



# The Colombian Peace Process and the new role of Civil Society

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In Colombia, only the very elderly can answer the question of how the country was when it was at peace. The remainder of the population has to resort to their imagination, literary descriptions, theoretical projections, or travel experiences in other countries to try to understand how it is live and move about in peace at any given time and place. The vast majority of contemporary civil society in Colombia has been living in contexts of fear and insecurity on a daily basis. Many have faced a series of tragedies while others have had to accustom themselves to the constant misfortunes destroying the lives of close relatives and community members.

This is how fifty years of personal resignation, social normalization and the internalization of an armed conflict in the national public agenda have gone by: aligning with one or another side of the conflict or opposing all participating actors, whether recognized or unrecognized by the state. Each member of Colombian civil society has taken, been forced to take or inherited a given position within the context of the conflict. The current state of mind of Colombian civil society is far from being neutral—after decades of being surrounded by frustration and violent acts, or constant news reporting on violence, members of civil society are ready to discursively assume a position of defense or confrontation with respect to their seemingly opposite side, the right or left wing of the political spectrum. A position of animosity that is quite distant from the otherwise kind and affable temperament of Colombian people. In fact, only a small proportion of Colombians has effectively taken arms and fully engaged in an active violent confrontation. They have done so for reasons of revenge, ambition, ideology, or for the need of survival and income generation in the rainforest and rural regions of Colombia where the illegal labor of combat and ancillary roles are one of the few sources of stable income.

The present Colombian government strategically designed a negotiation road map towards an agreement to end of the armed conflict with the FARC guerilla, and more recently a separate process with the ELN guerrilla. This is not the first effort. Prior successful peace agreements have been signed with other guerrilla groups as well as right-winged groups (paras / paramilitaries) the current one advanced with the FARC took 4 years of negotiation in La Habana, Cuba where it was hosted. On the 24th of August the Santos Government and the FARC, jointly presented to the Colombian people the *“General Agreement for the Termination of the Conflict and the Construction of a Stable and Lasting Peace”*. A 297 pages long document which citizens would have to approve or

disapprove in the plebiscite set for October 2<sup>1</sup>. Colombians were barely given a month of time to read, understand and synthesize all their opinions into a solid yes or no. Given the restricted “citizen time” to understand the text proposed which would become constitutionally protected and unmodifiable if approved, the strategy of politicians was to flood the civil society space with emotional publicity. Oversimplified for the ease of political marketing, ads, selfies, memes, songs and posters the decision was reduced to an infantile level of “yes- I want peace” and “No-I don’t want peace”. Some political pundits even recommended not to read that long text and vote with the heart. The country bifurcated into two currents of “yes” and “no”. The YES people or agreement supporters were convinced of being morally superior more humane and open than those in the NO side who were stigmatized as war supporters. The NO people in turn stated that they didn’t support that agreement because it was a peace rooted in impunity and not real and effective, they too felt morally superior for protecting true peace through institutions. At the backstage of the Yes and No was the vanity of political leaders in office and out of office was also present. On one side, President Santos and the FARC looked for support to their agreement, on the other atomized forces were diverse but among them the most visible leader was former president of Colombia Alvaro Uribe; Santos most fierce contradictor.

Colombian press and opinion polls predicted an easy and generous triumph of the yes over the no. The President even announced the end of Colombian war in the UN General Assembly and with great fanfare invited Ban Ki moon, among other presidents and dignitaries to the formal signature of the peace agreement with the head of the FARC Guerrilla Timoshenko, in an event in Cartagena de India’s. All guests attending were dressed in white while military planes colored the sky in yellow, blue and red, the colors of the Colombian flag. And then, on Sunday, the Colombian people said NO. The “sovereign” didn’t find enough justice and safety in the terms of the *Agreement of Stable and Lasting Peace* proposed by the government.

The YES side defending the utmost importance of repairing all the victims through transitional justice, unveiling the truth of massacres, forgiving and starting a new, offering a better future to rural Colombia and changing bullets for arguments, did not not prevail. The NO Side instead convinced the people saying that it was unfair not only to pardon the FARC but to have to finance their new political party, grant them seats automatically in the Congress and moreover, offer amnesty to guerrilla members and sanction the heads of the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.equaltimes.org/war-art-and-peace-about-the?lang=en#.WBZhuC197IU>

FARC – authors of massacres and kidnapping (Re. Ingrid Betancourt among hundreds more) child recruitment and human trafficking among- only with movement restriction instead of confinement of some sort, at least for a year or so. The context of a collapsing Venezuela led by Maduro an ideological partners of FARC and the imminence of the Tax Reform presented by the Government to compensate the dropping oil prices and finance the peace process also explains why after that month of citizen time of reflection, civil society said NO.

