

GUERRILLAS, POLITICAL VIOLENCE, AND THE PEACE PROCESS IN COLOMBIA

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- LAS GUERRAS DE LA PAZ.* By OLGA BEHAR. (Bogotá: Planeta Colombiana Editorial, 1985. Pp. 415.)
- PROCESO A LA VIOLENCIA Y PROCESO DE PAZ.* By JAIME CASTRO. (Bogotá: Oveja Negra, 1986. Pp. 98.)
- HISTORIA DE UNA TRAICION.* By LAURA RESTREPO. (Bogotá: Plaza and Janes, 1986. Pp. 255.)
- LA GUERRA POR LA PAZ.* By ENRIQUE SANTOS CALDERON. (Bogotá: Fondo Editorial CEREC, 1985. Pp. 324.)
- EL PROCESO DE PAZ: UN PASO ADELANTE, DOS PASOS ATRAS.* By GERMAN SILVA GARCIA. (Bogotá: Comité de Solidaridad con los Presos Políticos and Fundación de Estudios Sociales y Investigaciones Políticos, 1985. Pp. 171.)
- BETANCUR Y LA CRISIS NACIONAL.* By ALFREDO VAZQUEZ CARRIZOSA. (Bogotá: Ediciones Aurora, 1986. Pp. 287.)

Five years after President Belisario Betancur began the peace process in Colombia in 1982, Minister of Defense General Rafael Samudio informed the public of the existence of four guerrilla groups in the country with more than six thousand armed members.¹ Guerrilla actions have included attacks on police and military stations, abductions, assassinations, and bombings, while armed forces and police have been charged by human rights groups with extrajudicial executions, torture, and "disappearances"—the so-called dirty war. What went wrong with the peace process in a country that has suffered thousands of deaths from almost uninterrupted guerrilla warfare since the end of the 1940s?

Although the matter has been much less publicized than the crisis in Central America, Colombia has been facing a serious political crisis since the late 1970s. The situation has continued to deteriorate in recent years. Since 1981 mounting criminal violence and increasing guerrilla warfare, coupled since 1985 with widespread political murders of left-wing and liberal personalities, have aggravated the crisis further.

Although few analysts outside Colombia have tried to come to grips with these developments, more than thirty books and many more articles have been published within the country discussing both traditional *violencia* and the ongoing violence. Differences in approach, practical experience, and analysis make any selection of works problematic. I have opted to review six books representing a wide variety of viewpoints and approaches. Given the intrinsic complexity of the peace process, however, a definitive study of its roots, development, and consequences will require more perspective than is now possible.

The Colombian Political System and the Peace Process

At least four factors must be taken into account in any analysis of Colombian domestic politics. First, although Colombia is an open society and its media are not threatened by censorship, the quantity of information available does not provide a complete picture of certain events, such as the occupation of the Palace of Justice in November of 1985 by M-19 *guerrilleros*. Information is often confusing, contradictory, and manipulated for political reasons. It is risky for journalists to report on issues like guerrillas, drugs, and crime.² Moreover, even if information is subsequently clarified, often no explanation is given as to why the distorted information was wrong in the first place.

Second, the political elite in Colombia—which is made up of politicians, leading businessmen, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, and the military—is extremely closed to the outside world. The reasons why certain decisions were made and what consultations took place between whom are extremely difficult to establish.

Third, despite the fact that Colombia is a democracy, the armed forces and their leadership play an extraordinary and sometimes dominant role in security-related questions. The fact that guerrilla warfare has been going on for decades has necessarily affected civilian-military relations. Consequently, the fiction of a purely civilian government, which is civilian only in formal terms, clouds important issues, particularly when dealing with the peace process.

Fourth, some actors who employ violence for political or other reasons are intertwined—including combinations involving the civilian government, the armed forces, right-wing paramilitary groups, guerrilla organizations, criminal gangs, and drug-related armed bands. As a result, it is often difficult to identify which groups are responsible for which assaults, abductions, and assassinations. For example, sectors of the guerrilla movement are publicly criticized for collaborating with the drug lords ("*narcoguerrillas*"), military officers are tried for transporting drugs, and the drug business wields major influence in political and

economic circles (it is estimated to produce between four and eight billion dollars per year).

