

Colombia between peace and war

The 2018 presidential elections and the way forward

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Summary

The presidential elections of 2018 are expected to have significant implications for the matter of peace, justice and conflict resolution in Colombia. Since conflict intensity rose considerably in the 1980s, presidential elections have been greatly influenced by the candidates' approaches to the conflict and how to deal with illegal armed groups, particularly the FARC. What visions of peace do the 2018 presidential candidates have, and what could the implications be for the current peace agreement with the FARC? The candidates, right-wing and frontrunner Iván Duque and left-wing candidate Gustavo Petro, promote dissimilar visions of peace for Colombia. These reflect a deeper political polarization within the country, a key issue the next president will have to deal with.

The Colombian armed conflict has lasted more than five decades and has been characterized by several peace attempts with different guerrilla groups, as well as paramilitaries. In 2018, the two prime contenders for the Colombian presidency hold different visions for peace with the FARC (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). The seemingly strongest candidate is Iván Duque, a political right-winger and a strong critic of the 2016 peace accord. His challenger, Gustavo Petro, represents the renewed political left and has on the contrary expressed his firm support to the political settlement with the group. These candidates reflect the intense polarization that has permeated Colombian politics the last years. This polarization became particularly visible to the world, after the historical peace agreement was first rejected by a slim

majority on October 2, 2016. While a revised accord was approved by Congress in November 2016, the implementation process has been difficult. For the 2018 presidential elections, some fear the election of Iván Duque could mean a relapse to conflict. With Petro as president, the willingness to implement the peace accord is likely to be higher.

In this policy brief, we look at the political platforms on which Colombian presidents have been elected in Colombia since 1998. Familiarising ourselves with these platforms—and the actions and discourses that followed—may situate us better in understanding the upcoming elections, and how the elections may further shape the formal attitude to the internal in security. First, we explain why leaders sometimes have a substantial effect on the way that conflicts unfold. Second, we explain how this applies to Colombia. Third, we discuss the potential implications of the 2018 presidential elections on the peace process in Colombia, contemplating areas of concern and suggesting policy recommendations on how to best avert a relapse to conflict.

Why leaders matter in peace processes

The literature on conflict resolution suggests that the inertia of leaders to opt for a negotiated end, often helps to explain the prolongation of armed conflicts. Changing the official objectives of military defeat to a political solution, may express a sign of weakness. Therefore, leaders may continue to follow a military route (continued fighting), and not make efforts to pursue a political solution (negotiations). Leaders may be more willing to negotiate, however, should they anticipate that they themselves could bring the peace

process through. Hence, new leaders may provide a necessary political shock to a protracted situation. New leaders may see the conflict with different eyes, perhaps making new calculations, and slightly altering the interpretation of the actors' goals. While one should not over-rationalize the decisions of leaders, leaders seek to achieve various objectives when making important decisions. Particularly in questions of war and peace, actors may hide part of their objectives and they may seek to misrepresent information. Hence, unpacking their real intentions is often difficult.

Previous presidents' peace proposals

In the case of Colombia, we see both new presidents pursuing old policies, and new presidents pursuing new policies. In 1998, president Andrés Pastrana proposed, as most presidents before him, a peace process. The first large-scale break in this trending policy occurred in 2002, when president Álvaro Uribe won on a platform of war with the guerrillas. In the following, we explore the contexts of previous presidential elections, and how presidents' political platforms have changed, in part as a response to changing conflict dynamics, but also individual political preferences.¹

Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002)

In the context of a surge in civilian and military casualties, and internally displaced people in the 1990s, a potential peace process with the FARC characterised the debates around the 1998 presidential elections in Colombia. This replaced the focus of the beginning of the decade, when attention was given primarily to the Medellín and Cali drug cartels. Prior to the 1998 presidential elections, Colombian citizens had expressed their tiredness of war. In 1997, a civil society initiative had provided Colombian voters with a separate ballot in the local elections, through which 10 million people gave the next president of Colombia a 'Mandate for Peace, Life and Liberty'. This reflected an underlying frustration in the Colombian population, suffering not only from the indirect consequences of insecurity, but also from the direct victimization of grave violence. As a consequence, candidates' proposals for dialoguing with the FARC took centre stage. Pastrana saw it in his mandate to fulfil the popular demand, and was elected, partly due to his motivation to reach out to the FARC. Despite meeting with FARC-leader, Manuel Marulanda (alias), to lay out

the plans for the talks, the Caguán dialogue—which they were to be called—never progressed far. Pastrana ended them in February 2002, after the FARC hijacked a domestic plane and kidnapped a Senator.

Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010)

In 2002, many Colombians' frustration with a perceived unwillingness of the FARC to pursue a political solution in the Caguán dialogue, paved the way for a new approach to the conflict. In a landslide presidential election, the hardliner Álvaro Uribe was elected president on a political platform of an all-out war on the FARC. Pastrana, who preceded him, had been seen to offer the FARC several chances to commit to a political solution. Hence, Uribe's military approach was perceived highly rational and would secure him widespread popularity. While Uribe developed a more effective counterinsurgency strategy and further strengthened the Colombian Armed Forces and the National Police, Pastrana had laid much of the foundation for a military upsurge during his presidency. Importantly, Pastrana secured massive military support in aviation, technology and intelligence from the United States through Plan Colombia. While the US' interests originally concerned counternarcotic operations, defeating the FARC became integral to this plan, fusing the "war on terror" and the "war on drugs" discourses. Having shown considerable progress in the fight against the FARC in the early 2000s, pushing them out of the outskirts of the capital and restoring security in and around other major cities, Uribe was re-elected in 2006 on the same security platform as in his first presidential period. Framing the FARC as 'terrorists', a threat that would ultimately have to be eliminated in order to avert catastrophe, negotiations were communicated as implausible and undesirable. Uribe, despite his terrorist discourse towards the FARC, did make some attempt to talk with the group. In 2008 and 2010, Uribe gave the green light to conduct secret back-channel talks with the group's leaders. These never progressed, however, and many doubt Uribe's real willingness to talk with the guerrilla. This is both because he saw the imperative of a military victory and because he rejected the FARC's legitimacy as a political actor. A political solution prior to the FARC's abandonment of arms, was consequently projected as a sign of government weakness.

2

President	Presidential periods	Conflict policy
Andrés Pastrana	1998-2002	Peace dialogue and military build-up
Álvaro Uribe	2002-2010	Military defeat or FARC surrender
Juan Manuel Santos	2010-2018	Political solution from position of strength

Table 1: Colombian presidents' policy approach 1998-2018

Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018)

Juan Manuel Santos, Uribe's Defence Minister from 2006-2009, became Uribe's preferred candidate in the 2010 elections. While elected as the candidate to continue Uribe's security policies, however, he quickly changed the official approach to the conflict. Only three days after taking office, he formed a surprising, yet pragmatic and initially secret peace alliance with Hugo Chávez, the leader of Venezuela and an external ally of the FARC. More importantly, Santos reached out to the FARC through a secret back-channel, which eventually led to a peace process with Cuba and Norway as guarantors. The formal process started with pre-negotiations in Havana, Cuba from February to August 2012. Only in August were the negotiations revealed to the public, when Santos with dedication and commitment spoke of the necessity to pursue a political solution. Why did Santos, who was elected as Uribe's preferred candidate, break with his predecessor's policy? Likely, Santos made different calculations of the FARC's military capacities, its political willingness and its legitimate political representativeness. While Uribe was intent on defeating the FARC militarily, Santos seems to have considered the chances of military victory to be smaller, and the benefits of reaching a "sustainable" and "democratic" peace, greater. Santos also seemed eager to attract in greater numbers foreign investments into infrastructure and extractive industries, which would proliferate from a formal declaration of peace within the country. In order to reach a political solution, however, one should also note Santos' willingness to risk his political capital, but also his pragmatic and long-term approach to gather support and recognition from key external actors. It seems, then, that Uribe with a controversial, yet quite effective counterinsurgency, managed to weaken the FARC, and that Santos took advantage of the military superiority that Uribe had provided, to pursue a political solution. While Uribe seem to be convinced that the FARC could have been defeated in the prolongation of his stringent security policy, Santos claimed that Uribe's policy program had been successful and that a "democratic" solution, in its continuation, will be more sustainable.

