

Colombian government signs revised peace deal with FARC

By Andrea Lobo
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The Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas celebrated a new peace accord last Thursday in a sober ceremony in the capital, Bogotá. President Juan Manuel Santos's promises that the culmination of the five-year peace talks will bring the country "progress, wellbeing, peace and concord" have already been discarded as frauds by a majority of the population.

On October 2, a previous and only slightly different peace agreement was narrowly voted down in a national referendum, with 19 percent of the total electorate voting against it and 63 percent abstaining.

The Colombian far right, dominated by ex-president Álvaro Uribe, has been strengthened as the most organized and intransigent opposition to the accord, saying that the new document remained virtually unchanged. "What will we tell the 3,5000 criminal organizations?" he asked, calling the agreement, "the worst example for the future of the country."

Throughout his decades in positions of power, Uribe has defended the interests of the landed aristocracy that prefers to finish off or imprison the decimated FARC guerrillas, who today reportedly number 6,000, only a third of their strength under Uribe.

In spite of the continued opposition by the official "no" campaign, the FARC and the Santos administration decided to go ahead with the ceremony, hoping that "the process of consultation will be approved through the course of the next week" in Congress, where the ruling coalition holds a majority of the seats.

Recognizing that a popular vote could again reject the document, president Santos, who was awarded the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize for his role in the peace talks, declared: "The most convenient and legitimate way to consult the new accord is through Congress. It is there that all laws of the Republic ought to be discussed and approved."

Four days after the new agreement was initially reached two weeks ago, two FARC fighters were killed and one gave himself up to government armed forces, leading the

government's top negotiator, Humberto De la Calle, to warn that the ceasefire, "is indeed fragile!"

In spite of these expressions of concern and with a year left before the 2018 elections, the Liberal Party and the others in the ruling coalition are chiefly seeking to provide a political cover for the much more unpopular measures they will implement to deal with the country's current budget crisis and economic stagnation. Since their beginning in 2012, the peace talks have been used as a smokescreen.

On the day before the ceremony, the Ministry of Economy presented the first stage of a regressive tax reform urged by the IMF and Wall Street credit agencies, increasing the added-value tax from 16 percent to 18 percent. Economy Minister Mauricio Cárceles reported on Thursday that the IMF was highly pleased with the proposal, and that it had demanded Congress approve it by the end of the year.

These short-term measures to deal with the current budget deficit will further undermine the country's production and its limited reductions in poverty. Over the last decade, the oil reserves were severely depleted, allowing the country to grow at an average annual rate of over 5 percent. This, however, led to an increased dependence on oil exports and shrank the manufacturing sector and labor productivity, according to a 2015 study by the Levy Economics Institute, "Finance, Foreign Direct Investment, and Dutch Disease: The Case of Colombia."

While this growth allowed for minimal assistance programs, a small financial elite in the country got obscenely rich, turning away investments from the real economy further.

The drop in oil and other commodity prices has contributed to a 35 percent drop in export earnings since June 2015, along with the widespread deterioration in agriculture and manufacturing caused by oil exploitation and the associated free trade agreements signed by Santos with the US, the European Union and others. Now, the government is struggling to deal with massive trade and accounts deficits and a crisis in public finances.

International heads of state and other top figures, who had

been enthusiastic about the peace accord before the “no” vote, have supported the new agreement with sobriety and some reluctance. One of the main backers, US Secretary of State John Kerry, pledged support, while declaring, “After 52 years of war, no peace agreement can satisfy everyone in every detail.”

The London-based *Financial Times* expressed great skepticism about the new accord, predicting that Uribe’s party will gain strength and “have a strong footing from which to challenge for the presidency in the 2018 election.”

“Many Colombians feel hatred towards the FARC, viewing them as drug traffickers and human rights abusers,” adds the FT. Given the surprising referendum result, which demonstrated how useless the peace deal is to give legitimacy to the current administration’s attacks against social conditions, the dominant imperialist and national bourgeois forces in Colombia are pivoting towards Uribe’s bonapartist means of imposing the costs of public debt and economic stagnation onto Colombian workers and peasants.

Donald Trump’s election and the greater challenges posed to the Colombian economy by his proposed nationalist economic policies, along with likely higher interest rates, are also feeding into a greater support among the bourgeoisie for Uribe’s ultra-reactionary program, which includes massive tax cuts for the corporations and the rich, widespread social cuts and an escalation of the war against peasants to take their lands.

The anti-deal Uribistas are hopeful for a sharp change after Trump’s election. The Democratic Center senator, José Obdulio Gaviria, said that Marco Rubio, who is allegedly close to Uribe, will try to influence Trump in what he called “the new scenery of the anti-terrorist alliance.” Gaviria then hinted at the potential extradition of 50 FARC “narco-terrorists” with pending arrest warrants.

After Trump’s election, Álvaro Uribe was quite direct and tweeted, “Congratulations to President Trump; Colombia’s narco-terrorism and Venezuela’s tyranny are the greatest enemies of our democracy.”

During his speech on Thursday, the leader of the FARC, Rodrigo Londoño, also known as Timochenko, stated: “We welcome Donald Trump’s election as the new US president, and we hope that his administration can play a leading role in favor of world and continental peace.” So far, this is the most blatant demonstration of the political bankruptcy, subservience to imperialism and right-wing character of the FARC and the future, nominally left party it proposes to found.

The current situation of economic crisis and a strengthened far-right was prepared by all the previous governments together with the current administration, which sold out Colombia’s resources, attacked jobs and wages,

exempted corporations from taxes and gave the military and paramilitary units a free rein to commit atrocities across the country. The widespread unpopularity of the current government has been severely increased due to their efforts to prop up the discredited leadership of the FARC as a left cover for the government.

Ultimately, both leading political factions of the Colombian ruling class, the center-right Santistas and the far-right Uribistas, agree on social austerity and cutting import tariffs and taxes for transnational corporations and banks that exploit the country’s resources and cheap labor. They also agree that if an incorporation of the guerrillas into official politics happens, the state will still move ahead with its plans to militarize the country and the region and to continue undermining democratic rights.

One of the more significant points of the new agreement will be its separation from the Constitution, giving flexibility for its implementation. Under a “Special Jurisdiction for Peace,” the accord also gives impunity to military and business elements that were involved in the conflict and leaves the option for FARC members accused of crimes to avoid sentences by making amends to the victims.

In terms of political participation, it still gives the FARC leaders and even those accused of war crimes party financing and a chance to run for public office, but it will eliminate the 10 automatic legislative seats that the previous agreement granted them. It also sets a six-month period for disarmament.

In terms of land grants, the accord reasserts the “current authority” and “constitutional rights” that protect the private property of the rural landowners. The agreement promises to use 3 million hectares for redistribution among landless peasants and war victims, under the cloak of “investments in the countryside with an entrepreneurial vision.”

Among the larger changes made in the revised, 310-page document is a further elaboration of the process of listing assets of the guerrillas that will be used for reparations, along with a detailed description of the “agricultural colonies” which are to serve as special prisons for the FARC members found guilty of crimes.

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