

What Kind of Peace for Colombia?

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BOGOTA, Colombia - Colombia's political climate has dramatically changed over the last week with the military rescue of 15 political prisoners from FARC custody, including three U.S. military contractors and high profile hostage, ex-presidential candidate, Ingrid Betancourt.

After nearly 7 years of captivity in Colombia's jungles, Betancourt had become the symbol for humanitarian exchange in the international arena. Having French nationality, as well as Colombian, the international community championed for her liberation as her family worked tirelessly for her negotiated release.

In December of last year, a video showing an ill and emaciated Betancourt, the three U.S. citizens, as well as a number of other hostages being held by the FARC, sparked increased pressure on both the Colombian government as well as the FARC to come to agreement for a humanitarian exchange. At that time, Venezuelan president, Hugo Chavez, and Colombian Senator Piedad Cordoba began negotiations with the FARC, resulting in the release of 3 hostages in January 2008.

Growing tensions between Venezuela and Colombia later in the year hampered continued talks, as pressure for exchange increased from the Betancourt family and the French government.

The monumental rescue of last week is an indisputable triumph for the Colombian government and military in their fight against the FARC. It is without question a positive occurrence insofar as these 15 people have been reunited with their families and can enjoy some degree of normalcy in their lives again. Indeed, the events of last week have sparked certain hope in some sectors of the Colombian population that a road to peace is being forged through military strategy and might.

The question, of course, is what sort of peace will be brokered through a military defeat or a debilitated FARC coming to a negotiation table with little capacity for real negotiated peace or reconciliation? The cessation of hostilities does not guarantee the end to structural violence or true integral peace for the millions of victims of the 50 year armed conflict.

The effects of this event on President Uribe's popularity are undeniably positive – domestically as well as internationally. Having suffered significant blows to his international reputation over the last year through the para-politics scandal,¹ the negation of a Free Trade Agreement with the United States because of human rights concerns and the failed demobilization process with the paramilitary structure, the timing of the rescue could not have been more serendipitous. Particularly, Uribe's bid to modify the constitution for a second time to allow for third presidential term seems to have been guaranteed through the manoeuvre.

¹ Currently, over sixty members of Colombia's Congress and Senate are under investigation for connection to paramilitary networks, including the president's cousin, Mario Uribe. The vast majority of the officials are members of pro-Uribe political parties.

A third term would not only make a mockery of democratic process and respect for constitutionally instituted political norms, it would also guarantee 4 more years of Uribe's Democratic Security Policy which has been proven responsible for increased levels of internal displacement,² increased numbers of extrajudicial executions,³ and ineffective curbing of paramilitary activity despite the demobilization process initiated in 2006.⁴

The military feat of the rescue – which should legitimately be hailed as successful given that not a single shot was fired– seems to be overriding the human rights concerns with the Uribe administration and the international community should be careful in lauding the triumph as an unequivocal demonstration of Uribe's legitimacy as the president to bring peace to Colombia through military strategy.

The new popularity of the Uribe government and the unquestioning praise of the military rescue creates a concerning precedent for the liberation of the other hostages, and the support of military strategy as the path to peace in Colombia.

Although Betancourt has now altered her discourse to a certain degree according to an interview given over the weekend which has received little media attention,⁵ the universal legitimization of the military operative sets a concerning precedent and raises the question again of what sort of peace does Colombia need? A “peace” created by military victory with little space for dialogue of the structural issues that perpetuate a systematic violence which keeps 65% of the population in poverty (80% in rural areas), unequal land distribution where some 13% of the population is owner of 85% of the land, and one of the largest gaps between rich and poor in the region, is something that must be considered as Colombia moves into a new political era with the FARC and the end of their campaign being a real possibility.

If the FARC are defeated militarily, and there is no space for dialogue or negotiation, civil society will need to work all the more diligently to assure a voice in the development of the justice, reconciliation and reparation process. The root causes of the decades long war are structural and without civil society representation, true democratic process will not occur and the injustice will persist.

