Toward a Shared Vision of Peace

Magali Alba Niño | Simón Bolívar University Cúcuta | malba01@unisimonbolivar.edu.co
Jan Boesten | University of Oxford | jan.boesten@politics.ox.ac.uk
Annette Idler | University of Oxford |annette.idler@pmb.ox.ac.uk
Juan Masullo | BIGSSS, Jacobs University Bremen | jmasullo@bigsss-bremen.de
Arlene B. Tickner | Rosario University Bogotá | arleneb.tickner@urosario.edu.co
Julia Zulver | University of Oxford | julia.zulver@sant.ox.ac.uk

Abstract: The University of Oxford's CONPEACE (From Conflict Actors to Architects of Peace) Program at the Changing Character of War Centre, together with Bogota's Rosario University and the Simon Bolívar University in Cúcuta, organized a one-day, cross-stakeholder workshop in Bogotá prior to the presidential elections to discuss the changing security landscape in Colombia. The workshop brought together stakeholders from Colombia's civil society (both urban and rural), the UNHCR (the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) and the UN Mission to Colombia (as representatives of the international community), the national government, and national and international academics. This article explores some of the most important insights from our debates. Three points were essential: first, our understanding of security issues can benefit greatly from employing human and citizen security lenses that go beyond mere military presence throughout the national territory; second, the peace process with the FARC is not reversible and should be seen as an opportunity for the new government to create sustainable peace; third, the national government can learn from the collective action and community organizing of civil society in marginalized regions to improve long-term, people-centered security.

The Goal of the Workshop

Two things are clear about Colombia: the security landscape is changing, and there exist divided opinions on how to address these changes. It is evident that the disappearance of a critical actor like the FARC-EP (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia–Ejército del Pueblo) from the mix of armed actors in Colombia has ramifications that are felt throughout the country. It is equally apparent that the transition towards the post-accord period entails pressing security challenges.[1] The demobilization of the FARC-EP, although a crucial step, is by no means synonymous with peace, nor is the absence of some of the other nonstate armed actors. Violence continues to affect important areas of the country. The profitable, global illicit drug economy ensures that transnational organized criminal groups will maintain a strong presence, along with a variety of newly emerging armed actors vying for territorial control over important corridors of the drug economy. One guerrilla group remains active (the ELN, Ejército Liberación Nacional) and is expanding into territory vacated by the FARC.[2] Throughout its final year in office, the Santos government engaged in negotiations with the armed group, but negotiations have proven difficult. The ELN has continued to attack the country's infrastructure and police stations, resulting in government attacks on ELN strongholds.[3]

Other important contextual facts are the disconnect between Colombia's political and economic centers and its peripheries as well as the persistence of political divisions; both of which seem to overlap with differences in how Colombians interpret the security challenges facing the country. One of the peculiarities of the plebiscite in 2016 was that those living in the regions most affected by the armed conflict voted in favor of the peace accord, while those living in the country's larger cities (with the exception of Bogotá) opposed the agreement. The people with

most exposure to the conflict's violence appeared to be more willing to trade concessions for peace than the rest of country.[4]

Persistent divides in Colombia—be they over political convictions or the diverging perceptions on matters of security—should not come entirely as a surprise. The Colombian case suggests that multiple visions of security can exist within one nation-state. Even before the advent of the drug trade in the 1970s, different armed actors created rules of conduct in their zones of influence. The resulting systems of security—rules emanating from armed actors that structure the relations between armed actor and community, day-to-day relations for members of the community, as well as the relation between the country's center and periphery—are often intertwined. Above all, they have a disproportionate impact on those living in close proximity to the particular armed actor. As has been the case historically, today's changes in the security landscape are experienced and interpreted differently, depending on where social actors sit within Colombian politics and its national territory. Therefore, we saw that it was an important moment to bring together diverse actors, with diverse experiences of violence and less observable forms of insecurity, to discuss what security means for them and how the changing security landscape affects them.

