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## Dismantling labels: Colombia's long-term challenge towards peace

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After fifty years of war the Colombian government and the [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia \(FARC\)](#), the [longest operating left-wing guerrilla army in the hemisphere](#), have agreed to sign a peace accord by the end of this month. Although it is still uncertain if they will be able to meet this deadline, it seems that the ongoing peace process is reaching its final stage. The parties have already agreed on four of the six points of discussion defined in the [General Agreement](#) that inaugurated the peace talks back in 2012 ([integral rural development](#), [political participation](#), [transitional justice](#) and victims, and [illicit drug operation](#)). They also have made important announcements towards other concerns, such as the definition of a “humanitarian demining mission” and a special compromise with the families of victims of forced disappearances. More recently, the UN Security Council has adopted a [resolution](#) to establish a political mission to monitor and verify the ceasefire and the end of hostilities. It seems that, this time, there is no turning back.

However, Colombia still has to face one major challenge: how to dismantle the friend/enemy distinction that has driven the conflict for all these decades. This is an urgent call, not only because former FARC members will look forward to reintegrating into society, but also because, in the development of Colombia's conflict, labeling someone as an “enemy” became a dangerous way to consider some civilians as targets too. This process led to the most horrible atrocities around the country and, aside from what has been achieved in the peace process, it seems that this friend/enemy dichotomy is far from disappearing.

A good example of this continuing issue is the story of Nelly Amaya Páez. She was a social leader from the Catatumbo region who was found dead in the urban centre of a small town called San Calixto, in the department<sup>[1]</sup> of Norte de Santander at the beginning of this year. According to the national press, Nelly was a member of the [Catatumbo Peasant Association \(ASCAMCAT\)](#), a strong social organization that since 2006 has demanded the recognition of peasants' land rights and the implementation of rural development programs in the country. As its claims are similar to those demanded by FARC in the negotiations and most of its members live in places that have historically been controlled by the guerrilla army, ASCAMCAT has also been constantly labelled as a sympathiser of the rebel group.

The [Catatumbo](#), like many other regions in Colombia, has a long history of violence. This is due to its natural resources (especially oil) and also because of its strategic position. It is located between the eastern mountain range and the border with Venezuela, a location that makes it ideal for drug trafficking. Hence, it is a very attractive zone for all armed groups.

Back in the 1980s, three major rebel groups—FARC, [The National Liberation Army \(ELN\)](#), and the [Popular Army of Liberation \(EPL\)](#)—dominated this region. Nonetheless, the guerrillas' military strength and the rise of their political support among civilians (especially among peasants' organizations) started to be seen as a terrible threat by landowners and drug traffickers who were being severely affected by the guerrillas' activities. These landlords were being made victims of robbery, kidnapping, and extortion, among other crimes. Under this context some of these property-owners (in some cases with the help of drug traffickers) decided [to support and finance self-defence armies](#).

The main aim of these new paramilitary groups was to eliminate the guerrillas by any means. Taking the friend/enemy logic to an extreme, they not only went after rebel combatants, but also started to prosecute anyone who could be considered a “guerrilla civilian”. As the National Centre of Historic Memory has [reported](#), “the social and geographical coexistence of armed groups and civil population has functioned as a pretext to raise the criminal formula of ‘civilian rebels’”. Under this pretext and ignoring the fact that in armed conflicts relationships between civilians and combatants are usually [blurred and mobile](#), labelling peasants as “enemies”, especially those who were actively engaged with any political activity, was one of their major tactics. The paramilitaries went after peasants, labourers, and left-wing leaders, especially those who were members of the [Patriotic Union](#), a political party that was founded by former FARC members who demobilized during a previous peace deal in 1985.<sup>[2]</sup>

In the year 1997, the formation of the [United Self Defence Forces of Colombia \(AUC\)](#), a group that brought together all the paramilitary groups, looked forward to turning this plan into a national strategy. But during those years the means used to label someone as an “enemy” went far beyond what is permitted under international law. In Mapiripán, for example, a town usually related to FARC's activities, the paramilitary leader Héctor Buitrago (alias “[Martín Llanos](#)”) dressed himself as a member of the guerrillas to ask for shelter and food. He also made a list of “rebel collaborators” that included every peasant who helped him. This same list was then used by the paramilitaries to target and kill fifty “rebels”. Now known as the “[Mapiripán massacre](#)” the Inter-American Court of Human Rights declared that these were not FARC members and imposed sanctions on the Colombian

state for failing in the protection of civilians. However, what happened in Mapiripán is far from being an extraordinary event in Colombia. According to the [National Centre of Historic Memory](#), between 1985 and 2012, there have been a total of 1,982 mass killings across the country.<sup>[3]</sup> The Centre claims that 1,166 of these cases have been attributable to paramilitary groups.

If we go back to the story of Nelly Amaya, it can be said that this targeting of civilians as “enemies” has not yet vanished. Today, FARC and ELN are still present in the Catatumbo. In addition to that, there is an important presence of *Los Urabeños*, one of the rising criminal gangs (now known as [BACRIM](#)) formed by some ex-members of the AUC<sup>[4]</sup> and a wide number of new recruits. Nelly, on the other side, was a true believer in the peace process. She was leading the pedagogic activities of the agreements and she wanted the peasants to lead the changes already approved by the two parties; but she still carried a stigma. She was a peasant leader in a region usually associated with a strong guerrilla presence. She was a former member of the Patriotic Union and she was politically engaged in ASCAMCAT. Once again it seems that a peasant leader lost her life after being labelled as a rebel collaborator.

With the signature of a peace accord, there will be an open door for the guerrilla to become a legal political movement. Whether ASCAMCAT or any other civilian organization has close relationships with FARC or not, one of Colombia's greatest challenges is to learn how to dismantle this unhelpful friend/enemy dichotomy that has shaped the conflict for more than fifty years. There is a need to start thinking within a new political sphere where different ideas can coexist and be debated without people feeling in danger of being targeted for those very ideas. No advocacy in the name of a rural transformation should be seen as a threat. No one should lose their lives purely for being labelled an “enemy”.

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<sup>[1]</sup> A ‘department’ is the term commonly used for Colombian administrative units, or ‘states’.

<sup>[2]</sup> The party lost its political status in the year 2002 after a systematic prosecution and the homicide of most of its main leaders.

<sup>[3]</sup> The concept includes the killings of four or more persons found in a state of defencelessness.

<sup>[4]</sup> The AUC demobilized in the year 2005.

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