

Colombia's New Presidency: Peace as Business (as Usual)

Written by Manuela Trindade Viana

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MANUELA TRINDADE VIANA, JUL 31 2018

What is the impact of the electoral results in Colombia as regards to the implementation of the Peace Agreement? Here, I engage with such a question by, first of all, refusing to see the text emerging from the negotiations in La Habana as a “safe harbor” under threat. That is, framing the Peace Agreement as an undisputable contribution to the purge of violence from Colombia[1] and somehow claiming that Iván Duque’s contrasting approach to “peace” threatens the building of a “durable peace” in the country. Instead, I pursue a two-fold analytical strategy. Firstly, I argue that we should read Duque – and his close relations to Álvaro Uribe – as a set of political continuities in Colombia, so that we can explore some of the implications of such reading to the implementation of the Peace Agreement. Secondly, I explore how Duque’s background in finance is inscribed in those lines of political continuities in a particular and central domain of the agreement signed in La Habana: the so-called “post-conflict” agenda.

Continuities in Change

On June 17, 2018, Iván Duque was elected president of Colombia[2], with 53% of the valid votes (10,373,080 votes) in the second round disputed with Gustavo Petro (41%). Among the themes characterizing the electoral campaign, the future of the Peace Agreement was one of the main topics addressed by Duque. The uncertainty surrounding the implications of his election to the implementation of the Peace Agreement is not unfounded: Duque was one of the leading voices of the “No” campaigns in the context of the referendum of the Peace Agreement, along with former president (2002-2010) and senator Álvaro Uribe. The close ties between the latter and Duque fueled claims that the rejection of the terms negotiated in La Habana was to be revived in his eventual victory in the polls. More than this, such claims underlined the rupture the election of Duque could represent to the peace building allegedly constituted by the implementation of the Peace Agreement under Juan Manuel Santos’ administration (2010-2018).

The terms with which the contrast between Santos and Duque was painted deserve attention because they are misleading: they read as rupture processes that are actually expressions of the same rationality. The fact that Santos was the minister of Defense from 2006 to 2009 under Uribe’s administration is a piece that cannot be ignored in this puzzle. Indeed, it was during this period that the second phase of Plan Colombia[3] was ignited – a fundamental phase within a more extensive trajectory of military and police operations against the guerrillas[4].

The reversal of the military equation in favor of the Colombian public forces during this period is key for us to understand a position recurrently vocalized by Uribe. He considers his administration the center piece of the pacification allowing for the guerrillas to choose to negotiate a peace agreement. According to Uribe’s reading, the guerrillas could only have assessed the negotiations as a better deal than to continue to fight, given the high costs deriving from the intensification of military operations. Such a position exposes the entanglement between war- and peacemaking in Colombia, rather than picturing them as opposite positions of a political debate.

Furthermore, Marta Lucía Ramírez, elected vice-president with Duque, was Uribe’s minister of Defense from 2002 to 2003. During this period, Ramírez issued the Democratic Security Policy (*Política de Seguridad Democrática*), a 10-year package aiming at recovering the territorial integrity and institutional strength of the Colombian state. It is also noteworthy that, before taking one of the most important ministries in Colombia, Ramírez had been the minister

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of Trade during Andrés Pastrana's administration (1998-2002). This fungibility from trade to defense reveals how those domains are connected through a security-development nexus[5], as much as it expresses how "good administration" enjoys a more privileged position than "better politics" in times of "New Public Management"[6].

In this sense, the general idea of a rupture between Santos and Duque becomes quite blurred in light of the juxtaposed trajectories and practices of Uribe, Santos, Duque, and Marta Lucía Ramírez. As the discussion above shows, they have all advanced political practices expressing a security-development rationale. In undertaking such a task, two interlocutors were never forgotten or separated: the military forces and the private sector.

The Contribution of the Private Sector to the Post-conflict (and Vice-Versa)

The key-word of Duque's trajectory is "finance." Indeed, during his career, he worked for the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the Andean Development Corporation (CAF), two of the main development banks in Latin America. He also served as an advisor at the Ministry of Finance in Colombia during Andrés Pastrana and Álvaro Uribe's administrations, prior to his career in the Senate (2014-2018).

