

THE ELN & PEACE PROCESSES: BACKGROUND, UNIQUE TRAITS, AND REINTEGRATION

INTRODUCTION

A peace process with Colombia's second largest guerrilla group, the ELN (National Liberation Army), seems imminent. GOC-ELN peace talks were conditioned on the release of Gernot Wober, a Canadian who was taken hostage by the guerrilla group in January 2013. Wober was freed on August 27th 2013. This document outlines the context, background, and possible characteristics of a peace process with the ELN.

Foundation of the ELN

The ELN was founded in 1964 by six Colombians studying in Cuba. Leader Fabio Vásquez Castaño and the other founders believed that the Cuban Revolution's political model was the solution to the socioeconomic issues and political violence affecting Colombia's rural peasantry.ⁱ The ELN made its first attack in 1965, officially declaring its presence. In the 1990s, a very active decade for the group, the number of combatants grew to 7,000.ⁱⁱ

The ELN has a strong ideological base. The group originally adhered to Marxism, and when it recruited Catholic priests early in its history, liberation theology was added to the conceptual base, focusing on Christian teachings to free the poor from unjust conditions.ⁱⁱⁱ Since then, the group has had a dual focus of championing the needs of the poor and resisting capitalist invasion of Colombia from abroad.^{iv}

Current characterization

In May 2013, Minister of Defense Pinzón stated that the GOC believes that the ELN currently has approximately 1,300 armed guerrilla members.^v Three thousand people are believed to comprise the support networks.^{vi} The ELN has historically been concentrated in Colombia's Northern mountains, near and in the Colombia-Venezuela border region.^{vii} In 2012, the ELN was active in 13 departments of Colombia: Antioquia; Arauca; Bolívar; Boyacá; Casanare; Cauca; Cesar; Chocó; Nariño; Norte de Santander; Risaralda; Santander; and Tolima.^{viii}

The ELN have frequently attacked oil infrastructure, aiming to fight foreign control over local oil. Kidnapping and extortion are also used to generate income. ELN involvement with the drug trade has increased since the 1990s. It should be noted that after decades of quarrels with the FARC over territory, the two guerrilla groups have recently worked together.^{ix}

There are three main branches of the ELN: 1) the combatant force that engages in warfare and attacks; 2) the support network, which includes informers and assistants who do not directly participate in combat; and 3) the social support networks, which have little or no direct contact with the ELN but support the group's ideology and perceived struggle.^x

The Central Command (COCE) is led by: Nicolás Rodríguez Bautista, alias 'Gabino'; Israel Ramírez Pineda, alias 'Pablo Beltrán'; and Eliécer Herlinto Chamorro Acosta, alias 'Antonio García'. These are the commanders expected to take central roles in the GOC-ELN peace process.^{xi}

PREVIOUS ELN PEACE PROCESSES

Peace talks with the ELN have been held on multiple occasions. The most recent attempts were made between late 2002 and mid-2005 by the Uribe administration. Various issues pervaded these efforts, which saw a central mediation role for Mexico: 1) the ELN's proposal to add international facilitators; 2) a unilateral or bilateral ceasefire; 3) opportunities for broader society to participate directly, including the ELN proposal of a "national convention"; and 4) tense communication between the ELN COCE and the GOC. After much work to establish and maintain effective communication and formal negotiation terms, the talks were suspended in April 2005.^{xii}

Two months later, in June of 2005, President Uribe's government re-initiated talks with the ELN, again with a strong emphasis on civil society participation. A "Casa de Paz" was created with the objective of allowing civil society to present proposals for political reform. In December 2005, GOC-ELN talks began in Cuba. By October 2006, the parties had tentatively established peace process terms, including international and civil society participation. In June 2007, the parties were confident that a ceasefire would be signed. However, one month later, eleven kidnapped politicians were killed, and tensions around the dialogues increased. The GOC imposed more conditions on the talks, which the ELN rejected. In August 2007, the GOC made attempts to revive the process by expressing a degree of flexibility on ELN requests. Uribe enlisted Venezuelan President Chávez to re-open lines of dialogue. Chávez was successful in this task, and the ELN expressed hope that they would be able to sign a framework for a peace process. However, tensions were later generated between Presidents Chávez and Uribe, and resulted in the ELN's cancellation of the dialogues in December 2007.^{xiii}

