

Colombia's Peace Process: Agrarian Reform and Rural Development

Written by William Avilés

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On Sunday, May 26th the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Colombian government led by President Juan Manuel Santos reached an agreement on agrarian reform as part of an ongoing peace process. This agreement was reached after six months of negotiations between the Colombian government and the FARC, a leftist guerrilla organization of approximately 8,000 soldiers that has been waging a war against the Colombian state since 1964, the longest lasting conflict in Latin America. This peace process is the fourth time in 30 years that the Colombian government and the FARC have tried to negotiate an end to this conflict. The fact that these talks are being held at all is an accomplishment for supporters of a negotiated solution. The last peace process ended in failure in 2002, with both the government and the FARC ratcheting up their military capabilities during the process with both parties further from a resolution to the conflict than before the talks began. In fact, the Colombian public became so discouraged of a negotiated solution that they embraced the hard-line approach offered by Álvaro Uribe in the 2002 presidential elections who continued the expansion and modernization of the Colombian armed forces in pursuit of a military solution. The Colombian government's military successes since 2002, unlike previous military campaigns, have successfully weakened the FARC and contributed to their willingness to negotiate with the current Santos administration. In addition, the ability of the FARC to survive eight years of an intensive and costly military offensive while retaining the capability to ambush police and military forces or disable segments of the country's infrastructure has also contributed to the government's interest in a negotiated solution. The FARC-Government's recent accord on agrarian reform represents a positive step in the current process, one that illustrates a shared agenda on the changes needed to protect the livelihoods of small peasants in Colombia's countryside. However, important obstacles face the implementation of these specific reforms, reforms which threaten the autonomy and impunity that landed elites have enjoyed for generations.

Land and Rural Development – First of Five Points

The May 26th agreement over land and rural development is the first point on a five point agenda that both parties view as central to the termination of the conflict. The other four points are political participation and the FARC's political future, ending the conflict (cease-fire, demobilization), the illegal drug trade and victim's rights. Regarding the agreement on land reform there are four central elements to the accord. The first aims to distribute land to the landless from a "land bank" that would include illegally held land, underused land and state-owned land which would be redistributed to the landless and displaced. The agricultural frontier will be "closed" with a particular concern toward environmental conservation. Second, the agreement calls for the establishment of special developmental programs for farmers such as subsidies, technical, and marketing assistance as well as credit. Third, the accord calls for increased spending on social programs, infrastructure, housing plans, and potable water in marginalized rural regions. Finally, the FARC and the government agreed to improve food security by increasing the productivity of farmlands as well as working to eradicate hunger.[i] Related to these goals is a commitment to formalize land ownership through the proper titling of these properties as well as the creation of agricultural systems of justice and expanded police presence dedicated to settling land disputes and defending property ownership. The institutionalization of an accurate cadastral map to comprehensively register lands throughout the country will ostensibly secure the properties from illegal theft as well as allow small farmers greater access to credit.[ii] These advances complement a commitment to ensure compliance with the nation's labor laws though increased monitoring

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and control by the government.

One important reason why some are hopeful that this agreement, and the overall process itself, will be successful is that the Santos administration has already taken important steps toward land reform. The Victims and Land Restitution law, passed in June of 2011, has sought to return land and/or compensate the millions who were displaced because of the violence. As of 2011 approximately 50 leaders of displaced communities seeking to return to their lands have been assassinated, mainly by neo-paramilitary groups.[iii]

In addition to the Victims and Land Restitution law, the FARC hopes to expand upon the use of “peasant reserve zones” which are regions of the country that limit the size of land properties and in which communities enjoy a degree of political autonomy. These zones were legally institutionalized in 1994 and the agrarian accord recognizes them as one tool to address landlessness. There are presently six peasant reserve zones with a total of 800,000 hectares and another five consisting of 1.2 million hectares are in the process of being created. These represent another potential mechanism to distribute land.[iv] Both sides stressed, as they have from the beginning of the process, that these reforms will not be implemented until a *final* peace accord has been achieved.

Promises and Obstacles

The fact that the first issue of these peace talks focused upon the land question is no surprise. Land has been, and continues to be, the central axis generating violent conflict in Colombia. As the statement announcing the agreement on land reform indicated it “seeks to reverse the causes of the conflict”. Failed attempts to redistribute land through legal channels in the 1960s and 1970s, in which organized peasants faced state and para-state repression for challenging these inequities, left land concentration relatively untouched. Inequities only exacerbated during the 1980s and 1990s as narcotraffickers, with the assistance of the state and parastate security forces displaced peasants from their properties in order to concentrate land in their own hands while legalizing their illicit gains. The Colombian government estimates that 6.5million hectares of land was stolen or abandoned between 1985 and 2008 as a result of the conflict. By 2013, according to the UN Development Program, 52% of farms were in the hands of just over 1% of landowners.[v]

The conflict over land continues to this day. Whether its neo-paramilitary groups or the FARC controlling territory for the production or shipment of illegal drugs, paramilitary commanders working hand in hand with “legitimate” economic interests and the state to expand oil palm plantations, or mining/energy transnational corporations seeking to secure and defend their control over Colombia’s energy resources violent conflict persists over property. In 2012, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC) and the Norwegian Refugee Council, 230,000 Colombians fled their homes for fear of violence adding to the over 5 million Colombians that have been displaced since 1985 making Colombia the country with the largest internally displaced population in the world.[vi]

It is hoped by many that this agrarian accord will contribute to ameliorating these conditions, but the obstacles facing the implementation of this accord or even the completion of the peace process are considerable. First, and probably most important, the central state continues to be unable to provide the necessary security for the peasant activists and leaders of the displaced operating in Colombia’s countryside. In too many corners of Colombia regional power brokers, reactionary factions within the security forces, narcotraffickers and neo-paramilitary groups continue to wield authority through either clientelism or terror. There have been few clues as to how the central state will resolve this issue or if it even has the political will to address these security concerns.

