

ESSAY **14****LEARN FROM A
DEMOCRATIC
CULTURE**

For decades, Colombia, through adversity and prosperity, has counted on one undeniable truth: the strength of its democracy.

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IN 2008, DURING MY FIRST-EVER visit to Colombia, I watched aerial coca eradication operations in the conflict-ridden Meta Department, then flew to San Vicente del Caguán to catch a flight to Bogotá. On the ramp at San Vicente were two squads of Colombian army troops. Having just arrived at the base after a month of patrolling in search of Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) units, they slumped, exhausted and muddy, their packs and weapons stacked neatly, awaiting airlift back to their base. The contrast between these warfighters and the comfortable, twenty-first-century Bogotá I had left that morning could not have been starker. That juxtaposition was the beginning of my understanding that two Colombias—one modern, connected, and progressing, the other disconnected, geographically remote, and stuck in an endless loop of exclusion and violence—existed side by side. Colombian democracy and its leaders have been tested for decades as they try to end these recycled conflicts by institutionally, economically, and physically joining the Colombia of exclusion and criminality together with its modern half.

An adapting, imaginative, courageous Colombia

Colombia's political system has strained to meet that challenge. For decades, the country has been plagued by insurgencies. Groups as diverse as Pablo Escobar's Medellín Cartel to drug-dealing paramilitary groups like the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) to terrorist organizations like the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the FARC (both deeply corrupted by narcotics) have serially sought to upend democratic processes. Colombian administrations for nearly forty years have sought to break the cycle of conflict. And as Colombia has sought to confront these challenges, it must be noted that some state actors at times engaged in terrible criminal abuses, from allying with paramilitary groups to the disgraceful "false positive"¹ killings of innocents to unlawful interceptions of individuals' communications.

But let's fully appreciate what Colombian democracy has achieved, and how. Over the past four decades, Colombia's democratic leaders have responded with innovation and courage to address seemingly intractable problems. They wrote a new constitution with the participation of a demobilized, terrorist group; reformed security, intelligence, and judicial entities (with the longtime partnership of the United States); and undertook nearly a dozen serious negotiation efforts. These leaders negotiated the demobilization of whole rebel structures, notably the 19th of April Movement (M-19) leftist guerrillas and the right-wing paramilitary AUC. Colombian administrations built on the experiences of their predecessors as they conceived new approaches. The culmination was the landmark 2016 Peace Accord with the FARC, a comprehensive and internationally-praised effort achieved after an arduous six-year negotiation. The accord remains controversial, but it took the FARC off the battlefield and into the halls of congress. It was a triumph of Colombian democratic institutions and leaders, even if it remains a work in progress.

Examples of the innovation and courage of Colombian democracy abound. In the 1950s, Colombia established an enforced bipartisanship to lower the political costs of being the out-party. The presidency passed from Liberal to Conservative hands, knowing that the constitution required "adequate and equitable participation" for the party that did not control that office. When the threat of violence from that quarter receded, Colombia confronted new and even more devastating challenges. From the 1970s through

the 1990s, extrajudicial actors convulsed the nation with violence to seek the government's capitulation. Pablo Escobar ordered car bombs, destroyed an airliner in flight, directed the murders of hundreds of police officers, and was behind the assassinations of government ministers and two candidates for president in his battle against the state and justice. Four major and several minor terrorist insurgencies, including the FARC, M-19, and ELN, sought the violent overthrow of the state. The AUC engaged in narco-trafficking, displaced thousands to steal their property, and committed horrific human rights abuses.

While the Colombian state battled these groups with arms, every Colombian administration since the 1980s also sought to negotiate the demobilization and integration of the rebel groups into institutional democratic life. Even after a catastrophic wave of attacks and death in the mid-1980s, including the bloody takeover and destruction of the Supreme Court building in downtown Bogotá by the M-19, the aspiration to achieve a negotiated settlement was never extinguished.

By the end of that decade, then-President Virgilio Barco and his team had drafted an Initiative for Peace and were negotiating directly with a "guerrilla coordinating group" that included all major insurgent groups. The initiative did not achieve all of its ambitious goals, but it resulted in the demobilization of the M-19, members of which were central players in drafting the 1991 constitution. Moreover, the initiative established starting points for President Juan Manuel Santos' ultimate successful negotiation of the Peace Accord with the FARC, the most important of these being a government commitment to integrate the rural, disconnected Colombia with the rest of the nation and provisions to address political participation and justice concerns.

By the late 1990s, Colombia was again in crisis. The FARC moved into the space occupied by the dismantled Medellín and Cali cartels to become the country's most significant drug trafficking organization and used its wealth to finance fighters and materiel to topple the state. In another example of Colombian imagination and daring, then-President Andrés Pastrana turned over a 16,000 square mile tract in central Colombia to the FARC to create momentum for negotiation. This step is seen as either painfully naïve or dangerously counterproductive. Regardless, its real importance was that

the FARC's bloody criminal reign of terror in the so-called *zona de distensión* showed its true nature.