This was the core objective of the workshop held in Bogotá in May 2018. Prior to the presidential elections in May and June, the University of Oxford's CONPEACE Program (From Conflict Actors to Architects of Peace), together with Rosario University in Bogotá, the Simon Bolívar University in Cúcuta, and the UNHCR Colombia, brought together over 30 representatives from civil society, academia, international organizations, and national decision-making institutions. The objective of the workshop was to discuss the security challenges Colombia is facing in the current post-accord context. It built on the normative contention that the understanding of "security" cannot be superimposed from above, but is the result of an intersubjective process that values input from as many affected actors as possible. In other words, it requires deliberation. Deliberation can be demanding in the best of contexts, but it is

particularly challenging when participants have had personal experiences with violence. Despite this sometimes traumatic context, discussions were frank but always maintained the *sine qua non* of productive deliberation: mutual respect for each other's points of view.

The Importance of Human and Citizen Security in a Changing Security Landscape

Over the past two years, the international media has presented Colombia's Peace Accord as an unprecedented success. It seemed to signal to the world that protracted armed conflicts can be brought to an end through negotiation. The process with the FARC-EP is indeed a historic opportunity for Colombians to finally live peacefully. While this optimism is perhaps well-founded, one of the most concerning factors that prompted the workshop was that the peace process is in a somewhat fragile position: the FARC political party[5] had to abandon its first congressional campaigns after the peace accord due to security concerns; one of its highest-ranking member is indicted in the US for trafficking cocaine *after* signing the peace treaty; many former mid- and low-level fighters have left transition-zone camps (for security reasons or because of the Siren songs of potential profits in the drug economy); and, above all, social leaders in Colombia's regions are assassinated in the hundreds by newly arriving or transforming nonstate armed groups. Particularly worrisome is the increased engagement of Mexican cartels in Colombia itself.

The UNHCR informed participants during the workshop, while there is an evident improvement in the overall parameters measuring security, marginalized regions are experiencing a reconfiguration of armed actors that generates uncertainty and deepens insecurity. Colombia's periphery endures the assassinations of civil leaders that continues at a most worrying intensity, resulting in widespread fear. Certain sectors of the country are again beginning to see widespread displacement of civilians by armed nonstate actors. Finally, the refugee crisis, fueled by the political crisis in neighboring Venezuela, places heavy social and economic burdens on regions that are already suffering from a changing security landscape.[6]

The current situation in Colombia is therefore ambiguous. It is true that violence has abated in many aspects: homicide rates are down (the statistic for 2017, 23.90 per 100,000 inhabitants, is in fact the lowest in over 30 years)[7] and the number of battle deaths has moved close to zero (although there is a recent increase due to the confrontations with the ELN).[8] It is fair to say that the overall security situation has nominally improved. Despite this, the number assassinations of activists mobilizing on behalf of peasants, Indigenous peoples, Afro-Colombians, crop-substitution advocates, human rights defenders, and land reform activists has substantially increased since the FARC-EP and the government signed the final version of the peace accord. According to Colombia's Human Rights Ombudsman (the Defensoría del Pueblo), 282 social leaders were assassinated between January 2016 and February 2018.[9]

It is this contrast that creates the rift in perceptions of security, separating urban and rural areas, the country's core and its periphery. Of course, the tragedy is that this fits a historical pattern in Colombia. The most atrocious forms of violence—since the civil wars of the immediate post-independence period all the way through La Violencia in the 1950s to the drug-fueled violence of the last decades—have more often befallen rural Colombia and less so the country's urban hubs. It is an equally historic pattern that the numerous peace processes in Colombia's past had at its core the imperative to increase/improve state presence throughout the national territory. Alas, they have all consistently failed to achieve just that. It is these contradictions that surface, and have surfaced, in the course of past and present peace processes that make it imperative to view Colombia's security challenges through the lens of human and citizen security.

