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AQ FEATURE

Ask the Experts: Colombian Peace Process

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Soto

What can Colombia learn from other countries that have ended conflict and achieved peace?

Clem McCartney answers:

Colombia has already had the foresight and wisdom to analyze the experience of other countries in bringing internal conflicts to an end—including South Africa, the Philippines and Northern Ireland. As I write, representatives of the conflicting parties in Northern Ireland have just finished meeting Colombian government and FARC negotiators.

Perhaps the immediate lesson they might learn is the need for patience. There have been murmurings from both sides that the peace process may collapse. The government accuses the FARC of jeopardizing the talks by continuing attacks, and the FARC accuses the government of not taking the process seriously.

But such rumors and rumblings are common during most negotiations. They are a reminder of the challenges negotiators face from skeptics within their own community and the wider public. Clearly, in the recent Colombian presidential elections, there was significant support for a tougher line against the FARC. At times like this, the negotiators need to support one another.

I can well imagine that one message the visitors from Northern Ireland brought was the importance of achieving a ceasefire. It is unusual that there is not a ceasefire yet between the two parties in Colombia. Absent that, there is always a chance that violence can disrupt the negotiations or even lead to their breakdown.

The parties have understood that dialogue and negotiations are necessary, that they need to build mutual respect, that they need to deal with past hurt and grievances from the conflict, and that they need an agenda that deals with the underlying issues of concern to all parties. Another lesson from past talks is to make the process as inclusive as possible.

Supporters of Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos march in Bogotá in June 2014. Photo: Diana Sanchez/AFP/Getty.

It is important not just to apply these lessons in form but also in substance. The National Party negotiator in South Africa, Roelf Meyer, who has visited Colombia, has talked about the need to really engage with opponents as partners. Though he admits that even in South Africa—the exalted example of peace talks—that shift came only at a late stage.

This perhaps is the biggest challenge: how to give substance to a new orientation?

Joydeep Mukherji answers:

Even during its more than five decades of violence, Colombia enjoyed GDP growth rates that averaged over 4 percent. This year, Colombia's per capita income could exceed $8,000, and in the next few years its economy looks set to grow by more than 4 percent annually, thanks to earlier economic reforms and prudent fiscal and monetary policies.

The impressive economic numbers at the macro level contrast with immense social problems and injustices associated with the prolonged armed conflict. Any successful peace agreement will need to sustain economic growth while delivering more of its benefits to victims of the conflict and addressing the social exclusion that fueled it.

The long-term benefit of peace could add 1 percent of GDP growth annually. However, there will also be costs, especially in compensating victims and in implementing new or expanded social programs. The key to success is to create a political consensus on measures that address the immense social debt

and on an economic policy that creates jobs and sustains growth.

The example to avoid is El Salvador, which has been locked in a political stalemate since the 1992 peace agreement between the two sides that fought in the civil war. El Salvador has followed market-friendly economic policies, similar to Colombia, but the results have been poor, with per capita income growing less than 2 percent annually.

El Salvador's failure to create a new consensus on both social and economic policies has constrained private investment and economic growth, and denied the government resources needed for social programs. In contrast, South Africa was able to create a durable new consensus during its transition from apartheid, resulting in continued economic growth and new policies to address social problems. Although its circumstances are somewhat different, the lesson for Colombia is that it is not enough to merely shift conflicts from the battlefield to the ballot box. Economic success depends on building a new shared vision for the country.

Aldo Civico answers:

Conflict resolution experts classify Colombia as an "intractable conflict." To the layman, the term is not a particularly positive one, because it suggests that the fate of a particular country is cursed. The academic definition, though, is a different one, which helps to frame the highly complex dynamics of Colombia's armed conflict. As Adam Kahane writes in *Solving Tough Problems*, in intractable conflicts cause and effect are far apart in space and time; their future is unfamiliar and unpredictable; and people involved look at things very differently.
As a result, these kinds of complex conflicts cannot be solved by authorities from on high; those involved must participate in creating and implementing solutions.

The peace process with the guerrillas, though an important, inescapable step, will not in itself bring peace to Colombia. This is the lesson learned from the efforts to transform other intractable conflicts such as in Northern Ireland, South Africa, Mozambique, or El Salvador. In none of these cases did a peace agreement close the economic, personal and social divisions that led to and reinforced the conflict. And in most of them, the agreements did not properly respond to local needs and demands.

Real resolution requires real change. What we have learned from other cases around the world is that resolution requires, on one hand, containing and curbing the multiple factors that have historically pulled Colombia into a valley of violence and war and, on the other, strengthening and multiplying the country's potential and capacity for peace and reconciliation, which is often latent but still present.

This, as we learned from South Africa, for example, requires the emergence of moral and transformational leaders, which will also require Colombia's business leaders to assume a more active, progressive role.

Álvaro de Soto answers:

Colombians have learned from past mistakes (their own and those of others) in the current negotiations. The choice of Cuba as host has helped to keep talks leak-free. This can be crucially important—as I learned from bitter experience when I was a UN negotiator on the conflict in Cyprus—and it will serve the negotiations well. Discipline and discretion are essential when it comes to the implementation of any agreement.

Perhaps the Colombian government also learned that a ceasefire need not be a precondition for talks, or even a stage in a continuum leading to peace, when it served as a "friend of the secretary-general" in the 1991 to 1992 UN-led El Salvador negotiations. It's a lesson that will serve it well. As we discovered in those talks, negotiating during wartime can create its own positive dynamic.

Colombia's recent presidential elections turned into a close-fought referendum on President Juan Manuel Santos' peace plan. But with Santos' victory and a clear mandate for a negotiated end to the war, the parties can concentrate, at a deliberate pace, on getting the overall package right. Doing so will ensure that legitimate grievances can be tackled within the law.

All of this has created a propitious atmosphere and setting for the discussions. But there is also the question of the role of third parties. Colombia is a proud country, with a booming economy and solid institutions, and it was perhaps out of fear of losing sovereignty or appearing like a banana republic that it has—publicly at least—resisted a strong role for the third party negotiators, Cuba and Norway.

No doubt the Cuban and Norwegian facilitators in Havana are playing a more prominent role than the public has been led to believe, but, by downplaying their role, both the Colombian government and the FARC may deprive themselves of the ability to make compromises at the bidding of a third party that they can't bring themselves to make to each other.

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