If the FARC come to table, debilitated as they seem to be, their negotiating chips will be far fewer than the government and civil society will again need to work diligently and push even harder for a meaningful position and voice at the negotiation table. In both these scenarios,

² According to the Colombian Consulting organization for Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES), 75% of the currently displaced population has been displaced since the implementation of the Democratic Security Policy and the highest recorded number of displaced persons was registered in 2007.

³ According to the Centre for Research and Popular Education (CINEP), extrajudicial executions have increased alarmingly in the last 3 years. Between 2006 and 2007, executions increased from 182 to 319 respectively, the majority of these cases being lost in the judicial system, which counts with a 98% impunity rate.

⁴ According to the Washington Office on Latin America, in 2008, 12 trade unionists have been killed and numerous national and international human rights organizations have been ransacked, had information stolen and have received death threats from newly mobilized paramilitary group, the Black Eagles.

⁵ In the interview, Betancourt states that the “language of hate” towards the FARC should end for this will not bring peace to Colombia, only more violence. (<http://www.myrtlebeachonline.com/872/story/513043.html>)

Colombian civil society will need the support of the international community to assure their positioning in the talks and development of a meaningful peace for the country.

The last scenario, which is also possible, is that the FARC are not as debilitated as it seems, and the response to this latest string of events will cause them to reconsider their military strategy, re-organize their communication system, and retaliate in a more directed, sophisticated and destructive manner.

The success of this latest military move not only creates more validity for continued military strategy to end the war, but also gives certain legitimacy to the military with one of the worst human rights records in the hemisphere.

This event has also once again reframed the discussion around the possibility of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) being signed between the U.S. and Colombia, an agreement that has been frustrated by a democrat controlled Congress in an election year, with concern for the appalling human rights record of the current administration, particularly the continued systematic assassination of trade union leaders. In response to the rescue, after congratulating the Colombian president and the army, U.S. President George Bush championed the FTA as necessary for security reasons, as well as all the more possible given the Colombian army's control over the "situation" in the country and the security foreign investors would enjoy from a strong military force.

In addition, the presentation of Uribe as a hero has concerning consequences for the work of NGOs in Colombia who are dedicated to human rights and peace work, such as MCC. In the last year, numerous NGOs, including MCC partners, have been subjects to suspicious information robberies and threats. Uribe has made statements in the past, referring to these sorts of organizations as "supporters of the FARC" and "supporters of terrorism" for their critical perspective on the human rights situation in the country. These latest events have served to justify these sorts of statements in high profile media spots, such as the Wall Street Journal which published an op-ed confirming that the "left-wing NGOs and other so-called human rights defenders, including Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and Colombian Sen. Piedad Cordoba, are nothing more than propagandists for terrorists"⁶.

This sort of misguided journalism and information being divulged to the general public regarding the situation in Colombia can only serve to make the path to peace that much more difficult, as the truth is being compromised in the service of economic and political interests.

True peace in Colombia will only be realized if the root structural issues of violence and injustice are addressed which can only be done if meaningful participation from all sectors of Colombian society is secured and will not happen if military might is hailed as the only possibility.

Clearly, after countless failed peace talks with the FARC, beginning in the early 80s, some might come to the conclusion that the only answer now is military defeat. However, in a more detailed analysis of those talks, one would recognize that one of the consistent weaknesses in every peace

⁶ http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121538827377131117.html?mod=todays_columnists

process is precisely the lack of significant civil society representation. The same mistakes cannot be made at this point in Colombian political history.

Also, the “Red Dance” policy of the late 80s which saw nearly 4,000 members of the Patriotic Union – the FARC’s genuine attempt at entering the political arena through political organization and democratic process – systematically assassinated is perhaps one of the most overlooked historical tragedies of the civil conflict, and reason for the pessimism and suspicion the FARC have demonstrated towards conversation with the government, particularly this current administration.

Hopefully Betancourt’s current call for continued negotiation and more tolerance will lead to a justly negotiated peace. If not, although the war may end, the violence will not, and Colombia’s tragedy will continue.

So, the final question again, is: what kind of peace for Colombia?