

Conflict in Colombia
An Analytical Commentary

Meg Chamberlin

Royal Roads University

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Instructor: Robert Hanlon

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Introduction

For five decades, Colombians have been caught in the middle of a grueling and violent triangular battle between the government, guerrilla activists and paramilitary groups. The conflict has claimed over 200,000 lives (Oliver, 2015), and torn at the very social, economic and environmental fabric of the nation, resulting in the greatest number of internally displaced people (IDP) in Latin America (UNHCR, 2015).

The protracted situation has been marked by years of social unrest, human rights abuses, drug trafficking, rebel infighting and illegal acquisition of land. The critical national players are the three largest guerrilla groups, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), and the Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL), as well as the Special Vigilance and Private Security Services (CONVIVIRs), allied paramilitary (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, AUC) and the Colombian government, army and national police (Mikaberidze, 2013). This paper will discuss the root causes of the conflict, elements of intractability and the successes and failures in attempts to shift dynamics during attempted peace talks.

Historical Roots of Conflict in Colombia

The FARC and ELN, considered terrorist groups by the United States (U.S. Department of State, 2015), are Marxist-Lennonist insurgent groups which were loosely formed during the era of internal Colombian conflict called 'La Violencia' (1948-1958). Their presence consolidated in the mid-60's when the groups began targeting The National Front, a collaborative governance structure of conservative and liberal parties in Bogotá (Mikaberidze, 2013). During the 70's and 80's, powerful drug cartels emerged, providing financial backing to

both the guerrilla and paramilitary groups, resulting in strong political, social and economic influence by these factions in the country (Mikaberidze, 2013).

Both guerrilla groups use insurgent methods “characterized by small, lightly armed bands practicing guerilla warfare from rural base areas” (Fearon & Laitin, 2001, p. 3) and claim to represent the poor peasant and agrarian classes, a large part of which are indigenous and have suffered from deprivation of social supports. As FARC and ELN rebels are generally anti-imperialist they actively oppose globalization and privatization efforts of the government (Stanford University, 2015) while in contrast, the paramilitary groups seek more directly to replace the government in areas of the country where governance is weak or absent (Crocker & Hampson, 2005).

The timeline is complex, so the focus will be on elements of the conflict that have lent to its intractability. From 1998-2002, President Pastrana’s government actively sought peace talks with the FARC in hopes of reaching the end of violent armed conflict. They failed miserably, marked by repeated infractions of the negotiated terms and finally being pulled by Pastrana after FARC rebels hijacked a domestic airplane and kidnapped a senator in February 2002 (Crocker & Hampson, 2005). Attempts at peace talks continued with no success in the early 2000’s; the time was checkered with a rise in violence against innocent civilians, deteriorating quality of life for rural Colombians in zones of conflict and IDP’s, and an ongoing battle between rebel factions and paramilitary groups for control over the illicit drug trade. In July 2007, hundreds of thousands of Colombians protested the violence demanding change.

During this time, any ability to reach terms of peace negotiations was restricted by infighting between the FARC and the ELN and by tenuous relations with neighbouring countries, Ecuador and Venezuela (in 2009 Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez ordered 15,000 troops to

the border to prepare for war) (BBC News, 2012). In 2010, diplomatic ties with Venezuela resumed, but hit and run raids by the rebels were commonplace. In addition, notable sentences were laid against paramilitary officers responsible for grave human rights abuses against civilians. In 2011, some progress towards peace was made. FARC released several high profile hostages and the senate approved a law to compensate victims of the civil conflict, returning land to millions of IDP's (BBC News, 2012). In 2012, the FARC and the national government in Bogota, led by President Juan Manuel Santos, launched into peace talks in Havana, Cuba in 2012 which are still ongoing. Notably, the ELN, the second largest of the guerrilla groups, is not currently at the table, and this is an element of negotiations that many feel is critical to achieving long-term peace in the country: "A process from which the ELN is missing or to which it comes late would lack an essential element for the construction of sustainable peace." (International Crisis Group, 2014, para. 1)

Moving Along the Intractable Continuum

Colombia's conflict, which began primarily as an internal social conflict, increasingly moved along the intractability continuum due to the fragmentation of armed actors, the degradation of peace talks, abuses against civilians and the financial strength of the rebel forces supported by the availability of economic resources through the narcotics trade (Crocker & Hampson, 2005). "The Colombian state's mediocre performance and problem-solving record degrades central authority, reducing public compliance and policy options, and leading to a further deterioration in internal order as para-institutional forms of security and justice emerge" (Mason, 2004, para.9). Burgess and Burgess (2003) argue that parties will not readily extricate themselves from intractable conflicts if the perceived end result of eliminating the conflict is greater than the benefits of continuing it. Tapping into the positive effects of negotiations for

each group is a key point of entrance for possible success in the current talks; according to the Colombian army, more and more rebels, especially at the low-ranking level, are disarming in search of a more regular 'family life' (BBC News, 2015).

