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A call to arms 2.0

In Colombia, a FARC splinter group has announced rearmament. But that doesn't mean the end of the peace process

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Although it didn't come entirely by surprise, a YouTube video sent shockwaves through Colombia on 29 August 2019. Three years following the hard-won declaration of peace, a FARC faction announced that it would be splitting away and, after laying down arms in 2017, take them back up as the re-organised FARC-EP (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—Ejército del Pueblo; Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army).

In some ways, the video looked like a relic of the past: 16 aged men and four women in rubber boots and combats in front of banners bearing images of Manuel Marulanda and Bolívar: at their centre, two familiar FARC leaders, known by their pseudonyms of Iván Márquez and Jesús Santrich, who played a key role in the controversial peace process of recent years.

Pessimists see this new declaration of the return to armed conflict as the start of renewed escalation, as the beginning of another spiral of violence in Colombia and, potentially, in the wider region – and, whatever the case, as the end of a celebrated peace process. Is it, however, beyond the bounds of possibility that this announcement will, if anything, generate a new momentum for peace in the country? The answer is that this all depends on how not just the Colombian government but the international community reacts to this development.

Give peace a chance

Since the peace accord was signed, Bogotá's priority has been immediate disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration of fighters. The longer-term goals of the agreement such as land reform, development in rural areas, and the installation of state structures in neglected areas, as well as

safety assurances for the general population and political reform, have been left for a later date. Moreover, since his inauguration in August 2018, President Iván Duque and his administration have been battling with a peak in cocaine production of historical proportions. Given that the government has decided against manual destruction of the coca plant and replacement, it is most likely that, once again, the feared systemic herbicide glyphosate will soon be in use again.

Both on a national and international level, observers of the process have warned that the current Colombian administration is not committed enough to implementing the terms of the contracts. They also note that the government is abusing the financial settlement agreed without providing the physical and legal protections FARC members and associates were promised. Indeed, since the agreement was signed, at least 150 FARC members and 350 social justice and human rights activists have been murdered.

Nevertheless, it is not entirely clear what the aims of the rearmed group are: their political message remains unclear, as do its addresses. In a follow-up video, they made an attempt to deliver something of a policy statement, quoting Simón Bolívar ('it is better to die upstanding in battle than on one's knees – or to be murdered in the street') and claiming that they would limit their targets 'solely to the corrupt political elite of the country' and 'blackmailing international conglomerates'. This refers back to a topic which, more than the peace process itself, has gripped Colombia in recent years.

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The group's symbols and manifesto would indicate that it sees its future role as a cross-border organisation: strikingly, it declared its former enemies – the guerrilla group ELN (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*; National Liberation Army) – to be its allies, and ELN is known as a binational organisation which also controls the two southern provinces of neighbouring Venezuela, a region rich in natural resources known as *Arco Minero* ('the mining arc'). As recently as late July, Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro could be heard welcoming Colombian guerrillas to his country which, along with Cuba and Norway, is a guarantor of the Colombian peace process. Now, Maduro has made an immediate offer to moderate a new round of negotiations.

International silence

In view of the political crisis and instability of Venezuela, however, this state of play represents a powder keg for the region whose shockwaves, if it ignites, will be felt in all neighbouring states. Moreover, the continuous stream of young Venezuelan migrants fleeing the chaos of their home country represents a new source of recruits for the armed movement which currently seems unable to entice Colombians into its ranks.

This negative scenario is centred around the perilous security situation inasmuch as the Colombian state has, as yet, proven incapable of erecting truly national structures which knit all regions of the country together. As such, the persisting inequality, discrimination, and poverty hold continued potential for conflict. Sceptics of the peace accord now see their view confirmed that the process was pointless. And President Duque's reaction was tardy: in a speech responding to the declaration, he concentrated primarily on the state's military reaction and put bounty out on the leaders of the movement, not mentioning the peace process until his final remarks: 'All Colombians want peace.'

