigned sustainably by redirecting investment to dwindling oil production.

Colombia faces a similar threat from within, not from its military, but from Uribe, who is using his huge political capital (he's significantly more popular than any other leader, including Santos) to undermine the peace process and cement impunity for the widespread human rights violations committed during his rule.

Uribe is legally shielded from prosecution as a former president. Only congress could investigate him, which won't happen while he retains his popularity. That is why he has become Santos's sharpest critic. To secure his hold on Colombian decision-making, Uribe has mobilized political opposition and public opinion against the peace process.

That is where distractions like NATO and Capriles come in. Colombia is not targeting Venezuela's Maduro nor risking losing the gains from Santos's rapprochement with Latin America. But Santos needs to secure votes on the Right to solidify his reelection in 2014. Currently, his biggest obstacle is Uribe, who can't seek another term barring a constitutional change but is expected to run for the Senate and to field a puppet candidate for next year's presidential election.

Basically, Uribe is eyeing a political comeback, in part, to guarantee no prosecutions for the abuses that were committed by his paramilitary forces and the military. Santos is supporting Colombian courts investigating human rights crimes and illegal land claims by paramilitaries, who were often acting under the orders of Uribe's local and regional bosses and drug traffickers. While Uribe isn't specifically targeted, the investigations are closing in on him.

Uribe also is accusing Santos of yielding to the FARC, but that is just because any land reforms that would accompany a peace settlement would affect Uribe's rich landowner supporters and their paramilitary backers. However, Santos

realizes that a peace deal with the FARC would secure his reelection.

Colombia is gambling its history, justice and future in the 2014 presidential elections. Colombians must choose between a long-term peace and reconciliation process along with investigations into past abuses, or a reborn Uribista movement which will not only return Colombia to a populist, narcoparamilitary regime, but also bury the truth indefinitely.

Of course the political game the recent tough talk between Venezuela's Maduro and Colombia's Santos is risky. The rhetoric could get out of hand and damage the bilateral relationship between the two neighbors and threaten the improved regional cooperation.

But as long as words remain only words, both Maduro and Santos should be able to buy enough time to hold off their domestic rivals. Otherwise, it's back to square one for both.

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