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Negotiations in Colombia: disunity within FARC and the relevance of the local

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Conversations with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) **are advancing** in the midst of a heated debate about a supposed division within the organisation. Whereas some analysts believe that it is no longer possible to understand FARC as a single monolithic entity, others insist that it continues to observe its traditional principles of hierarchy, unity, command and control. The discussion is relevant since it unveils the possibility of insurgency sectors rejecting demobilisation if an agreement is reached in Havana.

But what is usually overlooked in the debate is that whichever the result, if every insurgent leaves war behind, or if some structures remain as violent splinters, the local level holds a key to avoid the re-emergence of patterns of confrontation and conflict.

Events during a **unilateral ceasefire declared by FARC in November 20**, which lasted two months, stirred the debate. According to a report by the Joint Command of the Military Forces, the insurgency breached the ceasefire at least fifty times. Actions included six attacks against military patrols, seven light assaults, 23 attacks with explosives, two illegal checkpoints, a terrorist attack, nine actions against civilians, and the destruction of an energy tower. An explanation given is that since FARC's command is broken and several units reject negotiations, they willingly engaged on such actions.

Several analysts and political figures including Sigifredo Lopez, a politician who was FARC's hostage, and [Roman Ortiz](#), a Lecturer at Universidad de los Andes, believe the insurgency is divided. In their view, one sector observes peace as an authentic goal, while the other sees conversations as a strategic tool to advance in their original purpose of war, but never considering demobilisation. Since most actions during the ceasefire were conducted by the Southern and Western Blocs it is believed that these units are reluctant to surrender their weapons. It is the opposite case of the Caribbean Bloc, commanded by Ivan Marquez, head of the negotiation team, which did not produce a single action.

Complementing this vision is the hypothesis that FARC's new commander has not grounded sufficient support from its troops. In personal interviews that I conducted with several military and civilian officials in Colombia they argued about the possibility that Timoleon Jimenez (*Timochenko*) is not appreciated through the ranks as previous charismatic commanders were. Being stationed in Venezuela for years, arguably, has made it difficult for him to connect with combatants. He **became commander** only because two more likely successors to the post were killed in spectacular military operations. There is, however, no evidence to support this claim.

But other analysts and political figures oppose the idea of a disrupted insurgency. Researchers Ariel Avila and Alfredo Rangel explained that hierarchical command and control continue to be the backbones of the organisation as it has been throughout history. As a matter of fact, the idea of dissent has never been considered since combatants know that it is punished with execution.

Avila argued that the ceasefire was indeed observed. He explains that the number of **attacks decreased from an average of 170 per month to 41** in the two-month period. From these actions, only seven clearly constituted violations; eight were on the thin line between defensive and offensive operations, while the rest were purely defensive manoeuvres. (It must be noted that the government refrained from declaring a ceasefire.)

However, it is not completely absurd, and it might actually be convenient, to believe that some structures could in fact refuse to demobilise. Avila recognised that actions in the province of Choco (Northwest) are of concern given connections to drug dealers in this area. And it is precisely this factor, profiting from drugs and other commodities, which might push combatants away from re-integrating into society. FARC is, among other things, a means of sustenance for individuals in marginalised areas. If the organisation disappears, combatants might decide to remain as outlaws to guarantee the stability of their income.

Analysts such as Fernando Cubides have spoken about a 'bureaucracy in arms', existing not only to pursue a particular end, but to preserve itself as an organisation, including thousands of individuals that depend on it for their sustenance.

In that sense, responses should not only be thought of in terms of a national agreement. Local dynamics, especially in those isolated regions that have served as the insurgents' 'heartland' will determine the success or failure of FARC's transition into legality.

Fighting insurgents directly in local theatres, as it has been the tradition in counterinsurgency, is obviously necessary if remnants persist, but it wouldn't be sufficient. The Colombian state has already learned, through many years of trial-and-error policies, that military might and police protection need to go hand in hand with social and economic development. It is necessary to build state institutions in those regions in order to provide the services and infrastructure that will guarantee the sustainability of communities within the legal economy. Otherwise, the effort is just an invitation for splinters of the insurgency to return.

But even if the opposite result is produced, if every single combatant follows his or her leaders into demobilisation, local dynamics will also be vital. Social and economic conditions in isolated regions that have nurtured the insurgency for decades will be similar if the end of hostilities is declared. They could even worsen if local criminal economies are disrupted, leaving communities without immediate means of sustenance. Cycles of violence might then persist and new actors could even emerge to exploit the power vacuum. In that sense, once again, it is necessary for the state to implement programmes aiming at the construction of state and social institutions in order to provide the necessary means for local populations to integrate legitimate economic structures.

In sum, whether FARC remains undivided or if splinters emerge, understanding the solution only as a national-level agreement between the parties is insufficient. Only action on the local level to promote social and economic development will guarantee that a handshake in Havana is not going to be remembered as yet another image of failure in Colombian history.

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