Colombia: legitimacy, women and the Havana peace talks
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Ending the armed conflict in Colombia with the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) is not only legitimate but essential. Fifty years of war have taken countless lives, displaced countless inhabitants, caused countless disappearances, and polarised society. And if ending the conflict is essential, the peace talks between the government and the FARC that began in Havana in February 2012 are legitimate.

But we all know that an action’s legitimacy does not make the action any easier. When armed struggles first emerged in Colombia and Latin America, many people around the world saw them as necessary to achieve social and political transformation. For many, therefore, the struggles were legitimate, although not all of them were successful or ended well.

Today, most Colombians do not see the FARC as an armed group that will transform the country and its people. In the post-9/11 counter-terrorism era, the FARC is associated with drug trafficking and narco-terrorism. Colombian society as a whole does not believe in armed conflict as a way to emancipate the underprivileged. Society has become anaesthetised to violence, but rejects rebel actions.

President Juan Manuel Santos was Defence Minister under President Alvaro Uribe and some Colombians still look at him with mistrust and suspicion, despite his efforts to distance himself from his past. Uribe has claimed that his political support for Santos clinched his election victory. The shadow of the ex-president is everywhere and carries a powerful right-wing agenda. Uribe constantly attacks the Havana negotiation process because he finds it completely illegitimate to negotiate with the FARC, which he portrays as criminal and terrorist, and to be dealt with by force.

**Legitimacy and the Havana talks**

Some good choices have been made regarding the Havana negotiations: the way in which preparatory talks were kept discreet; the public acknowledgement of key aspects of the armed conflict – the victims and dispossession of lands; and the recognition of the security challenges faced by human rights advocates.

However, the general understanding among Colombians of the Havana negotiations is of a distant discussion among elites – government and business elites and the FARC leadership. But this does not mean the negotiations are wrong. Precisely because they are between elites and take place outside Colombia, the talks may in fact deliver agreement on key issues.

The six agenda points of the talks address major challenges of participation, human rights, economic justice, social development, active regional and international engagement, and extending democracy.

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From the perspective of Colombian society, however, the Havana negotiations are primarily a process to end fighting between the government and the FARC. But is this a peace process? The big question is: how to transform the output of the negotiating table in Havana into an input into the broader peace process that Colombia needs, and which can be validated by the Colombian people?

Today, Colombian society wants more than an elite negotiation. It wants a profound transformation of the structural conflict drivers. This is the difference between the Havana negotiations and a peace process for Colombia. Many other peace agreements have been signed, and as a result of some of them Colombia got a new constitution in 1991. But now we need more.
Very few Colombians today think that an armed approach is a legitimate way to engender change. But equally few consider that the political parties are legitimate, that Congress is legitimate, that the government is legitimate, or that the justice system is legitimate. There is a serious credibility crisis and intense scepticism about Colombian institutions.

**Representation and the women’s movement**

Colombia is a country with problems: an internal political war, drug trafficking, and criminal and neo-paramilitary groups. In some parts of the country, people are overwhelmed by fear, and the country has an outdated and ineffective economic model. An agricultural strike in August 2013 shook the country and reminded people of the key challenges of justice, redistribution, trade and income generation. The place for addressing such issues, however, is not the negotiation table in Havana, but in a broader peace agenda for Colombia.

Colombian civil society is not represented by guerillas or armed groups. The different civil society movements are essential to help resolve fundamental peace issues. Take the case of women. The priorities of women’s or feminist movements are not represented at the table in Havana. Why not? Because they are not the sort of political issue being discussed there. The negotiators have not had the eyes to see or the ears to hear these seemingly new perspectives of exclusion.

Women’s movements have opinions about what should be discussed. They have participated in public forums, in summits and in international advocacy, but their demands do not stop at the table in Havana. Fundamental issues such as violence against women, agrarian reform, extending democracy, and the ethical crisis that is destroying us do not end in elite discussions, but are part of a broader agenda for peace.

Following women’s mobilisation and advocacy, President Santos appointed two new female members to the government’s official negotiating team for the first time in November 2013. This is a step forward and an example for other parts in the world. It is appreciated as a signal that women’s demands are being recognised. But women want to be significant actors in defining Colombia’s future.

Discussions in Havana include the provision of sufficient guarantees for FARC members to return to society, including a transitional justice arrangement. Women demand that transitional justice sets very clear conditions when facing crimes against women, internationally recognised today as torture and crimes against humanity. A key step once the agreements have been reached will be a public discussion to legitimise them, and a quick transition into a broader peace process for social change. This is what the women’s movement banking on.

The Havana negotiations are legitimate because they are seeking to end a 50-year war. But their continued legitimacy will be measured by their acceptance by Colombian society and their connection to a broader peace process. Many women are mobilising for peace, seeking opportunities for substantive change. In October and November 2013, women from diverse sectors of Colombian society launched new peacebuilding initiatives: the women’s summit with more than 400 delegates from all over the country; the women’s march on 22 November; and the Ethical Pact for a Country in Peace, which sets out a 15-point petition to transform social and political attitudes to promote lasting peace in Colombia. This is a petition that anyone can sign (see Further reading). The Havana negotiations must become the foundation for the transformation of structural conflict drivers to ensure new opportunities for a society that is both frightened and corrupt, both victimised and victimiser.

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