After 65 Years—Will Peace Finally Come to Colombia?

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Colombia has the longest history of ongoing political violence in Latin America. Some date the beginning as April 9, 1948 when Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, the Liberal Party's presidential candidate, was assassinated, leading to the Bogotazo riots that took 5,000 lives and unleashed a civil war between Conservatives on the one hand and the Liberals and Communists on the other. Between 1948 and 1958 that war took 200,000 more lives, injured hundreds of thousands more, and displaced perhaps a million. That period, known as *La Violencia* was followed immediately, by commencement of the guerrilla warfare, partly under the inspiration of the Cuban Revolution of 1959, that still continues. Liberals and Communists, some now converted into followers of Fidel Castro and Ernesto "Che" Guevara, established several guerrilla organizations in the mountains fighting to overthrow the Colombian government. One group emerged from those movements that in 1964 founded the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which worked with the Colombian Communist Party (PCC) that had its own organization and led labor and community groups in the city.

In 1984, President Belisario Betancur (1982-86), a Conservative, negotiated a cease-fire with several guerrilla organizations, including the largest group, FARC, as well as the National Liberation Army (ELN — also founded in 1965), and the April 19 Movement (M-19 — founded in 1970). Between 1984 and 1989 some of the guerrilla organizations (though not the ELN) ceased hostilities and attempted to enter civilian political life through the creation of a political party, the Patriotic Union (UP). However, rightwing, paramilitary death squads murdered between 4,000 and 5,000 demobilized FARC members, many of them UP political leaders including a presidential candidate and elected congressmen. Consequently the FARC ended its truce and returned to the armed struggle. The experience of the assassination of their activists who accepted a transition to peaceful political activity in the 1980s left the FARC leery and wary of new negotiations.

Several developments in the 1980s and 1990s changed the political situation. First, the FARC was accused by the Colombian government, by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) of being involved with the Colombian drug cartels, a charge the FARC denies. Second, the Colombia government gave tacit support to rightwing paramilitary organizations that assassinated not only those believed to be members or supporters of the guerrillas, but also community leaders, labor unionists, or outspoken political dissidents. At the same time, sometimes secret and sometimes public negotiations between the Colombian government and the guerrilla organizations continued throughout the 1990s, though ultimately without success.

Colombian President Andrés Pastrana Arango (1998-2002) entered into "Plan Colombia" with the United States, which provided almost one billion dollars in military assistance to fight both drug traffickers and the guerrillas. At the same time, he entered into negotiations with the FARC and the ELN, granting them a demilitarized safe haven of 16,200 square miles, about one and a half times the size of the state of Maryland, though, after three years, the negotiations broke down.

President Ávaro Uribe (2002-2010), an independent, pursued a hard line against the guerrillas while tolerating and encouraging the illegal paramilitary organizations as well as setting up legal paramilitary groups with tens of thousands of members. Between 2003 and 2005, Uribe negotiated the disarmament of the right-wing paramilitary United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) and passed a law that would reduce sentences for crimes they committed, though some paramilitary groups continued to operate. Several AUC leaders and other paramilitaries were extradited to the

United States to be tried for their involvement in the drug trade. Uribe attempted various negotiations with the ELN and the FARC, some through the efforts of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, but all failed.

The current president, Juan Manuel Santos, a conservative and former Minister of Defense who was elected on the ticket of the Social Party of National Unity made up of the followers of former president Uribe, decided to initiate a new peace process. The current "peace dialogues," as they are called between Colombia and the FARC, began in Norway in October and moved to Havana, Cuba in November. Colombia and the FARC have put everything on the table from the demobilization and disarmament to the release of hostages by the guerrillas and of guerrillas' prisoners by the government. There is also the question of the country's five million displaced persons, more than those of any other country in the world except Sudan. Also on the agenda are the questions of the reintegration of the FARC into civilian life and the political future of the FARC. Other guerrilla groups are not participating in the talks, though parallel talks with the ELN could also take place.

The most important and difficult issue on the table at the moment is that of some sort of distribution of land, which many see as the root of the problem from the beginning, that is, the oligarchy's monopolization of land throughout the country's history. The peace talks have led to a reaction by the oligarchy and by "ex"-paramilitaries who have formed the Anti-Restitution Army that has started killing people and threatening human rights workers, peace activists, and land restitution activists. While President Santos sees the negotiation of an agreement as key to his political future, former president Uribe, whose former alliances with the paramilitaries could lead to future legal problems, has been doing everything possible to sabotage the negotiations. Many believe this is the best change in years, perhaps the best chance ever, to negotiate peace in Colombia.

