

# Colombia votes against peace accord between the FARC and government

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Colombians voted to reject the peace accord signed by the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas in a national referendum held Sunday. The measure failed by a slim margin—50.2 percent voted “no” and 49.8 percent voted “yes,” a margin of 54,000 out of a total 13 million ballots cast. The referendum was marked by widespread abstention. Just 37 percent voted, below the usual 40 to 50 percent turnout in presidential elections.

While voter turnout was affected by the whiplash storms and floods caused by Hurricane Matthew on the Caribbean, the main factor was the general alienation from the “peace talks.” The bulk of the Colombian working class viewed the 299-page peace agreement—negotiated by the unpopular Juan Manuel Santos government and FARC with the help of the governments of the United States, Cuba and Venezuela—as incapable of solving the profound social crisis plaguing Colombian society.

The sanctimonious pleas for “peace” by the Santos government and its backers in the US and Western Europe are aimed at covering the real purpose of the referendum.

According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Colombia’s profit rate for foreign direct investments (FDI) fell from a 12 percent average between 2010 and 2014 to 4 percent in 2015, particularly because of the fall in commodity prices. Total FDI inflows fell 26 percent last year. High inflation has led to decreasing real salaries this year. Unemployment has increased and public debt is now approaching 45% of GDP, while tax income is falling for a second year in a row.

In this context, the peace accords become a political cover for austerity, militarism and a sharp worsening of the social crisis in the country, all signs of political and

economic weakness. The Santos administration was not constitutionally required to hold a referendum, but calculated that a “yes” vote would provide the government with the political legitimacy required to carry out stronger social cuts and militarization.

Currency devaluation, tax cuts for corporations and added-value tax increases that are being discussed would further undermine the living standards of the 61.7% of families that report barely making ends meet.

The financial elites and their press have expressed this frustration. *New York Times* journalist Julia Symmes Cob tweeted on Sunday, “So Twitter, in the year of Brexit, Trump and Colombia’s peace vote, how are we feeling about democracy?”

This comment expresses the anti-democratic outlook of the financial aristocracy and its public relations representatives at the *New York Times*. The violent suppression of social opposition throughout Latin America by US imperialism over the last century proves that democracy must be done away with whenever it poses an obstacle to the profit margins of the banks and multinational corporations.

The *Financial Times* also wrote that the bank HSBC stated, “This political defeat could also lower the chance of Congress passing the much-needed tax reform ahead of year-end... notwithstanding the government’s assurance that spending cuts in the 2017 budget (particularly on public investment) will be enough to comply with the fiscal goals.” The *Financial Times* reported that the country’s peso fell 3 percent before steadying at 2.1 percent lower.

An analyst for Goldman Sachs expressed concerns that the result will affect the activities of the central bank, while an analyst for Citibank stated: “The question is how easy is it now going to be for the government to pass a tax reform of such a meaningful

size.”

The Santos government is politically weakened by the vote result. Most polls during recent weeks showed an overwhelming victory for the “yes” vote, even by a two-to-one margin.

Now, the Colombian government is calculating a “plan B” for the imposition of austerity.

In an attempt to show leadership amid the uncertainty on Sunday night, Santos stated: “I have given instructions to the chief negotiator of the government and the top commissioner for peace to travel tomorrow to La Havana to keep the FARC negotiators informed about the results of this political dialogue.”

The head of the FARC, Rodrigo Londoño, known as Timochenko, declared on Sunday that the result demonstrated that “our obstacles as a political movement are much greater.”

The deal was the product of a long process. Negotiators missed an initial March 23 deadline and suspended the talks as a response to the rise in paramilitary attacks on politicians, indigenous and peasant leaders, which have continued to increase since 2012 in spite of the drop in fighting against the guerrillas.

The deal was based largely on providing official state funding for the FARC through its transformation into a “democratic” political party, with a guaranteed number of spots in the legislature. The plan’s proposal to abolish the illegal drug trade with mild subsidies would in fact likely allow the expansion of large landowner *haciendas* and facilitate the extraction of natural resources with increased violence used against the peasantry and rural working class.

The accord also would provide impunity for FARC guerrillas, who have carried out kidnappings, extortion and murders as the backbone of its bankrupt guerrilla program. The crimes of the FARC, however, are outweighed only by those committed by the government and its right-wing paramilitary supporters who are responsible for about three-fourths of the estimated 177,000 civilian deaths throughout the decades-long civil war.

Regardless of how the “peace” process resolves in the short term, Colombia is a crucial part of the US government’s “pivot to Latin America.” US funding and direct military assistance have allowed Colombia to build the largest military force in South America with

445,000 members. Currently, the FARC report having just 5,800 fighters across the country, compared to the estimated 19,000 they had when Alvaro Uribe became president in 2002.

The US-backed militarization of Colombia gives the lie to the government’s claims to want “peace.” According to calculations made by the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), the sum of US military and police aid and US arms sales to Colombia has had a sustained increase from less than \$900 million in 1997-1999 to \$2.5 billion in 2012-2014. New taxes and budget reallocation have ensured that the Colombian workers and peasants are forced to pay a greater share of the buildup of the repressive apparatus.

The Colombian Defense Minister Luis Carlos Villegas announced last month that the 2017 military budget will grow by \$230 million “to accompany the post-conflict with a powerful Public Force.” Obama, on his part, requested Congress a \$390 million aid package primarily for “security and counter-narcotics” as part of its “Peace Colombia” program.

Already, the US has taken advantage of the drawing down of the guerrilla conflict to integrate Colombia’s military into regional US efforts of militarization as part of the bilateral Security Cooperation Coordinating Group between both governments. More than 300 joint training exercises are expected to happen in Latin America next year.



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