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Interview with Gearóid Ó Loingsigh on the Colombian political crisis

José Antonio Gutiérrez D.

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This is a short interview we conducted with Gearóid Ó Loingsigh on the state of affairs in Colombia at the moment after the release of Ingrid Betancourt and after years of the implementation of Plan Colombia. Gearóid is an Irish researcher for social organisations in Colombia and author of “La Estrategia Integral del Paramilitarismo en el Magdalena Medio” and “El Catatumbo: Un Reto Por La Verdad” as well as a forthcoming publication on the oil industry.

1. It has been said that since the successful rescue of Ingrid Betancourt, the three US mercenaries and the other 11 soldiers held by FARC, the guerrilla group is badly beaten. Is this accurate?

There is no doubt that the FARC have taken a beating, not just with the rescue of the 11 hostages but also with other events. The guerrilla commander Negro Acacio was killed in an aerial bombardment last year and Raul Reyes the FARC’s ‘Foreign Minister’ was killed in an attack on his camp inside Ecuador. However, whilst

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these military setbacks are important the FARC can and probably will recover from the them. The more important setbacks have been the surrender of Karina one of the most feared commanders and the only woman to rise to such prominence as commander of a guerrilla front within the FARC. Prior to that Ivan Ríos was killed by his own bodyguard who then cut of his hand as proof to hand over to the authorities in order to claim the reward. These events damage their morale and ability to trust each other. The natural death of their highest commander Manuel Marulanda was not a setback but they lost their legendary leader and also someone who kept them united and under his undisputed command. Though it is too early for the State to cry victory as the FARC has recovered from setbacks before and the other guerrilla group the ELN is famous for having literally risen from the ashes time and time again. They too have suffered setbacks and like the FARC two leading commanders have died of natural causes and others have been captured in the last year.

One last point is that the media have pointed to the rescue as proof that the FARC's internal communications have collapsed, yet they were able to nominate a new commander Alfonso Cano and make changes in the Secretariat within a short period of time and if media reports are to be believed, commanders from very distant zones were able to meet and travel to Nicaragua recently. All of that indicates that they still retain a certain capacity. Their weakness is real but over exaggerated.

2. How do you think negotiations or demobilization of FARC would help a peace process in Colombia?

The first thing to bear in mind is that the conflict is older than the FARC. It began at the very latest in 1948 (when the conflict began is a matter of debate but no one puts it any later than 1948) and the FARC and the ELN were founded in 1964, the EPL in 1965 and M19 (now demobilised) in the 1970s. Everyone from the guerrilla groups to NGOs, unions, academics etc. agree on a number of points that the conflict is the result of gross inequalities in the

6. Are there any alternatives to the polarisation in Colombia between Uribe and FARC?

Alternatives? I am not sure what you mean. If you mean a middle ground, well there is always some option, but they are not real options. We shouldn't confuse issues, one thing is the war which brings up a myriad of positions. However, this presumes that one is either with Uribe or with the militarism of the FARC. However, the opposition to the mining companies to the privatisation of public companies, to the murder of human rights activists come from social organisations, trade unions etc and not from the guerrilla groups.

Some see the Polo Democratico as an alternative, however, whilst there is no doubting its commitment to human rights, it has no economic programme and amongst its leading members are ex ministers in previous right wing governments, people like Maria Emma Mejía and Daniel García Peña. It has allowed a forum from which criticisms of the State can be made but it is a long way from being an alternative.

However, in terms of the polarisation that you speak of, the atmosphere in the country is that you are either with Uribe or against him at best and at worst you are either with him or you are a terrorist. He himself has described, politicians, human rights groups and even supreme courts judges that have dared criticise him as terrorists. And you should bear in mind that being called a terrorist or even a guerrilla supporter is tantamount to a death threat. In relation to Uribe there is no middle ground. With the FARC, well no one really voices support for them, for obvious reasons. But they have also taken an attitude that you are either with them or Uribe and have even gone as far as to kill members of the Polo Democratico.

distribution of wealth, the concentration of land and the violence used by the State to repress any challenge to that. After the Oligarchy murdered Gaitan, the Liberal and Conservative parties pitted the peasantry against each other in civil war that claimed over 300,000 lives out of a total population of 11 million. When the Liberal and Conservative parties came to an agreement to share power it was their refusal to address the concerns of the peasantry which saw some Liberal guerrilla groups remain active. These went on to found the ELN in the north of the country and the FARC in the south. The reason why I point this out is that now a lot of groups are talking about the conflict in terms of a shooting match, that if only the guerrillas gave up, all would be well. That is a mistaken view of the conflict. Amongst those who are pushing this are foreign governments (including the EU) and companies anxious to open up the country to multinational exploitation to an even greater degree, foreign and national NGOs who hope to get a lot of money from post conflict projects. The degree to which these NGOs are a business should never be underestimated.