Colombia has experienced a long history of amnesties, peace talks, and reconciliation efforts because of its many civil wars with excessive casualties. Attempts to start peace talks with the guerrillas were cautiously undertaken by former presidents Alfonso López Michelsen (1974–1978) and Julio César Turbay Ayala (1978–1982). Such attempts proved futile, however. When guerrilla attacks intensified and widespread human rights violations focused international attention on Colombia, the lack of credibility of President Turbay Ayala's efforts made any meaningful progress impossible.

Only after Belisario Betancur won the election against López Michelsen for the 1982–1986 term was a comprehensive peace effort undertaken, at a time when the legitimacy of the government had suffered seriously. After two secret meetings with M–19 leaders, a truce was signed in 1984 with four guerrilla groups.³ The groups participating were the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC),⁴ the Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL), the Movimiento 19 de abril (M–19), and the Autodefensa Obrera (ADO). Shortly afterward, however, new fighting broke out repeatedly. While it is difficult to blame one side only (the public usually blames the guerrillas), there is no question that the military as an institution opposed the peace process from the beginning and has deliberately provoked at least some of these incidents.⁵ With the EPL and the M–19 returning to guerrilla warfare in 1985, only the FARC remains in compliance with what both sides viewed as a shaky truce. But in October 1988, the government announced that it regarded the truce with the FARC as suspended until the FARC Secretariat had resolved the ambiguities in its role in the peace process.⁶

Several thousand guerrilleros and members of the armed forces and police have died in the last several years during the fighting and bomb attacks launched by the guerrillas. Large-scale political assassinations have targeted traditional as well as left-wing politicians and activists, with the majority of the victims belonging to the Unión Patriótica (UP). This left-wing political party created by the FARC in 1985 has lost about seven hundred members to assassins. Meanwhile, the Colombian government can neither conduct serious investigations nor detain suspects, let alone punish the persons guilty of these serious crimes. Under such conditions, asking guerrilleros to return to "civilian life" is scarcely realistic because no civilian life has existed in Colombia for years. It is also clear that the state cannot protect even high-ranking functionaries, as attested by the murders of Minister of Justice Lara Bonilla in 1984 and Attorney General Mauro Hoyos in 1988. Beyond the

deaths resulting from armed confrontations are the increasing large-scale violations of human rights that usually take the forms of extrajudicial executions and "disappearances."⁷

Colombian Contributions to Analysis of the Peace Process

Olga Behar's *Las guerras de la paz* contains more than fifty contributions from sources ranging from former presidents (Lleras Restrepo and Turbay Ayala), cabinet ministers, and military officers to guerrilleros and former guerrilleros belonging to the FARC, the M-19, the EPL, the ADO, and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN). Even so, the collection lacks contributions from representatives of the Catholic Church, trade unions, and Indian communities, and traditional political parties are underrepresented. Behar, a radio and television journalist who now lives in exile, begins with La Violencia in 1948 and ends with the account of a judge who survived the occupation of the Palace of Justice.

Las guerras de la paz is an invaluable source for every student of Colombian politics, particularly because of its wide coverage of participants, years, and places. Yet it does not pretend to provide any set of explanations or theories about guerrilla war or the future of the Colombian political system. A careful reading of these accounts left this reader with the sense that both sides have demonstrated strong motivation for a sustained peace process. It has apparently failed thus far for lack of a clear concept, rigid mutual perceptions having made it impossible to view adversarial moves as anything other than maneuvers, and also because some sectors have consistently opposed and manipulated all attempts. Unfortunately, it remains unclear who these sectors were and what were their interests.

Liberal party member Jaime Castro served as interior minister under President Betancur from 1984 to 1986. His *Proceso a la violencia y proceso de paz* contains the last official analysis presented by the Betancur government to Congress regarding the results of the peace process, its weak points, and future challenges. Castro's report discusses five major successes: having found a way back from the point of no return existing at the end of Turbay Ayala's government, a situation that threatened a civil war; strengthening the democratic system; the government's winning the political struggle; creating conditions for guerrilla demobilization; and making clear distinctions between forces favoring and opposing peace (pp. 42–49). Castro views fundamental reforms in the political system and effective decentralization as urgent next steps. He rejects criticisms of the passivity and reluctance of the traditional parties, although he observes mildly that the Liberal party could have improved coordination of its activities on legal projects frequently

presented by the government to Congress. In the end, Congress made few decisions. The problem was that Betancur was leading a government dominated by the Conservative party that included only a few hand-picked Liberals, and the Liberal party controlled the Congress.