Ricardo Esquiva: Peace Activist

The son of an Afro-Colombian father and an indigenous mother, Ricardo Esquiva was raised on the Caribbean coast. When his father developed leprosy and was institutionalized, Ricardo lived on the streets until the Mennonite Church took him in and educated him in their school. From that small school, he went on to study law and then returned to the Caribbean coast to organize poor farmers in Montes de María. Accused of being an ideologue for the guerrillas for his community organizing, Ricardo, his wife and four children fled, first to Cartagena and then to Bogotá. There, he founded Justapaz, the Christian Center for Peace, Justice, and Non-Violent Action. He served as its Executive Director for thirteen years, developing work with displaced communities and projects for sustainable economic development and peace education. His work with conscientious objectors brought him into conflict with the Colombian military and forced him to flee into exile in the United States.

Ricardo also helped establish the Commission for Restoration, Life, and Peace of the Colombian Council of Evangelical Churches (CEDECOL), which he still serves as National Coordinator. In that capacity he facilitated the development of five regional commissions of pastors and lay leaders to help Protestant churches provide emergency assistance to the displaced, to develop small-scale economic projects, and to work with local leaders to build a grassroots movement for peace. He has participated in national and regional dialogues with legal and illegal armed groups in Colombia.

In 2004, he moved back to the Caribbean Coast, forming a small, non-profit, faith-based organization, Sembrandopaz (Sowing Peace). As a founding member with three Catholic Bishops of the Foundation of Development and Peace of Montes de Maria, Ricardo works regionally and ecumenically to increase civil society participation in a "laboratory of peace" funded through the European Union. Working with CEDECOL, he has helped create a network of Associations for a Dignified Life in Solidarity (RED ASVIDAS) to develop income-generating projects, to reweave the

social fabric, and to create an infrastructure for peace. There are now about 130 local, municipal, and regional church-based associations of ASVIDAS on the Caribbean coast, which include 5,000 people, 230 congregations, and 29 denominations. He was the recipient of the Tanenbaum Center's Peacemaker award in 2005 and the Fellowship of Reconciliation's International Pfeffer Peace Prize in 2008.

Interview with Ricardo Esquiva

New Politics. *Can you tell me something about how you became a peace activist? Did it come from your family's experience? School or university? Or from your experience in the social movements?*

Ricardo Esquiva. I think that the place where one is born and the people with whom you are born affect who you become later in life. In my case, the fact was that our family didn't have land — we were landless peasants. The fact of marginalization makes you ask questions. The fact was that my dad was a leper and that was considered a public calamity. Lepers at that time were caught and kept in a place where healthy people, even their healthy children, couldn't enter, this made one ask questions. After that, I went into the Mennonite world where 100 healthy children of parents with leprosy were gathered in a center. We were the poorest of the poor, the poor children of lepers, and that also prepared one to ask questions and get involved in these issues. All these things pointed me in this direction.

After the Mennonite school, I studied in Bogota and there in high school, maybe in the fourth year, I had contact with the priest Camilo Torres Restrepo. He was a Colombian priest who promoted the idea of liberation theology and later joined the guerrillas and died in combat. He had come to talk at our school, and after that several of us joined the work he was doing in the barrios. The work with him in the barrios as part of the *Frente Unido* (United Front) was training people and changing people's political culture. Leadership training. And that initial dialogue with him, plus my concerns prompted by the Anabaptist Menonnites, as well as my personal concerns for justice and watching the civil rights movement of the blacks in the United States — all that made me an activist and made me start to work in the barrios of Bogota with the youth groups associated with the United Front.

New Politics. *Why did you become a peace activist rather than a guerrilla or a political militant?*

Ricardo Esquiva. I lived my youth at a time when Latin America thought revolution was just around the corner. After the Cuban revolution, Latin America had a strong political resurgence. And in the universities many students joined the guerrillas. Many friends of mine were slaughtered because of being associated with the guerrillas or simply being accused of being a guerrilla. But I never took that step of joining the guerrillas. I never saw it as a clear way. Instead, I thought about other forms of political struggle besides armed struggle; I think the theology of the Mennonite church led me not to take that step.

New Politics. *You're a person of African descent. Has your race and your experience as a black person been important for your personal development and your choice of the path of peace?*

Ricardo Esquiva. Yes, of course. I lived in Bogota in a racist and classist society. Even though one wouldn't want it, it marked you and pushed you to look for answers and alternatives to such a racist and marginalizing society. I had to struggle a lot because of my color, and that was a strong ingredient in my search. I didn't choose to be an activist. Life pushed me to be one. I couldn't be anyone else. It's like when a current pulls you along and you can't do anything else. For me, there was no other option.

