



Siguiendo el conflicto: hechos y análisis de la semana

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Peace and Reconciliation Program in Medellín: The gradual erosion of illegal power

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During recent months, the administration of Medellín Mayor Alonso Salazar has been facing turbulent times. Salazar has come under virulent attacks that seek to undermine the legitimacy of the elections that carried him into office as mayor of the city. His opponent in the 2007 elections, Luis Pérez, has alleged that the Salazar's campaign was financed and supported by none other than extradited criminal "Don Berna." The latter, from his prison cell in the United States, has confirmed the accusations in a letter that combines vague details with specific facts: "packages for 20 million" channeled "through the candidate's brother-in-law" and electoral support and proselytizing in communities made up of demobilized combatants. The intention of this accusation is to reexamine the city's recent past: alleging that the achievements by the administration of Sergio Fajardo were a show put on by the media to hide the ugly truth; that Alonso Salazar's contributions to strengthening the Peace and Reconciliation program were not made in support of demobilization, but rather that they were the start of his plan to consolidate his political aspirations in the city of Medellín and the country.

Based on information ascertained through research that the Ideas para la Paz Foundation did during 2008, to evaluate the Peace and Reconciliation program in Medellín, we shall endeavor to provide some evidence that may be useful to raise the level of public debate about the recent past and the future of the city.

Origin of the controversy

Looking at the process in detail, it may be seen that in the current political debate over Medellín, disputes that were simmering during the administration of Sergio Fajardo have come to a boil. These disputes may be summarized in the following questions:

- 1) Who governed Medellín during the period 2004- 2007, Sergio Fajardo or Don Berna?
- 2) Was the Peace and Reconciliation program in Medellín a factor for State consolidation (national and municipal) in the city, or

did it actually serve to enable paramilitary interests to hide under a cloak of legality and, in the process, to channel Salazar's political ambitions?

Who governed Medellín during the period 2004- 2007, Sergio Fajardo or Don Berna?

In our opinion, this question is a false dichotomy. From the start of his term in office in 2004, Sergio Fajardo exercised control of the municipal government with autonomy and political support. But Fajardo did not come into a city in which the state and municipal government had full control of the territory. It was common knowledge that many barrios of the city were under the influence and control of urban paramilitary cells. The dominant paramilitary figure was Mr. Murillo Bejarano (Don Berna) whose Cacique Nutibara Bloc exerted control over the criminal interests that operated in the city of Medellín: bands, gangs, and paramilitary cells. His power grew as the result of the infamous Operation Orion that state security agencies implemented in the Comuna 13 region of the city, to root out the guerrilla militias and the Metro Bloc strongholds.

What were the alternatives available to Mayor Fajardo during his administration, to deal with the power challenge known as Don Berna? Hypothetically there were three options: 1) Eliminate him violently, 2) Acquiesce to co-exist with him, or 3) Minimize his power and influence gradually. From this perspective, Mayor Fajardo apparently chose the latter.

Eliminating him violently was impractical and undesirable. This would have resulted in a proliferation of Operation "Orions," which neither the city nor the national government, the agency authorized to make use of coercive force, would have supported. In addition to the enormous human cost, the effectiveness would have been very limited, not to mention counterproductive in terms of reducing violence.

As for acquiescent coexistence, such as a secret deal to share government power, this could have been useful to Fajardo in terms of immediate gains, but it would have been catastrophic for his future political prospects. First, it would have destroyed the political coalition that supported him. Second, one may ask: Would it be conceivable to build a political project of national scope, as Sergio Fajardo seeks to do, based on an alliance with a fearsome hybrid of drug trafficking, paramilitaries, and organized crime? The most likely answer is no.

We believe that Fajardo chose the strategy of gradually and progressively eroding Don Berna's authority and his power struc-

ture. The peace process that the government of President Uribe began with the AUC was a determining factor in this decision. The Santafé de Ralito agreement involved the demobilization of the paramilitary groups, due to start before the end of 2003. The Cacique Nutibara Bloc was the first to demobilize to keep the AUC's promise to the national government. Why was this bloc the first demobilize? Most likely because Medellín was the first location that provided the necessary security conditions for the successful demobilization of paramilitary structures. However, the decision concerning demobilization, made in December 2003, was not agreed with the municipal administration. The La Ceja agreement that framed this process was signed by the National Government, represented by the High Commissioner for Peace, and the Democracia Corporation, an organization that is described in the document as representing the demobilized combatants from the Cacique Nutibara Bloc. Outgoing Mayor Luis Perez and incoming Mayor Sergio Fajardo signed the agreement as witnesses.

The municipal administration's choice of the gradual option was not free of risks. The first of these was that at the start of 2004 there was no national policy on collective demobilizations. Until then these had been handled through the coordination of the Interior and Defense Ministries, and the Program for Reintegration into Civilian Life (PRVC), aimed at individuals who voluntarily left armed groups. As such, in January 2004, the municipal administration had to decide what to do with 868 demobilized combatants from the Cacique Nutibara Bloc (equivalent to the full demobilization of the M-19), for whom the La Ceja agreement only stipulated that the municipality would provide them with employment for a period of 12 months, extendable for an additional six months. After those 18 months, they would be left to their own devices, although they were to be involved in some unspecified reconciliation initiatives. Despite this, the municipal government took on the responsibility for implementing the demobilization process. This gave rise to the Peace and Reconciliation program that for four and a half years has been working on reintegrating 4,200 former combatants into society (minus the 20% who have relapsed or been murdered).

