Colombia Visit: Personal Thoughts
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Excitement/Expectations. I joined the June 2010 visit to Colombia with high expectations and excitement. These expectations and excitement were well served. Colombia is a great country, rich in resources and history, and home to warm, beautiful, talented people. I am happy to have joined the trip, and thankful to all those I met for the experience and the friendship. I must emphasized that my learning from the Colombian sojourn was not limited to Colombia. I also learned new things about my own country, observing, listening and interacting with my fellow Filipinos who were mostly unknown to me before the trip. The visit provided me more insights into the CSO initiatives, giving me a better grasp of the complex processes of social change. I did not expect to learn more than my declared topic of interest, but having joined the Exchange Visit did give me more solid perspectives from academics, peace groups and sectoral advocacies.

Topic of interest. I declared that I would be most interested in **security sector reform**, specifically on how to organize and train security forces at various stages of the conflict. I figured that my decades of experience in the counterinsurgency campaign in the Philippines would serve me well in making comparative reflections on Colombia's internal conflicts.

Colombia's Policies and Practices. As Colombia still embarks on an all-out offensive against the rebels, I did not have much to work on in terms of the interactions/visits/readings that I requested, that would have given me a closer look on the following:

> Introduction of peace concepts within the armed forces
> Training methodology and design
> Organization and mobilization of organizations working on peace processes
> Understanding the obstacles to peace approaches
> Strategic communications- policy and advocacy approaches

I did not find much literature (or discussion) related to my policy paper, which was about institutional peacebuilding[1] approaches as a consolidation strategy that will serve as the main framework for ending the four-decades old communist insurgency in the Philipines. I did find some experiences which somehow validated my previous study, and some observations that would compel me to look deeper into certain issues, like the DDR.

I did find some of Colombia's local practices/models that can be replicated in the Philippines. Of note are the people's organizations we visited in Magdalena Medio, and the local government initiatives in Bogota. I was also impressed by the academic community and the NGOs who continue the quest for peaceful means in the midst of a pacification policy.

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[1]

http://www.defence.gov.au/jetwc/docs/publications%202010/Publctns_100924_Phillipines2010andBeyond.pdf

The Visits/Meetings

There was limited interaction with the military, nil for police, former rebels, and local officials. Most fruitful were the meetings with NGOs and POs, and the officials working in Bogota's peace, security and development departmentss.

Reflections:

1. **Country and people.** The two countries, while located on opposite sides of the globe, share many similarities. Both are rich, in human and natural resources. Sadly, both also share the pains of armed internal conflicts. It is ironic for both countries to be so rich, in many ways, and to be so violent, for so many decades. What gives?

2. **Observed Initiatives.** The Colombian government had been on an all out-offfensive for most of the decade, and has claimed success in almost all military fronts against the FARC, the biggest of the rebel groups. These offensives enjoy the overwhelming support of the Colombian population. Civil society organizations have continued to push for peaceful means, although they have largely been marginalized by current state policy, and the popular support the policy enjoys. To their credit, the CSOs and the people have continued to pursue laudable projects that should serve the ends of peace, like the development projects in Magdalena Medio, and the local peace projects in Bogota.

3. **Mood for change.** I believe the time for policy change is now. Military success must be transformed to popular success, in that it must benefit the whole Colombian people. The support for all-out offensive circa 2002 must be seen as a reflection of people's frustration to the unending, intractable negotiations, and a collective reaction to the vicious cycle of violence. It is not a positive, exclusive support to the all-out offensive. It is a choice when there was no better choice. Now that the tide has changed, and the rebel strength has been down, as well as their influence and popular support, the policy shift is a must. Otherwise, the government will lose whatever gains it had for the past years, and allow for the return to the cycle of violence and conflict. The irreversible trend against the rebels must be turned as a popular juggernaut for the eventual lasting solution to the conflict.

4. **Missed opportunities.** I think the military has missed the opportunities for a more complete victory when it focused too much on the military parameters of success. It has not converted military success to widespread national success. When government claims success, it must project the achievement as that of the whole Colombian nation. The pronouncements smack of traditional mindsets, as if current operations are still in the realm of world war 2 standards.

5. **Timing.** The story of missed opportunities seems to continue, and before they are totally missed, the government must seize these opportunities. The popular support for the offensive must not be seen as bottomless and unlimited, rather, they must be viewed with caution. Support for state policy maybe eroded quickly if the other protagonists are able to shape the conflict and influence opinion against the state. If the Colombian government insists on its current track, it might find itself forced to shift policy at a time its support has waned. It is time the Colombian government shifts to a holistic peace policy by converting its widespread support into a national peace project. As it is now, it

can declare not just military victory, but a "national victory" and proceed to peaceful dialogues and development projects. The people of Colombia, while supporting the military offensive, have also pursued alternative peace and development projects, indicative of their aspiration for peace in their country. This is my impression when I talked to members of peoples' organizations, and farmers while in Barranca Bermeja. This is the same impression I got when I sat down one afternoon with the local peace, security and development officers of Bogota. There appears to be a common drive for peace, in the rural as well as in the capital. I see this as an expression of preference (and readiness) for the peaceful means of conflict resolution, even as they currently support government efforts in the military front. Considering the general events that transpired for the past two decades, there is certainly a need for policy change, in favour of peace and development. The table below illustrates that the conflict has evolved from talks to violence, to all-out offensive, and to successes in the implementation of constitutional, legal initiatives and DDR. But it must be remembered that while these successful initiatives are still in effect, new policies must be pursued to seal the victory for the people. To ignore this timing could be fatal to the aspirations for peace in the country.