Castro identifies as major problem areas guerrilla activities and stances, the deteriorating economic situation that caused cuts in the national rehabilitation plan, the drawn-out legislative process, and possibly a lack of support from traditional parties as well as delayed political reform. The conclusion expresses Castro's conviction as to the necessity of reforming the country in order to achieve peace, although no specific ideas are offered about how guerrilla groups who have not accepted the peace process thus far could be involved in a dialogue.

Journalist Laura Restrepo was named to the presidential commission on negotiation and dialogue in 1984. Her account, *Historia de una traición*, covers the beginning of the process until the M-19 returned to guerrilla warfare in June 1985. Restrepo provides a vivid picture of what it means to work at the "front," trying to encourage and deepen the dialogue between the government and the guerrillas. She describes her conversations with M-19 guerrilla leaders, military officers, Jaime Castro, and President Betancur. The impression conveyed is that of a rather uncoordinated enterprise on the part of the government, with different forces sending contradictory signals: the military leadership actively opposing and subverting the process, the president seriously committed to it, and Castro playing a somewhat ambiguous role. According to Restrepo, what led to the breakdown was the lack of political will and lack of control of the military. Yet she often appears to take at face value explanations from the M-19 in answer to criticism for breaking the truce.

Another account of the peace process has been provided by Enrique Santos Calderón, a member of the famous Santos family who own *El Tiempo*, the most important daily in Colombia. Originally published in that paper between 1982 to 1985, Santos Calderón's account was later published in book form under the title *La guerra por la paz*, with a foreword by Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez. Santos Calderón's perceptive comments on the peace process are shaped by his keen sense of the ambiguities involved. On several occasions, he discusses the activities of paramilitary groups whose members have consistently been linked to active police and military officers. Yet only one group, MAS (Muerte a los Secuestradores), has been investigated, in this case by Attorney General Carlos Jiménez Gómez (himself on a death list since the fall of 1987). Even here, no serious steps were taken by either civilian or military justice. Elsewhere in the book, Santos Calderón frequently criticizes ambiguities in the pronouncements by FARC and M-19 guerrilla leaders, who in his view were engaged in a kind of parallel

war and peace strategy that made it easy for skeptics and adversaries of the peace process to discount their statements and promises. Santos Calderón's belief in the process apparently became more and more shaken in 1985. *La guerra por la paz* contains a useful collection of relevant documents, including complete texts of the 1984 truce with the FARC, ADO, M-19, and EPL groups, as well as amnesty and pardon laws and a key document issued by the military high command in 1984.

El proceso de paz: un paso adelante, dos pasos atrás by Germán Silva García, starts with first steps taken by President Turbay Ayala. A jurist who had worked for the Jesuit-directed Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular (CINEP) in Bogotá, Silva García provides a chronological description of events from the perspective of an academic observer. He views poverty and the restricted political system as the causes of the emergence and growth of the guerrilla groups, and his discussion concentrates on the limitations imposed on democracy under the Frente Nacional. In Silva García's view, President Betancur wanted to play the role of the dove, and Minister of Defense Vega Uribe and Jaime Castro became the hawks. The author also points out the problem arising from the government's contradictory signals during this time.

Although Silva García's description and analysis constitute a well-documented overview of major developments, a larger systematic analysis is lacking. In his view, the military and the government are responsible for the demise of the process, although he also criticizes the guerrillas for their rigid and schematic political analysis, the self-exclusion of the ELN and the Frente Ricardo Franco from the peace process, and the occupation of the Palace of Justice (pp. 139, 162).

The most comprehensive account of events from the 1970s through the occupation of the palace is provided by Alfredo Vázquez Carrizosa in *Betancur y la crisis nacional*. As a former foreign minister and the current president of the Colombian human rights committee, he was targeted on a death list published in Colombian newspapers in the fall of 1987, along with numerous other left-wing and liberal public figures. His analysis is the only one that covers the roots and evolution of the socioeconomic crisis in the 1970s and U.S. policy toward Central America and the Contadora initiative. According to Vázquez Carrizosa, internal factors caused the political crisis, the excessive concentration of land and income, the incapacity of the political system to integrate citizens beyond the boundaries of the traditional parties, widespread clientelism, and corruption in government and administration. He focuses specifically on the negative repercussions of the Frente Nacional in limiting political participation, excluding the left, and restricting the capacity of successive governments to investigate widespread violations of human rights. Vázquez Carrizosa alone discusses at length the role of economic factors in exacerbating the political crisis: the crisis of the

development model, increasing monopolization and speculation in the economy, and the lack of a distributive model of development, all of which he believes have swelled the ranks of the poor and marginalized sectors of the population.

