

TEN PROPOSITIONS ON THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE CONFLICT IN COLOMBIA

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The conflict that is reigning in Colombia is a complex matter, particularly because of its current transformation. The following ten propositions may help to explain recent developments in the country, where the great potential for violence has been generating negative headlines for a long time.

Number one: the conflict in Colombia is neither over nor near its end, but it is acquiring a new quality. In the classical conflict which the country has been and still is undergoing, there were three key players: a traditionally weak state whose institutions the citizens were hardly willing to trust; guerrilla groups like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC); and paramilitary groups which, integrated in the umbrella organization AUC that was formed for the country's self-defence, describe themselves as the answer to the FARC and other groups.

The transformation came in 2008, when the increasingly weakened FARC lost three of its leaders, Ingrid Betancourt and other symbolic hostages were set free, and large segments of the AUC were demobilized under the Ley Justicia y Paz of 2005. Since then, only two players have been active in the conflict: the state, which has regained a measure of trust, and a large number of criminal groups operating in drug trafficking and terrorism without any political or ideological concept.

The growing weakness of the FARC robbed the paramilitary of some of its legitimation. Old frontlines have been replaced by regional agreements concluded between more or less all groups to safeguard drug transit routes. To be sure, pressure is still brought to bear on politics, but it now serves political interests, not supra-regional ideological concepts.

In the era of the tripolar constellation, the state began by negotiating with one of the other two sides to boost the dynamism of the peace process. The government of Andrés Pastrana negotiated with the FARC, while Álvaro Uribe dealt with the paramilitary groups. Today, the government says that more than 35,000 fighters of the classical paramilitary and 15,000 guerrillas have been demobilized.

The government probably found it hard to decide between two poles – pragmatic minimalism and legal maximalism. The first would have meant granting impunity, the second disarmament without any concessions to the fighters who would have had a life in jail to look forward to. Failure of the process and an increasing number of victims would have been the

inescapable consequence. There can be no other solution for Colombia but to choose the middle way between the two poles, all the more so as the attitude adopted by civil society is encouraging: the demonstrations against violence early this year were the biggest the country has ever seen. Apparently, the backing of both guerrillas and paras is dwindling.

Number two: the current situation in Colombia apparently represents a post-conflict phase. Yet a closer look is necessary, for the conflict itself can be none other than the classical conflict already described.

Number three: the successful disarmament of guerrillas and the demobilization of paras gave the country the leeway it needs to put other problems on the agenda. Solving social problems is as urgent as alleviating poverty, reforming the health system, and acquiring investors. First among the issues that worry people is social disparity, while violence ranks third. And indeed, the social question is being debated openly by a wide variety of parties these days. The existence of many peaceful initiatives indicates that a fresh breeze has sprung up in Colombia's democracy. While the country certainly is not 'democratic' yet, it now permits all opinions to make themselves heard within a legal political framework.

Number four: the bipolarity of the new scenario in Colombia indicates that the conflict is 'normalizing'. This certainly does not refer to a positive normality in which society and politics are peaceful. Yet the present structure of the conflict is no longer unique; rather, it is familiar to other countries in Latin America as well as elsewhere.

Number five: the post-process has acquired a life of its own. Critics remark that the Ley Justicia y Paz was written only with the paras in mind. The answer to that is that in March 2008, the government extended the scope of the law to include FARC fighters who were ready to lay down their arms. What is more, Mr Uribe broke his word to the paras no less than twice, thus disarming those who suspected him of preferential treatment: the first instance was when he moved the AUC leaders to the high-security prison of Itagüi, the second when he had several of these leaders who came under the law but were not prepared to cooperate with the judiciary deported to the USA.

Number six: we must distinguish between Uribe I and Uribe II. In his first term of office, the President addressed himself to weakening the military power of the guerrillas and preparing the disarmament of the paras. Now that his strength has grown, he employs soft power. Indeed, Uribe II appears more creative than Uribe I in solving the classical conflict.

Number seven: because of the successful stabilization of Colombia's democracy, the esteem in which the country is held abroad is growing. Today, Colombia is no longer regarded as a country in conflict but as engaged in actively confronting and overcoming it. Now, other states are lending their support to the South American country, including the Federal Republic. There can be no doubt that human rights are still being infringed by state institutions, but this is not done systematically. Moreover, the government has demonstrated that it is prepared to make its own contribution towards stabilizing the safety of democracy.

Number eight: at the very moment of success in its fight against the FARC, the country is embroiled in a conflict with its neighbours. Confronted by growing pressure at home, many FARC leaders can feel safe only abroad. Thus, the camp in Ecuador where the FARC leader, Mr Reyes, was killed was not a temporary installation. Moreover, the data found on Mr Reyes' laptops indicate that the guerrillas were supported by the governments of Venezuela and Ecuador in contravention of international law. Early in 2008, Mr Chávez demanded that the FARC should no longer be prosecuted as a terrorist organization but regarded as a warring party, although he distanced himself from this position some months later. One thing is certain: this is not a conflict between 'brother states' but an asymmetrical dispute in which one state attempts to instrumentalize a non-governmental player in a neighbouring country. The situation resembles that in the Middle East: governmental and non-governmental players crossing international borders; terrorist practices being employed to settle hostilities between states.

Number nine: mechanisms to support conflict prevention and solution are lacking in the region. As late as March this year, the member states of the Rio group demonstrated their ability to solve conflicts spontaneously. Yet one thing is clear: whether tensions mount or relax is often controlled by emotional caudillos while the ministers and institutions of the states involved merely look on. Especially in a region where neighbours mistrust one another it is a grave deficit to have no working institutions that might facilitate communication and regulate conflicts.

Number ten: in Latin America, there is a gap not only between leftist and rightist governments but also between democratic and populist forms of rule. In the meantime, official Venezuelan politics has been toning down its professions of sympathy for the FARC. The evidence from the laptops of Mr Reyes' must have been weighty, for international interest in paying court to the group has slumped since then.

In Colombia, a conflict with three players has turned into a two-sided affair. However, one might as well say that there is more than one conflict in the country, involving a multitude of groups that fight against the public order.

In various guises, all these gangs fight mainly to secure drug trafficking routes. Then again, legal and illegal business often blends these days. One case in point is the cultivation of palms for oil, a new biofuel. Coca farming now faces competition; where this is not the case, people often grow coca and oil palms simultaneously. And to ensure that these legal-illegal farmers can make a quick buck, land is needed. This lends urgency to issues such as the forceful expulsion of the local population, land reform, and the fight against impunity.

There is much to do for the government of Colombia. To begin with, the classical conflict needs to be resolved. While it is probably impossible to defeat the guerrillas militarily, their influence and the threat they represent can be diminished. Land mines, too, present an acute danger. Next to Cambodia, Afghanistan, and Angola, Colombia is one of the most affected countries in the world. Another problem awaiting solution is the post-conflict with its numerous facets. Thus, it would be necessary to compensate victims of violence, segregate certain parts of the political sphere from the paras, and suppress common crime. Colombia has acquired merit through its endeavours to address a complex conflict from the past. While it cannot yet be called a normal state today, there is a chance that Colombia might advance on its stony path, provided the international community continues to assist it on the way.

IN: *Auslandsinformationen* 1/2009, ISSN 0177-7521, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V., Berlin, p.134-138