

10 clues to explain the Colombian frenzy

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"To the extent that no one could know for sure where the boundaries of reality were" – Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. [Español](#)



Indigenous people walk with a banner that reads in Spanish "Peace" during a peace march in Bogota, Colombia, Wednesday, Oct. 12, 2016. AP Photo/Fernando Vergara.

Explaining oneself is a complex and unfinished task. This is why people often resort to psychologists, friends, teachers or priests. Explaining to outsiders what has happened in Colombia in the last two weeks is no less demanding. Signing the end of a 52-year-long civil war (September, 26), having the agreement submitted to a plebiscite which was won by the No vote (October, 2) and then the losing president being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (October, 7) describe a society trapped in a spirit of frenzy by the demons of contradiction. Probably the most paradoxical thing to understand from afar is the triumph of the No vote, and this article aims to give some clues to understand what happened and what comes next.

What happened

1. Abstention won – much as usual. Colombia is a country where, for a variety of reasons, more than 50% of the electorate has never gone to the polls. The average turnout at elections is between 30 and 40%. This time, 63% percent of those entitled to do so did not vote. After 52 years of civil war, an important part of the country which views the war as if it had happened in some far-away country, stayed at home and let minorities decide for them. At the end of the day, 18% of those who did go to the polls voted No and decided on the fate of the remaining 82%. Indolence is one of the most dangerous enemies of democracy because it offers those whom Valentina Pazé calls fools^[1] the opportunity to decide – in this case, not to decide - on the fundamental rights of us all.

2. There happened, in addition, a magical spell reminiscent of García Márquez's Macondo. The Caribbean coast, where support for the Yes was overwhelming, came under the impact of Hurricane Matthew. In all the departments there, the Yes won by more than 60%, but the abstention rate was above 75%. Had there not been a hurricane, we would not by now be doing any of these analyzes. In a plebiscite that was lost by less than half a percentage point, a handful of votes in that area would have changed the outcome.
3. Juan Manuel Santos has now been President for the last six and a half years. Power wears down and Santos's image has been eroding. His approval rate is no higher than 30%. There was a definite risk that some of the No voters would do so against Santos, not against the agreements. And it came true. The No vote catalyzed several dissatisfactions. Those who were not willing to make any concessions to the FARC. Evangelical and Catholic extremists who think that family and Colombia itself will come to an end if gay community rights are recognized. Those who reject Santos's economic and social policies, as well as his tendency to make unfulfilled promises. Former President Uribe's and his extremist policies' nostalgic ones. The list is endless. Several guilds and associations made public pronouncements and called to vote No if the government did not comply on issues that were not included in the agreements. That is, the plebiscite was used to download all sorts of dissatisfactions - some had to do with the agreements and many others did not. The Yes vote, by contrast, focused on the agreements: an important part of the population do not support the president's policies, but do support the content of what was negotiated.
4. The official campaigns for both the Yes and the No polarized and manipulated the electorate. On the government's side, pride prevailed: on the one hand, it thought that the Yes would win in a landslide; on the other, it portrayed the No voters as friends of war and enemies of peace. The president himself raised absurd and awkward fears saying that if the No were to win, the next day the cities would be bombed by the FARC. The campaign led by Uribe, for its part, studied and manipulated the population thoroughly. As the campaign manager recently confessed, the strategy was not to explain the arguments against the agreements, but to alter the population and get people to go to the polls irrationally angry.^[2] To this end, the middle and upper classes were told that their taxes were to be raised in order to pay the guerrillas, and the lower classes were told that subsidies would be cancelled and given to the guerrillas instead. The No campaign prophesied throughout the country that if the Yes won, there would be a Castro-Chavista government in Colombia, even though no explanation was given as to what the logic behind the prophecy was. But fear is not driven by logic. None of this was in the agreements, but they managed to get people to vote against them. In the last 15 days, the No campaign intelligently told its followers that they would not be voting against peace but against the agreements. Many Colombians began to assert that they had read all 297 pages of a legal and politically complex text, and that they disagreed with many aspects of it, even though they were unable to say which and why. This message psychologically empowered many voters who were embarrassed to be seen as enemies of peace.
5. Religion played an ambivalent and dangerous role in a deeply religious country. On the side of the Catholic Church, while Pope Francis campaigned non-stop from Rome for the Yes, and went so far as to say that he would visit Colombia only if he Yes won, the Colombian Episcopal Conference issued a statement urging the faithful to vote according to their conscience... thus displaying a nauseating apocalyptic lukewarmness quite contrary to the signs of the times (Revelation 3:16). On the side of the evangelical churches, most of them directly and actively opted for the No, mixing divine commandments and moral prejudices which not only collide with human rights but have nothing to do with the agreements. To them, the Bible definitely prophesied the demonic nature of the agreements and so the faithful should vote No. Unfortunate but true: the brethren believed their pastors and went to the polls as irredentist and subaltern sheep.

6. The majority of the media indulged in a simulation that put at risk the right to information. Although many of them kept an editorial line in favour of the Yes, they actually conveyed the terrible lies of the No and became their permanent mouthpiece, falling short of fulfilling their duty to check the accusations. Quite a number of politicians in favour of the No got used to hurling accusations, which were both very serious and showed no signs of truthfulness against the president, the FARC and the agreements, without proving any of them, and the media got used to relaying them uncritically, as if there was a right to manipulate and lie, and a duty for the media to act as mouthpieces of that right. What was important for them was not the information, but the boost in the audience ratings after each outburst. Perhaps one of the few journalists who behaved in an exemplary manner was Yolanda Ruiz.^[3] She refused to broadcast unfounded accusations by the No advocates, reminding without much success that it is journalism's duty to safeguard truthfulness and not give voice to manipulation.

