**Colombia’s Fight for Peace**

Putting an end to long-lasting conflicts is never easy, and Colombia, home of the second largest displaced population in the world, is a good example of the challenges involved in attempting to reach peace. Despite four years of intense negotiations in Cuba, a peace agreement between the government and the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC or Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia as they’re known in Spanish) was rejected by the plebiscite on September 28th. The “no” to the peace agreement was won by just a 0.4 percent majority. The unanticipated result has shown that peace in a democracy requires rather more than two war enemies simply arriving at a deal.

In a democracy, the perception that both the benefits and cost of peace should be fairly distributed among all the involved parties is critical for the implementation of the agreement. This is particularly important in the conflict in Colombia, which has been ongoing for 52 years now; it has caused 250.000 casualties, forcefully displacd over 6 million people, and, until now, remains the biggest armed conflict still waging in the Western Hemisphere. However, Colombians showed that ending a long fratricidal war within the terms of the Havana peace agreement is too high a cost to pay for the violations the country has suffered at the hands of the FARC. Indeed, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos has been accused of conceding too much to the FARC.

The “no” ‘victory’ by the plebiscite has been interpreted as Colombia’s own “Brexit” moment. As many would argue in light of the recent unexpected result of the referendum in the United Kingdom, likewise, there was no need for President Santos to ratify the peace agreement through popular vote. However, he was misled by personal ambitions and over-optimistic polls. With a projected overwhelming victory of a “yes” vote showing a comfortable yet very mistaken 66 percent, President Santos was hoping to silence the opposition’s voice, which was mainly articulated by the former President Uribe.

The opposition has been demanding, among other things, that the FARC members should be sentenced for their crimes and that the political privileges given to the FARC in the potential first post-war elections should be limited. The campaign for the opposition to the peace deal was constructed around the notion that President Santos was about to transform the FARC into an armed political party. Despite the accusations against the peace accord, it seemed that President Santos had everything working in his favor; after all, for the first time since the start of the conflict, the negotiations for peace seemed to be reaching a concrete deal.

An overconfident President Santos could never have imagined that his biggest failure would be not convincing approximately 60 percent of the electorate to go to the polls. Around 20 million potential voters changed the fate of a historical peace deal by simply failing to exercise their right to vote and allowing 50 percent of the 13 million population who did vote to temporarily halt the peace negotiations. This result changes the leveraging power of the different negotiations during the attempt to revitalize the peace talks.

The FARC have also emerged stronger in the aftermath of the plebiscite. Unlike President Santos, FARC’s leader, Rodrigo Logroño, alias “Timochenko,” can exercise more autonomy before choosing to pursue any future strategy. Timochenko’s leadership is not based on democratic rapport with his followers. Most Colombian politicians are fighting to convince voters to accept the terms of the peace agreement, whereas FARC’s leader autocratically decides for the entireity of the armed force; 6.500 guerrilla fighters. In the past, the FARC experienced great difficulty reaching power and engaging in peace negotiations due to the effective cohesiveness of the Colombian political elite. Now though, the FARC is negotiating with a political system that is more divided than ever.

Under a fractured political establishment, the announcement that President Santos was named the Nobel Peace Laureate of 2016 gave a new impetus to his already weakening negotiating position. Yet, it is unclear how President Santos will satisfy the demands on the one hand of a more assured political opposition, and, on the other hand, of a more autonomous FARC. The reopening of negotiation talks must come soon, although the unification of the country around a new peace deal seems to be too distant still.

The complexity of reaching a new deal is huge. However, this challenge should not overshadow the overall positive context of this historical moment. Firstly, that the Colombian government has already initiated talks with the second biggest guerilla group, the National Liberation Army (ENL), showing its commitment to a more encompassing peace while pressuring the FARC not to abandon the negotiating table. Secondly, prior to President Santos, eight presidents have tried to negotiate a peace accord with the FARC and the ENL but they never achieved anywhere close to the state of the current events, which should be interpreted as unprecedented progress. Thirdly, the negotiations to obtain peace have mainly involved countries from within the region—Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Ecuador, and Venezuela—reducing the risk of possible suspicion from foreign power involvement with any interest other than that of guaranteeing peace.

Today’s Colombia is not the same country from the past. Nowadays, Colombia displays a more mature democracy that is well aware of the continuous losses of keeping an armed conflict alive. It is clear that Colombia’s long path to peace might be more tortuous than once imagined. But while democracy seems to have disrupted this path, it has at least assured those following the events that there is no clear winner or loser, which is the cornerstone of any lasting peace.