



Peace and Democracy in Colombia

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On a hot rainy day in August 2013, a group of young Colombians were celebrating the completion of a playground project in the village of Villarrica, Tolima. The project was funded by a nonprofit, Fundación ECCO, which I founded to encourage youths in rural areas affected by violence to develop leadership skills and engage in the democratic process.

After the celebration was over, a 12-year-old girl named Yaneth approached me. With scores of her peers looking on, the girl began to shake and cry. I took her aside, and she told me that a week before, a FARC lady [a recruiter, many of whom are female] had “taken away” three of her friends after school. She said that the lady had come back for her, and that she was terrified. Sobbing, Yaneth implored me: “Please, I don’t want to join their team!” My only recourse was to take down her full name and her mother’s phone number and alert the Colombian equivalent of child protective services, the ICBF. A few days later, an ICBF representative told me that she had called Yaneth’s mother about the FARC recruiter threatening her daughter. According to the ICBF representative, Yaneth’s mother said that there was no problem. She most likely feared retribution for saying otherwise.

As it happens, Yaneth and her mother will likely soon have a FARC recruiter as their new neighbor. On August 25, the Colombian government and representatives of the guerilla group signed a peace agreement in Havana. The agreement stipulates that safe haven camps (zonas de distensión or zonas de concentración) for demobilized FARC fighters must be established around the country, within which neither the Colombian army nor the national police will have jurisdiction. The locations of these camps were announced in late June, per a mandate by the Juan Manuel Santos administration. As it happens, Villarrica is one of two municipalities in the state of Tolima which will “host” one of these camps within its town limits. Given the bloody history between the residents of Villarrica and the FARC, the governor of Tolima, Oscar Barreto, publicly objected to the decision via Twitter and the press in early July, but to no avail. In other words, Colombia’s rural poor, who will literally have to live with many of the consequences of the agreement, have had no democratic say in that fate.

The zonas de distensión mandate is part of the peace agreement’s “execution clause,” which covers how the four main points of the agreement—land reform, cessation of FARC drug-trafficking activities, transitional justice, and the FARC’s right to form a political party—are to be executed, overseen, and enforced. The content of the signed agreement is outlined in a 297-page document available on the FARC’s official website and those of the main Colombian newspapers. Although many of the details might be confusing to the average reader, the problems with the way the deal grants the FARC the right to form a political party are clear to anyone who understands the basic tenets of democracy: As of 2018, the FARC will be given five Senate seats and five House seats in the Colombian Congress for two four-year terms. In other words, whoever these ten individuals prove to be, they will not be elected by the people for their first term, nor be reelected for their second. Whatever platform they promote (the FARC was founded as the militant arm of the Colombian Communist Party (PCC) in 1964), existing leftist parties such as the Polo Democrático Alternativo and the Partido Liberal Colombiano will eventually need to consider whether to create a united leftist front or leave the FARC to fend for itself in the Colombian political jungle.

Time will tell whether the Colombian government’s sacrifice of democracy for peace was justified, if not just. For 52 years, the men and women of the Colombian Armed Forces and national police have sacrificed life and limb protecting Colombian citizens from the FARC’s terrorism. Their efforts transformed a country under siege into a country whose current president, Santos, might be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Likewise, the FARC’s decades-long fight to assume political power will soon be realized.

On October 2, most of Colombia’s citizens will vote to approve or reject the peace deal in a referendum, the exception being the men and women of the armed forces and national police. Although they protect the lives and democratic rights of their fellow citizens, they are forbidden by law from participating in this or any other electoral process. If the referendum passes, it will have several effects beyond allowing the FARC into the political process. It should prove a catalyst for some sort of shift in the drug-trafficking world, although it is unlikely to lead to a decrease in illegal trafficking, since there are plenty of criminal groups waiting to snap up whatever the FARC leaves behind. But perhaps the execution of other points of the agreement will effect positive change. For example, as part of the land reform clause, the government has promised to start supporting poor rural farmers in some manner. As part of the disarmament clause, the Colombian army should soon be able to commence with a national initiative to locate and remove the thousands of land mines the FARC has planted over the years.

When it comes to encouraging Colombian citizens to vote “yes” on the referendum, the Colombian government and FARC negotiators are asking voters to take a leap of faith. But, if the referendum does pass, perhaps Yaneth and other children of Tolima who’ve lost friends to the FARC will one day see them again.

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