The other obvious risk of the gradual approach, was that its potential ambiguity would create conditions that could be interpreted as a tacit agreement to govern jointly with organized crime elements. No doubt in the dealing-making between the city administration and Democracia Corporation, some excesses occurred that led to thinking about shared government authority. Don Berna's associates played up all insinuations that suggested that their boss was in charge. This was flaunted before some divisions of Fajardo's political coalition. Some sectors of the population accepted this idea as true. Nowadays his political enemies are trying to use the media scandals against Alonso Salazar, to spread this version in local and national public opinion.

In our view, the facts prove that this version is mistaken. When Murillo Bejarano was extradited to the United States in May 2008, disturbances did not break out in Medellín, as they did in 2005

when the government ordered his arrest in connection with the murder of a political candidate in Tierralta, Córdoba. This means that after three years of the gradual strategy Murillo Bejarano's control over the city of Medellín was diminished.

Second, some Medellín researchers maintain that Alonso Salazar did poorly in the elections in the communities with a high proportion of demobilized combatants. In fact, demobilized combatants have fared poorly when they have run for public office. They fielded candidates for 14 local administrative boards in 2007, and succeeded in getting only one alderman elected (who is now under arrest) and failed in their bid to win two seats on city council. Salazar's victory cannot be attributed to the alleged support of that group. In fact, in the days prior to the elections, it was said that demobilized combatants were supporting Luis Perez.

Third, we believe that the political scandal that is being mounted against Alonso Salazar reflects a breakdown among the forces that were united at the start of the Fajardo government. The municipal elections reflected the degree of that breakdown. The unexpected nature of the election results (only Salazar's downtrend has changed in recent weeks), explains why the scandal took a few months to break. The defeat took sectors by surprise that thought that the change in administration would now effectively pave the way for a marriage of convenience between the government and illegal factors. Salazar understood the opposite. It is not that he has changed the pace of the gradual strategy. Rather, what has changed is the content of the measures involved in this strategy: a lot of negotiation and diplomacy have been exercised with good results, to ease the demobilized population back into legality. With their power weakened, it is now possible to step up coercive and repressive force to continue undermining the power of the former paramilitary interests. This is what Alonso Salazar proposed at the start of his term in office, and this is what he has done. The only limitation in this shift of emphasis is that now it depends on institutions that are outside his realm of authority: the Prosecutor General's Office, the courts, and to a certain degree the National Police. The dismissal of head prosecutor Guillermo Valencia Cossio, the transfer of General Naranjo to Medellín to direct the operations against organized crime, and the explicit support that Senior Advisor for Reintegration Frank Pearl has provided to the Peace and Reconciliation program, show that the National Government has understood the message and is acting accordingly.¹

The Peace and Reconciliation Program: Cronyism and illegality or the restoration of the law?

There are multiple threats to the security of the people of Medellín, and as such policies to address these cannot be limited to the Peace and Reconciliation program. Nonetheless, this program was the main instrument for encouraging 4,200 demobilized members of the Cacique Nutibara, Héroes de Granada, Héroes de Tolová blocs, and some others that were operating in Medellín and the surrounding regions, to return to life within the law.

In the world there are 22 programs for demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration. They are based on two suppositions: a) The programs are justified for security reasons. To put it bluntly: former combatants must be “paid off” to prevent them from becoming a factor for crime or violence. This underlying motivation reveals an inevitable logic of extortion and produces uneasiness among the public and victims of armed groups. The Peace and Reconciliation program was no exception. b) Reintegration requires changing the demobilized combatants’ military or violent mindset, to instill a mentality of citizenship. This kind of psychological shift can only be slow and gradual. The Medellín government, in acknowledgment, decided to extend indefinitely the period for providing support to demobilized combatants, with an emphasis on comprehensive care and not just job creation (see table).

The conclusion of the assessment by the Ideas para la Paz Foundation is that the Peace and Reconciliation program has provided the paramilitaries with the conditions that have made it possible for 80% of the 4,200 demobilized combatants to return to life within the boundaries of the law. This in itself is a tough blow to organized crime.

But there can be no doubt that our research has also identified problems, indicated by the people’s complaints registered with agencies such as Medellín’s Human Rights Ombudsman and Instituto de Capacitación Popular (IPC), alleging that some demobilized combatants are straddling the line between legality and illegality, that in some districts they maintain dictatorial power but that now they are more discreet (with weapons but without uniforms), that they are still involved in extortion, and that they are failing to uphold the standards that the program requires of them. It is also said that the Democracia Corporation has ties to the Envigado enforcement office. Municipal and criminal justice authorities need to address these complaints. But what is not acceptable is that these problems are being blown out of proportion with the clear intention of insinuating that this is the “murky reality” of the program. That disregards the progress that the program has made toward consolidating lawfulness in Medellín’s neighborhoods and districts.

What is worthwhile questioning whether this progress could be undone. Only time will tell, but the homicide rate in the city of Medellín was up by 35% in 2008; evidence of a return to violence. Even if this upward trend on homicide holds steady, this does not mean that the Peace and Reconciliation program has failed. Most analysts and officials attribute the resurgence of violence to settlements of accounts that do not necessarily involve demobilized combatants. Remember that the demobilized combatants have now enjoyed four and a half years of immersion in civilian life with the benefits of education, job training, legal work opportunities, and the consolidation of family and social ties. One could say that they now have something to lose.

THE PEACE AND RECONCILIATION SUBPROGRAMS

The psycho-social program has 60 psychologists who serve 130 demobilized combatants each.

Work program to involve them in productive activities: at the end of 2008, a total of 1,830 demobilized combatants were reported as working

Education: At the end of 2008 it was reported that 2,762 demobilized combatants were in school.

The program includes the demobilized combatants’ families and the communities in the neighborhoods where they live.

¹ “Gobierno estará en Medellín en proceso con ex AUC,” *El Tiempo*, 5 February, 2009, p. 1-4.

