

Columbia's FARC peace deal collapses after referendum

By [Ed Smith](#)

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Image: FBallesteros

THE COLOMBIAN public's rejection of the peace treaty that was signed between government forces and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC) on 26 September 2016 has generated shockwaves across the world.

The civil war between the FARC, a left wing guerrilla force and the Colombian government is the oldest modern day civil war, dating back to the 1960s. The prospect of a peace treaty was received jubilantly across the nation. Over 200 000 people have been killed and over 5 million displaced. Opinions began to split as the details of the treaty became known, with many opposing the idea that a significant majority of FARC forces would not spend any time behind bars, and that FARC would be allowed to form a legitimate political party, causing many people to believe that there will be no justice for those killed.

Many, including former president Álvaro Uribe who became the figurehead of the No campaign, believed that there would be no accountability for the murder, kidnapping and extortion FARC engaged in. As recently as last year, the FARC was continuing guerrilla warfare, such as an attack on an oil pipeline in Nariño which caused 10 000 barrels of oil to contaminate water supplies for over 150 000 people.

Nonetheless there have been concerted efforts to demobilise and significantly reduce the violence throughout the country by peaceful campaigning and negotiations. This has included joint government operations with advertising agency Lowe and Partners, such as, 'Operation Rivers of Light', where personal messages, jewellery and sweets were filled into luminous balls and dropped into rivers. It was hoped FARC soldiers would see these messages and demobilise. After the first operation, 331 FARC soldiers demobilised, out of a total of 17 000 demobilising since the operations began in 2006.

In addition to the 'light' settlement Santos has agreed with FARC leaders, many argue he has alienated voters by not involving any victims of the conflict. Cynically, he used the treaty to boost his own falling popularity. As one Colombian political commentator said: "people could have voted for peace without feeling as though they were being invited to support Santos." This is compounded by the fact that Uribe's approval rating of 59 per cent far outweighs Santos' 38 per cent, with critics arguing Santos' exclusion of citizens affected by the conflict in the referendum campaign has negatively influenced his prospects, especially as Santos and Londoño were shortlisted for a Nobel Peace Prize.

The question however is: "what happens next?" It would be the best course of action for a treaty to be eventually ratified. However, it is clear that the Colombian government needs to make an effort to engage more of the country in politics. The referendum had the lowest voter turnout in 22 years at 37 per cent. This signals a political disenchantment among Colombian citizens, perhaps emphasising how they view their political system as unequal. If this view is correct, the way to a peaceful Colombian future may be greater inclusivity with the public until a satisfactory accord is met, as ultimately it is only the people who can pass constitutional reform in Colombia.



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