

Colombia Peace Deal Inches Forward

Indigenous, Afro-Colombian leaders fear the state has not shed its violent past

By [Asad Ismi](#)

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The peace accords signed in November 2016 by the government of Juan Manuel Santos and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC, Colombia's largest guerrilla army) ended a half-century-long conflict that killed 260,000 people and displaced another six million. Under the terms of the deal, the FARC was supposed to hand over its weapons by June 20. Despite its accusations that the government was violating the deal, FARC met this deadline on June 16.

Still, factors are threatening to delay demobilization. One of them is the important issue of land reform. Though the main cause of the conflict was the concentration of land ownership in the hands of the Colombian elite, **President Santos** has pushed that conversation into the future. A resolution may not even be possible as long as the Colombian government remains committed to an extractivist economic model benefitting the private mining and energy sectors. For Santos, a key benefit of peace is to get the FARC out of the way of multinational corporations that want to exploit Colombia's natural resources in the countryside.



FARC guerrillas marching in formation during the Caguan peace talks (1998-2002)
(Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Meanwhile, the violence continues. Most of the killings during the civil war were carried out not by the FARC but by paramilitaries linked to the state. Human Rights Watch called these public-private militias "the sixth division" of the Colombian army. The peace accords do not disband the paramilitaries, who killed 156 human rights activists between January 2016 and March 2017, according to Colombia's ombudsman **Carlos Alfonso Negret**. In April, two

FARC members were murdered by paramilitaries within 10 days, even as the guerrilla army was in the process of laying down its arms—an ominous reminder of the right-wing massacre of 3,000 former FARC members after their successful 1985 election showing under the Patriotic Union party.

“Unfortunately, I believe that these accords will not bring peace because they were not made to resolve the root of the social conflict that brought FARC into existence,” says **Olimpo Cárdenas**, spokesperson for the Social Roundtable for Peace, a coalition of unions, social movements, political organizations and NGOs that promotes the participation of civil society in the Colombian peace process. “The worst thing is the lack of political will on the part of the government to open politics to the FARC or to any other political view.

“Violence is a structural element of the Colombian regime,” he adds. “Historically every peace agreement has led to the mass assassination of the opposition. The establishment is playing good cop and bad cop, but together they have actually managed to disarm the most powerful guerrilla army of the continent, basically for nothing in return.”

Cárdenas is not entirely negative about the accords. Despite the bleak present situation, he says the FARC “is going to open a space” in the political landscape. “It might not be a success in the first year but they should be an important political and social actor in the future.” The Colombian peace accords also include an “ethnic chapter” that provides specific safeguards for the rights of Indigenous and Afro-Colombians, both of whom have been disproportionately affected by the armed conflict.

Cárdenas’s concerns are shared by **Luis Fernando Arias**, Indigenous leader of the Kankuamo people and general counsel of the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC), which represents 47 Indigenous organizations.

“This process of paramilitarization of the countryside in Colombia has led to the murders of 27 social, Indigenous and peasant leaders between January and March,” he tells me. “This paramilitary offensive obeys an economic logic because following it, the large corporations arrive, especially extractive industries.”

According to **Fernando Arias**, Indigenous people in Colombia have legal rights to 33 million hectares of land, about 27% of the national territory. Furthermore, 87% of Indigenous lands are legally protected as conservation areas, yet 95% of Indigenous territory has been conceded to extractive industries without consultation with Indigenous people.

“Essentially what the government has managed to do is get the FARC out of the way so that extractive industries can come into Indigenous lands and elsewhere,” he says. “So while it is good that they resolved the armed conflict, on the other hand it will create deeper social, environmental and economic conflicts for us, especially with private companies.”

Fernando Arias emphasizes that Indigenous peoples are the most directly affected by the government’s conflict with the FARC. His grandfather and uncle were both killed, in 2001 and 2004, along with 386 Indigenous leaders from his community. But he says these recent

killings cannot be separated from “a process of historical genocide and this genocide has a master which is capitalism.” Then, as now, the objective is “to take our riches, our natural resources such as gold. The European invasion of South America, started by Columbus, is now being carried on by corporations and their big extractive projects.”

A report published in May by the National Security Archive in Washington, D.C., based on declassified documents, found that Chiquita Brands paid armed groups in Colombia, including paramilitaries, to protect its operations. In 2015, murder charges were laid in Colombia against an executive of Drummond Coal, a mining company based in Arizona. **Charo Minas Rojas** wonders how Colombians can talk about a lasting peace under such a brutal extractivist economic model.

“As Afro-Colombians who have endured the armed conflict in flesh and blood, we demand a peace process that confronts and addresses the racism, inequality and violence directed against us,” says the Afro-Colombian human rights defender, and member of the Black Communities Process in Colombia, who helped write the ethnic chapter of the Colombian peace accords. “When we look for the source of the conflict, we find that we are not really victims of the armed conflict, we are victims of capitalism—this is what is killing us. This is what is massacring us and committing genocide against us.”

One-third of the six million people who have been displaced by armed conflict in Colombia are Afro-Colombians. In May, over 150,000 Afro-Colombians from Buenaventura declared a general strike that shut down the country’s important port city. Traffic was stopped by roadblocks, halting all economic activity. The strikers demanded basic rights from the government, including increased health care coverage, clean drinking water, more education spending, basic sanitation (there is no sewage system) and adequate employment.



Source: [teleSUR](#)

Buenaventura has the highest poverty rate in Colombia (close to 66%) and its people have been subjected to years of armed conflict and paramilitary violence. In response to the strike, on May 19 the Santos government sent in the military and police, and the city has been placed under curfew. Strikers have been teargassed, pepper-sprayed and attacked with rubber bullets; 80 people have been arrested and more than a dozen injured.

Sheila Gruner, a professor at Algoma University who has been following the work of the Black Communities Process in Colombia for many years, tells me Buenaventura can be considered “a test case for ‘post accord’ Colombia.” She says the state repression of the peaceful mobilizations in the city “raises questions about the peace accord in relation to political participation and the right to peaceful dissent.”

Gruner says the peace process is very important for Buenaventura.

“If the issues are not addressed as raised during this strike, if Black leaders who have been working on these issues for decades are not allowed to lead efforts for peace in their jurisdictions, as they have every right to do in the implementation phase of the peace process, if the issue of increased paramilitary activity in Buenaventura is not addressed, then there will be even

more fertile ground for the continuation of war, displacement and violence against Black communities.”

Even if the deadline for demobilization is met in June, Fernando Arias, like Cárdenas, says the Union Patriótica massacres of the 1980s could easily be repeated.

“How can there be peace when killings on such a large scale are continuing? We want the whole world to know that Colombia is not a paradise where peace has been achieved. Paramilitarism is strong in Colombia and as long as it is not dismantled, we cannot have peace in the country.”

***Asad Ismi** is the CCPA Monitor’s international affairs correspondent and author of the anthology *The Latin American Revolution* (2016) which can be ordered from the CCPA. He is also author of the radio documentary with the same title (2010) which has been aired on 40 radio stations in Canada, the U.S. and Europe reaching 30 million people. For his publications visit www.asadismi.info.*

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