What comes next

7. Fortunately, the triumph of the No has not meant the end, but rather the resumption of the negotiations. While at first the supporters of the Yes looked as if they had no B plan, those of the No showed that they did not even have an A plan. The former did not expect a defeat, and the latter did not imagine a victory. This meant that the hours immediately after the results were steeped in a menacing level of uncertainty. Fortunately, the statements from the president, the FARC, and Uribe were reassuring and displayed a political high-mindedness commensurate with the seriousness of the situation. To this must be added the consensus of all sides to keep the bilateral ceasefire, which is in itself a great victory. For the process to go ahead, it is necessary, moreover, to maintain and to strengthen the support of the leadership of the Armed Forces and the United States. Today, the former seems more feasible than the latter, considering the unwanted but not impossible victory of Donald Trump.

8. There is no road ahead. It has to be built and agreed upon, not by two actors any more, but three. Here are some of the possible paths:

8.1. One path would be to go ahead with the agreements and get Congress to validate them. This is politically the most unlikely and most illegitimate one, because it would not only ignore the result of the plebiscite, but involve the most despised institution in the country, the approval rate of which stands at less than 8%.

8.2. Another path would be a fairly speedy renegotiation of some parts of the agreements. This would be the most desirable one, because it would cater for both the Yes and the No advocates, since they would both feel that they have won and that their vote has been useful. But it remains to be seen whether the FARC are willing to renegotiate. It all depends on what they are presented with. It is also to be seen whether Uribe's side wants a short negotiation or one that would last until the presidential elections of 2018. The fact that Uribe has chosen three presidential hopefuls as its three negotiators is a warning signal. It would be a serious mistake to make the agreements depend on future elections, and, besides, an 18-month campaign would be just unbearable.

8.3. A third path would be to convene a National Constituent Assembly, FARC's proposal from the start of the negotiations which was rejected again and again by the government, but which today seems likely to happen sooner or later. This is a risky way out because while it is true that the agreements demanded dozens of constitutional reforms, it is no less true than the current Colombian constitution includes some guarantees that would probably not be surpassed by a new one. On the contrary, the current polarization of forces and ambitions is such that a new constitution would probably be a kind of Frankenstein text which would assemble the competing interests of multiple groups and associations, and lose the common good guideline of the existing constitution. This position forgets that Colombia's problem is not the constitution but the lack of political will to implement it. A new Constituent Assembly runs the risk of adjusting the constitution to the disparate, contradictory (and selfish) wills that would negotiate it.

9. Transitional justice is a political process in which justice becomes flexible in order to move from a negative historical state to a new and better one. The agreements included this situation: retributive justice was to be

minimized with respect to restorative justice, but, in return, the perpetrators of crimes from all parties (the guerrillas, the military, the police, politicians, businessmen, landowners) were required to confess the whole truth about the very serious crimes committed or face the full weight of criminal justice. A shadow that hangs over this new context is whether truth will not in the end be the victim of the victory of the No and the ensuing renegotiation. Truth affects the elites of all the parties involved in the conflict, who are not particularly interested in having its light shining on the population and in clarifying the facts and their historical interpretation. A 52-year civil war could not have been sustained over time without the support of economic, social, religious and political forces. What these elites are worried about is not so much the risk of impunity - in Colombia, in fact, it is not a risk but a reality: the new attorney general acknowledged in his inaugural address on August, 1st, that the current impunity rate is 99% -, but the fact the truth be known. As Nietzsche said, humans are not ashamed of committing morally abhorrent acts, but of others knowing about them.

10. We are left with a fragmented... and yet hopeful country. On the one hand, a third of the population, which went to the polls, divided and confronted. Polarization affects the everyday life of families, groups of friends or fellow workers, neighbours. The plebiscite opened wounds in the closest and most trusted circles which are difficult to heal. On the other hand, it is a fact that in almost all of the areas which have experienced the armed conflict, the Yes won by an overwhelming majority. How are we to explain to the indigenous, black and rural communities, and to the victims, that their urban fellow citizens, who have not suffered from the war, have decided that they should keep on suffering from it? This lack of solidarity is not only incomprehensible but also unjustifiable - it is classism's persistent, lingering historical repetition. Finally, a sign of hope. A crowd of young students took to the streets of major Colombian cities on Thursday, October, 6, shouting "We want peace" and demanding that the three parties agree - swiftly. Hundreds of thousands of students reminded their elders that they do not wish to keep on living through a war that is none of their doing, but that they are willing to contribute to its end. Maybe street pressure will in the end force the warring parties to reach a final agreement.

There is a general feeling in the country that this agreement has to be found. There is a saying in Colombia which describes those who are frightened at their own success: "To kill the tiger and be frightened by the leather (its skin)". Today we find ourselves in this situation, and the surprise at the plebiscite results is driving the opposing parties and voters to recognize that a way out must be found. It would seem that, for the first time, starting from the tremendous international ridicule of the victory of the No, the Colombian people are willing to shed their own historical conviction, which concludes *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: "... because lineages condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not enjoy a second opportunity on Earth."

[1] Pazé, Valentina, *En nombre del pueblo. El problema democrático*, Marcial Pons, Madrid, 2013.

[2] http://www.larepublica.co/el-no-ha-sido-la-campa%C3%B1a-m%C3%A1s-barata-y-m%C3%A1s-efectiva-de-la-historia_427891

[3] <http://www.eltiempo.com/entretenimiento/cine-y-tv/omar-rincon-la-paz-en-el-periodismo-el-otro-lado/16710880>



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