

## » Colombia's move toward a post-conflict era: Transitional challenges

Bogota » 06 » 2016

### A WILLINGNESS TO PUT AN END TO THE CONFLICT THROUGH POLITICS

After several failed attempts and some partial results, Colombia welcomes the opportunity to put an end to the armed conflict through negotiations between the national government and insurgent groups. After five decades of confrontation, this situation is the result of the combination of several factors which come together to form a rational framework for the decisions of both the state and the guerrillas.

The first of these facts is the military unfeasibility of the revolutionary project. Seizing power through the use of weapons, or the complete takeover of certain parts of the extensive national geography, in which these groups could act as a "state" –once the objectives of these organizations– are utterly unachievable. During the 18-year process of professionalization and provision for the Armed Forces, supported by the United States' assistance plan, known as Plan Colombia, the military horizons of the insurgent groups, which fell into a sharp decline, slowly narrowed. The defeat of the main military and political commanders of the FARC, the largest guerrilla organization, marked the prelude to the negotiations.

The second factor leading to the end of the Colombian conflict is the lack of international support for these guerrilla movements. Where only a few years ago these forces saw sympathy and open cooperation from the countries aligned with the chavista project and its expansion in Latin America, the movement's failure has

resulted in a loss of that support. The final nail came from the hemispheric context, marked by the redefined relationship between the United States and Cuba, which put an end to the Cold War in the continent.

The third aspect that facilitates the end of the conflict through negotiation is the impact of drug trafficking on the revolutionary cause and the deterioration it has generated in the insurgents' discipline and structure. Financing the political and military apparatus of the guerrillas through drug trafficking and kidnappings ended up being lethal for their own objectives, as well as a serious threat to their unity.

To this landscape of dissuasive factors was added a series of persuasive political actions, which helped reach the critical mass needed to prepare the country for, at last, an end to the conflict. A willingness to define and process an agenda based on the demands of the insurgents and provide opportunities for political participation for those who put their weapons down have been crucial steps in building the will to negotiate, with both the FARC and ELN.

### THE NEW POLITICAL ARENA

For the guerrillas, the key to negotiations is replacing their means without giving up their goals. They still maintain their socialist ideals and their intention to seize power, although now in the political arena rather than through military coup. Success is not guaranteed, but there is greater opportunity and ability to compete for power, particularly in areas the political system has been unable to win over despite the existence of strategic resources, due to the scarce population and, hence, the small number of votes. Their theory is that the insurgent military defeat does not mean a triumph for the institutions or the population. Their pledge is to complete the revolution through politics, betting on the failure of the state and a crisis in the political system, as well as the delegitimization and polarization of the established powers.

Meanwhile, for the national government, this process means transitioning from high alert to peace, and represents an opportunity to incorporate "peripheral" territories and residents into the realms of governance and development, creating conditions to capitalize on the competitive advantages this incorporation could mean for the country in the coming decades. Although Colombia is a country of cities, with more than 85 percent of the population living in the large urban centers, its greatest productive potential is in its rural wealth. More than half its territory, despite high market potential, runs a high institutional deficit. Consequently, contrary to the guerrillas and political movements that welcome them, the government's wager is on the enthronement of the state and its institutions. Its best strategy is to lead the state, and the market, by the hand.



Other forces and visions also carry significant weight in this new political context. On the one hand, there are those who procured and preserved their possessions and rights despite the looming violence. Their main concern and objective is to guarantee the post-conflict does not become a reason to encroach upon their interests in the name of peace. Their greatest threat is the abuse of power by the institutions themselves in an attempt to conquer the new reality. Also, they believe this process may jeopardize recent accomplishments in security and public order. This perspective has a significant impact on the public support this process needs and explains the strong opposition it receives. For both the government and the insurgent groups, the challenge in this matter is educational: explaining the agreements and persuading Colombians with the benefits of ending the conflict.