The Irreversibility of Peace with the FARC

Despite the problems that irrefutably exist within the current peace process—of which the assassination of social leaders is among the most serious—at the workshop the government representatives maintained that it is an opportunity of historic proportions. For the majority of

Colombians, there has always been a war with the FARC-EP. As a consequence, for several decades almost all public debates around policy were channeled, and politicized, through a discourse fully embedded in the polarizing dynamics of a country in the midst of civil violence. The end of the armed conflict with the FARC-EP offers the opportunity to discuss the country's fundamental problems—social and economic inequality, political clientelism, lack of social mobility—in a balanced and nuanced manner. Indeed it was these conditions that paved the way for FARC to emerge in the first place. We need to remember that not too long ago, public accusations of being a guerrilla supporter amounted to a death sentence. This was not least because paramilitary death squads used FARC atrocities as a justification to assassinate thousands of activists, journalists, and left-wing politicians after they were accused of supporting the guerrilla's cause. The transformation of the FARC from a guerrilla to a political party creates the real opportunity to eliminate the ground for demagoguery in Colombia's political culture (see also Juan Carlos Restrepo's contribution in this dossier).

Despite the opportunities provided by the peace process, it is readily apparent that the demobilization of the FARC-EP has in some zones intensified already existing problems or even created new ones. Power vacuums left by the demobilizing guerrilla are being filled by other violent nonstate armed groups. It is the core responsibility of any government—the exiting Santos government, but above all the new government of Iván Duque—to extend the state's institutionality to those zones where these problems exist. Most crucially, however, the peace process is a reality that constitutes a historic opportunity that the new administration must not let pass.

Building Institutions from the Ground Up

While everyone at the workshop agreed on the historical magnitude of the peace process and the opportunities it offers, the notion that democracy relies on solid and robust state presence in the entire territory caused some discontent. The critique expressed was not that this notion is

intrinsically wrong; indeed it was foundational to former president Álvaro Uribe's Democratic Security policies as well as to Santos' policies of rapprochement with the FARC-EP. Furthermore, the fact that the state lacked presence in the entirety of its territory and that nonstate armed actors exploited this state absence led policymakers to militarize security policy in the past, most notably in the form of US military assistance through Plan Colombia. Rather, the contention was that most often, militarization came at the expense of building responsive—and permanently visible—civilian institutions that operate from the ground up. Positive peace is not solely the absence of violence; it must also contain a political renewal that strengthens civic and participatory institutions at the regional level.

A second caveat of the militarization of security is that it created a blind spot. When establishing military presence, at the expense of civilian institutional presence, is held as the panacea to countering deficient state presence, other critical aspects of the lack of state institutionality in the country's regions were sometimes neglected. It is readily evident, for example, that systemic corruption undermines the strength of state institutions. The *parapolítica* scandal of the 2000s[10] showed that armed groups strategically co-opted political offices to buy influence with politicians, with effects at both the regional level and national level. Normatively, institutional robustness is intrinsically linked up with claims of legitimacy, which in turn rest on guarantees of impartiality and fairness in the management of public affairs. Corruption, on the face of it, is antithetical to these claims of impartiality and fairness.

Viewing the changing security landscape through the lens of citizen and human security entails that the state cannot be reduced to its coercive institutions alone. Above all, it means that those who are affected by policies of bringing state institutionality to the regions must have a say in the design of local institutions. It was in this regard that social leaders from Colombia's regions expressed a sensation of systematic invisibility. The general vision and specific policies created in Bogotá—particularly regarding questions of security—are often only a truncated reflection of the concrete reality in those regions. In light of extensive threats to activists, social leaders had a more pessimistic outlook. In contrast to other areas of the country, they are immensely and disproportionately exposed to the numerous new forms of violence in Colombia. In Cúcuta, and in rural parts of the neighboring Catatumbo region, for example, persistent and abject poverty and the lack of basic services creates a hotbed of violence and criminality. This is most notable in the presence of new and old armed actors (FARC dissident groups, criminal gangs—*bandas criminales* or BACRIM) and new transnational organized crime groups. In this context, members of civil society stressed that strengthening communal autonomy and supporting existing community organizing processes could be a key strategy to bring security and peace to the territories (see also Magali Alba's contribution in this dossier). Where historical state absence has led to an influx of armed actors, it was civil society organizations that developed mechanisms to protect communities from the effects of systematic and pervasive violence. At the workshop, community members highlighted that the state could support these evolved institutions and design programs and policies accordingly so that they reflect the interest and input of communities themselves. Above all, this could help build the trust between the center and periphery that is needed for a successful implementation of the peace agreement.

