

Poor peacebuilding risks power vacuums in Colombia

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On March 30, the Colombian government and the National Liberation Army (ELN) signed a framework agreement in Caracas formally to launch peace talks. Meanwhile, negotiations between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) are in their final stages. The coordination of negotiations with Colombia's two leftist guerrilla groups is crucial in ensuring the security and stability of their territorial strongholds after they make peace.

What next

In some guerrilla strongholds, demobilised fighters will probably have more legitimacy than central state representatives to engage in local politics. Peace will therefore rely on the government gaining credibility by partnering with local decisionmakers, including ex-combatants. With the FARC likely to sign a peace treaty long before the ELN, the latter may recruit disillusioned FARC members. However, the ELN's peace trajectory may encourage members of both groups to turn to violent crime instead.

Analysis

While political discourse is deeply polarised regarding the benefits of peace agreements with the guerrillas, few in Colombia's marginalised regions expect the signing of accords to improve their daily lives to any great degree.

In such areas, a longstanding absence of official institutions has seen violent non-state actors replace the state in providing governance and basic services such as healthcare and road infrastructure (see [INTERNATIONAL: Neglect fosters illicit governance - July 8, 2015](#)).

Putumayo and Arauca in particular constitute regions of shadow governance, and are strongholds of the FARC and the ELN respectively, though the FARC also has some presence in Arauca (see [LATIN AMERICA: shadow governance zones - April 5, 2016](#)).

Shadow economies and governance

The geographical locations of Putumayo and Arauca on the borders of Ecuador and Venezuela, respectively, make them ideal for drug trafficking and other forms of transnational organised crime.

The extremely low price of petrol in Venezuela makes gasoline smuggling particularly common in Arauca, while arms trafficking serves as an income source in Putumayo.

Such activities are crucial to the war efforts of the guerrilla groups, and they also provide valuable sources of income for local people who, in the absence of legal economic opportunities, can sustain their livelihoods as coca farmers or smugglers.

In such a context, the guerrilla groups that permit and run illegal businesses become the providers of jobs and the guarantors of communities' wellbeing. The state is often at best viewed as absent and at worst as an active aggressor for attempting to impede businesses.

The government's aerial fumigation of coca crops became a particularly strong source of resentment in many areas.

Impact

- Necessary peacebuilding cooperation with guerrillas will leave the government open to attacks from the opposition and peace process critics.
- The success of foreign aid workers will depend on their building local democratic capacities rather than assisting the government.
- State efforts to tackle BACRIM encroachment by force could destroy any hard-won legitimacy with local populations.

President Juan Manuel Santos banned the practice in October 2015, citing suspicions that the glyphosate used might be carcinogenic (see COLOMBIA: Government will push for crop substitution - October 2, 2015). In addition to the possible health hazards, however, the practice of flying over peasant farmers' fields and destroying their crops was extremely bad public relations on the part of the government, and was far from conducive to the peace process.

Crop fumigation has left a legacy of resentment towards the state

Although aerial fumigation is now banned, years of perceived attacks have led to deep mistrust of the state in some areas and have given guerrilla groups local legitimacy as defenders and providers.

The guerrillas' role in society goes far beyond local economics, however. Armed groups provide community conflict resolution mechanisms and often instill some rule of law.

For many inhabitants of guerrilla strongholds, supporting the FARC or the ELN is a pragmatic survival decision rather than an ideological choice. Weakened power structures in the event of a peace agreement could create uncertainty over where authority lies and what rules the public should follow to keep themselves safe.

Peace zone complications

Uncertainty is compounded by peace process discussions on the issue of 'peace zones', where former FARC members might be held under conditions of restricted freedom, rather than having to go to prison (see COLOMBIA: Country's future rests on justice talks - December 8, 2015).

The FARC's request that there be a zone in Putumayo raises many questions for the local population, regarding how such an area would be governed.

Civilian populations within such zones could find themselves stigmatised as FARC collaborators. They may also have grievances if they are excluded from the benefits that ex-combatants receive for demobilising.

Meanwhile, in Arauca, where the FARC and the ELN were at war with each other from 2006-10, coordination between the two peace processes is particularly critical. While the groups now coexist peacefully in parts of the territory, mistrust remains.

The ELN has more political influence in the department, including among government authorities in the departmental capital city, Arauca. This has implications for the post-agreement period. If, as is almost certain, the FARC signs peace first, local ex-FARC members may join the ELN.

The government has already announced that there will not be any peace zones next to borders, but it is considering establishing one elsewhere in Arauca, not near the border. If these are zones of strategic importance for drug trafficking routes towards Venezuela, there is a risk that the ELN could attack them to regain control.

Demobilisation zones could become soft targets

Political legacies of shadow governance

In the extremely unlikely event that the FARC and the ELN sign peace agreements concurrently, violence between the two groups may be avoided, but local politics will constitute a major democratic challenge.

Whether through respect or fear, local populations are likely to support the group -- or its political successor -- that previously imposed the rules of the game and took care of the community.

Support will therefore not necessarily be based on a participatory process to shape a new political agenda, unless local communities are trained in democratic processes and receive the necessary protection and reassurance from the state that this will bring more benefits and security than adhering to the rules of non-state actors.

Neo-paramilitary threat

In Arauca, Putumayo and other areas of shadow governance, third parties may take advantage once the FARC and the ELN lay down their arms.

Right wing, neo-paramilitary crime groups known as BACRIM have expanded in recent years, especially the Urabenos (see COLOMBIA: Peace talks offer BACRIM opportunity - February 13, 2015), who declared a community shutdown across northern Colombia on March 31, successfully forcing businesses and schools to close and transport to stop for the weekend.

Despite the subsequent capture of dozens of alleged Urabenos by state security forces, and a series of successful strikes against the organisation over the last year, the group is extremely powerful and in many parts of the country is better placed than the state to fill the power vacuums that will be left by the FARC and ELN.

Should areas of shadow governance by the guerrillas fall to the Urabenos, rather than the government, more violence and oppression will result, triggering a new cycle of armed conflict.

The Urabenos shut down
northern Colombia on March

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