Civic precaution won over Civic progression by only 60.000 votes. And precisely because of such slight difference, the country split in two currents of opinion and action. Many reasons have tried to explain the results. I believe the yes would have prevailed if Civil Society would have been given the time to really think and deliberate, instill the need of change. Having the people that made war advocating for peace amid celebrities was not very convincing either. With respect and time to understand and ponder, quite possibly the result of the plebiscite would have been different. But the institutional part of the State, didn't give enough time to the constituent part of the State to begin to change its old adversarial feelings for new ones. One month is not enough to change a 50 year national mindset deeply tied to pain and mistrust into forgiveness and union with old enemies and mistrusted politicians to handle them. In fact, only 8 years ago this exact same civil society was marching in Colombia and around the world against the FARC Guerrilla calling them terrorists and a drug cartel<sup>2</sup>.

Rushing juridical decisions and imposing political changes on civil society is not that easy for the simple reason that the idea is presented to people not imposed to orient cattle. Human beings are not mobilized they are led, as in inspired by example and persuaded by ideas and both require time and respect for a true dialoged. Civil society is not another facet of the Consumer Society it has a separate logic that is not easily oriented by ads and emotions; understanding and wanting are not the same. As members of an intelligent species, the sapiens sapiens even if uneducated resort to reasons to decide, not only emotions to pull her/him forward.

The past English and Colombian Plebiscites show that at the end, in the silence and privacy of the voting booth, individuals express the mistrust and fear they are familiar with. Only true individual or collective leadership can inspire trust and persuade on the importance of change. So, the ample time that was not originally computed in the pre-plebiscite equation ended up opening its way

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<sup>2</sup> <http://plataformacol.com/7-anos-despues/>

through and imposing as a post-plebiscite phase. Colombians now have time to think, gather and exchange, converse and decide if they are going to live in a split country or come together to wrap the peace process already begun.

Some have compared this moment to the Arab spring, I am not quite sure that is exact. I had the privilege to be involved in the years 2009-2012 in the sociopolitical life of Tunisia and Egypt. What I saw there was the emergence of a civil society seeking to distinguish and demarcate from an old political society that denied them social justice, democratic space and the preeminence of an institutionalized Rule of Law over the Rule of Opinion and Preferences of Ben Ali and Mubarak. In my country, Colombia, such it is not the case. Civil society is not demarcating and demanding institutional democracy and rule of law; we already have it no matter how much it can be bettered. And Colombian Civil society is not demarcating from political society, in fact it split and took sides. Some experts insist that government should not have requested the opinion of people through a plebiscite to avoid this moment of doubt and polarization like the current one. Quite on the contrary I believe that it was precisely the question, much more than the answer what is forcing us to become a more mature and tolerant civil society. It is the current efforts to find common ground between the Yes and No people is what is making us grow. In fact it is the agenda setting of peace in a country trooped in violence for half a century what is extra-ordinary, the endurance of President Santos in the process is why he deserves the Nobel peace prize recently granted to him. It would have been nevertheless better to give it to him when the polarization was over. When the international celebration of his efforts and those of many in the country don't appear as an act of intervention to elevate the Yes and outshine the legitimate voice of the Colombian people who in a majority said NO to the President. A small NO but a sovereign national NO.

Currently, the main task of the full spectrum of our political society is to re-negotiate the agreement and manage to end the armed conflict. The challenge of our civil society is to demarcate from the political society in order to unite the "yes" and the "no" in a "we" and help to stabilize the boat. Civil Society has to accompany political society but not become Colombians need time to run the page, arguments and serenity in a human and private dialogue of Colombians so that we can help political leaders to negotiate their opposing views but not to the point of merging as one bilateral front because that was, what 60 years ago provoked the emergence of the FARC, ELN and other guerrillas in the first place.

Preserving civil society space, our democratic institution and safeguarding the peace process and securing them in a tolerant, plural and constructive way is what Colombian Civil Society has started to do since the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October. While news reported the rejection of the agreement to end armed conflict, civil society began to emerge and look for ways to reunite and begin act more maturely and independently to protect the common good underlying the peace process from political battles. It is in that new up cropping of civil society that it is possible to say that, like our Arab brothers and sisters in the other south, we also are at dawn of our spring.

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