Three conclusions emerge clearly from *Betancur y la crisis nacional*. First, Vázquez Carrizosa believes in a political solution rather than a military victory over the guerrillas. Second, he perceives human rights violations and governmental inability to prevent them as major factors in the peace process. Third, he stresses the need for structural political reform to eradicate the causes of nonviolent and violent dissidence. The author seems nevertheless to lack insight into when and how political decisions were reached during the peace process under Betancur, or else he prefers not to publish them at this time.

The works reviewed here reveal four major weaknesses, some of which might be remedied by greater perspective on the events. First, information on guerrilla groups as to their founding, internal discussions, recruitment, and political goals is conspicuously absent from all six works, probably because such information is seldom obtainable (in the Behar collection, for example, several guerrilleros and guerrilla leaders explain their positions but do not provide this kind of information). As a result, no clear picture emerges of the forces at work on the guerrilla side of the conflict. More knowledge about political tendencies within guerrilla groups is obviously needed to comprehend the process more fully. Hints are given in a couple of contributions, a few interviews with guerrilla leaders, and some official programs, but they are insufficient for genuine understanding.

Second, a similar problem exists with respect to the other side, which includes the government, traditional parties, and the political elite. Despite the availability of much information and numerous anecdotes, government action is often discussed only superficially, as policy outputs. Analysts apparently know little about how and why certain governmental actions developed. Motives, forms of consultations, and "schools" among politicians and business leaders seem difficult to establish. Most important, the relationships among politicians and party, business, and military leaders remain obscure except regarding extraordinary events such as the ousting of Defense Minister General Fernando Landazábal. The political and economic elites in Colombia thus appear to be excessively hermetic.

Third, data are an essential component of any peace process in order to answer the key questions. How did the political violence and strength of the guerrillas develop over the years? Did violations of the truce (usually by guerrillas) as reported in the mass media actually take place, or if not, what really happened? Information and analysis about these events are notoriously unreliable and often politically motivated

because information depends on the military commander in the area or on the high command of the armed forces. Only Vázquez Carrizosa's *Betancur y la crisis nacional* offers statistical data drawn from governmental sources.

Gabriel García Márquez posed the key question in the title of his introduction to the Santos Calderón account: "Whom does the president believe?" Various assaults initially attributed to guerrillas later turned out to have been committed by others. It appears from all accounts that the government relied greatly on the military for information and analysis. In contrast, the commission for verification, appointed on an ad hoc basis by the president, has rarely made pronouncements attributing responsibility for breaches of the truce. The government, and particularly Jaime Castro, employed the commission primarily to reestablish peace in the zone where hostilities or other public disturbances had occurred. It often remained unclear to the Colombian public who was responsible for keeping the peace or breaking the truce, an important factor for establishing confidence in the peace process. The violent occupation of the Palace of Justice by M-19 guerrillas undoubtedly ended the active period of the peace process by creating the generalized impression that the guerrillas had cheated the government after it had made a serious attempt to start a dialogue and restore peace.

Finally, what are lacking (with the partial exception of Castro's account) are a concept and strategy for conducting a successful peace process. Such a strategy would have to include a realistic evaluation of which guerrilla groups are interested in a dialogue, what the medium-term aims of a peace process could and should be, and what means should be used for starting the dialogue and persuading key sectors of society (leading politicians, the military, business and church leaders, and the media) as well as the population at large to support the policies chosen.

Has the Peace Process Failed?

Students of Colombian politics require answers to four broad questions relating to the peace process. Why did the government led by Betancur start the process and what were the government's exact motives? What were the motives of the guerrilla groups who accepted the truce in 1984? What were the main factors in the breakdown that began as early as 1985? Are there any possibilities for restarting the peace process with reasonable hopes that it will succeed this time?

