

Colombian president receives Nobel Peace Prize for rejected accord with the FARC

By Andrea Lobo
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Last Friday, Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in the four years of negotiations to reach a peace accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas. The announcement came five days after Colombians narrowly rejected the accord in a referendum marked by widespread abstention.

As the second Colombian to receive a Nobel prize—after the renowned novelist Gabriel García Márquez received the prize for literature in 1982—Santos accepted it “in the name of all Colombians.” He also announced on Sunday that the \$930,000 reward will be “donated for the reparation of the victims” of the civil war.

This attempt to exploit the prize to promote national unity fell flat, however, in the face of the deep and bitter divisions revealed by the unexpected rejection of the accord in a referendum that saw only a 37 percent turnout and a margin of victory for the “no” camp of just 60,000 votes out of the 13 million ballots cast.

The selection of Santos for the Nobel Peace Prize only underscores the dubious character of this distinction, which has been bestowed on the likes of Barack Obama in the midst of military escalation in Afghanistan and drone assassinations, and figures ranging from the US war criminal Henry Kissinger to the right-wing Israeli leader and former terrorist Menachem Begin.

As is often the case, the selection of Santos for the prize was driven by definite political and economic interests. The bourgeoisie internationally has a serious stake in the Colombian accord, which it hopes will end the armed conflict, opening up the country to far more intensive penetration by transnational capital. At the same time, it would serve to turn the FARC, the last major guerrilla movement, into a new bourgeois party tasked with containing and diverting the struggles of the Colombian working class.

In the weeks prior to the vote, President Santos had declared that the only “Plan B” in the event of the accord’s rejection was “going back to war,” and that renegotiating the deal was “categorically impossible.” His top negotiator in the talks in Havana, Cuba, Humberto de la Calle, had said that a “no” vote would be the fault of the FARC and that, “There are people

that are not clear that the agreement cannot be renegotiated.” De la Calle has now offered to resign, while another government negotiator complained that there were no plans to renegotiate, and FARC leaders have expressed resistance to changing the accord.

Meanwhile, Santos has renewed the ceasefire, but only until October 31, leading the FARC leaders to order their fighters to prepare to go to emergency safe zones. The Santos government has also initiated negotiations with the far-right figures leading the “no” campaign: former presidents Álvaro Uribe and Andrés Pastrana, granting them the political center stage after the referendum.

While claiming to prefer a “better accord” with the FARC, Uribe and the elements around him represent the blood-soaked interests of the aristocratic ranchers and landowners who prefer the annihilation of the remaining guerrillas and the continuation of land seizures and control.

While recognizing the “real danger the peace process will come to a halt and the civil war will flare up again,” the Norwegian Nobel Committee has now joined US Secretary of State John Kerry and other international figures in supporting the Santos-led negotiations with the FARC. The award text celebrates that, “Santos is now inviting all parties to participate in a broad-based national dialogue aimed at advancing the peace process. Even those who opposed the peace accord have welcomed such a dialogue.”

This year’s pool of 376 candidates is the largest ever—a reflection, as the head of the Nobel Institute Olav Njolstad put it, of “a world where there are a lot of conflicts...” Among the leading contenders for the prize were the White Helmets in Syria, a civil defense NGO funded by the US Agency for International Development and the British government that operates in close collaboration with the Al Qaeda-linked Islamist militias as a kind of propaganda arm in the war for regime change.

On Friday, US President Obama said that the Nobel committee “made the right decision,” and, along with John Kerry and several European politicians, congratulated Santos. These gestures around the Nobel prize notwithstanding, the rise in global warfare and the civil war in Colombia itself have been fueled by American and European imperialism’s attempt to

impose global hegemony through military force.

Even before Colombia's half-century-long war officially began in 1964, the US was already backing the landed oligarchy's use of paramilitary and state forces to suppress armed guerrillas linked to the Stalinist Communist Party and sections of the Liberal Party that were operating in peasant communities and ended up forming the FARC.

These first efforts by the US government were embodied in Plan Lazo, a policy to "... execute paramilitary, sabotage and/or terrorist activities against known communist proponents," as defined in a 1962 secret report to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The counterinsurgency methods used to fight the guerrillas were given a cover under the US "war on drugs" beginning in the 1970s, as the FARC were reportedly using drug money to fund their operations. So, too, were right-wing paramilitaries aligned with the Colombian oligarchy, not to mention the CIA, which, in the 1980s, was transporting drugs out of Colombia to finance weapons for the Contra forces fighting against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

The continued assistance and direct US military involvement fueled the paramilitary death squads, which came to a peak with the \$9 billion Plan Colombia to arm and train forces to fight the guerrillas. The plan elaborated during the Clinton administration in 1998, and implemented under Bush, became part of the "counterterrorism" efforts in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. The plan was then expanded into the Andean Regional Initiative to give military support to Ecuador, Venezuela, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, and Panama.

During this period, the CIA and NSA were involved in a targeted assassination program using GPS-guided "smart bombs" to carry out extra-judicial killings of leaders of the FARC, which had been labeled as a terrorist group by the US State Department. Several thousand innocent peasants and workers were also extra-judicially murdered by the military and paramilitary forces under a grisly program dubbed "false positives." Civilians were kidnapped, put into guerrilla uniforms and summarily executed and passed off as FARC combatants in order to reap bounty money offered by the Defense Ministry in conjunction with Plan Colombia.

For his part, the new peace laureate Santos has spent most of his political life immersed in this bloody imperialist violence. Part of a prominent family that owned the country's largest newspaper, the conservative *El Tiempo*, of ex-president Eduardo Santos Montejó (1938-1942), Juan Manuel Santos made his way into the executive office after becoming a naval cadet in Colombia and graduating from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

After serving brief terms as a Minister of Commerce in 1991-1993 and as Minister of Finance under Pastrana in 2000-2002, he became a loyal follower of Uribe, founding the Social National Unity Party to support Uribe's second presidency. As Defense Minister under Uribe from 2006 to 2010, he oversaw some of the most brutal attacks against the

guerrillas and peasant communities as part of Plan Colombia, including the bombing of Ecuadorian territory in 2008 and the wave of "false positive" executions.

The government's military advantage over the guerrillas was secured by 2007, but as minister and as president after 2010, he has continued to expand arms deals and military aid from the US, while increasing participation in US-Colombian joint training exercises aimed at militarizing the region.

Santos, along with the corrupt and militaristic ruling elite to which he belongs, has shared immense responsibility for the prolongation and costs of the war, which has led to more than 220,000 deaths and 6 million displaced—including over 3 million peasants expelled from key agricultural and mining areas—in more than 52 years of fighting.

The 2016 Nobel Peace Prize celebrates this political figure and a "peace accord" that grants virtual impunity for war crimes carried out by the government, the paramilitaries, and the FARC.

Santos' economic and trade policies as minister and now president have focused on intensifying the exploitation of workers and peasants through devaluations of the peso and applying austerity measures ordered by the IMF, affecting virtually every area, with the exception of the security forces. He has also increased the economy's dependence on mining and fossil fuel exports through trade agreements and currency devaluations, amplifying the effects of the fall in commodity prices: rising public debt, economic stagnation and an increase in the unemployment rate to over 12 percent.

Given the background of president Santos, his public approval rating of barely 21 percent and inability to garner national support for his "peace dialogues" with the FARC are no surprise. The Nobel prize—likely decided upon before the "no" vote in the referendum—was an attempt to counter popular hostility to Santos, which has become an impediment to the enactment of a deal seen as crucial for the plans of imperialism and the national ruling elite to continue their attacks against Colombia's workers and peasants.

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