New Politics. *Do you think that the independent organization of black people is important for the construction of the peace movement?*

Ricardo Esquiva. I think that it's important that blacks or indigenous groups search for their cultural identity, so that they have autonomy, but then to unite with other groups and work for a better society. I think that a black group should look for its identity not to separate from others, but instead to join in the struggle for peace and justice within society. A black group on its own will never go anywhere.

New Politics. *Colombia has the longest history of political violence in Latin America. How do you see the national perspective at the moment?*

Ricardo Esquiva. They say there is no ailment that lasts 100 years, nor people who could stand it. I think that Colombia is seeing the time of the end of this ailment that been going on for so many years, the armed conflict. At this historical moment, we're seeing that there are the right conditions so that the government, the establishment, and the guerrillas could end the armed conflict. Then each one will explore the ways to fulfill their interests without the use of arms. I think we are in a moment of concretizing hope. These dialogues taking place in Cuba between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia can put an end to war and then the hard work of building peace, or rather continuing to work for peace, goes on. Peace itself won't come from the dialogues, as warriors never make peace. The most that the warriors can do is end the war, and that helps a lot towards the building of peace.

New Politics. *How do you see Colombia's political situation? Can the parties of the guerrilla organizations (FARC and ELN) reach an agreement this year? How do the coming national elections affect those possibilities?*

Ricardo Esquiva. What we can achieve this year are agreements between the government and guerrillas to begin an armistice this year. But dialogues with the drug traffickers and the criminal bands will have to come afterwards. I don't think that the formation of new political parties will come out of the dialogue, but social movements can come out of them and help construct peace. The current government hopes to end this year with an agreement with the FARC and present themselves as the ideal ones to construct the peace in the next period. The dialogues are key to who becomes the next president. For the current president, Juan Manuel Santos, it is absolutely necessary to have signed an agreement. If not, he won't be reelected. It's key.

New Politics. *What is the role of the peace movement in this context? Are there social movements independent of the parties and of the guerrilla organizations? Is there a united peace movement or are there various movements?*

Ricardo Esquiva. I think that embryos of peace movements exist: strong embryos for peace but they haven't managed to join together. So there isn't "a peace movement" in Colombia. These small movements are independent of the political parties and the armed groups and as they grow and strengthen it will affect their ability to lobby and have an impact. At this moment, we are very weak but with a vocation for growth.

New Politics. *What is the role of the Walk for Peace? How can marches or this march in particular bring Colombia to peace?*

Ricardo Esquiva. This walk, this march, like others that will happen and others that have already happened, mark a possibility that indicates that there are communities who can work together to struggle for their reparations and their rights. The thirty-two rural communities that marched on

April 5th are in special circumstances. They are in Montes de Maria, in the Caribbean region, where there are two peasant reserves. They are also in four municipalities that the government has declared a “zone for the consolidation of peace.” The government says it has already invested considerable resources there. That’s why this will call the attention to the whole country. What these communities are demanding are their reparations. So the question is: what happened to all those resources? All that money? Why are these people marching? Something happened. Something is amiss. If 1,000 peasants expose themselves to dangers and walk 114 kilometers to Cartagena to make their demands, then clearly something is really wrong.

This helps the work for peace by showing that there is unity and that people can come together for their cause. This is proof that these embryonic groups can work together.

New Politics. *You have been one of the principal actors in the peace movement in Colombia. How do you see your personal role in the future? Do you plan to change your activities? Will you continue to organize at the base of society, or will you lecture, write, train cadres? How do you see your personal future?*

Ricardo Esquiva. First, I’m not one of the important people in building peace in Colombia. I’m just a worker that works at the base. I have been one of the many actors in these movements. I dedicated 30 years to build a national movement for peace from Bogota, the capital, but I saw that perhaps that’s not the way. I arrived at the conclusion that one must strengthen the regions. And to do that you have to work at local levels, with local communities. That’s why for the last eight or nine years I’ve dedicated my time to working with local communities. For now, I think I’ll continue in that role, as a kind of supporter and mentor to these groups in their processes of building peace. I think the work is to plant the seeds of hope, and cultivate hope and transfer hope to communities, to have hope in themselves and believe in themselves, so that they see that the strength comes within them, not from outside. The only thing that can transform things is the united efforts of communities. For the moment that’s what I think I’ll do. Tomorrow I may think something else. These are living movements. Not linear, not mechanical processes — they are living, organic processes.

Footnotes