

Peace at Stake:
2016 Peace Agreement Implementation
A Field Case Study of the Systematic Assassination of Social Leaders in
Colombia

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Overview

In 2016, the Administration of former President Santos signed a peace accord with the armed group FARC. After more than half a century of internal armed conflict, it seemed that it was coming to an end or, at least, alleviating. Bilateral ceasefire happened, most combatants demobilized and gave their weapons away, and FARC leaders issued public apologies to some groups of victims. There was an atmosphere of hope and optimism that brought expectations to ex combatants, most victims, the government, and to civil society in general. Nonetheless, the prospect was irreparably damaged when social activists, local advocates for human rights, started to get threatened. What happened next is the “logical” step that follows when threats aren’t addressed: social leaders became target of censorship through murder.

2016 Peace Agreement: The Land

Colombia is the most unequal country in Latin America regarding land distribution. 57% of the land is concentrated in the hands of 1.5% of the population while the other 43% is divided between the rest 98.5% (Portafolio, 2011). Land is a source of power in Colombia since the country’s economy relies on it: petroleum extraction, coffee production, agriculture, cattle raising, and mining, among others. Hence, those who own the most land, hold the most power. Piketty’s concern on richest ones getting richer and the poorest getting poorer finds solid ground in Colombia’s absurd distribution of land. As a matter of fact, this issue has been the triggering factor for conflict in the country. The FARC flourished as a rural guerrilla made up of country people who were fed up with the government’s policies to benefit the rich only. When they started to gain strength through their ideals, not only the military fought them since they were illegal, but also paramilitary groups came out to fulfill the same duty as the military but for private interests.

The confrontations between these groups and others that have been emerging marked the country’s history as well as the victims’. 8.8 million people, approximately, have been victims of armed conflict in Colombia since 1958 according to the Single Registry of Victims (RUV, 2019). Millions of dreams that have been shattered by gunshots, threats, violence. As a result, it is no surprise that the 2016 Peace Agreement with the FARC had brought a glimpse of hope towards a different, inclusive future. The main point that was discussed in the negotiations was regarding

land in the Comprehensive Rural Reform. Basically, it sought to give land to farmer families, guarantee them means to make them productive, and give them voice in the planning of their regions. The other 5 key points were: political participation for the FARC, ceasefire, solution to the drug issue, victims' reparation, and implementation and verification of the Agreement. The Agreement's ultimate goal is to achieve a long-lasting and stable peace built upon truth, justice, and no repetition, pillars that both sides committed to.

Transition: from paper to field

The world saw the moment when former President Santos and FARC leader Timochenko shook hands after signing the paper where the accord was printed. A nice, moving ceremony took place and then everyone went home. Peace was signed. After a few weeks, willing-to-demobilize combatants came to designated areas where they were to stay for six months while the transition process into civil life. The TATR, or Territorial Areas for Training and Reintegration, worked as places where ex combatants would learn, develop productive projects, and attend to the nearby communities' needs. It was planned as a model of community reincorporation. This year, actually in June, a group of all-ages ex combatants graduated high school after 2 years of taking in the Agreement.

Transition seemed to be going good until obstacles, like rich-landowners' private interests, interfered as well as drug trafficking ones. Moving into the transition zones meant that previously FARC-occupied zones were to be empty and to become an appealing target for other armed groups like the ELN, paramilitaries or drug traffickers because of their strategic location regarding coastal exits and resource availability. Local social leaders from the affected communities started to unite and raise awareness of what was happening. The efforts towards social justice for farmers and displaced people were undermined by a new wave of violence that was to come.

The Role of Social Leaders

2019 started with three murders on 1 January. Three social leaders were murdered under unclear circumstances. Since 2016, when the Peace Agreement was signed, and until 31 January of this year, 462 social leaders were murdered according to the National Center of Historical Memory. Today, each week 3 social leaders are being killed while every 4 days an ex combatant is.

Leaders are claiming for their rights, the ones that the government has neglected over time or that the armed groups have stripped them away from. What they are striving for is nothing out of proportion. They are asking for *some* land so either they can have a decent livelihood and eat or because the land they are asking for belongs to them historically (which is the case of indigenous people). Furthermore, there are other leaders that are, or were, fronting initiatives to eradicate the culture of illegality in their communities by crop substitution and developing agriculture-based projects distant from drug-related activities. Last, there are the leaders who are fighting for basic human rights like education for their communities, basic access to healthcare, or even protection from the government after they got the threats.

Peace is actually costing lives and these are the ones from agents of social change. Although no life is more important than other, when a leader's life is taken away in a ruthless and sudden way, the community is left with a huge vacuum in it and all the progress that has been made is abruptly erased. The greed and intolerance are the factors that are driving Colombia back into a violence loophole where conflict and death prevail over rights and values.

Public Opinion

With the statistics mentioned before, one may think the country's government is doing everything in its power to protect its people. However, the actual government barely recognized the systematicity in the assassinations and the severity of each death. The former Attorney General stated that the killings responded to personal issues each victim had instead of recognizing they responded to their claims for protection and rights. How else can one explain that 44% of the homicides were executed at the victims' residences? (Semana, 2019) "Attacks have been reiterative and continued, as well as they show signs of planning. (...) The State's negligence, as well, can also suggest systematicity," according to Camilo Bonilla, conflict researcher from National University of Colombia. It was not until 11 January of this year that the government acknowledged the systematicity in the homicides.

According to a report from the National University of Colombia and Cinep, the patterns the homicides follow are: the geographical aspect where killings take place, the people that are targeted, the way in which murders are executed, their frequency, and their possible perpetrators (Semana, 2019). Regarding the geographical factor, where most killings have been executed are

the places where the State lacks presence, violence levels are the highest, TATR programs are being developed there, and illicit crops are generalized.

On the other hand, the International Community has a different saying on the issue. Alberto Brunori, Representative of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights at the UN, has stated that “A single homicide is enough to turn on the alarms. A single one is inadmissible and unacceptable in any society of the world” (Semana, 2019). The Security Council, on its July 2019 Visiting Mission to Colombia, did a press release on the attacks against social leaders, urging to

Improve security guarantees as a critical element in rebuilding the trust in the state for communities and former combatants. A core issue, according to the Secretary-General’s report, remains the expansion of a comprehensive and effective state presence, including civilian and security institutions, in remote and historically neglected areas that can contribute to addressing the current security vacuum. (What’s in Blue, 2019)

What is next?

It is unacceptable that the fellow government of the people who are dying in their fight for rights has no hurry in addressing the issue in an effective way. As things appear to be going, homicides will continue until the government takes the situation seriously by giving the leaders guarantees of protection but also by attending their concerns regarding human rights and land ownership.

Spaces like the UN where solidarity is awakened when it comes to human rights work as pressure tools for inefficient governments. The UN Verification Mission to Colombia for the Implementation of the Peace Agreement needs to pay close attention to this issue and raise its voice when needed because what is happening is, after all, a consequence of post conflict.

Homicides against social activists need to stop now. After that happens, the next step is to prevent them. It is crucial for a long-lasting and stable peace that access to justice and strong institutions is guaranteed. Consequently, conflicts can be resolved through words rather than violent confrontations, the State can gain legitimacy by providing support and protection to leaders, and justice can be accessed when needed.

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