On the other side of that coin, experts worry that those raised in guerrilla warfare know no other way of life and do not have the skills or support structures necessary to move forward. Reflecting Hobbes insights, Gray (2011) states that "even if humans were not moved by the pursuit of power and glory, scarcity and uncertainty would drive them repeatedly into conflict with one another". Given the territorial and ideological overlap between FARC and ELN rebels, there is fear that the lack of parallel peace talks with the ELN will result in them gaining strength by acquisition of demobilized FARC rebels, undermining current peace efforts, remobilising attacks and fuelling the drug trade during this time (ICG, 2014).

The Impact on Human Security

The social impact on innocent Colombian citizens has been devastating; human rights organizations have found that the parties involved have explicitly and systematically violated international humanitarian law (ICG, 2014; Mikaberidze, 2013; MSF, 2015). Both the rebel and paramilitary groups have been guilty of "committing massacres, killing civilians, engaging in torture, the mutilation of corpses, death threats, forced displacement, hostage-taking, arbitrary detention, and looting, among other violations" (Mikaberidze, 2013, p. 103). Chomsky (2000) argues that neoliberal reforms have resulted in alarming levels of poverty and inequality, leaving 55 percent of Colombia's population below the poverty line at the turn of the century. The number has since reduced to 30%, indicating hugely positive change and an increase in accessible social services over the past fifteen years (World Bank, 2015).

The respected president of the Colombian Permanent Committee for Human Rights, former Minister of Foreign Affairs Alfredo Vizquez Caffizosa, writes that it is general poverty and inadequate land reform that have “made Colombia one of the most tragic countries of Latin America”, though he also argues “violence has been exacerbated by external factors,” primarily the initiatives of the Kennedy administration, which “took great pains to transform our regular armies into counterinsurgency brigades” (Chomsky, 2000).

The Role of Narcotics and Arms Trade

Estimates are that FARC earns \$1 billion USD per year from the production and sale of cocaine, and according to Leon, head of the national police force, the group is “undoubtedly involved in trafficking of the narcotic to international markets” (Murphy & Acosta, 2013, para.2). In addition to the cultivation, production and distribution of illegal drugs, the ELN, FARC and paramilitary groups are involved in arms trades bought and sold on international markets (Mason, 2004). Thus, the Colombian crisis is at the middle of a regional, transregional and international security issue.

Global markets for illicit drugs, links between Colombian armed actors and international criminal organizations, regional externalities of Colombian violence, the massive level of migration to the North, the explosion of the global third sector's presence in Colombia, increasing U.S. military involvement, and growing concerns of the international community about the deteriorating Colombian situation all illustrate the international face of this crisis. (Mason, 2004, para.2)

Since the 1980's, the United States has supported aerial interdiction efforts by the Colombian government to disrupt the illegal transport of cocaine base and paste from Bolivia and Peru to processing labs in Colombia and transport of finished products to international

destinations (Embassy of the United States, 2015). International intervention is fraught with complexities, however, as a United Nations study reported that Colombian forces strengthened by Plan Colombia “maintain an intimate relationship with death squads, organize paramilitary forces, and either participate in their massacres directly or, by failing to take action, have undoubtedly enabled the paramilitary groups to achieve their exterminating objectives.” (Chomsky, 2000)

In May of this year, President Santos ruled a stop to the large scale American-supported crop-dusting programme of the herbicide glyphosate which was being distributed in large quantities over rural Colombia (Witness for Peace, 2015). The move followed a World Health Organization report that the chemical is probably carcinogenic and has led to calls for re-imagining national and international policies surrounding the global drug trade (Witness for Peace, 2015).

