

Colombia's Peace Agreement under the Elected Government

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Colombia's President-elect Abelardo de la Espriella has campaigned on an 'iron fist' platform that promises to solve crime and violence through heavy military pressure, fumigation of coca plantations, and extradition of criminals to the US. But the problem he inherits is more complex than his political agenda acknowledges. The relatively centralised rebel governance the FARC once exercised across rural Colombia has been largely replaced by a fragmented criminal governance run by professional and internationalised armed groups that have significantly expanded since the 2016 Peace Agreement.

This reality makes de la Espriella's security agenda riskier than his slogans imply. The 2016 Agreement was written for territories where the FARC had governed by taxing, settling disputes, regulating illicit economies and imposing a criminal local order. After the FARC's demobilisation, the state did not fill the ensuing power vacuum. Instead, the vacuum was filled by the ELN, the Gulf Clan, the AGC, FARC splinter groups, and a shifting constellation of local gangs, all of whom compete and collude over coca production, illegal mining, extortion, and other criminal activities.

One core problem in this context is that these criminal groups do not stand outside the local communities in which they operate; they are intertwined with them. They recruit local youth, tax local shops, move goods along the roads everyone uses, and offer the only income many households can find. When armed actors and civilians are this entangled, an iron-fist policy cannot reliably tell the combatant from the neighbour, or the trafficker from the farmer who sells to them, because there is no other buyer. An iron fist applied to such contexts tends not to remove criminals surgically but is likely to cause indiscriminate violence against civilians. It will thus likely cause precisely the kinds of harm that the Peace Agreement was meant to end.

What is more, the new government's narrow focus on military pressure threatens to undermine the core pillars of the 2016 Peace Agreement. One of these core pillars is the Comprehensive Rural Reform, which seeks to redistribute land, among other things. This reform matters because land inequality was one of the main drivers of the Colombian conflict. A more equitable rural land access through land redistribution, formalisation of informal holdings, and support for productive use can erode armed groups' grip. We can expect that criminal authority grows when the state fails to secure peasants' livelihoods through land redistribution as laid out in the Agreement. The incoming government proposes to replace the agrarian reform with military security and private-sector-led mega projects, risking leaving small farmers out of the equation.

Another important pillar of the Peace Agreement is victims' reparations through transitional justice institutions. The special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) is protected by Legislative Act 02 of 2017 and woven into the wider system of truth, justice and reparation. However, the elected president threatens to dismantle it. Eliminating it is difficult because of its protected constitutional status, wide support in Congress and international pressure. Furthermore, there is a realistic threat of slow strangulation via budget cuts, delegitimation, and selective compliance.

The future of the Peace Agreement will be a contentious process, as there is debate over whether its implementation will focus on peacebuilding or be integrated into counter-criminal security control. Colombia does require state authority, including the use of force against criminal groups; however, an overly aggressive approach that neglects the core principles of the Peace Agreement's implementation could lead to a renewed cycle of violence against the very civilians it aims to protect.

About the author

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