

THE CONVERSATION

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Why Colombia voted 'no' to peace with FARC

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Going about their business. EPA/Christian Escobar Mora

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It seemed like a done deal. After 60 years of fighting, three years of detailed negotiations, and a peace agreement signed in front of the head of the United Nations, the horrific conflict between the Colombian state and the Marxist Fuerzas Armadas de Colombia (FARC) finally seemed to be over.

The peace process looked set to be a model for future negotiations around the world; all it needed was public approval. And then, in the referendum that was meant to finish the job, 50.24% of voters rejected the agreement – with fewer than 40% even showing up.

This wasn't supposed to happen – but looked at in a different way, it's far from a surprise.

The negotiations were all but designed to be disconnected from voters, and might as well have taken place on another planet. Sequestered behind closed doors in Cuba, the negotiators represented only the Colombian state and FARC; both sides dealt with the human consequences of their violence by flying in representatives of victims' groups, and then flying them home again.

As far as securing a deal goes, the design worked. Untroubled by the day-to-day vacillations of popular opinion and safely isolated from the violence between the two sides, negotiators reached a well thought out settlement to stop the conflict for good – a remarkable achievement after one of the modern world's longest-running wars.

On paper, it was a remarkable achievement. But on the ground, it was also clear that most Colombians had no interest in what was happening.

There were attempts to engage them: touring meetings and talks where people would be spoken to and have their opinions listened to, adverts and documentaries in which former enemies publicly reconciled, a website on which people could post their opinions. Nevertheless, the lack of interest was palpable – and for some reason, it apparently didn't strike the negotiators as a significant problem.



The 'Yes' campaign failed to fire Colombians up. EPA/Christian Escobar Mora

All the expertise and effort was at the negotiating table. If these two sides could resolve the intractable conflict everyone would be relieved, regardless of the deal's content. There was no need for a Plan B: after all, who would vote against peace? No one would read the thing anyway, and they would vote with their instincts.

But instincts change over the course of 60 years of war, especially a war in which guerrillas fight the state military and police, who themselves collude with or fight paramilitaries, who in turn fight the guerrillas – all of them killing thousands of civilians and displacing millions more. In a climate like this, the norms of justice shift; impunity rules, violence escalates, illegal and legal economies alike are infused with violence. Distrust thrives.

Personality contest

In the end, the Yes-No campaign revolved around two men: the dealmaking current president, Santos, and his predecessor, Álvaro Uribe, who campaigned for a No vote. Santos is more unpopular than ever; like many leaders from elite backgrounds, he comes off as uninterested in ordinary people. Uribe's stock, evidently, is much higher.

At first, Uribe totally opposed any negotiations with FARC; then, once the negotiations were clearly working, he moved on to opposing any deal under which FARC members would avoid proper judicial sentences or be allowed to enter political office. His objections were always unlikely to be met, but he'd hit a nerve: for many Colombians, the social and personal injustices of negotiating an end to war were just too painful to accept.



Álvaro Uribe on the trail for 'No'. EPA/Christian Escobar Mora

Uribe also stood to lose out personally from the deal. The central pillar of his legacy was the military campaign that weakened FARC to the point that they would negotiate. Yet, his well-reported connections to paramilitaries who killed thousands of civilians while fighting FARC indicate a dirtier side to this war. Many of his political allies – including his head of intelligence, his brother, and his cousin (who was his campaign manager) – are now behind bars for colluding with paramilitaries to advance their political and business ambitions.

By offering reduced sentences to those who confessed their crimes on all sides, the deal could have opened up the Uribe era to unprecedented scrutiny. The media even speculated that Uribe himself could face criminal convictions for crimes against humanity.

And yet, Uribe remains surprisingly popular. He was able to mobilise his supporters against the peace process; without his efforts, there might have been a different result.

In the name of the people

Many people who voted No are angry. Like Uribe, they view the conflict with absolute certainty: destroy, by any means necessary, or be destroyed. To them, FARC must be contained either through annihilation or incarceration; there is no alternative. Those that voted Yes don't necessarily support either the deal or Santos, but they saw no option but to accept what was offered. They were prepared to put aside revenge and retribution so that future generations could live without fear.

The high proportion of non-voters, meanwhile, reflects not just popular alienation from the peace process, but also a much longer history of political distrust. Most voters have seen this all before: a deal is done behind closed doors and, outside of election campaigns, leaders take little or no interest in their people's needs.



The road not taken. EPA/Christian Escobar Mora

Ironically, that's what started the war, and what perpetuated it. Belligerents on all sides claimed to be fighting for "the people". But most Colombians recognised that some or all of them ended up fighting for their own interests. For some, continued conflict feels safer than peace by compromise, while others will feel that Colombia has thrown away a chance to offer its next generation a peaceful life. Still others will see this as nothing more than business as usual: a never-ending story of self-interest, lies, corruption, impunity and violence.

It's hard to know what happens next: more negotiations, another offer, reinvigorated conflict. The already weakened FARC might yet fragment, making another deal less robust; the government might shift back to the right, possibly heralding a return to a war fought through paramilitary proxies.

Whatever happens, Colombia needs to find a way for all its people to discuss their own war – and their own peace – in a way that validates their experiences and does not escalate the violence further.

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