Internationally, too, reactions were rather quiet. In Colombia, there was never any doubt about the fact that peacekeeping would be more difficult than simply reaching an accord. Outside of the country, interest rapidly cooled off following the signing of the agreement, however. More than anything, the lack of regional policy is making itself felt: the Organisation of American States (OAS) has yet to make a public statement and the US President responded to press questions on the matter with bewilderment; this silence on the part both of the superpower US and other regional players is deafening. Indeed, Colombians feel that they have been left to their own devices as the country takes on the highest number of Venezuelan migrants without the asylum regulations or state structures to provide them with proper integration.

On 27 October, Colombia will have regional elections, and in the campaign to date, the peace process has not been of any great importance. In the regions affected by the conflict, the topic is, in fact, something of a political taboo. In many of these areas, life for the local population has changed little since the peace accord, and often, local elites are making a calculated decision to maintain their power in consensus with a national government which has yet to publically throw its entire weight behind the peace process. As such, there is no reason to presume that politicians critical of the peace process will not profit from the current situation in urban constituencies, rubbishing the process as part of a vote-winning strategy. It's certainly a golden opportunity for those who stand to benefit from society becoming ever further polarised.

Reasons for optimism

So, in view of this state of affairs, are there any grounds for optimism? Firstly, it's by no means certain that the rearmed group will actually prove an attractive prospect to the more than 13,000 demobilised FARC fighters, 91 per cent of whom, whether resident in reintegration zones or elsewhere, are keeping to the terms of the agreement as they go about their professional and personal lives.

Moreover, the comprehensive process of dealing with the past from both a historical and legal point of view has now begun. In spite of the criticism levelled at it by the current president, the special peace courts (JEP, *Jurisdicción Especial por la Paz*) have begun their work and are now tackling the most difficult cases. At the same time, the senators and representatives of the new political wing of FARC, who have been given seats in the country's congress as part of the agreement, are taking an active part in political life, working in a parliamentary group for freedom and in other ways to achieve goals of relevance to Colombian society as a whole.

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Immediately following the upload of the video, the party was unanimous in distancing itself from the rearmed rebels, and in the upcoming regional elections, 300 candidates will be standing for the new FARC party, sometimes as part of bipartisan alliances. Given the new grouping, these candidates will surely be wondering if they need to change their name; they have nevertheless received messages of public support for their stance from people of all other political persuasions in Colombia, including President Duque.

What is the potential political path forward from here? There are several possibilities for overcoming the current paralysis that has gripped Colombia – and the only way forward is to look forward. Both domestically and internationally, the Colombian government has its work cut out as it must make a comprehensive, lasting commitment to peace while accepting international help and advice.

This includes working towards a peaceful democratic solution in its neighbour, Venezuela, and trying to get itself involved in negotiations there. It also needs international financial aid and organisational assistance in order to develop a robust concept for dealing with the challenges of migration (i.e. smuggling, the increase in armed groups,

overstretched humanitarian systems). At the same time, however, it must prove to its own population that it is not deaf to its concerns, tackling poverty, creating jobs, and increasing security in many parts of the country – this will mean nothing less than declaring a new social contract predicated on no lesser goal than the wellbeing of the Colombian people. The alternative is to leave a bottomless well of fuel for future conflict.

Moderate, peace-orientated groupings will have to come together politically, yet the current state of paralysis is also one with the potential for positive impetus towards peace – a movement which became evident in March during the protests against Duque's attempt to circumvent the reconciliation body JEP.

The cross-party *Defendamos la paz* group ('Let's defend peace'), which brings together several important protagonists in Colombia's national life to make the case for peace, is one force in action here. Widespread support also becomes clear in the public criticism of the most vehement opponent of the peace policy, former president Álvaro Uribe, whose popularity has never been lower than in recent days. Times are changing in Colombia, a country which now needs new answers to a host of old problems if it doesn't want to find itself going back to the future.



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