

Despite the intransigence of the FARC and the opposition, the peace process is still alive

IT IS two years since President Juan Manuel Santos's government began peace negotiations with the FARC guerrillas in Havana, and the going has been slow. The two sides have reached provisional agreements only on the easiest three of the six points on the agenda—on rural development, participation in politics and how to fight drug trafficking. The FARC's leaders seem to be in no hurry to abandon a 50-year habit of war for the uncertainties of peace. Now, as Mr Santos sets off on a tour of Europe seeking political support and money to implement the hoped-for peace deal, the talks are facing ever-shriller opposition at home.

That opposition is led by Álvaro Uribe, Colombia's president in 2002-10, whom Mr Santos served as defence minister for three years. Mr Uribe, now a senator, unleashes a daily blast of vituperation against his former colleague. To follow Mr Uribe's Twitter account, as more than 3m Colombians do, is to be told that Mr Santos, an urbane pillar of his country's establishment, has become a sympathiser of "Castro-Chavismo". In up to 30 tweets a day, Mr Uribe makes outlandish claims: for example, that Mr Santos favours "the political leadership of the kidnappers and the handing over of the country to the FARC". Mr Uribe's party last month issued a document called the "52 capitulations of Santos in Havana". No sooner had the government answered these charges one by one, than the uribistas added an extra 16.

There are legitimate disagreements to be had about the peace talks. Many Colombians dislike the idea that leaders of the FARC, a murderous Stalinist outfit that has financed itself by drug-trafficking and kidnapping, might end up, through the democratic process, in political control of chunks of countryside or escape punishment for heinous crimes. But when president, Mr Uribe himself put out feelers to those he calls "terrorists". His charges are "outright lies", Mr Santos told Bello. The government has "red lines that we won't cross", including the defence of the armed forces, private property and the idea of a market economy.

Mr Uribe has ignored an offer from the president to discuss his concerns. Some prominent Colombians worry that without a united front in Bogotá, peace in Havana will be impossible. The FARC are every bit as intransigent as Mr Uribe. When Mr Santos said in August that the discussions had reached the final stage, Iván Márquez, the FARC's chief negotiator, flatly contradicted him.

Yet it would be wrong to conclude that the talks are doomed. Rather, they have entered a make-or-break period. The negotiators have abandoned their sequential approach and are now simultaneously talking about the remaining issues. These include transitional justice (ie, what punishment the FARC will face and how many of them will face it) and the reparation of victims; as well as disarmament, demobilisation and the reintegration of the guerrilla rank-and-file into civilian life. Drawing the line between justice and peace is “the most difficult point in ending any conflict,” Mr Santos says. And getting a guerrilla to lay down his gun is never easy.

The government negotiators have been reinforced by senior army officers. And almost all of the FARC’s most important—and notorious—commanders have joined the talks. Mr Uribe denounces this as the government facilitating a FARC “Congress of terrorism” in Havana. That sounds like nonsense: the FARC is faced with momentous decisions; ending its war needs a united front of its own.

The biggest problem now is time. Mr Santos has erred in the past by announcing a timetable that the FARC ignored. But the talks will lose credibility if they drag on. In the coming months, the government must confront the FARC’s leaders with a choice: either they accept a deal that is not victory and under which at least some of them will have to go to prison, or the state will resume a military offensive in which the guerrilla chiefs will sooner or later be wiped out.

As for Mr Uribe, he fails to admit that the talks offer the best chance of ending a conflict that has burdened Colombia with death, destruction and the displacement of millions of people. The irony is that it was his security build-up that forced the FARC to negotiate. What explains his campaign? In Bogotá it is variously attributed to envy, irrational obsession and anger that prosecutors have pursued officials from his government for corruption. Mr Santos conjectures that “maybe he thinks his political capital would disappear if there was peace.” As a saying widely attributed to Don Quixote put it, “let the dogs bark, Sancho, it’s a sign that we’re advancing.”

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