On the other hand, major threats to this process come from individuals and circles of power who have accumulated political and economic privilege through violence. In these cases, they are true regional elites, some on the left and others on the right, who have built and maintained strongholds of territorial domination through weapons and intimidation. Here lie the greatest enemies of the political solution to the armed conflict. They sow the seeds of dissidence –common in processes of this nature–. They are also the most unwavering enemies of any state presence in these territories, including any business activity. The challenge these forces represent for the state, besides their dismantling, lie in containing any selective violent behavior, which could be used as an instrument of political influence.

#### AMBIGUITIES

The end of the armed conflict, aside from closing a long and painful chapter of violence, will allow Colombia to unleash its full potential and accelerate its development. It is good to keep in mind that, despite the unrest, the country has grown consistently for the past 50 years and has been able to consolidate a democracy; currently considered one of the most stable political systems in Latin America. Peace will accelerate all these trends.

Nevertheless, the transition will mean traveling a winding road, full of challenges.

Firstly, the materialization of substantial agreements, specifically those related to rural development, illicit drugs, political participation and victims' compensation. Governing these matters will not be an easy task, as it will certainly be riddled with controversies and tensions in accordance with its scope and effects. It can be anticipated that, on one hand, fulfilling these agreements will be analyzed through the lens of the media, while, on the other, it will be evaluated according to results. In many cases, what will be considered accomplishments by some will not be perceived as such by others.

Secondly, it will require managing the fulfillment of procedural matters associated with the end of the conflict, including the dismantling of insurgent military structures and the inclusion of their members in civilian life. During negotiations, a bilateral cease-fire will have to be agreed upon, as well as a laying down weapons and, along with the determination of the legal fate of former combatants, a definition of their socio-productive options and political participation.

The substantive and procedural elements of the agreements are conditional upon one another, governed in both rhythm and development by the lack of trust in the other party's word. This is to say, during the post-conflict, mutual trust must be cultivated.

This is a core issue. The convergence of these two agendas will establish the final balance of power for the insurgency in the

“The end of the armed conflict, aside from closing a long and painful chapter of violence, will allow Colombia to unleash its full potential and accelerate its development”

negotiation. In their development, both of them clash in the exercise of territorial power. Their application is the prelude to the definition of a new political regimen administrated over territory –which explains the pressure for a constitutional assembly– which is the underlying factor in this negotiation. It is foreseeable that this is where most crises will occur.

Third, the management of the post-conflict reality requires administrating the public's expectations, since disbelief will precede any hope of favorable positive changes, especially in terms of public safety and social development. Explaining the ambiguities characteristic of this type of process will not be an easy task, especially when there are continuous advances and setbacks –more of the latter

in the beginning–. This is especially true when they constitute ammunition in a political competition marked by polarization, both at the national and regional levels.

A fourth factor that will be critical in the post-conflict period is the control of new forms of violence that may erupt as a result of eventual dissidence within the guerrilla organizations, such as a mutation to new forms of organized crime or the dispersion of their members into other forms of common criminality. The criminal economies of drug trafficking and illegal mining, both of which are active in the country, are factors that heighten this risk.

#### THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY IN THE POST-CONFLICT ERA

The end of the Colombian armed conflict will create a new business atmosphere. In fact, the reduction of violence during the last few years has already facilitated the flow of investments and allowed the materialization of business agreements that were previously inconceivable.

In a new public policy context, the extensive, varied and rich environmental diversity of the country will contribute to the development of its rural areas. Food production, high-tech agriculture and livestock, tourism, hospitality, energy and mining, just to name a few, are economic sectors that display a lot of room for growth. In addition, public spending and private investments in the modernization transportation, logistics and services infrastructure will partially close the gap the country currently has in this area.

However, the private sector will not be free of risks during this transition either.

