

DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION AND PEACE[1]

by Eduardo Posada

Is there an opposition in Colombia? At first sight, this seems a pointless question – the evidence should leave no doubt. Andres Pastrana is the president, the opposition party candidate who defeated the candidate of the governing party. For more than three years in office, he has had to face the opposition of both the Liberal party and a number of independent movements. This opposition has made itself felt in Congress, in local government, in elections and in public opinion.

Despite this and other evidence, it is widely believed that there is no opposition in Colombia, and this is a quite deep-rooted belief, like any other stereotype. Some may be surprised that such a mistaken judgment on the nature of the Colombian political regime is so widespread. Those who have taken up arms against the system, of course, do not find it at all surprising. After all, the notion that there is no political opposition, and no room for it, is the justification for their existence as revolutionaries. As a FARC leader Raul Reyes said, “It is lamentable that there have been so many deaths in so many years of war, due to the State’s insistence in wiping out democratic opposition.”[2]

So, is there a democratic opposition?. The question needs an urgent answer. Very few issues are closely bound up in the prospects of a negotiated peace as this. First, then, we should appreciate how the idea that this is no opposition (with differences of emphasis) has come to be accepted without much question by many in senior political positions.

Some, such as former Defense Minister Rafael Pardo, say that “there is no tradition of an opposition, it is not understood, it is interpreted as disloyalty or “sour grapes”, it is looked at as a conspiracy”.[3] For Maria Emma Mejia, a former Foreign Minister, “For the first time we are trying to form an opposition”. For the first time? And what happened before? , Well, before, there had been just “180 years of Liberals and Conservatives with very closed ideologies which controlled the country. They took turns to govern, and if there was a problem, they fixed it between them”.[4] When a guerrilla leader said that the FARC were “the only opposition group in Colombia”, the editor of the magazine Cambio, Roberto Pombo, wrote, “Those words are dramatically true. There is no true opposition in Colombia to the parties that come to power, other than some aggressive and superficial fencing between the sectors that today divide the politicians from the Establishment. But no more than that.”[5] According to Felipe Zuleta, “In Colombia there is no real democracy and no real opposition”.[6] Another El Espectador columnist, Juan Carlos Rodriguez quotes an interview of the newspaper with Fabio Valencia, in which the Conservative leader said that “the only real opposition is up there in the mountains”.[7] And Luis Carlos Valenzuela, as Minister of energy, said in a widely-publicized speech, noted that “If we had had elites, we would not have allowed .. each and every leader of the left who wanted to do politics through democratic channels to be killed...” and then, “This is a society where the only form of opposition is under arms.”

Perhaps all these quotations need qualifying. Perhaps we are not doing full justice to the positions of such a distinguished group of leaders. . But I believe that what they say there in speeches, newspaper columns and interviews published in papers with a nationwide and international readership, nicely illustrates a point which needs more systematic analysis. We should note the origin of these quotations: former ministers, ministers, distinguished journalists and Liberal and Conservative leaders. We should also note the worrying message

they bring: there has been no tradition of opposition here, no true opposition, armed opposition is the only real opposition. The more telling, when they come from sectors of opinion opposed to the traditional parties. How can we explain that such messages – as I see them, mistaken – have taken such firm roots?

Without trying to be exhaustive, I would like to offer some explanations. The first is to be found in the poverty of literature on our political history – a lack of thorough study of the past of our democratic institutions, parties, Congress, elections and press. This has created mistaken opinions which nobody takes much trouble to challenge. The second, and perhaps the strongest, is related to the way most people see the Frente Nacional (the alternation of power between Conservatives and Liberals for sixteen years after 1958). It is wrong to assume that the two-party agreement in practice stopped the development of democratic opposition. The third originates in the tragic fate of the left-wing Union Patriótica, whose experience tends to be extended to the whole political situation. The fourth is conceptual, in that the word ‘opposition’ itself has been discredited, and almost made equivalent to ‘radical and extreme confrontation with the System’. The fifth refers to the dynamics of the peace talks themselves, in which representatives of the State and society have often adopted the terms used by the guerrillas. [8]

All these explanations merit deeper examination than we can afford here. To start with, we would need to review our political history in order to understand how, at least since the elections of 1836-7 [9] a competitive party system developed which quickly – if not without problems – took up the modern idea of opposition. Such a review would need to abandon parochial positions which would ignore the value of democratic achievements in Colombia compared to other countries. [10] We would also, of course, have to review the stereotypes of the Frente Nacional. [11] What was installed here in 1958 was not a British-style system of government and opposition: nor was it a puer two-party system with a seamless, solid and permanent consensus. It may have undermined the cohesion of the parties, and perhaps held up the process of modernization: but it did not stop the development of democratic opposition, nor stop the opposition from expressing itself in the press, in government or at the polls.

