

# **Building peace in Colombia beyond “yes” or “no”**

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The news that the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP guerrillas was rejected by voters in a national referendum last Sunday, October 2, sent shockwaves around the world. It was close, but a victory for the “no” campaign nonetheless: 50 percent against 49 percent.

As a matter of fact, the “no” campaign did not actually have to win more votes than the “yes” campaign in order to claim a victory. For them it would have sufficed to collect enough votes to put the legitimacy of the agreement into question. Nonetheless, they managed to win in spite of the fact that all of the media, the international community and the vast majority of political and public figures in the country were decidedly in the “yes” camp.

So, what went wrong?

## **RURAL “YES”, URBAN “NO”**

In a previous article, I explained that the main feature of this referendum was the lack of enthusiasm among the population in general, both with the peace process as such and with the referendum in particular. It is telling that a mere 37 percent of voters participated in the plebiscite. The circumstances cannot be compared to what happened before in El Salvador, Northern Ireland or South Africa, where peace agreements were met with an explosion of hope and optimism. In this context, it was foolish to dismiss the strength of the “no” camp’s appeal.

Over the past five decades, the Colombian conflict has largely been contained to rural areas that are off-radar to most Colombian urbanites. Peoples in the cities are not directly affected by the violence and are only exposed to the realities of war only through a media intoxicated with counter-insurgent propaganda. Generally, “yes” voters tended to be concentrated in areas where the conflict had been particularly intense and where the guerrillas had a long-time presence, while the “no” vote was largely concentrated in areas where there is no real conflict to speak of. There were exceptions to this rule, of course — some pacified areas of the Caribbean voted “yes” and the birthplace of the FARC-EP in Southern Tolima voted “no.” But altogether the tendency holds.

The “no” vote should not be read unequivocally as a vote to reject peace, to promote war, and not even as a vote of support to the far-right agenda of former president Álvaro Uribe, the main advocate of the “no” camp. Certainly, there was an element of conservatism among the voters, but that doesn’t explain the whole story. The vast majority of voters rejected the specific peace agreement that had been negotiated in Havana and expected a renegotiation.

It is surprising that the peace process was sold more successfully to the international community than to the Colombian people — president Santos seemed more interested in getting the IMF, the World Bank, an array of international advisors (Israel, Northern Ireland, El Salvador, Israel, etc.) involved in the process than obtaining broad participation from Colombians themselves. Whatever meager participation existed was thanks to public forums organized on the insistence of the guerrilla organization. Santos stayed aloof, giving talks in Europe and the US, yearning to win the Nobel Peace Prize and expecting trade agreements and a fresh influx of loans and investment.

The Colombians themselves were taken for granted. No doubt most people saw this as a distant agreement, negotiated in a foreign country between two very unpopular parties.

## BITTER PILLS, POOR CAMPAIGNS

In fact, Santos is possibly one of the most unpopular presidents in Colombian history, and he surrounded his “yes” campaign with a motley collection of corrupt and discredited politicians, raising suspicions among ordinary Colombians. Throughout the entire process, his government’s PR department was more interested in discrediting the insurgents than in developing an understanding around the issues being negotiated.

The main message of his campaign was that this was the “best possible” agreement. It contained some bitter pills that were hard to swallow, but in a tit-for-tat fashion they *had* to be swallowed in order to achieve peace. But people don’t like to swallow bitter pills, even if they often have to. Given a choice, they will reject them. The option of a re-negotiation was always there, despite the government’s insistence that they wouldn’t do it — simply because both parties had agreed that they would not resort to taking up arms against each other, even in the case of a “no” victory.

The FARC-EP, for their part, have a significant amount of popular support in most of their rural strongholds. But the legitimacy in these marginal territories — which are not decisive in terms of national politics — turns into visceral hostility outside of these areas, particularly in the country’s main urban centers.

Curiously, the people most hostile to the guerrillas often have never even met a guerrilla in their entire lives. It was key, therefore, to connect and generate support for the peace process and the peace agenda among the urban population and among rural people outside of the FARC’s areas of influence — people who are affected by the conflict, but only indirectly and in a differentiated fashion. The negotiating parties were unable to generate this type of popular support, and didn’t succeed in explaining the opportunities peace provides to Colombian population in general.

The left, which supported the “yes” vote, ran a campaign as poor as that of the government. Divided, weak and marginal as it is, disconnected from the concerns of ordinary people, prone to alienating supporters by insulting those who think differently and rather inept at generating inclusive grassroots processes, lacking imagination, with vertical and anachronistic methods of organizing concealed behind vague slogans and the lack of a program for actual change, the left was unable to muster support for the peace process.

The negotiated agreement, as such, was bound to generate indifference. The everyday social and economic struggles of ordinary Colombians were not addressed. As such, it was unavoidable that the public debate on the peace process would be dominated by the supposed “impunity” of the FARC-EP commanders. Naturally, the mainstream media did not make a fuss about the massive impunity the state would enjoy for the numerous crimes against humanity perpetrated by its own troops and its paramilitary allies.

In the post-conflict narrative manufactured by official propaganda, the state appears as a benevolent father willing to receive back in his home the mischievous son who had gone astray. The key debate between the Uribe and Santos factions centered purely on how lenient the father should be.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

In the short term, there are two options left. On the one hand, there is the alternative of calling an assembly to re-draft the constitution to create a space for the peace agenda rejected by voters in the referendum. This would be a folly. It is unlikely that in the polarized environment of today's Colombia a new constitution would be more progressive than the current one. It would also be disrespectful towards the people who already expressed their views.

The other alternative would be to re-negotiate the Havana agreement. This would require a more inclusive process that includes a broader selection of social groups – not only the far-right represented by Uribe and his minions, whose proposals will likely be limited to demands for more draconian conditions. It would also require closer popular proximity to the overall process, with the debate and renegotiations taking place in Colombia, in view of the public eye.

As such, the idea to call for a broad “national dialogue” proposed by the second-biggest Colombian guerrilla group, the ELN, as part of their own peace process with the government (an idea rejected out of hand by Santos) should not be dismissed after all. Indeed, it has actually become a necessity.

In the long term, however, those who strive for an egalitarian and emancipatory agenda should pay heed to the concerns expressed by the Colombian people. Instead of adding insult to injury, dismissing the voters as “ignorant neanderthals” who don't care about “peace” or their “country,” the result should be accepted humbly; arrogance should be abandoned and self-criticism should be quite high on the political agenda of a new left.

The most important lesson is that a political project that appeals to the majority of the people cannot be built without the participation of the people themselves. Likewise, the people need to be an active agent in the creation of a peace agreement if it is to mean something to the vast majority of those who sorely need concrete answers to the deep problems affecting them in their everyday lives. There is a need to be bold in proposing a transformative project of peace that can actually capture the popular imagination, even if the so-called international community – whose interest in peace in Colombia derives largely from their interest in investment and the mining-extractive industry – frowns upon it.

People are not a herd to be led by those in the know. People need to be the principal actors in their own process of emancipation; the main protagonist in the construction of a better and more peaceful society. As far as the left fails to understand this, it doesn't stand a chance to become a relevant actor in a country that badly needs a libertarian and truly egalitarian alternative.

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