

## The Military and the Peace-Process in Colombia

Reflections about the dilemmas and challenges of the transformation of the Security Sector after signing the General Peace Agreement for the Termination of the Conflict and the Construction of a Stable and Lasting Peace between Colombia Government and the FARC.

Alejandra del Pilar Ortiz-Ayala

### Introduction

Deliberately, the peace agreement signed with the FARC avoided reforms related to the security sector (DCAF, 2018; Gobierno Nacional de Colombia & FARC, 2016; Rafael Grasa, 2019; Liévano Bermúdez, 2018). Although little has been said about this issue, it was one of the most significant concessions made by the FARC who during the negotiation would have requested the reconversion and reduction of the size of the Military Forces- currently Colombia has total of 481,100 Active Armed Force Members and 180,000 Police Force officers. Other proposals included the decrease in defense spending to 2% of GDP – defense spending in Colombia for 2018 was 3.2%<sup>1</sup> -, the transformation of military education into a civilian one, and the elimination of Public Force radio stations.

However, for the Colombian government, the transformation of the Army or the Police, were red flags. In fact, the General Mejía, a former Army commander and government delegate in Havana, stated: “The transformation of the Army is carried out by the military, the changes in our doctrine are made by us because we are the ones who know these issues, here, no civilians will come, nor will any organization come to make us do those changes” (Mejía, 2015).

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://datos.bancomundial.org/indicador/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS>

Despite of the international cooperation to advance and facilitate in conversations with the civil society, the academy and some governmental institutions at the territorial level with the security forces (Rafael Grasa, 2019), substantive discussions are still pending. For instance, the pros and cons of maintaining a narrow role division between military and police forces. Although the Constitution says that the Police is a Civil body, while the Army has the duty to defend the national sovereignty from international threats, the fact is that both bodies are ruled by the Defense Ministry, without clear limits of their actions and responsibilities in the practice (Cruz-Rodríguez, 2017; Rafael Grasa, 2017; Rafael Grasa, 2019; Leal Buitrago, 2006)<sup>2</sup>. This discussion will have to take place now that Colombia is part of OECD and NATO.

Similarly, little has been discussed about the military and police electoral participation; Colombia is one of the few countries in the region where the military and police cannot exercise the right to vote. While some scholars believe that an important price is paid in democratic terms, there argue that this decision, made since 1932, shields the uniformed individuals from political polarization and ensures the development of their legal commitments and democratic stability. Nonetheless, for some others, it is not the time to open this *Pandor's Box*<sup>3</sup>.

In the following sections, I will present five specific aspects of the Colombian case that materialize the dilemmas and challenges that explain the lack of political will to open a national discussion on the transformation of the security sector after the signing of the peace agreement with the FARC.

The Colombian paradox: Coexistence between democracy and political violence

Today, Colombia has experienced a narrowing trend in generalized violence but an uptick in targeted violence during and after the peace agreement. The anti-activist violence organized by criminal groups attached to drug traffic, has intensified with a disturbing increase in systematic assassinations of social leaders and human rights defenders (Ball, Rodríguez, & Rozo, 2018). The historical coexistence between democracy and political violence is one of the most obvious paradoxes of the

---

<sup>2</sup> This has caused accidents such as those that occurred in October 2019, where members of the military forces shot to the air during a student protest in the north of the country (Semana, 2019)

<sup>3</sup> See more in <https://cerosetenta.uniandes.edu.co/y-el-voto-de-los-militares/>

Colombian case (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2014). In the minds of the soldiers, the territories are divided between *poblaciones afectas y desafectas*, in English “affection- or disaffection” populations. This division reflects the logic that the state armed actors have to classify civilians and communities, that is between those ones considered close or related to the status quo and the establishment, and those that have been characterized as rebellious, resisting and against the institutionality. For instance, the current Minister of Defense manifested in different public scenarios his intentions to regulate the social protest. In July 2018 he said; “We respect social protest, but we also believe that it has to be ordered and truly represents the interest of all Colombians and not just a small group”. For that reason, it is not surprising that in October 2020 the Vice President and the Minister of Defense supported the bill proposed by the Conservative Party to regulate the social protest<sup>4</sup>.

