



Personal perspectives

In November 2001, when the peace process between the government of Andrés Pastrana Arango and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) was in crisis, the legendary FARC commander Manuel Marulanda Vélez spoke to the Colombian newspaper VOZ. He said that in order to provide continuity and stability in the peace talks, the Establishment needed to determine what was negotiable on the path to a political settlement of the conflict. It seems to me that this is the key to the negotiations, as was clearly stated in the report from the *Comisión de Personalidades*, presented to the Government and the FARC in September 2001.

The *Comisión de Personalidades* (Commission of Distinguished Citizens) – renamed the *Comisión de Notables* by the press – was appointed by agreement between the parties at the first summit held between Pastrana and Marulanda, and stipulated in the *Los Pozos Accord* of 9 February 2001. The Commission comprised four people, two proposed by the Government (the constitutional lawyer, Vladimiro Naranjo and the director of the national newspaper *El Colombiano* Ana Mercedes Gómez Martínez) and two by the FARC (the doctor Alberto Pinzón Sánchez and the director of the newspaper VOZ, Carlos A Lozano Guillén). Its mission was to produce a report with recommendations on how to reduce the intensity of the armed conflict and proposals on how to combat paramilitarism. The report was delivered in September 2000, although not signed by Ana Mercedes Gómez, who alleged differences with the rest of the commissioners.

The principal stumbling block for peace in Colombia, without ignoring the negative effect of the terrible acts

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of war, is that the Colombian establishment has not determined how far it wants to go with negotiations with the insurgency. Its position during the talks, as a rule, is limited to descriptive issues (i.e. procedures, methodology, timetables, etc.), while the in-depth issues concerning political, economic and social reforms, which in the end will be those that resolve the conflict, are relegated to second place.

The history of peace processes between the government and the FARC or the ELN confirm that whenever the time comes to address problems at the root of the Colombian conflict (political, economic, social and historical causes) in the negotiations, pressure from the 'dominant class' is exerted to break them - in the majority of cases using the military actions of the guerrilla as a pretext. This was the case with Betancur's government in 1984, in the Caracas and Tlaxcala talks during the government of César Gaviria in 1993 and in the Caguán peace process.

While the Colombian Establishment maybe has the 'will for peace' it does not have the 'will for change'. It wants peace but without eliminating the causes of the conflict, such as the lack of democracy (or at least the restriction of democratic freedoms inherent in an exclusive bipartisan political system) and the profound disintegration of the social and economic fabric.

Throughout the Colombian conflict the dominant class has tried to defeat the guerrillas militarily in order to impose surrender, an approach some call a kind of *paz de los sepulcros* (peace of tombs). The result of similar efforts in the past has been greater escalation in the armed conflict and the strengthening of the guerrillas.

The government of Pastrana acted in this way when it broke off the peace talks. The pretext was the hijacking of the plane and the kidnapping of Senator Gechem Turbay on 20 February 2002, but there is a perception that Pastrana had taken the decision to end the peace process with the FARC as far back as October 2001, under intense pressure from the right wing sectors of the traditional parties, the majority of the business sector (in particular cattle-ranchers and large landowners), the military high-command and the Embassy of the USA. With the process in crisis and lacking concrete results, the parties would have had to begin in-depth discussion of political and social issues. Instead, there was a period of inertia from October 2001 until the incident in February 2002. Throughout three and a half years the talks were focused on issues related to the acute ongoing conflict, and with aspects of form, and never reached the Common Agenda adopted by both parties in May 1999. Yet without doubt this Common Agenda was the most important and transcendental advance in the peace process.

This was exactly what the Report of the *Comisión de Personalidades* concluded. It clearly recognized the political and social character of the conflict and recommended that the Common Agenda form the basis of the negotiations in order to arrive at concrete accords or even a 'Peace Accord'. Such an accord would need to be agreed through a National Constituent Assembly, before which the guerrillas should disarm. For the Commission this was the purpose of the negotiation process.

In this context, the report proposed that there should be a bilateral truce for six months, renewable on joint agreement by the parties, and a bilateral commitment to respect human rights and accept IHL, in order to reduce the intensity of the conflict. This would create a better environment for the parties to advance the negotiation of the in-depth issues in the presence of different sectors of Colombian society. With regard to the paramilitaries, it recommended rooting out any relations to and protection from state agents and bringing them to justice, with the understanding that there could be no level of political recognition.

The Report of the '*Personalidades*' was directed at the peace process with the FARC, although the ELN was interested in it. It was very well received by both parties and by various sectors in the country, amongst them the Congress, the Liberal Party, the parties of the left, the trade unions, the business community and the main industrial trade associations, the Catholic Church and the diplomatic corps. Although both parties agreed to adopt it as a 'route-map' in the *San Francisco de la Sombra Accord*, the report arrived at the worst moment of crisis and the largest offensive against the process by enemies of peace in Colombia. The processes with both insurgencies failed through a unilateral rupture, in both cases by President Pastrana.

In the short term it is difficult to see how the peace processes could be reconstituted under the government of Uribe Vélez. In official policy, oriented by Washington, war has the upper hand and the attitude towards even a humanitarian accord on the issue of kidnappings and retentions is negative.

Despite this, the Report of the '*Personalidades*' could be useful in future efforts towards peace. It is fully valid as a kind of route map for the political resolution of the conflict, as is the Common Agenda, which includes the in-depth issues that could clear the way for a democratic opening in Colombia. The report underlines the political origin of the conflict, the bilateral nature of agreements, the need for a reduction in intensity of the armed conflict and for advanced political and social reforms.