1990s	1998-2002	2002-2006	2006-2010	2010-?
Peace talks	Peace talks Violations Violence IDPs "national frustration"	Uribe Strong military/police Military offensive US support "popular support to offensive"	Military offensive Justice and Peace Law DDR	Resurgence of violence? Criminal gangs? Scandals? Loss of popular support? New issues? End game strategy?
Negotiations	Negotiations	Direct action	Pacification	Peace policy
	Direct action	Military, police	Military, police	Peacebuilding
			Incentives for DDR, et al	Conflict resolution

6. **External factors.** The shift in security policy is all the more favourable because the country is currently in its best position to obtain the support of the United States, and the international community. International organizations will most likely intensify support if the government seeks to improve its standing in the eyes of the international community, especially in the observance of human rights, and international humanitarian law.

7. **The military.** The meeting with the military was limited, and mostly tense. It was obvious that they (the Colombian military) were not comfortable meeting NGOs. There appears to be a collective uneasiness in dealing with NGOs. I think this phenomenon is reflective of the official indoctrination, and the natural result of all-out offensives. Also, this reflects natural fatigue of protracted conflict, plus the fact that the military has been accused of extrajudicial killings. The Philippine experience is similar. It seems that long drawn-out offensive, and bloody one at that, spawns hatred amongst the protagonists, especially the armed actors. The protracted conflict develops into a level of social, generational blood feuds. And the more it becomes protracted, the more difficult it is to reverse.

8. **The Policy of Democratic Security**. It may have achieved its goals of degrading the rebels' capability, and is widely viewed as successful, but I believed it has reached its peak. The time is ripe for policy change, or maybe it is late in the day, depending on what were already done, in preparation for the next phase of conflict resolution, if any. I did

not have the opportunity to determine this. Successes in military operations, with massive popular support, must now be transformed into a national peace project. I believe it is time for Colombia to seize the moment, for a shift to a peace policy. And it can start with training the military for peacebuilding.

9. **The DDR.** I would accept that the DDR was effective. But to say it is successful is premature. I would judge DDR after, say, three-five years. This is because a pacification approach like the DDR is largely tentative, and does not address the root causes of conflict. DDR must not define the policy, it is just one of the means of policy.

Prospects. The past years (and recent events) have been mostly favourable for the government to pursue a peace policy. I cannot emphasize enough that the timing here is essential. If it has not yet done so, then it is a must that the Colombian government undertake a massive re-education of its military and police forces for peacebuilding, before it loses the initiative. The so-called vicious cycle of violence can return when the cycle is not completely reversed. There are already signs of "evolving" conflicts from the paramilitaries and "criminal gangs". The only way to totally reverse the cycle is to declare and effect a peace policy, while the state is in the upperhand. No doubt the people of Colombia will welcome such a shift. Here the role of the military, and the police, seen as the lead actors for the government's successes, is crucial. Those who led the fight to victory must now be mandated to lead the peace project.

Ifs. If the government continues to its current drive, without the complement efforts for peacebuilding and eventual conflict resolution, it may find itself back to where it was before. In a position of weakness. The more it pushes forward the offensive, it might lose the initiative, and lose the golden opportunity. Already issues of scandalous proportions are coming out that threaten to undermine military claims of success, such as reports of collusion between top government officials and their allies with drug lords and criminals, serious violations in the work of the state intelligence agency targeting NGOs, media, and many others, and the extra-judicial killings of members of marginalized communities, presented as rebels killed in combat. These issues are precursors of renewed fighting and the potential of a return to high level of violence. I hope to be proven wrong.

Way Forward.

1. **Security policy**. The shift to a peace policy is a must, now. Current successes in constitutional initiatives are commendable, but are still framed within a militarist state policy. Military success must be presented as a national success, and the only way is to adopt a peace policy. The security forces get the credit for laying the peace with its sacrifices in the fields of combat. Popular support is expected to continue, people morale will be uplifted, and the national psyche, used to violence, maybe transformed to one of national pride for the peace achievement.

   The state must avoid relying on military and paramilitary repression and pursue the meaningful development of security sectors. This means broadening the concept of internal security from the traditional militarist view, which is often associated with the abuse of power, and instead seek and promote a healthy, holistic appreciation of the

nexus between security, development and human rights policy. When government and military accountability is ensured, and the roles of civil society, national institutions and international humanitarian organisations are enhanced, the overall infrastructure of security is strengthened.

2. **CSOs**. The government must harness the role of the CSOs in the peace project. The social benefit of an improved CSO participation in the present-day Colombia is very promising. The current government could use its recent successes to invite and encourage more CSO participation. It must put its trust in the strength of its mature democracy. My impression is that there is a genuine desire for participation in the peace efforts among academics and CSOs. A national transformation can only be done with the active support of CSOs.

   The state must be transformed in order to be relevant, but its transformation must be informed by the transformation of civil society, not vice versa. It is very important for governments to seek and nurture the trust and confidence of civil society, however problematic and tenuous that may be, not just to obtain support for policies but, more importantly, to derive lasting benefit from a constructive interaction with civil society. The rationale of policy shift to peace includes opening up civil society's participation in the political discourse. The process may be difficult, but the quality of the discourse, between the state and civil society, is what defines a nation.

3. **Security Sector Reform**. The Colombian military and police forces have done very well in their mandate to degrade the rebels' capability to conduct offensives. In this context, they enjoy the gratitude of the people. However, since military successes do not redound to immediate peace and development dividends, owing to continued operations, the general perception is that the government is after annihilation of the rebels, and not really after the welfare of its people. When military success is not seen to trickle down to benefit the people, the support maybe be lost under the argument that government's success is hollow, and the ordinary people has nothing to gain from it. My impression is that the people hate the rebels more than the soldiers because of the violence and abuses. It is therefore time for the security sector to retool itself, from a successful military offensive, to a prime component of a peace policy. This could be achieved with peacebuilding education and training in the military, even before the security policy change is in effect.