In that sense, the development of democratic values and the constitutional mission of the State Military Forces has been born and established since the prioritization of the protection of a regime and not of the citizens. This change of approach will be far from happening while the friend-enemy logics persist, and the institutional conditions are presented to classify civilians as less deserving of state protection, suspects or potential threats for questioning the status quo.

Civil Subordination? Civic-military relations in the Colombian Case.

The statement of the General Mejía is a reflection of what in Colombia is called The “Lleras Doctrine. In 1945 the civilian president- Alberto Lleras Camargo- who followed the military regime, was a victim of an attempt of coup. A few days after this situation, in a public speech he framed the civil-military relations in Colombia that remain until today (Duffield, 2010; Rafael Grasa, 2017). The message was clear, there is an inconvenience of the military participation in politics, as well as civil interference in the management of security issues. Some scholars argue that the Public Force can be seen as the main support of the restricted democracy in Colombia and at the same time as one of the main obstacles that impede the consolidation of a democratic State

---

<sup>4</sup> See more in <http://www.icnl.org/research/monitor/colombia.html> and <https://www.rcnradio.com/politica/mindefensa-respalda-proyecto-del-conservatismo-para-regular-la-protesta-social>

throughout the Colombian territory (Cruz-Rodríguez, 2017; Dávila, 1999; Leal Buitrago, 2006). The above meant an important turning point in civic-military relations in Colombia, and the reason why there is currently: an insufficient political leadership of defense matters (Grasa, 2017), so much so that there is no national security and defense law as a State Policy. To that extent, despite the fact that in the institutional design and in the law there seems to be a civil direction on defense issues, some experts describe the relationship between civilians and the military as a de-institutionalized subordination (Cruz-Rodríguez, 2015; Leal Buitrago, 2002, 2003; Pizarro, 1995) characterized by a lack of parliamentary oversight and a weak civic-control that is needed beyond the law (DCAF, 2018; Grabendorff, 2009; Rafael Grasa, 2019).

Type Transformations: Train-equipment– hard line security approach.

One of the biggest challenges that Colombia faces after the signing of the Peace Agreement, is to build peace and stability in the middle of high levels of internal violence. According to the international community, both security and development are connected, and they are vital foundations for the sustainability of peace (DCAF, 2006; Sedra, 2017). However, in Colombia the securitization of development or subordination of development objectives and activities for security concerns have negative consequences.

First, because the initiatives of security are more short-term oriented, intended to regulate and control citizens instead of being over inclusive, long-term development policies. Second, the security strategies are usually focused on the hard-line idea of security, understood as the security provisions concerning capability, equipment, and efficiency (Buur, Jensen, & Stepputat, 2007; Duffield, 2010; Jackson & Bakrania, 2018). This vision ignores that the security institutions themselves need to have changes related to the way that they understand the idea of security and how they define enemies and threats after the end of the conflict, without these reforms, the security objectives could contribute to the perpetuation of violence. As Nilsson (2018) argues in Colombia all the development and security activities are subordinated to the idea of “Security, state consolidation and the control of the criminal actors and the illicit economy as their financial bases and the Enemy-centric understanding of security stands”.

## Contradiction between territorial peace and the logic of the war on drugs

Currently, the Cocaine production in Colombia is at historical levels<sup>5</sup>. According to the signed Peace Agreement, the government was supposed to invest in crops substitution programs as part of The National Comprehensive Program for the Substitution of Illicit Crops. This program was a vital part of the peace agreement as it considered the problem of illicit drugs with a socio-economical approach regarding the impact on rural peasants in remote places. Nevertheless, the current government's failure to comply with these programs and because of the international pressure imposed by the United States, the government deciding to return to the traditional strategies of forced manual eradication and aerial glyphosate fumigation. The soldiers are sent to the territories in order to support the forced manual eradication operations of these crops, as well as flying the aircrafts in the herbicide fumigation.

