

PEACE: IS THIS NOT THE SILENCING OF THE GUNS?

By Eduardo Posada

“The peace which I have proposed”, said President Pastrana in Puerto Wilches on 19 December 1998 “goes beyond the solution to the armed conflict”. If peace is not defined by a future agreement with the guerrillas, what then is the government’s peace proposal? Such an elementary question deserves greater attention by public opinion, which has so far seemed to accept the language of peace which contains so many mistakes. Almost two years after the installation of the negotiating tables in San Vicente del Caguan, and in the lack of any effective sign of pacification on the part of the guerrillas, the government will have to undertake some serious rethinking. It should begin by redefining the concept of peace which has so far been the basis of its politics.

How has this government understood peace? First, we must recognize that there are no surprises here. During the presidential campaign, the then candidate Pastrana was transparent in his proposal, as he said in his speech on 8th June 1998. In the next two years of his term of office, government rhetoric on peace has been consistent, with some variations on emphasis which sometimes suggest possible changes of direction. The concept of a “comprehensive policy for peace” is nonetheless prevalent. This is defined as a “genuine and durable” peace, one in which we can build a new Colombia, a just and more democratic ... and more equitable country, a peace, then, which is not defined only by the solution of the armed conflict.

The president himself, and his closest collaborators, have insisted that we must understand what the “peace” proposed by the government is, in order to appreciate “the tasks required”. Sometimes, the language which attempts to define that peace adopts religious connotations. “Peace is a spiritual conquest”, said president Pastrana when inaugurating a meeting of the National Peace Counsel on 25 March 1999. His other definitions contain similar messages: “peace is a condition for living”; “peace is social justice”; “peace demands opting for life”; “peace needs us to recover our faith in God”. Some will say that these are merely empty expressions, without greater implications. I disagree. The language of “comprehensive peace” contains a specific diagnosis of the causes of armed conflict, from which therefore the specific policies of government can be formulated, and that would condition the process of negotiation with the guerrillas.

“With hunger, there is no peace”. Said the then candidate Pastrana in a speech on 8th June. He also said that there will be no peace “without far-ranging political reforms”. And he said that the action of the state will be concentrating on the struggle against the so-called “objective causes of violence: poverty, and the inequitable

distribution of income". In an official document of 18 February 1999, it was also noted that in order to support peace, we needed a "careful transformation in society, such that the value of differences will be recognized, and the capacity to resolve conflicts peacefully will materialize". Thus, on the one hand, the origin of the problems would be in the lack of social justice, or in the close nature of the system. And on the other, the problem would be national culture itself, identified with intolerance. We should not that, in any case, with this concept of an "integrated and integrating peace", the solution of armed conflict ceases to be a central objective of any peace process, and more particularly, of negotiations with the guerrillas. What is wanted here, according to the official language, is a transformation of the country, the "construction of a new democracy", "a model of a new society".

It is true that at sometimes the government has changed its ground on this discourse. In a speech on the Officer Training School, on 6 May 1999, the President announced the open willingness of the Government and of the Colombian people and the guerrillas, and that we should not forget that "the objective is the final end to a conflict of so many years". Months earlier, when setting up the negotiating table in San Vicente del Caguan, he also seems to have proposed the problem in other terms: "social justice and opportunities for all can only grow with peace". Note the change of ground: here peace is not found as social justice, but as a condition to achieve it". This position, however, seems to be an isolated one, and even contrary to the general spirit of a rhetoric dominated by the concept of comprehensive peace. The "war of peace" as the President himself said "is won by employment, housing.... health, education.... in the certainty of survival, always open to happiness".

It is naturally very difficult to know what happens in the secret surroundings of a negotiating table. But it is clear that the common agenda agreed by the parties is a faithful reflection of the concept of integrated peace taken up and disseminated by the government. The most ambitious catalog of economic, political and social reforms. The President has said that the government does not seek "peace at any price, but peace in democracy". In a democracy, however, such a catalogue of transformations would be no more than a government platform for one or two parties which regularly dispute power at the poles. It is impossible to conceive a pluralist and free society where there are no differences on very many of the points included in the common agenda. These differences should not be resolved by force, or under the threat of the gun. This is precisely the meaning of all democratic politics: the ability to reach civilized settlements between opposed interests, subject to regular reviews by the electorate.

To redefine peace itself and its objectives would be not only to privilege democracy over and above the gun, but also to aim for an achievable peace, over and above utopian and rhetoric. As historian Marco Palacios has said "specific negotiations with the guerrillas ...should be rid of the substantive elements which are proper to the democratic agenda, and should concentrate on demobilization of armed

organizations, and their reinsertion into political life". An alternative conception of peace would bring a negotiating process almost solely concentrated on the basic aspects of procedure: cease-fire and disarmament, the conditions for reinsertion into civil life, the guarantees of democratic participation. The abandonment of the idea of "comprehensive peace" would by no means ignore the fact that there are serious problems of poverty, health or education. Nor would it abandon the progress made in these matters at the negotiating tables. But it is at best an illusion to continue to insist that we would only achieve peace when we have transformed the country. The recent contact between President Pastrana and the head of the liberal opposition, Horacio Serpa, opened up the possibility of a state policy against violence. If that policy is to be effective, there must be a new concept of peace. Obviously, once the armed conflict is resolved, the agenda of pending problems will be very long. But without the solution of armed conflict -that is, without peace- there is no future. So let us define peace in its simplest terms: the laying down of arms and the return to legality. And let us recognize also that the central objective of negotiations cannot be anything else except the silencing of the guns.

*This article is the third in my series on the dominant language in political analysis in Colombia