This exposure of the FARC's brutal criminality was a key factor in the 2002 election of President Álvaro Uribe, whose promise to impose "democratic security" was appealing to Colombian voters. Uribe's tough new approach included continual operations to pressure the FARC militarily, a high-value target strategy to eliminate FARC leadership, and new methods to knock down unprecedented coca cultivation and cocaine production, which funded the FARC's war machine. Uribe enjoyed strong, sustained, bipartisan support from the United States through the new Plan Colombia. Uribe's unprecedented aggressive approach would have lacked justification and support, nationally and internationally, had Pastrana's "*despeje*" (demilitarized zone) not revealed the FARC for what it was.

Other branches of Colombian democracy showed their vitality. In 2010, a very popular Uribe sought to amend the constitution to permit a run for a third term in office. The Constitutional Court determined the proposal for a referendum to allow a congressional vote on the matter to be unconstitutional. Importantly, Uribe—who retained very high popular approval—quickly accepted the ruling, despite his disappointment and disagreement with the decision.

Santos's peace talks with the FARC (2010-16) were the culmination of the decades-long effort by Colombian democratic institutions and leaders to address the root cause of violence and exclusion and incorporate that insurgency into the institutional democratic system. The imagination, rigor, and courage with which the Santos team negotiated the ultimate accord are well known. But it held its own risks. Holding peace talks with the FARC was hardly unprecedented, and the FARC, battered by eight years of military pressure, was ready to come to the table. However, FARC violence had made it profoundly unpopular, so any concessions to it, even in the context of peace talks, were likely to raise popular ire. In 2009, hundreds of thousands of Colombians took to the streets in massive "*No Más FARC*" demonstrations. Finally, the long gestation period of the talks—six years, start to finish—tried the patience and interest of the Colombian people. Santos' iron-willed determination to see these talks to their conclusion in the face of FARC obstructionism and growing concerns about perceived excessive concessions to the FARC can be traced to Santos's obsession with peace, as

well as the long history of courageous Colombian leaders seeking to negotiate an end to the conflict.

Colombia's way ahead

Colombia's democratic institutions and its leaders over the years have proven imaginative and courageous, and the work continues. Three specific observations are salient.

First, Colombians are far too self-critical. The first to complain about the ineffectiveness of Colombian democracy are Colombians, which is understandable, but it's a barrier to searching analysis. Colombia will realize its true democratic potential only when Colombians can assess their weaknesses and *also* appreciate the achievements of their democratic institutions and leaders. The US constitution refers to forming "a more perfect union," implying a continuing need for debate and reform. Discussions that devolve into mere contention with endless reference to past failings are not helpful. Nor is embracing the notions of Nietzsche and (more importantly) Gabriel García Márquez that time is a flat circle, and we are condemned to repeat the past. A Colombia that recognizes the remarkable achievements of its democracy and its innovative, courageous political culture—that progress is not just possible, but has occurred through its own efforts—will be best prepared to face its future trials.

Second, the next challenge is already here. In explaining the fundamental goal of the peace talks with the FARC, Santos spoke of Colombia becoming a "normal country with normal problems." That is happening. Like nations worldwide, Colombia's economy was set back dramatically by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thousands of middle-class families have plummeted into poverty, while low-income families have dropped to extreme poverty. These Colombians are understandably and justifiably demanding that their political and economic systems respond effectively. Such problems are invulnerable to facile populist solutions. Colombian democracy needs to take action quickly, building on the political culture of innovation and courage it showed in confronting twentieth-century challenges.

Finally, a Colombia armed with the self-confidence derived from accepting the significance of its achievements can be an even more influential player regionally and internationally, especially in partnership with the United States. The world is increasingly dividing into two governance

models. The United States and Colombia embrace a liberal democratic system based on individual rights, open markets, and clear, universally applied rules. Its counterpart is the authoritarian vision of China, in which an unelected government grants rights to citizens on condition of behavior, subjectively and impermanently, and the center applies laws and norms variably following its own criteria.

Colombia and the United States are already collaborating on law enforcement and judicial matters in the hemisphere; our work should be broadened and deepened to partner on these governance matters. Given its painful experiences and vibrant democratic culture, Colombian insights can be uniquely useful.

In the summer of 2016, I joined a group observing a demining effort in Caquetá, a rural department long torn by insurgency, coca/cocaine, and disconnection from the rest of Colombia. As we flew that sunny morning in a Colombian army helicopter, I gazed out at a lush piedmont landscape dotted with small farms. The undulating terrain was marked by watercourses and dirt roads, rising into mountains just distinguishable through a blue haze. My reverie was interrupted by a colleague, who showed me a news flash on his phone that the government and FARC had reached a final agreement on the peace accord. There was a completeness to the moment. I looked again at the bucolic scene, and it struck me why it appealed to me so: it strongly resembled the piedmont of my beloved home state of Virginia. A peace and future in which the Caquetá piedmont could be a sister to the Virginia piedmont, with inclusion, education, and opportunities, seemed within reach.



Endnotes

- 1 False positives killings were murders of innocent people by criminal commanders in the armed forces and presented as combat kills of guerrillas. Commanders and units were encouraged to demonstrate effectiveness by increasing their “body count.” The practice first came to light in 2008, and reportedly resulted in the deaths of over 3,000 individuals. The Special Jurisdiction for Peace created by the 2016 peace accord with the FARC is investigating these killings.