This piece of information is important because it speaks not only to the groups to which Duque is politically familiar, but also to the "post-conflict" discourse that has been megaphoned since approximately 2009-2010. The center of gravity of such a discourse is the transformation of the "root causes" of the armed conflict through development projects – in fine tune with the World Bank discourse since late-1990s[7]. Underlying this proposition is the idea that the armed conflict has been historically concentrated in the rural areas of Colombia – transforming the "root-causes" is thus intrinsically related to offering the economic conditions which would "pacify" the *campesino*.

Based on this "post-conflict" discourse, during his second administration, Santos has invested most of his political capital in the approval of the National Development Plan (*Plan Nacional de Desarrollo*), a road map comprehending capacity building, income assistance and local development strategies focused in those regions most affected by the armed conflict.

The Plan was conceived as to rely on funds from public-private partnerships and international cooperation projects – reason why the resources provided by the private sector, foundations and international aid programs soon were considered as the condition for a "durable peace" to be built in Colombia. It is unsurprising, in this sense, that the Presidential Agency for Cooperation (*Agencia Presidencial de Cooperación*) is as much in the spotlights of governmental architecture nowadays as the Ministry of Defense was a couple of years ago.

Interestingly (given his familiarity with the funding realm), Duque was one of the main critics of the National Development Plan. The main resistance of the newly elected president refers to what he sees as an excessive multiplication of governmental agencies that results in unnecessary public spending. In his campaign, Duque suggested that, if elected, he would extinguish the Territorial Renewal Agency (*Agencia de Renovación del Territorio*), which is currently in charge of implementing development programs in selected municipalities according to how they have been affected by the armed conflict and their institutional weakness. Instead, Duque seems inclined to transfer this responsibility to the Ministry of Agriculture – which would surely result in a rarefied attention towards those programs, once disputing positions in the agenda with policies aimed at boosting the agribusiness in Colombia. In this sense, despite the surprise with his criticism at first glance, the terms and suggestions constituting Duque's critical view of the National Development Plan may come as expected – given his proximity with the agrobusiness sector in Colombia.

Importantly, if Duque's position sketches a possible rupture with Santos' post-conflict agenda, it is fundamental to underline that the agrobusiness sector has been enjoying a very privileged position within governmental circles since the early 2000's – that is, even before the Santos' administration. Indeed, while investing the "rural Colombia" with the responsibility of a "durable peace" through a set of policies allegedly focused on the *campesino*, development programs have actually been operating towards benefiting large-scale agrobusiness. Constituted by armed conflict, population displacement, land dispute, and economic profit, this dynamic is not a particular feature of the most recent times in Colombia – nor an exclusive feature of Colombia, one could very plausibly argue. Nevertheless, the

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early-2000's have seen some of these processes taking shape, as the re-organization of violence in Colombia has been stabilized.

Indeed, for many years, sectors such as palm oil, mining, and wood-extraction have been significantly benefiting from the conditions emerging from the symbiosis between the armed conflict and the "pacification" of Colombia. In the 2000's, however, some of these sectors have gone through a boom in their businesses, in large measure, due to a sharp fall of land prices in the regions most affected by the armed conflict. The case of palm oil is emblematic in this regard: in the Magdalena Medio region, terrified by paramilitary violence, many *campesinos* (tenant farmers) sold their lands for an insignificant price in order to pay for the displacement expenses or even abandoned their lands before selling it[8]. In this sense, the persistent and massive internal displacement characterizing the period stretching from the late-1990's to the 2000's has coexisted – unsurprisingly – with the rise of Colombia as one of the greatest palm oil producers in the world. This, in a context in which Colombia was starting to circulate in the international vocabulary as a "success story", for purportedly having solved its deep-rooted violence problems through so-called efficient security policies[9]. Here, we see the security-development nexus pulsing throughout the whole process, from Pastrana to Santos.

"Doing well out of war"[10]

The dynamics above lead us to three main conclusions. First, just as we have seen with the overview of security policies in Colombia, there are remarkable continuities between Santos and Uribe, one of the closest political allies to Duque, as regards the centrality of the Colombian agrobusiness in development dynamics in Colombia. More than this: as argued here, the boom experienced by this sector has both benefited from the armed conflict as it has from the stabilized re-organization of violence in the "post-conflict" context. As we have seen, the security-development nexus guiding the relations between the Colombian government and the private sector has stretched across times of war and peace, throughout Pastrana, Uribe, and Santos.