FEATURES OF A 2013/2014 ELN PEACE PROCESS

Five countries have offered to be host of a GOC-ELN peace process: Brazil, Costa Rica, Uruguay, Venezuela, and Cuba.^{xiv} While the FARC prefer closed peace processes between them and the GOC, the ELN favor involving other countries. It is likely that at least one of these countries will be asked to take a role in monitoring and mediating the possible talks.^{xv} Each negotiating team will have five members. The GOC side could include former Inspector General Jaime Bernal Cuellar, the Rector of the Military University General (r) Eduardo Antonio Herrera, and un-named others. The ELN side could include alias "Pablo Beltrán", ex-leader now imprisoned Juan Carlos Cuellar, alias 'Comandante López', and un-named others.^{xvi}

Experts agree that the current military weakness of the ELN influenced their willingness to enter a peace process with the GOC. However, their inability to win the conflict does not mean that they will be willing to give up their ideological and political goals. These goals are likely to shape the agenda for

pre-process discussions as well as the guidelines for the possible peace process itself.^{xvii}

Topics on the discussion agenda could include exploitation of oil, foreign investment, labor reform, and education.^{xviii} The oil industry is a long-standing focus for the ELN, but some experts say that it may not be given a lot of importance in a new negotiations agenda.^{xix} Others say that the agenda could prioritize resource sovereignty, the environment, development in areas around the pipelines and wells, and sustainable nationally controlled expansion.^{xx}

There also exists uncertainty over the place of illegal drugs in the GOC-ELN peace process. While the topic is central in the FARC negotiation agenda, the importance it would be given as a stand-alone topic for the ELN remains to be seen. The group has not historically been as involved in the production and trafficking of cocaine as the FARC, but has recently increased these activities for financing. The GOC would likely incorporate illegal drugs into part of an ELN agenda, but the degree of significance it would be given is uncertain.^{xxi}

One aspect of the peace process that does not seem to cause debate is the central role that would be held by civil society. Previous ELN peace processes have called for a “national convention” in which civil society leaders can voice their requests for political and socioeconomic reform, and a similar if not identical mechanism is expected to be used in the upcoming peace process. The ELN’s emphasis on social participation aims to open the peace process to input from sectors of society that do not frequently have opportunities to influence politics. In addition, input from regional representatives could be highlighted by the ELN as another area in which sectors whose voices are not frequently heard at the national level can make their concerns known.^{xxii}

While the involvement of civil society is almost a given, the role of the Catholic Church in a GOC-ELN peace process is not so clear-cut. Given the history between the ELN and the Church, it is possible that the religious entity will be central in the talks. Experts agree that the Church would have more influence over the ELN process than with the FARC, but whether it would be seen at the dialogues table is uncertain.^{xxiii} It is possible that a mediating team will be formed by civil society leaders and Church representatives.^{xxiv}

A final consideration when contemplating the possible features of a GOC-ELN peace process is victims’ rights. The ELN is aware that they can be sanctioned by law, and that these norms could be used to call for their legal prosecution and sentencing. They are also aware that the victims have a right to know the truth about grave ELN crimes during the conflict, and that this truth could feed into the legal cases against them. In private meetings, they have accepted this responsibility and are open to discussing the charges against them after the truth has been established. However, they condition this openness on the Colombian state’s similar acceptance of responsibility for grave crimes during the conflict and consequent legal evaluation.^{xxv}

ELN REINTEGRATION PROCESS PARTICIPANTS

Traits of ELN ex-members currently in the ACR program could characterize the population that would demobilize after a peace agreement. So far, 4,143 members of the ELN have left the group - 3,338 adults (6% of the national total), and 805 children (15% of the national total). Of the 3,338 ex-ELN adults, 78% are men and 22% are women. 3% identified as being indigenous, 10% as Afro-Colombian, and 87% as of another ethnicity. As of September 2013, 46% of the demobilized adult ELN members were active in the ACR program, 22% were being investigated for recidivism or other disqualifications^{xxvi}, 17% had never registered in the program, 4% had died, 4% were inactive, 2% had finished the program, and 5% had otherwise stopped receiving benefits. This data is comparable to equivalent data for the FARC.