So the call for the FARC to demobilise is essentially a call to ignore the real issues. I don't think the FARC can bring about change in Colombia and I don't think kidnapping and dropping gas cylinders on towns is an act of liberation. However, I think people should concentrate on the issues, multinationals running amok in the country and the State handing over the natural resources of the country to them. The Permanent Tribunal of the Peoples (the successor to the Russell Tribunal on the Vietnam war) recently condemned over 20 multinationals for their grave human rights violations, amongst them, Chiquita, which has already publicly acknowledged that it financed the paras, Coca Cola which denies it but is being sued by the same lawyer in the Chiquita case, oil companies like BP etc.

In short none of the issues, human rights, poverty, concentration of wealth and land etc, require anyone to talk to anyone. The State is in a position to deal with them, that it has not done so is because

it doesn't want to, that it has opted for murder of the opposition time and time again is the real issue. Perhaps the State should demobilise, it has caused more deaths than anyone else.

3. The official media portrays Uribe as a highly popular president... is this true? How is it possible given his own human rights record?

Yes, this is very much true. Uribe came to power through corruption, the head of his campaign is now in jail and also through threats, this we know from the fact that over 20% of the Congress is now in jail for links with the paras. However, what many did not want to recognise is that he actually built up a support basis through his populist rhetoric and actions. He is the Colombian equivalent of Fujimori and hopefully will end up like him, on trial. He has been helped in this by the media that are not only unquestioning but they show for Breakfast, Dinner and Tea. Switch on the TV and there he is, it doesn't matter what it is, much of it has nothing to do with his role of president but he is there. He has even appeared to talk about yoga! His son's wedding on Saturday 26th of July was a media event comparable to the tripe that is served up in relation to the British royal family.

The tone of the coverage is sycophantic and when the cover the opposition the media is particularly hostile. The principal media groups are owned by the Santos family (vice president and also the minister for defence) and also by multinational such as the Spanish companies Planeta and Prisa. The print media is slightly better, but only just.

The last point is the actions of the guerrillas themselves. Dropping a gas cylinder on small towns is not exactly popular, neither is kidnapping or car bombing. In that they have no one to blame but themselves. Threats made against indigenous and social organisations in Cauca who have criticised the FARC hasn't helped them either. The parallels with Peru are striking, a right wing populist president and a guerrilla group that couldn't care less about public opinion.

4. On Sunday there was a march to demand the release of all hostages which the government manipulated to be seen as a support march for his second re-election... how many people participated? Do you think there was any difference between this march and that of February 4th and March 6th?

The first thing is that it was smaller and there was less hype than before. However it was a march of the far right with many banners openly supporting the president and calling for another reelection of Uribe. However, the march was still significant. In order to guarantee success they organised it around free open air concerts which some people would attend just to see the artists. Imagine a free concert of U2, Sinéad O' Connor, the Cranberries, Christy Moore and Planxty and you get the idea, many would go just to see the artists.

5. After the mass demonstrations against FARC, how do you think this will affect the course of the conflict?

I don't think it will have much impact in the short term. The FARC aren't listening to the marches, they have written them off as manipulations of the State and the US, which they are in part, but as I said before they do tap into real feelings. The FARC has lost all of the political capital it gained in the negotiations with Pastrana and is now much more isolated than before. It may lead to them lashing out, but so far they haven't shown the ability to repeat the massive mobilisations of hundreds of guerrillas to take over military bases that they did before Uribe came to power.

What it will do is encourage the NGOs and governments who see the problem in terms of a shooting match and pay lip service to the idea of poverty etc to go on the offensive. The government has a strategy for what it calls Integral Action for the Social Recovery of Territory, a joint military civilian strategy to win over hearts and minds financed by the US, the EU and various NGOs. They will step up the pressure on farmers and others to cooperate with the State. The real danger is political and not military, something the FARC have never understood.