On a national level this peace process and this agrarian agreement faces opposition from the former president Álvaro Uribe and his allies within the legislature, while agricultural interests represented by groups such as the cattle rancher federation FEDEGAN have expressed opposition to the agrarian reform plans being proposed in the accord. Uribe has referred to the agreement over agrarian reform as unacceptable given that it was made with “narcoterrorism”.[vii] Uribe continues to remain a popular political figure and depending on the progress of the talks his allies may expand their strength in the March 2014 legislative elections an important base of power to undermine whatever reforms are agreed to at the negotiating table. Relatedly, President Santos is expected to be seeking re-election in May of 2014 and progress in the peace process is instrumental to his re-election. If little tangible progress

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is made by the end of this year his government may seek to end the talks in order to better secure his electoral success. In fact, Santos' government has committed to not allowing the negotiations to proceed beyond 2013.[viii]

The political dynamics and conflicts on a national level are relevant to the success of the peace process, but Colombia's economic model acts as another potential obstacle to agrarian reform. Free trade, privatization, and the loosening of capital controls over foreign direct investments are all elements of the neoliberal economic model more or less embraced by different Colombian governments since the late 1980s. Free trade agreements, such as the one Colombia has signed with the United States endangers the livelihood of small farmers throughout the country, placing in jeopardy any future distribution of land. For example, OXFAM found that the free trade agreement will reduce the average income of 1.8 million small farmers by 16 percent.[ix] Even a 2004 report from the Colombian Ministry of Agriculture examining the consequences of free trade concluded that without adequate protections small farmers faced "...no more than three options: migration to the cities or to other countries...working in drug cultivation zones, or affiliating with illegal armed groups".[x] Thus, even if progress can be achieved distributing land to the landless and the displaced, Colombia's neoliberal economic model places these properties in jeopardy.

Ultimately, there is no doubt that the current peace process between the government and the FARC, and specifically the accord on agrarian reform, are reasons for supporters of a negotiated solution to feel optimistic about recent progress. But this optimism must remain cautious as conservative forces on a national and regional level as well as Colombia's steady integration into capitalist globalization are realities that ultimately may undermine the implementation of this reformist project.

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[i] Patricia Grogg and Constanza Vieira. "Key Land Reform Accord in Colombia's Peace Talks," *Inter Press Service* 27 (May 2013). URL: <http://www.ipsnews.net/2013/05/key-land-reform-accord-in-colombias-peace-talks/>

[ii] Ibid. According to the economist Ana María Ibañez of the University of Los Andes only one in three displaced peasants have a formal title to their land (see Juanita León. "El acuerdo FARC-Gobierno sobre el agro: un ganancia," *La Silla Vacía*, 27 (May 2013). URL: <http://www.lasillavacia.com/historia/acuerdo-agrario-en-la-habana-44462>

[iii] Human Rights Watch. "Colombia: Victims Law a Historic Opportunity," 10 (June 2011). URL: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/06/10/colombia-victims-law-historic-opportunity>

[iv] Grogg and Viera, "Key Land Reform"

[v] Sibylla Brodzinsky. "FARC Peace Talks: Colombia Unveils Major Breakthrough," *The Guardian*, 27 (May 2013). URL: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/may/27/farc-colombia-peace-talks>

[vi] El Espectador. "Colombia, el país con más desplazados internos en el mundo," 29 (April 2013). URL: <http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/nacional/articulo-419036-colombia-el-pais-mas-desplazados-internos-elmundo>

[vii] Álvaro Sierra Restrepo. "El campo: primer acuerdo entre Gobierno y FARC," *Semana*, 26 (May 2013). URL: <http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/el-campo-primer-acuerdo-entre-gobierno-farc/344564-3>

[viii] Kevin Howlett. "Nothing is Agreed Until Everything is Agreed," *Colombia Politics*, 26 (May 2013). URL: <http://www.colombia-politics.com/farc-agrarian-reform/>

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[ix] Michael Norby and Brian Fitzpatrick. "The Horrific Costs of the U.S.-Colombia Trade Agreement," *The Nation*, 31 (May 2013). URL: <http://www.thenation.com/article/174589/horrific-costs-us-colombia-trade-agreement#axzz2Y10vhuD3>

[x] Ibid. The recent case of large transnational corporations such as CARGILL exploiting and buying out rural farmers and small cooperatives is illustrative of the pressures associated with liberated foreign direct investment (see Sara S. Muñoz. "Colombian Land Deals are Scrutinized; Large Firms Bought out Deeds Distributed to Farmers," *Wall Street Journal (online)*, 28 (June 2013). URL: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323689204578571832721057220.html>

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