CONCLUSIONS

As the GOC moves towards a peace process with the ELN, it is necessary to understand the group’s background and previous peace processes. The prominence of civil society, the Church, and the international community in previous negotiations are a strong indicator of the groups who will be involved in the coming talks. In addition, the ELN’s strong interest in the oil industry, and its prioritization of education and social reform could also shape the future negotiations agenda. The group’s history of unpredictability in responding to GOC communications should also be taken into account in the approach to and realization of peace negotiations.

The ELN’s 1,300 combatants and 3,000 additional members would demobilize in the case of a peace agreement. Data related to demobilized members will be crucial in the design of reintegration programs for the ELN, which could combine with successful talks to result in stable and lasting peace.

ⁱ Gutierrez, F. *The Dilemmas of Recruitment*. In “Understanding Collective Political Violence” (Guichaoua, Y. Eds.). Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire, 2012.

ⁱⁱ Insight Crime. *ELN*. www.insightcrime.org/groups-colombia/eln

ⁱⁱⁱ Interview with Luis Celis, Corporación Nuevo Arcoiris, October 2 2013.

^{iv} Insight Crime. Op. Cit.

^v *El ELN remató a militares con tiros de gracia: Mindefensa*. RCN Radio.

www.canalrcnmsn.com/noticias/el_eln_remat%C3%B3_militares_con_tiros_de_gracia_mindefensa

^{vi} Interview with Luis Celis, Corporación Nuevo Arcoiris, October 2 2013.

^{vii} *Mapping Militant Organizations: National Liberation Army (ELN)*. Stanford University.

www.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/87

^{viii} *VIII Informe sobre grupos narcoparamilitares*. Indepaz, 2013. www.indepaz.org.co/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Informe-VIII-Indepaz-final.pdf and *Quaderns de Construcció de Pau No. 17: El Proceso de Paz en Colombia*. Escola de Cultura de Pau, Barcelona 2010.

^{ix} Stanford University. Op. Cit.

^x *Ibid.*

^{xi} *El Tiempo*, Op. Cit.

^{xii} Valencia Benavides, A. *The Peace Process in Colombia with the ELN: The Role of Mexico*. Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars. Georgetown U., 2006.

^{xiii} Civicon, A. *The negotiation with the ELN: Missed opportunity?* Center for International Conflict Resolution. Columbia University, 2008.

^{xiv} “Cinco países se ofrecieron para ser sede de diálogos de paz con ELN” *El Espectador* September 23rd 2013.

^{xv} Interview with Camilo Leguizamo, IOM Offices September 26 2013.

^{xvi} *El Espectador*, Op. Cit.

^{xvii} Interview with Luis Celis, Op. Cit. and Interview with Carlo Nasi. Universidad de los Andes, October 1, 2013.

^{xviii} *El Espectador*, Op. Cit.

^{xix} Interview with Carlo Nasi. Op. Cit.

^{xx} Interview with Luis Celis, Op. Cit.

^{xxi} Interview with Luis Celis, Op. Cit. and Interview with Carlo Nasi. Op. Cit.

^{xxii} *Ibid.*

^{xxiii} *Ibid.*

^{xxiv} Interview with Camilo Leguizamo, Op. Cit.

^{xxv} Interview with Luis Celis, Op. Cit.

^{xxvi} It is important to clarify that, according to the GOC definition, recidivism is understood as any crime incurred during the reintegration process, including petty crime, and does not necessarily imply taking up weapons again or involvement with BACRIM or other armed groups.