Areas of concern for Colombia's next president

The individual policy approach of the Colombian president matters, as the above run-through of the last two decades has shown. In the 2018 presidential elections, the peace agreement is supposedly in danger due to the likely election of Duque as president. While his political opponents suggest that Colombia might relapse to war if Duque is elected, Duque himself insists on the necessary amendments of some clauses, including the FARC leaders' political participation,

the anti-narcotics policy, as well as transitional justice. Most importantly, the political will of Santos' government of reaching a negotiated solution, might—considering the altered take on what "peace" should imply—to a large extent evaporate if Duque takes office. A key question will be to what extent Duque will act as the "puppet" of Uribe, a staunch peace accord critic and by many considered a spoiler to the peace process. Political will of both armed actors to pursue a political solution is the key explanation for why they reached the agreement. Should Colombia's president as of June 18 lack the willingness to further implement the peace agreement of 2016, it is likely that also the FARC's willingness will decrease. Already, the group has proceeded in the process despite staggering guarantees by the government and had to cancel its presidential campaign due to security concerns. Government guarantees will likely continue to be put on test, if Duque, the "Uribista" candidate, takes the presidency.

The most urgent area of concern in the Colombian peace process is FARC ex-combatants' potential return to armed struggle. Per now, the government's faulty implementation of the reintegration program and the disillusionment of many FARC ex-combatants, may cause more ex-combatants to leave the reintegration camps. While many leave for their home communities, some also seek to continue the armed resistance. However, as the FARC is currently a political party, the armed groups that appear are unlikely to become a strict continuation of the former FARC guerrilla. Rather, individuals may join the only remaining active guerrilla group of size (National Liberation Army, ELN), criminal groups (BACRIMS) or form new organisations. These constellations will be expected to have vaguer political objectives than the FARC had, primarily due to stronger influences by criminal agendas. Moreover, it is unlikely that they will be able to build the strong hierarchical structures that characterized the FARC. Partly, these are elements which made negotiations with the FARC possible, and an organizational feature which - in its absence - has made negotiations challenging with the more horizontally structured ELN. Potentially, then, armed conflict may recur, but the armed actors will have different names and exist in different forms. To counteract this process, a more efficient and dedicated implementation of the reintegration program is needed.

A second area of concern is the longer-term aspects of the agreement, such as agrarian reform, safeguards for political participation and the restoration of state authority. To over time create local ownership and popular support for the peace process, the agreement must be implemented in such a way that most

Colombians will note the positive effects of it. The implementation of these will be prolonged by continued political disagreement, and will probably continue to suffer from limited resources. Hence, and because of the nature of these complex policies, changes may not be felt in Colombia in the short term. Securing the support of many sceptical Colombians will require a less divided political landscape that agrees on key issues like the restructuring of land, the re-integration of former combatants and the (re)establishment of public services in previously FARC-controlled areas.

Relatedly, a third area of concern is to gradually tackle the political polarization in Colombia. Intertwined in the traditional liberal/conservative divide, competing interpretations of the peace agreement and the FARC has nurtured the political division. Particularly, popular disagreement has appeared in priorities of peace versus justice and the FARC's participation in politics and society. This underlying tension will in any case not disappear in the short-term, and whether Duque or Petro wins, it will be a key element also in the coming four years of Colombian politics. In the short term, peace education and creative spaces for popular participation and transparency might help reduce the ramifications of fear propaganda and 'fake news' that have challenged the implementation process. These efforts already exist, and can have greater effect if intensified and supported by whichever president Colombia elects on 17 June.

Concluding remarks

As many times before, also the 2018 presidential candidates differ substantially in their approach to the conflict and the peace. It will be challenging—if not impossible—to unite Colombian voters, not least the political elite, around one vision. At the same time, opponents have demonstrated their mutual objective of moving away from conflict, despite disagreeing on the principles that peace should build upon. If motivated to do so, the next Colombian president can take small but important steps towards decreasing the political polarization that hovers over the implementation process. The creation of formal and informal spaces for dialogue can create channels to express and address collective emotions, explain policy and disentangle misinformation issued in the ambience of insecurity and opposition.

The implications of the election results may be substantial, but the success of Duque is neither synonymous with a relapse to war, nor does the election of Petro mean that peace is secured. History has demonstrated that individual leaders may issue significant impact on the transition from war to peace and vice versa. In the four years ahead, the next Colombian president's actions will be of great importance. Moreover, his discourse will have important implications for whether a divided Colombia drifts further apart, or finds a common path from which to start a long process of peacebuilding and (re)conciliation. While Colombians agree on where to go, they have yet to agree on how to get there.



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