

COLOMBIA AT THE LIMITS OF HOPE

Of all the major countries of Latin America Colombia is perhaps the least well known in the rest of the world. Nevertheless, for many decades Colombia has succeeded in exporting the image of an almost perfect democracy in which the military is controlled and elections for the presidency and other public offices are held peacefully in accordance with established rules.

Since 1901 Colombia has experienced no successful political revolutions and only one coup d'état (1953-1957): this "privileged" history has inspired the most favorable interpretations of Colombian democracy abroad.

But what is the true situation? Can such an image of the country be sustained when:

1) The oldest guerrilla force in the world exists in Colombia, along with four other similar groups who have gained considerable popularity and authority both in their own right and as a result of crisis within the two traditional political parties.

2) It has recently come to light that a catholic priest was assassinated by landowners because of his defense of the poor.*

Obviously a number of fundamental questions have to be raised--questions about the nature of these two traditional parties and about the real extent of public participation in political life; about the distribution of wealth in general and land distribution in particular; about access to educational institutions; about the level of unemployment and the power of the military and the church. We need to ask precisely why, in such a supposedly almost perfect democratic regime, there are so many strikes, so much violence, so many prominent guerrilla groups and such powerful narcotics organizations.

*An anonymous letter was published in March of this year, giving the names of the assassins. (See Daniel Samper Pizano, "Ulcue: un crimen feudal" El Tiempo, Bogotá, 13 de marzo 1985, p. 5-A.) Moreover, last December the President stated in a private meeting with American bishops that he was sure that the murderers of priest Alvaro Ulcue were "terratenientes".

This is not the place to respond to all of these questions, but the issues which they concern are at the basis of the particular situation which I should now like to discuss.

On November 20, 1982 at the instigation of President Belisario Betancur an Amnesty Law was approved by Congress, and in 1984 three of the four major guerrilla groups signed agreements with the Colombian government. Both of these developments made decisive contributions to the national peace, a peace that is "pushing" its way through but whose future is still uncertain.

The signing of the agreements proceeded as follows. The "Armed Forces of the Colombian Revolution" (FARC) were the first to sign in April 1984. The other groups -- the "19th of April Movement" (M-19), the "Popular Army of Liberation" (EPL) and the "Workers' self defense" (ADO)--all signed in October of the same year. Only the "Army of National Liberation" (ELN) did not sign. The agreements included truces but did not require the guerrillas to turn over their arms.

The various guerrilla groups have different ideological orientations and came to somewhat different agreements with the government.

a) FARC, the largest guerrilla organization, is reported to be supported by the legal Colombian Communist party. Its agreement included a truce of one year during which FARC members (more than 10,000) could regain their legal status without giving up their arms. There were also proposals for reforms to establish full democracy in the country and to guarantee the freedom for new forces to emerge on the national scene. A high-level commission was set up to supervise the year of truce and the carrying out of the agrarian reforms.

b) The very active and popular "19th of April Movement: (M-19) is a nationalist group that derived its name from the date in 1970 when the victory of Gustavo Rojas Pinilla in the presidential election was not recognised by the incumbent regime. In a few years M-19 won tremendous popularity because of its nationalist ideology and acute tactical skills. The strategy of making agreements with the government originated in 1980 when most of the foreign ambassadors in Bogota were kidnapped during an official function.

M-19, the Maoist "Popular Army of Liberation" (EPL) and Autodefensa Obrera (ADO) signed agreements including cease-fires and demands for a "National Dialogue." The agreements did not specify exactly what the concept "National Dialogue" was supposed to mean, and this has been widely discussed since. For example, the well-known sociologist Orlando Fals Borda believes that the purpose of the National Dialogue "is to organize the people in such a fashion that

it is they who control their power". (Correo MP, Nº 8, Bogotá, Agosto 1984)

Essentially, the National Dialogue consists of discussion of national problems at all levels--high-level commissions, popular groups, "cabildos abiertos," academic organizations, etc. -- seeking solutions in accordance with the needs of the people.

It is easy to see that, in their search for peaceful change, these agreements involved substantial aspects of the political, economic and social situation, and this reflects the deep crisis of the "perfect democracy" of Colombia. However, it should also be recognized that President Betancur made the decision to start this attempt to find peaceful solutions against the will of his own (conservative) party and that of the liberal party, both of which opposed the agreements. The traditional Colombian church has given only timid and ambiguous support. Their sense of professionalism and loyalty to the Constitution have had the Armed Forces to support President Betancur. However, such support does not reflect the political sentiment of an officer corps, which is constantly being incited to stage a coup.

Come what may, Betancur is convinced that without reforms and without the incorporation of the guerrilla groups into the nation's political life there will never be peace in Colombia. The main opposition to the agreements comes basically from the influential and powerful right-wing sectors in each party, who criticize the fact that the guerrillas are not returning their arms. But the history of Colombia has shown that amnesty laws have served as a pretext to disband guerrilla groups and assassinate their members. So, behind the argument about the return of arms, the oligarchy hides its true position: nothing must be allowed to touch its privileges.

Thus, in the present Colombian political situation, this peaceful attempt to solve the nation's problems by civilian means can be seen as the last chance to avert civil war.

The breakdown of this process will result once again in a face-to-face confrontation between the guerrilla groups, now much stronger because during the truce they have increased their effectiveness, and the Armed Forces, looking forward to the moment when they can return to their long battle against the guerrillas.

If this happens, we shall see Colombia transformed into a new El Salvador. As the popular saying has it, "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." The democratic current of the United States should support the agreements signed between the guerrilla groups and the

Colombian government. Colombia is still a land of the lords, a "señorial" state. At the very least, the program for political modernization contained in the agreements is a necessary step towards economic and social reforms. This is a matter of national urgency.

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