In these scenarios, the soldiers face the civilian population who occasionally responds aggressively, putting them in a difficult position. Forced eradication is proceeding faster than voluntary crop substitution, contradicting the spirit of the Peace Agreements that supposed a territorial peace that would respond to the realities and needs at territorial level with an integral intervention of the State. These scenarios, generate not only a loss of confidence with the institutional framework, as it also hinders the possibility to restore and heal the former fragile relations between the State and communities especially in territories that have been historically stigmatized and abandoned by the state.<sup>6</sup>

## In the midst of transitional justice: Victims, heroes and perpetrators

The Armed Forces are at an identity crossroads or an identity questioning among being victims, heroes and perpetrators when it comes to relating to the mechanisms of Transitional Justice that were designed in the agreements of Havana. In other words, the Armed Forces were located in what is called "grey areas" where the distinction between victims and perpetrators collapses and actors can have this double condition (Orozco,

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2019/07/06/cocaine-production-in-colombia-is-at-historic-highs>

<sup>6</sup> See more in <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/crop-eradication-vs-substitution-doubts-crippling-colombia-rural-communities/>

2009) The foregoing given that transitional justice mechanisms can have a tendency towards the victim-perpetrator dichotomy leaving aside the gray areas. Therefore, the actors will see in the transitional justice an opportunity to self-justify and avoid being presented as the “bad guys” at all costs. Therefore, they will prefer to make their victims visible and establish self-heroic speeches rather than accepting the atrocities committed in the past.

Likewise, it must be taken into account that many of the current Army commanders have been involved in human rights violations (HRW.org, 2019) and to that extent key actors inside the institutions have much to lose. In fact, the institutional discourse of the Army, backed by the current Ministry of Defense, is precisely the defense of the legitimacy of the institution. This reveals how difficult is to think at this historical moment, the possibility that the Security Forces could understand in the institutional recognition, an opportunity for their future legitimacy and not a threat, or that they seek to minimize the systematic violence under individual responsibilities, covered in the discourse of “rotten apples” therefore, avoiding any process of accountability in the institutional level (Rivera-Páez, 2019). To that extent, they start from the idea that being acting within the legal framework automatically shields institutions from doing accountability exercises (Wills, Ortiz-Ayala, Machado, 2017).

For now, the price that the Colombia is assuming, will be a slowness in the substantive transformations of the security sector, since many of these will depend on the level of reflection, evaluation and clarification regarding the impact of contra insurgency strategies, institutional, and para-institutional violence in the behavior of the state armed actors and their way of relating to civil society. Even if reforms at the institutional level, such as removing the National Police from the Ministry of Defense or training parliamentarians in Security Sector Reform take place. As long as a narrative based on the defense and honor of the institutional legitimacy is maintained, the possibilities of having transformations within the institutions will be limited in the way civil-military relations are established. This leaves open the possibility of perpetuating the logic that has contributed to the construction of permissive environments of violence in the country.