Contributions and Contributors

Given the delicate situation in Colombia, particularly for social leaders from the regions, the event was held under Chatham House Rules, meaning that the information and arguments presented at the event could be shared, but not attributed to a particular participant. It is for that reason that the text above does not include names other than the contributors to this dossier. For this dossier, we asked three participants to share the most important insights and arguments they took away from the workshop. Juan Carlos Restrepo, national security advisor to outgoing president Santos, explores the achievement and the historical importance of this peace process. Magali Alba, director of the social work program at Símon Bolívar University in Cúcuta, reflects on the specific

challenges for social leaders in marginalized zones of the country and makes concrete recommendations for improving security in the medium to long term. Borja Paladini from the Kroc Institute reflects on the academic perspective on territorial security post-conflict. We, the authors of this article and organizers of this event, all share the conviction that the peace process with the FARC-EP—despite its challenges—not only presents a historic opportunity that we cannot let pass, but also requires us to think creatively about solutions to changing security challenges in Colombia's regions. Thinking creatively is an intersubjective process, and this dossier is a first attempt to bring together a plurality of voices of those who have been impacted, in different ways, by violence in Colombia.

Notes

[1] See, for example, the most recent report from the Insight Crime and Universidad del Rosario project Observatorio Colombiano de Crimen Organizado: "La nueva generación de narcotraficantes post-FARC: 'Los Invisibles,'" Insight Crime, March 14, 2018, https://es.insightcrime.org/indepth/observatorio-rosario/.

[2a] There are no precise statistics on the troop strength of the ELN; the last reliable numbers (2015) estimate that the ELN has about 1,500 members. There is a consensus, however, that it is expanding its activities. Jessica Villamil Muñoz, "Las claves del fortalecimiento del ELN, una guerrilla 'pequeña pero peligrosa,'" *El País*, January 30, 2018, http://www.elpais.com.co/proceso-de-paz/las-claves-del-fortalecimiento-del-eln-una-guerrilla-pequena-pero-peligrosa.html.

[3] Angelika Albaladejo, "Colombia's Last Guerrillas Escalate Battle to Control Cocaine Hub," Insight Crime, March 22, 2018, https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/colombias-last-guerrillas-escalate-battle-control-cocaine-hub/.

[4] *Revista Semana*, "Las victimas votaron por el Sí," October 2, 2016, https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/plebiscito-por-la-paz-victimas-del-conflicto-votaron-por-el-si/496571.

[5] Rebranded as the Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común (Common Alternative Revolutionary Force).

[6] See UN Human Rights Council, "Annual Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Situation of Human Rights in Colombia," March 2, 2018, https://reliefweb.int/report/colombia/annual-report-united-nations-high-commissioner-human-rights-situation-human-rights-0.

[7] *El Espectador*, "Colombia tuvo en 2017 la tasa de homicidios más baja en cuatro décadas: Mindefensa," December 26, 2017, https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/judicial/colombia-tuvo-en-2017-la-tasa-de-homicidios-mas-baja-en-cuatro-decadas-mindefensa-articulo-730383.

[8] See Centro de Recursos para el Análisis de Conflictos, http://www.cerac.org.co/es/.

[9] Defensoría del Pueblo de Colombia, "En más de dos años ocurrieron 282 homicidios de líderes sociales y defensores de derechos humanos en Colombia," March 1, 2018. http://www.defensoria.gov.co/es/nube/noticias/7074/En-m%C3%A1s-de-dos-a%C3%B1os-ocurrieron-282-homicidios-de-l%C3%ADderes-sociales-y-defensores-de-derechos-humanos-en-Colombia-l%C3%ADderes-sociales-defensores-de-derechos-humanos-Defensor%C3%ADa-del-Pueblo.htm.

[10] The *parapolítica* scandal revealed that politicians in Colombia's Congress had maintained mutually beneficial alliances with paramilitaries, who have committed human rights and crimes against humanity. **//**