International Intervention

In 2001, former foreign minister of Colombia and mayor of Bogotá, Augusto Ramirez Ocampo, stated “the need to address the critical human rights situation, environmental ravages, the impossibility of adequately integrating in to the globalization process, violent human displacement, and the global drugs problem, are only a few of the issues where the Colombian agenda coincides, fundamentally, with the international agenda” (Ocampo, 2001, p.1). The United States had recently initiated Plan Colombia in the year 2000, designed to combat the drug trade, “expand and consolidate” government presence, increase transparency and strengthen the judiciary system, improve the daily lives of Colombians through sustainable social and economic opportunities and protect human rights (Embassy of the United States, 2015).

As the Plan is essentially an attempt to facilitate peace through military means it has received criticism from the international community for its methodology. Mason (2004) argues that methods to shift conflict in Colombia have been too heavily lodged in international relations theory, emphasizing state structure and ignoring the essential alternative political communities and transformative role of NGO, civil society groups, humanitarian associations and global organizations.

Moving Towards Peace – Conflict Transformation

In order to develop greater understanding of the aspects of intractability and possible ways forward in the Colombian conflict, Mason (2004) encourages us to access institutionalism theory, highlighting social action, to understand the role of global institutions and norms in conflict resolution. Kriesberg (2004) analyzes many factors of transforming conflict, some of which are highlighted in the current peace talks between FARC rebels and the Colombian government. These include transforming the ways former enemies see themselves and relate to each other, creating truth commissions for reconciliations, changing conduct of key actors to reduce discrimination and creating a supportive external environment for social service development, stopping and preventing illegal trade of arms and drugs, reducing the military character of international intervention, creating dialogue circles, applying meditation methods, implementing policies to bring justice to human rights violations and encouraging governance to be more transparent, participatory and accountable.

The Havana peace talks have led to an agreement with the FARC to negotiate the terms of a five-point agenda including “land reform, political participation, anti-drug trafficking initiatives, the rights of victims and reparations, disarmament of the rebels and implementation of a peace arrangement” (Illingworth, 2015, para. 8). There has been some progress in the area of

rural land reform but there are still major issues to be solved, including victim rights, rebel disarmament and the method by which agreements will be implemented (BBC News, 2015). In addition, the ELN is not currently involved in the peace talks, but they are demonstrating a desire for dialogue by seeking a process on broad political and social issues including “national sovereignty, mining and extractive industries, environmental concerns, democratization and popular participation, and human rights.” (Illingworth, 2015, para. 12)

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) believes that “giving visibility to the humanitarian situation and enhancing coordination mechanisms are key” (UNHCR, 2015, para. 11) to successful peace talks in Havana. Over the past four years, the Colombian government has allocated significant funds to assist IDP’s, however gaps in implementation has led to little change in the quality of life for such individuals (UNHCR, 2015).

Despite government efforts to improve its response to forced displacement and to implement the Law on Victims and Land Restitution (Victims Law), widespread security risks and violence involving the forced recruitment of children and youth, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), threats, disappearances and murders, continue to occur.” (UNHRCR, 2015)

The talks have been going on amongst continued violence and human rights violations (Woody, 2015); conflict escalations in the southwest of the country have led to more IDP’s, restriction of civilian mobility and insufficient access to social goods and services including health care (MSF, 2015). This has resulted in civilians, members of the global community and former President Uribe to call for justice without impunity (BBC News, 2015). However, the most recent ceasefire agreement took hold just weeks ago, on July 20, and there is reason to be

hopeful as key members of the FARC rebel group and government appear to continue to take the talks seriously and stand to gain economic, political and social reconciliation if they are persistent.

Conclusion

“War is about the peace it will shape” (Gray, 2005). In the case of Colombia, this couldn’t be more poignant. This war derived from social unrest and will ultimately only be healed through an in depth plan targeting those social roots. But, this is exactly what is on the table in Havana and that is reason to be optimistic. Efforts to discuss land reform, victim compensation, disarmament, drug trafficking and political participation are being legitimately addressed by FARC rebels and the current government, with the support of the international community. The International Crisis Group reports that the “broader context [for peace] has arguably never been so favourable” (ICG, 2014, para. 6).

Current president Santos declares this as a time to move from democratic security to democratic prosperity and with the support of local, regional and global actors, this may be possible (Herring, 2014). He acknowledges that along with the factors listed above, better relations with Ecuador and Venezuela are also necessary for sustainable change and that international understanding and cooperation will be essential. Colombia is a nation poised for sustainable change; if the government and FARC rebels are able to continue along this path of discussion and reformation together and find equitable ways to implement their agreements, and especially if ELN rebels carry out simultaneous or sequential peace talks, there is legitimate reason to believe powerful conflict transformation will continue.

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