Second: given the centrality of those to which Duque is already familiar with in the current configuration of the "post-conflict" agenda, it is unlikely that he turns the table in this regard. As Duque might have learnt from his professional trajectory prior to his election as the next Colombian president, markets are not fond of ruptures. On the contrary, his professional trajectory is in tune with the rationale to which donors operate.

Third, if the resources and economic opportunities provided by the private sector are claimed as a key condition for the implementation of the "post-conflict" agenda, the analysis here developed seems to point in another direction. As I argued, once the armed conflict created the conditions for the boom of the Colombian agrobusiness, peacemaking has offered the stabilizing conditions for business to prosper. In this sense, rather than inquiring how the private sector can contribute to the "post-conflict" agenda, we should inquire how the "post-conflict" has been contributing for the private sector to prosper.

Notes

[1] I have, elsewhere, addressed the limits of a manufactured dilemma between "war" and "peace" as the poles representing, respectively, the "no" and the "yes" in the referendum held in October 2016. See (in Portuguese): Viana, Manuela Trindade. (2016) A paz é mais complexa: o referendo na Colômbia e a guerra na paz. *PCECS*. Available at: <https://redepcecs.com/2016/11/14/a-paz-e-mais-complexa-o-referendo-na-colombia-e-a-guerra-na-paz/>.

[2] Importantly, almost 50% of the Colombian population did not vote in this election (47,81%).

[3] Plan Colombia was a US-funded plan aimed at fighting drug trafficking in Colombia. The Plan operated with the assumption that counternarcotic operations could effectively weaken the fire power of "illegal armed groups" in Colombia, given that such groups found in drug trafficking the resources to buy weaponry and equipment – hence the vocabulary of "narcoguerrillas". The Plan was set to be implemented for 5 years (1999-2005), and its renewal was approved by the US Congress for an additional 5-year period (2005-2010). For more on how the debates in the

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Congress about the renewal of the Plan unfolded, see: VEILLETTE, Connie. (2005). *Plan Colombia: A Progress Report*. (GAO-10-837). CRS Report for Congress No. RL 32774. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service. For a critical view on how Plan Colombia has been framed as a “model”, see: ISACSON, Adam. (2010). *Don't Call it a Model*. Washington, D.C.: WOLA.

[4] During Santos' mandate as the Ministry of Defense, there has been at least two widely known “deeds” of Colombian Army: *Operación Jaque* (as “check”, in chess) and *Operación Fénix*.

[5] Juan Manuel Santos himself was the minister of Finance from 2000 to 2002, during Andrés Pastrana's administration.

[6] New Public Management refers to a set of practices through which governmental agencies incorporate routines and vocabularies characteristic of the private sector, under the assumption that the latter could provide formulae aimed at optimizing the use of resources and rationalizing the work routines and performance reporting in a given institution. In a nutshell, New Public Management rests upon the claim that the public sphere has a lot to learn from the private sector as regards practices related to efficiency and impact (i.e. cost-benefit).

[7] Paul Collier is an emblematic figure of the transformation of the mission of the World Bank from post-conflict reconstruction to conflict prevention, through the incorporation of development as the core concern of this institution. See, for instance: Collier, Paul. (2003). *Breaking the conflict trap: Civil War and Development Policy*. New York: World Bank.

[8] For a detailed analysis on how these dynamics take place and how they affect *campesinos* in Colombia, see: Molano, Alfredo. (2013). *Dignidad Campesina: entre la realidad y la esperanza*. Bogotá, D.C.: Icono.

[9] See: DeShazo, Peter; Primiani, Tanya; McLean, Phillip. (2007). *Back from the Brink. Evaluating Progress in Colombia, 1999–2007*. Washington, D.C: CSIS. Available at: https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/media/csis/pubs/071112-backfromthebrink-web.pdf.

[10] The title of this section appropriates the title of a well-known article by Paul Collier, but with contrasting analytical purposes.

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