President Betancur's term of office began at the best possible moment for initiating a serious peace process. A liberal, dynamic president made peace his banner, and such a process looked attractive to

the political elite (although probably less so to the economic elite) when compared with continuing guerrilla warfare. But the process was closely associated with the president himself. It now appears that the plan lacked widespread support, and certainly Betancur's base of support eroded quickly after the first setbacks. The majority of the Liberal party consistently criticized the peace process publicly and vigorously from the beginning, and leading Conservative politicians also remained skeptical. Meanwhile, the Catholic hierarchy took an inactive role, and some media (like *El Tiempo*) displayed a highly critical attitude from the start.

The guerrillas probably considered the moment ideal, given the lack of legitimacy of the government, their own increasing popular support, and (for the first time) a president from a modest family background who did not represent purely oligarchical interests and who had declared that not one drop of blood should be shed in the future. Thus for the first time, it seemed possible to discuss and press for political and social reform. Whether the guerrillas actually wanted to exploit the advantages of a parallel legal (political) and extralegal (military) front to prepare for the next decisive battle is open to speculation. It is likely that some guerrilla commanders took this line, but certainly the guerrillas also understood the considerable dangers involved in accepting the peace process: a probable schism in the guerrilla movement between groups who accepted the truce and others who refused to grant the government the legitimacy to crush the dissident groups militarily. Given the ongoing paramilitary assassination campaigns and the experience of the 1950s, when many guerrilleros from the Llanos Orientales were murdered after they surrendered, there continues to be an immediate danger that guerrilla members and leaders will be assassinated once they return to civilian life. The sad history of the Unión Patriótica is a vivid case in point. Finally, in political terms, accepting the process would lend new legitimacy to the government, which might later blame the guerrillas if the process broke down, which is exactly what happened.

Based on existing information, the main factors precipitating the early breakdown were a lack of political will on both sides and insufficient government control over the military. The military leadership's consistent and aggressive opposition to the peace process is probably the single most important factor on the government side. Although a good analysis of the guerrillas' role is still lacking, it can be conjectured that the FARC probably hoped to continue some of its activities while blaming other guerrilla groups for them. The guerrillas' lack of either a political project or long-term perspective on the consequences of a deteriorating political situation in continuing the armed struggle has seriously undermined both the credibility and scope of action of the guer-

rilla groups, especially the M-19. After so many years of fighting, the keys seem to have been a lack of confidence among conflicting parties and a lack of individuals and mechanisms who would immediately work toward reestablishing confidence lost in recurring armed confrontations after the truce had been signed. Also, although rarely mentioned, the lack of business community involvement in the process is another important source of failure that should be explored further.

The new government of President Virgilio Barco (1986–1990) has announced the continuation of the process, but with a change in strategy. Instead of a peace commission, the dialogue is now being conducted directly from the president's office through a presidential adviser on rehabilitation and reconciliation. The central goal is to convince the FARC to demobilize its forces as soon as possible. But neither this goal nor the incorporation of new guerrilla groups in the peace process has been achieved so far. In the spring of 1988, the M-19 abducted former presidential candidate Alvaro Gómez Hurtado to pressure the government to hold talks with the guerrillas. After a new peace plan presented by the government in September 1988 failed to attract the interest of guerrilla groups (except for the M-19), the general expectation has been that guerrilla fighting and the dirty warfare will increase.

NOTES

1. "Nuestra tarea se ha facilitado: min. defensa," *El Espectador* (Bogotá), 12 Aug. 1987.
2. At least twenty-six journalists were murdered in the last ten years, and many others left the country because of death threats.
3. Use of the term *truce* is contested in Colombia, given that guerrilla groups are not recognized as armies. What is meant is a cessation of hostilities (*cese de fuego*).
4. The Frente Ricardo Franco of the FARC rejected the truce and continued to fight. Its leader, Javier Delgado, organized the murder of at least 160 member of his group because they were alleged to be army informers.
5. Important evidence can be found in the document from the high command of the armed forces commenting on the process and the future role of the armed forces. See Santos Calderón, *La guerra por la paz*, pp. 295–302. See also the analysis offered by the former defense minister, General Landazábal, on the position of the armed forces regarding the peace process in February 1983 in Landázabal's *El precio de la paz* (Bogotá: Planeta Colombiana Editorial, 1985), pp. 41–70.
6. "En suspenso acuerdos de la Uribe," *El Espectador*, 5 Oct. 1988.
7. See Amnesty International, *Colombia: A Human Rights Emergency* (London: Amnesty International, 1988). Criticisms by the human rights group were rejected by both the government and the military.