We would also have to insist that, however the past is interpreted, the Frente Nacional ceased to exist many years ago. Today it has been replaced by a new power structure with more room for political and cultural pluralism [12]. That this new structure was accompanied by a peace process that allowed several guerrilla groups to demobilize and enter the political system. “We exchanged bullets for the ballots-box, and the results are here” said Antonio Navarro recently, when passing judgment on the demobilization of his M-19, stressing their good results at the polls since 1991, despite some limitations. [13]

Finally, we need to clear up the conceptual confusion surrounding the idea of “opposition”. When saying that “there is no tradition of opposition”, or “no true opposition”, as did the political leaders quoted above, they might be right if they went on to explain that what they meant was that the government-opposition pattern which the Barco administration tried to institutionalize is not in place. [14] It is true that there is still an inclination in Colombia to form coalition governments – partly due to the fears conjured up by the memory of sectarian violence, partly due to the insatiable habit of trading political favors, and partly because any country in crisis wants to play down differences and create as much room as possible for consensus as a guarantee of governance. It is also true that we need to fortify our democracy with a more modern opposition, with better tools to make sure that it works, a system of benches in Congress and discipline in the parties – and these are some of the measures which the elusive but much-desired political reforms should contain.

Nonetheless, none of these conceptual judgments or points should lead us to deny, in such flat and simple terms as many do, that Colombia has had and has a democratic opposition. Even less, should we continue to accept that that sort of language which justifies the appeal to arms should be allowed to be dominant.

The purpose of peace requires that violence in all its forms be stripped of any legitimacy. And I believe that if we were to look again at the value of recognized democratic achievements in Colombia, with all their complexities and defects, we would find a more fertile ground for a negotiated solution to the conflict.

[1] This is the ninth of a series of articles on the language which is most often used today in analyzing the situation in Colombia and its effects on the quest for a negotiated solution to the armed conflict

[2] Interview in El País, Madrid, 3 March 2000

[3] Rafael Pardo "Oposición o polarización" El Espectador 11 August 1999. I have referred to this and other quotations in another essay where I also suggested that it was important to review the language of analysis of the situation in Colombia, "La crisis política como crisis intelectual" in Various Authors "¿qué está pasando en Colombia? Anatomía de un país en crisis" (Bogotá, EL Ancora, 2000 and 2001)

[4] Interview, EL País Semanal, Madrid, 15 August 1999

[5] Roberto Pombo, "La voz de Cano", Cambio, 15-22 November 1999

[6] Felipe Zuleta, "Paradojas" El Espectador, 5 June 2000

[7] Juan Carlos Rodríguez, "Poco sordos hace muchos mudos" El Espectador 9 August 1999

[8] On this last point see Malcolm Deas "La paz: entre los principios y la práctica" in Francisco Leal ed. Los laberintos de la guerra. Utopías e incertidumbres sobre la paz (Bogotá, Tercer Mundo 1999)

[9] See my essay "Alternancia y república: elecciones en la Nueva Granada y Venezuela, 1835-1837" in Hilda Sabato ed. Ciudadanía política y formación de las naciones. Perspectivas Históricas en América Latina (México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999)

[10] See. For example, the interesting piece by Richard Hofstadter. The idea of a party system. The rise of legitimate opposition in the United States 1780-1840. Los Angeles and London University of California Press, 1969).

[11] Much more attention should be paid to the classic work of Mario Latorre, Elecciones y partidos en Colombia (Bogotá, Universidad de los Andes, 1974)

[12] Any look at the composition of local governments and electoral results in recent presidential campaigns will show this. "The third forces", as Francisco Gutiérrez has shown, "have in the last thirty years had a place in the Colombian political system which no observer could reasonably describe as 'insignificant'. See his essay "Rescate por un elefante. Congreso, sistema y reforma política" in Ana María Bejarano y Andrés Dávila eds. Elecciones y democracia en Colombia 1997-1998 (Bogotá, Uniandes and Fundación Social, 1998)

[13] Antonio Navarro "La desmovilización del M-129, diez años después" in Fernando Cepeda ed. Haciendo Paz. Reflexiones y perspectivas del proceso de paz en Colombia (Bogotá, Ed. Ancora, 2001)

[14] See Fernando Cepeda's essay "Una Colombia nueva: la visión política de Barco" in Malcolm Deas and Carlos Ossa eds. El gobierno Barco. Política, economía y desarrollo social (Bogotá, Nomos, 1994).