In a highly politicized environment in which the citizens will have inflated expectations about the immediate and direct benefits of living post-conflict, the private sector will experience a great deal of pressure. The intensity will be even greater for extractive sectors of the economy, including the oil, mining, agro-industrial, electric and infrastructure industries. If institutional responses to population requirements are deficient or delayed, the result will be increased demand for corporate profits, inclusion in the value chain and additional resources for social programs. Ultimately, this dynamic could entail an increase in the number of strikes and blockades, in detriment to the operational continuity, as well as claims of flawed social, environmental and human rights practices that will call companies' reputations into question.

As for security, a decline in the hostilities associated with the armed conflict, such as kidnappings, extortions and infrastructure destruction, is evident. In general terms, crime rates show a sharp decline in practically all types of crimes, both in cities and rural areas. Nevertheless, it is necessary to anticipate and manage the possibility of a deterioration in public safety as a result of two factors: on one side, the dismantling of insurgent structures, and on the other, greater exposure of people and business assets in environments previously banned because of the armed conflict.

Companies must be prepared to face these and other direct and indirect pressures. The development of their strategies, both for capitalizing on opportunities and managing risks, implies strengthening their abilities to relate and communicate in a socio-political system of growing complexity in which they will need to legitimize their performances like never before. Tearing down the curtain of conflict will be an extremely demanding phase of the collection and preservation of "social license."

Good practices, resulting from fostering socio-environmental standards, will be a necessary but insufficient condition. The private sector must participate in the inclusion of population

groups, for example by employing former combatants or victims of the conflict. But this will only be part of the solution.

Transcending the conflict to build a stable and lasting peace necessitates a more active role, as well as bold business people. Circumstances must bring them together to create new companies, promote productive associations, adopt inclusive models, support entrepreneurship, share knowledge and business skills, stimulate innovation and support the strengthening of state institutions, prioritizing those areas of the country most affected by the armed conflict. A good businessman knows that today, the best business practice is investing in and supporting peace.



**Ernesto Borda Medina** For more than 20 years, Mr. Borda has analyzed armed conflicts and actively participated in peace negotiation and post-conflict processes, both in Colombia and internationally. He has advised various Colombian governmental bodies on the formulation and development of peace negotiation processes. A lawyer holding a degree from the Universidad Javeriana de Bogotá, he is an expert in political science and human rights, areas in which he has held public responsibilities, provided international consulting services and university lectures. Mr. Borda served as an adviser to the General Commander of the Military Forces of Colombia, Director of the Institute of Human Rights and International Relations of the Universidad Javeriana and Director of Promotion and Dissemination of Human Rights in the Ombudsman's Office of Colombia. For the past 16 years, he has headed TRUST, a leading consulting firm in the analysis, formulation and implementation of risk management strategies associated with socio-political factors and the public safety environment in Colombia and Latin America.

[eborda@trust.com.co](mailto:eborda@trust.com.co)



**Developing Ideas** by LLORENTE & CUENCA is a hub for ideas, analysis and trends. It is a product of the changing macroeconomic and social environment we live in, in which communication keeps moving forward at a fast pace.

**Developing Ideas** is a combination of global partnerships and knowledge exchange that identifies, defines and communicates new information paradigms from an independent perspective. **Developing Ideas** is a constant flow of ideas, foreseeing new times for information and management.

Because reality is neither black nor white, **Developing Ideas** exists.

[www.developing-ideas.com](http://www.developing-ideas.com)  
[www.uno-magazine.com](http://www.uno-magazine.com)



AMO is the leading global network of strategic and financial communications consultancies, with over 940 professional consultants and offices in more than 20 countries.

The network brings together local market leaders with unrivalled knowledge of financial markets and cross-border transactions in the key financial centers of Europe, Asia and the Americas.

Providing sophisticated communications counsel for M&A and capital market transactions, media relations, investor relations and corporate crises, our member firms have established relationships with many S&P 500, FTSE 100, DAX 30, SMI, CAC 40 and IBEX 35 companies.

[www.amo-global.com](http://www.amo-global.com)