## Bibliography

- Ball, P., Rodríguez, C., & Rozo, V. (2018). *Asesinatos de líderes sociales en Colombia en 2016–2017: una estimación del universo*. Retrieved from Bogotá-Colombia
- Buur, L., Jensen, S., & Stepputat, F. (2007). *The security-development nexus: expressions of sovereignty and securitization in Southern Africa*. Uppsala.
- Cruz-Rodríguez, E. (2015). Relaciones cívico-militares, negociaciones de paz y postconflicto en Colombia. *Criterio Jurídico Garantista*, 8, 12-41. doi: <https://doi.org/10.26564/21453381.581>
- Cruz-Rodríguez, E. (2017). El postconflicto y la reforma de la Policía en Colombia: el problema de la desmilitarización. *Memorias*, 15(27), 15-30. doi:doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.16925/me.v15i27.1732>
- Dávila, A. (1999). Ejército Regular, conflictos irregulares: la institución militar en los últimos 15 años. . In M. V. Llorente & M. Deas (Eds.), *Reconocer la guerra para construir la paz*. . Bogotá: Uniandes-CEREC-Norma
- DCAF. (2006). *United Nations Approaches to Security Sector Reform* Retrieved from Bratislava:
- DCAF. (2018). *Colombia SSR Background Note* Retrieved from <https://issat.dcaf.ch/Learn/Resource-Library2/Country-Profiles/Colombia-SSR-Background-Note - Anchor5>
- Duffield, M. (2010). The Liberal Way of Development and the Development-Security Impasse: Exploring the Global Life-Chance Divide. *Security Dialogue*, 41(1), 53-76. doi:10.1177/0967010609357042
- Gobierno Nacional de Colombia, & FARC. (2016). *Colombia: Acuerdo Final para la Terminación del Conflicto y la Construcción de una paz estable y duradera*. Habana-Cuba Retrieved from <http://www.altocomisionadoparalapaz.gov.co/procesos-y-conversaciones/Paginas/Texto-completo-del-Acuerdo-Final-para-la-Terminacion-del-conflicto.aspx>.
- Grabendorff, W. (2009). Limited Security Sector Reform in Colombia. In H. Born & A. Schnabel (Eds.), *Security Sector Reform in Challenging Environments* (pp. 69-86). Münster: LIT: Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF).
- Grasa, R. (2017). *La transición en materia de seguridad pública en la Colombia posacuerdo: preguntas y agenda para la próxima década*. . Retrieved from Bogotá
- Grasa, R. (2019). Construir paz en Colombia reforma del sector de seguridad y violencia directa no política. *Revista CIDOB d'afers internacionals*, 121.
- Gutiérrez Sanín, F. (2014). *El oraguntán con sacoleva. Cien años de democracia y represión en Colombia (1910-2010)* Bogotá Debate Universidad Nacional de Colombia
- HRW.org. (2019). *Colombia: New Army Commanders Linked to Killings*. Retrieved from
- Jackson, P., & Bakrania, S. (2018). Is the Future of SSR non-linear? *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 12(1), 11-30. doi:10.1080/17502977.2018.1426548
- Leal Buitrago, F. (2002). *La seguridad nacional a la deriva: del Frente Nacional a la posguerra fría*. Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes
- Leal Buitrago, F. (2003). La doctrina de seguridad nacional: materialización de la guerra fría en América del Sur *Revista de Estudios Sociales*.
- Leal Buitrago, F. (2006). *La inseguridad de la seguridad*. Bogotá: Planeta.
- Liévano Bermúdez, A. (2018). *Los Debates de La Habana: Una mirada desde adentro*. Bogotá Fondo de Capital Humano
- (2015, September 2015 ). *The Army of the future: between transformation and doctrine to build peace* [Retrieved from <https://soundcloud.com/urosario/foro-el-ejercito-del-futuro-mayor-geneal-alberto-jose-mejia-ferrero>
- Nilsson, M. (2018). Building Peace Amidst Violence: An Analysis of Colombia's Policies to Address Security and Development Challenges. *Iberoamericana - Nordic Journal Of Latin American And Caribbean Studies*, 47(1), 34-44. doi:<https://10.16993/iberoamericana.411>

- Orozco, I. (2009). *Justicia Transicional en tiempos del deber de memoria* Bogotá Temis-Universidad de los Andes
- Pizarro, E. (1995). La reforma militar en un contexto de democratización política. In F. Leal Buitrago (Ed.), *En busca de la estabilidad perdida. Actores políticos y sociales en los años noventa* (pp. 159-208): Tercer Mundo – Iepri.
- Rivera-Páez, S. (2019). Oportunidades de mejora en la legitimidad de las Fuerzas Militares: análisis y propuestas. In (pp. 209-238).
- Sedra, M. (2017). *Security Sector Reform in Conflict-Affected Countries: The evolution of a model*. 2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group.
- Semana. (2019, 1-10-2019). En video: Militares dispararon al aire en manifestación de estudiantes de la uniatlántico
- Wills, M. E., Ortiz-Ayala, A., & Machado, J. (2017). *Conversaciones inéditas entre la Fuerza Pública y el Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica: Aprendizajes de una experiencia 2012-2017*. Retrieved from Bogotá  
<http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/noticias/noticias-cmh/conversaciones-ineditas-entre-la-fuerza-publica-y-el-cnmh?fbclid=IwAR1olyH1GsbnjytQRmEHGhJn7imnIJZYSARtgZ9hjxmmraHJPvZPc7JmuDo>

## **To the author**

Alejandra del Pilar Ortiz-Ayala,

Political Scientist, 29 years old Colombian, and Phd student in the National Centre of Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Otago.

[alejandra.ortiz.ayala@postgrad.otago.ac.nz](mailto:alejandra.ortiz.ayala@postgrad.otago.ac.nz)