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From issue: **Cuba and Colombia** (Fall 2014)

■ AQ FEATURE

The Myths of the Colombian Peace Process

BY [Marcela Prieto](#)

An agreement won't end endemic problems of poverty and narco-crime—but it will certainly help.

From its very beginning, Colombia's peace process has aroused enormous expectations, not only within Colombian borders, but also in the international community. The negotiation is, in good measure, the result of the "Policy of Democratic Security" adopted by President Álvaro Uribe Vélez during his two terms (2002 to 2010), which helped limit the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—FARC), weakened the group structurally and turned the dynamic of the armed confrontation back in the state's favor.

After the spectacular failure of the San Vicente del Caguán peace negotiations under Uribe's predecessor, President Andrés Pastrana (1998 to 2002), President Juan Manuel Santos' decision to sit down again with the illegal armed organization is an ambitious bet on ending, once and for all, the only active armed conflict in the Western Hemisphere.

The *Acuerdo Marco* (Framework Agreement—a roadmap of the process) defined a five-point agenda. So far, three points have been cleared: comprehensive agricultural development, political participation and drug trafficking. This is certainly an unprecedented step forward: never before has a negotiation with the FARC gotten so far.

However, the two thorniest points have yet to be resolved. Current meetings are under way in Havana to resolve the fourth point—who have been the victims and who is responsible—and the final point, regarding the process of disarming and demobilizing combatants. Both are intimately related to another point which, despite not being expressly mentioned, is intertwined with the entire process: transitional justice, with all that it implies vis-à-vis truth, justice and reparations.

One of the rules of the process, contained in the Framework Agreement, is that "nothing is agreed upon until everything is agreed." In other words, nothing can be taken for granted.



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That cautionary note has taken on increasing importance. In the past three months, perhaps as a consequence of the current juncture of the negotiations and the complexity of the issues now under discussion, the FARC seems to have intensified its show of force, through violent actions and strident declarations, leading Santos to warn the FARC, in his inauguration speech on August 7, that the patience of the Colombian people and the international

community is not infinite.

Meanwhile, four myths have emerged that cloud understanding about what the negotiations are likely to achieve, and what the end of the conflict will—and will not—mean for Colombia’s future.

1. All You Need is Peace

In a country accustomed to war, the promise of peace feeds all sorts of illusions and expectations. For example, there’s a long-held notion that the FARC, the violence and the drug trafficking are basically one and the same—and that therefore narcotics-fueled violence will end when the FARC ends. In reality, the violence in Colombia not only predates the FARC but is also rooted in a variety of factors that will not disappear with the demobilization of the insurgent group. In fact, the demobilization of the FARC could bring new risks, including former armed combatants simply converting themselves into criminal groups involved in the narcotics trade.

The FARC was created long before the rise of Colombia’s drug cartels. But the breakup of the rebel army is unlikely to eliminate the lucrative drug trade, and the associated violence and illegality will almost certainly outlive the FARC—even if the guerrillas were to fully comply with their commitments.

Other problems facing the country (poor infrastructure, severe inequality, lack of competitiveness) are not a consequence of the conflict, and therefore will also outlive it. Still, a negotiation and successful process of demobilization and disarmament would present a potential opportunity to overcome these problems, and should not simply be written off. The point in the framework to negotiate “comprehensive agricultural development” provides an opportunity to address the lack of basic services (water, sewage and electricity) and public goods (highways, education, health, justice, and security). It remains unclear, however, how these more practical goals have been negotiated and can be accomplished alongside the FARC’s traditional discourse of rural marginalization and repression.

2. Colombia’s Civil War Is Different

There is an all-too-easy tendency to believe that the Colombian conflict is exceptional (incomparable to other conflicts, the product of endemic, singular and exclusive problems), and that therefore there are no lessons that can be applied to negotiations and an eventual post-conflict era. However, the structural origins of the Colombia conflict—and the challenges of resolving it—contain similarities with irregular and asymmetrical conflicts elsewhere in the region and the world, and much could be learned from other peace processes and post-conflict experiences, such as those in El Salvador, Guatemala, Sierra Leone, and Northern Ireland. Those who affirm the supposed exceptionality of the Colombian conflict are in effect implying that it is interminable, or that its prolongation—with or without negotiations—is inevitable. Both assumptions are false, even though the negotiation, as noted above, is not a panacea for all of Colombia’s problems.

3. The Peace Process Is a ShortCut for the Radical Left to Reach Power

Although many believed that with the end of the Cold War the conflict in Colombia had lost all ideological foundation, the much-hyped “Pink Revolution” of the late 1990s and early 2000s that brought a variety of leftist governments to power in Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Chile, Argentina, and Ecuador revived fears in some sectors of Colombian politics. Even though the democratic triumphs of the left in several Latin American countries further delegitimized the armed struggle and demonstrated the obsolescence of the FARC, the electoral victories of the left also awoke suspicions that something similar could come to pass in Colombia.

The negotiations with the FARC in Havana have revived these suspicions. However, even if the FARC maintains its political ambitions, it’s clear that the process will not become a fast track to obtaining power; nor will it spare the FARC from electoral competition or allow just any FARC member to be popularly elected.

The *Marco Legal para la Paz* (Legal Framework for Peace) was adopted in part to regulate the conditions of political participation by FARC members. But it is also important to note that the FARC lacks substantial political capital and has lost credibility and legitimacy in public opinion. If it aspires to become a viable political project, it will have to start from scratch, breaking from its past and overcoming the apprehensions of the vast majority of the country that has little, if any, faith in it.

4. Peace Will Bring a significant Reduction in the Armed Forces

Contrary to some expectations, the state’s security apparatus will neither be dismantled nor substantially reduced immediately after the negotiation of peace. Nor is this likely to happen in the

medium term. Emerging security challenges, such as the need to prevent the recurrence of violence, in particular by containing the guerrilla strongholds that reject demobilization and pursue criminal activity, constitute sufficient reasons for the Colombian state to maintain its current level of force. This is a lesson learned from similar processes elsewhere. While the state's security structure will undoubtedly transform and adapt to the changing domestic situation resulting from the breakup of the FARC, building stable and long-lasting peace—the ultimate purpose of the negotiations—will require maintaining sufficient military and police capacities. Without them, the agreements could not be guaranteed.

Clearly, the peace process will not be easy. After more than 50 years of conflict, and with the negotiations finally under way, it's no surprise that expectations are high. But all sides will need to maintain a realistic outlook on the challenges and limitations of reconciliation, integration and collaboration.

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